

## The Metabolic Age 09.11 — 10.25.2015

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### The Octopus in Love

by Chus Martínez

The octopus is the only animal for which three quarters of its brain are located in its (eight) arms. Without a central nervous system, every arm “thinks” as well as “senses” the surrounding world with total autonomy, and yet, each arm is part of the animal. For us, art is our possibility of imagining this form of decentralized perception. It enables us to sense the world in ways beyond language. Art is the octopus in love. It performs a transformation of our way of conceiving the social as well as its institutions, and also on the hope we all have for the possibility of perceptive inventiveness.

#### 1. PARTS BEING TOTALS

Let us now imagine an institution composed entirely of well-functioning parts of other institutions—a strange new form of urbanism taking the shape of a gigantic museum. Parts, as well as departments, would coalesce into a gigantic yet sensical choreography, recognizable as “institution”—defined as a behavioral pattern so powerful that the viewer could easily embody the sense of interiority such institutions create. The image I am trying to convey here is not that of an institutional “quilt”—of several well-functioning parts spread over a territory and dependent on a larger bureaucratic container centralizing all assorted activities. Rather, this is an image of a formation, a system that unravels multiple codes simultaneously. All these systematics would be invisible at first. We would not be able to name any of these parts as such; to us, they would appear and function as totalities. The simultaneity of these multiple meanings—forms of understanding art and practice—and the simultaneity of languages that present the heteroclit nature of art both today and in the past, would render the structure that holds them together as innocent or even absent. And so, these different institutions, or better, organisms, in their natural way of inhabiting a coordination and even successfully broadcasting it, would render insignificant the prototypical academic prejudices of level, character, or style. None of these organisms—our former museums, art centers, art projects, art societies, kunsthalls, etc.—would be arranged in a hierarchical formation. At the same time, it would be difficult to claim that these organisms’ equality is determined by any form of standardization of working codes. None of these parts or totalities would be embedded in a didactic form of organization.

## 2. THE RAIN FOREST

To present a rainforest inside a white cube is impossible. A rainforest is the radical other of a white cube: the opposite of culture, the opposite of an exhibit, the contrary of scale, the opposite of legibility, the opposite of ideology, order without subject matter, or any other subject matter than life in itself.

In a conversation we once had, the artist and founder of El Museo del Barrio Raphael Montañez Ortiz said that when the Museo was conceived, he thought that all its exhibitions should start with a rainforest. Or rather, that the preamble of any form of art presentation should pass through a rainforest. He did, in fact, collaborate with the American Museum of Natural History to this end, by creating a rainforest room with their help. Unfortunately, no images of it have survived. After telling me about his idea of the rainforest, he stared at me and asked: "Do you understand?" I did not—or, at least, I did not at that moment.

For a long time, I have been wondering what he meant; surely not reproducing nature or a representation of nature inside the gallery. I remembered the title of his two-volume dissertation, *Towards an Authenticating Art*, published in 1982. The book is an exhaustive account of his growing interest, from the late sixties on, in psychic healing therapies and rebirthing. He coined the term "Physio-Psycho-Alchemy" in other words, a physical reversal that can be conducted by means of the mind and its alchemic power. A rainforest at the core of an institution is also a reversal—an alchemic reversal of the institution turned first into an organism so that later, a "room" can be able to host art, art works, and artifacts.

Claude Lévi-Strauss was also fascinated by the potentiality of reversal. He often wrote about the "chiasm," a rhetorical figure also used masterfully by Shakespeare, for example. A chiasm is a reversal that produces a total confusion of identity that aims, later on, to reestablish that identity under a renewed contract, so to speak. As in Shakespeare's comedy of errors, the Museo del Barrio—invented, created, and developed by the artist in such special circumstances of diaspora and the civil rights fight for equality—may have been disguised as a rainforest before it was able to emerge as an institution at all. How else could a museum for a still-forthcoming community be possible? Disguised as a rainforest, the new organism could claim both the monumental importance of the project and the futility of presenting itself as "alternative." The transformative language required to change the art historical canon demands a radical metamorphosis—like that of becoming-nature—and not only a modulation in the narrative, or potential inclusions in canonical lists. This museum of a certain future, which still needs to flourish under a yet unknown relation between modern aspirations and vernacular language, was forced to appear as a rainforest first before becoming an institution. The rainforest is the beggar that will become the sovereign. What, then, is the question? How is this presentiment of such radical transformation going to find its fulfillment, or, at the very least, its mode of performance?

I then recalled the distinction between game and ritual in Lévi-Strauss. He defines a game as a structure that produces symmetry among the players through its rules:

An essential principle of every game is that the rules are the same for everyone; the starting point of every game is symmetry. The end result of a game is intended to engender asymmetry by producing a winner. This asymmetry is the product of non-structural factors: individual skill or talent, chance, or accident—in other words, an “event.”<sup>(1)</sup>

What gives rise to a ritual is also an event—

A death that brings about an asymmetrical relationship between the living and the dead, the sacred and the profane. ... The purpose of the ritual is to perform a series of pre-ordained “actions” (which are different from the “actions” or events that make up a game; since they are pre-determined they constitute an integral part of its structure), and thereby ensure that all the participants to the ritual end up being “winners.”<sup>(2)</sup> The purpose of the ritual is the performance of a series of pre-ordained actions” that reestablish symmetric relationships. The actions or events that make up a ritual are very different from the actions or events in a game. Like the rules of the ritual, they constitute an integral part of its structure, since they are pre-determined, their role is to ensure that all the participants in the ritual end up being winners.

In the historical horizon of this museum-as-artwork that Raphael Montañes Ortiz proposed, it makes sense to believe that the rainforest invokes the institution to take ritual as its structure. The logic of the ritual may serve at least in the sense that the social imbalance—disruption—that gave rise to the ritual (the rainforest/ museo) is morally remedied or otherwise compensated for. If the modern institution is one in which structure is closer to the logic of the game, in 1968 the emerging museo embraced the ritual.

