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This Insistent Becoming New

Before

There was warmth and presence and rhythm.
There was a slash of light and the cold rasp of dry breath.

[Jump cut. Sub-title: '26 Years Later']

There was a desire to consolidate my auto-didactic wanderings with some kind of institutional structure. I began a Master's Degree.

[Jump cut. Sub-title: '3 Years Later']

The Masters, entitled 'Performing the Art of Life: Four projects' (Chapple, 2006), was completed with Pia Ednie-Brown as my supervisor. The key conceptual focus of the projects and theoretical exegesis was the rhythmic process of material transformation through which life was constituted in relation to world. Philosophically, I was more resolved, but an interdisciplinary wanderlust remained. I embarked upon a residency at SymbioticA, the collaborative art and science research laboratory in the School of Anatomy and Human Biology at the University of Western Australia.

[Jump cut. Sub-title: '12 Months Later']

Having successfully created piezoelectric transducers from cow bone, isolated, amplified and freeze dried large quantities of my lower intestinal flora, extracted collagen from waste rat tails, and vibrated tissue to grow in resonance patterns, my residency was complete. My approach to material investigation had been transformed. I returned to Melbourne, where Pia had asked me to be an artist in residence as part of an interdisciplinary teaching initiative called the BioSpatial Workshop. I prepared myself for the next phase of life's insistent becoming new.

Artist-in-Residence

When Pia first approached me to be artist in residence, I decided to devise a clear project of my own that would work with and feed into the broader context of the BioSpatial Workshop teaching structure. The project that I initiated, and which continues into this year as an Arts Victoria funded work, was given the working title, *Bodies of Water*. Conceptually, this project was designed to explore the material-economic relationship of our animal body of water to larger environmental and political bodies – oceans, rivers, aquifers, cities, nations states – and to probe the ambivalent, yet metaphorically potent, relationship that we hold to the messy nature of our wet physicality. The initial project outline was conceived at a time when drought was high on the Australian political agenda and water – or the lack thereof – was on everyone's minds. I set out to focus on the construction of two prototypes, which were described as such:

Autologous: Pure survival

This prototype aims to close the loop on the digestive tract, recycling urine through a wearable filtering tube that circles back from urethra to mouth. Moisture from the breath will also be captured. An ongoing self-experiment will be performed in order to investigate the feasibility of, and length of survival time afforded by, different designs.

Autologous: Alchemy for a global economy

This prototype aims to create an integrated living system in which urine is recycled and the extracted waste products are collected for sale to corporations that use them in the production of cosmetic and pharmaceutical products. This is sustainable agriculture for the new world order. Income earned from self-pharming is to be used to buy enough water to keep the system in operation.

Contamination

However, both of these prototypes are concerned with the recycling of excreta and excreta is not easily contained. It was, thus, appropriate that my work rapidly leaked out of its neatly devised conceptual framework and began to merge into the broader context of the Biospatial Workshop project. The tensions between interconnectedness and self-containment evident in the relationship of the human body to the material-economics of the water cycle, are also at play in the relationship between individuals involved in a collective process of transdisciplinary exploration. The focus on contamination in the Contaminated Life seminar in the first semester proved an appropriate introduction. To contaminate something is to render it impure, to mix it up, to decompose its identity. In doing so there is the risk of deconstructing it to the point of non-existence – but then there is recomposition and you begin again. While an interdisciplinary context may be challenging to the boundary conditions of an individual practice, it also has the potential to introduce novel contaminants and thus produce more vigorous and unexpected results. As my work merged with the flow of the Biospatial Workshop, the clear conceptual framework that I'd started with was recomposed to allow for a more porous engagement with its situation.

Process and Product

It is fitting that the Cultivating Life design studio in second semester became something of a contaminating element within the sealed and carpeted office environment of The Design Institute. By semester's end, piles of fabrics, parts of models, equipment, tools, plants, worms, cables, laptops, a tent, a portable stereo and an overflowing heap of CDs collected like some kind of baroque mould growing over the surface of the work space. Staff working in the adjacent offices had to physically negotiate the changing configurations of the contaminant 'organism' on a daily basis. Conversations overflowed between spaces, regularly transgressing the traditional boundaries between administrative staff, academic staff, researchers and students. It was nonetheless essential that certain measures were implemented to ensure that the inhabitation did not exert too much deconstructive pressure on its host – a fine balance. One of these measures was the 'clean' tent – clad in plastic and installed with a filter – which was constructed for the purposes of limiting the impact of wet and smelly work on the shared space.

Despite also maintaining an adjacent office, I found my own work was quickly drawn into the material-spatial mash-up of the design studio. One of the most obvious consequences of this move can be seen in the low-tech, DIY aesthetic of the prototypes. I wanted them to be open conversations that fed back into the collective process; to be immediately accessible and to operate very much in the realm of the everyday rather than to stand aside as polished artifacts. As such, I became less concerned

with the functionality of the prototypes than with their ability to critically reflect on the relationship between body and world, container and context.

