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## **Bodies within affect. : on practicing contaminating matters through bioart**

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## Chapter 5

# The Ethics of Contamination

Whether or not art is allowed to play with life it's been a big question in my art, and I think I am trying to bring it into some other level of experience than just what can I learn from this - that's repeatable, that is one piece of a puzzle that proves the elegance of the universe. And instead, I might prove that chaos exists and feelings are important and life is strange, you know, permanently.<sup>1</sup>

### 5.1 Contaminant V like a Vastal<sup>2</sup>

My first encounter with the work of Adam Zaretsky was at Leiden University in 2011, when he gave a lecture during a course on “Ecocriticism and Bioart” led by Robert Zwijnenberg and Isabel Hoving. I was expecting yet another artist’s portfolio presentation with undoubtedly inspiring concepts and approaches. “It will be a nice, relaxing lecture, just listen and enjoy,” I recall thinking. Only those readers who have met Adam will know how wrong I was. It was a regular class, with over twenty students staring at the teacher’s desk, behind which the Dionysian persona of Zaretsky is talking about “Appropriate Pervert Technology” and “Post-sustainable Orgy, as Our Only Hope.” While demonstrating the naivety of the transhumanist belief in enhancement and arguing for the introduction of biotechnology into what he described as “radical difference,” on the board behind him, Zaretsky was screening images of human and non-human pornography, fetishisms, mutations and technological bio-transgressions. I remember that my thoughts were exploding with ideas during his lecture. I was agitated, excited that, finally, someone was touching upon the weird, uncomfortable, moving, contaminating and messy materiality. Undoubtedly, Zaretsky’s shock therapy, designed to wake up the senses, had worked on me. It was trashy and noisy – everything you would not expect from an academic lecture. I discovered a similar logic,

<sup>1</sup> Fragment transcript from Adam Zaretsky, *DIY Embryology*, 2012, <https://vimeo.com/51410231>, accessed 16 March 2017

<sup>2</sup> Vastal stands for *The VivoArts School for Transgenic Aesthetics Ltd.*, it was formed in 2009 by Adam Zaretsky. For further description and details see Zaretsky, “VASTAL: The Vivoarts School for Transgenic Aesthetics, Ltd.” (ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 2012), <http://search.proquest.com/docview/1220674667/>, accessed 17 March 2017.

driven by the “messy, trashy and noisy”, in 2013, in the exhibition “Yes Naturally” in The Hague, the Netherlands, where Zaretsky presented his work *Errorarium* [Figure 29].



**Figure 29.** Adam Zaretsky, *Errorarium*, 2012, exhibited at “Yes Naturally”, The Hague, The Netherlands, 2013, <http://ja-natuurlijk.com/site2/category/kunstenaars-en/>, accessed 17 March 2017.

The work *Errorarium* was a part of the research “BioSolar Cells” in the Netherlands<sup>1</sup> – a program that focuses on establishing a sustainable source of energy by extracting chlorophyll<sup>2</sup> from organisms, such as plants, algae and some bacteria, which are capable of photosynthesis (the process of converting solar energy into chemical energy<sup>3</sup>) and implanting it into other organisms, such as zebrafish embryos. *Errorarium* was a machine that was built in order to contain and further stimulate the new solar organisms that Zaretsky called – “biosollar mutants.”<sup>4</sup> Since the activity of these new organisms depends on environmental conditions, such as the availability of water, nutrients, temperature and light, the idea behind the work was that by manipulating the conditions in which the plants live, the visitor could influence the expression of the plant’s genes, hands-on. By playing with the knobs of the machine, the

<sup>1</sup> “Home – BiosolarCells,” <http://www.biosolarcells.nl/en/home.html>, accessed 9 February 2017.

<sup>2</sup> “The green pigment in plants that functions in photosynthesis by absorbing radiant energy from the Sun” “Chlorophyll - Oxford Reference,” <http://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780199600571.001.0001/acref-9780199600571-e-1406>, accessed 23 June 2017.

<sup>3</sup> “Photosynthesis – BiosolarCells,” <http://www.biosolarcells.nl/en/zonne-energie/fotosynthese.html>, accessed 23 June 2017.

<sup>4</sup> Adam Zaretsky, “From the Desk of Adam Zaretsky, Ph.D.,” <http://docplayer.nl/663342-From-the-desk-of-adam-zaretsky-ph-d.html>, accessed 9 November 2016.

visitor could change light and sound, altering the environment of the growing organism inside the machine [Figure 30]. In this way, unlike a scientific experiment, which, in order to be epistemologically valid, must be conducted under strict protocols and precision, the way of engagement proposed by Zaretsky was affectively singular, unrepeatable and contingent:

By changing the variables on the Errorarium, you are making the experiment non-repeatable and hard to utilize. At the same time, you are finding variables that are beyond the scope of known research. Therefore, the Errorarium produces a wide range of chaotic artificial light and sound results by maximizing jazz variability within the artistic growth chamber.<sup>5</sup>



Figure 30. Adam Zaretsky with his *Errorarium*, 2013, <http://ja-natuurlijk.com/site2/adam-zaretsky/>, accessed 9 February 2017.

From Latin, the word ‘error’ denotes “the action of roaming or wandering; hence a devious or winding course, a roving, winding.”<sup>6</sup> As a deviation from accuracy, it also means a mistake, transgression, trespass, fault and wrong-doing.<sup>7</sup> The explicitness of Zaretsky’s use

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> “Error, N.,” *OED Online* (Oxford University Press), <http://www.oed.com.ezproxy.leidenuniv.nl:2048/view/Entry/64126?>, accessed 9 November 2016.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.

of that word to name a tool of mutation is strengthened by the Latin suffix *-arium*, which denotes “thing connected with or employed in, place for.”<sup>8</sup> Through this etymological analysis, *Errorarium* can be understood as a location, a space of wandering deviations. However, not only the name of the work evokes a space of tension and contamination.

