

Talk by Nils Hellstrom at the Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts in Copenhagen on 2 June 2022 in the context of the conference Rewilding the Museum.

Introduction by conference organizer Dehlia Hannah:

*Nils Hellstrom is an independent entomologist based in Northern California. He holds a Ph.D. in myrmecology from the University of Kansas and has been associated with the Natural History Museum of Los Angeles as well as the University of California, Los Angeles. His research has been featured in the prize-winning film *The Hellstrom Chronicle* and the prize-winning novel *Hellstrom's Hive* and on the cover of *TIME* magazine he has been called "the biologist who claims insects will take over the planet."*

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Good afternoon everyone. I guess I should start with a disclaimer. I'm not Nils Hellstrom. My name is Jacob Lillemose and originally, I was supposed to have conducted a live interview with Mr. Hellstrom via Zoom but a couple of weeks ago he emailed me to say that he, unfortunately, wouldn't be able to interview due to circumstances beyond his control.

Instead, he has asked me to read the following paper entitled *Invasion the Planetary. Or the End of the Museum as We Know It*.

Good afternoon everyone, my name is Nils Hellstrom.

First of all, I want to thank the organizers for being so considerate about my current situation and accepting this paper on such short notice.

It's been a while since I last spoke in public, let alone in an academic context. Nevertheless, I'm excited to return to public speaking at this specific conference.

I'm sorry that I can't attend the conference in person but adverse events in my research lab demand that I remain here in Northern California.

Therefore, I've asked my dear friend and colleague Jacob Lillemose, who I met at the Institute for Built Environments back in 2018, to read my paper. He and I have discussed my research on many occasions over the years and I could think of no person better suited to act as my replacement than him.

So with that, over to you Jacob.

I want to begin by introducing my research and its history to give you some context for what I want to say today.

I work as an independent entomologist. For those of you not familiar with entomology, it is the scientific discipline of studying insects, both in the lab and in the wild. With an estimated more than 2 million insect species on Earth, entomology is, as I have always claimed, not only one of the most significant disciplines in the field of zoology but in natural science in general.

Insects are simply essential to life on Earth. Not only today, but also in the past, and most definitely in the future. It's a super-powerful planetary force that natural science needs to reckon with at its deepest level.

Humans have been studying insects for since the first cave paintings of bees dating back to 13,000 BC.

Later, in ancient Egypt, Greece, and Rome, insects were not only featured in images and jewelry, humans also began to keep bees as part of their civilization and Aristotle wrote about insects in the last centuries BC.

From the 13th century what humans today call scientific interest in insects emerged, albeit only in sporadic writings until the 18th and 19th centuries when this interest matured into a distinct and prominent scientific discipline.

I consider myself part of this tradition. I consider my research to be its natural conclusion.

Insects had fascinated me since an early age and I decided to study first entomology and later myrmecology – the specific study of ants – at the University of Kansas, only a couple of hours' drive East from the small rural town, where I grew up.

However, I quickly learned that my fascination with insects was somewhat at odds with that of my fellow researchers and remains so to this very day.

I was never a hippie.

I never had a romantic view of nature.

I never thought nature was gonna save us.

In fact, I always knew it was gonna kill us.

Just as I always knew that insects will outlive humans and rule the planet after humans are gone.

Insects aren't more intelligent than humans but they have several hundred millions of years of knowledge about surviving on Earth. And in that sense – on a planetary scale – they are without a doubt a superior species.

Such reasoning didn't go over well with my colleagues and I became a disputed figure in the scientific community. I lost both institutional backing and friendships and found myself pretty isolated less than a year after I had defended my Ph.D. on ant architecture to much controversy.

I admit, it was hard but I found encouragement to continue my research when the filmmaker Walon Green approached me. Walon was planning to do a documentary about insects in which he wanted to feature me and my research and flattered by his interest I immediately said yes without knowing much about him or his movies.

