

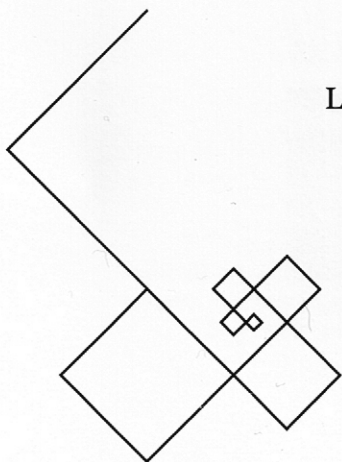
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# *EnvironMentalities*

TWENTY-TWO APPROACHES  
TO ECO-ART

LINDA WEINTRAUB

*with* SKIP SCHUCKMANN



AVANT-GUARDIANS  
TEXTLETS ON ART AND ECOLOGY

ARTNOW PUBLICATIONS

# Brandon Ballengée

**Born 1974 Sandusky, Ohio** Brandon Ballengée is an artist who seems obsessed with spineless sex. He has created *Love Motels for Insects* in Asia, Europe, and the Americas, with

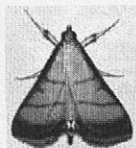
upcoming variations in Australia and Israel. Viewers may be disappointed that his motel settings lack heart-shaped beds and mirrored ceilings. The hedonist paradises created by Ballengée appeal to arthropod eroticism. Instead of dimming the lights, Ballengée turns the lights on to full voltage, because lights turn the insects on to full sexual arousal. Insects can't resist the glaring ultraviolet lights he installs, along with bed sheets, in these outdoor sculptures. While the insects are courting, and copulating, he is counting insect species and tabulating their diversity. Ballengée is not only a laborious voyeur. He is a methodical Cataloguer.

Entomologists have not figured out how the ocular structure of some insects' eyes enables them to perceive ultraviolet light, or why UV light is so irresistible to them, but Ballengée eagerly exploits these attractions. When the installations are first set up out of doors, they function as pick-up bars for cruising arthropods. But the *sculptures quickly become transformed into steamy sex clubs after the first insects arrive, become sexually aroused, and saturate the sheets with pheromones.* This sexy perfume entices and excites newcomers. As more insects convene, more pheromones are released and the sculptures become an aphrodisiac paradise. Raucous, all-night insect orgies ensue.

The human perspective on this scene is far less sexy. Ballengée's project involves the collection, identification, phylogenic examination, and photography of as many arthropod species as possible. Digital prints of individual insects comprise large wall installations for gallery displays of the data he collects and catalogues. The images are arranged to present the evolutionary relationships among the species. Individual prints are separated into families, families into genres, and genres into species. The resulting wall works document the complex interconnections among insect life-forms. Generally, each print is identified by date, location, and time, while each insect is identified by its Latin name and its name in the local language.

The full title of the series is *Arthropod Diversity Study Units AKA Love Motels for Insects*. Ballengée explains, "This series of works began in Central America in 2001 as an investigative reaction to the intense arthropod diversity found within tropical rainforests. Attempting to attract insects, I set up primitive structures made from black (ultra-violet) lights and bed-sheets placed in the forest floor. Within moments, hundreds of flying visitors came to the piece: fluttering moths, blood-sucking hemipteras, clunky beetles, delicate caddis flies, ants, lacewings, and many more. The diversity of colors, shapes, and sizes was fantastic! Female moths released chemical pheromones to attract mates and consequently 'painted' the piece. Beetles hungrily humped one upon the other while releasing vibrant colored eggs and primordial fluids. I found I had staged a kind of arthropod rite of Bacchus. On the second night, spiders and their predacious kin began to visit. They laboriously decorated the sculpture with their own form of geometric abstraction. Attracted to movement, other predators, such as tarantulas, mantids, scorpions, bats, and amphibians followed. I counted, photographed, recorded predator/prey

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relationships, created a biotic index, and attempted to identify each species that interacted with the sculptures."<sup>(2)</sup>

Ballengée reveals his status as an archetypal Cataloguer when he states, "I like to show as many insects as possible, not just the sexy ones or the aesthetically interesting ones. Some day I would like to show thousands of the photographs of insects from all over the world and cluster them according to continents so people can see the similarities and the variations."<sup>(3)</sup> The difficult part of this project is not finding the insects. Insects are in the soil beneath our feet, in the air above our heads, on and in the bodies of the plants and animals around us, and on and in us. The challenge involves managing the abundance. *Love Motels* can attract between four and five thousand insects each night. Ballengée estimates that over the course of his career he has documented more than 12,000 different species of insect. But his goal of representing insect diversity is far from achieved. His accomplishment is a tiny percent of the approximately 700,000 insect species that are named and classified, and the 30 million insect species that may actually exist.<sup>(4)</sup> Arthropods outnumber all other forms of life combined. They constitute 80 percent of animal diversity on the planet.

