



THE INSTITUTE OF QUEER ECOLOGY

Hysteria



Production film still. Aerial footage of Chittenango Falls near Syracuse, New York, where the INSTITUTE OF QUEER ECOLOGY filmed *Hysteria*, 2023

THE INSTITUTE OF QUEER ECOLOGY (IQECO) is an ever-evolving, collaborative organism that brings peripheral solutions for environmental degradation to the forefront of public consciousness. IQECO projects are interdisciplinary but grounded in the theoretical framework of queer ecology, an adaptive practice concerned with interconnectivity, intimacy, and multispecies relationality. Queer ecology can be a tool for understanding ourselves, our environments, our biologies, and our collaborations through queer lenses. It teaches queer strategies of transformation and symbiosis—mutability and mutualism—that allow us to reinhabit and rehabilitate a planet experiencing profound and rapid changes.

Hysteria is an original multichannel video installation by IQECO premiering at the Kestner Gesellschaft. In this installation, the institute uses image, movement, and sound to construct an ecofeminist retelling of the poorly understood “dancing plagues” that swept through Europe between the tenth and the seventeenth centuries. The afflicted dancers are subtly recast as pointedly subversive agents entangled in environmental contagion and contamination that drive these wild, manic uprisings.

Dancing plagues (also referred to as dancing mania, choreomania, and tarantism) were spontaneous social phenomena in which groups of people, at times in the thousands, danced erratically and without restraint. The mania affected people of all ages and genders, and they often danced until they collapsed from exhaustion or suffered injury and even death. Although the phenomenon is well documented and affected multitudes of people across several centuries, these choreomaniac events are still poorly understood. There is no consensus among modern-day scholars regarding cause, treatment, or cure. One theory maintains that dancing mania may have been a form of mass psychogenic disease in which the physical symptoms spread among a group of people along the connections formed by social exchanges and interactions.



Engraving by HENDRIK HONDIUS portraying people affected by the dancing plague, 1564. Work based on original drawing by PIETER BRUEGHEL.

In the sixteenth century, the Swiss physician and alchemist Paracelsus first used the term *choreomania* to describe the dancing plague. In his view, the disorder stemmed in part from immoral behavior, which explained:

“[w]hy whores and scoundrels who take pleasure in guitar and lute playing, who satisfy all voluptuousness, bodily pleasure, imagination and fancy, never escape but become ill in such a way that they jump and dance, thus applying what has been their occupation. ... It is for these reasons that they behave so disgracefully and unreasonably.”

Then, as now, outcasts who were labeled immoral or promiscuous were accused of being more susceptible to immorality and sin. There was a fear of the disorder spreading, and yet there was practically nothing known about how to prevent or stop it. Today, pandemics like AIDS and the more recent monkeypox outbreak have exposed the way pandemics are treated differently when they are perceived as diseases that primarily affect the LGBTQIA+ community. THE INSTITUTE OF QUEER ECOLOGY

transmutes the historical dancing plagues into a radical form of rebellion, forming an anachronistic alliance between the dancers in the present and the dancers in the past, defying social expectations, disobeying rules, and defying the authority of habit and custom.

Wildness unites social transgression, queer defiance, and ecological grief through dance. In *Wild Things*, Jack Halberstam describes a postnatural queerness that works against reductive binary frameworks: “*Wildness is neither utopia nor dystopia; it is a force we live with and a way of being that we are organizing out of existence. If the wild has anything to tell us, it is this: unbuild the world you inhabit, unmake its relentless commitment to the same, ignore the calls for more, and agree to be with the wild, accept the wild, give yourself to the wild, and float or drown in its embrace.*”

This project of world-unbuilding—not world-building—is necessarily impassioned; it is anarchy with an anti-assimilationist spirit. It demands the dismantling and discrediting of extractive industrialization and the exploitative modernization of global capitalism so that new worlds can be dreamed and new experiences lived. Halberstam’s queer, postnatural wildness grows out of a lineage of ecofeminist writing like *The Death of Nature* by Carolyn Merchant, who leads a forensic investigation into how the living, vibrant world became subject to financial interests. Merchant writes that “*the image of the earth as a living organism and nurturing mother had served as a cultural constraint restricting the actions of human beings. One does not readily slay a mother, dig into her entrails for gold or mutilate her body, although commercial mining would soon require that. As long as the earth was considered to be alive and sensitive, it could be considered a breach of human ethical behavior to carry out destructive acts against it.*” Non-extractive relationships with the Earth had to be literally and figuratively bulldozed to justify the myriad ecological destructions of the present. Nature had to die for capitalism to be born; global warming must be denied for capitalism to continue.

