



PERFORMANCE  
PHILOSOPHY

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## EXHAUSTING THE (HUMAN) PROBLEM: A PERFORMABLE DYS/SOLUTION

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Global conflict, forced displacement, mass extinction, oceanic acidification, viral pandemic, economic devastation, environmental dissolution... The exasperating condition of things gone awry has become commonplace. It is the world we live in now, amplified by an apparent inability of human-kind to respond to crisis. What possibilities reveal themselves in this new age of the impossible, the unthinkable, the unimaginable?

Is it possible that we have exhausted all solutions because we ourselves are exhausted? Or is it perhaps that we have exhausted ourselves by exhausting the problem? If so, what can be asked of us? How do we rethink the ways we live, survive, thrive even? Who is this 'we' anyway?

This piece *feels* through the ecological and intellectual exhaustion caused by one of the most problematic notions in philosophical thought—the category of the human and specifically, the genre of “Man.” As Sylvia Wynter exposes, this mythology of humanity has become synonymous with all that matters, its morphology shaped by colonial forces depleting all planetary, political, and physical-psychic energies.<sup>1</sup> This is now a geological problem that centres the human as the presumed author of the Anthropocene (Crutzen and Sturmer 2000), a distinct epoch of global upheaval and climate instability.<sup>2</sup> Yet this concept liberally assumes *humanity* to be a complicit, compliant, even consensual aggregate referent to a single subject. It presumes a stable *we* placed at the heart of both problem and solution.

In what follows, I sidestep this double bind by tracing an alternative to the “monohumanist” fantasy (Wynter 2015, 44)—an invitation to embrace *we* as being(s) *beside ourselves*, always spilling in all directions, in a muddled universe full of experimentations, misadventures, troubles and wonders. I am aiming for a different story altogether that invokes what Jose Ésteban Muñoz refers to as “thinking outside the regime of the human as simultaneously exhilarating and exhausting” (2015, 209).

### Is there anything left?

In *Ends of Man*, Jacques Derrida asks: “But who, ‘we?’”, questioning the specific morphology of this liberal incorporation. This emblematic ensemble invents form for itself against the bodies of *others*, becoming itself precisely in the denial of its contingent enfleshments.<sup>3</sup>

I propose that this univocal fantasy uncritically leaves out the concrete status of bodies—irreducible, asymmetrical, fractal entities, always patchy at best. Bodies, especially of the human kind, are finite, easily worn out, their dynamism sustained by other matters—gravitational (walk!), atmospheric (breathe!), chemical (beat!) microbial (shit... think!).

Scholars such as Mel Chen and Eva Hayward have knowingly argued that we cannot think of bodies as separate from environments. Hayward, living with cancer and autoimmune disorder, writes: “we are vulnerable to one another; our bodies are open to the planet” (2011). For Chen, who uses their body, their illness and their encounters with other ecologies to think through molecular intimacies, the question becomes not how to secure *our* identity, but “which bodies can bear the fiction of independence” (2011, 274). Philosopher Bayo Akomolafe (2020) makes home and kin with what is unsolvable and preposterous in the meeting of the human *within* the world, asks: “what if the way we respond to crisis is part of the crisis? What if the climate change imaginary, and its commitments to sustainability [...], are not solutions at all, but particular ways of thinking of the world and our place ‘in’ it?”

I wonder, might the form of the human be the problem after all? Not humanity as a thing, a body or species, but as an intellectual posture—the mytho-formation of a solutionism committed to individualised thinking. A solution-mindset bent on saving the planet from its troubles. As I write through a time of chronic exhaustion, I wonder what it really means to remain *critical*. I wonder if this form of interruption, interval, suspense, can release us from the pressures and expectations on *our* bodies. I want to lean into it and yield to the promises of lying fallow, practicing slowness in crip time, following Alison Kafer’s intuition: “rather than bend disabled bodies and minds to meet the clock, crip time bends the clock to meet disabled bodies and minds” (2013, 27).

The shape-shifting nature of brokenness is perhaps what remains untouched in our philosophical conversations: “*For crip time is broken time*. It requires us to break in our bodies and minds to new rhythms, new patterns of thinking and feeling and moving through the world” (Samuels 2017, original emphasis). I wonder if this *dysorientation* might help recompose our-selves in new modes of liveability. I am inspired by Kim Q. Hall’s notion of “crip sustainability”, which means

“understanding a sustainable world as a world that has disability in it, a perspective that recognises the instabilities, vulnerabilities, and dynamism that are part of naturecultures” (2017, 438).

This perspectival fall precipitates us backward into *we*—the messy agglutination of the matters *with* us. Following Wynter’s praxis, this flippancy might just lead us into a practice of slow wayfinding. As Akomolafe suggests, “slowing down the pace of who we are” might be what is required to re-compose the human in its *inhuman* nature (Akomolafe and Young 2023). I want to linger for a moment on this promising ferment of (bio)possibilities, generative of what is yet to come.

### What’s the use?

The *we/us* of this project spills from what Alexander Weheliye calls “minority discourses” (2014, 6–7).<sup>4</sup> These orientations inspire experimentation with alternative shapes of life through material methodologies that take shape in relation to exhaustion. Here exhaustion emerges as the affective drift of matter in modes of saturation, dissipation, and (self)dispossession. This inconspicuous, inoperative state becomes a disabling condition of human norms, presenting a problem to exalted forms of agency and causality. Its posture connotes a ruptured torpor that sunders the spatial and temporal flow of human capital. In a very critical sense, the exhausted exists in a crisis of form—an indeterminacy whose meaning remains difficult to absorb, whose *inaction* stays suspended. Yet it keeps going.

I take this affective figure as that which animates the aesth-ethic project allowing bodies to partake in collective shape-shifting and sense-making. At the core, an investigation of the conditions of the sensible through concrete materiality. In practice, I am interested in material artistic practices that through very elemental and plastic methods take a stance—a shape—in relation to exhaustion.

