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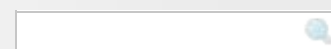
PROLIFIC ENCOUNTERS TOWARDS A PHILOSOPHY OF MUTABILITY

admin

By [MIRIAM VAN RIJSINGEN](#)

Mutability was a central issue in the oeuvre of artist Helen Chadwick in the late 1980s and 1990s of the last century. Her work explores the “territories of prolific encounters”, mostly the body, landscape, the embryo and the cell. The encounters could be between natural and (man-made) toxic materials, between beauty and economics, between natural law and memory, desire and form, between the material and the digital or informational. The processes that ensued from the territories of prolific encounter she associated with viruses. In her “viral aesthetics” Chadwick (1989, p. 97) considered these processes as contingent on risk, not as damage persé, but as potential – cultivating the possibility of change. Concepts of purity or essentialism and contagion no longer apply in her work and Chadwick reworks the danger of the hostile into hospitality. Chadwick is not alone in this quest, as “viral sensibility” is discussed in many ways, from computer technology and marketing strategy to body/machine interfacing and philosophy. “Viral sensibility”, according to Joseph Nechvatal, “conveys latent excess”, is “ecstatic, variational and non-hierarchical” (Rogue 2004). I will investigate the viral as a metaphor in art and art/science encounters in order to develop a possible philosophy of mutability.

Chadwick’s *Viral Landscapes* (1988/89) form an inspirational first step in developing a possible philosophy of mutability. In the late eighties, as she worked on her Viral landscapes, the advent of AIDS encouraged artists and intellectuals to examine the idea of viral infection (Sladen 2004, p. 21) and analyse the metaphorical transference between the concept of the virus and other forms of social and cultural expressions of ‘trauma’ (Sontag 1989). Helen Chadwick explores the openness of the body and the relation between host and virus as a metaphor for the relation between individual and world. She writes about viral infection, “The last vestige of autonomy is the self-sufficiency of the cell, separated from all around by that first boundary, the protoplasmic envelope. It is the original frame. But it will yield to the impetus of a virus and surrender its sovereignty. In return a process begins” (Chadwick 1989, p.95). In this perspective, her ‘theory of self’ reflects a critical awareness of the autonomy and integrity of



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the individual and she “challenges the romantic separation between the individual and society” (Sladen 2004, p.21). As we will see, Chadwick celebrates the abolishment of many boundaries through vagrancy in order to allow for a transformative process of becoming(s).

Viral Landscapes consists of five large panoramic computer generated, colour photographic images. What we see at first glance are photographs of the Pembrokeshire coast superimposed with images of blood and tissue cells. But the process behind these works reveals an encounter that is much more profound. Chadwick got samples from her own blood cells and tissue cells from her cervix, vagina, mouth and ear. She also took a blank canvas to the shore, threw paint into the sea and dragged the canvas through the waves. The resulting images were digitalised and edited in the final work. “The ‘writing’ of the waves”, as Marjorie Allthorpe-Guyton (1994, p. 13) describes it so well, “is held in the cellular structure of the image (...) using pixel replacement to splice images of the internal body and external nature”. These images are scattered – Allthorpe-Guyton uses the words “smeary storm” – over the photographs of the coastal landscapes, visually evoking morphic resonances. However, they also invade as it were, the modernist ‘colourfield paintings’ on the left of each landscape. We could understand this as an intense formal reflection on the theory of morphogenesis, which characterises all form as the irruption of a discontinuity in or of the system. “Spliced together by data processing, these are not ruined catastrophic surfaces but territories of a prolific encounter, the exchange of living and informational systems at the shoreline of culture” (Chadwick 1989, p. 97).

Chadwick was fully aware of the possibilities of the digital. She digitised photographs and paintings to allow new (and infinite) possibilities of change. From the encounter of the material and the informational latent excess and variability within both systems becomes visible. She writes in 1989, “The digital image is infinitely available for modification, each latent pixel subject to change. Such access heralds a genetic revolution where life forms are prone to transformation in a mechanically produced reality. The stimulus to *new solidarities* could be emancipatory, an ecology where everything is connected and rigid boundaries cease to be” (Chadwick 1989, p. 97, italics MvR).