This play of inversion between game and ritual—the chiasmic logic—is intended here as a means of reconciliation between the modern and the vernacular: both used as thinking models to address social and aesthetic paradigms. The former should no longer be considered as belonging to an earlier, pre-scientific stage in an evolutionary process that invariably leads to the latter. Rather, both models must find a way—through art—to reflect one another in such a way that the vernacular provides a kind of inverted mirror image of the modern way of structuring and interpreting the real. The Levi-Straussian message—channeled here through Ortiz's rainforest/museo—is that the force separating vernacular from modern worlds is not time, or history, but rather “a synchronic system of symmetrical relationships of correlation and opposition”.<sup>(3)</sup>

There are many ways to interpret Ortiz's vision of the rainforest as the preface to every exhibition. To put it simply, I think his rainforest introduces a very novel element into the existing

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(1) Boris Weisman, “Claude Levi-Strauss, Chiasmus and the Ethnographic Journey,” *Arachnofiles* no. 2 (Autumn 2001):

[http://www.ed.ac.uk/polopoly\\_fs/1.81508!/fileManager/Claude%20Levi%20Strauss%20Chiasmus%20and%20the%20Ethnographic%20Journey.pdf](http://www.ed.ac.uk/polopoly_fs/1.81508!/fileManager/Claude%20Levi%20Strauss%20Chiasmus%20and%20the%20Ethnographic%20Journey.pdf)

(2) *Ibid.*

(3) *Ibid.*

discussion around the politics of the white cube. The debate has been a notably hard one, either taking architectural perspectives, as related to modernity, or flowing freely and responding to active discursivity and project-oriented energy, as in the late-nineties and this century's first decade. Amidst all this, what the white cube discussion has lacked is precisely a rainforest: a principle that in its radical otherness defies the container, since the life force represented by a rainforest cannot be contained.

I still do not know exactly what to do about this incredibly beautiful image of a rainforest installed at the core of an art institution. It embodies all the difference in the world, apart from human agency and ideology, yet it also encapsulates the source of all that. It differs from the conventions of neutrality, and by its scale and its very nature it escapes from any formal canons as it compels a form of intelligence without consciousness to erupt into the white cube. "The rainforest," as Raphael Montañez Ortiz has said, "is an element that really helps us to think about class and labor and autonomy and dependency, just introducing a radically different viewpoint, the viewpoint of the rhythm of moisture."

In short, it seems very fertile to picture art beyond (or even outside of) the notion of culture itself. Can you imagine a white cube adopting a rainforest?

### 3. THE INVENTION

The rainforest marks one of the multiple ends of the era of critical philosophy. Critical philosophy seeks necessary conditions or general foundations in order to determine possible relations. In the place of casting solid architecture is the exercise of casting doubt, an enormous parenthesis that allows us to avoid entering into the detail of things. A museo emerging from a diasporic community suffering from social and legal inequality, could not possibly start by presenting itself, as an artwork, as an "alternative" to modern institutions. There were no shared general conditions that could produce a "new modern Museo"—not enough of a social, political, or aesthetic consensus. Thereby, in 1968, the museo is already not an alternative art space, but rather, through the rainforest, a true invention. This idea of invention is given the greatest importance by French philosopher Michel Serres. He defines philosophy as having the aspiration to give birth to a world of politics and professional ethics, rather than remaining crouched in an impregnable position from which it either approves or condemns modernity or rationality—or the clarity of all discourse, for that matter.

And in philosophy as in life, in life as in the sciences, I personally prefer invention accompanied by the danger of error to rigorous verification paralleled by the risk of immobility: "All around us, language replaces experience. The sign, so soft, substitutes itself for the thing, which is hard. Yet, I cannot think of this substitution as an equivalence. It is more like an abuse—a violence." As Serres has pointed out, "the sound of a coin is not worth the coin; the smell of cooking does not fill the hungry stomach; publicity is not the equivalent of quality; the tongue that talks annuls the tongue that tastes or the one that receives and gives a kiss." (4)

It is very complicated to describe any exact meaning for the word “invention,” or to apprehend the central role that the senses play in Serres’s writing. He argues for a reinvention of the site of relations between law and science. As a result, to invent consists of leaving behind an idea of philosophy as having the right to judge, thereby regaining the possibility to create. To invent is to produce that which will foster production, to formulate and express a system of laws, to understand and apply scientific possibilities.

This simple mention of the rainforest represents the opposite of the critical project: a rejection of the narcissism that defines the re-institutionalization of the forms of knowledge and culture that transform artworks into cultural products and exhibitions into ideological demarcations of experience. It is also the opposite of the demand of art to be significant, to deliver what we can call a situation of reading, of extenuating meaning and memory into a sterile void. The image of the rainforest embodies an ongoing, performative speculation about the ways of affecting and being affected, about the ways of naming—a language, a place, a time. The viewer must find a language, imagine a place, and conceive a time, while at the same time producing a position far away from it all.

This, I suppose, is what we call invention.

#### 4. THINKING THROUGH THE SKIN

“For Serres, before language, before the word, there was noise: a ‘background noise, which precedes all signals and is an obstacle to their perception.’ This noise, against which previous philosophies have blocked their ears, is both the very possibility of language and also its interference; it is the multiple sound of the universe that “the intense sound of language prevents us from hearing”.<sup>(5)</sup> He continues: “What is mathematics if not a language that assures perfect communication free of noise?”<sup>(6)</sup> In other words, “in order for these diverse systems of coding to speak to one another, the philosopher must establish pathways of communication between this network of systems. The philosopher’s work is to ... understand communication itself as an enactment of the turbulent relationship between contingent pockets or figures of order, and the swirling disorder that is its grounding world”.<sup>(7)</sup> Serres writes that “[n]oise is the basic element of the software of all our logic, or it is to the logos what matter used to be to form”.<sup>(8)</sup> Communication only emerges from background noise, from signs differentiated from an infinite cacophony of other signs and from the static that refuses to be read as a sign at all. The analysis of the flows and thrusts, the prepositions that link together these turbulent systems, become, perhaps unexpectedly, part of Serres’s project to construct “a decent philosophy of the object” (Genesis, 91).<sup>(9)</sup>

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(4) Michel Serres with Bruno Latour, *Conversations on Science, Culture, and Time* (Studies in Literature and Science), trans. Roxanne Lapidus (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995), 193.