In *The Hellstrom Chronicle*, as the movie ended up being titled, I recount the story of how my particular interest in insects got me ousted from the scientific community and why I think entomology is such a critical scientific discipline for the future of our planet.

My narrative was accompanied by the most extraordinary cinematography that even to this day remains state of the art when it comes to documenting the wonder and violence of insects.

The very same year, just as I was finishing shooting *The Hellstrom Chronicle*, I got an unexpected call from the writer Frank Herbert. Frank, who I recognized as the author of the great novel *Dune*, told me had heard about my research through his ex-wife, who had heard me speak at a military base in San Diego the year before, and that he wanted to do a book on it. Again, I didn't hesitate and welcomed Frank into my private research lab just three weeks later.

Coincidence would have it that the period of seven months that Frank spent in my lab happened to be the most dramatic – or rather dangerous – time in my career as a scientist.

I knew that a group of former colleagues had alarmed the US authorities about my research. I had not given it much thought until one morning the FBI showed up on my doorstep and started to question me about my research. They didn't have a search warrant so I didn't let them in nor did I tell them anything significant about

my research. The encounter led to a protracted stand-off, involving several more encounters, but eventually, the FBI realized that offering an armistice was in their best interests and officially withdrew from their position.

Frank was a primary witness to all of this and describes the situation with remarkable precision and insight in his book *Hellstrom's Hive*.

As fate would have it *The Hellstrom Chronicle* ended up winning an Academy Award for Best Documentary Feature in 1971, and *Hellstrom's Hive* became a New York Times bestseller.

After years of being persona non grata in the scientific community, I was suddenly famous outside the scientific community. TIME Magazine featured me on the cover and I had multiple offers from both private companies and governmental institutions to come and work with them.

Nevertheless, I decided to stay independent to continue my research without limitations.

In fact, I have not given a public lecture since I spoke to a subcommittee on Biology and Geopolitics in the US Congress in 1983.

But when Jacob forwarded me the call for paper for this conference, I knew that this was an opportunity for me to step forward once again.

I'll be frank with you. I think the notion of "Rewilding the museum" is nothing but paradoxical if not straightforward delusional.

How can you *rewild* something that was never wild in the first place? Or rather, something that was made to tame the wild?

Besides, what does the wild care about museums: Nothing! Absolutely nothing!

The museum is a construction that was conceived and built by humans for humans.

What humans treasure as one of the most precious manifestations of human culture has no meaning whatsoever to the wild.

If anything, the museum is a death trap to the wild and if the wild was ever to become aware of this, it would most certainly revolt.

Moreover, the whole notion of the wild itself is misguided. Nature is not wild. Nature is nature. Nature is only wild from the point of view of civilized humans.

I aired these reservations to Jacob and while he agreed to the inherent paradox in the conference title, he also introduced me to a little handful of artworks that in various ways incorporate the wild and the chaos it entails. Jacob presented them with great excitement to me and I have to admit that I was amused and to some degree even encouraged by them.

Hotel Palenque is a series of photographs taken by the American artist Robert Smithson in 1972, documenting a derelict hotel in the city of Palenque located on the Yucatan Peninsula in Mexico. Smithson had stayed at the hotel three years earlier when visiting the nearby Mayan sites with his wife and his gallerist but the final construction of the hotel had since been abandoned and what had then promised to be a lush tourist hang-out, now stood left in an unfinished state as a modern ruin devoid of both guests and staff.

Why the hotel had closed was not what interested Smithson nor is it what interests me about the photographs. What I appreciated about Hotel Palenque is how Smithson pointed his camera to the natural processes that were slowly but inevitably over-taking the deserted hotel, leaving it in a liminal state between architecture and nature. Iguanas had begun to occupy the pool that never was, grass was partially covering a mound of bricks, while turtles and an alligator were sharing a small pond in the hotel lobby. Eventually – on a time scale beyond the human – these processes will completely integrate the hotel into the surrounding rainforest, just like the ruins at the Mayan sites, Smithson had originally come to visit.