The machine is reminiscent of an old, coin-operated game machine, with the same kinds of sounds and flashing lights as those from the 80s and 90s. Through the style of the past, Zaretsky lures spectators into a seemingly innocent experience of the future present. Any moral concern that might be raised by the manipulation of actual living organisms rather than inorganic matter is diminished by the policies of the gallery space where you are invited to touch and play. In this way, Zaretsky creates a space where our sensitivity and responsibility are literally tested and confronted with the desire and curiosity to encounter, to engage in play. In his work, the question of ethics is inseparable from the question of creativity and production, but also the desire to control and manipulate. He asks: “Do you think you are enriching or stressing the organism in the *Errorarium* with your mediated entertainment? Why do you believe this?”<sup>9</sup>

However, I will argue that the playfulness of manipulation, under the cover of sustainability and scientific innovation, raises a much more profound question. In his work, Zaretsky produces a new shape for ethics, a new understanding of how to live within the encounters of contamination. The “BioSolar Cells”<sup>10</sup> research belief in a better future, due to improved and sustainable energy consumption, where mutating bodies are to be governed for profit and human benefit, is questioned by the artist. This distortion in the trust in sustainability can be noticed in the design of the arcade machine itself. The side walls of the machine feature images of cosmonauts in the space [Figure 31], uncannily reminiscent of Stanley Kubrick’s *2001: A Space Odyssey*, a movie in which a human invention of a sentient algorithm in a spaceship, designed to serve people, ends up killing humans in order to protect itself. Is this a cautionary tale? Zaretsky seems to ask: Are we ready for these mutants and have we truly thought through all the implications of living with mutants? As he writes:

Do the organisms we are tweaking have an advantage that might make them capable of major disruption of imperilled habitats? Are these mega sun energy harvesters capable of more disruption of the dynamic equilibrium

<sup>8</sup> “Arium, Suffix,” *OED Online* (Oxford University Press), <http://www.oed.com.ezproxy.leidenuniv.nl:2048/view/Entry/10794>, accessed 9 November 2016.

<sup>9</sup> Adam Zaretsky, *BioSolar Cells: Making a Field for Interpretation Two Year Report and Proposal for Future Research*, ‘From the Desk of Adam Zaretsky, Ph.D.’, <http://docplayer.nl/663342-From-the-desk-of-adam-zaretsky-ph-d.html>, accessed 9 November 2016.

<sup>10</sup> “The world population is growing and increasing numbers of people aspire to higher standards of living: we need more and more energy and food. We can only do this by producing energy and food in a sustainable way, which means creating less waste and lowering CO2 emissions. The sun is a source of energy that fulfils these conditions.” See more on <http://www.biosolarcells.nl/en/zonne-energie/waarom-is-duurzame-zonne-energie-nodig/>, accessed 9 November 2017.

of planetary diversity than the energy benefits that they may provide? Are we making monsters for short-term competitive excellence or is the offset of carbon credits shoring up travesty and more anthropogenic alienation in the form of life itself?<sup>11</sup>



Figure 31. *Errorarium* presented at the *The Hortus botanicus Leiden*, 2012, <https://plantenolympiade2012.wordpress.com/>, accessed 17 March 2017.

Through *Errorarium*, Zaretsky created spaces of tension as a tool for asking these questions, as a way of encountering these multiple concerns, ways of life and desires. When we do not need to reach an agreement according to a given telos of what it means to improve, to sustain and to make decision about who deserves to live, we can focus on a different set of questions and problems. Instead of inquiring about what is, we can experiment with what bodies that are, may become. We can focus on processes of experimentation that might be disagreeable, which may destroy you or change you. The radically contingent meetings that are not preceded by the given categories and values become Zaretsky's ethics of contaminations, ways of being with the future present mutants.

<sup>11</sup> Zaretsky, "From the Desk of Adam Zaretsky, Ph.D."

## 5.2 The Time of Matters of Affect

Zaretsky's works and performances are embedded within the reciprocal entanglement of aesthetics, ontology and ethics. In his practice, he seems to enact Guattari's "new aesthetic paradigm," that actualizes "ethico-political implications."<sup>12</sup> As Guattari writes, "to speak of creation is to speak of responsibility of the creative instance with regards to the thing created."<sup>13</sup> This new aesthetic paradigm, which Zaretsky calls "transgenicaesthetics," involves acknowledging and sustaining the lack of any given logic of appropriateness, and the correspondence of practice with the presupposed model or imperative. His workshops, experiments and practices in the lab do not follow strict rules, scientific protocols, or that which can be considered social habits, norms and power relations. Instead, Zaretsky seems to create, to use Guattari's words, a "new taste for life,"<sup>14</sup> which emanates from the processual transformations of new bodies, their new subjectivities and ways of living. Zaretsky brings the future into the present in his work. He actualizes the impossible, exposing not matters of fact, but rather, what I call, contaminating matters of affect.

These matters of affect are thus not a utopian pursuit for omnipresent relationality, an uncritical embracing of emotions, contented feelings of agreements and consensus. As discussed in the previous chapters, these are difficult encounters, risky relations and collective transformations. Donna Haraway calls such matters of affect "staying with the trouble."<sup>15</sup> Matters of affect are contaminations that call for the production and sustenance of tension, rather than urging for its antiseptic resolution. We need to formulate the problems that must be considered, the tensions that need to be cared for rather than taken care of. However, it seems that, particularly through art, we can encounter, test and actively generate those encounters of transformations. In other words, scholars still have to learn what, for art, is a "natural" habitual way of becoming. This is what Deleuze and Guattari called the production of affects and percepts, the preservation of encounters of transformation that are unique and unrepeatable by other bodies.