These works are propositions for the “flux of being” (Allthorpe-Guyton 1994, p. 13) and for radical openness instead of fear of other. “The spectacle of violation of self, the destruction of one’s separate integrity, might not altogether collapse into scenes of destruction”, it reveals “(...) a most productive moment, permitting the locus of unstable, permeable identities” (Chadwick 1989, p. 97). The permeability and transformational quality of body and self that Chadwick is after is also expressed in her poetic text ‘Soliloquy to flesh’ (Chadwick 1989, p.109) and one of Chadwick’s works is actually titled *On Mutability* (1984-86). Both celebrate the dissolved ego. The body is dispersed across (social) space, a joint territory of micro- and macro worlds, of nature, myth and history. Or, as Josph Nechvatal would put it in his text inspired by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, “A body’s capacities are literally the result of what it incorporates; the self is not only corporal, but corporate” (Nechvatal, Virustext). For Chadwick, there is no (moral) judgement, “(...) here in a scenario of mutual being the ideals of purity, and thus contagion, no longer apply. Previously, as punishment for vagrancy, the inevitable final closure would be death, but disintegration has already occurred. The living integrates with other in an infinite continuity of matter, and welcomes difference not as damage but potential” (Chadwick 1989, p. 97). Not so different from what Deleuze & Guattari describe as “becoming”, and which involves “a shared deterritorialization”. (Deleuze & Guattari 2004/1980, p. 324)

If viral aesthetics is to be characterized in few words, I would say it is the expression of latent

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excess within the organized system, the futility of borders, and the potential perspective of mutability and variability against the aura of autonomy. A virus causes changes, not only for worse, but also for better. Think of recombinant DNA biotechnology, in which infected persons are injected with cells transformed by viruses that carry a functional copy of the defective gene, in order to survive. This resembles in a way the rhizomatic quality of viral marketing. It makes sense of the democratising effect of (bio)technology in a Benjaminian way. The productive and mutable aspect of the viral is otherwise met in the increasing number of games and cultural events that mark themselves as Viral. A shift takes place from privileged logos to variability, from hierarchical to dispersion, from one self to interacting selves, from the closed to access and potential excess. Risk and survival are core issues.

Helen Chadwick was an artist who took up residencies in scientific environments such as King's College Hospital in London. In working with discarded embryos she allowed the materials, tools and concepts of scientific practice into her body of work, but also infected the laboratorial space with concepts of beauty and meaning, that had been 'othered' by science. In the Assisted Conception Unit she explored the criteria of selection and favoured the discarded un-symmetrical pre-embryos and turned them into floating jewels, in *Unnatural Selection* (1996). For Chadwick the prolific encounter between art and science was necessarily part of her work on mutability.

Art-science encounters are widespread in the last couple of years, and discussed not very convincingly to my opinion in terms of dichotomy and benefit mostly. Who benefits the most from those encounters? This turns out to become a blind stare. Let's look at those encounters as prolific encounters in a perspective of potential mutability and variability. What are the benefits of the risks of openness in the perspective of change (and survival)? I will discuss three cases and formulate a first tentative conclusion, beginning with Mel Chin's *Revival Field* (1990-1993) which is about transformation and survival, but first of all about the benefits of vagrancy in art and science. After this, works of Brandon Ballengée on biodiversity, and Kathleen Rogers work *Tremor* (2007) on morphogenetic processes and touch, will pass in review.

Mel Chin once said "The survival of my own ideas may not be as important as a condition I might create for others' ideas to be realized" (Art:21 2007). Art can be a host. But art can also be a virus that inserts itself into a host. According to Chin, "[Viruses] insert themselves and replicate with the host, not necessarily to kill the host you see, but to replicate ideas, or their own form, but they always slightly mutate, but not exact. I thought, if I could transfer that to the world of ideas we would have the methodology, be as it is. (...). It might just help somebody to survive". (Sparer 2007)

Chin's work *Revival Field* is one of the cases in which art created a condition for a (scientific) idea to survive and become reality. A toxic landfill was revived and engendered new scientific research. The project shows the potentials of vagrant ideas.

