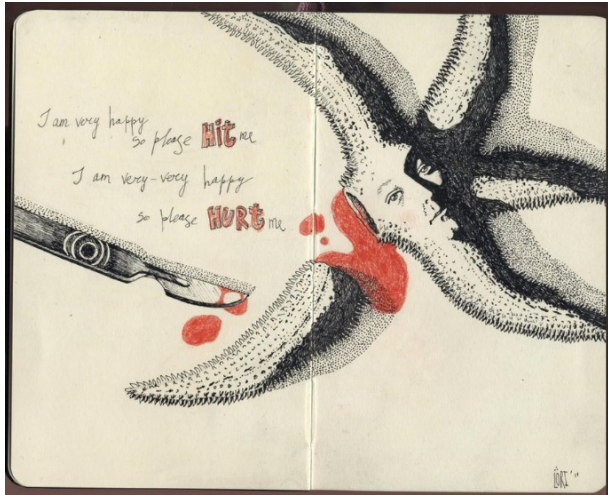


QUEERING THE ETHICO-ONTO- EPISTEMOLOGY OF THE POSTHUMAN

By Charlotte Grum, December 2016

Setting the scene.

This is an invitation to enter an affective space, so please listen to this piece of music before reading on:



As Hayward explains in her 2008 article ‘Lessons From A Starfish’ unfolding the trans-potential of this song, this music ripples through styles and textures, suggesting that the tone and the wording of “Cripple and the Starfish” put us in touch with things that it mentions or hints at. Likewise, the contents and layout of this essay is meant to create an affective space in which theoretical hints will act as flight lines and virtual articulations. A sort of poetic enactment of my current material-discursive art practice. According to Hayward, ‘trans’ is meant “-to disturb purification practices; the well-defined is confounded at multiple material and semiotic levels” (2008: 253).

In this essay, I focus on how to undo othering effects of human and posthuman thinking, that is, how to deal with virtual starfish, dead frogs and other queer critters in a posthumanist manner. Or – as posthumanist matter!

With Barad (2003, 2014) in mind, I find it interesting to think of which diffractive effects ‘the posthuman cut’ is creating – which critters, creatures and concepts are included and which are silenced, made invisible, kept voiceless.

My overall aim and interest is to explore how posthumanist thinking can be used in developing performative situations in public space, a central part of my “onto-performative” art practice¹.

According to Ferrando (2012), in 2012, extensive debate had been formulated on what Posthumanism is. The main focus had been directed towards the contents and meanings of a posthuman paradigm shift, while the methodology employed to reflect upon hardly was disputed. Since the article was written, I am sure that scholars and practitioners have made up for this imbalance. Still, I am inspired by her view that “posthumanism is praxis”, which is why I find it meaningful continuously to criss-cross between my artistic manifestations and my conceptual thinking tools, or to be more precise – to explore the thick texture of my entangled thinking-doing-knowing, creating navigational tools and temporary landing points along the way. Thus also using this essay to reflect upon HOW to perform in a posthuman manner. That is, continuously exploring the posthumanist implications for the artistic framing of matter.

This means, that we take as a departure point that artistic practice is not about making new works, but making new worlds!

The posthumanist approach is called more conceptual and a forerunner for the posthuman/transhuman cyborg universe (Lippert-Rasmussen et al, 2012). According to Ferrando (2012) the notions of posthuman and posthumanist are interrelated, but not synonyms. She argues, that ‘posthuman’ applies to a broad field of studies, including advanced robotics, nanotechnology and bioethics whereas

¹ I explore how posthumanist conceptual figurations like “puzzle creatures”, “body without organs”, “becoming insect” and “queer critters” work as thinking tools and navigational

cartographies in order to recompose subjectivity and materiality in public space. See more here www.charlottegrum.dk

‘posthumanist’ mainly refers to a shift in the humanistic paradigm and its anthropocentric worldview.

According to Barad’s agential realist ontology, what is in the world (ontology) and what we know is in the world (epistemology) cannot be separated as two separate things that do not affect one another (Kleinman, 2012). In my academic and artistic practice, I am very inspired by the ethico-onto-epistemological work of Barad (2003), exploring how matter comes to matter – and what is ‘un-mattered’ in the process.

In this essay, I have chosen to explore the ethico-onto-epistemological potential of two art videos of Chinese new media artist Lu Yang² (b. 1984).

I see Yang’s work with Ferrando’s 2016 article on “A feminist genealogy of posthuman aesthetics in the visual arts” in mind, situating Yang in the midst of other contemporary female artists dealing with gender, social media and the notion of embodiment, all elements that Ferrando (2016) argues will become of key importance in fourth-wave Feminism.

In her article, Ferrando emphasizes the extraordinary number of women artists “- who have contributed, with their radical imagination, to the shaping of posthuman aesthetics, featuring techno-mythologies, cyborg embodiments and rhizomatic bodily performativity, even before the birth of the cyborg as a theoretical framework was conceived and the term “posthuman” popularized” (Ferrando, 2016: 2).

The particular videos are chosen as I still try to grasp the queering effect of the human/non-human/posthuman going on in the works. At the same time, this essay will work as a conceptual preparation-unfolding-enfolding-process for my next performance piece, for now called, “How To

Explain The Universe to a Sea Star”, to be presented at Ven, a small historic island between Denmark and Sweden, in June 2017.

The song by Antony and the Johnsons starting off this essay, the two video works by Yang and my ‘virtual’ coming work on Ven function here as aesthetic elements of an assemblage aiming at producing thinking and further reflection. Nomadically zigzagging from art works to posthumanist lines of thought, the assemblage is also performed graphically dividing this paper into areas or zones of different intensity, ‘pulling at the stiches of ongoing processes’ as Hayward (2008: 250) poetically puts it.

