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## Entomopolis, Contemporary Art, and John Dee

*Erratic Speculations on the Art Contagion and Its Vectors Spurred by a Reading of Robert Smithson's 'Incidents of Mirror-Travel in the Yucatan'*

Jan Bäcklund

There is a passage in Robert Smithson's essay, "Incidents of Mirror-Travel in the Yucatan," that has kept intriguing me for a long time. I am referring to the last few sentences of "The Seventh Mirror Displacement," when Smithson has described a confused "no man's land" with uprooted trees:

Nevertheless, flies are attracted to such riddles. Flies would come and go from all over to look at the upside-down trees, and peer at them with their compound eyes. What the fly sees is "something a little worse than a newspaper photograph as it would look to us under a magnifying glass." [...] The "trees" are dedicated to the flies. Dragonflies, fruit flies, horseflies. They are all welcome to walk on the roots with their sticky, padded feet, in order to get a close look. *Why should flies be without art?*<sup>1</sup>

Immediately, this appears as a downright whimsical question, comparable with a buddhist *kōan*, and is probably also left standing as such, oscillating between its unanswerable quip as well as its epiphanic weight. But Smithson's essay is not at all concerned with the artistic institutions of flies, but rather with agencies or agents of art beyond history, around the

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Smithson, "Incidents of Mirror-Travel in the Yucatan." In *The Writings of Robert Smithson*, ed. Nancy Holt (New York: New York University Press, 1979), 101. Orig. published in *Artforum* 8, no. 1 (September 1969): 28-33.

question concerning the *cause of art*, where the past and the future behaves as if mirrored and superimposed in one of Smithson's enantiomorphic chambers. Continuing on the trail of inquiry from "Incidents ...," my aim here will be to make the counterintuitive point that the practice of John Dee will (within an imminent future) be considered an art project (*Tezcatlipoca knows the work of John Dee*). In the sense that John Dee, his angelical conversations (in particular), his cartography and astrology, his collecting and studio at Mortlake, as well as his other activities will feature at art-exhibitions and art-historical essays within a decade or so. Although a blatant stupid thesis, it has nevertheless the advantage of being rigorously verifiable or falsifiable and I will, like the myopic (*i.e.* fly-sighted) Miranda in Ingeborg Bachmann's short story "Ihr glückliche Augen," be the first to admit my *Denkfehler*, if proven wrong.<sup>2</sup>

To do so I will follow three – heavily condensed and abbreviated – lines of thought, more or less freely adapted from ideas present in the works of artists such as Hilma af Klint, Ilya Kabakov, Walid Raad, as well as from Robert Smithson: *a*) the recent metamorphosis of art itself, which seems to be evolutionary driven by a desire beyond human intentions, but where the objects of this desire *epiphanically* presents themselves as art for our imagination; *b*) that this art nevertheless does not behave and function like a concept, but rather like a germ or a bug, carried by an angelical (or demonical) vector – for instance the housefly, *musca domestica* – and finally; *c*) that this bug has always been 'knowing' that, for instance, the cave paintings eventually would be realized as an art when the cinematographic dispositif of the brothers Lumière eventually became assembled in 1895, in the same way as it always *knew*, for instance, that Hilma af Klint's or Maria Sibylla Merian's work would not only be compossible, but furthermore paradigmatic, for art after 'the history of art,' in very much the same way, as '[t]he Jaguar in the mirror that smokes in the World of Elements knows the work of Carl Andre.'<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Miranda's capacity of sight is "something a little worse than a newspaper photograph as it would look to us under a magnifying glass," but it is Beatrix, in "Probleme, Probleme," who develops the concept of "Denkfehler." The methodological stance taken here is thus motivated by Ingeborg Bachmann, *Simultan* (Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp, 1972) together with Jean-François Lyotard, "De l'apathie théorique," *Critique* 31, no. 333 (February 1975): 254–65.

<sup>3</sup> Smithson, "Incidents of Mirror-Travel," 97.

### *The Art Contagion*

When the German priest and pomologist Korbinian Aigner (1885–1966) was included in the 2012 *Documenta 13*, this was not an exceptional inclusion, but rather part of a significant trend in recent biennials (and exhibitions in general) of including practices, which never understood themselves as having anything to do with art, *as art*. The Venice Biennial of 2013 was almost exclusively built up around this concept, and the *Documenta* included, apart from Aigner, the late Finnish pornographer and computer-futurist Erkki Kurenniemi, the Austrian quantum physicist Anton Zeilinger, and a number of other ‘projects,’ who would never describe themselves as art projects. These projects were smoothly joined with works by well-known artists, such as Walid Raad or Pierre Huyghe, which in their turn addressed this eerie topography of art in their work, corresponding to Smithson’s description of the Seventh Mirror Displacement: “Are they dead roots that haplessly hang off inverted trunks in a vast ‘no man’s land’?”

