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Susanne Winterling: "Lobsters, Hormonal Storms, Brittlestars, and Sticky Things – Matter of the World"

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Susanne M. Winterling, *Diademseeigel Immersion Prototyp*, 2014. Still from 3-D animation. Courtesy the artist.

There is a world of things. There are things that cause us headaches. Things we have a hard time understanding. Things that challenge our beliefs, that resist definitions. Things we love, but risk suffocating with our eagerness to name them. There are things, ideas that, rather than wanting to be jotted down, ask first to be touched, ingested. But, hey, how can anyone touch or ingest an idea? It is a matter of intimacy: moving closer, into the vicinity of the thing we wish to know about. How could anyone write or speak about love, for instance, without having experienced its uplifting tunes and dreadful turns? How could one write about advanced capitalism and its regimes of surveillance and control if not by pushing at its normative permissions and restrictions?

During the three months of writing *Testo Junkie*, Paul B. Preciado (born Beatriz Preciado, 1970) self-administered testosterone. In the book, Preciado explores the current regime of governmentality—the “pharmacopornographic”—which is based on the management of bodies, sexuality, pleasure, and identity. Preciado puts to test theories of surveillance and control by subjecting them “to the shock that was provoked in me by the practice of taking testosterone.”¹ Through this self-experiment, Preciado’s body becomes an amplifier of the roaring of advanced capitalism, an echo chamber of collective desires, frustrations, hopes, and resistance. As Preciado gets high on the drug, the words flow, and the results are stimulating, titillating. Comparative analysis alternates with delirious visions, triggering wild fantasies. The book turns conventional discourse analysis upside down by proposing that objects and theories are living organisms. *Testo Junkie* literally puts critical

theory back into the body—a body that performs critical analysis. For Preciado, theory is a practice of *doing*, rather than a way of representing the truth of an external reality that we gain access to through language. In the book, the distance between experience and speculation, object of research and researcher, abstract discourse and material practice, and between the body and the technologies meant to control it is compressed. In this way, the given-ness of categories such as “human” and “non-human,” “material” and “immaterial” are called into question by analysing the practices through which these boundaries get stabilized.

Preciado’s approach to the material world resonates strongly with Karen Barad’s theory of agential realism. Barad describes reality as an entanglement of social and natural “agencies” that configure the relation between human and non-human, discourse and phenomena through a series of “intra-actions.” Following a philosophical and feminist tradition that rejects the Cartesian divisions between body and mind, object and subject, nature and culture, Barad reconsiders the relation between human and non-human, material and discursive, and how both equally contribute to produce knowledge of the world. She writes:

-Theories are living and breathing reconfigurings of the world. The world theorizes as well as experiments with itself. Figuring, reconfiguring. Animate and (so-called) inanimate creatures do not merely embody mathematical theories; they do mathematics. But life, whether organic or inorganic, animate or inanimate, is not an unfolding algorithm. Electrons, molecules, brittlestars, jellyfish, coral reefs, dogs, rocks, icebergs, plants, asteroids, snowflakes, and bees stray from all calculable paths, making leaps here and there, or rather, making here and there from leaps, shifting familiarly patterned practices, testing the waters of what might yet be / have been / could still have been, doing thought experiments with their very being.

Matter is alive, it thinks, it theorizes. However, contrary to object-oriented theories that reject the primacy of the human over other kinds of existences, Barad is not interested in assigning primacy to material over language or object over human being. It is not a matter of choosing between two options; she neither grants objects complete autonomy from the human nor perpetuates an anthropocentric view of the world. The world is not divided into the neat, rigid categories that discourse analysis too often seems to suggest. Boundaries are constructions, after all, the result of material and discursive practices. For instance, Barad draws our attention to the way scientific research works. She refers to the theories of physicist Niels Bohr, who argues that the apparatuses of scientific research influence the way a phenomenon materialises. Barad questions where the boundaries are between scientific tools, research, and objects of research. The design of the apparatus, the ideas behind its construction, the parameters set for reading and analyzing the collected data—all of these factors influence the result. In other words, the apparatus contributes in its own way to define the analyzed object and shape the phenomenon no less than ideas, theories, and bodies do. Likewise, the boundaries that separate scientific discourse, social sciences, and artistic practices are imaginary. If we understand that they are not entirely separate fields of knowledge, how can the boundaries between these disciplines be meaningfully activated?

