

Bio Flicks: Control, Race, Sexuality, Violence, the Future

I. Ausgangspunkt (Point of Departure)

The point of departure for this essay would be this striking stanza from Daniel Borzutzky's poem *The Performance of Becoming Human*: "The poem is firm in its convictions and compassionate at the same time./ This is a people poem, not a political poem. And they say: You have shame in your eyeballs, you have love in your eyeballs, you have pain in your dimples, you have guilt in your mouth, abjection in your lips...anger in your cheekbones, fear in your chin, disgust in your forehead, disaster and promise and despair in the furrows of your face and in the murmuring economies on your rotten carcass tongue."¹ Under the context of political and economic violence shared by Chicago and Chile, to become human is to navigate borders, the fuzzy borders of institutions under which the bodies endure state-sanctioned and systemic abuses, until it becomes a globalized subject whose body is shared between the earth, the state and the bank. It is interesting how in the first line, a dichotomy between "people poem" and "the political poem" has been established. It captures the essence of biopolitics: a politics that deals with life, that takes control of both the body and life; with the body as one pole and the population as another.

An important quote from Foucault that explains this theory is that "What we are dealing with in this new technology of power is not exactly society, nor is it the individual body. It is a new body, a multiple body, a body with so many heads that, while they might not be infinite in

¹ Borzutzky, Daniel. *The Performance of Becoming Human*. 2016. Print.

number, cannot necessarily be counted. Biopolitics deals with the population, with the population as a political problem, as a problem that is at once scientific and political.”² Such techniques of power disciplining the multi-headed population are extremely prominent in the separation, alignment, serialization and surveillance of each individual in regards to race, sexuality, economics, visibility, state violence...

Fortunately, human beings can still rely on art, the so called “abstract machine” as named by Deleuze and Guattari. The abstract machine is the unfolding of complexity of the world of which art, with its tendencies toward counterpoint, improvisation and actualization of the new within the real, brings forward “what is yet to come, a new type of reality. It revolts against a constraining present composed of captured possibilities within the continuous promise of generation of potential”.³

Such potentials are manifested in artworks such as *Becoming Dragon*, that explores unconventional sexuality and identity as well as the contradiction of heteronormal conventions of pornography; the revolt against silence and invisibility through performativity as in *Tongues Untied*; the branding of terror and brutality marked onto bodies by politics as in *the Inland Sea* and *Felix in Exile*; the suffering of the flesh as well as resistance of the body through pain as in *65 KG and 12 Square Meters*; the bodiless form escaped to an alternate futuristic reality as in *Bubble Vision*... With the theoretical foundation established by the texts *Postscript on the Societies of Control*; *Sexual Politics*; *Poetry, Immigration and the FBI: The Transborder Immigrant Tool*; *Bioparanoia and the Culture of Control*; *New Media At Risk: When the Future*

² Foucault, Michel, . The History of Sexuality. New York: Pantheon Books, 1978.

³ Zepke, Stephen. Art As Abstract Machine: Ontology and Aesthetics in Deleuze and Guattari. New York: Routledge, 2005. Print.

Ain't What it Used to Be, the essay will explore the code-switching potentials of video art to emancipate the bodies, and its exploration of the relationship between “dividuals” and “individuals”.

II. The Society of Control (65 KG 12 Square meters,)

In Deleuze's canonical text *Postscripts on the Societies of Control*, a brilliant metaphor has been used to summarize the transition from a disciplinary society to the society of control: The old monerary mole is the animal of the spaces of enclosure, but the serpent is that of the societies of control. We have passed from one animal to the other, form the mole to the serpent, in the system under which we live, but also in our manner of living and in our relations with others. Enclosures are molds, distinct castings, but controls are a modulation.⁴ The threat of a modulation lies in its infiltration, as well as its capability to blur boundaries. The coils of a serpent entangle the body like shackles that cannot be escaped from.