No one could be more unconcerned about art than Korbinian Aigner. The apples (and occasional pears) he painted in watercolor, gouache or with colored pencils, stand in no relation whatsoever to the West German or International art scene of his time. They are impossible with it, in the same way that Hilma af Klint’s paintings are impossible with abstract painting of the early twentieth century. Nevertheless, it was obvious for any visitor that Aigner’s project was of paramount interest for art history and theory. For most of us, the inclusion of Aigner, was not only feasible, but furthermore *self-evident*. Before the huge walls and showcases of hundreds of postcard-size images, it became evident that it was all about the systematic and *archival* way of *documenting*, the *project character* of this archive, and this project’s merging with the question of art and life in the shape of the *bare life* of the concentration camp prisoner through *a biological form of remembrance*, for which the grafting of the apples became a performative vehicle. Nothing of this is visible as such, but is rather communicated through an initiation in the art discourse, in much the same way as the knowledge of the apple varieties *KZ1* (no. 541), *KZ3* (no. 600), and *KZ4* (no. 543) among the hundreds of ‘ordinary’ apple varieties is kept inexplicit, if the observer doesn’t engage in the project. This is an initiation that establishes a contract between the visitor, the work and the institution in which every enunciation is undergirded by the promise that they all are mediated by art. One aspect of this, I learned after having left Kassel, was the planting of an apple-tree of one of the abovementioned varieties in Kassel, thus

acting as a self-sustaining and autonomous biological vector of Aigner's work projected into the future, devoid of any 'signature.' The author being nothing but the reproductive evolution of the variety itself.

Aigner's project, running from 1912 to 1960, does of course represent a huge effort from its maker/medium, so much that he was criticized by his superiors for being more a pomologist than a priest. If not Aigner or his superiors, the drawings themselves nevertheless knew they were art. This is suggested partly by the limited pomological relevance they carry. The drawings are kept in a scale of 1:1, but not consistently so, and contrary to the then well-established pomological practice, they do not provide cross-sectional drawings of the core. And when transformed into an art discourse, it becomes obvious that Aigner is not even the author of the project. The nominal author of the project is not its agent, but part of its *iconography*, in the same way as a proper name is part of a novel. But more importantly, and contrary to common belief (*i.e.* the institutional theory), any author is neither to be searched for among the curators. The curators, as well as the visitors, *answers*, are responding to, an intention and an agency, and this agency is *the desire of art itself* – hence the self-evident apparition for the initiated and the sheer incomprehensibility for the uninitiated. It is the explication of this desire that makes certain projects self-evident and self-explicatory as art projects: its contagiousness. The aesthetic response is always 'of course! How could we *not* see it?' produced by the artistic discourse itself. An authorless, self-evident epiphany generated by the desires of the art world itself, which produces a beauty its promise of happiness provokes, that is: an obligation, or bond, with a perfective future.

The premise for this argument is that *if* there is to be any art of the future (*i.e.* art museums, history, collecting, etc.) it has to opt, with necessity, for a future viewed in a *perfective aspect*, else 'art' would dissolve into the (contingent and imperfective) production of wares, services, and experiences. Without dwelling at this part of the argument (I have done it elsewhere), we note that any history, collecting, and discourse of art must precipitate from an already realized event in the future (a perfective future), as history is always written backwards: Tezcatlipoca "knows the Future travels *backwards*."<sup>4</sup> And this is the very reason why the idea of the 'end of art' is such a persistent theme in art theory; it is the *sine qua non* of art.

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<sup>4</sup> Smithson, "Incidents of Mirror-Travel," 97.

### *The Knowledge of the Fracture*

We, artists and art historians, can have no reasonable knowledge of such a perfective aspect of the future (or of the past – we cannot know how the past *ends*), but this incapacity is not shared by the art work. Regardless of how we look upon the object in question, its predicate as art was always there, even when it couldn't be observed. The work of art 'knows' the shape of this perfective future, precisely because it *is*, embodies and incarnates, this future event. The (specific) art work is the vector of the (generic) contagion: *art*. The future event is ossified as a pledge waiting for its fulfillment and liquidation as art, much in the same way that the upper paleolithic cave paintings was liquidated with the cinematographic device in 1895.<sup>5</sup> The art work chooses its artist, who acts as the medium for the realization of *it*, as is seen from Duchamp's concept of the readymade as a *rendez-vous* in the future (with all kind of delays).<sup>6</sup> Artists, such as Hilma af Klint, Robert Smithson, Ilya Kabakov, and Walid Raad perceive this, and their works could be viewed as models or proposals for such a perfective future of art. But more importantly, the art world itself, this intangible yet distinct agent, has always oriented itself towards such a teleology like a magnetic needle orients itself in relation to the North Pole.

What is more, with Korbinian Aigner's project, the recent reception and inclusion in the art discourse of the pioneer entomologist Maria Sibylla Merian (1647–1717), active in the decades around 1700 and daughter of the printer and engraver Matthaeus Merian the Elder, a topological transformation of the art historical narrative establishes a meaningful link between Maria Merian and Korbinian Aigner, beyond any conceivable chronology or causality. Consequently, this proximity, or non-causal inheritance, will inevitably contradict any narrative running, say, from Rembrandt to Watteau, or from Caravaggio to Goya,

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<sup>5</sup> On the general epistemological challenge the discovery of the cave paintings implied, see Mats Rosengren, *Cave Art, Perception and Knowledge* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012); its relation to the cinematographic device: Gerald Noxon, "Pictorial Origins of Cinema Narrative. The Illusion of Movement and the Birth of the Scene in the Paleolithic Cave Wall Paintings of Lascaux," *The Journal of the Society of Cinematologists* 4-5 (1964–65): 20–26 and Werner Herzog, *Cave of Forgotten Dreams* (IFC Films, 2010).

<sup>6</sup> "Préciser les "Readymades". En projetant pour un moment proche à venir (tel jour, telle date telle minute), "d'inscrire un readymade". – Le readymade pourra ensuite être cherché (avec tous délais). L'important alors est donc cette cet horlogisme, cet instantané, comme un discours prononcé à l'occasion de n'importe quoi mais à *telle heure*. C'est une sorte de rendez-vous. – Inscrire naturellement cette date, heure, minute sur le readymade, comme *renseignements*. Aussi le côté exemplaire du readymade." Marcel Duchamp, *Duchamp du signe. Écrits*, ed. Michel Sanouillet (Paris: Flammarion, 1975), 49.

or whatever, fundamentally reshaping any art historical narrative into a topological (contagious) space.