We need new ways of thinking about relations of contamination, where the creation of new relational concepts and practices is not only allowed, but prompted. Affect, as I have been arguing in this book, may become such a condition of relational practice. Importantly, as a condition, in order to work-with rather than work-against, it cannot work according to any fixed method and closed system of rules. As I have demonstrated, affect has significant implications for the way we think and practice our bodies, how we understand how the meaning of bodies is produced and what the political consequences of such a relational and material understanding of bodies are. None of the implications of contaminating

<sup>12</sup> Felix Guattari, *Chaosmosis: An Ethico-Aesthetic Paradigm*, trans. Julian Pefanis (Bloomington, IN: Indiana University Press, 1995), 107.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 92.

<sup>15</sup> Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press Books, 2016).

matters of affect are stable and intrinsic. The logic of contamination that affect implies is driven by tension and transformation. When this transformation is applied to traditional categorization and systematization, affect may become fixed into affection, constituting a powerful tool for the logic of signification. In the previous chapters, I discussed Mouffe's warning that passions, when driven by the logic of emotions (affection), only strengthen and empower the regimes of identity – affect, rather than being affectus, becomes a fixed state of affection.<sup>16</sup> Hence, affect becomes a powerful phenomenon. It can create bodies and multiply their relations, but, because of its relational and transformative character, it can also serve as a tool of management, control and destruction through fixation and universalization.

This different logic of affect is not a simple application of relation based on tension. Rather, it requires an experimental and relational thinking driven by the acknowledgment of the material notion of meaning and understanding of the collective and open agency that directly influences body politics. In other words, affect as a condition of thinking practice and practicing thought forces and allows us to shape onto-epistemological parallelism. Affect 'shows' that gathering knowledge about bodies is inseparable from the way these bodies are and how we practice them.

Inevitably, ethical questions arise as a result of contamination and the dynamic character of knowledge-making practices and the becoming of our bodies within these practices. If not only the way I practice the body's affects, bodies' relationality, but also the way I understand them changes those very bodies, should I be held responsible for them? If I, as a multibody, am not autonomous from the onto-epistemological processes of bodies, but rather become a participant and co-agent of those processes, who is responsible for a multibody's actions or lack of them?

These are highly ethical and pragmatic questions that have been raised in each previous chapter. In this way, I have indicated the parallelism of ontology, epistemology and ethics – that the knowledge about bodies, their practice and becomings are inseparable. Affect as a condition of relational thinking and practice thus demands a rethinking of the ethics that are equally dynamic, relational and processual as our bodies are. Such ethics will have to respond to the agonistic spaces within which bodies are produced, and to relations of tensions that affect implies. Finally, ethics will have to parallel the microbiopolitics of the multibodies that we are. Reminiscent of Haraway's infectious ethics, I call this the ethics of contamination.

Ethics based on sustaining tension means creating agonistic contaminating spaces without the necessity for consensus, but also, without the trauma of encounter as an abuse of power. This is a tension that produces and disrupts, not in order to destroy what is, but rather to create what is not yet – that which is yet to come.

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<sup>16</sup> See Chapter 2 of this book.

### 5.3 Responsibility in Times of Affect

Haraway's famous call for practicing "response-ability" grows more urgent every day. Response-ability, she explains, should not, however, be understood as a call for a simple act of response to what is there:

Response-ability is not something that you just respond to, as if it's there already. Rather, it's the cultivation of the capacity of response in the context of living and dying in worlds for which one is for, with others. So I think of response-ability as irreducibly collective and to-be-made. In some really deep ways, that which is not yet, but may yet be. It is a kind of luring, desiring, making-with.<sup>17</sup>

In this way, I argue that Haraway indicates what practicing bodies within affect may imply. Although we are all already response-able, our bodies are full of multiple capacities and our understanding of bodies is generated by these capacities; the problem is that we do not know in advance what these capacities do. The challenge and urgency is thus to create spaces where the implications of these capacities may be encountered. In this way, I will argue that response-ability must be confronted with responsibility – the implications and consequences of our actions.

Making-with, production and creation can be easily consumed by the machine of consensus fuelled by capitalism, as Philippe Pignarre and Isabelle Stengers argue. Simple acceleration of production, collective making that does not involve any encounters with their consequences and verification, can only fuel and strengthen existing categories, division and hierarchical structures. Creation that transforms rather than neutralizes involves encountering and learning the consequences in the onto-epistemo-ethical dimension:

Not to 'interpret' but to transform doesn't signify that everything is good from the moment that it activates transformation, but that the truth of an idea or of a definition or of a hypothesis is nothing other than their verification, that is to say, the way in which they can produce consequences that orientate action.<sup>18</sup>

Importantly, this responsibility enables new encounters and, therefore, have a different dynamic than any moral imperative.

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<sup>17</sup> Donna Haraway in conversation with Martha Kenney, "Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Chthulhocene," in *Art in the Anthropocene: Encounters Among Aesthetics, Politics, Environments and Epistemologies*, (eds) Heather Davis and Etienne Turpin, (London: Open Humanities Press, 2014), 257.

<sup>18</sup> Philippe Pignarre and Isabelle Stengers, *Capitalist Sorcery: Breaking the Spell*, trans. Andrew Goffey (Houndmills/New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011), 17.

