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"SINGING MACHINES IN THE GARDEN OF EDEN - EDGARDO RUDNITZKY'S CICADAS"

by Heinz Peter Schwerfel

Whenever the film industry needs an affordable, non-union villain, special effects artists like to turn animal-like creatures crossed with dim-witted machines into organic monsters, scary virtual fantasy products with killer instincts. From spike-tooth aliens to Orcs born in mining shafts in the center of the earth to the space army of Citauri, as recently seen in the American Marvel blockbuster «The Avengers» with - much better paid – human protagonists serving as moving targets. Mechanized animal villains are popular fantasy creatures; they represent the eerie side of nature, a consequence of the anthropocentric teachings of the world, the way they have shaped our thinking not just since the beginning of monotheist religious teachings.

In graphic arts, animals are dealt with completely different: animal art pieces are met with sympathy. The Englishman George Stubbs was the most famous painter of horses, the American William Wegman was the first to photograph Weimaraner dog Man Ray – and her descendants of the same name – in the most impossible poses and with surreal impact and has thereby created a new genre since the seventies of the twentieth century. Living bees and dogs play an important role in this year's documenta, mostly bees, as highly organized civilization threatened by unknown – probably attributable to human progress madness – phenomena.

But in the arts, even animalistic techno-creations are not misused as fighting

machines or monsters as is the case in movies, but they mutate into gentle, zoological artifacts in the hands of the artists. Similar as in Philip Dick's novel «Do Androids Dreams of Electric Sheep?», the template for the cult film «Bladerunner», in which the citizens of a future planet earth are allowed to cuddle with robotic pets only, machine-animals in graphic arts generally function as happy makers. Take artist Rebecca Horn for example, whose little museum wall-mounted butterflies flap their wings coquettishly. They are cute, puzzling, aloof, and even moody sometimes – mostly when they break down.

One has to differentiate between the mechanized animals of artists and the cuddle-robots for children or the petting seals, which are currently being tested for calming dementia patients: they have character. The autonomy of each mechanized species is underscored, their unpredictable reactions. Every instrumental function is denied, in arts there is – allegedly – no utilitarian thinking. Ever since the Nouveaux Réalistes, it is fashionable to infuse life into these machines which have been robbed of their functions, from the rusty apparatuses of the Swiss Jean Tinguely and Bernhard Luginbühl to the psalming pistons and cylinders of car- and plane engines, which are currently on display in Kassel by the Frankfurter Thomas Bayrle. It gets really exciting in areas of mechanized zoology, when American art students program quadrocopters so they behave like bees in a swarm and therefore simulate the possibilities of group dynamics, which, thanks to computer technology, gives us humans information about animal behavior.

It's only logical then when a museum of natural science, which is searching for new ways of communication, would ask an artist for his collaboration for the display of his as-of-yet lifeless exhibits. Even more so as the case of the unconventional Argentinean artist and Berlin resident Edgardo Rudnitzky, a loner and outcast, is also a sound designer and composer who has the gift to make dead machines come alive by making them sing. Mechanically produced music as a popularity medium for insects, which are not very attractive at first sight.

Everyone knows the ten to twenty second long musical noise-salvos of the allegedly Apollo-gifted singing Cicada, which was even mentioned by Plato, and whose high frequency singing from sometimes over 20,000 hertz, barely noticeable for the human ear, promises us Central Europeans southern realms and the Mediterranean, whilst it's a mainstay of acoustical ambiance in subtropical areas. As in South Africa for example, where the local species resemble a small buzz saw at times. There's something calming to us humans about the singing of the male Cicadas, who are enticing females with their music, guarding their territory or just rattle in a chorale. Unlike grasshoppers they don't fall silent when we approach, only in bad weather; they don't hide in

holes, and just like little solar cells they seem to live off the sun's energy and reach peak performance around noon, only to recharge their batteries at night.

It was never Edgardo Rudnitzky's intention to just mimic the Cicadas. For him it's about a sentimental synthesis of eye and ear, about sense and mind, about emotional conceptual art that's only possible in an art piece. Conceptualized because the sound generations of the timbales are evacuated to the wings, the acoustic room experience of the audience calculated and perception artistically provoked thanks to computer programs. Rudnitzky didn't recreate the singing Cicada that often appears martial because of its five eyes, he let himself be inspired by them to adorable little machines with pre-programmed group dynamics. Just like in the Japanese Origami, the sensitive, almost transparent wings are folded with 90 grams light paper. These paper wings are set into motion just like a membrane, not by muscles but by metal pin, unlike with male singing Cicadas, who generate their tone primarily with their drum organ, the timbale. The body volume of machines cannot be changed, just like with the original, but there are two different pitches nonetheless. As well as rhythmic variations, which are controlled by a computer with complex switching.

The development of the artificial Cicada gets especially complicated because Rudnitzky gives his little creatures not only resonance, but also latitude. There are cantors, alpha males so to speak, and musically inferior followers. There are chorales with adjusting levels in the according pitch, and even interactive disturbances when the rush of the human audience becomes too much for the Cicadas and they quiet down. These interactive disturbances are programmed very discretely, the reactions don't happen by command, like with approach, but are individually different. Just like in nature; only weather influence plays no part with Rudnitzky's Cicadas. That would have been difficult in Halle (Saale).

All in all Rudnitzky wrote nine different songs onto his musician's delicate brass body, nine behavioral patterns, nine programs. In nature, the Cicadas prefer to sing on plants rather than on the ground. In the exhibition room which was designed by set builder Oliver Proske and whose outwardly softly swung and with plastic film upholstered walls play with the wing shape of the Cicadas, they sit on wires in small groups seemingly weightless in a total of five wooden frames spread across the room. A kind of accessible stage, concert- and exhibition hall all at the same time, which precludes urban reality.

A sixth frame shows examples of real Cicadas from the zoological collection of Halle University, however the music-making living are stealing the show from the dead. The art room thereby turns into a virtual Provençal landscape, in which one can wonderfully stroll around, because it's like a so-called immersive art installation – the visitor discovers the stage from a slightly elevated position and

then immerses into the room, into an acoustic Garden of Eden, according to Edgardo Rudnitzky's arts-acoustic credo: «Sometimes perception is more important than knowledge».

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