By doing a cross reading of quantum physics theories, post-structural philosophy, feminist and queer theory, biology and science studies, Barad offers an intriguing proposition on how to rework philosophical concepts and scientific practices to gain new perspectives on existing knowledge. This is an important point, because it is not on the basis of the “novelty” of their theories that Barad’s and Preciado’s radical positions should be judged. What makes their respective practices relevant is the way in which they activate and make use of available knowledge—reworking existing concepts, remapping territories, renaming, testing boundaries, experimenting with thresholds. The point is not to produce new theories that can supplant the existing ones, but rather to call into question assimilated habits of mind (like the distinction between words and things, meanings and matter),

proposing alternative approaches to existing phenomena and discourses. Both Barad's and Preciado's theories are pragmatic responses to lived realities, practices rooted in the material world, in the understanding that the world is not separated into the disjointed domains of words and things. This is also reflected in their performative approach to research—swallowing, touching, dwelling in the vicinity of their object of investigation, experimenting with matter, developing affinities with other beings and forces. This is the way they theorize.

The unorthodox ways in which Preciado and Barad approach their respective disciplines and practices have placed them in dialogue with artistic practices. Their theories have become popular among contemporary artists because they problematize the Western philosophical separation between material and thought, between meaning and matter, and between human and non-human agency. Questioning such separations in embodied ways is not new to art. What is art if not getting your hands dirty, diving into one's own intuitions, swallowing ideas, dealing with the resistance of the material, playing with indeterminacy? Artistic practices inhabit a zone of what Barad describes as "multiple indeterminacies," in which relations between things, ideas, and material are not fixed and boundaries are porous.

Some artists value experience as an important form of experimenting with, living in the proximity of, and theorising about the world through touching, brushing, scratching, cutting, absorbing, swallowing. It often begins with an encounter with the material world: a body, a color, a particle, a shrimp; a sticky materiality that doesn't lend itself to easy interpretations or appropriation and demands to be examined more closely. For instance, the female protagonist in British painter Lucy Stein's disarmingly funny painting *Honour does not move slowly sideways like a crab* (2012) picks a fight with a crab. This densely worked painting shows a woman using her hands and feet apparently to defend herself against an impossibly large crab that figures at the bottom of the canvas. The woman's long arched arms mimic the shape of the crab's claws, comically emphasizing an affinity between the two as the woman tries to pull one of her hands out from the crab's clutch. The two are fastened together, entangled in an ambiguous embrace that could be read as contentious or as pleasurable. In another painting, entitled *Gambas al Pil-Pil* (2011), a woman in a bikini is crawling on or riding a big prawn. It is not clear whether she is fighting the crustacean, or clutching it out of love. Or is Pil-Pil only playing with it? The woman's skin is painted the same orange as the prawn. A streak of orange paint, like an oversized shellfish antenna, descends from the woman's mouth, connecting with and echoing the antenna that extend from the prawn's head. The title, which translates as "Prawn à la Pil-Pil," announces a succulent meal while we witness an epic battle between the woman and the shellfish. If they are fighting, what are they fighting for? Life? Territory? Supremacy? It is not entirely clear. A dark humor impregnates Stein's scenes: the woman and the crab, the human and the animal, divided and yet entangled in each other's existence. In both of these paintings, the artist welcomes, with a hint of hysteric joy and potential violence, the idea that existence is not an individual affair.