It is rare for humans to encourage insects to reproduce. Most encounters with arthropods involve swatting, zapping, stomping, spraying, or trapping. In fact, UV lights are used to lure insects into electrocution chambers, not to facilitate breeding. The

(2) Telephone interview with the artist, July 20, 2005.

(3) Ibid.

(4) "Selective Memory," [www.free-soil.org/algae/](http://www.free-soil.org/algae/) "t " \_blank"  
[www.free-soil.org/algae/](http://www.free-soil.org/algae/)



word "insect" conjures disagreeable images of termites gnawing on houses, cockroaches fouling food in kitchen cabinets, ants invading picnics, lice infesting hair, spiders biting flesh, beetles devouring flowers, mosquitoes carrying West Nile viruses, and moth larvae feasting on heirloom textiles. These associations explain the terms "Don't 'pester' me" and "Stop 'bugging' me".

Ballengée introduces the public to the emotion-free, fact-bound views that typify Cataloguers. His respectful attentiveness reveals the significance of insects in maintaining a living planet by pollinating, decomposing, aerating soil, etc. As the renowned Harvard biologist E. O. Wilson once wrote, "So important are insects and other land-dwelling arthropods that if all were to disappear, humanity probably could not last more than a few months."<sup>(5)</sup> Ballengée also conveys the fact that an increasing number of insect species are appearing on the Red List of Threatened Species.<sup>(6)</sup> That is why he exhibits photographic records, rather than collecting live specimens.

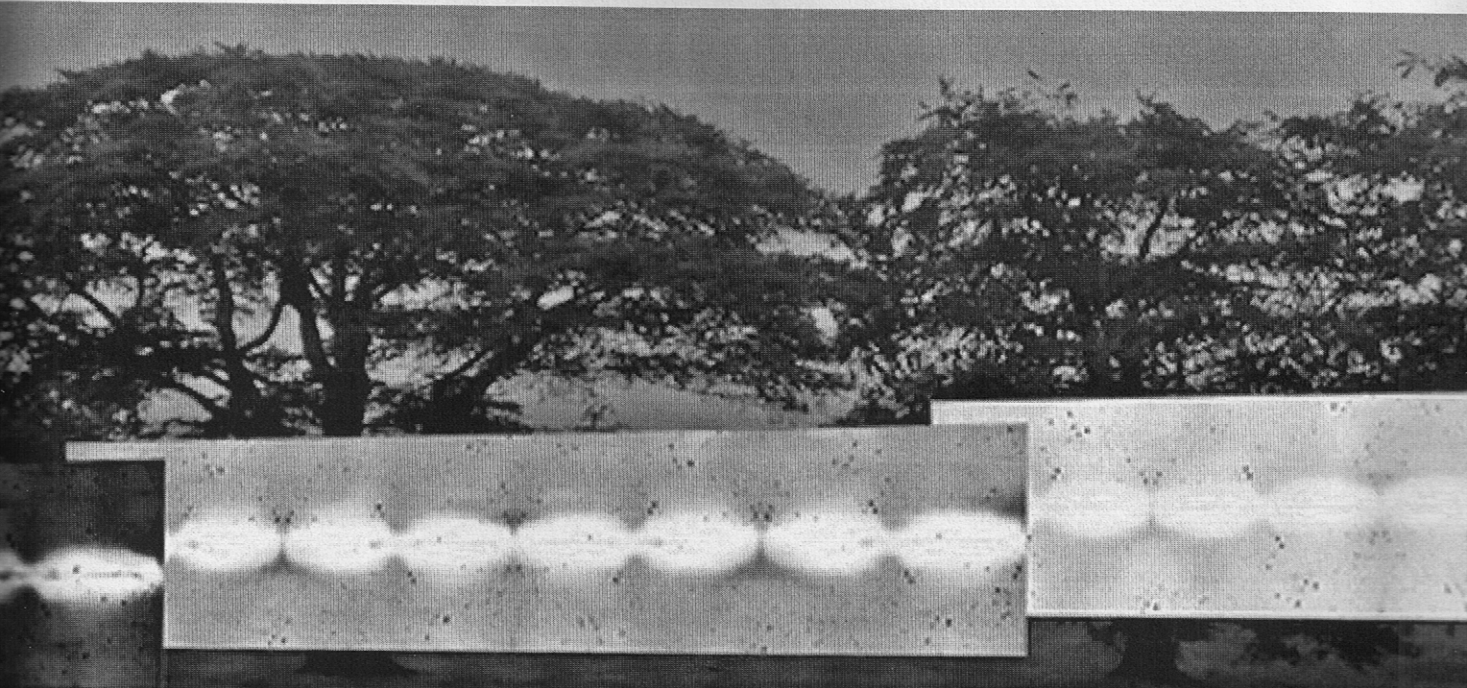
Pilot programs around the country are utilizing citizen-monitoring programs to augment the collection of scientific data. Ballengée supports these initiatives. He refers to his works as "social sculptures," because he is intent on attracting humans as well as insects. Part of each project includes organizing public field trips, mounting public installations, and inviting the public to participate by photographing the insects. He comments, "Insects have short life spans. Most only live a few days. The public can see the fantastic evolutionary drama of the life cycle played out. This is not possible ordinarily, considering our typical life and our idea of time. It is an epic."<sup>(7)</sup>