In *What is Philosophy*, Deleuze and Guattari emphasized a way of thinking about responsibility that shifts the relations of power that the concept of responsibility itself implies. The word “responsibility” denotes “Capability of fulfilling an obligation or duty; the quality of being reliable or trustworthy,” but also “The state or fact of being accountable; liability, accountability for something.”<sup>19</sup> As such, responsibility is inscribed in the moral structures and values designating the systems of laws and rights. Instead of talking in terms of “responsibility for something”, which immediately attributes selected bodies with power and others with less power, Deleuze and Guattari introduce an idea of thinking in terms of “responsibility before”. The transformation of the preposition “for” into “before” has agential implications. As they write: “We are not responsible for the victims but responsible before them.”<sup>20</sup> To act, create and transform cannot occur through an escapism from that what they call “ignoble” in order to look for an outside position of judgement. Such escapism only fuels the ignoble. We must “play the part of the animal (to growl, burrow, snigger, distort ourselves): though itself is sometimes closer to an animal that dies than to a living, even democratic, human being.”<sup>21</sup>

The notion of “responsibility before” is triggered by “shame,” which allows for embodiment of the multiple relationality that one finds to become-with. As Deleuze and Guattari write: “The feeling of shame is one of philosophy’s most powerful motifs.”<sup>22</sup> It would be the kind of shame one experiences encountering Zaretsky’s work. It is a shame that has nothing to do with the pity that puts an immediate power relation into play. It is rather a material phenomenon that can be compared to an experience of synaesthesia, when sound has the immediate material capacity to produce colour. The sound of the word “shame” spoken in your native language, rings not only as a concept, but reverberates in your guts, leaving the memory of anxiety and stomach ache. The word that reminds you of a non-linguistic world of meaning and, most importantly, of non-subjective forms of agency – where you are immersed in the world of multiple others, encountering and residing already within you. It is through such a notion of shame that responsibility emerges. Not as a moral duty, but as an encounter with agency that can be touched, felt and, as a result of the encounter you are mutually transformed.

What Deleuze and Guattari seem to propose is a sense of responsibility that focuses neither on the care for something because of existing inequalities, nor in the name of pursuing the resolution of those inequalities. Affect that generates the onto-epistemological practice of thought and thinking practice of bodies demands rather the notion of responsibility that is beyond moralizing systematization and the pursuit of consensual agreements. The ethics of contamination would thus be about keeping the vibration, the tension that is to

<sup>19</sup> “Responsibility, N.,” *OED Online* (Oxford University Press), <http://www.oed.com.ezproxy.leidenuniv.nl:2048/view/Entry/163862>, accessed 10 February 2017.

<sup>20</sup> Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?* (London [etc.]: Verso, 1994), 108.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*

stimulate difference and that is to resist any *ressentiments* of identity and sameness that forces consensus. As Deleuze argues:

Morality presents us with a set of constraining rules of a special sort, ones that judge actions and intentions by considering them in relation to transcendent values (this is good, that's bad...); ethics is a set of optional rules that assess what we do, what we say, in relation to the ways of existing involved. We say this, do that: what way of existing does it involve?<sup>23</sup>

Deleuze's question: "what way of existing does it involve?"<sup>24</sup> reveals the onto-epistemo-ethical entanglements. The next question that would follow would be: how can we act ethically? What would such ethics beyond morality be like today, for the multibodies, mutants of the present future?

I have argued for an understanding of affect that is relational, transformative and which can be conditioned through the continuous relations of experimentations as discussed in Chapter 2. Such experimentation would follow and generate new material meanings (Chapter 3) that work according to the logic of multiplication of increasing encounters, intensifying the relations and producing new affects (Chapter 4). As I have written elsewhere: "In such a way, ethics is intertwined with aesthetics, as it seeks to invent new possibilities of life, new ways of existing in terms of experimenting with new relations, in terms of how it is to affect and be affected by."<sup>25</sup> For artists, the onto-epistemo-ethico-aesthetic practice of bodies is apparently already inherent in their practice. In particular, as discussed in this book, bioart's engagement with living matters imperceptibly yet profoundly and vividly practices the multiple dimensionality of an infectious ethics. Implicitly, I have already demonstrated the affective way of dealing with bodies in bioart's practice that urges a consequent conceptualization of affect for practicing bodies within affect. Yet, one last argument deserves consideration in the context of the new concept of ethics that must be created.

Zylinska writes: "Bioartistic experiments not only undermine the metaphysical understanding of life but also challenge the traditional humanist value-based ethics, where this nebulous entity called 'human life' is posited as a value in advance, something to be protected at all cost."<sup>26</sup> It is thus not about bioart being the only party with the capacity of a critical approach to life. After all, biotechnological practices are perfectly fine on their own for securing bioethical standards and undermining any dogmatic understanding of

<sup>23</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Negotiations, 1972-1990* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1995), 100.

<sup>24</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>25</sup> Agnieszka Anna Wołodźko, "Materiality of Affect: How Art Can Reveal the More Subtle Realities of an Encounter," in *This Deleuzian Century: Art, Activism, Life*, (eds) Rick Dolphijn and Rosi Braidotti (Leiden/Boston, MA: Brill, 2015), 179.

<sup>26</sup> Joanna Zylinska, "Taking Responsibility for Life: Bioethics and Bioart," in *Ethics and the Arts*, ed. Paul Macneill (Springer Netherlands, 2014), 194, [https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-017-8816-8\\_17](https://doi.org/10.1007/978-94-017-8816-8_17).

actual scientific findings and argumentation. The point she is making lies rather in a non-pragmatic orientation of bioart's practices, which she calls "non-goal oriented agendas."<sup>27</sup> Bioart and science, as Zylinska argues,

are often developed from within the same labs and are part of the same research grants, [yet] bioart's mission is ostensibly different from the one embraced by the biotechnological industry. The primary business of bioart is the representation, articulation and open-ended creation of newforms and modes of life – not capital-induced production of Life.<sup>28</sup>

For this reason, as she further argues, the given norms of bioethics, those that are applied to researchers working in the same labs, cannot be applied to artists. Such a statement provokes a troubling question, however, about whether there are any limits to art's playing with life. For her, bioart's practice with life is justifiable "when bioart takes responsibility for life, without retreating to any predefined entrenched moralist positions about what this life is and how it should be treated."<sup>29</sup>

