

Chapter 6: Conclusion

A pause before the end, (the interminable plague pause): the final performance:
Exosmosis



Figure 1: V Barratt, *Exosmosis*, Samstag Museum of Contemporary Art, 2022 (pod, slime and mushrooms, magnetic rock instrument, projection)

Late in 2020 I was offered a beautiful cavernous space and financial support to present what was supposed to be the final major performance of my PhD. By mid-2021 temporality had begun to stretch and dissolve into strings of unformed matter—as had I. We were living on COVID time. The performance of June 6, 2021 was postponed to July 2021, then to December 10, 2021 in a different space, and then finally programmed at the Samstag Museum for July 16, 2022—ten days before my PhD submission date. I installed and performed the work, entitled *Exosmosis*, in an atmosphere of cultural frenzy. July of 2022 was a bottleneck of postponed arts events, all smashing up against one another after rolling postponements. It was horribly thrilling and stressful to the point of being corporeally nauseating!

Exosmosis began with the concept of a cell. Specifically, imaginal discs—the cellular data inside the larva of insects that undergo metamorphosis. These cells facilitate the journey from grub to bug. There are “wing discs”, “leg discs”, and other discs dedicated to the development of the insect.

One of the most fascinating and beautiful of these processes observed by humans is the metamorphosis from caterpillar to butterfly. This change takes place within a chrysalis, which is the secret chamber of transformation. Inside the chrysalis, the caterpillar undergoes an autophagic process. It secretes digestive juices in order to break itself down into slime, into undifferentiated matter. The imaginal discs then proliferate, able to begin their work of building something completely new from the unformed matter of the caterpillar—a butterfly. The caterpillar is and is not the butterfly, and vice-versa.

Initially these cells are seen by the caterpillar as invasive cells, and the caterpillar’s system attempts to annihilate them, but the imaginal cells proliferate too quickly for the caterpillar, overwhelming it, and it succumbs to the process.

What is interesting to me about this process is that this transformation into a new form can only arise out of complete annihilation. Partial annihilation and partial transformation is not possible. The data necessary for the creation of newness already exists in the primordial goo that results from this destruction. A new relationship of matter to content and form is required in order for the caterpillar to become butterfly.

All form arises from and dissolves into undifferentiated matter, without cessation. From the abyss to the void—one and the same. Beings, buildings, machines, systems, communities—one and the same. Matter is mobilised by desire and intention. Revolution and oppression arise from the same matter and are differentiated by desire and intention.

The “imaginal discs” necessary for individual and collective social, ecological and systems transformation are always already seeded. We just need to dissolve—and become.

Exosmosis

DATE: 16th June 2022

TIME: 4pm – 7pm

Venue: Samstag Museum of Art, Fenn Place, Tarntanya, Adelaide SA 5000

Collaborators:

Virginia Barratt: production, concept, object construction, live vocals and performance, video

Em König: rock and magnet instrument construction, live sound processing

Lauren Abineri: rug tufting, synth coding, Twitch channel live streaming

Mistress Tokyo: Rope design and pod dressing, performance assistance

Margie Medlin: Lighting design and operation

Amanda Calder: Object fabrication, installation assistance

Jam Dickson: Pod steelwork

Live streaming by *Replay*.

Watch the twitch.tv livestream here [\[LINK\]](#)

An online synthesiser was live-coded by Lauren Abineri using sound samples grabbed from the live performance. The synthesiser was playable during the performance, and the process of making the synthesiser was projected onto the walls of the gallery.

See the synthesiser here [\[LINK\]](#):

The performance took place at Samstag Museum, in the large ground floor gallery. I commissioned Jam Dickson, a blacksmith, to create a skeletal steel chrysalis or “pod” for me, which was to suspend from a height and house me for the 3 hour duration of the performance, during which time I would dissolve into primordial stuff, linguistically,

generating resonant vibrations of sonic affect. I sat naked in the pod, wearing rope chest and hip harnesses which would support my exit from the pod. The pod itself was skinned in 370 meters of rope knotted by Naomi Spilsbury aka Mistress Tokyo. The “skin” of the pod both revealed and concealed me, allowing my voice to be disconnected from my body and to be thrown, acousmatically.