The forms of chimeric agglutinations that assemble around the figure of Belgian artist Berlinda De Bruyckere offer a vital approach to the matter of the exhausted. These fantastic formations, rendered from wax, pelts, fabrics, and polymers, do not solely experiment with the material affordances of exhaustion, but think through what it means to occupy such a position for theory. Matter thinks through matters and creates abstractions.<sup>5</sup>

What this yields is not a way to conceptualise artistic work, and I am not sure if this is always needed. The matter(ing)s of the artistic apparatus should be left to do their stuff, with *us* respecting their autonomous nature. Instead, I pursue a speculative method, a way of imagining otherwise deeply rooted in affective forms that recognise the queer animacy and intimacy of artistic capacities that are not (and cannot be) restricted to the realm of the human. The work is guided by a biomorphic orientation grounding a nonhuman aesthetic angle through which a Deleuzian-Massumian notion of “affect” and “becoming” activates in art practices. This mobilises two key aesthetic notions: the performative—the primary activation of aesthetic matters—and the performable—the sensible shaping of what is already mobilised in aesthetic praxes. The direction of these propositions is my next trajectory.

## What's the matter?

Is something vital missing in thinking about bodies (not necessarily human or even animate) as making art in-tensity with the world? Isn't the force that throws things into moves and shapes the cascading performance of it all? Aren't the *informing* capacities of art's own making what drives the active and sensible directions of the aesthetic work?

Philosopher Judith Butler recognises this sustained activism as the "performative dimension", referring to how an artwork *performs*, how "it acts, that it intervenes upon and transforms a space, that it seems to exercise its own agency and effect" (2017, 172). I want to linger here on the vital(ist) intuition of the art's ability to actualise itself simultaneously as giving itself a-way—to change. Alongside the active principle of performativity, I propose, something else exists—the performable quality of art's potential to be affected and shaped, its reiterative capacity to receive and transmit intensities. I want to anchor my speculative orientations on the emergent notion of this *perform-ability*. Art's performativity and performability operate as distinct but interrelated forces. While performativity effects how art works (its agency), performability affects how art forms (its receptivity).

The introduction of performabilities is not simply a linguistic jest for academic effect. Rather, the sense of the practice of art becoming itself in polyvalent shapeshifting is intuited via Karen Barad's agential realism (2003, 2007, 2011) where the movement of bodies and their material-discursive practices emerge through "intra-action":

Phenomena are constitutive of reality. Reality is not composed of things-in-themselves or things-behind-phenomena but "things"-in-phenomena. The world is intraactivity in its differential mattering. It is through specific intra-actions that a differential *sense* of being is enacted in the ongoing ebb and flow of agency. (2003, 817, my emphasis)

Every-thing is a relation. In this sense, Barad exposes the continuous difference without separability of things being performed. In this sense, art's performative (intra)activity cannot be processed apart from its affect-ability—or performability—as its capacity to be shaped by and shape relations.

Affect is precisely the speculative opening of things/bodies as a porous capacitation of what could or might be. Philosopher Brian Massumi describes how the networked influence of the affective precisely involves passing from one state of capacitation to another (2009, 1). The regions of both aesthetics and ethics are bound up with this receptivity in the way their *things* are sensed by what at the same time is being sensed, albeit in (un)certain differential ways.

The artwork emerges through this double movement: its performative force (what it does) and its performable potential (what it can become). This distinction matters because it opens art to a different kind of agency (well beyond the human)—not just its power to effect *things*, but its capacity to be affective, to hold open possibilities for transformation. By means of—or *per*—their

trans\*form-ability, the co-operative field of the artwork is animated not only by the performance of things but by *the sense that makes matters matter*. If performativity is the artwork's active condition of being, then per-form-ability is the continual unfolding of its experience—its horizon of possibilities that shapes—or *transforms*—the relational field of art's-own-making.

### What next?

Once more with feeling, performativity potentiates the artwork while performability in/trans-forms its aesthetic sense. Together they drive the exhausting activity of being effective (mattering) and the inexhaustible capacitation of affectivity. What builds here is an aesthetic ecology—of bodies among bodies—exceeding each body's self-realisation toward yet unfelt possibilities. This susceptibility sets conditions for alternatives to cascade asymmetrically, (shape)shifting between the possible and (yet) impossible.

The combinatorial plasticity of the performative (in-active) and performable (affective) mirrors the compositional capabilities of exhaustion as both an existential problem and an actual impossibility. As bodily matter, exhaustion destabilises the epistemological and ontological safety of the coherent and consistent. In exhaustion, matters simultaneously give in and give out.

This deformation surprises habituation—a spatial anarrangement felt as the collapse of containment, the outside looking in, the decomposition of fixed form. A slurred, bent, suspended shape, its contours loosened, never stable to begin with. Such formal dispossession speaks to alternative relations of space and time, conditioned not by utility but by enigmatic impossibility. Exhaustion and temporality articulate the ruptured stagnancy sundering matters from human flow. The matter of the exhausted resists progressive time to reorient us around “crip time” (Kafer 2013)—where speed, pace, duration, timing, rhythms take flight from systems of order, organisation and volition. Time becomes irreducible. In crip time, time becomes itself, its suspended lapse resonating the quotidian tonality of affective life.

Where, after all, is the problem? Precisely where we left our definition of the human. It is an identity problem. To individuate is to give precise meaning, to define or delimit its in-formation, to determine what becomes important, to create hierarchies of value. If we approach an artwork through this delineation, it becomes the subject of the work itself. We submit the event to our volitional and cognitive resources. We maintain things in our control.