The emergence of the self-evident topos created by the spacetime contagion of, for instance, Maria Merian's and Korbinian Aigner's projects, or by the establishment of the cinematographic apparatus by the brothers Lumière in 1895 with the sudden appearance of the paleolithic cave paintings the very same year, are neither arbitrary, nor necessary, but *intentional*. This intention can only express itself as art, by the desires art history and art theory creates. In a part ("Index XXVI: Red") of his performance-lecture-installation, *Scratching on Things I Could Disavow* (2007–), Walid Raad gives a rather precise description of this future's desire and workings with the past by the future Arabic artists' need for the color red, which they through telepathic contact with 'Walid Raad' consequently, but unintentionally, *produces*.<sup>7</sup>

This corresponds to a well-known phenomenon every artist (or writer) inevitably must have noted, namely that the physical work develops an agency, a certain craving, a groove, or a gravitational field that demands to be released. The physical work starts to insist on itself, on its own logic. The modernists called this phenomenon an 'inner necessity,' and located this necessity in the sensibility and inner subjectivity of the artist, whereas none of the recent reconfigurations (as for instance Korbinian Aigner or Hilma af Klint) seem to support such an artist-centered or anthropocentric agency. On the contrary, the intentionality seems to stem solely from *the facture of matter itself*. Another recent revelation, also perfectly answering to the desires of the art world, could illustrate this point.

In 2015 the exhibition "Allegory of Cave Painting," at Extra City Kunsthall and Middelheim Museum in Antwerp brought together a number of contemporary artists in a framework of the so-called Branshaw, or *Gwion Gwion*, Rock Paintings in North Western Australia. The subject is controversial, mainly due to disagreements if these stylistically isolated paintings are of aboriginal origin, or if they are produced by some other, now extinct, culture, as well as due to considerable different dating of the paintings, spanning from 45,000 years to only some 2,500 years from now.<sup>8</sup> These issues were not addressed by the exhibition. What attracted the interest of the art world was instead the fascinating

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<sup>7</sup> Walid Raad, "Index XXVI: Red," *e-flux* 54 (April 2014): 1–6.

<sup>8</sup> Ian M. Crawford, "Function and Change in Aboriginal Rock Art, Western Australia," *World Archaeology* 3, no. 3 (February 1972): 310.

fund by the microbiologist Jack Pettigrew and his team that these paintings were colonized by bacteria and fungi, which has formed a living pigment:

[...] colonized by red cyanobacteria and black fungi, main actants in a biofilm consisting of hundreds other, symbiotic microorganisms. Their rejuvenation (cannibalizing on preceding generations) and reciprocal sustenance (an exchange of carbohydrates and water) sustain the paintings' chromatic vibrancy. Bacteria and fungi coproduce a process of continuous restoration, while also etching the picture deeper into rock.<sup>9</sup>

The desire this scientific thesis arouses in an art context is precisely this desire for an object-orientated and material agency within the very core of the work itself. This non-anthropocentric perspective is furthermore confirmed by an aboriginal guide, who as the first, albeit reluctantly, explained the provenance of the Branshaw's rock paintings: "Long ago Kujon a *black bird*, painted on the rocks. He struck his bill against the stones so that it bled, and with the blood he painted. He painted no animals, only human-shaped figures which probably represent spirits."<sup>10</sup> This myth concerning the provenance of the Branshaw rock paintings has since been independently corroborated from other sources, suggesting that the aboriginals were aware of the material rejuvenation of the images and interpreted this as an evidence of their non-human origin. "For the Europeans, the salient question regarding the paintings has always been: *who painted them? what do they represent? what do they tell us of their authors?* These questions are not automatically the primary ones. For the Aboriginal people, they evoke very different questions: *where are they?* and *what do they want?*"<sup>11</sup>

### ***Where are they? What do they want?***

First of all, flies do play a role in art history, a marginal role, admittedly, but still curiously significant in its marginality. I am thinking of religious paintings and illuminations from Burgundy before the time of art, in later Dutch still lifes during the seventeenth century up to Ilya Kabakov's *Concert for a Fly* and other similar installations on the same theme.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Mihnea Mircan, "Figure 1." In *Allegory of the Cave Painting*, ed. Mihnea Mircan and Vincent W. J. van Gervan Oei (Antwerp: Extra City Kunsthall / Mousse Publishing, 2015), 14.

<sup>10</sup> Agnes Schultz, "North-West Australian Rock Paintings," *Memoirs of the National Museum of Victoria* 20 (January 1956): 47. Crawford, "Function and Change," 306, *my emphasis*.

<sup>11</sup> Adam Jaspers, "Lonely Rocks," in *Allegory of the Cave Painting*, ed. Mihnea Mircan and Vincent W. J. van Gervan Oei (Antwerp: Extra City Kunsthall / Mousse Publishing, 2015), 83.

<sup>12</sup> Ilya Kabakov, *Installationen 1983–2000. Werkverzeichnis*, ed. Toni Stooss (Düsseldorf: Richter Verlag, 2003). "The Fly with Wings" (1984), no. 3, "Concert for a Fly (Chamber Music)" (1986), no.