Figure 2: V Barratt, *Exosmosis*, Samstag Museum of Contemporary Art, 2022 (detail, pod, rope, mushrooms, rubber)

Beneath the pod was a rubber tray catching pools of slime that were oozing out of the composting mycelial fruiting pods hung on either side of me. The mushrooms growing from these pods were sporulating in beautiful clouds which caught the light, spiralling upwards. On the floor were rugs based on scientific drawings of imaginal discs, and an insect leg rug that the audience could sit on. I commissioned artist Lauren Abineri to create these for me.



Figure 3: V Barratt, *Exosmosis*, Samstag Museum of Contemporary Art, 2022 (detail: imaginal disc rugs, insect leg rugs, rock magnet instrument)

My improvised vocalities shifted from mouth noise and moans to vocal droning to a kind of intoned lecturing, as well as some deep doom vocalities and screams. It was frightening, even to me, at some points, and in that layered cacophony there was also some humour. The voice was live-mixed by Em König, an electronic musician who I rehearsed with across the 2 years of the project. Em created a sonic field for the voice to enter, based on sound samples I had collected across time from various geological sites, from the forests near my home, and from my own body. The other live voice was “organ speech”, amplified via an intravaginal microphone which enabled the processes of digestion to be heard. There were four speakers and two sub-woofers, creating a vibrational rumble in the space which could be felt internally.

After 3 hours I emerged head-first from the pod into the slime catching tray, into the reverberating silence, into the space full of the ghosts of the voice. I felt reconfigured. The potential of the voice to effect and transform at a cellular level was realised through the infrastructure of the performance—the installation elements such as the sporulating

mushrooms, the lighting and projections, the sonic modification and amplification all contributed to the immersive environment. The boosting of the bass frequencies meant that sound was felt as well as heard, contributing to the sense that the entire body is a listening device. The subsonic frequencies also bounced around between bodies and the architecture, so that each body became part an expanded field of sensing in relation to the environment. It was frightening and grotesque, soothing and thoughtful, meditative and revelatory, annihilating and transformational.

Through noise and through my throat, through the shifting of internal matter in the gut, through the elegant dance of matter, I learn myself, and learn my limits as a body in and of the world. I learn also how to generate a contagious effect.

How do you truly know a part of you that you *think* you know simply because it and you have been shackled together for the longest time? How do you pull that deeply embedded co-relation out of the darkest part of you, the most entangled, cellular part of you? How do you bring it close, shine a light on it, and love it, when you spend every waking minute trying to destroy it? And who would you be without it?

It was always clear to me that I would write about panic. What else? What else is there? Is there anything more special than this knowledge accreted across a lifetime, sequestered, inscrutable?

I have lived with panic and its siblings anxiety, fear and terror for the duration of my life. Panic is a foundational part of who I am. It is vulnerability, existential insight, empathy, urgency and transformation. Panic is active. It is excitation and vitality. It is vital in ways that are about dissolution and becoming—one and the same. Some of the becomings are turgid and some are light. Panic is both existentially enabling and constraining, and these ways of being are co-constituted. The challenge is to flow with both, since one cannot exist without the other.

Panic always seemed to me a hard limit—all constraint—and this left me nowhere to go. I wanted only to annihilate it before it annihilated me. Speculating on the potential for transformation of this limit into resistance and insight offered me a way to develop a politics that embraced this hard place. I needed to look at panic, through panic, rather than looking away. In the looking, I was able to see that my panic is an appropriate

response to the entangled and extractive forces of the bio-, socio- and geo-political contexts of late stage Capitalism.

I must have, as Joanna Tiitsman so poignantly put it, “an incredible stomach for loss”¹ Living with panic, and then attempting to contain it in order to use it as matter for research requires a perseverance that galvanises the gut in ways that, for me, are unmatched.