Affective matters in general and exhaustion in particular cut through the problem by making impossible the intellectual posture that creates the problem. They refuse the categories of philosophical reflection through sustained in-activism. This (de)composition holds the problem open—in suspense. As the shape of life failing humanist ideals, exhausted matter has no form but the unthought.<sup>6</sup> Its operational inactivism cannot be *had* by the (human) subject. It works differently than *us* via an exchange of ideas, influences, directions. ‘We’ become merely one aspect among things taking life within phenomenal, *in-forming* possibilities.

This opens a nonhuman aesthetic where ‘becoming’ achieves collective mobilisation in art practices. Matters invent form in ensemble with other matters, though precise relations to shared form. Like runaways from capture, affects take risk and care with the shapes they make and share (Campt 2019). After all, fugitivity (following Moten and Harney 2013) isn’t about safe escapes but making kin with things resisting completeness and sameness. Such unruly kinship needs both sensuousness and its refusal.

Why do some of ‘us’ claim the full spectrum of experience as the only bodies-that-matter? What of being the ones whom feeling is not (meant) for? A more-than-human discernment requires a more-than-human sensorium. Might ‘we’, perhaps, support art’s intimate expressions by not-feeling? In-activist suspense or self-surrender, might just be the affective form that release our hold on problematic feelings.

I borrow this intuition from philosopher and film theorist Eugenie Brinkema’s scintillating work (2014). Simply put, Brinkema posits that affects have forms. The daring novelty of this unconventional formalism is to escape the fixation on individualised emotions, as a refusal to “preserve a kernel of humanism in any discussion of affect” (32).

Yes indeed, how queer, scandalous, even perverse to trespass the quintessential site of affectivity—our (human) bodies. But for once, without feeling, we may be able to witness what Brinkema calls the “self-folding exteriorities” of compositional particulars—shapes, structures, and genres (25). Affective capacity forms bonds with their specific movements, rhythms, durations, weights, intensities, and their minor accents. This liberation from prescribed sites of feeling propels philosophy into animated fields of shimmering moments, a thousand everyday sparks of things speculating, intuiting, and confabulating, amidst the human logic that keep us (pre)occupied with problems. To consider these aspects in a work of art might well reveal something other-wise, deeply grounded in the co-compositional abilities of matter(ing)s, their capacity to think, feel, respond, make change possible.

Ultimately, what is this for? Would this radical formalism of affective aesthetics merely re-dress the problems? What’s the use? I am not after resolution or consensus here. If we concede that the artwork is a self-realising form, it is not to endow with a new philosophical concept or have the concept validated by the work of art. Regarding forms affectively means investing things with what Barad (2007, 176ff.) calls “agential separability”—not projecting construction nor meditating on pure materiality but recognising a topology of specific *matterings*.<sup>7</sup> This sense of “exteriority within” opens changing a more capacious sites where materiality and discursivity hold equal weight (Barad 2003, 825). So, let’s have aesthetic objects release their performative and performable energy and do the work of thinking and philosophising with their own specific languages, forms and problems, and let’s get *thinking things together*, after all, in a Laruellian non-philosophical sense, aren’t all thoughts equal (see Ó Maoilearca 2015)? Art and theory can then transform through mutual consideration and transformation of all.

### What can be asked?

In what follows, I attempt a careful engagement with practices of close thinking emerging from the agential materiality of specific artworks. Particular attention is bestowed on aesthetic composition and spatio-temporal combination as they resonate with distinct affective structures. The question of critique and its problems is the context. The intuition is that the narratives of affective forms will ripple out to join the discussion and submit their own responses.

With this in mind, I turn to the bodies of work that gather around the figure of Berlinde De Bruyckere. Exhibition pieces, installations, drawings, collages, and, more recently, performances, that have become recognised primarily as sculptural practice. Together, they exist as incubation spaces where specimens gather in sparse situations, forming conceptual provocations through hybrid species, long extinct or in passage to a changed future.

In *We are all Flesh* (2009), horse hides stretch across iron armatures, their pallid surfaces marked by resin veins and folds.<sup>8</sup> Some forms hang together, intertwined yet headless, the flesh-toned wax creating an unsettling proximity between organic mass and grafted tissue. The work suspends at a height forcing direct encounter with gravity.

*Inside Me* (2008–10) exhibits bulbous forms resembling internal organs, rendered in wax and fabric. These visceral masses, varying in scale, rest on industrial trestles. Their surfaces alternate between smooth and wrinkled, both sturdy and tender. The tonal range from pink flesh tones to deep reds, exacting organic materiality.

*Actaeon* (2012) features tangles of wax-cast antlers drooping across concrete slabs. These twisted forms, wrapped partially in cloth, echo dismembered limbs. *Cripplewood's* (2013) massive fallen elm trunks translate bark and skin through wax and cloth. The support of sandbags and metal structures forcing movement around broken forms.

Each composition materialises exhaustion through specific formal choices—suspension, fragmentation, drooping, wounding—while maintaining the tension between biomorphic and synthetic elements. Their plastic techniques of elemental amalgamation translate into corporeal masses of alternative enfleshments, grafted from mixed matters that fall into solitary shapes and emerge organically in associated clusters.

In other words, what holds their environment together is that both as singular forms and collective formations exist absorbed in affective extremities that resemble the morphology of the exhausted. They hang in the balance of abeyance, depletion, collapse, while also abiding, spreading, radiating. Such suspense counters a state of precarity with the capacity for sustainability.

I dwell in these inspiring wonders as they *inform* my incomplete practice of wayfinding with art's workings. Here, exhaustion shapes the aesthetic project through formal resemblance, redistributing matter through inhuman terms. Its formalism becomes a disabling condition of



human morphologies and mythologies, making exhaustion performative (bestowing agency on bare life) and performable (in its capacity to shapeshift relations).

The human factor remains conspicuous in these creative relations: De Bruyckere's international recognition, the art market's demands, institutional spaces. These forces are co-generative of the artwork's entangled bonds and (in)tensions. Rather than seeking coherence, this slow experiment takes on a wayward method, a slanted approach, latching onto critical points where discourse breaks, analysis falters, and linear logic disperses. In the artwork's wake, these disruptions become not problems to solve but form(ulation)s to unfold.