However, the question remains, what does such responsibility actually mean? What might such responsibility-for be like when it does not refer to any given moralistic norms? Her use of "responsibility for" already suggests, as we have discussed, the presupposition of the relation of power and duty towards a less potent other. While Zylinska refers to "the tendency" to describe ethical relations in Spinozian/Deleuzian terms of affective encounter, she indicates the necessity of human assessment. She seems thus to criticise the affective understanding of ethics, pursuing the inevitability of human judgement regarding which relations are good and which are bad. She calls it "cutting":

The function of this 'cut' is to allow, first, for these and not some other relations to be recognised as individual relations, and, second, for (at least provisional) judgments to be made about those relations. The situation as such demands an assessment from the human – who is capable not only of recognising in him – or herself this propensity for being affected but also of theorising this propensity.<sup>30</sup>

Zylinska actualizes affect within the judgement of good and bad relationality. I argue, however, that the ethics of contamination practiced by bioart happens in the very moment before such actualization takes place, where rather than thinking in terms of responsibility for, something else happens. We think practicing and practice thinking as responsibility

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<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 194.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 194–95.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 195.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 197.

before – as the spaces of tension. The ethics of contamination that I propose here, is not directed at creating a system of practices, manuals about what can or cannot be done. Rather, the ethics of contamination focuses on what we should establish for the tension to occur in a way that would not destroy the bodies but make them proliferate.

The underlying presupposition of this book is that my multiple encounters and processes of thinking with affect result from the contaminated thinking-writing-reading process, which has not been disciplinarily separated. However, the lack of separation between philosophy, art, politics, culture, sciences, biology, technology and many more, does not mean a lack of difference between those multiple platforms, multiple ways of practicing bodies. As I have showed, through the multiple points of view and their contaminants, we encounter temporary agreements and possibilities to think otherwise. These temporary agreements do not imply any universal and fixed methods of how to practice affect, but rather through dynamism and multiplicity of points of view, the necessity of risks and tensions involved in the process of conditioning transformations becomes evident. Through speculation and creation of relations as thinking otherwise we can prolong the tension, and in this way, condition the ethics of contamination for our multibodies.

Thus, the ethics of contamination has emerged from a different kind of logic, one that values not the rules that govern and guarantee its smooth fulfilment, but temporary conditions that sustain the tension between those rules. The ethics of contamination is about creating and producing spaces of encounters where the only telos of this continuous production is a necessity of conviction that something more important might emerge. This is what bioartists have been doing with bodies, changing radically the understanding of what it means to practice the body, to be a body and to mean a body. The question of ethics transforms itself into a plea for thinking otherwise, that the thought as such must be important. This conviction of importance, the importance of importance, will be the driving force of the ethics of affect – it is the plea of the persona that Deleuze named “an idiot” and which we, even if for a moment, must become.

## 5.4 In Search of Resistance

It is quite risky to end a book, especially one that is to prove your academic abilities, with the pursuit of an idiot. I will take the risk, nevertheless, and position an idiot as a conceptual persona that facilitates the practice of thinking with affect. Isabelle Stengers has already formulated such an experimental approach to thinking otherwise by implementing Virginia Woolf’s plea for “Think we must”<sup>31</sup> as a form of resistance in the Deleuzian notion of an

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<sup>31</sup> “But you will object, you have no time to think, you have your battles to fight [...]. That excuse shall not serve you, Madame. As you know from your own experience, and there are facts that prove it, the daughters of educated men have always done their thinking hand to mouth; not under green lamps at study tables in the cloisters of secluded colleges. They have thought while they stirred the pot, while they rocked the cradle [...]. Think we must. Let us think in offices, in omnibuses, while we are standing in the crowd, watching Coronations and Lord Mayor’s

idiot. In Stenger's quest to find a method of creating the spaces and situations in which we would be able to think otherwise, without the urge for progress, quick solution and consensus, she points to the need to prioritize experimentation. She argues for the sheer necessity to experiment with thought, situations and problems, yet not any problem, but only those that "mobilize us."<sup>32</sup> For Stengers, such methods of experimentation would work after adopting Deleuze's conceptual persona of an idiot. Deleuze mapped the persona of an idiot as someone who slows things and others down, but not because something is not true or wrong but because there is something more important: "It's the Idiot's formula: 'You know, there is a deeper problem. I am not sure what it is. But leave me alone. Let everything rot [...] this more urgent problem must be found.'"<sup>33</sup>

The idiot slows down, although the exact issue of importance is not yet known, there is only a sense of it coming. The persona of an idiot, like affect, is not neutral. Moreover, Deleuze distinguishes two kinds of idiot. The first one is Cartesian, "who is the private thinker, in contrast to the public teacher."<sup>34</sup> He is obsessed with truth understood as undeniability and certainty. He – Descartes' idiot – is ready to deny, as Deleuze with Guattari mock, "that  $3+2=5$ ."<sup>35</sup> The other kind of idiot, Deleuze finds in Dostoyevsky, and this is the one who is still "a private thinker, but with a different singularity."<sup>36</sup> He is not driven by truth, but by a sense of importance: "The old idiot wanted truth, but the new idiot wants to turn the absurd into the highest power of thought – in other words, to create."<sup>37</sup> Significantly, those two idiots are never separate beings, but rather the second is a mutation of the first, as they put it: "Descartes goes mad in Russia?"<sup>38</sup>

With the mutation of the persona of an idiot, Deleuze and Guattari show how it is not a question of a dialectical difference between concepts, but rather how to mutate the existing ones. They emphasize the change of focus from what is into what is important. The acknowledgment that there is something much more important becomes a critical condition of thought. Importantly, "critical" here is not understood in a deconstructive

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Shows, let us think as we pass the Cenotaph; and in White Hall; in the galleries of the House of Commons; in the Law Courts; let us think at baptisms and marriages and funerals. Let us never cease from thinking—what is this 'civilization' in which we find ourselves?" Virginia Woolf, *Three Guineas*, quote from: Isabelle Stengers and Vinciane Despret, *Women Who Make a Fuss: The Unfaithful Daughters of Virginia Woolf*, trans. April Knutson, 1<sup>st</sup> edition (Minneapolis, MN: Univocal Publishing, 2014), 26.