(5) Laura Salisbury, “Michel Serres: Science, Fiction, and the Shape of Relation,” *Science Fiction Studies* 31, no. 98 (March 2006): <http://www.depauw.edu/sfs/backissues/98/salisbury98.html>

In his book, *Les Cinq Sens*, he demonstrates that sensory embodiment makes it impossible to free oneself from the world's entangled networks: the multiple spaces and times traced by the circulation of objects. One can never stand either in front of or outside the world. This thought, however, is very difficult to convey. Serres rejects analytic philosophy, which he identifies with the critical school. But he also distances himself from writers like Foucault and Deleuze. His thought operates within an intriguing and fascinating refusal of language. Part of this refusal is a turning away from the discourse of phenomenology, which traces its lineage from the post-structuralism of Derrida through Heidegger's fundamental ontology and up through Husserl. Serres tells Latour that the "return to things" always runs up against the barrier of logic within philosophy; phenomenology, in particular, always filters sensory experience through structures of language. He refuses this "agreement" on which language lies, an agreement that petrifies objects and prevents the chaos caused by the senses. In place of this refusal, the embodied subject is shown to feel, think, and construct itself through the already multiple effects of information dispersed and condensed as well as the centripetal and centrifugal forces that make both center and periphery impossible to locate. These forces and processes are the sensory body's work of self-making and self-transformation.

## 5. THE EGG

Federico Manuel Peralta Ramos, an Argentinian artist, created a large egg as his contribution to the final Instituto Torcuato di Tella show in 1965. The egg was entitled *We Are Outside*. Very little documentation remains of this piece. At first sight, the pictures show the large egg alone with its maker on a thin plinth on the gallery's floor. The black-and-white photographs show some dark areas in the plaster; the piece was not entirely dry at the time of the show. The few surviving friends who saw the piece recall that the work was made in such a hurry that it broke immediately after the jury saw it and declared it the "winner" of that year's final show. A relative of Peralta Ramos similarly told me that the artist miscalculated the tension between the metal structure and the skin of plaster, and so the piece imploded right after the prize ceremony. However, there is a picture that shows Peralta Ramos destroying the piece himself. Too large to be moved, the work was made inside the gallery space and was always fated for destruction.<sup>(11)</sup>

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(6) Michel Serres with Bruno Latour, *Conversations on Science, Culture, and Time* (Studies in Literature and Science), trans. Roxanne Lapidus (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1995), 78

(7) Laura Salisbury, "Michel Serres: Science, Fiction, and the Shape of Relation," *Science Fiction Studies* 31, no. 98 (March 2006): <http://www.depauw.edu/sfs/backissues/98/salisbury98.html>

(8) Michel Serres, *Genesis*, trans. Geneviève James and James Nielson (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997), 7.

(9) Laura Salisbury, "Michel Serres: Science, Fiction, and the Shape of Relation," *Science Fiction Studies* 31, no. 98 (March 2006): <http://www.depauw.edu/sfs/backissues/98/salisbury98.html>

(10) Salisbury

(11) Another, very unclear, image shows the piece being part of an ensemble that also includes a mural painting and an obelisk. Although there are no pictures of the obelisk, there is one of the painting that was situated just behind the egg. The paint has the texture of molten rock forming a trail moving down the wall. The black-and-white image allows us to perceive the painting's dark colors, combined with brighter ones, but we are unable to imagine either its real tones or its effect next to the egg. ..

Over the years, and because it was his last art object, the egg formed part of the myth surrounding Peralta Ramos. Some say he abandoned art (he later became an important character on a late-night television show), but he did not. The egg marks more of a beginning than an end. It brings to an end the anxiety of becoming a conceptual artist, a part of an international movement—a figure able to comment and contribute to a certain tradition. Like the rainforest, the egg is also an end of critical thinking. Like the rainforest, the egg is also an invention. It is an invention of a different kind: a more classical one, still organized around appearance and what is hidden—around enigma and truth. Unlike the rainforest, the egg depends on language; it establishes a dialogic form that calls attention to the physicality of the object: its texture, shape, even its sound as a form inhabited by void amidst the space. The egg actually speaks. It is the egg that says we are outside. The piece traces a clear correspondence between rationality (sense) as "outside" and irrationality (non-sense) as "inside." The momentum of meaning is delayed as the egg starts to fall apart, turning all possible narratives into debris. During this process of announcement, presence, and disappearance, a movement of another sort arises: not production but seduction.

In the years following the egg, Peralta Ramos devoted himself to life, giving parties with his grant from the Guggenheim Foundation, but also meeting friends in cafes during the day and at cabarets during the night. He performed living as an artwork while writing maxims on bar napkins, paper, and canvas. It all indicates that the egg was part of an avant-garde gesture focused on a personalized surrealist take on total autonomy, the destruction of art, and the overlapping of rules that separate form from content. But, apart from the obvious, the interesting part of all this lies in how Peralta Ramos ended up on the other side, so to speak. If "we are outside," it is because he—the egg/the artist—is inside. He did not stop making art; he just started making it from the other side. The egg—Humpty Dumpty—is, like Serres, tired of language, but still ultimately dependent on it. Like Humpty Dumpty, he and he alone can decide on the meaning of words. The egg can rename the world and invent it anew. However, since only he knows this meaning, the whole process may end up becoming a radical, solipsistic effort. The world was invented that day. The egg stood in front of us—all of us, people from the past as well as the future. Peralta Ramos transfigured the world, changed the rules, and altered the universe in Buenos Aires—an act not far from the Psycho-Physio-Alchemy of Rafael Montañes Ortiz. And then?

Like La Rochefoucault, Federico Manuel Peralta Ramos took refuge in maxims. Not by chance. Like the French thinker, he intuited how to transform negativity—nobody but him saw or felt the world change—into a voluntary force toward the good, toward living life as a second passion, each one more cunning than the previous.

While living, he coined thousands of maxims. Sentences full of a "terse" wisdom: "Believe in an invisible world, beyond the fars and the nears"; "I am a start, since I only go out at night"; or "I am a piece of atmosphere." People came to see him, at a café he used to go to every day, looking for a saying: a sentence he would often write to them on a piece of paper. They called him a street philosopher at times, a pacifistic scholar at others. The sentences are quite stupid, in the best sense of the word. He was stupid because he needed to embody the

expression of refusal without any kind of defensiveness. This form of refusal is much more difficult to locate since it seems to appear as something not there or not understood or not contained.