Through creative experimentation I have generated a place to explore the enabling potential of panic. The challenge for this project was to represent the profound and ineffable experience through affective modalities. Under the umbrella of Arts Based Research I found my way to autotheory, experimental poetics and affective performance in order to manifest the experience of panic and what it reveals about our lived experience in an entangled world. In a Harawayan situated mode, I use my own body as site, research and researcher. Performance, the writing of performance and the performance of writing are the experimental methods I employed for agential dissolution and becoming. Speculating, crying, overbreathing, and unmaterring are all generative of new ways of knowing, and these new ways of knowing are painful but enlightening. It matters how we unmatter. Through these experiments I was able to find a voice for panic and to explore the potential for creative practice to manifest and affectively reproduce the experience of panic for, upon and through an audience. I want viewers, listeners, and readers—those who intersect with my lines of flight and panicked becoming—to see with and through panic, as I do, with their whole self, to peer through the torn veil of the world as it seems and into the infinite realm of the world as it is. Seeing the world as it is gives us access to dismantle its workings.

Throughout this project I embraced the labour of being a humiliating messy abject body disrupting clean institutional spaces as a productive and valid research approach. To eschew containment in favour of writing with tears and mucous, to be unapologetically excessive and incite discomfort feels like production of value. In a phenomenological and entangled sense, the act of disassembling my structures, forms and systems also disassembles the flesh of the world. This project takes to heart the work of some inspiring theorists who also live and think with and through panic. Orr’s shimmering concept of PSYCHOpower as a “site for thinking about embodied entanglements of the

¹ Tiitsman, "A Question on Affect."

psychological, the social, the affective, and the historical”,² posits that panic is a “profoundly corporeal”³ practice of troubling the disciplinary borders between these realms.

Similarly, my autotheoretical research enables me to inhabit a trans-disciplinary space and mobilise panic across these borders in a productive way through affective contagion and collective experience. Gorska’s work on breathing matters talks about how panic attacks facilitate “flow” and “letting go”⁴ in terms of their own enforced internalised disciplinary boundaries. Gorska developed, in response to this cue to flow, a politics of corpo-affectivity and vulnerability that derives from how we are in the world, and how the world is in us, and the Baradian notion of the entanglement of all things, human and non-human. Panic is not preconstituted. We are not born with an easter egg⁵ of panic nestled secretly inside us. Panic emerges in response to, and calls attention to, the potentially precarious conditions we find ourselves in. Panic grows where Capital flows. Like Gorska, I find value in panic as a productive force, and an appropriate response to, the “vulnerabilities and power relations of the contemporary world”.⁶ Gorska cites Barad’s notions of entanglement and intra-action across human and non-human worlds as a way of acknowledging that we are always in-relation. To a volcano, to poverty, to violence, to the machines of production, to the flows of a stream, and to the stench of a gutter. To the ocean and to the future vision of a warm blue beach of micronized plastic sand. Panic is a futures technology, always attuned towards change.

Panic has been a transformative long-term relationship for me. Panic has shut me down utterly in a dark and smothering grave. This was a tendency towards death. Moving towards an understanding of panic as vital, moving and constitutive of political agency has created a world I can move through with desire and intention, embracing panic as desire and potential for change, not an adversary to be destroyed. Following the flows of panic opened me to a new relationship, not just with panic, but with the intra-active

² Orr, *Panic Diaries: A Genealogy of Panic Disorder*, 19.

³ Ibid., 15.

⁴ Juelskjær, "Dialogue With Magdalena Gòrska," 34.

⁵ I am using this in the ludic sense. An easter egg is a feature hidden inside software, or a game, for example, which will activate once certain conditions are met.

⁶ Gorska, "Breathing Matters," 233.

dynamics of my embodied subjectivity within the social, cultural and geopolitical world. I see and understand the affective ripples that move across all of human and non-human nature when I enact panic as a political force.

I am the flesh of the world on which panic describes its meanings.