<sup>32</sup> Isabelle Stengers, "The Cosmopolitical Proposal," in *Making Things Public: Atmospheres of Democracy*, (eds) Bruno Latour, Peter Weibel, and Zentrum für Kunst und Medientechnologie Karlsruhe (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005), 994.

<sup>33</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Two Regimes of Madness: Texts and Interviews, 1975-1995*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edition (New York: Semiotexte/Smart Art, 2008), 317.

<sup>34</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?*, 62.

<sup>35</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid.*, 63.

sense, but as a creation, as a production of the new, as the urge to create, to make spaces enabling to pose questions of importance.

An idiot becomes understood in this way, as the persona of the ethics of contamination. The idiot of affect is the one who, rather than searching for certainty, stability and intersubjectivity, will search for the uncomfortable question. Significantly, Dostoyevsky's idiot cannot be taken as the idiot Bartleby in Herman Melville's novel *Bartleby The Scrivener*, which Deleuze ascribes with the literal sense of the formula "I would prefer not to."<sup>39</sup> Resistance of an idiot is not directed at its own nihilation, does not end with death, as is the case in Melville's novella. I argue that an idiot of the ethics of contamination is a mutation of not only the Cartesian idiot, but also of Bartleby. Bartleby seems detached from any concerns, ignorant of habitual practices and resistant to conform to any given systems and norms. Instead of following the logic of expectation, consensus of that which can be expected, Bartleby introduces a new logic – "a logic of preference" – which, as Deleuze explains, "is enough to undermine the presuppositions of language as a whole."<sup>40</sup> Because of that, and because of the resistance to norms by following a different logic, the idiot shares a great deal with Bartleby. Yet, Bartleby's resistance does not lead him to any form of creation. The nonsense of Bartleby does not produce, does not generate new logic of new processes, unless we consider the nonsense of the others reacting to his detachment. If Bartleby produces affects, they would be sad ones, ones that stop further relations, ones that destroy bodies. Bartleby's idiot is a withdrawal from the affect, from relations, and it is sustained by pity, not by shame.

When referring to an idiot, I indicate the idiot that is driven by importance, that creates by sustaining the tension in her belief in importance, in desiring for significance rather than remaining in the state of equilibrium that is empty resistance, which is almost close to agreement with the status quo. The idiot of the ethics of contamination is driven by the sense of creativity, by the feeling that something is more important for the sake of creation and production of the new. An idiot resists the status quo by sensing and desiring to think otherwise, to create. She takes a flight and continues the ritual of experimentation; mutating, in this way, even the significance of her resistance.

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<sup>39</sup> Gilles Deleuze, *Essays Critical and Clinical*, trans. Daniel W. Smith and Michael A. Greco (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 1997), 68.

<sup>40</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

## 5.5 Encountering the Witches Flight

Although art for nonhumans is an interesting topic that I am also exploring ... essentially art is a manifestation of the human trying to understand themselves, so it is about us, of course, and I have actually pointed it out that it is ultimately not about plants per se because plants here are just one example of how we do or completely do not relate to something that is radically different – this other, this vegetal other. But it does not have to be a vegetal one, it can be another race, an alien, anything that we cannot use this empathy to understand. We need other tools. So, it is a sort of an exploration of this [...] the relationship to plants in particular that for me still remains to be answered or at least sketched out [...]. At the moment, I am still, I would say, in the dark even though I was standing in the light for so long. And I appreciate being in this position because I believe that life in general is very complex and it is absolutely self-indulgent to think that you have the answer.<sup>41</sup>

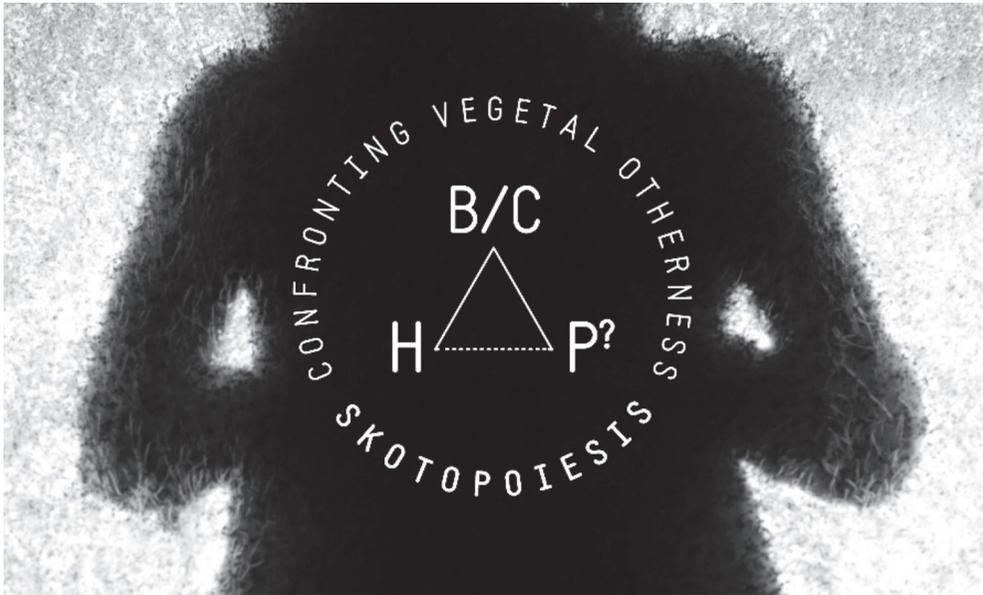


Figure 32. Špela Petrič, *Skotopoiesis*, 2015, performance Galerija Kapelica / Zavod Kersnikova, Ljubljana, <http://www.spelapetric.org/portfolio/skotopoiesis/>, accessed 17 February 2017.