### How do we end here?

In the environ of De Bruyckere's creative gatherings, the material artistic methodologies take stance through elemental methods in relation to experimentation. The abandonment of traditional resistant materials—metal, stone, bronze, marble—for malleable wax, animal skin, cloth, wood, resin documents the chemical and intimistic aspects achievable through compounded relations. Their forms of articulation produce paradoxical figurations through reticular agglutinations and inserted supports.

Their physical aspect gives the impression of enigmatic congregations:

the skin is furrowed by folds which, together with a lattice of veins and arteries, weave an intricate pattern; the muscles are rendered with a keen anatomical eye; while the pallor of the flesh is a reminder of the transience of life. The bodies are explored by way of subtraction: the figures, always incomplete and faceless, are the portrait of a fragmentary existence. (De Bruyckere 2013)

In their plastic language, these formations consolidate states of abjectness, fragmentedness, corpo-realness that compound recurrent themes. These qualities respond aesthetically to ideas of death, vulnerability, decay while “evoking processes of birth, metamorphosis, dissolution, and regeneration” (Lynch 2014, 89). This resonance emerges from De Bruyckere's engagement with classical traditions: the visceral gothic of Flemish Trecento art, the transfigurative icons of Netherlandish Renaissance, the chiaroscuro of Roman Baroque. The narrative references cross mythological motifs, images of battlefields, and other scenes of abjection and transformation.<sup>9</sup> Yet what I find arresting about these projected scenes are elemental structures wrest from symbolic sublimation.

Out of their coagulated shapes, these biomorphic displays “have no heads to think with, nor eyes to see” (Downey 2018, 51). I understand this abstraction as a symbiotic (not symbolic) principle—a metabolism conceptualising through raw methods of materials that experiment with their tinkering spirit. Critic Herta Pümpel notes how “De Bruyckere's method of work is craft and its substance associated with concepts of joining together and connecting” (in Sagmeister et al. 2016, 216).



The structural composition here functions as formal articulation of how things become implied in their affective orientations. Their constitution is achieved not through received narratives but through exhaustive arrays of devices combining elements with synergies and resistances. Each material's experience of sensing and being sensed drives collective becoming. Their networked technologies respond to energies transmitted and shared—inflection, temperature, pressure, duration—via forces of rupture and cohesion defining relations.

For example, wax is inherently dense and unstable, repellent to moist and insoluble to water, made malleable by heat and bending/melting to flame; epoxy is wet, resistant, and adhesive to many encounters, tensile and bearing strength to compression and bending, with tendencies to low shrinkage and high retention properties. To all intents and purposes, their networked technologies are governed by the affective and sensible orientations of their coalitions.

In the present case of syncretic mattering of different substances into spatial shapes, the elemental and simple already appears as a resonance between poly-cognitive forces and experiences. It expresses itself, formally, as a correlative reality from the start—matters considering collaborative learning, that think through the proclivities and repercussions of syncing and embedding, a modality that attends to the role of a wider composition.

This combinatorial capacity yields new properties through external-within supplementation. Following Foucault's non-teleological approach to histories shaped by force, I pursue not what the artwork *means*, but how we might regard it otherwise—attending to the substrate matter where form takes place. These compositional structures sustain what Isabelle Stengers (following A. N. Whitehead) calls "lures" for feeling and thinking (Stengers 2008).

Exacting both rigor and curiosity in considering how De Bruyckere curates *with* materials, rather than convince you of an analytic method, I will share, as well as I can, an orientation toward thinking *with form's affective arsenal*. As tools of relation, these attentive speculations gesture toward the intricate play of agential materiality, yielding performative and performable possibilities.

### Can we go on?

With this disposition at heart, I turn to the long form of Gilles Deleuze's essay on Samuel Beckett's narrative structure—"The Exhausted" (1995). This text and the aesthetic modulations fostered by De Bruyckere share a special relation to exhaustion. Both tend to(ward) forms and rhythms that are simultaneously bio-poetic-political. Both break and repair the aest-ethical limit. Through their exhausted structures—their formability, disability, penetrability, sustainability—they invite an inhuman morphology that lays the human problem to rest.

Exhaustion, as we feel it, carries an element of the impossible; it seems unthinkable to go on. Yet we press on, exhausted—but toward what? Deleuze presents exhaustion not as defeat but as necessity, a tactic escaping the tyranny of all present(ed) possibilities:

Exhausted is a whole lot more than tired. [...] The tired has only exhausted realization, while the exhausted exhausts all of the possible. The tired can no longer realize, but the exhausted can no longer possibilitate. "That the impossible should be asked of me, good, what else could be asked of me?" (Deleuze 1995, 3)

Deleuze's model of exhaustion begins with a formal encounter and infectious thinking with Beckett's novels and plays, radio plays, and his more extremely experimental late writing and television plays. The philosopher's argument (in complicity with Beckett's text) may appear to be little more than a riddle wrapped in the enigma of (im)possibilities. With no solutions in mind, I want to consider this arresting puzzle—problem or question—from the literalness of its affect.

The exhausted figure remains "'bowed head resting on hands', hands sitting on the table and head sitting on hands, head level with the table" (5, citing Beckett's television play *Nacht und Träume* [1982])—a lump of matter lapsing into other matters. This slumped shape "without the force either to rise or lie down" (6) carries on into shadowy, indeterminate versions of itself. A de-compositional movement of suspense—still-in-action. It doesn't bear thinking.

Let's linger on this posture that escapes human exaltation, renouncing all while holding itself in a suspense without ends. Overwhelmed by all that is and has been, collapsed in a condition of indeterminacy and incompleteness, taking up entirely its immobility, deflation, at the limits of existence.... It's indeed exhausting, simultaneously as a physical state of matters being consumed, and the logical principle of using up a whole set of possibilities.

