

# (Re)volting data

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## Abstract

As a panel of artist researchers, we offer critical accounts of artistic acts with data that arouse aversion or disgust. We address the following: 1) speculative art fictions that engage with the resistances and revolts of microbes in computational ecologies; 2) the biopolitics of our corporeal matter, using the material transformation of blood into artwork as a case study; 3) artistic research and practice as a study of small things, tiny revolts and frequencies of interference; 4) the boundary between life and death, growth and decay; and 5) the biopolitics of disgust through artworks that invite visitors to eat food produced from members of the human microbiome.

## Background

Our panel, *(Re)volting data* is a response to the ISEA2016 theme of Cultural R/evolution. Discussions of Big Data have drawn attention to corporate acquisition and manipulation of personal data, alerting us to the so-called ‘scraping’ of our “online” identities and social media. From sweat pouring into our smart phones to urinating in sewage systems, we generate petabytes amounts of quantifiable data, most of which becomes indeterminate to us. Plants, nonhuman animals and microbes also contribute to what has been termed the “data deluge”. Big Data has been described as both being, and causing, a revolution in the way that we live and work. However, we use the term ‘revolting’ in two ways, firstly, to break away from, or rise against, constituted authority, such as placing humans or algorithms in authority over nonhuman animals, or governance by predictive algorithms, based on unknowable decisions in the pool of Big Data.

Secondly, we use ‘revolting’ to mean intense disgust. Recently, social theorists have analysed the processes through which specific populaces are figured as ‘revolting’ and accounted for the practices these populations use in order to ‘revolt’ against their subjectification. [1] Scholars of media art and comparative literature have drawn attention to the

collapse of boundaries between information and embodiment and the ways that bodies are co-constituted with data, or emerge with data. [2], [3] It is common for such writing to take either utopian stance, described by Katherine Hayles as the wish, “to be raptured out of the bodies that matter in the lust for information,” [4] or conversely, a dystopian view. We show that there are porous boundaries, or entanglements, between nonhuman animal and human, between life and death.

We propose using corporeal scrapings, biological functions and biomaterial of artists and nonhuman animals as media for artistic expression to subvert the formation of subjects by Big Data. We discuss how these artworks engage with the felt aesthetics of data - one that might offer alternative political possibility. We discuss the generation of data as a form of open rebellion, where data is deployed as a means to cast off allegiance or subjection to those in authority. The authors above are listed alphabetically. The paper will now unfold in order of presentation on the panel.

## Helen Pritchard: Microbial Revolts

In 1997 Oak Ridge National Laboratory announced the development of a living sensor, the “Critters on a Chip”, a tiny light-sensitive computer chip coated with bioluminescent bacteria, placed on a standard integrated circuit. In the presence of targeted substances including petrochemical pollutants and explosives, the bacteria emitted a visible blue-green light. Small, inexpensive and fast, critter chips imagined an affective scene in which microbes could be used to monitor remediation and bioaccumulation at sites contaminated by petrochemicals. It was imagined these critter chips could be located in sites where humans and other nonhumans could not survive. As Rosi Braidotti [5] has noted, the political economies of bio-chemo capitalism hold no distinctions between humans and nonhumans when it comes to profiting from them. Seeds, plants, animals and bacteria all become sites that generate data. Although

much feminist theory and art/science work has focused on the positive, co-creativity of nonhuman organisms and humans, little attention has been dedicated to the aesthetic practices of nonhuman organisms in the network, who don't engage with us, but accompany us in the dark backgrounds. This paper foregrounds the relations and material loops of environmental data; relations between petrochemicals, waste, computation and capitalism, so that we might attend to the semi-living, exhausted, partial lives of particular organisms that are enrolled with the computation of (big) data, yet often disappear in its data structures. By focusing on nonhuman organisms, I do not wish to reinstate the categories of the animal, fish or bacteria as fixed. Instead, I want to develop a fuller understanding of the *capitalist practices of computing* and the ways in which it extends its reach into nonhuman organisms *through affect*. I focus on the speculative figure of the critter chip and the artwork "Critter Compiler". "Critter Compiler" is a speculative fiction writer, a botnet constituted by the queer musings of atoms, microbes, slime moulds and algae. "Critter Compiler" engages with the more-than-human critters of the internet, an ecology of critical life that demands attention. Drawing on the work of Lauren Berlant I discuss the aesthetics and promise of critter chips that is brought into being by sensing corporealities. Highlighting the entangled intra-actions of bioaccumulation in the artwork "Critter Compiler", I speculate on the resistances and revolting aesthetics of microbes that propose an alternate political possibility.