Although flies do not play any iconographic role at all in Smithson's art, the question of agency and the observational apparatuses of flies is of course not by chance: its ubiquitous presence, its inexterminable stamina ("would come and go from all over"), and its observational apparatus (almost 360° patchwork images in low resolution but high frequency). But I believe it is Ilya Kabakov who gives the key, when he insistently links the housefly with the "little white men," the toilet, dirt, and corners, all of which points towards the specific theological and metaphysical character of the fly: angelic and subterranean; winged, omnipresent, and all-seeing, but attracted to shit and decay; together with its grotesque appearance, which it shares with most insects, of being composed of mechanical, mineral, vegetable, as well as biological parts.

Entomologically, Smithson is not referring to the fly (*muscidae*) as such, but any winged insect (*pterygota*), as he includes "dragonflies, fruit flies, horseflies" in his enumeration, and if we were to stick to the Linnaean taxonomy we would have to include butterflies and beetles as well. But there are no compelling reasons why we should prefer this discourse before any other "Chinese encyclopedia," apart from noting that – *in art* – dragonflies, butterflies, and beetles are more closely related to *muscidae* than the Linnaean taxonomy suggests.<sup>13</sup> Compelling is, however, the fact that Smithson inconspicuously refers to "art" in relation to flies. It is not images or aesthetics that flies have, but *art*. That thing "art," which in our culture has existed since the Renaissance, and from the time of Robert Smithson onward, has taken over the few other art traditions existing in the world (the Chinese, the Japanese, and the Islamic art traditions), as well as it has colonized innumerable non-art cultures and traditions into the discourse of contemporary art (African, Medieval, Aboriginal, and Paleolithic art), comparable to how "[i]nsect vectors of pandemic diseases have probably affected humans more than any other eukaryotic animals."<sup>14</sup> This, seemingly inevitable expansion of the art world has naturally posed an insurmountable problem for any narrative or history of art as we know it. The art pandemic has had a tremendous, *recursive*, impact on the concept of art, in such a way that our accustomed notions like

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12, "Concert for a Blue Fly and a Yellow Pencil" (1990), no. 35, "My Motherland. The Flies" (1991) and "The Life of Flies" (1992), no. 56, "Concert for a Fly" (1993), no. 71.

<sup>13</sup> Jean Pucelle "refined the 'drolleries' into a fairy tale alive with birds and flowers, snails and insects; and among these a place of honor was reserved for the elegant dragonfly, *demoiselle* or *pucelle* in popular French, which became the punning trademark of his shop." Erwin Panofsky, *Early Netherlandish Painting. Its Origins and Character* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard UP, 1953), 32.

<sup>14</sup> David Grimaldi and Michael S. Engel, *Evolution of the Insects* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2005), 5.

“representation,” “illusion,” “expression,” “abstraction,” “readymade,” and so on, have become more or less irrelevant, an evolution of which Smithson seems to have been perfectly aware.

Although Smithson does not inquire after any ‘intelligence’ or ‘agency’ as I am doing here, he is just stating it: “The Jaguar in the mirror that smokes [*i.e.* Tezcatlipoca] in the World of Elements knows the work of Carl Andre.”<sup>15</sup> But he does give some hints regarding the ‘form’ of this agent. In the introductory part, we are told that the “road went through butterfly *swarms*. Near Bolonchen de Rejon thousands of yellow, white and black swallowtail butterflies flew past the car in *erratic, jerky flight patterns*.”<sup>16</sup>

*Swarming* is an emergent, decentralized behavior especially among insects, such as bees, ants, locusts, or termites, which precisely exhibit this kind of extra-individual intelligence. Although swarming presents a wealth of attractive attributes and is typical for most insects, it does not seem to play any compelling role when it comes to muscidae, butterflies, or beetles, which are the insects most commonly encountered in art. A concept closely linked with swarm intelligence is *stigmergy*, a mechanism of indirect coordination between agents and actions, who lack any memory, intelligence or even awareness of each other, leading to the spontaneous emergence of coherent and systematic activity. One significant example of stigmergic behavior is the migration of dragonflies, beetles, and butterflies, which differs from bird migration in that it doesn’t necessarily take the same direction each year, but furthermore due to the fact that since the migration can last over several generations to complete, the migrating insects is capable of keeping the flight pattern intact through some kind of inheritance or re-enactment. How the species manages to return to the same overwintering spots over a gap of several generations is apparently still a subject of research.<sup>17</sup> But, to my knowledge, such stigmergy or migrating inheritance in butterflies through a medium of time or generations does not seem to apply to muscidae either.

For us, as for the medieval theologian, the fly seems devoid of any *raison-d’être*. It seems useless, and superfluous, “but also because it seemed a kind of counterfeit life, life

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<sup>15</sup> Smithson, “Incidents of Mirror-Travel,” 97.

<sup>16</sup> Smithson, “Incidents of Mirror-Travel,” 96, *my emphasis*.

<sup>17</sup> Christine Merlin, Robert J. Geagear, and Steven M. Reppert, “Antennal Circadian Clocks Coordinate Sun Compass Orientation in Migratory Monarch Butterflies,” *Science* 325, no. 5948 (September 2009): 1700–1704; Charalambos P. Kyriacou, “Unraveling Traveling,” *Science* 325, no. 5948 (September 2009): 1629–1630.

self-realized in excess of the divine blueprint.”<sup>18</sup> And maybe it is just that. Remembering a passage in Bruce Chatwin’s succinctly art theoretical novel *Utz*, the character Olřík says:

‘I chose’, he said, ‘to study *Musca domestica* within the Prague Metropolitan area.’