Entanglement is a key term in Barad's theory of agential realism. She describes it as a way of being in the world in dis/continuous relations, meaning that all attempts to separate the material from the discursive, the affective from the scientific, fall away. Barad poses that matter and meaning, discourses and phenomena, human and non-human are entangled. In her relational ontology, she describes reality as an endless reconfiguring of matter. Things do not preexist the moment of their "intra-acting," but rather they are constituted by this encounter. In other words, things (and human beings) affect one another in ways that shape or change them. Emotions and passions influence behaviors and actions. But emotions are not privileges of human beings only. In the example of the quantum leap, which, in quantum physics, describes the discontinuous change of the state of an electron in an atom from one energy level to another, Barad observes that an electron "gets

excited," that it "feels" the electricity going through its body, and is propelled to a new energy level. Does this experience sound familiar to anyone? The bonds between human and non-humans are many, as Barad convincingly suggests, and they demand to be carefully reckoned with.

To understand the world as series of entanglements opens important ethical questions involving humans and non-humans alike. As a living, pulsating materiality, matter has as much agency as any human being. Matter does mathematics, thinks, feels, loves, theorizes, and gets excited. In her book *Meeting the Universe Halfway*, Barad describes agency not as something one possesses, but as a doing, an enactment. If we acknowledge that matter is lively and "does," then agency is everywhere. It belongs to no one in particular but rather is distributed over non-human and human forms alike. Barad maintains that acknowledging non-human agency "requires much more attentiveness to existing power asymmetries" and a way of "thinking critically about the boundaries, constraints, and exclusions that operate through particular material-discursive apparatuses."³ It seems to be a question of how and who gets to use the power of knowledge. Science, Barad observes, is a field in which scientists deal with non-humans (and their potentials) on a daily basis. However it is also a field that produces knowledge based on exclusion and ideology, which are not "objective" apparatuses.

Therefore it is plausible to ask: Why should scientific discourse be more credible than philosophy or art or magic? Or what makes a scientific or academic account more reliable than a piece of science-fiction? In their video-works, the French artists Louise Hervé and Chloé Maillet mix science fiction, mythology, art history and scientific discourse (borrowing from the languages of archaeology, biology, and social sciences) in an effort to re-imagine what the boundaries between the different disciplines may be.⁴ Through working across these different fields and appropriating their rhetoric, Hervé and Maillet question the ideas of "truth" and "reality" that these discourses produce. Through the exuberant sense of humor that characterizes their works, they highlight that there is something preposterous, something comically pompous in the seriousness with which we take scientific discourse. In their reimagined world, the discourses of science and magic, fiction and analysis go hand in hand, creating rich narrative textures that the artists perform with elegance and the deadpan seriousness of scientists.

In their 2014 video *Un passage d'eau (The Waterway)*, the artists brilliantly problematize the human obsession with immortality and the non-human. In the video, which takes place in a sea resort on the Atlantic coast of France, we meet Ondine (like the eponymous marine nymph and mermaid), a former biologist and honorary member of club of people who claim to have found Atlantis. The aim of this club is to study submarine life in the hope of extracting the secrets of longevity. Ondine is fond of lobsters and crabs and ponders the possibility of becoming one. She explains the secret of submarine life to a young fisherman, who wants to become a member of the club, and who, with his crested haircut, poignantly and humorously bears a strong resemblance to a fish. The movie reaches its climax with Ondine taking a bath. Hers is not a simple bath. Ondine performs her ritualistic ablution earnestly and resolutely, her body entirely immersed in mud. We see her hands emerging, moving across the murky surface, clasping the bathtub's edges, and then retracting again—as though they were lobster's claws. With her eyes tightly close, Ondine breaths heavily, like a fish out of water.

On one level, *The Waterway* is a mockery of the desire to become non-human or superhuman. It also makes apparent the ideological agendas that underlie so-called objective scientific method. Ondine's preoccupation with preserving the life of submarine species and the scientific evidence she brings to sustain her thesis are driven by her narcissistic desire to be immortal. But the artists don't make a moral case out of it. Ondine's behavior remains open to many possible interpretations:

she seems to be the perfect portrait of a passionate believer moved by a deep desire to empathize, wishing to get in touch with the lobster, to feel what the lobster feels.