The first idea for the project came from a text by psilocybine expert Terrence McKenna who wanted to use *Datura* plants to clean up toxic soil. Chin was interested because it related to his interest in alchemy and his understanding of transformative processes and the mutable nature of materials. He considered the poetic and sculptural nature of the idea: "If pollution can be carved away, and life could return to that soil, a diverse and ecologically balanced life, then that is a wonderful sculpture"(Art:21 2007, interview). After reading another paper by Rufus L. Chaney on the subject, Chin contacted the scientist, who was frustrated by the lack of support for his research project, and he agreed to create a field for a 'replicated field test' that was necessary for the survival of Chaney's scientific research.

Chin experienced several changes in his artistic self-consciousness when he transformed the poetry of the idea “pragmatically and responsibly into reality” (Art:21 2007, interview). The artist crossed borders learning about the science, organising the money, convincing politicians, doing legal negotiations, taking the Hazardous Materials Incident Response Training. Whereas the project as such transformed political ideas about the necessity of trial fields for this particular research and more research has been done since. It reflected a strong societal awareness.

Revival Field is a 60 square foot section of the Pig’s Eye landfill in St. Paul Minnesota. A special group of plants, hyperaccumulators (a.o. Alpine pennycress), were used to absorb heavy metals such as Zinc and Cadmium, in their leaves and roots. The field was laid out as an X in a circle within a square frame, a metaphorical ‘target’ as well as a functional division. When in 1991 the (first) plants were harvested, dried, ashed and analysed, the metal received from the plants were at a level of commercial ore. These transformation processes of soil and plants, the mutable nature of materials, are still profoundly aesthetic to Chin. He considers the reduction process as sculptural concept, even when the material is invisible and the tools are biochemistry and agriculture. The project changed and expanded both science and the sculptural field, and bore many more potentials than that of art or science alone.

Brandon Ballengée’s works are about biodiversity and risk. In *Species Reclamation* (1999-2002), *The Ever Changing Tide* (2000-2001), and *Malamp* (2002), he worked together with several scientists, investigating ecological dynamics and the global disappearance of biodiversity. However, his work reveals how mutable and contingent nature is in and of itself, even when severely traumatised by human involvement.

In *The Ever Changing Tide*, Ballengée investigated what was for sale at the Queens Seafood Market as it related to the changing ecology of the Ocean. The result was interestingly ‘ambiguous’. On the one hand there is decreased bio-diversity through (regionally) introducing invasive non-native species in the waters, overfishing, and global climate change. But the Market-stalls showed and “amazingly, frighteningly biodiverse” supply (Ballengée, TECT). Collecting, identifying, phylogenic examination of and photographing each ‘individual’ showed the complexity of the interconnectedness among aquatic life-forms. Ballengée’s photographs and charts were brought back and on show in the market. Just to create awareness of what we are going to eat when we buy ‘fish’. Like the tracing and mapping of a rhizome. (Deleuze & Guattari 2004/1980, p. 13, 22)

This work is taken up again (through extended field survey) in *Malamp*, when Ballengée investigates the latent excess of traumatized nature in deformed amphibians, to reveal contingency, variability and the potential of adaptability in organisms. The work is part of a broader (ecological and biological) research devoted to the causes and effects of mutations, in the perspective of the knowledge that many diseases are vagrant from animal to human.

Ballengée is very insistent on human responsibility. The territory of prolific encounter is the environment itself where human intervention (of any kind) can create trauma with contingent and long lasting effects, which necessarily ‘infect’ humans also. The environment is a high risk territory, which is revealed in the excesses, the mutations and the decline of species. However, Ballengée does not come up with ready solutions. He once, in *Species Reclamation* began experimenting with selective breeding generations of Dwarf African clawed frogs backward, to regain (traits of) the (depleted or extinct) wild type *Hymenochirus curtipes*, from the domesticated laboratory frog. He came up with many “stylistically different” (Ballengée in Kac 2007, p.306) generations and unique individuals, but “I have not been able to obtain a pure *H. curtipes*” (Ballengée SR). Apart from the idea of re-wilding, Ballengée seems to find it more important to exhibit the variability. He thus not only fulfils his promise to reveal new discoveries

to help us realize how connected all life-forms are, but gives us food to discuss for example what 'domestic', 'native' and 'wild' means to biodiversity.

