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Bodies within affect. : on practicing contaminating matters through bioart

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Prologue

By reading this text you are incorporating it into your fleshy repertoire. During a focused semiotic transmission, more than thoughts change hands. Your basic physiology is altered as you read. Protein production is over – and under-regulated by intellectually reactive metabolites. Pride of knowledge, gullible acceptance, the deviant chuckle, these are not thoughts without physicality. There may be an avenue of interplay between communication and inheritance. If so, then this page is a transgenic vector, contagious, infective. Ideas received translate into proteins that have waiting receptors for novel gene expressions. Your children will have more or less bushy eyebrows if you continue reading. You may become too detached to breed! This is intergenerational selection, grammatological eugenics. You are now a transmemic GMO!¹

An effect is first of all the trace of one body upon another, the state of a body insofar as it suffers the action of another body.²

We have knowledge of bodies only through the shadows they cast upon us, and it is through our own shadow that we know ourselves, ourselves and our bodies.³

The more we know about the porous and relational nature of our bodies, the more we sense how unpredictable and unexhausted the body's capacity for transformation is. Once we cracked and then learned how to edit the DNA code, the endless variations of the long chain of changes our bodies may go through, our ideas and ways of living, continue to multiply, rhizomatically. We can study the imperceptible parts of our bodies, change them, manipulate them according to our desires, or totally reinvent the body's purpose; yet, we do not seem to see these relations of change in action. What we encounter and perceive are already the results of these manipulations, formed into given states of bodies. We live in the game of shadows, but these are not the platonic ones that would refer to some transcendent world beyond the tangible. The shadows – noticeable effects – refer rather to a highly relational understanding of our way of being, of our bodies. When you eat, you not only

¹ Adam Zaretsky, "Viva Vivo! Living Art Is Dead," *Leonardo* 37, no. 1 (2004): 91.

² Gilles Deleuze, *Essays Critical and Clinical*, trans. Daniel W. Smith and Michael A. Greco. (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 138.

³ *Ibid.*, 141.

give energy and nutrition to your body, but you become with the food. When you breathe, your lungs not only perform the involuntary movement that provides oxygen to your blood, but you become with the environment that breathes with you. When you tweak the DNA in a body, you not only change this body's structure, but transform the practices and ideas of what it means to have and be a body, of what it is like to be living. Reading these words, you are not detached from them, you become with me, contaminated by my thoughts and, maybe, you will grow more bushy eyebrows like mine, one day.

However, if all is related, if all actions, or lack thereof, have implications for others, can transform others, the attempt to grasp these relations seems to be futile. After all, we are already changing, contaminating, transforming. Once you try to study those transformations in order to understand their implications, these relations are already something else in their movement of change. We are already immersed in affect – in relations of transformation, events of multiple, imperceptible encounters, like the microbes building your guts, enabling your daily digestions. How can we see and, more importantly, why would we need to see these relations of transformation? Is witnessing their results not enough?

If we are continuously contaminating each other, however, be it in the clean lab creating a new genetically modified organism (GMO), or in your kitchen at home, consuming my favourite Boston baked beans, what does it makes us – a GMO as our permanent state? Modifications, contaminations, happen imperceptibly; we can only notice the effects of it happening. We are thus prone to continuous doubt and uneasiness – you never know what a particular encounter will make you become! It seems that only in encounters with other bodies, when experimenting with these bodies, can we understand how our bodies live, how we change and how our change may influence further transformations. By bringing scientific practices, philosophical ideas and artistic creations into a state of mutual contamination, we can find a way to grasp a body's relationality. Incorporating thinking and narrating new practices might be a way of understanding our mutually mutating bodies.

I was thus confronted with bodies' relationality by three unlikely friends: biotechnology, which manipulates bodies on the molecular level; art, which creates and speculates with bodies' new sensations and perceptions; and philosophy, which searches for ideas and senses in those practices. These unlikely fellows – art, science and philosophy – awkward and often not without a mutual hostility, distrust and tension, became my companions in the quest for new contaminations.

To know more about our bodies, to be able to act, to be able to sustain transformation, requires new contaminations between practices, fields and habits. Therefore, conditioning and practicing contamination become a necessary starting point for understanding the relational nature of our bodies. Yet, how are we to survive the ongoing process of doubt and tension that living with contamination involves? More importantly, do we want to avoid or induce contamination? Is it even safe to contaminate? In other words, how can we live and practice the contamination of bodies within affect?