Just as his friend Mr Utz could tell at a glance whether a piece of Meissen porcelain was made from the white clay of Colditz or the white clay of Erzgebirge, he, Olřík, having examined under a microscope the iridescent membrane of a fly’s wing, claimed to know if the insect came from one of the garbage dumps that now encircled the New Garden City.

He confessed to being enchanted by the vitality of the fly. It was fashionable among his fellow entomologists – especially the Party Members – to applaud the behaviour of the social insects: the ants, bees, wasps and other varieties of Hymenoptera which organised themselves into regimented communities.

‘But the fly’, said Olřík, ‘is an anarchist.’<sup>19</sup>

And this gives us a clue to why the fly, and especially the beyond comparison the most common species, the *musca domestica*, to my knowledge, without any significant swarming behavior, nor with any recognized stigmergy, nevertheless would be the most susceptible for having art – namely: its *synanthropy*, its metropolitanism and historical commensal relationship with humans, which seem to have been the very cause for the evolution and worldwide distribution of the species in the first place. The fly has accompanied humanoids and humans throughout the ages as our inseparable shadow. As such, the housefly is the most prominent transmitter of parasites, bacteria, and viruses to humans while it itself develops immunity within a couple of generations.

In a *Portrait of a Mathematician* (Luca Pacioli) by Jacopo de’ Barbari from about 1495,<sup>20</sup> a housefly sits with its sticky, padded feet right on the *cartellino* with the artist’s signature, partially obscuring the date. Because this cartellino is not part of the image itself, but a colophon to the image, and the fly sits on it, the fly pushes the colophon back as an integral, iconographic part of the image, making the painter and date the image-space effect and the fly the real-space cause. The fly occupies the same liminal status in Petrus Christus’s austere and thoughtful *Portrait of a Carthusian* (1446),<sup>21</sup> situated on the trompe-l’œil frame, outside the image, but, within the indexical space of the signature, here exactly above the interpunct that splits “petrvs” from “xpi.” A different effect is apparent in one of

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<sup>18</sup> Steven Connor, “Flysight,” accessed 19 January 2022, <http://www.stevenconnor.com/flysight>

<sup>19</sup> Bruce Chatwin, *Utz* (London, Random House, 1988), 28.

<sup>20</sup> Oil on panel, 99 × 120 cm. Napoli, Museo di Capodimonte, Q 58.

<sup>21</sup> Oil on panel, 29.2 × 21.6 cm. New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 49.7.19.

Carlo Crivelli's *Madonna and Child* (ca. 1480),<sup>22</sup> where the fly sits on the parapet to the left corresponding to the trompe-l'œil signature on a cartellino attached to the watered-silk cloth with wax to the right. The Holy Figures both seem distracted by its presence, as if they were posing in a photo session, and in the very moment of exposure were disturbed by this sudden presence of the fly.

Since Erwin Panofsky first identified this iconographic quirk in the history of European painting, it has subsequently been observed in different parts of Europe during the long century before art, i.e. from the mid-fourteenth to the early sixteenth century, when it as suddenly as completely disappears.<sup>23</sup> It is clear that the real-space images of flies painted on the image-space or trompe-l'œil frames or cartellini are related to the story of Giotto fooling his master Cimabue, which is first documented in Filarete's treatise on architecture from the early 1460s, where Filarete says he had read "of Giotto that in one of his first works he painted flies and his master Cimabue was fooled by them, thinking they were alive, and wanted to chase them away with a cloth."<sup>24</sup> Even if based on a topos well known since Antiquity, it is obvious that this story can't be the cause of the *muscae depictae*, but that the anecdote is itself an expression of the quirk. The transformation of the classical topos from featuring a drapery or grapes into flies might, on the other hand, be due to Guerino da Verona's Latin translation of Lucian's satirical *Muscae Encomium* in 1440, which inspired Alberti to write his own adaption.<sup>25</sup>

Anna Eörsi has identified the earliest example of a representation of real-space flies on an image-space to be Giovannino de' Grassi miniature painting "Creation of the World," in the *Visconti Hours*, dating from around 1394–95.<sup>26</sup> Seven flies (and a stag beetle, that is a *scarabaeoid*), in life-size and seen from above, are all welcome to walk on the page with their sticky, padded feet, in order to get a close look. They are *on* the image – partly joining

<sup>22</sup> Tempera and gold on panel, 37.8 × 25.4 cm. New York, Metropolitan Museum of Art, 49.7.5.

<sup>23</sup> Erwin Panofsky, *Albrecht Dürer* (Princeton: Princeton UP, 1943): II, 12. André Pigler, "La mouche peinte: un talisman." *Bulletin du Musée Hongrois des Beaux-Arts* 24 (1964): 47, 50.

<sup>24</sup> Antonio Averlino detto Il Filarete, *Tratto di architettura*, ed. Anna Maria Finoli and Lilianna Grassi (Milan: Il Polifilo, 1972), II, 181. Quoted from Norman Land, "Giotto's Fly, Cimabue's Gesture, and a 'Madonna and Child' by Carlo Crivelli," *Source: Notes in the History of Art* 15, no. 4 (Summer, 1996): 13.

<sup>25</sup> Kandice Rawlings, "Painted Paradoxes: The *Trompe-l'oeil* Fly in the Renaissance," *Athanor* 26 (2008): 7–13.