Following Deleuze, exhaustion is the exercise of the combinatorial—the art (or science) that compounds variables by renouncing "all order of preference and all organization of goal, all signification" (3–4). This suspension of priorities doesn't mean passivity: "you press on, but toward nothing" (4). This is the paradox of Beckett's protagonist in *The Unnamable* (1953): "You must go on, I can't go on, I'll go on" (Beckett 2009, 407). This principle of de-composed-in-differentiation is what the philosopher finds in Beckett's work with text, space and screen. It lands on particular and specific structures: a figure—the rolling gait of *Watt*'s listless character shuffling in all directions far from equilibrium; a diagram—the absolutely reduced spatial-mechanical nature of *Quad*'s sequences; a space-image—the camera's disjunctive cuts and travelling frames in *Trio*.

The scene defines itself not through content but through *form*—its "internal tension" (Deleuze 1995, 9). A world made up of countless permutations of topological intra/extro/in/versions. The exhaustion of logical possibilities opens "another reality to possibility, one that is itself exhaustible" (Stevenson 2009, 82). Here exhausted meets exhaustive at the limit edge—impossibility. As scholar Audrey Wasser notes "exhaustion invents the possible as it exercises it, and it has affair [...] only with the impossible, which belongs to it as an essential determination and a limit to be displaced" (2012, 128).<sup>10</sup> Exhausted matters de-compose themselves in the possibilitation of the impossible, at the point where the (human) figure disengages its-self.

Let us pause. Exhaustion lays bare its compositional energies. An elementary situation that cannot take anymore "of that which coerces, from the outside and from the inside" (Pelbart 2015, 23). In

its extremity, exhausting becomes the art of composing with “a fantastic decomposition of the ‘I’” (Deleuze 1995, 5). Everything is being (de)composed out of an energy asking matters to hold shape.

A point of suspension. A curiosity.

What are we capable of holding? This strategy of matters co-(de)composing demands engagement with exhaustive energies grappling between collapse and radical sustainability. Empty head in captive hands, I temporarily suspend thought via an elliptical form bringing into being the not-yet...

### What escapes (us)?

The dys-organic compounds that make a scene in De Bruyckere’s theatre seem to express themselves via the de-composing capacities of exhaustion. From the moment wax, resin, wool, hair, iron, cotton, skin, artist and all other intervening agencies come together, they engage in unpredictable theory-making through compositional tendencies. Their inherent properties break down, bend, blend and dissolve under machines, processes and atmospheres.

Skins elongate and tighten under the pressure of shifting volumes. The wetting of epoxy makes atomic bonds with the substrate of wood, cloth, wax and hair. The jumble of particulate collisions precipitates castings, carvings and shavings. Metallic bones tense between the lifting and landing of weights. Transient states enter a zone of impact and sync in. Network technologies work their alchemy through more-than-conscious understanding of *bodies* in relation.

Matters appear held together by a principle that is inherently sensory and social—a collective self-sense that shapes an orga|ni|smic deployment. For instance, let’s consider the choreography of *We are all Flesh* (2013), a series of works in skin study. The disparate pieces derive their communal expressive, technical and aesthetic features from still-unfolding questions about collapse, surface tension, and abeyance.

Oddly shaped carcasses of swollen mixtures—wax, resin, hessian, twine. The masses heavy in their quietude, the weight almost unbearable, layering, positioning, and sliding on and over metal, concrete, and wood structures. In response, they spread out so as to release their gradations in colour or size, to rub against the singular perspective. Their suspension underscored by their arching lines—their faceless sensuality heavy but held. Like composted paradigms, finding comfort in their demise. These formal agglutinations syncretise an impressive collection of ‘bodiments’, in the sense intended by Emily Anne Parker:

*bodiment* instead of *embodiment* because I take the latter to be a hylomorphic term, *em-bodiment*, which suggests that something immaterial has passed into something material (em-). In this way the concept of embodiment problematically suggests that a body is divisible into agency as “form” and inertness as “matter.” (Parker 2018, 448; original emphasis)

Such wonders do not take form as their object but occupy such a position—making home with matter(ing)s yearning beyond binaries. In a critical sense, form belongs to the indeterminacy of

things, a speculative opening where matter affects itself. The background precipitates into critical sense-making through performative revitalisation that weaves bodies into performable becomings.

What becomes animated is a nonhuman aesthetic angle finding support in the unknowable—where judgement hangs, suspended. The headless approximations of new casts and species are both outcome and means by which techniques of unhinged logic develop and exhaust. Pieces assemble in recursive series jolted from order, seized into semblance of depleted action to the point of saturation. Systematically truncated from habitual definitions, they remain held in abeyance.

All possibilities here exist in a state of figural and figurative suspension that generates entangled meaning. Wrenched from the flow of ordinary sense, they emerge in relative isolation. Lifted from any functional activity, they exist in a collapsed state of energy, gripped in the suspension they perform. The dissociation of surface and form from a single recognisable source, logic or sequence intensifies the tension between formal extroversion and topographic composition.

Waxen antlers slump/ed over shelves, tables and plinths  
stuffed pelts h-a/hung from gallows and iron cranes  
stacks of woollen blankets roll/ed out on beds, crates or trolley legs  
crippled branches recline/d over pedestals and metal trestles  
lumps of gutty fibres splay/ed across racks  
synthetic limbs slung/ed between sawhorses  
Some droop/ed on high trampolines, some hover on hooks  
some rest/ed in old vitrines  
all wrest from the ground—in a realised state of... *suspense!*

What's happening now? What's going on? What's going to happen? How enigmatic... How thrilling....

