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An Itinerant, a Messenger and an Explorer: The work of Brandon Ballengée

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There has been an enormous amount of interest over the last decade in the intersections between art and science. These intersections cover many forms and depend on interpretation, but rarely do any examples indicate a genuine fusion of the best of both fields. The environmental artist and ecological researcher Brandon Ballengée possibly comes closest to this idealised synthesis.

Ballengée's artistic practice is immersed in the study of and exchange of ideas around biodiversity and ecological change, and particularly global species decline. He has a special interest in amphibians and fish, but his projects have also investigated insects and birds. All his work is invested in studying the changing ecologies in which these species evolve, adapt and struggle to survive. His practice incorporates primary biological research (field and laboratory), ecological surveys, participatory field trips, environmental activism and exhibitions, often incorporating installations of constructed wetland ecosystems with living species, maps and survey results, and high-resolution scanned images of specimens collected in the field, often collaborating with scientists and members of the public.

A primary part of Ballengée's work is investigation into deformed and declining amphibian species. As a species that metamorphoses in water, amphibians are extremely responsive to changes in their environment and therefore serve as an "advance guard", warning us of degradation of habitats. About one-third of the over 5000 known amphibian species are declining or already extinct. Amphibian deformities are an increasing area of concern and study for scientists; deformities in amphibians have been found on six continents and appear to be increasing. It has been suggested that the occurrence of malformation may affect already declining species.

In his twofold role as artist and researcher, Ballengée has initiated and taken part in many surveys of amphibian species in North America, and he has shown work and given lectures on the results and implications of these studies. He has also shown his ongoing attempts to breed an extinct species of frog back into existence, and in 2002, more controversially, web cast his collaboration with Dr. Stanley Sessions in which they practiced an experimental, mechanical disruption in developing amphibian limb buds, twiddling embryonic pre-limbs with a physical tool resulting in multiple limbs, as part of an ongoing research process to determine the factors causing these types of malformations.

The Arts Catalyst, Yorkshire Sculpture Park and Gunpowder Park (in London's Lea Valley Park), have commissioned Ballengée to undertake a study of amphibians in the localities of the parks, particularly looking at deformities, which have not been well studied in this country. Ballengée is working closely with local ecologists on this study,

including Richard Sunter from the Wakefield Naturalists Society in Yorkshire. During a preliminary research phase in Summer 2007, Ballengée and Sunter identified a particular population of toads in Yorkshire with a very high incidence of deformity. The artist set up a number of tanks at the sculpture park to study the possible effects of parasites and predators, in an effort to determine what might be the cause of the malformations. During Winter 2007, Ballengée is working with scientists to examine collected specimens, involving a process known as 'clearing and staining' which renders the soft parts of the specimen transparent or semi-transparent in order to study their morphologies. In Summer 2008, Ballengée will return to Yorkshire Sculpture Park to continue the study, the work culminating in an exhibition and publication of the study's process and its results, both artistic and scientific (if these things could even be said to exist separately in Ballengée's work).

Ballengée high-resolution scanned images of his 'cleared and stained' specimens are the most obvious visual outputs of his practice, and along with the preserved, cleared and stained specimens themselves – particularly the amphibians – they are the art objects that his New York gallery is most easily able to sell (although the interest from collectors in buying the actual preserved specimens initially surprised the artist himself). I think that the market for these objects contributes to a confusion about Ballengée's practice: that his 'art' comprises these tangible outputs, but I believe his practice is his unique blend of ecological research, public participation, environmental activism and education, undertaken as an artist. Ballengée's field trips, in which participants (members of the general public, scientists, families, young people) play an active part in biodiversity surveys, are collective experiences by which the artist enables people to collaboratively acquire understanding of particular species and ecosystems. Through this shared experience between artist and participant, new meanings and values emerge in the relationship with the natural environment. The process of involvement, understanding, discussion, learning, creativity, communication and community is, for me, the heart of Ballengée's art.

The artist and teacher Pavel Büchler has argued that the artist's relationship with society is more important than any actual work of art: 'Modern society undoubtedly needs creativity, critical imagination and resistance more than it needs works of art. It needs artists with their ways of doing things more than it needs the things that they make. It needs them for what they are rather than what they do.'¹ My own view would replace 'more than' and 'rather than' with 'as much as' and 'as well as', particularly as it seems unrealistic and unnecessary to divide and rank these aspects of an artist's practice. However, Büchler's views can help us to appreciate Ballengée's practice as more than the sum of its parts. For Büchler, it is the subjectivity of artists that counts, unlike science where objectivity is the cornerstone. Thus Ballengée operates as 'an itinerant, a messenger and an explorer'² in science's territory.

The scientific method consists of the collection of data through observation and experimentation, and the formulation and testing of hypotheses. The hard-won knowledge thereby obtained is issued to the rest of us via press releases on the occasion of some institutional discovery of newsworthiness. Ballengée's practice short-circuits and realigns this process, placing public involvement and communication at its heart and exemplifying a rare model of participatory, performative science rooted in a contemporary artistic practice.

NOTES

1. Büchler, Pavel, *Somebody's Got To Do It*, in 'Art: What Is It Good For?', Institute of Ideas/Hodder & Stoughton, 2002. p 29
2. Ibid, p 32.