<sup>26</sup> Florence, Biblioteca Nazionale, Landau-Finaly 22, f. 19. Anna Eörsi, "Puer, Abige Muscas! Remarks on Renaissance Flyology," *Acta Historiae Artium Academiae Scientiarum Hungariae* 42 (2001): 7–8. Edith W. Kirsch, *Five Illuminated Manuscripts of Giangaleazzo Visconti* (University Park and London: College Art Association – The Pennsylvania State UP, 1991), 55, 89–92, ill. 60.

us in our observation, and partly irritating and obfuscating our view – and in this case, outside of the creation, as if insects were not created by God but rather some kind of ready-made remnants, or cast shadows of invisible entities. This would at least be Ilya Kabakov's interpretation.

Due to the fact that these real-space representations 'landed' on manuscript illuminations and panel paintings during the century before art, just to disappear altogether – or dissolve into the image-space – during the sixteenth century onwards, the flies acts as if agents or vectors in the establishment of this art. This is further emphasized by the fact that the flies are almost always depicted close up to, or even above, the signatures, as if correcting or demean them. This resonates curiously with the mischievous misspelling of the Arabic artists' names, communicated by the artists of the future, in Walid Raad's "Index XXVI: Red." But the reason, the performance-lecturer speculates, is because the future artists need the *color red* that will eventually surface with the sprayed corrections.<sup>27</sup>

In a signed painting by Derick Baegert, *St Luke Painting the Virgin* (ca. 1470),<sup>28</sup> the signature is placed on a jug on a cabinet in the back of the room where St Luke is painting, immediately adjacent a trompe-l'œil fly, albeit within the image-space of the picture, but more conspicuously, further in the right background we see *an angel grinding the color red*,<sup>29</sup> as if prefiguring "Index XXVI: Red" of Walid Raad. The *St Luke*-picture is the model from which the centerpiece – of lesser quality, and without signature and fly – of a *St Luke Altarpiece* is copied. The altarpiece (and *a fortiori* the panel) – so argues Felix Thürlemann – is in turn a close copy of a lost original altarpiece by Robert Campin,<sup>30</sup> and if Baegert copied every detail meticulously, then the lost original of Campin would be the earliest *musca depicta* on a panel, and would then date from the 1420s.

"Nevertheless, flies are attracted to such riddles." The "riddles" Smithson refers to are of topological nature: "dislocated North and South poles," "poles that have slipped from the geographical moorings of the world's axis," establishing and marking local, peripheral places, "regions of the mind fixed in mundane matter" as marking a "dizzy path from one

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<sup>27</sup> Raad, "Index XXVI: Red," 4–6.

<sup>28</sup> Oil on panel, 113 × 82 cm. Münster: Westfälisches Landesmuseum, 59.

<sup>29</sup> Eörsi, "*Puer, Abige Muscas!*," 17.

<sup>30</sup> Felix Thürlemann, "Das Lukas-Triptychon in Stolzenhain. Ein verlorenes Hauptwerk von Robert Campin in einer Kopie aus der Werkstatt Derick Baegerts," *Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte* 55, no. 4 (1992): 524–64.

doubtful point to another.”<sup>31</sup> Although based on very few artefacts, it has been argued that the earliest representations of insects in Olmec art and writing, notably as a letter in a yet unknown writing system, functioned precisely as a transcendental vector identified as the *axis mundi*,<sup>32</sup> that is the mobile, dislocated topological axis flies are attracted to.

John Dee depicted this *axis mundi* in his “Circumpolar chart” (1580),<sup>33</sup> with its magnetic rock, *rupes nigra*, based on information received from Gerard Mercator.<sup>34</sup> The source of Mercator, the otherwise unknown Jacob Cnoyen (active during the last quarter of the fifteenth century), must nevertheless, directly or indirectly, have informed Hieronymus Bosch of this polar rock, as can be plainly seen on the central axis of the central panel of his *Garden of Earthly Delights*, which obviously interprets Cnoyen’s description of the North Pole (as the center of the world), but where the central rock is rendered as a kind of spherical glass, crystal rock, or bizarre *arkhitekton*. Dee had access to, and used, Chinese maps for the Far Eastern part of his “Circumpolar chart,”<sup>35</sup> and somehow, through some strange enantiomorphism, this idea of *rupes nigra* came to mirror one of the central topos in Chinese art: *the readymade rock*, which presented itself for the susceptible mind.<sup>36</sup> And here we should not forget what John Onians reminds us of, namely that Pliny the Elder’s reports of the painters and sculptors of Antiquity “are not introduced as histories of art at all, but as accounts of how earth, metals and stones are transformed by man for his use. [...] Sculpture and painting appear only because Pliny need to give an account of the processing first of metals and then of stones.”<sup>37</sup>

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<sup>31</sup> Smithson, “Incidents of Mirror-Travel,” 101.

<sup>32</sup> Arnaud F. Lambert, “Insectiforms in Olmec-Style Art and Writing,” *The Post Hole*, no. 34 (2014): 17–24.

<sup>33</sup> Robert Baldwin, “John Dee’s Interest in the Application of Nautical Science, Mathematics and Law to English Naval Affairs,” in *John Dee: Interdisciplinary Studies in English Renaissance Thought*, ed. Stephen Clucas (Dordrecht: Springer, 2006): 102.

<sup>34</sup> “In the midst of the four countries is a Whirl-pool ... into which there empty these four indrawing Seas which divide the North. And the water rushes round and descends into the Earth just as if one were pouring it through a filter funnel. It is four degrees wide on every side of the Pole, that is to say eight degrees altogether. Except that right under the Pole there lies a bare Rock in the midst of the Sea. Its circumference is almost 33 French miles, and it is all of magnetic Stone [...] This is word for word everything that I copied out of this author [Jacobus Cnoyen] years ago.” E.G.R. Taylor, “A Letter Dated 1577 from Mercator to John Dee,” *Imago Mundi* 13 (1956): 60–61.