Lingering on this affective intensity, suspense comes to coincide with an intense interval of possibility without top certainty or bottom end. This form of arousal is akin to what philosopher Alanna Thain recognises as "*a technic* for an attentive awareness to the minor form of difference that (re)constitutes a body in time, a feeling of futurity immediately impinging on the body's stability and reopening it to intensive relationality" (Thain 2017, 3; my emphasis). From this thickness, suspense emerges precisely where subjectification loosens up—at the point we hold on to bewilderment and wonder.

How curious... How intriguing.... Having trouble to know, not deciding whether to be or not to be, taking off interpretation.... Maybe this tension is just an invitation—to be more curious about another(ness). Are we ready to be in audience? Are we struggling to be with our attention? Perhaps what we need is a queerer sensorium more attuned to other-than-human intimacies. A radical accessibility where we can let ourselves be spoken to by matter's own intentions.

## What's up?

Suspense is in the air, hanging with the carnal anomalies that come under the name of De Bruyckere, replicating what Thain recognises as “a vertiginous swept-upness, affirming a becoming that precedes and exceeds knowing” (2017, 53). What resurfaces is the problem of perception—of how human logic and utility becomes the project atop the rest.

Every molecule making its risky journey through air into senses is a portal to dialogue beyond knowledge or language. Every move reaching *us* enlists *our body* into atmospheric choreography, telling what's hanging, what's (re)occurring, what's (de)composing, what's changing. In this sense(making), we become participants in an ecosystem of feelings....

We are swept up into unresolvable tensions, losing ground control of knowing or thinking on human scale. In this suspenseful milieu, we are in enfolded de-territoriality—literally off-ground—through a technology of expanded *in*activism.

I want to ally the held-in-drift temporality of suspense and Kafer's rendition of crip time as “flex time not just expanded but exploded” (2013, 27). This dehiscent rhythm makes space for a groundless practice attentive to bodies colliding in community. Here lies the embodied experience of difference opening *other* systems of perception, interdependency and mutuality, that can take care for all forms of matterings.

Underlying this is a belief in creative practices that challenge epistemological assumptions producing the problem of ‘knowledge’. In the call and response of the sculptural formations that take on the semblance of exhaustive exhaustion, we might be sustained by its affective structures to rethink through, as we think among, the ways in which its *informal* relationality is recurrent, resurgent, even recycled.

In other words, the exhaustive combinatorial is where all the options or contraries taken together are equally enactive (performative) of a transpositional (performable) disposition. The result is a sense of extraordinary polymorphic complexity as the affect—the desire for a kind of infinite expression—combines with... more or less anything.

Let's return for a moment to *We are all Flesh* (2012), where expansive renderings of horse hides, epoxy and iron armatures explore transient states by creating contact and syncing into form. Resin-filled veins and metallic structures coordinate, returning sustained impressions of life-size carcasses from collapsed perspectives. The singularity of each structure multiplies as matters link and influence in combinatorial patterns.

Or let's consider the phenomenal disjunctions responding to the serial kilter of the *Inside me* series (2008–2015). Wax, wool, cotton, wood, rope, epoxy, and iron rendered into bulbous lumps, displaying all manner of innards, resembling bursting anatomies. Their outlines carry outward into industrial supports while sinking into structure, spilling into synthetic collaborations through the overlap of material accommodations and tensions.

Materials and technologies experiment with the virtual possibilities they surrender to. They express the (neuro)plasticity of their headless bodies, exerting themselves in lingering collapse, extricating affects with each enlisted form, composting rhythms of autonomous gradations into combinatorial in-possibilities.

Notice how surfaces stretch, press and contract in sync with the shifts in the spectrum; how the hard edges of metals intensify against collapsing volumes; how the iridescence of wax activates tension between depth and surface. Shadows animate cuts vertically or capture material waves horizontally. The irregular densities of plaster flow with the viscosity of resin. Fibrous muscle-mass vibrates infusing hidden movement through the whole ecotone.

I lean here on Nicole De Brabandere's suggestive reading of the informing rhythms of affective intensities:

[a]s the specific qualities of the rendering ecology generate intense tensions, they also *inform* how the texture is rendered and perceived. The *inform* emerges in the experimental ecology as the situated relations of form-taking activate new openings to attention and inhabited alignments of force and form. (2017, 70–1, original emphasis)

Energy isn't merely extracted (from bodies) but infuses the per-form abilities of non-sensory attunement rendering intra-activist matterings. The still-lives of exhaustion are sustained by a tensile re-posing—not mimicking grounded perspectives but resonating affective forces. Their *informing* recycles itself in resistance, using exhaustive energies while continuously exhausting bodies—toward nothing. No-thing resolves here; suspension remains in possibility-shaped guise without arrival or grounding. The with-holding of suspense attends only to polymorphic improvisations of exhaustive combinations.

From within this spread emerge techno-aesthetic bricolages that co-(de)compose even the artist, among the rest. Incomplete and uncertain, they are as fragile in their faceless figuration as strong in their sustained inactivity. They make body from each affecting matter, posture from each informing transition, experience from each inclusive dissociation. They hold anticipatory possibility.

In this suspension, what deformations of the human become possible? Can this impossible holding sustain relation with other-than-human humanity? How might “crip sustainability” behold a transformative praxis so the impossible can be absorb in the real? What new forms of socialities can emerge if we stay with these overwhelming dispositions?

Next and toward the end (if ever there is one), this exhausting cycle of problems and propositions sets again in creative fugue, assuming new response-abilities, tending reticular forms, sustaining even the most surprising or unbearable solidarities.

## Why go on?

The formidable figures of exhaustion that have taken hold of these pages return to the point where intelligibility is suspended. Their precarious introversions open up and cleave the most tender parts of the bodiments they press forth, always earthward—what we know goes to bottom, goes down.

It is among the site of encounter known as *Cripplewood* (2013) that I first witnessed the full weight of this dispossession, actualised through impersonal perception—feeling-beside-itself—finding its way into the artwork as a force in potentia. Here lies sustained tension between resistance and depletion, absorbing within its affective extremity the bio-syn(aes)thetic figure of incompleteness.