Environmental concerns of a different form weave through the historical dancing plagues: many of the medieval outbreaks occurred along the Rhine, resembling a connected, waterborne flow across space and time. Some current theories explicitly cite ecological factors as likely origins for these choreomaniac events. In one suggestion, the fungal disease ergotism, once known as St. Anthony’s fire, might be responsible for provoking widespread psycho-social turmoil. Ergot fungus would spread to rye and other grains in the damp periods following floods and in unseasonably rainy years, and the fruiting bodies of these fungi can cause hallucinations and convulsions when ingested. This fungal infection could have spread along the Rhine as the river spilled over its banks into fields and farmland. Although we can’t know whether this truly happened, water systems today still bring us countless new causes of anxiety and unease. The river we contaminate contaminates us.

A more modern form of contamination compels the dancers in *Hysteria*. It is ubiquitous, chemical, industrial. It is a poison that bioaccumulates, an algal bloom that suffocates. It is multifarious and ever present, coming from all sides. It brings eco-grief and cancer and is turning the whole world into a Superfund site. Last year we reached a new landmark: rainwater everywhere on earth now exceeds chemical concentration limits considered safe for drinking water. Pollution rains.

THE INSTITUTE OF QUEER ECOLOGY recorded footage for *Hysteria* through an artist residency with Light Work in Syracuse, New York, a post-industrial city with its own legacy of water contamination. The work is grounded in the harsh, icy landscape of upstate New York in winter, moving between sites of industrial extraction and the waterway tributaries and basins surrounding Syracuse. The city has a long relationship with water contamination, but one that is in no way unique: Lake Onondaga, once America’s most polluted lake, is also the spiritual, cultural, and historic center of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy for the Onondaga Nation, on whose ancestral land the lake resides. The poisoning of Lake Onondaga tells again the well-worn story of colonialist and capitalist desecration of indigenous communities and the destruction of the ecosystems through which all living things are connected.

In their recent work, THE INSTITUTE OF QUEER ECOLOGY navigates the idea of a vanishing “nature” through frameworks of queer futurity. The artists assume a position of critical optimism, in part as a coping mechanism for the pain of living in, engaging with, and loving a biodiverse world that is being undeniably annihilated. IQECO insists that there are other ways of inhabiting the world—seeing it, holding it, bringing it forth—that can be realized through strategies that are inherent to queer lifeways.

In his queer, quasi-dystopian *No Future*, Lee Edelman claims that the power of queer life is its ability to pump the brakes on the cycles of heteronormative reproduction that propel straight time. But in *Metamorphosis* (2020), a film series by IQECO, the artists propose instead a radical, global transformation modeled on the life cycles of holometabolous insects—those who undergo complete metamorphosis. As we watch, a caterpillar, a symbol of rapacious consumption, loses its mouthparts in metamorphosis and emerges as a gynandromorphic butterfly: an exceptional, beautiful insect with both male and female wing patterning. We hear the words of José Esteban Muñoz as an animation of this butterfly emerges from their cocoon: “*Queerness is not yet here. ... We have never been queer, yet queerness exists for us as an ideal-ity that can be distilled from the past and used to imagine a future.*” In these contrasting frameworks of queer time, queerness becomes both a force of creation and destruction.

The realities of social distress, then and now—the resurgence of governmental restrictions on bodily autonomy; the increase in zoonotic disease caused by widespread habitat disruption, natural disasters, climate displacement, and permafrost melt; the ever-widening gap in income inequality, fear, flood, famine—created and create conditions that catalyze spontaneous, contagious social revolution. Now, as in the centuries of the dancing plagues, existential crises and despair are widespread, caused by famine, poverty, political instability, and environmental contamination. Many live in a present that disbars them a better future. People in medieval Europe, perhaps facing nearly similar conditions, were overcome by the uncontrollable urge to dance.



Tarantism, ATHANASIOS KIRCHER (1602–1680). *Magnes sive de arte magnetica*, Rome, L. Grignani, 1641, p. 874. (A musical score from the seventeenth century that sought to cure tarantism, a compulsive dance mania in Italy that was thought to have been brought on by a spider bite. The Institute of Queer Ecology worked with musician Dasychira to incorporate this historical melody into the sound design of the exhibition.)

Today, we face our own bleak set of social, political, and environmental horrors. Despair spreads faster on social media. With each bleak IPCC (Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change), eco-grief grows. The momentum of capitalism demands endless progress and limitless growth, while each spring there are fewer birds in our trees, ancient forests are burned for beef pasture, and we are left with nothing but slivers of residual space between gargantuan Amazon distribution centers.

The world barrels towards total climate collapse, and people from historically marginalized communities find themselves disproportionately persecuted under increasingly draconian laws. As we watch the mutual deterioration of our public health and the environment, we watch the dancers on screen play out these cycles of world-making and -unmaking, facing the impossibility of reconciling the reality of the present with their desires for a future. *Hysteria* asks us to suspend ourselves uncomfortably between protest and revelry, pain and ecstasy, as we ache for the world to start dancing again.



Details from film set, with garments by AIMEE LIN that were made to personify non-human entities, or channel historical characters.