#### Jade J. A. Hastings: Trans-Xeno

Blood is a substance burdened with impedimenta--simultaneously a vital fluid, one's heritage, identity, a common bond, and a symbol of salvation. Medical practitioners from the ancient to the modern have studied the therapeutic potency of blood. As Ancient Egyptians believed bathing in blood was a source of rejuvenation, so too do contemporary physicians seek live-restoring therapies through mesenchymal stem cells and blood transfused from the young to heal patients with Alzheimers. Owing to its rich symbolic associations, in addition to its biological significance, blood naturally draws controversy when used to create works of art. A number of contemporary artists have defied cultural taboos to dissect the complexities of our modern relationship with our blood. In 1997, Eduardo Kac and Ed Bennett created the "phlebot"--a robot that provides its human symbiote with dextrose in exchange for the oxygen it needs to sustain a visible flame--for their event *A Positive* to explore the "emerging forms of human/machine interface...[through the production of new creatures and organic devices that populate our postorganic pantheon, be they biological (cloning), biosynthetic (genetic engineering), inorganic (android epistemology), algorithmic (a-life), or biobotic (robotics)." Helen Pynor and Peta Clancy produced *The Body is a Big Place* [6] which explored the cryptic boundaries between life and death through the

sustenance of a pig's heart *ex vivo* within a gallery setting. Mark Quinn has explored a diversity of ways in which to produce a self portrait using his own biological material, including his DNA, feces, and blood. Beginning in 1991, he produced a series of self portraits from nine pints of his blood poured into a mold of his head made in a block of ice. The result, he claims, is a complete "self portrait-ness" that also represents the "impossibility of immortality." [7] Then, there are artists who use their own blood in performance to indicate fragility, vulnerability, such as Kira O'Reilly and Franko B. Yet, these works tend to extend the current narrative of the blood as a token of identity and vitality, and exploit its capacity to elicit a strong visceral response as the basis of provocation. My research diverges from these previous works as the aim is not to simply utilise my blood *talis qualis*, but rather its metamorphic potential. Moreover, it subverts the status of one's blood as a substance standing in reserve for medical purposes, only to be handled by those qualified to study its objective properties. This research unpacks the biopolitics of our corporeal matter, using the material transformation of blood into artwork by and for the artist herself as a case study. Through the use of DIY phlebotomy and microscopy, the artist isolates and transforms the material state of their own blood purely for creative, rather than biomedical, purposes. Her work proffers the body as terrain for exploration and exploitation, pushing the aesthetic limits of blood as a creative medium.

#### Gillian Wylde: revolt, she said

Dodie Bellamy's essay "The Feminist Writers Guild" [8], describes her experience with a short-lived activist group in relation to Julia Kristeva's concept of "tiny revolts." [9] Bellamy writes; "Need the success of a political group be measured by its impact on a larger social order? What about the ways it transforms the lives and psyches of its members--their tiny revolts--are they not profound?" Revolt she said, revolt. For this paper I will take these this idea of 'tiny revolts' as a starting point to address, mongrelised revolting data within some of my recent video works. I will discuss recent work that addresses amongst other things, ideas relating to the *feminine écriture*, pleasure, monstrosities and madness within practices of art writing and video installation. Anger is of little importance. The presentation also draws on Deleuzian concepts of assemblage and multiplicitous attractions and influences--inflections through my video works. Assembled edits and cuts within my recent video work and writing are rendered both exact and invisible, inciting both problems and provocations and 'tiny revolts'. Identity is dead. Processes of performative assemblage, internet searches and Youtube browsing are constants through recent work; as a both a critical engagement with post-production and the mediated. These processes, also act as a critique of Big data and the inaccuracies of decision making. In this paper I links discuss links between 'creativity' and trends/un-trends, of the internet and the