The appearance of truncated tree trunks multiply, weaved with felt, rubbed by wax, spread in gradations of colour and size, expressing the bearing of weary bones. The environment finds in shadow resistance to affirming gaze, troubling mass, density, weight toward the point of amalgamation. Synthetic membranes hide within displaced matter, inspiring wonder as an unending, unfurling practice of wayfinding.

The distinct scales these expressions and contradictions inhabit can inhibit human logic of sense, unhinging binary systems. What is suspended are the conventional operations that divide the assumed *exteriority* of shape, structure, dimension, duration, light, line from the *interiority* of feeling subjects, “so privileged in Western thought” (Brinkema 2014, 22). In a very critical sense, *Cripplewood* finds form precisely in the indeterminacy of things. The difference between one matter and another, one composition and another, is not resolved but e/merges from exhaustion’s combinatorial return. I imagine this process as a *collaborative continuity*, where activity is never complete, only suspended, so that matters may find common production through shared exhaustion.

This *inactivism* grapples with the tender cont(r)acts between affect and form. Not restricted to dualist segregation, they recognise each other in the intra-action of the formed and formulated—the performative—with “the formless and unformulated” (Deleuze 1995, 5)—the performable. An ecology of matters among forces exceeding each entity’s self-understanding.

There is continuity between wood, skin, steel, cloth, wax, resin, concrete, integrating disparate forms into communal structure. Singularity and exhaustion converge into collective tissue holding separate agencies into a group, a series—a social field. This synthesis neither assimilates nor annihilates difference. No hierarchy is constructed.

Contradictions abound in inclusive disjunctions through the exhaustive combinations of matters. They account not to the one—matter, body, subject—but to all sides. They become lures of conviviality, shaping elemental yearnings into what Fred Moten (after Manuel Callahan) calls “real assembly”—“the gathering of things in the flesh, where performed devotion refuses every enclosure” (2016, 163).



This meshwork concretises the combinatorial force of exhausting matter(s): each material thinking through and beyond its own dissolution, *withholding* the tension between what dissipates and what persists—in-difference. No elsewhere, no divide, just otherwise. To sustain these possibilities is indeed suspenseful.

A vertiginous force done holding out for the human—body, thought, feeling, action—to be utilised or sustained. At the beat of crip time's refusal of normative productivity, it invites undifferentiated multiplicity where nothing needs to be fixed, managed or made proper. It swirls opposition into composition. A radically different sustainability—one that holds space for all forms of access, all modes of being and unbecoming, all ways matter finds to persist beyond prescribed understanding. Here, even *us* and *ours* become part of its wide embrace.

Such a situation demands imagining outside of the centrism of singular problems toward the responsive polyamory of forms/forces. Why? Because if we become capable of exhaustive (self)transformations we can also join the fantastic *combinatorial living* peculiar to art. Its radical creativity emerges through dispositions engaging intra-material and trans-affective potentials, providing a key for ethical liveability.

If art effects the in-active formalisation of exhausting possibilities, it also foregrounds its exhaustive potentialised sense. Just as there is inactivism in art—a performativity—there is also a force, or passion, in-forming its tendencies—a performability. The performative can be the motion that actualises any such variation in the language of the work of art. The performable is the text that can stress a praxis of sense-making—holding a sense of intention as simultaneously as becoming sensible in mattering(s).

In this double sense, art exposes its ways of *working* and *in-forming* the production of otherness—a state of conglomerate being performed on bodies stripped of subjectivity; a sense corroding the calcified forms of human norms. Here we can form new intimacies in not-feeling, abandoning old Self through world-sensing. This reorientation needs both sensuousness and its refusal.

How might we unlearn to feel *other things* by not feeling ourselves? Can this de-action become a speculative practice, a way of imagining otherwise? Can it reorient material praxis toward greater care? Can attention as felt form foster more responsible and sustainable (crip) *inactivism*? One minor step to take before inviting these (im)possibilities....

### Why not (we)...?

Exhaustion's minor gesture abides time with non-spectacular suspense. Philosopher Joff Bradley suggests: "it is also a kind of visionary act in that the seer perceives the virtual inhering in a given actuality that surpasses or overflows it" (2019, 271). A feeling that has done too much and has had enough. What is left is the refusal to compromise with all present(ed) possibilities—"this absence of the possible" enables "new processes of subjectivation... in their very impossibility" (Bradley 2019, 271). The scene of exhaustion invites us to relinquish accomplished postures, to stay with

overwhelming complexity as less defined, less Self, to experiment with what we consider a problem.

Do our critical postures disguise the crisis they replay? Is our solutionism, all too human, part of the problem? What if we adopt the intelligence—the sense-ability—that comes with suspending thought and action and tipping the problem sideways? Let's do something different and hold on to uncertainty, not to dismiss or bypass the problem, but to be felt by the experience of it. Receive the imagination or discovery that becomes possible when we attune (again) to our disintegration; to *other* sensible capacities that reawaken when we suspend cognition....

Upside down, head(less) first, stripped of the grounds of subjectivity, in the loose direction of crip time—dispossessed, extenuated, at the threshold of possibilities. We can re-learn how to be undone from presumed identity, how to feel through painful unbecoming. This disorientation opens new configurations, where refusing normative processes of being becomes a way of knowing otherwise, of sharing what emerges when we release the grip on certainty.

Following Brazilian philosopher Peter Pál Pelbart, the exhaustion with old forms can encourage the expressive, creative and modulatory capacities of (neuro)plasticity, in ways that escape from dominance:

“minor” modes of life that are not only more fragile, precarious, and vulnerable (poor, crazy, autistic), but also more hesitant, dissident, and at times more traditional than others (Indigenous people); that are, on the contrary, still being born, tentative, even experimental (to be discovered, invented). (Pelbart 2017, 137)

The tender things that insist on resisting, stay alive through attempting, wandering, escaping, failing without preconceived finality, knowledge or definition: “without hoping to entertain, fulfil, without the fear of nothing happening. The condition for something to happen is that nothing must happen” (Pelbart 2016).

