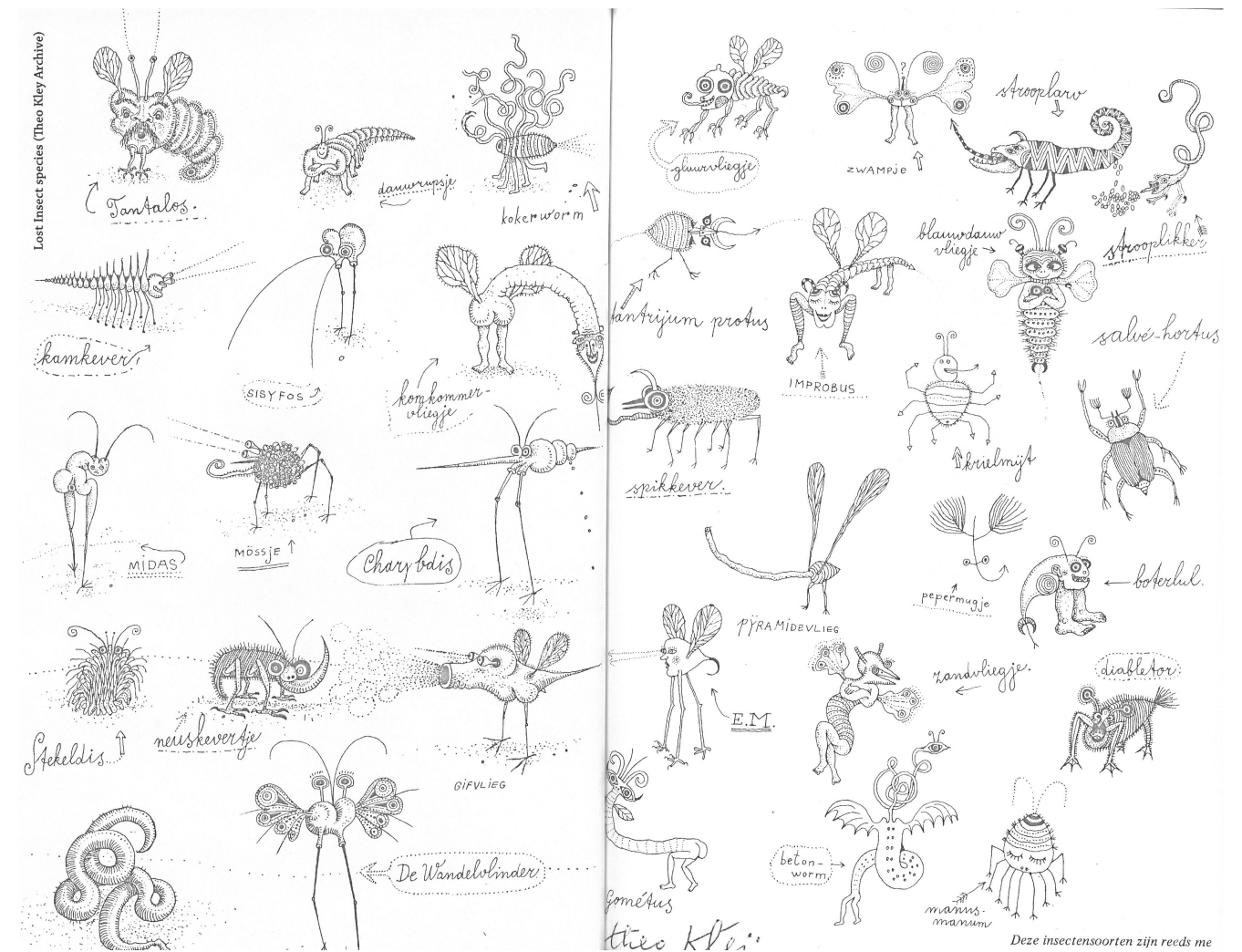


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THE ASSAULT ON THE IMPOSSIBLE

which “Mother, Where have the Butterflies Gone?” became a top hit performed by all kinds of choirs and groups on all kinds of occasions. The Insect Sect, Resistancy Orchestra, and Expertologic Laboratory (newly founded by Kley, Reneman, and Grootveld) eventually produced their own recording of it together with other Butterfly Opera songs, including “Soulology,” “Thinking of Holland,” and “Environment Boredom.”

The events of that time—the Happenings, theatre, art manifestations, and various street events and performances—inevitably attracted throngs of “nonartists” who wanted to participate. One activity produced another, and so began a general and continuous public outburst of creativity. Art was bypassing the official venues to become active on all fronts.

music and the Great Alarmist Choir providing the singers. Anyone else who wanted to participate was welcome, providing they costumed themselves as an insect—a butterfly, ladybug, dragonfly—or a bird.