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(5) Ibid.

(6) The International Union for the Conservation of Nature and Natural Resources Red List of Threatened Species included 623 insect species in 2006. [www.xerces.org/pubs\\_merch/articles/Encyclopedia%20article.pdf](http://www.xerces.org/pubs_merch/articles/Encyclopedia%20article.pdf)

(7) Telephone interview with the artist, July 20, 2005.





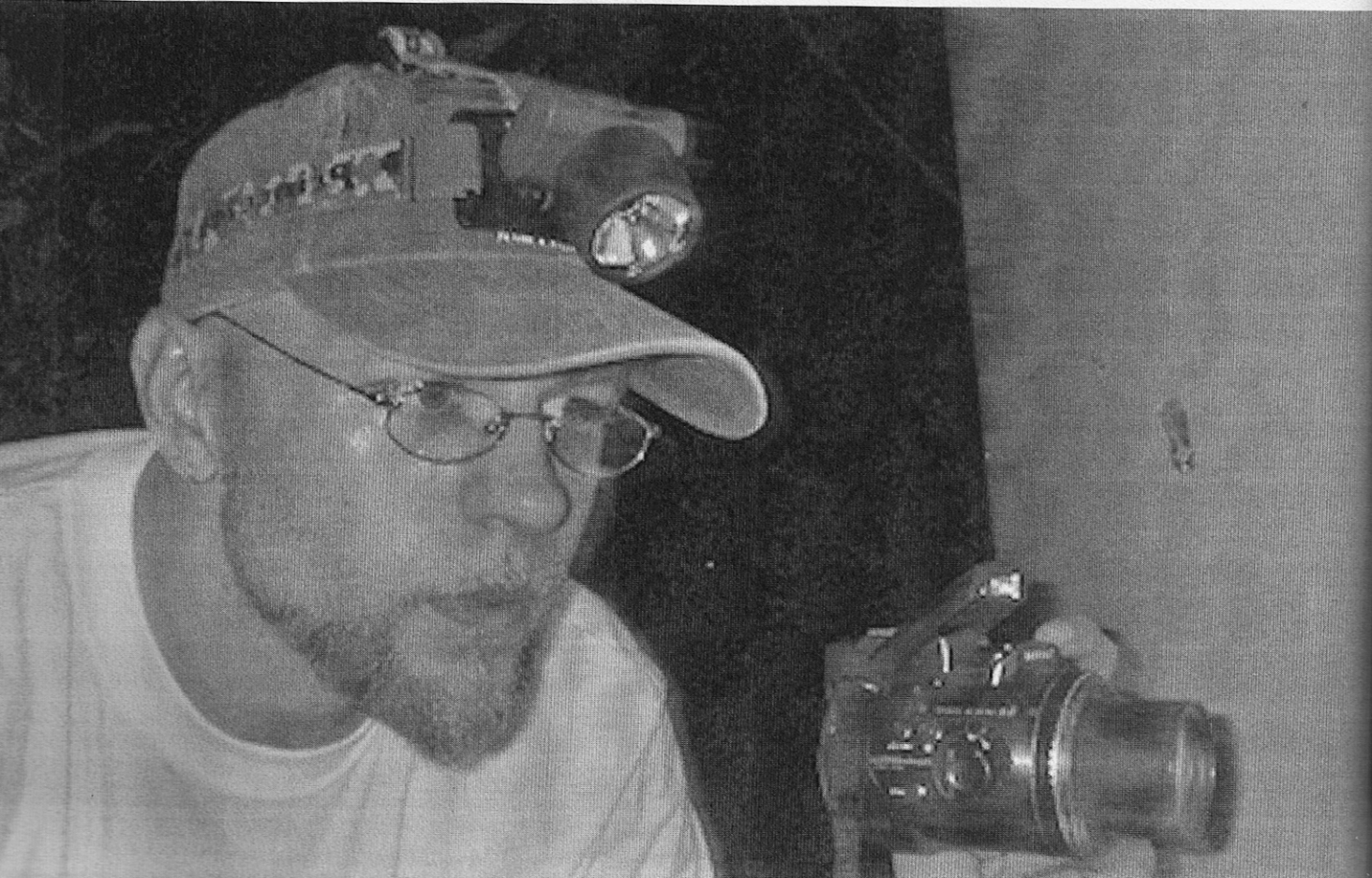
Ballengée straddles the categories of science and art. He and his participants gather scientifically rigorous information about insect life cycles, populations, seasonality, predators, and so forth. Furthermore, almost every time Ballengée constructs a *Love Motel*, he uncovers some previously unidentified species. "For those that are new discoveries, I provide the genus. If that can't be known, I provide the family. If that is uncertain, I identify the order."<sup>(8)</sup> His work is reported in science journals and presented in science institutions. But his photographs and prints are also reviewed in art publications and exhibited in art galleries, where they are pinned up in the manner of laboratory specimens to emphasize the scientific rigor of this art practice. Identifications and relationships between species, not aesthetics, determine the arrangement.