<sup>35</sup> Baldwin, “John Dee’s Interest,” 101.

<sup>36</sup> John Hay, *Kernels of Energy. Bones of Earth: the Rock in Chinese Art* (New York: China Institute, 1985); John Hay, “Structure and Aesthetic Criteria in Chinese Stones and Art,” *RES* 13 (1987): 6–22; Michele Matteini, “The Story of a Stone: Mi Fu’s Ink-Grinding Stone and its Eighteenth-Century Replications,” *Arts Asiatiques* 72 (2017): 81–96.

<sup>37</sup> John Onians, *Classical Art and the Cultures of Greece and Rome* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1999), 233.

### *John Dee, the contemporary artist*

The concept of a history of art, formed by Vasari, through Winckelmann up until modernism, is that the discourse of art continuously evolves through temporal causality. Cimabue and Giotto are the causes of Masaccio and Ghirlandaio, who again are the causes of Raphael and Michelangelo; Pollock and Newman are the consequences of Kandinsky and Mondrian, who in their turn are the effects of Monet and Cézanne, who are the effects of Courbet and Manet. In this way the art historian has access to earlier art through a methodological ‘reverse engineering.’ Any formal, iconographic, or semiotic feature in a work can be explained (interpreted) through this causal-historical engineered excavation of meaning. With the recent receptions – or rather: *epiphanies* – of Maria Sibylla Merian, Hilma af Klint, and Korbinian Aigner, among many others, the historiographical coherence of this methodology is altogether annihilated (not to speak of contemporary art practices). Any meaning, *including history*, of their practices, as works of art, must obviously stem from elsewhere.

Thus, the art historical relevance of Hilma af Klint’s practice is not – as often stated – any pioneering abstraction. Klint’s art stands in no relation whatsoever to the question of post-impressionism, cubism, suprematism, or neo-plasticism. It does not even concern the question of abstraction as such, nor does it concern other typical modernist concepts as expression, realism, ‘significant form,’ or any other such conceptual currencies from the early twentieth-century art. It is an implicit feminist project, opposing the male dominated art historical narrative by ‘going underground,’ and in this way undercutting the roots of this narrative. But what makes her practice momentous is first and foremost its project character, her re-definition of the author-function, first through the collaborative practice in the group “De Fem” (*The Five*), later through her communication with (the named) higher intelligences, giving her their assignment and defining the meaning and form of the images. These intelligences (Amaliel, Gregor, a Rosicrucian from the fifteenth century [*sic!*] ...) knows her art in the future; that the project was already realized in a perfective aspect: “In the rear-view mirror appeared Tezcatlipoca – demiurge of the ‘smoking-mirror.’ ‘All those guide books are of no use,’ said Tezcatlipoca, ‘You must travel at random, like the first Mayans, you risk getting lost in the thickets, but that is the only way to make art.’”<sup>38</sup>

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<sup>38</sup> Smithson, “Incidents of Mirror-Travel,” 93–94.

Smithson's use of Tezcatlipoca as the informing agent throughout the essay, is not by chance. Tezcatlipoca, which means "smoking mirror" in classical Nahuatl, is a black deity linked with sorcery and divination through his main attribute, the obsidian mirror. Smithson knew of these mirrors through his artist-friend Michael Heizer's father, Robert Heizer, a distinguished archaeologist who did some substantial works on Olmec obsidian mirrors and they are obviously connected to Smithson's ideas on enantiomorphism, that is mirrored symmetries. This enantiomorphic figure or obsidian mirror is used throughout Smithson's Yucatan-essay, often in a surprising context, as the rear-view mirror of a car or the like.

Apart from a number of other "glasses" and "stones," it was precisely such an Aztec obsidian mirror that John Dee, with his scrying collaborators, used in their communication with the intelligences. "The *speculum* brought by the angel might be the obsidian mirror in that Dee at first mistakes it for a round shadow [...]." <sup>39</sup> Although the provenance to Dee of the obsidian mirror in the British Museum is not firmly established, <sup>40</sup> this is of limited relevance in this topological (enantiomorphic) perspective: Horace Walpole, the antiquarian, collector, writer, and art historian, who first claimed that the *stone* was used by John Dee in the Actions, had already in 1784 produced the association of the activities of John Dee to Tezcatlipoca, the "Smoking Mirror," without the slightest idea of its Aztec provenance, but

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<sup>39</sup> Christopher L. Whitby, "John Dee's Actions with Spirits: 22 December 1581 to 23 May 1583" (PhD diss., University of Birmingham, 1981), I, 140.