Promoted as a “beastly work,” the Butterfly Opera debuted in Warder, a small village in northern Holland, with the local brass band taking part. The second performance was at Pietersberg near the Belgian village of Eben Emael, against the fantastic background of the Eben Haezer Tower. Stone mason Robert Garcet (1912-2001) had constructed the Eben Haezer Tower by hand, with all its proportions having a numerological significance based on his philosophical study of ancient codes and the Revelations of St. John. Garcet intended the tower to be a peace monument and a protest against war, and it had become an international gathering place for pacifists and Esperantists. The Eben Haezer Tower performance was recorded on film by Roelof Kiers for the Dutch TV channel VPRO. It was broadcast on Sunday, June 8, 1969, after

The Assault on the Impossible **by Marjolijn van Riemsdijk**

from the book Assault on the Impossible: Dutch Collective Imagination in the Sixties and Seventies

As an artist’s book, *Mother, what is wrong...* with this Planet? is a typical product of the Sixties, with simplified spelling, strip and collage - images, a chaotic layout, texts that finish abruptly, and unnumbered pages. It explores many of the projects Theo Kley was conceptualizing at the time, and provides extensive descriptions for some that were realized and others that were not. There is no shortage of imaginative vision, and many were collaborative. One of the more fantastic of the unrealized projects was the Motherdoll, an eleven-meter-high polyester figure of a naked, kneeling “mother surrogate” designed in collaboration with psychiatrist Joost Mathijsen. Inserting coins in a mechanism noiselessly opened the

huge pink belly. A viewer could then enter the womb by way of a ladder and dive from a small board into a pool of amniotic fluid made up of water, lemonade syrup, stewed pears, tutti frutti, currants, and alcohol.

Together with Jasper Grootveld, Kley founded the Throwaway Automobile Industry. A research survey they consulted had indicated that Dutch car owners clearly preferred coziness. Bearing that in mind, they equipped a prototype car with leaded gothic-style windows and a homey interior that included comfy rattan chairs instead of car seats. The survey also specified that Dutch owners preferred economical vehicles. So Grootveld and Kley offered an economical, environmentally-friendly “powder” motor that required only one packet of washing-powder fuel to travel 73 kilometers—the exhaust produced soap bubbles that added a festive atmosphere to driving. Their final design innovation ensured that the car folded quickly to fit into an ordinary suitcase, making it very convenient for use in the city. No more searching for a parking space;

The Butterfly Opera

Preparations for the Butterfly Opera were soon in full swing, Huub Mathijssen and Chaim Levano composed the music, with the lyrics of the deeply-sentimental opera highlight “Mother, Where have the Butterflies Gone?” written by writer/ painter Alain Teister (1932-1979). Reneman and Kley designed the costumes. Immune Blue, a color that the Insect Sect considered a potent weapon against toxins, would be liberally sprayed in the venues during the performances. Cigarettes with immune blue filters, which guarded against lung cancer, would be available. Kley would perform as the Fantastic Alarmist and Improver of the World; Reneman as the Immune Expertologist; and Joost Mathijssen would be featured as the Addicted Agrarian, Psychiatrist, Choir Boy, and Immune Blue Bird, assisted by a Black Nightbird, a Dragonfly, and a nurse from a detox camp. Photographer Cor Jaring and poet/biologist Dick Hillenius (1927-1987) were included in the cast, with The Resistancy Orchestra performing the

John Lennon and Yoko Ono were on their honeymoon in the Amsterdam Hilton Hotel at the time, conducting one of their two Bed-Ins for Peace. Reneman, Kley, and Huub Mathijssen visited to offer them honorary memberships in the Insect Sect. The couple accepted, and in a short, impressive ceremony they were presented with a butterfly flag of their own.

In June of 1969 a group of biology students from Amsterdam University asked the Insect Sect, in its role as an environmental action group, to participate in a student action against pollution. The two groups collaborated by curating an exhibition in Galerie De Tor (The Beetle Gallery) where visitors kneeled before a prie-dieu chair designed by Max Reneman that stood in the Blue Chapel of the Insect Friends. There, in an attitude of prayer, they listened to a recording of Grootveld reciting “Song of the Immune Blue.”

no worries about car theft.

Other projects included a Self-Service Automat for hungry homeless animals; a Relaxation Cell where overwhelmed people could retire to recompose themselves; the Demonstration Project, which provided cardboard cut-outs to the home bound (the “demonstrations” Kley had in mind were anti-Vietnamstyle political street actions); and the remarkable What-is-Holland-Worth? project, which advocated selling The Netherlands and restarting Dutch culture from scratch. (See Appendix 2 for more on the Demonstration Project and What-Is Holland-Worth?)