However, in Zhang Huan's performance 65 KG there's a refusal and a temporary escape from the system by using his own body as a medium of art creation. The artist himself has once stated that the body was the most direct way to contact with society as well as a proof of one's personal identity. In this regard, the physical body is the manifestation of one's inner heart. So how exactly did the artist use his body in the performance piece? Naked, gaged clothed in bondage and suspended from chains, the artist had his blood drawn by doctors into a blood bag, which was then dripped onto the pan of a hot plate. “I felt as if I was facing a giant thing and wanted to push it to the ground, although it was impossible. In the course of the hour, I tried to

⁴ Deleuze, Gilles. “Postscript on the Societies of Control.” *October*, vol. 59, 1992.

forget myself and separate my mind from my flesh, but I was pulled back to reality again and again. Only after the performance did I understand what I experienced.”⁵ The intense physical pain, the agony of the flesh is only a reflection of the pain suffered by the inner self placed within the society of control, with its surveillance and suffocating Sameness where people like Zhang Huan, the artists, are often regarded as heresies. In a system where the Same predominates, a viral violence is created. Such violence of positivity is clearly what Baudrillard has in mind when he writes “He who lives by the Same shall die by the Same.”⁶ To escape the system can be an legendary act only when everyone else is doing what is expected of them, and have never allowed the possibility of deviation. Just as Diogenes has felt the duty to stand as a living refusal in a backward world, Zhanghuan has intentionally placed himself in a highly painful situation where others merely observe him, feeling bewildered, shocked, sympathetic or disgusted by him. While the title of the artwork 65 KG describes the body weight of Zhang, it is also 65 KG of pain and suffering carried by the body. Thus, another important theme in the artwork would be resilience and trauma. “Yes, and a body has a memory. The physical carriage hauls more than its weight. The body is the threshold across which each objectionable call passes into consciousness---all the unintimated, unblinking, and unflappable resilience does not erase the moments lived through, even as we are eternally stupid or everlasting optimistic, so ready to be inside, among, a part of the games.”⁷ The artist shows immense resilience while being tortured in mid-air, but isn’t it an epitome of so many human bodies being actually humiliated or

⁵ Huan, Zhang. Interview with China-Underground. 2018.

⁶ Baudrillard, Jean. *The System of Objects*. London: Verso, 2005. Print.

⁷ Rankine, Claudia, 1963- author. *Citizen : An American Lyric*. Minneapolis, Minnesota :Graywolf Press, 2014.

tortured in reality, every single day? Resilience is not always a virtue, being able to be vulnerable and angry should be the normality.

Another important artwork by Zhang Huan is his *12 Square Meters*. The artist immerses himself with honey and fish oil, sitting in a filthy public restroom, attracting swarms of flies as they feast on the substance. After an hour, Zhang Huan walked toward an abandoned fishing pond and slowly immersed himself in the water, allowing the struggling flies to perish. An interesting interpretation of this performance would be from the lens of health in the (post)capitalist society of control. The capitalist economy absolutizes survival in a way that's not connected with the good life. Concern about living the good life yields to the hysteria of survival, the reduction of life to biological, vital processes makes life itself bare and strips it of all narrativity. Think about the modern ladies who spend hours at the gym or in the shower with 10 different products of skin care! It takes *livingness* from life, which is much more complex than simple vitality and health. The mania for health emerges when life has become as flat as a coin and stripped of all narrative content. Life reduced to bare, vital functioning is life to be kept healthy unconditionally. By intentionally making oneself filthy is an extreme form of resistance that involves walking away from the clean, healthy, benign life in the society of control.

III. Sexuality and Race (Tongues Untied, Becoming Dragons,)

State racism is an important concept when understanding Foucault's biopower and biopolitics. Instead of the politics of sovereignty, we've witnessed the historical transformation to a politics of society, from a 'sovereign who must be defended' to the 'society, the species, the population, who must be defended. In *The Will to Knowledge* Foucault describes how: Wars are no longer waged in the name of a sovereign who must be defended; they are waged on behalf of

the existence of everyone; entire populations are mobilized for the purpose of wholesale slaughter in the name of life necessity: massacres have become vital.⁸ A battle that has to be waged not between races, but by a race that is portrayed as the one true race, the race that holds power and is entitled to define the norm, and against those who deviate from that norm, against those who pose a threat to the biological heritage. Such racism will lead society to direct against itself, against its own elements and own production. The internal racism of permanent purification is the basic dimensions of social normalization.