In an expansion of cataloguing endeavors, Ballengée undertook Species Reclamation via a *Non-Linear Genetic Timeline* (1999 and ongoing). The work is a bold attempt to repopulate a vacancy on the listings of amphibian populations. Ballanegée is trying to recreate an aquatic Congo frog (*Hymenochirus curtipes*) that succumbed to the slashing-and-burning of its forest habitat. Ballengée explains, "By controlled pairing of related species and/or subspecies, I hope to generate an *H. curtipes* model by literally breeding backwards."<sup>(9)</sup> This work suggests that humans might cause species extinctions, but human effort might also reverse this regrettable trend.

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(8) Ibid.

(9) "Paradise Now: Picturing the Genetic Revolution," [www.genomicart.org/ballengée](http://www.genomicart.org/ballengée)



**Postscript:** Besides enumerating and organizing, through his art practice, the enormous number of species that have survived, Ballengée discovered a distressing number that are endangered. *The Ever Changing Tide: The Ecological Dynamics of the Earth's Oceans as Exemplified through the Biodiversity of the Queens Seafood Markets* (2000–2001) presents the remarkable diversity of fish populations; however, it does not commemorate their vitality because many of the marine species being offered for sale are threatened by overfishing, global climate change, and the introduction of competitive non-native species.

Another artist who engages in cataloguing as his creative art practice is Mark Dion. Unlike Ballengée, Dion reverses the association of diversity with threatened species. *Roundup: An Entomological Endeavor for the Smart Museum of Art* (2000) highlighted the resilience of organisms that survive and reproduce despite human efforts to banish them. Dion tabulated insects and microscopic life forms that thrive in the pristine and sanitized interior of this prominent art museum. *Roundup* is an installation that resembles a scientific laboratory, where Dion actually catalogued and exhibited the tiny insidious specimens that had escaped attempts to eliminate them.

Finally, *Free Soil*, an art collective, conducted two parallel cataloguing projects dealing with the Baltic Sea since the end of World War II. They organized their data by separating those events that documented environmental conditions from those that recorded human activities. They drew no conclusions of their own, but by placing the archives side by side, relationships emerged that might otherwise not be noted. Members Nis Rømer and Joni Taylor explain *Selective Memory* (2005), "We created an alternative archive of political and historical events that have occurred in the Baltic Sea region. . . and linked these with the sea's responses."<sup>(10)</sup> They noted, for example, that 2,350 tons of oil spilled after a collision between two carriers; the Swedish military's decision to halt the use of propellers by ships to avoid disturbing the contaminated sediment that lay on the sea floor; and the spread of toxic blue-green algae. The data were derived from high tech means such as satellite images and remote sensing, video material, interviews, digital images, online research, and data from an oceanographic institute. The workspace at the 2005 Garage Festival served as the point of contact for visitors, with drawings, maps, and a website on display. These parallel catalogues reveal that "the impacts of industrialization, population growth, and political changes have resulted in climatic and environmental changes recorded in the sea."<sup>(11)</sup>

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(10) "Selective Memory,"  
[www.free-soil.org/algae/](http://www.free-soil.org/algae/)

(11) Ibid.