<sup>40</sup> Whitby, "John Dee's Actions with Spirits," I, 138–41. Silke Ackermann and Louise Devoy, "'The Lord of the Smoking Mirror'. Objects Associated with John Dee," *Studies in History and Philosophy of Science* 43, no. 3 (2012): 542–43; Stuart Campbell et al., "The Mirror, the Magus and More: Reflections on John Dee's Obsidian Mirror," *Antiquity* 95, no. 384 (2021): 1550; Deborah E. Harkness, *John Dee's Conversations with Angels. Cabala, Alchemy, and the End of Nature* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1999), 30; György E. Szönyi, *John Dee's Occultism. Magical Exaltation through Powerful Signs* (Albany, NY: State University of New York Press, 2004), 205–6. The most compelling argument for that the obsidian mirror in the British Library really stems from Dee, is to be found in documents during the settlement of John Pontois's estate (Pontois being an alchemist and an intellectual associate and scryer for Dee during his last years) after his death in 1624 by another late associate of Dee, Patrick Saunders: "Saunders described Pontois's double study, which contained some of Dee's books, a few old trunks, 'a Table ... which Pountys [sic] rec[k]oned to be of great value,' and a 'stone or Jewell of Cristall.'" Hawes's description of the double study was more detailed. The grocer referred to 'a certain round flat stone like a Christall which Pountis said was a stone which an Angell brought to doctor dye wherein he did worke and know many strange things.' The valuable table was also more fulsomely described as a 'Table with Characters and devises uppon it which was kept covered by the said Pountis in the innermost of the upper studdyes.'" Julian Roberts and Andrew G. Watson, *John Dee's Library Catalogue* (London: The Bibliographical Society, 1990), 61. Quoted from Harkness, *John Dee's Conversations with Angels*, 219.



on the other hand unwittingly explaining why the Apparitions in the Actions more often than not are accompanied with smoke.<sup>41</sup>

If not causally linked with any main current of modernism, Hilma af Klint's practice is on the other hand perfectly *compossible* with the practice of John Dee, and furthermore casting a partly new light on the sense and meaning of Dee's quest for knowledge with his otherwise – even if we try to apply a period eye – unconventional blending of scientific, hermetic, and magical discourses.<sup>42</sup> It is true that the recent recognition of Hilma af Klint first and foremost is incited by her *paintings*, being the conventional artistic medium. But the *dispositifs* motoring this reconfiguration of art are, as said, nevertheless located in the hermeticism, the collaborative and non-anthropocentric practices, and especially the *performative* aspect of her work (without which the paintings would never had been exhibited in the first place). This becomes clear when we consider some other remarkable re-appearances, like the one's of Sophie Taeuber-Arp and "The Baroness," Elsa von Freytag-Loringhoven, both propelled by their *performative practices* and not at all by their 'Dada sculptures.' The latter pointing at the activities of Anita Berber and Sebastian Droste as navigational stars of any future art.<sup>43</sup>

This shift in contemporary art, from artefact to performativity, have some dramatic consequences, which of course have been operative all the time in every art tradition labelled 'primitive.' The most fundamental consequence, succinctly observed by Nelson Godman, being the *allographic* character of the performative arts, as opposed to the *autographic* character of physical works like paintings.<sup>44</sup> "Where does that leave the art object? If European art is necrophilic, mobile and semiotic, the art of the Ngarinyin and Murinbata is generative, spatial and performative."<sup>45</sup> This implies that the performative art work can only be disseminated through series of re-enactments or 'installations.' But as the art institutions are intrinsically dependent on exhibitable and reproducible artefacts, it has to

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<sup>41</sup> Whitby, "John Dee's Actions with Spirits," II, 50–51, 130–31, 163, 188–89, 271, 392.

<sup>42</sup> "[T]o approach prognostication on a strictly scientific ground, [...]" Szönyi, *John Dee's Occultism*, 157.

<sup>43</sup> Anita Berber (1899–1928) and Sebastian Droste (1898–1927), dancers and performers, published their version of a 'Mnemosyne-Atlas,' *Die Tänze des Lasters, des Grauens und der Ekstase* (Wien: Glossette Verlag, 1923). Irene Gammel, *Baroness Elsa. Gender, Dada, and Everyday Modernity. A Cultural Biography* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002), 331–33.

<sup>44</sup> Nelson Godman, *Languages of Art. An Approach to a Theory of Symbols* (Indianapolis: Hackett, 1976), 13.

<sup>45</sup> Jasper, "Lonely Rocks," 91.

transform any ‘document’ (and other remnants) from its status as historical record towards an exhibitable and reproducible artistic expression for esthetic apprehension.<sup>46</sup>

It is not without pride that Dee recalls his very first performance, with which he already as a young man gained a certain reputation as a magus:

Hereupon I did sett forth (and it was scene of the University) a Greeke comedy of Aristophanes, named in Greek Εἰρήνη, in Latin, *Pax* with the performance of the *Scarabeus* his flying up to Jupiter’s pallace, with a man and his basket of victualls on her back: whereat was great wondring, and many vaine reports spread abroad of the meanes how that was effected.<sup>47</sup>

As if a human-size stag beetle flew up onto the ceiling of Trinity Hall with its “sticky, padded feet, in order to get a close look.”

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<sup>46</sup> As for instance Hilma af Klint’s *Notebooks*, Maria Sibylla Merian’s *Publications*, but as a logical consequence, numerous ‘non-art’ documents as well, e.g. Walter Benjamin’s *Notes* as well as Aby Warburg’s *Manuscripts*.

<sup>47</sup> John Dee, “The Compendious Rehearsall . . .,” in *Autobiographical Tracts*, ed. James Crossley ([Manchester]: Printed for the Chetham Society, 1851), 5–6. In his *Mathematicall Preface* from 1590 he gives it a broader perspective when he describes the “Thaumaturgike,” the art of making “straunge workes, of the sense to be perceived, and of men greatly to be wondered at.” John Dee, “Mathematicall Praeface,” *The Elements of Geometry of Euclid of Megara*, trans. Henry Billingsley (London: John Daye, 1570), sign. A1. “Thaumaturgike” is one of the nineteen arts described by Dee as derivative of mathematics. Among these we note “Musike,” “Architecture,” and “Zographie,” the latter being Dee’s term for painting (and sculpture).