From my perspective, Hotel Palenque is an honest documentation of nature as an undeniable and all-powerful force. I don't know if I would call it an artwork but that's not really important to me. I look at the photographs as a scientist from the field of biology and to me – more than anything – the photographs demonstrate how human architecture will always come up short in face of the nature it is built on and built to suppress.

Jacob also told me about a somewhat similar project called *Don't Follow the Wind* located inside the Fukushima exclusion zone which the Japanese authorities had set up following the explosion at the nuclear power plant. As far as I understood from Jacob, the group of people who organized the project had commissioned several artists to create artworks that were then subsequently installed in various sites inside the zone. Inside buildings or out in the open. The placement of the artworks

was done in collaboration with the residents of the specific sites who had been involuntarily evicted.

Originally, the organizers had announced that the exhibition would not open until the exclusion zone was lifted and the residents could once again return to their homes. This has not happened yet, but of course, the exhibition has already had visitors. They've just not been human visitors.

When the organizers visited the exhibition some years after installing the artworks they noticed that wild boar had interfered with some of the works. No longer threatened by human predators – or any other predator for that matter – the wild boars were now violently roamed the area undisturbed.

That came as no surprise to me.

A more curious effect of the expanded presence of the boars was the fact that through crossbreeding with the domesticated pigs that had escaped confinement when the farmers of the area were forced to flee, the wild boars were gradually diluting the DNA of these pigs. This meant that within a relatively short period there would no longer be any human-imported pigs in the area, only the boars that were native to the nature of the area.

Jacob told me the organizers behind *Don't Follow the Wind* are now collaborating with local scientists to study not only the boars but also non-human life and how it will react to the presence of the residents that have returned.

Of course, the nature in the exclusion zone – or anywhere else for that matter – has no need for artworks so I can only applaud this development of the project.

Finally, Jacob drew my attention to an artwork from his native Denmark created by the film director Lars von Trier. It was called *Psykomobile #1* or in some instances *The World Clock*. It's a complex work, but I guess it is best described as a theatre performance, where 53 actors engaged in a 50-day-long improvised play across 19 settings in the exhibition building. Each actor played a character defined by a set of relations to other characters and a number of moods.

The reason why Jacob mentioned the artwork to me was that the moods of the characters were controlled by the movement of the ants in an anthill in El Paso, New Mexico. On a live video feed from the anthill projected in the exhibition, von Trier had superimposed a grid-like structure with 19 squares corresponding to each of the 19 settings in the exhibition building. Every time a certain number of ants

crossed one of the squares in the structure one of four colored lights would start blinking in the corresponding room accompanied by a siren going off. The actors would then have to freeze for a moment before changing the mood of their characters according to the guidelines they had been given.

My scientific background is in myrmecology, so it probably comes as no surprise that I find this artwork most fascinating. I do realize that it is a completely staged situation within the culturally codified confines of an exhibition building but it nevertheless emphasizes an essential point in my research, namely that humans are not in control of their planetary destiny.

Do I believe these artworks to be wild? Of course not!

As I already said, as a scientist, I don't believe in approaching nature through the notion of the wild. But even if I did – as an artist – I honestly can't fathom something like a wild artwork. As I see it, a wild artwork would no longer be an artwork. It would just be nature.

So to conclude, if the proposal of this conference to rewild the museum is to be taken seriously, humans – and everyone in attendance here at the conference – should realize and accept that museums can then no longer be for humans. An attempt to rewild the museum by importing and showcasing the wild will just end up as yet another attempt to cultivate nature according to human logic.

As a civilized species, we have been working to conquer and escape nature for thousands of years. And we have succeeded.

But our success has come with a prize: Nature has become a lost cause for humans, let alone for museums.

In other words, a rewilding of the museum if it is to make any sense can in my opinion only be achieved with one gesture. Let the museum be invaded by planetary forces beyond human control.

Thank you.