And what does the lobster feel? Concerned with the place of non-human agency in the human world, artist Susanne M. Winterling has been asking questions about the role global politics play in the lives of humans and non-humans alike, the implications of the entangled nature of matter and meaning, and how art can meaningfully contribute to these discussions. The artist has produced a series of installations, videos, and photos, as well as organized talks, screenings, and other public events that address the effect of the global economy and its speculative bubble. She is interested in the problems of mass urbanization, pollution, poor working conditions, and huge asymmetries between so-called "advanced" and "developing" societies as they affect the planet. In a long-term residency at *BetaLocal*, an experimental education organization based in Puerto Rico, Winterling collaborated with scientists, artists, anthropologists, and biologists. The project takes as its starting point the observation of the impressive range of bioluminescent plankton in the rich ecosystem of Puerto Rico's bays; these life forms are currently threatened by massive pollution and urbanization of the coastline. The bioluminescent plankton is for Winterling an interesting example that speaks to co-dependency, responsibility, and the connections between global and local economies. As a means to represent these concerns, the artist has developed a particular photographic language and use of printing techniques that privilege the tactile qualities of her images. Close-up pictures of sand, a crystal, a hand lifting up a test-tube, and an ultraviolet image of a jellyfish are mounted on acrylic sheets that, because of the refractive qualities of the acrylic, make the image sharper and the colors particularly brilliant. Winterling often uses reflective surfaces, working in Plexiglas, aluminum, neon-colored acrylic glass. But the coldness of this high-tech material is offset by the intimacy with which the camera zooms in on the object of investigation. The sensual visuals are in many ways closer to the language of textiles and sculpture. The lens of Winterling's camera becomes a membrane through which the world of matter reverberates. In a video entitled *Immersion Scorpio* (2014), the camera shows a glowing scorpion that lies immobile on a stone. Nothing happens until the animal finally moves and disappears into a corner of the image. The scorpion in the laboratory glows when its skin is touched by the black light, while the artist touches it with the eye of the camera. This triangulation posits the artist's relation to art as a form of touching, and touch as a generative moment through which a whole reality materializes.

This becomes more tangible in another of Winterling's recent works, *Diademseeigel Immersion Prototyp* (2014). The work, a 3-D animation displayed as video-installation, shows a close up of two interlocked hands wearing what look like laboratory gloves. The two hands float freely in flat darkness that slowly turns into a grey reflective liquid. As the thumbs twiddle, the hands become a projective surface on which pink sea urchin's spikes materialize and blend with the form of the hands. This is what entanglement at times might look like: holding each other's hands, becoming a projective surface, merging together.

Like art making, experimenting and theorizing are about being in touch, being responsive, and about developing "respons/abilities," as Barad writes, "to the world's patternings and murmurings."⁶ For Barad, respons/abilities entail listening and responding in alternative ways that take into account the many more or less visible forms in which the world of matters and meanings unfolds. The artists and writers discussed here—Preciado, Stein, Hervè and Maillot, and Winterling—propose different ways of listening to the "murmuring" of the world, and of being responsive to it. They respond to what you cannot fully define but that lives inside or next to you, to things that do not yet have a name, to things that glow and sparkle to make contact with you or that you want to make contact with but don't fully know how. They recognize that what we call reality is just one possible materialization of the world. The challenge is in paying attention to what is excluded from visibility. Barad writes that

"each meeting matters, not just for what comes to matter but what is constitutively excluded from mattering in order for particular materialisations to occur."7 Something is always left outside: something exciting, something not yet known, something our imagination, curiosity, and desire thrive on. In this constellation, respons/ability is not so much a moral duty, about protecting what is already there, but rather is a readiness to rejoin living matter in its wild unfoldings, whether by spending the evening with a scorpion, fighting with a crab, swallowing testosterone, writing a script for a movie, working on a painting, or chewing on an idea.

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