

Dean Kenning & John Timberlake

SURVIVAL UNIT

Project Space Plus

University of Lincoln

9th November – 2 December 2022

‘if an organism or aggregate of organisms sets to work with a focus on its own survival and thinks that that is the way to select its adaptive moves, its “progress” ends up with a destroyed environment. If the organism ends up destroying its environment, it has in fact destroyed itself. [...] The unit of survival is [in fact] a flexible organism-in-its-environment.’

Gregory Bateson, ‘Form, Substance, and Difference’ (1970)

For their collaborative exhibition *Survival Unit*, artists Dean Kenning and John Timberlake generate an ecology of sound, movement and image in the gallery. Their ecological environment consists of semi-autonomous robotic ‘crawlers’ and sonorous plant-like ‘sessiles’ bounded by the gallery walls which are painted to create a sense of illusionistic space. As the close-to-the-ground crawlers negotiate the gallery floor, avoiding obstacles and live-streaming what they see on a system of monitors inhabiting the landscape, the sessiles respond, making deep electronic noises as the crawlers approach their bases and disappear beneath their canopies. The exhibition plays with the forms of sci-fi genre whilst tapping into ideas from biosemiotics and machine intelligence. It initiates a post-humanist, ecological set-up where elements are symbiotically connected in real time, leading to unpredictability and liveness alongside and beyond human interaction. It is inspired, in part, by Gregory Bateson who sought to expand the concepts of both evolution and mind beyond the conventional boundaries of an individual organism and an individual human’s nervous system. For Bateson, the evolutionary ‘unit of survival’ under natural selection is not the individual or the species, but the ‘flexible organism-in-its-environment’.

Bios:

Dean Kenning is an artist and writer from Hounslow, west London. He studied Fine Art at Goldsmiths College and completed a PhD at the London Consortium, developing a critical theory of ‘idiocy’ in art. He makes motor and sensor based kinetic sculptures that seek to generate nervous and affective responses (‘vitalist kinetics’). He also has a wide-ranging diagramming practice (‘exploratory diagrams’) traversing art practice, theory and pedagogy. His video and performance-based works adopt a parodic approach to social and cultural material. Kenning was winner of the Mark Tanner Sculpture Prize 2020-21, making new robotic works for the touring exhibition *Evolutionary Love*. Other recent solo exhibitions are

Psychobotanical (Matt's Gallery, 2019), *The Origin of Life*, (Beaconsfield, 2019) and *Where IT Was* (Piper Keys, 2018). He has shown works internationally at group exhibitions and events including, recently: *The Soft Display* (Paradise Works, 2020); *Guest, Ghost, Host: Machine* (Serpentine Marathon, 2017); and *EXO EMO* (Greene Naftali, 2017). Collaborative projects include the Diagram Research Group (Flat Time House, 2020), the Social Morphology Research Unit (Space Studios, 2019), the Capital Drawing Group (Bergen Assembly, 2019), Sick Monday (various screening venues, 2018-19), and Diagram Research Use & Generation Group (DRUGG) (ICA, 2015). He has published articles on diagram theory and practice, artistic pedagogy, 'idiot art', and the politics of the art world and art education in journals including *Third Text*, *Arts*, *Visual Culture in Britain* and the *Journal of Visual Art Practice*.

John Timberlake studied Fine Art at Brighton Polytechnic (BA Hons, Fine Art Alternative Practice); The Whitney Museum of American Art Independent Study Program, where he was a Van Lier Fellow, and Goldsmiths (Art practice / theory Ph.D). Timberlake's exhibitions include: '*...both a beyond and the conditions of mapping that beyond*' a collaboration with Ron Haselden, at Husk space, Limehouse (2019); *10-4* at Stephen Lawrence Gallery, Greenwich (2018); group shows at Galerie Sabine Wachters, Knokke, Belgium, (2017, 2020); *Visions of War Above and Below* (Imperial War Museum, London, 2015-16); *Artists Impression: Mangled Metal* (2015, at the Peltz Gallery, Birkbeck; *We Are History* (Beaconsfield, London, 2014); *Turning Points* (Hungarian National Gallery, Budapest, 2014-15), and *After London*, a collaboration with the art historian Joy Sleeman at Stephen Lawrence Gallery, 2011. *Bussard Ramjet*, an illustrated fiction, was published by Artis Den Bosch / Artwords in 2009, and *Landscape and the Science Fiction Imaginary*, an academic monograph, was published by Intellect in 2018 and anthologised in the Whitechapel/MIT book *Documents of Contemporary Art: Science Fiction* in 2020. Timberlake's work is held in a number of collections, including the Imperial War Museum, London; Barts Royal London NHS Trust and the West Collection, Oaks, Pennsylvania.

The artists would like to thank Tom Exley (Kingston University) and Llewelyn Fernandes for technical help, and the Arts & Creative Industry Faculty Research Committee, Middlesex University for support.

SYMPOSIUM

Posthuman Aesthetics Symposium

Wednesday 9th November 2022, 14.00 – 17.00

University of Lincoln, NDH1010

A special symposium will take place in conjunction with Dean Kenning and John Timberlake's exhibition *Survival Unit*, running at Project Space Plus. In conversation with Dr Steve Klee, the artists will expand on their collaboration in relation to their own individual

practices in the fields of painting and sci-fi (John) and kinetic, robotic and analogue sound sculpture (Dean). They will discuss practical aspects of the work as well as some of the aesthetic and theoretical sources of the exhibition, in the fields of biology, AI, posthuman philosophy, kinetic sculpture and dystopian speculative fiction.

The symposium will include presentations by Elizabeth Sherratt and Hermione Spriggs. Elizabeth is an art and science PhD student at Lincoln studying Equine Sensory Simulation Devices as a way to view the world from a nonhuman, animal simulated perspective and therefore generate a discussion on how 'becoming a nonhuman animal' can lead to a better understanding into how horses experience their world.

Hermione is currently undertaking a practice based art and anthropology PhD at UCL on traps and tracks, with a focus on rural pest control in North Yorkshire, asking how hunters communicate with animals and exploring the relevance of a hunting attitude to environmental art practice.

Posthuman Aesthetics Symposium

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14.00 – 14.15	Set-up, Introduction (Steve)
14.15 – 14.45	Liz
14.45 – 15.15	Hermione
15.15 – 15.30	Break
15.30 – 16.30	John & Dean in conversation with Steve
16.30 – 17.00	Roundtable and Questions from audience