At the same time as the work became more responsive to its surroundings, so my prototypes expanded their sphere of reference to incorporate reciprocal plant/human systems and address non water-based forms of bodily waste. Given the time spent working with the Fashion students in the collective work space, it is perhaps unsurprising that most of my prototypes have manifested themselves as wearable items. But none of these artifacts are garments in the traditional sense. They do not fit and follow the external contours of the body. Rather they are designed to articulate with the body's metabolic, temporal processes. They dramatise the constant cycles of ingestion and expulsion that iteratively recompose the interface between our bodies and the material-economic politics of our surroundings.

Observing the students at work, I was fascinated by each individual's different approach to their materials and by the subsequent 'personality' of the final artifacts. As I worked alongside them, I began to realise there was a character – or characters – that existed behind and informed my own artifacts. Adopting a DIY aesthetic raises the obvious question as to who was 'doing it themselves' and why. This meant that the 'personality' behind the prototypes became an important parameter to consider in the construction of the work. An issue apparent to me from the outset of the project was that, in the face of an impending global, environmental crisis, there has been a distinct increase in the level of public anxiety about waste. I began to wonder if, for some people, these anxieties would eventually become pathological. In response to this, I produced a short film entitled *Rebreathe* (Chapple, 2007), which documented two characters suffering from pathological waste anxiety and demonstrated the construction of two DIY wearable carbon offset and moisture retention solutions. As is evidenced in the still images, one of these solutions works with Jen Wood's beautifully poetic condom sprouter design¹.

The Paradox of the Individual

Increased incidence of waste anxiety in recent years correlates with a marked shift in representations of environmental catastrophe, from something that will be visited on us by an external agency, to conditions for which society and each individual bear some personal responsibility. Carbon emission, carbon offset and carbon trading schemes have rapidly become part of the media vernacular and regularly feature in product marketing campaigns. In Australia, drought has seen households implement water-saving practices like never before. However, this emphasis on individual responsibility sits oddly with a predominant Western formulation of the individual as a discrete agent operating independently of his, or her environment. In dealing with our waste, we are confronted, and sometimes destabilised, by the paradoxical nature of our individual being – connected yet separate, in flux yet constant, porous yet contained. By taking the idea of personal responsibility to its logical extreme, I have attempted to highlight these paradoxical qualities of the living individual. The prototypes that I have created, simultaneously position the body as a fragile system in need of protection and as a destructive source of pollution requiring containment. The intentionally ridiculous and obviously untenable nature of my proposed systems draw attention to the problems inherent in containment as a strategy and reinforce the fact that, when survival is at issue, we are very much dependent on, and continuous

with, the functioning of our environment. Attempting to limit or contain can merely replicate a discrete patterning of the world that fails to take into account the ever evolving relationships between systems.

Hence, the material preoccupation with waste and contamination frames a much broader philosophical question regarding the relationship of the individual to its surroundings. In his introduction to 'The Genesis of the Individual', Gilbert Simondon discusses the process by which an individual differentiates from its surroundings and comes into being, or individuates. In doing so, he distinguishes between the physical individual, such as a crystal, and a living individual:

...*The living being conserves in itself an activity of permanent individuation. It is not only the result of individuation, like the crystal or the molecule, but is a veritable theatre of individuation. Moreover, the entire activity of the living being is not, like that of the physical being, concentrated at its boundary with the outside world. There exists within the being a more complete regime of internal resonance requiring permanent communication and maintaining a metastability that is the precondition of life.* (Simondon, 1992: p305)

The iterative process of consumption and excretion is the essential pulse of this continual 'coming into being' that we call life. It provides material evidence of the internal/external communication, micro (gut absorption)/macro (shit) relation, by which a living being maintains itself and defines itself as an individual. Thus, when we begin to address and critique our relationship to the world, to design new ways of living, we must necessarily attend to the rhythm of our excretions – the process of life-in-relation itself. In drawing attention to these rhythms, the prototypes I have created, both address the paradoxical quality of life's becoming individual only through relation, and suggest a modus operandi, a way forward, for future work in the domain.

Indiscretion and Laughter

If I were to write a manifesto it would be titled 'Manifesto for an Indiscrete Life'. As I reflect upon my work to date and contemplate the way ahead, I consider both the idea of indiscretion and the act of being indiscrete to be key. Philosophy, action and artifact unite under one rubric. An indiscrete life is one that both acknowledges and draws attention to its own material, political, economic continuity with world and the paradoxical status that this confers upon the living individual. To be indiscrete is to live life in full awareness of one's scatological rhythms and to be rude enough not to hide 'shit'. An indiscrete life does not politely shovell difficult excesses under the proverbial carpet. An indiscrete life makes jokes and laughs at its own expense. But an indiscrete life is not a frivolous one: it is to laugh, to release, to 'let it all hang out' and to seriously consider the nature of how it comes back together again. At its best, an indiscrete life is always intimately attentive to the processes of its own becoming.