Another way of interpreting this production is to read all these sentences as maxims—sentences expressing the profound structure of a wisdom yet to come. This gigantic production of sentences written here and there, handed to all those who came to see him, express the vertigo of knowing that we can never give an ultimate definition of man. Their flow traces an endless trail of demystification. Without knowing Peralta Ramos, Roland Barthes wrote: "(t)he infinite demystification which the Maxims stage for us could not fail to involve (to expose) the maxim-maker himself." (12) It may be useful to recall here the question of wisdom: wisdom being different from knowledge, in that it is impossible to be described as "being produced," a distinction that is also very present in the thought of Michel Serres. In a chapter entitled "Boxes" in *Les Cinq Senses*, Serres states that the body "should not become a statue or tomb" as it "radiates wisdom." It is our duty, he continues not to "receive sense data as a gift, without reciprocating." (13) One could say that the sentences of Peralta Ramos conceived of "a philosophy rooted in the experience of the world with a deep responsibility for giving back to that world—in whatever form—in return." (14) Whatever form, because the way the artist relates is not as a participant, or a citizen, but closer to a visitor. Remember? He went inside the egg. The egg is a shell, like a spaceship, and spaceships often change direction while heading toward their goal. Peralta Ramos, like "Ulysses and Colombus, Bougainville or Cook share, together with all sea populations, the rare chance of inhabiting and travelling simultaneously." (15)

## 6. OF ALL INHABITANTS OF THE SEA: THE OCTOPUS

The octopus is a very friendly monster. It was not an easy task to convince a bunch of teenagers from a wild coastal village on the Atlantic that an octopus could become a friend. They used to meet at breakwaters on the weekends, late in the afternoon. It was not dark, but dark enough to be unable to distinguish whom exactly was sitting there or what activity was being conducted. One of the village boys, a quite nice looking one, had almost an academic look, a remarkable trait in a group of dropouts from any kind of formalized learning. They were all at the end of their teenage years. Their conversation oscillated between sex, death metal, family life, joblessness, and that octopus-thing. Apart from being a huge part of the gastronomic tradition of the region, the octopi represent some sort of bridge between the inhabitants of the sea and those of the coast. Not that they were treated with any particularly friendly

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(12) Roland Barthes, "La Rochefoucauld: Reflections or Sentences and Maxims," in *New Critical Essays*, trans. Richard Howard (New York: Farrar, Strauss and Giroux, 1980), 20.

(13) Michel Serres, *The Five Senses*, trans. Margaret Sankey and Peter Cowley (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2009), 200.

(14) Lauren A. Benjamin, "The Sensory Philosophy of Michel Serres," *Pictures Places Things* (May 29, 2012) <http://picturesplaces-things.wordpress.com/2012/05/29/the-sensory-philosophy-of-michel-serres/>

(15) Serres, *The Five Senses*, 276.



behavior. It was not uncommon to see a group of woman hitting octopi against the coast rocks. Their body fibers need to break, they say, otherwise they are inedible. Years later, it was said that freezing them was enough to guarantee a great texture once cooked. Two images were iconic in that remote spot on that northwest Spanish coast: three or four octopi cooling on the windowsill, with their heads on a glass, and a large freezer full of octopi. I remember no less than thirty of forty in my own family's larder.

After a while, everyone was talking about that academic-looking boy becoming friends with an octopus. They said that the animal came to look for him every day at about the same time. They said that he came onto the shore every day to visit him. The boy took some photographs to prove to the others how the octopus "stared" at him, and how he grew. He claimed they sat together every day for hours on a cliff, watching the sun go down. I remember him talking non-stop about it: at bars, discos, and all the other sorts of gatherings that boring village life allows. I loved the story, but I lost touch with him as I only visited my family from time to time.

I came across new research on octopi recently in an article in *Wired*, published less than a year ago:

The octopus is weird; it has an eerily malleable body, sucker-studded arms, skin that can transform into a convincing facsimile of seaweed—or sand—in a flash. It can solve mazes, open jars, and use tools. It even has what seems to be a sophisticated inner life. What's confusing about all of this is that the octopus has a brain unlike that of almost any creature we might think of as intelligent. In fact, the octopus brain is so different from ours—from most of the animals we're accustomed to studying—that it holds a rare promise. If we can figure out how the octopus manages its complex feats of cognition, we might be closer to discovering some of the fundamental elements of thought and to developing new ideas about how mental capacity evolved. "Part of the problem in working out what's essential to intelligence in the brain is working out which are the features that, if you took them away, you would no longer have an intelligent system," says Peter Godfrey-Smith, a philosopher at CUNY who studies animal minds. "What's essential as opposed to an accident of history?" Think about it: chimpanzees are, like us humans, primates. Dolphins are mammals. Even clever crows and ravens are at least vertebrates. But our last common ancestor with the octopus was probably some kind of wormlike creature with eye spots that lived as many as 750 million years ago; the octopus has a sophisticated intelligence that emerged from an almost entirely different genetic foundation. If you want to study an alien intelligence, Godfrey-Smith says, "octopuses are the closest thing we have."<sup>(16)</sup>

I quoted this research somewhere and, in a recent visit to my village, somebody left a name and a number for me to call as soon as I arrived. I did. "It is me"—a male voice said—"the

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(16) Katherine Harmon-Courage, "How the Freaky Octopus can Help us Understand the Human Brain," *Wired* (October 1, 2013):

<http://www.wired.com/2013/10/how-the-freaky-octopus-can-help-us-understand-the-human-brain/>

Octopus friend." I recognized him. "You left your number?" I did not know quite what to say. "It is because of the octopus thing, you know. I saw you mentioned something, on Twitter," he continued. "You know," he was talking slowly, "it changed my life. The octopus, I mean." Silence. "I was about to quit school, you know. But I decided to go on and do something after that summer. I was there sitting for hours and feeding that animal and I felt I also should do something intelligent." I asked, "Did you take him home?" I felt stupid, even girlish, asking such a question. "Home? An octopus? No ... never thought of it actually. I just went to see him and one day he was not there any more. I was shocked, but I guess it is normal. But I think of it every day, you know, even today. And I decided to become an electric engineer." I thought this was weird, but also the most logical conclusion in the world.

It seems that a large part of the neuronal mass of the octopus is spread through its eight arms. Unlike humans, the octopus brain does not have a centralized encephalization, which shows that a centralized brain is not the only evolutionary solution for intelligence. The octopus's unusual neuronal distribution allows for its eight arms to be "autonomous." They can each carry on an activity on their own or coordinate among themselves without needing the head to be involved.