THE INSTITUTE OF QUEER ECOLOGY, *Metamorphosis* (2020). A film series by the INSTITUTE OF QUEER ECOLOGY, Digital rendering

About IQECO
THE INSTITUTE OF QUEER ECOLOGY is a collaborative, protean collective that works to imagine and realize an equitable multispecies future. IQECO builds on the theoretical framework of queer ecology. It works to undo dangerously destructive human-centric hierarchies—or even flip them—to look at the critical importance of things happening invisibly, underground, and out of sight. The idea of mimicry lies at the heart of the IQECO’s vibrant identity—mimicry as an act of survival, manifested in the adaptive behavior of many species and distinctly connected to the history of queer communities. IQECO presents itself as an institute in a dual act of mimicry and infiltration, reintegrating queerness into scientific discourse and bringing artists to the table of environmental decision making.

Founded in 2017 and co-directed by Lee Pivnik and Nicolas Baird, THE INSTITUTE OF QUEER ECOLOGY has worked with over 130 different artists to date, presenting interdisciplinary programming that oscillates between curating exhibitions and directly producing artworks. IQECO has presented projects with the Guggenheim Museum (New York, United States), the Institute of Contemporary Art (Miami, United States), the Julia Stoschek Collection (Düsseldorf, Germany), the Medellín Museum of Modern Art (Medellín, Colombia), the Museum of Contemporary Art (Belgrade, Serbia), the Biennale of Sydney (Australia), Prairie (Chicago, Illinois, United States), Bas Fisher Invitational (Miami, Florida, United States), Gas Gallery (Los Angeles, California, United States), and Vox Populi (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, United States), among others.

NICOLAS BAIRD is an artist, evolutionary biologist, writer, and dancer. His scientific research and creative practice examine coevolution, adaptation, biodiversity, and the relationships between bodies and their landscapes. He lives in New York and is working on a doctorate in earth and environmental science.

LEE PIVNIK is an artist based in Miami, Florida, working predominantly in sculpture, video, and social practice. His work takes inspiration from living systems and other species to imagine a future that is based on mutualistic relationships instead of extractive economies.

MAYA BJORNSSON is a multimedia artist living and working out of Philadelphia who uses new media technologies in service of experimental historical research projects that take a feminist and queer lens to primary sources. She draws from Western histories of sacred objects and employs jewelry-making, apparel, and immersive installation as a means of framing the body as a contemporary political site upon which divine and mundane interests meet.

DASYCHIRA (ADRIAN MARTENS) Dasychira is the alter ego of Adrian Martens, a South African artist now operating out of New York. Beyond their music, Adrian is building a universe that transcends the sonic. Their self-defined garden that they are building seeks the intersection of technology and spirituality and draws inspiration from the otherworldly, magic, and storytelling.

AIMEE LIN is an artist and poet based in Philadelphia. Primarily working in fiber, sculpture, and installation, their work is a testament to interconnectivity and empathy cultivated through the gestural potential of material and ritual. Their practice is informed by dreamwork, Victorian consumption, Western esotericism, and the relationship between insanity and divinity.

JUAN LUIS MATOS (b. Havana, Cuba) is a multidisciplinary artist and filmmaker based in Miami and a member of Third Horizon film collective, which is dedicated to Caribbean storytelling and hosts an annual film festival in Miami. He is a 2022 MacDowell Colony fellow and currently an artist in residence at the Bakehouse Art Complex in Miami. Matos is the top prize recipient for the 2022 Knight Foundation Made in MIA Award at the Miami Film Festival for his film *You Can Always Come Home*.

NADIA HANNAN is a dancer, choreographer, and arts administrator from New York. She has an MFA in dance from Sarah Lawrence College, currently works with the American Dance Legacy Initiative, and has previously worked at the New York State Summer School of the Arts School of Dance and as the education assistant and an administrative assistant at Brooklyn Arts Exchange.

JUAN HEILBRON majored in media studies. He connects artistic practices with ecology and architecture and works with film/video, installations, and sound. Heilbron co-directs the ¡Socorro! Caribbean research lab based in Barranquilla, Colombia.

DANIEL AYAT Daniel Simon Ayat is a Lebanese-American artist, writer, and educator based in Arizona and New York. His work analyzes the political aesthetics of the everyday and the history of public hygiene. He has conducted research on the history of sewerage technology, the development of public toilet networks, the place of the agricultural hinterland in the social imagination, the value of waste, and the legacy of the junk aesthetic.

Curator
ALEXANDER WILMSCHEN

Front cover
THE INSTITUTE OF QUEER ECOLOGY, *Hysteria (Quilt)*, 2023, Digital Rendering, Courtesy of THE INSTITUTE OF QUEER ECOLOGY

Works cited
Jack Halberstam: *Wild Things: The Disorder of Desire*, 2020

Carolyn Merchant: *The Death of Nature*, 1980

We sincerely thank
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