¹ The reason that Jen Wood's condom sprouter speculation (Wood, 2007) is so powerful, is that it so clearly draws together these two domains of reproduction and bodily waste. In doing so, it taps deep into the rich substance of metaphor, ritual and taboo surrounding the transitory states of life, death and generation. One potent myth arising from the alchemical traditions of the European Middle Ages concerns the special powers of a mandrake plant, which grows from the ejaculate of a hanged man. The original meaning of the word pollution is circa.1340, 'discharge of semen other than during sex' (Harper). More recently, assisted reproductive technologies and mechanisms of genetic surveillance place semen clearly within structures designed to continuously manage life.

In thinking about the question of indiscretion I have been influenced by Georges Bataille's thesis on the nature of eroticism, which he defines as "assenting to life up to the point of death". (Bataille, 2001: p11) Bataille draws bodily waste into correspondence with the taboo domain of sexuality through their mutual connection to death – the violent transition from discontinuous to continuous being. (*ibid*: pp17-18) Both sexuality and excreta represent aspects of a continuity between life and world that are manifest, before death, in the course of living. For Bataille, physical eroticism derives its power from "violation bordering on death" (*ibid*: p17) and excreta foreshadows the decay of the body after death. (*ibid*: p58) Sex and excretion are acts that tamper with the boundary conditions of the modernist individual; they offer momentary release from the pressure to be discrete. Thus, just as Bataille proposes a dissolute life to be one that erotically pursues the "partial dissolution of the person as he exists in the realm of discontinuity" (*ibid*: p17), I would propose that an indiscrete life is one that, in pursuing that which we excrete through continuous transformation, allows the poetics of birth and the politics of a life in relation to unfold.

The experience of indiscretion, the moment of excreta unfolding, is often expressed as laughter. In his article 'Poetics and Politics of Jokes and Laughter', Azfar Hussain draws this relationship between the domains of laughter and excreta quite overtly:

Freud indicates that release itself provides pleasure, and jokes come to serve this function, among others of course. ... [O]ne might, then, say that joking is like shitting. As we know, there are smooth jokes and constipated ones. (Hussain, 2007)

Laughter, like shitting, like sex, is a moment of opening up into continuity-with-world, a moment in which the defences drop. Indeed recent research suggests that "humor may have coevolved with another cognitive specialization of the great apes and humans: the ability to navigate through a shifting and complex social space." (Watson *et al*: p314) Laughter, sounding out, intervenes in the relationships between things. It releases us for a moment from the contradictions and difficulties of daily existence without effacing them. It allows us to see things differently. It is an act of repositioning. To navigate through the complexity of life in a globally networked economy, requires constant repositioning; from 'my life' to a global web of consequence and relation. From the looming nitty-gritty of the interpersonal foreground, to a far distant war. From vast devastation, to the passing niggle of a bad day.

Accordingly, the kind of humor at work in the prototypes I have created functions through the juxtaposition of consequence across radically different scalar domains: from a dripping nose to the state wide drought, from each out-breath to the rising levels of carbon dioxide responsible for global warming. On the one hand, when perceived at the individual scale, my interventions are like a clown's shoes – excessive and out of proportion. On the other hand, they are absurdly inconsequential in the face of a global crisis. This out-scaling technique produces a farcical illustration of the continuous/individual nature of our living being; where does our shit begin and end? The compositional incorporation of these apparently incongruous positions 'makes sense' in a flash of laughter, in the instant of the joke hitting home, we are immediately present to our paradox. As we laugh, we are momentarily released from the pressure

of relation, from the far reaching responsibility in which we are globally positioned and over which we feel little control. Yet as we laugh we also recognise the commonality of this experience, of our paradoxical relationship to the world. Laughter draws us together and allows us to experience our anxiety as a collective phenomenon. By letting it all hang out, by indiscretely laughing, we realise we are not alone in the predicament of existence and we are able to gather up and keep on 'following shit through.'

Beyond

To be constantly challenging the accepted boundaries of things necessarily involves a certain amount of discomfort and often a large amount of extra effort. However, as the logic of my practice reveals, I have always found it to be the preferred mode of operation. In the case of the Biospatial Workshop, there were definitely some moments in which students and staff were stretched in their capacities. The challenge of remaining true to ones discipline, at the same time as exploring its limits and being open to other disciplinary narratives, was a difficult one. Much like the paradox of the living individual, there is always the question of balance between porosity and consistency. Perhaps the question that I ask of my prototypes, and the question that we must ask of the interdisciplinary process, is similar: What new insights and relationships does the act of challenging boundary conditions produce? How can we engage and feed these relationships and insights back into the production of new and challenging work?

Perhaps like organic waste, like that which is not easy to incorporate at first, we must let these challenging insights compost and make their own rich connections before they can be productively utilised; to feed and grow sustenance for the next cycle of incorporation.

[Jump cut. Sub-title: 'Next']

Mankind conspires to ignore the fact that death is also the youth of things. ... Life is a swelling tumult continuously on the verge of explosion. But since the incessant explosion constantly exhausts its resources, it can only proceed under one condition: that beings given life whose explosive force is exhausted shall make room for fresh beings coming into the cycle with renewed vigour. (Bataille, 2001: p58)

- Georges Bataille

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