Yet, it is very difficult to imagine this. It is like imagining a finger being as much a part of the body as it is a totality, as difficult as imagining a small institution that is individually operated and also an essential part of the cultural organism. This image breaks our notions of how information flows, of how the senses think, and it cannot yet be expressed efficiently in metaphorical language.

## 7. THE EMBRACE

And so, historically a demand for autonomy and separation was posed: "The idea that art has its own sphere demarcated from other human activities and determines its own principles or rules. Art cannot be replaced by other activities without loss. Aesthetic experience should be explained by aesthetic terms or attributes, and art should be valued by itself alone. The idea is intended to protect art from being assimilated to scientific, religious, or moral functions and to insist that art has a different domain from science and morality." (17) This definition exposes a cognitive demand, a demand that serves as the basis for judgment. And so, the question is how to judge without judgment, how to think without the critical method, how to speak without creating an order that excludes the disorder created in the senses? Judgment and its exercise is so deep inside our way of understanding art, culture, the relationship of outside-inside between thought and body, object and thought, body and touch that it seems almost counter-intuitive to take very seriously the demand of leaving it behind. The Era of Judgment is the home of our complex institutional urbanism of aesthetics—one that believes in order and not chaos as the principle that secures the preservation of objects and values. It perpetuates also a cognitive attitude that prevents invention. The Era of Judgment, to borrow the manner coined by historian Henry Focillon, is marked by the flow of time, by consecutive-ness. But it

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(17) Nicholas Bunnin and Yiyuan Yu, "Aesthetic Autonomy," in *The Blackwell Dictionary of Modern Philosophy* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2004), 15.

is also an Era organized around the logic of transcendence, the game of oppositions between death and life, creation and non-creation. A logic that philosophy has tried many times to contest, even more so since 1968. But Michel Foucault, in his critique of institutions and power, is more digestible and comforting than the late Giles Deleuze or Michel Serres on the matter of politics and invention. And art and artists have been resisting the logic of transcendence, stating, for example, the importance of not being creative. In other words, in being life without generating life—in being life without seeing an artwork as a “production.”

Multiform and monotonous, repetitive of various forms of disorder art seems to seek—if not before—at least since the mid-sixties for ways of surpassing the Era of Judgment, finding a path that preserves life and is able to transmute our sense of politics. Art like quantum physics looks at photosynthesis to imagine new forms of imagining time, perception, in other words, the way it all connects preserving the values we learn to understand from our political past but are unable to define our future. It is a future that we cannot even call future because is not ahead, or beside us, but inside.

And this is how I came to thinking of this new demand to travel beyond judgment, like the rainforest or the egg, among million other demands to become life.

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## The Metabolic Age 09.11 — 10.25.2015

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### Food in the Metabolic Era

by Chus Martínez

#### THE DEATH OF THE EXPERIMENT

I spent many of my summers at Fondazione Morra, in Naples, going through pictures, stage materials and films of *The Living Theatre*. Known for the organic integration of scenography and fashion into their text, dramaturgy and performance works, the company, founded in 1947 in New York by actress Judith Malina and artist Julian Beck, remained active until 1985. The film documents of these plays and performances reveal what made this group emblematic for over two decades. The footage, though not always in the best condition, is a unique document of an experimental practice based on radical transformations of social and gender values. These very speculative plays move away from scripts, relying on the possibility of integrating the spontaneous performances of both the actors and the audience. However, as much as their confidence in dramaturgy compels, one senses in their work the increasing impossibility of relying too much upon “experimentalism”. Perhaps even more tellingly, all of these filmed performances and plays look “experimental”. They assume the possibility of denying or accepting the basic assumptions which constitute our world experience. They test through feeling. Sitting there, watching for hours, I thought, this way of giving one’s self up to experience has radically changed.

For me, these exercises of a body on stage, invoking freedom, peace and, above all, a will to make the body transmit these values via a vocabulary of gestures, recall the anti-psychiatric movement. I became aware of the social and political language of this movement thanks to the research and works of Dora Garcia and Luke Fowler. I decided to watch Fowler’s films on R.D Laing again. Of course, while watching the filmed plays of *The Living Theatre*, a million images from the sixties’ counter-culture movements appeared in my mind, along with *The Age of Aquarius* by C.G Jung and the days of W. Reich’s Orgone Chambers. However, these images appeared to me set in relation to the environment of crisis that has been growing around us over the past ten years. They had LSD and the anti-psychiatric movement and lived through the Great Depression, which remains the greatest financial crisis in history. How will our current crisis make us react and experience? What are the mind and body’s answers to this feeling of living inside “well-defined limits”?

Of all the films the Scottish artist-filmmaker Luke Fowler made on the controversial figure R.D Laing, *All Divided Selves* (2011) interested me most in the context of my current thou-

ghts. The film looks back at the vacillating responses to Laing's radical views and the unforgiving responses to his late career shift from eminent psychiatrist to enterprising celebrity. Fowler's film is beautiful and dense, weaving archival material with his own filmic observations, and leaves us with the feeling that the days of experimentation, as well as those when the performance of experiments was a means of testing the boundaries between dissimilar groups and classes composing the social body, are over. The film elaborates upon Laing's transformation into a public persona, the radical approach he took to channeling his views towards increasingly broad audiences and the almost decadent way in which he transformed himself into a media star. In a scene towards the end of the film, Laing appears on screen, singing. The image is surprising. It looks as if he is delirious, or, then again, perhaps not.

In 1977 and 1978, Laing collaborated with the composers Ken Howard and Alan Blaikley, resulting in the album *Life before Death* (1978) with lyrics in the form of sonnets, many of them quite compellingly stupid, written by Laing. At the time, Howard and Blaikley were well known in the United Kingdom, the authors of many hits there during the 60's and 70's. One of the most famous tracks from the album goes:

It's all correct, and crisp, and keen and bright  
A place of order, form, and right design.  
A haven, in this world of dark, of light.  
A Where to start a long and clean straight line.

It would be nice if all around we saw  
The grace, decorum of the antique mind  
Brought forward to the present as a law  
Instead of our cacophonous and brutal bind.

It should not need to hearten me so much  
To come across a little worth, among  
The slush and drivel, dross and mulch  
Which would be better formed of honest dung.

The game's not up. Some children still can sing.  
Go tell the falling leaves it'll soon be spring.

There's light and love and joy and freshness yet,  
There're those who have something to celebrate.  
There can be times we hope we'll not forget.  
A helping hand is not always too late.