Kathleen Rogers is also interested in the morphogenetic processes in living organisms, attracted by the beauty and mystery, specifically of the beating heart and flowing blood. But different from Ballengée, she focuses on lab-practices. She, like the Chadwick, Chin and Ballengée, collaborates with scientists, for example from University College London. Rogers involvement in scientific research and laboratorial practice is generated by her interest in movement, tremors, the fluidity of data (*The Waterworks*, 2006), the interconnectedness of memory and matter (*The Imagination of Matter*, 2000), developmental cascades, the "betwixt and between state" in biochemical condensation, the potential states of being (Rogers, diverse Posts in her website).

Tremor (2007) is a single screen video and sound installation, which shows a projection of microscopic video images of the transparent embryos of zebrafish – an inexpensive model-organism deliberately bred to study vertebrate developments. Zebrafish are known for their quick reproduction in large numbers, used to search for mutations and then selectively bred. The actual installation further consists of several tanks with zebrafish from a laboratory, cared for on a daily basis.

The transparency of the embryo makes it possible to study fetal growth in a living organism, to "capture the essence of life-force as movement". And movement is what is also exercised and produced. To study (evaluate and test) mutations the embryos are touched probed and scratched under the microscope, "creating tremors and palpitations that are tactile and reactive and are invariably fatal". Rogers calls this a "pathological trespass". The laboratorial practice stages, as it were, time and again a prolific encounter, in which "visual distortions, physical vibrations, reflections, shadows, scratches, detritus and microbial parasites randomly appear" (Rogers, all citations in *Tremor*). And this is what we actually see in the video-screening, opposite the tanks with different mutated, reproducing fish.

The laboratory itself is a territory of prolific encounter, and the installation "engages the viewer in a visceral and psychological reading of this encounter" (Rogers, *Tremor*). We experience the difficult hand-eye co-ordination that is involved, sensory detail, kinetic learning (as discussed by K. Hayles 1999), but also crude movements, optical ambiguities. The difference between looking and touching seems obsolete. Looking can become aggressively intervening, as if a boundary is lost somewhere. Also psychologically we feel a lost boundary, a double-bind if you will, as care and trauma are both part of the practice of the laboratorial assistant or scientist. But foremost, Rogers inserted the body, as embodied experience back into the scientific laboratory.

For Mel Chin, Brandon Ballengée and Kathleen Rogers the futility of borders is paramount to their work. Not only considering the collaborative nature of their work – the staging of a prolific encounter with science – but also in their focus on discontinuities, variety and mutation, diversity, excessive processes and change. They are all three interested in the potentialities of vagrancy and dispersion – of ideas, knowledge systems, identities, social realities and cultural meaning. Instead of asking whether their work is artistic or scientific, we could ask about the risks taken and the latent potential of new solidarities. What are the transformative processes that evolve from giving up solid borders and autonomy in these (and other) cases? Re/Survival, Connectedness and Embodiment are (but) three concepts that are processed through prolific encounters staged by Chin, Ballengée and Rogers.

A philosophy of mutability could take shape from these attempts of prolific encounter and the investigations into the vagrancies that lead to transformation and variability in infinite continuity

and difference, defying essentialism and purity. It could be big – considering world-ecology, or small – the awareness of ‘thinking’, ‘eating’ or ‘touching’. A philosophy of mutability leads us from the trauma of the body, the self and the system towards transformation, interaction, and new potentials. We are prone to change. The virus may be not such a bad metaphor.

“Under certain conditions, a virus can connect to germ cells and transmit itself as the cellular gene of a complex species: moreover, it can take flight, move into the cells of an entirely different species, but not without bringing with it ‘genetic information’ from the first host. (...) We form a rhizome with our viruses, or rather our viruses cause us to form a rhizome with other animals”. (Deleuze & Guattari 2004/1980, p. 11)

Need to be continued...

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