Such a normalization has led to the self-censorship within the racial groups that have been discriminated against, as in Marlon Rigg's *Tongues Untied*. "I was mute, tongue-tied, burdened by shadows and silence./ Now I speak and my burden is lightened, lifted, free."⁹ In Tamblyn's *Sexual Politics*, the lack of agency for women to gain access to the has been pointed out, and the author has talked about how video art offers a way out for female artists to have their voices heard. Rigg's *Tongues Untied* is also about performativity and visibility, in a sense. Riggs has created a narrative of his experiences of oppression and insult as a black homosexual boy growing up in the South. Silence was his shield as he thought that would be a secure way of not getting into trouble. However, trouble, bias and oppression will always torment the submissive and the silent. Why does language have such important power even though they are abstract and sometimes fictional? In fact, the *Sexual Politics* article has given an answer to that in regards of performativity and visibility. "In a psychological situation, the very terms of which are to withdraw attention from an external object--- an Other---and invest it in the Self. Because video

⁸ Foucault, Michael. and Hurley, Robert. *The history of sexuality : the will to knowledge*: vol. 1.

⁹ Riggs, Marlon T. *Tongues Untied*. United States: M. Riggs, 1989.

technology enables the image to be simultaneously recorded and displayed.”¹⁰ In a world that often renders a person invisible, being seen itself is already an important quest. As Steyerl has said in her artwork *How To be Invisible?* One way is to be a woman and to be over fifty. Even though we know more about the physical body---how it begins, how it responds to illness, etc than ever before. Yet not all bodies are created equal, some bodies clearly count more than others, and some bodies are not recognized at all. Constructed identities are crucial in defining bodies, as gender itself is socially constructed through commonplace speech acts and nonverbal communication that are performative, in that they serve to define and maintain identities.

The artwork *Becoming Dragons* can also be interpreted from the psychoanalytical lens as in Tamblyn’s article Sexual politics that combines video art with the psychology of identity formation. “Video’s real medium is a psychological situation, the very terms of which are to withdraw attention from an external object---an Other---and invest it in the Self. The video camera and the monitor form a parenthesis that surrounds the body of the performer, who is thereby ‘self-encapsulated’ in a continually renewed feedback loop.”¹¹ *Becoming Dragons* is also pushing the boundaries of heteronormal conventions of pornography as in the S/M sex club scene, of transgressive sex. One can find unrestrictive areas suitable to one’s desires, with sci-fi fantasies such as tentacle and alien sex etc. Thus, the “Social, visual and embodied experimentation with these new configurations of gender and sexuality can open the mind up to new demands for everyday life in the physical world.”¹² In fact, just as Maquis de Sade has

¹⁰ Fifer, Sally J, Doug Hall, David B. Bolt, and David Ross. *Illuminating Video: An Essential Guide to Video Art.* , 1990. Print.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Micha Cárdenas, “Becoming Dragon,”

deconstructed and challenged the moral and social fabric of men and society, video art like *Becoming Dragons* have the potential to have code-switching influence on viewers through both affect and effect.

IV. Bioparanoia, Violence and Horror (Inland Sea, Felix in Exile) *Immigration and the FBI: The Transborder Immigrant Tool; Bioparanoia and the Culture of Control*

In the article *Immigration and the FBI: The Transborder Immigrant Tool*, the most important point being made is that “the question of aesthetics, at least for us, creates a disturbance in the “Law” to the degree that it cannot easily contain the “break” and it is forced to enter into another conversation — a conversation that power-as-enforcement may not want to have.”¹³ In other words, art activism is managing to remove the discourse away from the familiar boundaries of the “law” and the “forbidden”, while seeking another set of code that functions and works. The fictional, the aesthetics and the poetics are thus effectual in reality with such code-switching. Such discourse and conversation are what the power-as-enforcement may not want to have or unable to have since they only know their own set of codes. Another important point made in this article is the one on immigrants. “Immigrants are always presented as less than human (bare life), and certainly not as part of a community which is establishing and inventing new forms of life.”¹⁴ Originally, homo sacer refers to someone excluded from society because of a trespass. According to Agamben, homo sacer stands for absolutely expendable life. He actually gave the example of people without papers or asylum-

¹³ Nadir. *Immigration and the FBI: The Transborder Immigrant Tool*. 2012.

¹⁴ *ibid*

seekers awaiting deportation in a lawless place. Such horror caused by the systematic violence of the state is well manifested in the video art *Inland Sea* and *Felix in Exile*.