Špela Petrič is an artist, a researcher, a biophilosopher, a biohacker, an educator, a scientist, and a bioactivist who practices the mutating ethics of contaminations. Her continuous travel and nomadic existence means she is based somewhere between her home city of Ljubljana and Amsterdam. I remember my first encounter with her work *Naval Gazing* in 2014 [Figure 33] – a project that won her a *Bioart and Design Award* in the edition of

<sup>41</sup> Špela Petrič, “Confronting Vegetal Otherness: Skotopoiesis,” audio transcript, <http://www.spelapetric.org/portfolio/skotopoiesis/>, accessed 11 February 2017.

“Matter of Life.”<sup>42</sup> *Naval Gazing* was exhibited in the MU gallery in Eindhoven as a reminder of what it was, namely a habitation kinetic machine designed to swim in the North Sea and become a platform for all organisms living in these waters. This “travelling biotope,” while majestic and mysterious in its habitat as the videos screening testified, was awkward, huge and disruptive in the gallery space. Transformed and consumed by the non-human organisms in the sea, it raised a strange dissonance between human desire to control, to familiarize, and the non-human flow of production, transformation and acceptance. This radical encounter, which generates transformations, hesitations and tensions pervades Petrič’s work. During many encounters with Špela, I have gradually learned to find her practice marking what the contaminating matters of affect may involve.



Figure 33. Špela Petrič, *Naval Gazing*, 2014, <http://www.spelapetric.org/portfolio/naval-gazing/>, accessed 17 March 2017.

A performance that literally tests the encounter of tension between human and non-human body, marking what the ethics of contamination are yet to address, is Petrič *Skotopoiesis*, 2015 [Figure 32]. It was part of the project “Trust me, I am an artist” – the same platform that hosted Willet and O’Reilly’s performance discussed in the *Contaminant G*. The *Skotopoiesis*, as the artist explains, denotes “meaning shaped by darkness” and was a performance that explored the possibility of encountering the non-human forms of meaning generation, and an attempt at “plant-human intercognition,”<sup>43</sup> or, as I would call it, a ritual for the ethics of contamination.

The design of the encounter was simple. The human (the artist) was standing in the dark in front of a bed of cress. The only source of light necessary for the plants to grow was

<sup>42</sup> “Matter of Life,” *Bio Art & Design Awards* (blog), <http://www.badaward.nl/matter-of-life/>, accessed 17 February 2017.

<sup>43</sup> Petrič, “Confronting Vegetal Otherness.”

positioned behind the human, so that her body shed a shadow on some parts of the cress. This performance lasted for two days, during which the artist stood for nineteen hours, seemingly passive, yet in a constant relation with the plants. In this event of an encounter that was neither a meeting, nor an interrelation nor an obstacle alone, the artist and the germinating cress faced each other, illuminated by a light projection [Figures 34, 35, 36].

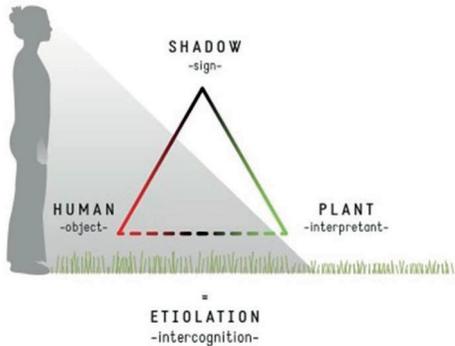


Figure 34. Špela Petrič, *Skotopoiesis*, 2015, performance Galerija Kapelica / Zavod Kersnikova, Ljubljana, <http://www.spelapetric.org/portfolio/skotopoiesis/>, accessed 17 March 2017.

Even though the performance demanded the immobilization of the artist standing in front of the cress, the event of the encounter was not about her being silent. Furthermore, as Petrič herself explains, the relation between human and plant did not concern the question of who stands where, who is more powerless in this power relation context. During the whole performance, as long as she maintained the same shadow thrown on the cress, the artist could talk to the audience, engage in conversation while standing. In this way, rather than focusing on subjects and identities, the work focused on the relation, tension and encounter between multiple agents. That the performance happened in this biosemiotic sphere of relations is clear from the triadic scheme of the performance, where Petrič seems to refer to Peirce's sign theory. The tragic characteristic of a sign, as discussed in Chapter 3, involves a spatio-temporal action where signs, in order to be understood as an active mode of being, must be materially embodied. In this way, *Skotopoiesis* was about exposition of the production of affect, but also affect happening.

For Petrič, experimenting especially within the art scene with animals and human self is immediately and easily positioned within the existing ethical debate. Our relation with animals and human bodies function already within well-established moral boundaries and laws. Creating with plants, however, poses no such immediate ethical dilemma. As she argues, because plants are so different “we have no moral intuition of how we can react to this plant life,” even though plants, as she stipulates, are the crucial part of living systems.



Figure 35. Špela Petrič, *Skotopoiesis*, 2015, performance Galerija Kapelica / Zavod Kersnikova, Ljubljana, <http://www.spelapetric.org/portfolio/skotopoiesis/>, 17 March 2017.

As she puts it, plants do not classify as a “moral being with which we can have empathy.” Because of their radical otherness, which we cannot quickly assimilate into what is, for us, familiar, plants can foster an encounter that she calls “authentic,” and which I would call affective because it is transformative. “Some things are just unlike us,” Petrič claims, therefore the radical challenge is to create a situation that would allow us to encounter the radical other in a transformative, rather than familiar, way. The artist creates thus a condition of resistance with regard to anthropomorphization, the condition of encounter that would reveal the multiple agencies of the non-human: the agencies of light, plants and a human, who, through her kinetic immobility, creates a condition of disruptive communication.



