

Editorial: Excess

Matthias Kispert

CREAM, University of Westminster

Editorial: Excess

Matthias Kispert

I am writing this editorial while sequestered at my home in Central London, at a moment when life as we know it has been put into a state of suspension for some weeks. The break in the flow of activity wrought by the Covid-19 pandemic has thrown many seeming certainties into question while exacerbating existing contradictions and engendering new ones that cut across social, political and individual bodies. Which of these junctures will leave permanent traces and what these traces will be like remain to be seen. As Arundhati Roy (2020) has said, the pandemic is 'a portal, a gateway between one world and the next'.

The theme of this issue of *Hyphen Journal* is Excess. In the pre-pandemic times when our editorial collective put together the call for submissions, our thinking was first of all centred around the question of how excess relates to creative modes of research, touching upon issues such as surplus, abundance, discovery and the 'making productive' of what initially might have appeared as waste. During the reviewing process, we sought to be open to many paths from which this theme can be approached, which are brought together in the six articles and two interviews published in this issue. These inevitably follow trajectories that were embarked on before the pandemic struck, yet at times the inquiries that they put forward serendipitously touch upon themes that have come to the fore in the present moment, more of which I draw attention to below.

Fathima Nizaruddin's work, which is discussed in the interview with her in this issue, hones in on an affective supplement that is present in the ways in which expert discourses are mobilised to shore up state authority. In her film *Nuclear Hallucinations* (2016), a series of unscripted, impromptu enactments by anti-nuclear activists in India playfully subvert the performative aspects of sovereign power: the tropes, mannerisms and rhetorical flourishes through which power communicates through its representatives, in order to present itself as self-evidently authorised to make and enforce decisions against the will of its subjects. At the same time, as Nizaruddin makes clear in her interview, the authority of the state does not only assert itself with rhetoric but also through violence against those who challenge its power. The crucial task for the filmmaker here is to speak with and not simply about localised struggles, in order to contest simplistic narratives that attempt to justify the excesses of the state.

Remaining on the Indian subcontinent and keeping with the question of state power, Joel Rodrigues's text examines the history of alcohol prohibition in the Indian state of Nagaland and the complex ways in which this is negotiated in everyday life. Rodrigues outlines how proponents of Nagaland's alcohol prohibition law sought to institutionalise Baptist Christian moral norms, and were successful to an extent, while at the same time coming up against the traditions of Naga tribes whose customary consumption of rice brew had been demonised by moral crusaders. In Rodrigues's view, the state and the law are produced through relational practices. In the everyday subversions of the alcohol prohibition law in Nagaland, the authority of state and

law are continuously being challenged, through practices that include both more or less clandestine drinking establishments serving rice brew and the sale of smuggled alcohol in shops.

State power gets entangled with private capital in Pablo Antolí's review of Trevor Paglen's installation *From 'Apple' to 'Anomaly'* (2019) at London's Barbican Centre, in which a profusion of images that lines the expansive wall of the Curve Gallery serves to make visible the workings of AI image recognition algorithms. As Antolí observes, the ways in which images are labelled by artificial intelligence replicate existing social biases, and the application of these algorithmic structures to the prediction of human behaviour carries uncomfortable echoes of the nineteenth-century practices of phrenology and physiognomy, which had the aim of developing an imagined typology of criminal bodies. While historically these images were stored in archives whose proliferation soon rendered them unwieldy, contemporary image recognition technologies are fed with images that reside in a state of 'productive invisibility', termed 'digital latency' by Antolí: these are images that have been taken without the purpose of being seen by human eyes, and their processing through AI-operated data centres opens up new possibilities for repressive politics of categorisation and prediction that eluded the phrenologists of old.

The interview with Jill Daniels brings into play other kinds of latencies, as her filmmaking engages with histories of trauma that are sited, and partially submerged, in particular places. Using experimental modes that challenge conventional strategies of truth-production in documentary, Daniels creates multilayered narrative assemblages which in both form and content speak to the ways in which historical truth is produced and contested. The conversation with Daniels examines two of her works which were screened at a *Hyphen Journal* event at the University of Westminster; for *Not Reconciled* (2009), the filmmaker visited the remnants of the town of Belchite in northern Spain, which was razed in the Spanish Civil War and is the site of mass graves of Republican fighters that have still not been exhumed. *Breathing Still* (2018) is a short film that traces the history of Rosa Luxemburg and also functions as a sketch for a larger project around anti-fascist and anti-nationalist resistance in Berlin, both in the early twentieth century and the contemporary moment.

Terri Newman's text examines a very different kind of invisibility, which relates to art-making that is not considered admissible in official assessment systems for pre-university age students in the UK. Newman's own pedagogic practice foregrounds collaborative processes with a view to engaging with knowledge as it is produced through action and reflection with others. Yet it is precisely collaboratively produced artefacts that are ignored by exam boards and consigned to a condition of redundancy or to destruction once work on them has finished. In excluding the material outcomes of these kinds of practice from assessment, educational authorities also undermine the legitimacy of intersubjective ways of working that engender rich pedagogical encounters.