The *Inland Sea* is less about code-switching, but more about perception-switching. The video art is composed of flashing generic fonts with synchronized music that changes with rapid pace at which the text appears. Watching the animation can be frustrating as the texts change just quickly enough that sometimes it's impossible to read an entire frame before the next frame appears. The video provides no option for a viewer to pause or rewind the works, forcing slow readers to either start over (maybe even several times) or accept that they won't be able to read the entire script. Thus, in some sense, *Inland Seas* suppresses the interactive and anarchistic promise of the digital world. These different readings require different cognitive modes, which, according to Katherine Hayles, mirrors our contemporary reading habits. Not being in control of the reading process also leads to a scattered sense of unity, one of postmodernism's essential traits. The viewer can no longer think what he or she wants to think. His or her thoughts have been replaced by moving images. But such perception switching is even more striking as the state violence is so vividly presented as if a living body has been opened up in front of the viewer's eyes. The words generate graphic images almost automatically and there is a chilling immersive effect of actually becoming the homo sacer who's forced to live the bare life.

In the text *Bioparanoia and the Culture of Control*, an important point has been made concerning the three types of body that stand out in regard to public bioparanoia derived from the spectacle of fear: the disinfected body, the aestheticized screenal body and the abused body...the territories of the abject, the destabilized, and the tortured bodies that have been

acted upon by external and internal forces that can reinscribe the flesh as the site of catastrophe.” The tortured body has been well delineated in William Kentridge’s artwork *Felix in Exile*. In fact, there’s an African woman in the drawing who documents the abused bodies, acting the role of the artists. These bleeding bodies ultimately melts into the landscape. The evidence of violence and massacre that’s part of South Africa’s recent history has thus been documented. The form of the video art matches the content. Kentridge has adopted the technique of doing “the minus”, by erasing parts of the drawing he’s already down, before applying new ones upon it, forming a palimpsest of narratives. The story is also fluid, constantly in transformation and in motion, flexible, changeable as the lines in the drawing that twists, vanishes, deconstructs and reconstructs. The animation is about history, but it also moves beyond the historical reality. On a deeper level, the artist seems to be saying that the abused and bleeding bodies have covered each other like layers of charcoal drawing throughout history. But even though they seem to have melted with the landscape, their traces will always stay, regardless of what form they take.

V. Hauntology and the Future (Bubble Visions)

Looking ahead, technologies have allowed us to be immersed in our contemporary version of the bubble vision---- Virtual Reality. A really interesting point made by Steyerl is that when using virtual technology, the users wear the special goggle that basically leaves the vision “bodiless”. The body is not encompassed in the realm of the virtual reality and the entire physicality is given a new layer of meaning that might also fall into disillusionment. Virtual

Reality enables “voyeuristic observation” that creates an inauthentic sense of realism without provoking any sense of social responsibility, an identity tourism.”¹⁵

As the essay *New Media At Risk: When the Future Ain't What it Used to Be* pointed out, its important “to consider how new media art constitutes the structural paradox of temporality. While serving as an artistic activation of passing presents, in which one moment goes while another comes to shape the future, new media art simultaneously creates networked traces and digital archives that prevent the past from falling into the inaccessible depths of the totally obscure.”¹⁶ When facing a future of risks like ones we are facing now: climate risks, political risks, the COVID-19 risks, how to prevent the slow cancellations of future and how to establish a new normality? These are important questions that media art would strive to answer.

“When the Future Ain't What it Used to Be” is itself a brilliant phrase that captures the distinctions between the no longer and the not yet, hauntology and the future hopes. The first refers to that which is (in actuality is) no longer, but which remains effective as a virtuality (the traumatic ‘compulsion to repeat’, a fatal pattern). The second sense of hauntology refers to that which (in actuality) has not yet happened, but which is already effective in the virtual (an attractor, an anticipation shaping current behaviour).¹⁷

The body politics is also highly related to the perception of one's body by oneself, accomplished though *vita contemplativa* as in “I am real too. I am not an avatar, a set of preferences, or some smooth cognitive force; I'm lumpy and porous, I'm an animal, I hurt

¹⁵ Steyerl, Hito. Interview *Bubble Visions*. 2018.

¹⁶ Murray, Timothy. *New Media At Risk: When the Future Ain't What it Used*

¹⁷ Good, B.J. (2019), Hauntology: Theorizing the Spectral in Psychological Anthropology. *Ethos*, 47: 411-426. doi:10.1111/etho.12260

sometimes; and I'm different one day to the next. And it takes a break to remember that in the deepest sense, what, when and where we are.”¹⁸

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¹⁸ Odell, Jenny. *How to Do Nothing: Resisting the Attention Economy*. , 2019. Print.

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