Up really high there's still clear perfect blue.  
Morning must dawn as long as there is night.  
Without the old there's nothing to renew.  
Occasionally, it almost feels alright.

Although I know that light needs dark to shine,  
I don't expect to tell what atoms mean.  
The universe is fine without being mine.  
The flowers of countless valleys grow unseen.

What is above subsists on what's beneath.  
The world is not entirely blasted heath.

The freedom that you seek is in the mean  
Between opposing tensions in your soul.  
Achieve the integration of the whole  
And then you are, and not a might have been.

**Remember that to live is to metabolize.**

So don't forget en route to the sublime  
To check on your mouth-anus transit time  
Look at the ground as well as at the skies

You've heard it all before? That's fine.  
Reiterated truths soon sound absurd.  
To be blasé is not beatitude.  
It's just your glutton tongue can't taste the wine.  
One in a million hears the blatant word  
Before it echoes into platitude.

What is more important than the lyrics is the mere fact that Laing performed and, crucially, the impulse that led him to sing. Why did Laing sing? In an article published in *The Observer* just a few days before the album's release, author Caryl Farrow pointed to the fact that R.D. Laing was always interested in the voice (and in music) and that the record could be linked to a previous voice recording he made with Georges Cunelli, a voice expert, theorist and close friend of James Joyce. It was only natural that Laing was interested in the voice, for, as both a psychiatrist and a media personality, he was perfectly aware of how a presence and a voice produced an effect on listeners. Singing, however, is a different story. The voice that speaks is not quite identical to the voice that sings. Even the control one can exercise as a trained speaker can be lost in the singing voice since the latter requires a wholly different though equally thorough training in breath control and rhythm. The singing voice does not form spontaneously. Thus, Laing was revealing himself much more than when he spoke, both in his (lack of) technique and in his personality, since singing stressed that he was a performer aware of the stage and how the subjects from his counseling were transformed into an audience.

The surprise in seeing him singing in Fowler's *All Divided Selves*, however, lies in the discovery that, at the beginning of the 80's, the days of "experiment", as understood by The Living

Theatre, and the idea of unmediated expression and self-expression, of experiencing the world as a “naked human”, were coming to an end. This musical performance by a very well known psychiatrist is not just an anecdote; it was a result of the radical transformation of expression into a more metabolic response. It was also the result of transforming information into a totally different substance, one that is more complex than knowledge since it is a form adopted by life that avoids contact with the naked body or the influence of LSD or any other substance. This singing is crucial because it does not proclaim or state, it addresses us from the inside. It is pure queerness as an accepted form and as an acknowledgment of the complex relationship between information, wisdom and culture. It revealed a need for a transformation that would go beyond action, that would live in us, transforming us first and then the world.

## REMEMBER THAT TO LIVE IS TO METABOLIZE

During the 20's and 30's, a branch scientific research appeared which focused on understanding the human metabolism. The isolation of vitamins started in the second half of the 19th century and during the 1920's multiple experiments explained the role of vitamins A and D while further studies isolated vitamins C and K. Thus, interest in diet took on a new form and food was redefined not only in terms of accessibility, class or tradition but also in those of health and self-control. Especially relevant in our context is the work and research of Catherine Kousmine (1904-1992), a Russian émigré who studied in Lausanne and developed a theory and practice for cancer treatment based on food or, more precisely, diet. Her first diet protocol, based on a 1949 case study describing the treatment and cure of a patient with intestinal cancer, was highly influenced by the research of another woman, Johanna Budwig (1908-2003). Throughout the 1940's, Budwig, a German biochemist, studied fatty acids and their influence in curing cancer. Budwig published her first diet protocol in 1952, which expounded the virtues of consuming flaxseed oil, low-fat cheese and meals rich in fruits, vegetables, and fiber while avoiding sugar, animal fats, salad oil, meats, butter and especially margarine. Even if Kousmine was following up on the discoveries and the precepts of Budwig's diet, she was also a pioneer in a new understanding of the properties of raw food for our health. She put a special emphasis on the health value of cold-pressed oils. During WWII, oils were pressed under heats ranging from 160 to 200°C, allowing up to 70% of the fat from the grain to be extracted. This resulted in a dark, strong smelling liquid that required further processing and refining and, though this oil lasted forever, it was, as Kousmine put it, “dead”. Cold-pressed oils, on the contrary, are alive, produced by simple physical processes like decanting and filtration, but are sensitive to light, become quickly rancid and require refrigeration once unsealed. Kousmine's texts are intensely eloquent in their explanations of how simple food had been transformed by industrial processes and how the loss of fatty acids, also known as vitamin F, plays a fundamental role in the weakening of our cell membranes' protection against external attacks, resulting in, for example, immunodeficiency disorders.

There is, of course, no proof that following diets, even those as rigorous as the Kousmine method, can cure cancer. I do not intend to present these methods as effective but to note

the parallel growth in understanding, at the start of 20th century, of both drug use and diet. The common denominator is clear: an effect on our metabolic system.

Both interests, in drugs and in diets, are part of the exploration of the possibilities of enhancing our capabilities. The world of drugs centers on the brain, the possible chemical transformations that enable us to explore this organ and, therefore, the way we sense the world. Comparing the rise of interest in vitamins and raw food with drugs seems nonsensical at first sight. Food may indeed have an effect on our organism, but isn't it too slow, too long-term a variable to provide a basis for proper comparison with drug use? Yet, after nearly one hundred years, such thinking has allowed food to acquire the social and media relevance it has today. The revelation of the importance of food, not as gourmet cooking, but as a source of and structuring method for life, bears a strange but powerful relation with all sorts of experiments on "freeing the mind", with the psychiatric and anti-psychiatric movements of the last century, as well as with Modernism and the avant-garde and the idea of controlling the body, fueling it not too little and not too much to maintain productivity. The science of nourishment does not only aim to avoid an ill body, allow us to live longer and increase the productive years of humans. Food science goes beyond attempts to strengthen the body-as-machine towards attempts to generate a paradoxical state in which the human organism is not merely healthy enough to work more but healthy enough to make us feel that we are in a state beyond labor. The body as resort. If drugs treat the mind as a skyrocket ready for takeoff, escaping the damaged body, the metabolic cult and super foods posit a body capable of making the mind stay.