In Hayward’s text, the starfish³ evolves from “being a tool for thinking about beingness” to a statement about literal animals always being a part of figural animals. “Animals are bound in language,” she suggests but also notes that “nonhuman animals are always already reworking language”.

Drawing on Lippett (1998), Hayward describes how animals expose the limits of representation, animals in language *dis-figures* representation, in the sense that ‘star fish’ “transplants a figural element into a literal one” (Hayward, 2008: 261), illustrating the intra-corporeality of matter and meaning, the literal and the figural emerge as interlocking and dynamic.

My current working title “How To Explain The Universe to a Sea Star” reproduces by itself a dualist worldview even though the intention is to bridge or to articulate or to present (a glimpse of) the differencemaking mattering process. Somehow I want to explore (and in the end produce, a performative situation framing) the agential cut (Barad, 2003) in which the universe and the sea star is being produced simultaneously.

² A further introduction to the thinking and practice of this artists specific matters and the specific mattering of this artist can be found in Qin (2015) and Peckham (2010) interviewing Yang.

³ According to National Geographic, marine scientists have undertaken the difficult task of replacing the beloved starfish’s

common name with sea star because the starfish is not a fish. It is an echinoderm, closely related to sea urchins and sand dollars. <http://animals.nationalgeographic.com/animals/invertebrates/starfish/>

Following this line of thought, a better title, though less poetic, would probably be SEASTARUNIVERSE.

As Barad explains, matter does not move in space and time. No, "matter materializes and dynamically enfolds different spatialities and temporalities" (Barad, 2014: 229). Following Barad's thinking, bodies – human and nonhuman – are among the differential performances of the world's dynamic material reconfiguring, its ongoing articulation. The starfish is an interesting body to explore as it is already something else, a transfigure, conceived not as a body but an organ – it has no brain but is all eye – queering our ordinary categories and sorting processes.

Queering has the job of undoing 'normal' categories like the human/nonhuman sorting operation, Haraway (2008: XXIV) states, making me wonder how to queer the human/posthuman sorting operation.

Ethics according to Barad is about accounting for our part of "the entangled webs we weave". Ethics is about mattering, "about the entangled materialisations we help enact (...), including new configurations, new subjectivities, new possibilities (...)" (Barad, 2008: 336). Knowing requires differential accountability to what matters and what is excluded from mattering. Barad's point being that it matters to the world, how the world comes to matter (2008: 332).

Turning to Yang's intriguing video work Uterus Man, in an online interview⁴, Yang is asked if the Uterus Man project reflects any issues in our current state of the world. She answers:

"Uterus Man's identity deals with the hidden issues of sexual orientation, genetics, reproduction, and problems with evolution. It's a vague concept that is hard to explain with words but can be

experienced personally, allowing for different interpretations by the audience."

Please see the entire video here, allowing it to add to the affective space of this essay:



In "Revived Zombie Frogs Underwater Ballet" (2009) Lu Yang sends electric shocks to dissected frogs to make them dance as they hover in water.

Please see this work by activating the photo.



On an onto-ethical scale, I suggest that even if Yang ensures that only dead frogs were used in the project, the work creates a different affective space than the Uterus Man. On one hand, it can be read as reproducing a dualist human-nonhuman power relation. On the other hand, the work also presents or frames the common biological nonhuman functions of all animals – including the human ones. In a way performing

⁴ Lu Yang explains here what and who Uterus Man is: <http://thecreatorsproject.vice.com/blog/meet-uterusman-the->

[androgynous-superhero-fighting-against-bad-genes-and-gender-stereotypes](http://thecreatorsproject.vice.com/blog/meet-uterusman-the-androgynous-superhero-fighting-against-bad-genes-and-gender-stereotypes)

nonhuman life beyond a biological self (Braidotti, 2013).

Continuing the reflection on how to do posthumanist performance art, I speculate on the practical implications of different loci of the onto-ethico-epistemological take. Braidotti's work seems to focus on the 'ethico-epistemological implications of mattering' part of the term, whereas Barad seems to be occupied with the 'onto-ethical' part of the term - probably also reflecting their different scientific training - Braidotti in philosophy and Barad in theoretical physics.

Thus, it seems that a posthumanist art practice is not only framing how matter comes to matter, but also need recognizing how 'old' matter and former mattering still need troubling.

Turning to Braidotti's troubling of the undifferentiated 'we, humans', which she calls "a negative sort of cosmopolitanism" postulating a panhuman bond of shared vulnerability and a future of posthuman anxiety, I wonder with her, how to become artistically and aesthetically accountable and 'worthy of our times' (Braidotti, 2013 and 2015, Keynote Lecture, minute 5:27).

All through her body of work, her articles, books and talks, Braidotti keeps stressing: "'We' were not human in the same way to begin with" (Keynote Lecture 11:25), calling for an ethical compass. Neither the human, nor the posthuman are neutral categories to begin with, she states. She argues that Sci-Fi literature and Hollywood movies construct the social imaginary of disaster, silencing the densely power entangled materiality of concepts such as class, gender, race - and I would add, species.

Dominant discursive-material figurations of the human shouts through posthuman thinking - not only causing each and every one of us to consider what kind of 'I' I am being offered, but also linked intrinsically to this question, what kind of 'I' I can become.

Considering the onto-ethical implications of Lu Yang's Uterus Man I find, that this art work queers and deterritorializes naturalized social categories such as man, woman, flesh, body, technology, biology, potentially releasing or drawing new territories for the 'I's of the world.

Being critically mindful of the diffractive posthuman matterings of the world is an important tool in aesthetic as well as academic matterings as they produce - or rather *are* - the social imaginary of the world.

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