Together with filmmaker Louis van Gasteren and photographer Cor Jaring (b.1936), Kley proposed a festival of world records in the Vondelpark, where participants could break a world record in the field of their choice. Van Gasteren predicted that people would soon live 120 years or more, and when that transpired the current Olympic Records would become unbreakable. The collaborators

believed it was time to develop a new kind of Olympics. They proposed celebrating events like Snapping Wooden Matches, One Hundred Meters of Fretwork (creating ornate fretted wooden patterns), Standing on One Leg, Reading One's Own Work. On August 17, 1968, Kley and van Gasteren appeared on Willem Duys's popular AVRO TV program to plead for assistance in establishing their New World Record Foundation. Despite the positive attention the proposal was getting, the city of Amsterdam declined to support the festival.

All of Kley's projects garnered widespread attention. Simon Carmiggelt (1913-1987), Holland's most popular newspaper columnist at that time, wrote in *Het Parool* (02/28/1968):

Because he does not get lost in the wordy, tedious fuss that realization of these projects would necessitate—just think of all the official agencies he would have to satisfy—but daringly pushes open windows with a view on a better

Nature Fund invited the Insect Sect to suggest an appropriate environmental action for children to do in the context of their lives. Kley and his colleagues proposed creating large blue flags centered on a golden-yellow butterfly (symbol of fantasy and metamorphosis) that would fly at half-mast whenever an environmental disaster took place, like the vast fish die-offs that were resulting from waste matter runoff. The Nature Fund responded enthusiastically, offering to publish a cut-out of the flag in its children's magazine, *The Ranger Club*. The children's TV program *Stuif es in* (Come

on Over) joined the project, offering to teach youngsters how to fabricate the flags, with the magazine notifying them to fly the homemade banners whenever an environmental disaster loomed. But on March 13, 1969, when Kley suggested in *de Volkskrant* that the flags appear every time Prince Bernhard, father of Queen Beatrix and chairman of the World Nature Fund, visited Africa on an elephant hunt, the Nature Fund withdrew its support.

Concert Program for The Butterfly Opera

The Butterfly Monument, as it was popularly known, became a tremendous success and was featured on the cover of the July 1968 issue of the trendy magazine *Avenue*. A 60-centimeter-tall model of it was offered to the magazine's readers for the price of one guilder. At the unveiling, Grootveld, Kley, and Reneman publicly advocated prioritizing the effort to save the nations butterflies because they were among the species most endangered by industrial and chemical waste.

To draw attention to the impending environmental catastrophe, the three collaborators began preparations for a Butterfly Opera to be performed in the spring, when farmers sprayed their crops. Kley and Grootveld traveled to the Ardennes to undertake a butterfly survey and mosquito hunt, because in their ironic opinion mosquitoes were also nearly extinct. The evolving butterfly project captured the public's imagination. The Dutch chapter of the World

world, I find his conceptions very inspiring. In any case, to his credit, he has started the assault on the impossible.

The Insect Sect

Kley and Grootveld both felt that something had to be done to highlight Holland's increasingly toxic environmental pollution. To bring the public's attention to the disappearance of insect species occurring as a result of an elaborate, nationwide agricultural-pesticide spraying program, they founded the Insect Sect. They claimed that the so-called harmful species—like the Peeper, Toady, Swarming Mite, Nosebeetle, Butterprick, Concreteworm, and the Diablebug (all insects they themselves had invented)—had already been eradicated, and that Holland's remaining insects had to be protected. In order to clean and purify the water and air, they proposed using Immune Blue Powder on a huge scale and exploding Green Bombs, delayed-action seed-filled bombs, on sites where nature had already been destroyed. They had Insect Sect members costumed as June Bug, Leaf Insect, Firefly,

Bumble Bee, and Grasshopper perform at sites where poison had been sprayed, and suggested the voluntary transfer of farmers and market gardeners to re-education camps where they could spray plastic trees and plants with as much pesticide as they liked.

The Insect Sect's performances were accompanied by a musical group called the Resistancy Orchestra, which included Huub Mathijssen, a violinist in the Royal Concertgebouw Orchestra and brother of Motherdoll-collaborator Joost Mathijssen. The name, Resistancy Orchestra, highlighted the musicians' resistance to insecticides and punned on Holland's officially-designated "Residence Orchestra," which is based in Den Haag. Mathijssen played the violophoon, or horngelige, a violin that generated horn-like sounds. Years later, in the daily NRC Handelsblad (01/23/1998), journalist Henk Hofland remembered the sounds as conveying "unfathomable melancholy, like the burst sounds of a past peacefulness." Pianist/ recitationist Chaim Levano and cellist/dramaturge

Carel Alphenaar were other prominent members of the Resistancy Orchestra

Butterfly Monument

The Insect Sect had only recently begun performing when Jasper Grootveld learned that Max Reneman was unveiling a butterfly monument for the konessen Hospital in Eindhoven. Grootveld and Kley immediately traveled to Eindhoven, where Kley met Reneman for the first time. Reneman's original conception for the sculpture had been based on the image of a spinal column, but during the creation process it had come to look more like a pole with butterflies clinging to it, so when it was finished he called it Monument for fallen Butterflies.