## POST-JUNKIE YEARS

This transformation in the scope of diet's influence on the human is part of a larger, radical shift in our understanding of the social and aesthetic conditions that determine our current relationship with the body and gender. It is defined not only by a tendency towards more freedom but also towards increasing control, which in turn leads to shifts in the notions of gender that are central to art. Here gender is not understood as constituted by a dichotomy of the male and the female, but as an intelligent means of addressing the problem of the dichotomy of the inner from the outer. This is gender as a language we can adopt to grasp the possibilities of consciousness. This is gender as another name for art.

To imagine that great things can result solely from self-disciplinary mechanisms is difficult. Food is surrounded by confusion. It is difficult to remove cultural and geopolitical factors from the discussion and even more challenging to discuss food without invoking the names of star chefs and the exploration of the senses through food. The rise of the star chef has much to do with classical experiments in self-expression and an avant-garde or Modern understanding of a subject able to cross his/her boundaries through taste and express her/his relationship towards an inside and an outside in a radically new way completely determined, however, by the dramaturgy of the plating and the restaurant in the same manner that, with



*The Living Theatre*, the stage determined the extent of the experiments. I am more interested in a different relationship to food, expressed by Catherine Kousmine's research, that studies the ingredients of a diet and considers diet as an act of absorbing nourishment that has nothing to do with aesthetic pleasure but, rather, with the strong intention to slowly affect the human system.

While there exists a vast body of research on drugs and the many other means of exploring the limits of our mind in its relation to science, literature, music and, later on, every other form of subculture, there is almost nothing written on how these early biochemical experiments relate to culture and art. The gendered aspect of this field must also be noted, for the history of research on food and diet as a means of altering life is peopled almost exclusively by women. Though there is as yet almost no existing artistic production in the form of raw food or vitamins, there is an unstudied aspect of art production based on the same principles as this new metabolic way of living.

## HEROIN AND CALORIE COUNTING

It was 1995 and I was in New York City. It was before the days of online newspaper reading, so I got myself a copy *El País* for the long train ride from Uptown down to Brooklyn. I read it nearly front to back, neglecting only the film section. The train ride continued, and was boring, so I decided eventually to read the film section as well. There, a critic used up an entire page smashing *Waterworld* (remember that one?). Though critics were nearly unanimous in their dislike for the film, this piece was masterfully humorous. The piece went on and on about the fact that the dystopia was set following an ecological disaster and that the bad guys were known as the Smokers. The Smokers! In a world of water where humans are almost fish: how did they manage to keep the tobacco dry?

Though the article was quite funny, I could not join in completely with the critic's argument since I come from a place where tobacco is preserved under water. Galicia, the region in Spain from which I come, has a particularly rough coast line. Piracy was common there for centuries and, during the dictatorship, the region was famous for the smuggling of goods over its border with Portugal. Economically underdeveloped in levels difficult to portray here, the virgin character of the region's water and land facilitated many farming initiatives. From the late 70's into the 80's, we saw the number of floating wood platforms drifting on the waters of the estuaries increase. These platforms, known as "bateas", served primarily for the farming of oysters and mussels but also for smuggling tobacco. From here the name "Winston de batea" was coined, designating the tobacco illegally entered into the country that shared with the shellfish the cold, nourishing waters of the Atlantic. This same coast saw, some years later, tons of heroin and cocaine introduced into the country, producing both a total imbalance in the local economy and the genocide of a whole generation of drug users. These were the same drugs that inundated both lower and upper class nightlife during the first years of democracy in Spain. For a whole decade, beginning from the age of 16, I co-existed with junkies in many ways. The village I am from and all the others like it were

actively witnessing how drugs could shape life. On the opposite coast, the relatively tepid consumption by hipsters at the high schools co-existed with increasingly visible signs of a dependent population in the streets - the public spaces, clubs, bank lobbies and food markets where, every morning, junkies would beg to housewives who in turn prayed to God that their sons and daughters would be spared such a fate. Heroin was bridging the Atlantic Ocean and the Mediterranean Sea through this trade.

After moving to Barcelona, I went or, rather, was required, as part of a school-sponsored prevention program, to attend many information sessions and to volunteer at one of the largest methadone clinics in Europe. Located in a neighborhood which no longer exists called Can Tunis, the area was a hellish island located behind the harbor, circumscribed on one side by a highway and on the other by the Montjuïc hill which both served to cut off this section from the greater urban texture. I have never seen a place so desperate and secluded. The permanent population consisted of between eighty and a hundred Sinti and Roma families who were accused of creating the biggest heroin market on the planet, even though they were the victims of extreme poverty and drug dependency. I started going there, scared to death, pretending to be a help to the organization while only managing to effectively cure myself of any desire to ever use such drugs. Indeed, my school's prevention program was highly effective. Methadone was presented at the clinic as the "solution", as a good substance that could replace the bad one and help one live a drug-free life. I was there every night for a year, over the course of which I discovered that methadone was an even worse drug than the one it was intended to replace. The whole operation was really a means of controlling the Sinti and Roma communities and their links to drug trafficking as well as a pretext for resettling these undesirables and expanding the harbor to its current size, effectively erasing Can Tunis.

Why I am recalling this episode? In my mind, the rise of the importance of food coincides with the drug war. I see these two phenomena linked in a dance that began in the Basque region with hopes of peace and at the Mediterranean coast as an attempt to absorb life and all its substances not from drugs but from food. Food was required to overcome tradition and go through a complex, alchemical ritual of re-invention. All of a sudden, it became socially and historically necessary to translate and re-translate the most obvious ingredients, the most banal tastes.