A more productive engagement with materials and encounters is also what Anthony Powis argues for. In his article, accounts of research trips conducted to investigate groundwater reservoirs in India are refracted through reflections on how assemblages of bodies, tools, skills, sites, gatherings and imaginaries come together in the production of knowledge. Drawing on the new materialist thinking of Karen Barad, Quentin Meillassoux, Steven Shaviro and others, Powis brings into play an ontology of thought that decentres the human subject as the privileged site of knowledge. Here, thought instead appears as a property of everything, and research always takes place in relational assemblages in which matter needs to be thought with rather than be gotten at, and in which the body of the researcher is calibrated as much as the tools that

are used in the process.

Other entanglements of thought and matter are engaged by Piotr Bockowski in his text on the writings of Antonin Artaud and the latter's insistence on the abject matter of the body – slimy discharges, mucous membranes and orifices, excrement and states of bodily delirium – as the ground from which linguistic utterances, thoughts and philosophies arise. At the same time, Artaud went on to attack the meaning-making capacities of language itself, as exemplified in his censored radio transmission *To Have Done with the Judgement of God* (1947). In Bockowski's analysis, the Artaudian body here is fragmented into multiple selves that revolt against language through electronic transmission, a process which is being extended today in online mediation. This gives rise to new impossible bodily formations and residues of processes in which mutations take on technological and/or fungal dispositions.

Finally, in Dellores Laing's contribution, fabric and other materials used in stitching reassemble through their linguistic representations in a figurative double-stitch formation that runs the length of a page. Words vibrate with the rhythms of sewing machines in operation, and the entanglement of materials, tools and bodies that come together in needlework conjures up a dance that traces shapes of fabric in a process of becoming newly assembled forms.

This issue's theme of Excess had been decided long before there was any inkling of Covid-19 or the state of exception that was soon to befall societies across the globe, yet it reverberates through many of the problematics that have come to the fore in the present moment beyond the pages of this journal. At the margins of the social body, precarious workers who had found themselves only ever one step away from subsiding into the reserve army of labour were all of a sudden elevated to 'key worker' status and celebrated. An 'infodemic' (WHO 2020) of disinformation and conspiracy theories metastasised on social media, bringing protesters out into the streets in at times violent displays of virulent ignorance and antisocial delirium. The openness of bodies to their surroundings was made palpable through the dangers posed by an infinitesimal infectious agent that can enter the body unnoticed and from there spread to infect others.

In their own ways the texts in this issue bring to the fore different kinds of surpluses, remnants or profusions. At a moment when questions related to various forms of excess have become particularly significant, it remains important to think with, inside and through the notion of excess, considering both the promise of unknown riches that it carries, as well as the perils of destructive outbursts and wasteful ruination that it augurs. Publishing a journal such as this of course carries with it its own instances of overflows that spill out beyond the creations that eventually make up the materials hosted on our website. These range from the pedagogical experiences of establishing and running a journal by a self-organised group of PhD researchers and all the conversations, encounters and communities that arise in the process, to the long hours of meeting, editing and organising that a project of this kind necessarily entails. With all this in mind, we do hope that the contributions to this issue will provide a fertile ground to nurture further debate, exploration and critique.

Finally, look out for the call for our next issue on the theme of Ecologies.

ISSUE 2 EDITORIAL COLLECTIVE

Pablo Antolí, CREAM
Swati Bakshi, CREAM
Steven Barclay, CAMRI
Karin Bareman, CREAM
Harshavardhan Bhat, *Architecture and Cities*
Iram Ghufuran, CREAM
Frankie Hines, *English and Creative Writing*
Monika Jaeckel, CREAM
Matthias Kispert (Editor-in-chief), CREAM
Sarah Niazi, CREAM
Mirko Nikolić, *Linköping University*
Lucy Rogers, CREAM
Arne Sjögren, CREAM

WEBSITE DESIGN AND DEVELOPMENT

Oscar Cass-Darweish (web developer)
Matthias Kispert, CREAM
Arne Sjögren, CREAM
Monika Jaeckel, CREAM

PROOFREADING

Thea Miklowski

References

Roy, A. (2020), 'Arundhati Roy: "The pandemic is a portal"', Financial Times, 3 April, <https://www.ft.com/content/10d8f5e8-74eb-11ea-95fe-fcd274e920ca>. Accessed 27 May 2020.

WHO (2020), 'Novel Coronavirus (2019-nCoV) situation report – 13', World Health Organization, <https://www.who.int/docs/default-source/coronaviruse/situation-reports/20200202-sitrep-13-ncov-v3.pdf>. Accessed 8 April 2020.

About the author

Matthias Kispert is an artist and researcher with an interest in the intersections of art, politics and activism. He currently is a practice-based PhD researcher at the University of Westminster, using artistic research methods to investigate precarious work on digital labour platforms. He is a co-founder of Hyphen Journal. Alongside his current work, he also has a history as an electronic music composer and performer with the media artist collective D-Fuse, is a lecturer in Sound Art at the University of the Arts London, and has been coordinating the Committee on Activism for the International Initiative for Promoting Political Economy since 2016.