mediated in the fabric of everyday lives. Before the internet, in an interview, televised after his death, 'L'Abécédaire' [10], Gilles Deleuze discusses with Claire Parnet the crucial link between creativity, the very possibility of thinking, and animality, through the practice of être aux aguets (being on the lookout) for rencontres (encounters). The best of Deleuze can be found on the Internet for sure. I discuss 'L'Abécédaire' (1988–1989) and practices working and thinking through performative assemblage(s) of browser doings, apparatus or equipment structuring's, rhizomatic unfolding's, non-human historiographies, and philosophies. I introduce as a response to these ideas, the artworks 'A as in Animal' and 'Enflamma Diagra' these works collide reverse path tracings; dissonance, discordance and difference, bringing into contact amongst other things; keeping fit with Donna Haraway, Derrida, blue and green screen special effects and spy mission project 'Acoustic Kitty'. Emergent indeterminate properties pervade both sound and image. This approach articulates activities of tiny revolt, accumulation, arrangement and movement that call to attention processes, which are improvisatory as, expanded critical and aesthetic tactics. Through this process less, emphasis is placed on observation, representation and subjectivity. Articulations stutter between different intensities, intensities that include, over-saturation of colour, shimmering substances, non-diegetic sound and trans-disciplinary couplings that resonant a rubbing up with the non human. The paper discusses how these video works are shaped conceptually by site and the context of peripheral indifferences. Software pre-sets and preconditions are cut with modalities of classification and taxonomy that flicker with continued involuntary repetition of sounds and image. 'The (female) cat breaks the fruit bowl the cubists spend their time hoping to glue it back together'. [10]

### **Jane Prophet: Life, death, growth and decay**

Psychologists have claimed that finding something revolting, being disgusted is evolutionarily advantageous to humans as it prevents us coming into contact with disease and contaminants [11], [12], [13], [14]. Humanities scholars have further argued that the basis for disgust is the messiness of the processes that are a necessary part of living and dying, that disgust developed not only as a way to police the boundary between "safe" and "contaminating" states [15] but also to prevent moral and ethical decay. [16] Some psychological experiments have been interpreted as showing that human disgust is related to our sense of being "other" than animal. [17] Ernest Becker's suggestion that the human body reminds people of their "animal limitations", the most basic of which is the inevitability of death. [18] Experimental psychologists have tested disgust's role in human/nonhuman animal boundary reinforcement to test the hypothesis that "cultures promote norms that help people distinguish themselves from animals" to protect humans from their concerns about mortality. [18] This presentation

discusses the author's memento mori artworks, made from neuroimages produced during experiments designed to analyse brain activity during death meditation and while looking at memento mori. The process of making the works with neuroscientists is situated within an interdisciplinary feminism [19]. Specifically, new materialism is used to consider revulsion and disgust in relation to memento mori, combining a cultural analysis of disgust and death with scientific insights about the physical and chemical processes of decay. I argue that the life seen in the putrefying and decaying corpse challenges the "historical materialist sense that the agency of matter is derivative of deliberate human activity" [20].

### **Tarsh Bates: *Cum panis*: the biopolitics of self, fermentation and revulsion**

The human microbiome has received a lot of attention in the last ten years, with claims that human cells are outnumbered ten to one by bacteria, fungi, arachnid, and insect cells, and an explosion of scientific research into the importance of such microorganisms to human evolution and health. Monica Bakke claims that knowledge of our microbiome does not threaten our identity although "an awareness of it definitely alters the way we think of our bodies, as they no longer can be perceived as sealed vessels". [21] However, Bakke's claim ignores a long lineage of scholarship that shows that the perception of the body as "sealed vessel," a "unified self," has always been a fantasy. This paper discusses a number of recent artworks that demonstrate the ability of the human microbiome to disrupt the fantasy of the unified "self" through the production of food using members of the human microbiome. The ancient fermentation processes that produce bread, cheese and beer are disturbingly and abruptly shifted into the realm of disgust and revulsion through the use of organisms harvested from the human body. This paper traces the biopolitics of fermentation, self and disgust activated through these artworks.

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