## FOOD AND THE POLITICAL ALGORITHM

Not long after my Can Tunis experiences came my first encounters with molecular cuisine. A friend took me to a seminar during which we were presented with an egg whose yolk had been replaced by café con leche. Actually, though my friend remembers this story, I am uncertain the memory is accurate. I am not even certain whether it was Ferran Adrià himself or a member of his team doing the "cooking" and presenting this new juggling act of taste and technology. Memory, not only that of the individual but that of the collective as well, always finds good reasons to collapse objective information. The group attending this mee-

ting, consisting mostly of architects, product and graphic designers, web developers as well as two of the most important advertisement teams in the country, was truly shocked. However, this shock had nothing to do with food as a “dish” or culinary event. The cooking demonstration was received with as much enthusiasm, misunderstanding and resistance as when a new discipline of knowledge is introduced. This egg containing a café con leche was perhaps only described to us, but it is an incredibly powerful image. It produced among my associates attending the seminar an endless series of jokes, repeated again and again, morphing the two original elements into things like a strawberry with a heart of anchovy and a thousand other combinatory variations. All society seemed, at this point, to be laughing at this extreme Pantagruelic game that the chefs were performing with food. Imagine, the raw DNA of an animal product, the egg, was being replaced by a culturally made element, café con leche. Café con leche! Our breakfast staple had replaced the egg’s “origin” point which, though still protected like the yoke before it, was transformed into a consolidated item ready to be swallowed whole without consideration, without thought. The ritual chain of small, familiar gestures, the unconscious steps taken from hand to mouth, had been, all at once, replaced by a single, determined act, as unified as taking a shot of liquor. The vast collective choreography of every Spaniard, every morning, across millions of counters, publicly performing the gestures of drinking their café con leche had, all of a sudden, been replaced by the precarious substance of an egg.

Such transformations had nothing to do with food and much to do with a metabolic revolution that emerged from under the flood of drugs that had submerged Spain as unexpectedly as a tsunami. The drugs were not merely there because of the convenience of Spain’s geography and location, but also because of the intense appetite unconsciously created over many years of dictatorship now made manifest during these transitional years into democracy. Such appetites were the product of senses that had been restricted from performing their normal functions for too long and further oppressed by the fact that the old system was neither removed nor contested but was merely being allowed to die away. The rise which occurred in drug use and, after their peak, in the importance of a new food played a fundamental role in creating the conditions in which a new self could be formed.

Like a metabolic reaction inside the social body, this new interest in food possessed a distinctively synthetic character. It could be linked with neither a long tradition of cuisine nor with the bourgeoisie. On the contrary, it emerged, almost like an artistic movement, from an independent group. The molecular cuisine and its accompanying tendencies were somehow Kantian, focusing not on the food itself but on invention and a kind of social training. This cuisine set up as a goal, though of course impossible, to make us all eat through the mouth and sense through the nose in one special way. The very impossibility of this goal, that an entire culture would adopt an attitude towards eating which was deeply anti-culinary, made it into a radical proposal to challenge the habits of an entire nation. It suggested that a new historical period should not start off with the same gestures and tastes of the previous regime. Food that is not food and recipes that are impossible to share are excellent antidotes to nostalgia. Almost over night, a huge portion of the population was addressing food in a completely different manner and, thus, opening itself to new possibilities in how and what it was consuming.

In my own strange memory, I see the fall of heroin use coincide, along with the rise of a new food, with the emergence of feet encased in the pneumatic forms of the first Camper and Camper-like shoes. In my mind, here too began the Spaziergang fever. The black rubber soles of Camper shoes that refused to stop at the limit of the foot's actual form, expanding pneumatically around it and abstracting the shape until it resembled a digitally enhanced paw, always fascinated me. These were friendly, democratic feet, without edges or borders, ready to traverse the asphalt plains of huge cities as readily as the dirt of the rustic Mallorcan countryside from whence these shoes came. Their formed rubber shapes also recalled for me the dinghies so often used to transport bricks of cocaine, hashish and heroin along the cold beaches of the Atlantic coast. Yet, they were designed to convey a new era, never quite realized and now completely gone, in Mediterranean culture, populated by metropolitan neo-peasants who took to the markets and supermarkets to rehearse and proclaim their new values, wafting through the cities a balsamic-marinated social democracy. This unarticulated movement was so powerful and present, even if, to this day, it remains impossible to interpret its promise or the stakes of its speculative energy. It was clearly there, however, and I dislike it now as much as then, perhaps because I blame it, albeit unfairly, for mixing nostalgia with resentment and for encouraging a very specific form of unpreparedness. It was the diluted aftertaste of a movement, politically expressed with the worst kind of liberal defensiveness. It was the opposite of what the surrealist egg with its yoke of café con leche had wanted to announce. Something had gone rotten.

## GENDER MOUSSE

Everything troubling with the image of the singing star therapist, as the mutated by-product of the anti-psychiatric movement, can also be seen in what went wrong with molecular cuisine and its interpretations. And, as in the case of R.D Laing, the first response may be to sing an ode to the incredible misunderstandings "food" created at the core of the social body at a very particular historical moment. Like the leaf on Siegfried's back, a point of vulnerability was created that was conquered by gourmet promises and comfortable, oversized rubber soles. Via the mouth of the middle class, a major transformation occurred that altered senses and modified tastes forever. I call it a tragedy because I am an optimist and see, as Laing saw, that it might be good to be singing this drama for a while. Most likely, though still unprepared to understand, we are shortly before hearing amazing news concerning a radical transformation of human sexuality. After the wave of drugs that promised both potency and resistance but only exhausted the body to an unthinkable extent, exterminating its natural defenses and powers, food acted as an antidote. However, all elements of culture began to act very directly upon our sexuality. The construction of the body during the Camper era did not happen by chance but was, rather, an already corporate-approved reinterpretation of a post-therapy hippie, now fully integrated into the productivity chain with a democratic body ready to present itself in a post-sexual state. The new food appeared at a crucial moment in the transformation of a body eternally oscillating between diets, drugs and anti-depressants, a transformation that is now moving us towards a completely different understanding of gender. Together, new food and fashion combined to produce forms of desire and anxiety

that displaced sexual appetites. Corresponding with the rise of virtual realities and online pornography, a period defined by a kind of disinterestedness towards sexual interactions, especially heterosexual, took place which allowed for a new sexual revolution. It has given us not only gay marriage and rights, but also made possible a new imagination in which gender and its functions are also a matter of choice. Gender has become a key aspect in the liberation of the body from Modernity, labor and *Leistung* (productivity). The slow but steady deprioritization of body-with-body sexuality is a metabolic process within the social body that will create the organic space necessary for this new gender reality. This produces, of course, all sorts of anxieties, from eating disorders to extreme surgical operations. Food, with its incredible capacity for transferring to the mouth some of our genital sense, can most successfully compensate for these lacks and losses. Camper's inflated rubber paws, though as rudimentary and nostalgic as our current ideology, appeared to signal this transitional era. It will not last, however. Like the period of shedding old skin before the metamorphosis into a new creature, one whose form is as yet unknown to us, we are performing our old cultural-critical logic before acquiring a new one. We just need to sing it a little while longer.

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