The minor qualities imperceptible to human logic—affects, senses, resonances—stick with no-things, no-matters, no-bodies. Multiple as they are, they commit to crip sustainability as a disposition for collective liberation—a praxis of *thinking things together*.<sup>11</sup> A formal expedient for larger environments to emerge. Some relational field of *in*action, some differential shape for coalition—some things performative *and* performable.

Unlike the tired which realises possibilities, exhaustion must in-possibilitate—must create. Just as the crisis is not the result of a problem, the critical bodiments that have called our attention here raising the questions which problems become ruse for new, inventive (cor)relations. Their micropolitical attunements—barely perceptible shifts in how matter moves and holds still—teach us to notice what trembles at the edge of attention, what whispers beneath the threshold of recognition.

Why not we... take their cue, slow down, lose our heads, ditch our human scales, risk new shapes, weighed as we are with unsubstantiated feelings, swelled as we are with desires and con+fusions,

to tenderly hold the combinations of relations that compose all bodies and their survival.... It feels good to be felt.... What else can happen now but the impossible?...

I am exhausted. I hope you are too....

--

What happened? Is it still happening? Are we still—here? I am writing this post scriptum in times of renewed dislocations, genocidal destruction, grief, conflagrations in thoughts and implosions in values. At the end of another earth revolution (2024). Reminded again of our radical incompleteness. To notice we've never not been indebted to our undoing.

An inflection point is reached with exhaustion. Loosening predetermined expectations, changing the shape of experience, staying with the minor tremors of bodies, yielding into a wayward pattern, a queer feeling, a fugitive moment, a strange perception. The sustenance for these times comes from the gift of our sensuous solidarities, the glimpses of artistic (autistic) futures, the other lives that have always sidled ours.

You are still being felt.

Held with care.

I wish you good rest and quiet fallowness.

### Notes

<sup>1</sup> A morphology defined by European, Western modernity in both forms of the Vitruvian Man and the medical-natural organism. Such mythology that privileges an implicit whiteness, masculinity, cis-ness, hetero-ness, symmetry, and ability, across an intersectional field of gendered, sexual, racial, and colonial relations (see Parker 2018).

<sup>2</sup> A term coined to formalise the geological epoch of modern Earth as characterised by the transformation of human activity as the primary factor in determining the direction and flow patterns of ongoing geological processes. New concepts have since emerged to illustrate some of the contradictions of the Anthropocene, such as "Capitalocene" (Moore 2016), Plantationocene (Haraway 2015), "Afrocene" (Akomolafe 2022), "Plutocene" (Solón 2019), "Mantropocene" (Raworth 2014), or even "Technocene" (Hornborg 2015) and "Wasteocene" (Armiero 2021), and more.

<sup>3</sup> Stacey Alaimo, Hortense Spillers, Jasbir Puar, Sara Ahmed, Zakiyyah Iman Jackson, Jack Halberstam, Alexander G. Wheellike, Sophie Strand, among others, have demonstrated how this projection is inextricably tied to, even predicated on, various dehumanised and inhuman bodies—the feminine, blackness, disability, queerness, transness, animality, and the non-human animate and inanimate.

<sup>4</sup> Feminist new materialism, queer theory, affect theory, critical race studies, disability studies, postcolonial critique, and other adjacent fields.

<sup>5</sup> In my ears here the motif that thrums throughout Donna Haraway's *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (2016): "It matters what thoughts think thoughts. It matters what knowledges know knowledges. It matters what relations relate relations. It matters what worlds world worlds" (35).

<sup>6</sup> I consider this dimension referring to states of dehumanisation in a broader field of gendered, sexual, racial, ableist, and colonial norms and relations at their intersection (see Waheliye 2014).

<sup>7</sup> Curiously, for Barad 'geometry is concerned with shapes and sizes [...], whereas topology investigates questions of connectivity and boundaries' (2003, 825).

<sup>8</sup> "De Bruyckere has spoken candidly about her relationship with the Bruges University Veterinary Clinic, who contact her when they have a deceased equine patient. De Bruyckere chooses the bodies with care and consideration. She doesn't take every horse carcass she is offered; she must, in her own words, 'fall in love with' a particular body, find it beautiful or moving" (Downey 2018, 53).

<sup>9</sup> For instance, the series titled *Slaapzaal III* (1999) made out of layers of woollen blankets stacked on bed, tables and wheeled structures emerged in response to news footage of refugees in Rwanda (see De Bruyckere 2012).

<sup>10</sup> Elsewhere Wasser (2017) also anchors Deleuze's philosophy in the notion of "problems", which is relevant to this journal issue.

<sup>11</sup> As an aside, I would like to acknowledge philosopher Erin Manning's (neuro)atypical intuition on the differential attunement of micropolitical movements: "A minor gesture that activates the collectively at the heart of thought effects change. It affects not only what the text can become: it alters to the core what thinking can do [...] and gives that thought the space to develop collectively" (2016, x).

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## Biography

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Their research, teaching and artistic methods tend to minoritarian bodies and matters—those rendered as racialised, gendered, disabled and non-human by normative politics. These activities weave together neurodiversity, queerness and trans-materialities as regenerative practices offering compelling strategies to heal, thrive and re-enchant matters in times of crisis.

The work is always done with others in the belief that regenerative practices emerge through collective wayfinding. Recent projects include “Endosymbiotic Love Calendar 2021”, merging microbial science with performance art (funded by Arts Council England/Microbiological Society), and “Flow.Walk.Drag.”, exploring ecological performance methods (supported by the Ecological Citizen[s] fund – UKRI/Royal College of Art).

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