Figure 36. Špela Petrič, *Skotopoiesis*, 2015, performance Galerija Kapelica / Zavod Kersnikova, Ljubljana, <http://www.spelapetric.org/portfolio/skotopoiesis/>, accessed 17 March 2017.

The Anthropos that slows down by creating a form of resistance to the quick solution and consensus, comes close to enacting the persona of an idiot of the ethics of contamination. The resistance to what “ought to be” happens by allowing for the generation of spaces of multiple encounters, but also, by allowing “the whole to generate what each one would have been unable to produce separately.”<sup>44</sup> In her performance, Petrič enacted the persona of an idiot, who slows down and resists in order for something different to occur. In her work, however, the necessity to think outside the anthropocentric significations is never without the acknowledgment of the inevitably asymmetrical relations and anthropocentric privilege she, as a human, embodies.

Nevertheless, through the tension of this hierarchy of bodies in the encounter, her art captures imperceptible biosemiotic movements. This is an experimental approach to thought as practice, the biosemiotic urgency of creating material relations that would foster new processes of thinking. As she explains:

The reason why I am doing this is because I have so many questions and I just have no idea how to answer them and be smart about it and serve the public, you know: ‘this is the way, I have read all the literature, trust me, I am an artist, I know what I am doing!’ Well, I don’t. So, I am hoping that through these series of experiments some things become clearer. Rather than relaying

<sup>44</sup> Stengers, “The Cosmopolitical Proposal,” 1002.

on theory, I will just see how this process transforms me and my thoughts towards this.<sup>45</sup>

This collective understanding of Petrič practicing the persona of an idiot has a different, more resonant, I would say, persona that is a witch during her witchcraft. Not coincidentally, Deleuze and Guattari were writing about demons, sorcery and witchcraft as a possibility to think otherwise. Thinking with demons is thinking with relations, with movements, processes, encounters and tensions – presupposing that it is always a populated act within multiple becomings: “Demons are different from gods, because gods have fixed attributes, properties and functions, territories and codes: they have to do with rails, boundaries and surveys. What demons do is jump across intervals, and from one interval to another.”<sup>46</sup>

The interval jump from an idiot to a new persona reflects a pursuit of a ritual, the repetition of movements through which difference may be produced. Concepts, glossaries, ways of thinking otherwise are neither given, nor neutral. They demand practice of habits, changing and re-shifting those very habits as none of them is separated from the body, form the material and are without material implications. Thus, when Deleuze and Guattari insist that “to think is always to follow the witch’s flight,”<sup>47</sup> we should not take it as a metaphor, but an actual plea for embodying the relational practice of attachments and ritual encounters that would resist and betray your masters:

There is always betrayal in a line of flight. Not trickery like that of an orderly man ordering his future, but betrayal like that of a simple man who no longer has any past or future. We betray the fixed powers which try to hold us back, the established powers of the earth. The movement of betrayal has been defined as a double turning-away: man turns his face away from God, who also turns his face away from man. It is in this double turning-away, in the divergence of faces, that the line of flight – that is, the deterritorialization of man – is traced.<sup>48</sup>

Contaminating matters of affect thus become the contemporary witchcrafts of which bioartists are the witches who establish new ways of practicing bodies and their multiple relationalities. Bodies of biotechnology demand these witches take flight, resist universal capture, create ways to repeat this resistance and sustaining the practice of mutation. Rather than a quick fascination with scientific enhancement, or a too prompt rejection on the grounds of essentialist judgement, today’s bodies of mutation, leaking, porous and multiple,

<sup>45</sup> Petrič, “Confronting Vegetal Otherness.”

<sup>46</sup> Gilles Deleuze and Claire Parnet, *Dialogues*, trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Barbara Habberjam (New York: Columbia University Press, 1987) 40.

<sup>47</sup> Gilles Deleuze, Félix Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?*, 41.

<sup>48</sup> Deleuze and Parnet, *Dialogues*, 40.

demand practices of creative resistance and its continuation. We can learn from these artists, by searching for new concepts, by changing the logic of thinking about bodies into relational and multibiopolitical, or we can remain the idiots of Cartesian consensus. This is not a choice between two opposite ways, between artistic fuzziness and academic rationalism. Rather than being within the epistemological debate, this is a choice concerning the very onto-epistemo-ethical way of life. This is the understanding that, as Zaretsky puts it, you “mutate or you die,<sup>49</sup> which has never been more literal than now, when encountering the very mutants of multibodies that we are.

As Stengers argues, for an idiot, it is not about creating the sphere of “a good common,” but rather it is to “slow down the construction of this common world, to create spaces for hesitation regarding what it means to say ‘good.’”<sup>50</sup> These spaces of hesitation do not regard axiological judgements, the system of moral rules within which we can judge an action, intersubjectively and according to the given law. Rather, the spaces of resistance and hesitation create a sense of the necessity to stay with the trouble, as Haraway would put it. Creating spaces of hesitation means creating spaces of tension, of encounters that are not to be resolved in terms of “good will” of agreement. Instead, the contamination must occur and be sustained. Performing witchcraft through the witches flight is performing the contaminating matters of affect through thinking bodies and bodies of thinking in multiplication of an infinitive: to engage, and to be touched, and to relate, and to experiment, and to disagree, and to be eaten, and to fight, and to love, and to mutate, and to go back, and to think, and to touch, and to eat, and to slow down, and to plant, and to grow, and to act, and to listen, and to resist, and to live, and to die, and to laugh, and to matter, and...

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<sup>49</sup> Peter Vidani, “‘Mutate or Die’ with Adam Zaretsky,” <http://artscienceethics.tumblr.com/MutateOrDie>, accessed 17 February 2017.

<sup>50</sup> Stengers, “The Cosmopolitical Proposal,” 995.