

A Breathcrystal

Group exhibition guest curated by Mihnea Mircan

Project Arts Centre

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Deep/ in the timecrevasse,/ in the/ honeycombedice/ waits, a breathcrystal,/ your inscrutable witness. – Paul Celan

Concerned with notions of contamination, cross-bred categories and hybrid modes of sense-making, *A Breathcrystal* stems from a wider pool of research: the project *Allegory of the Cave Painting*, presented at Extra City Kunsthal, Antwerp, in 2014-2015. This project took the prehistoric Gwion Gwion paintings in North-Western Australia as pretext and mental model. Subject of much archaeological speculation (sometimes carrying strong colonial overtones), resistant to conventional dating protocols, chromatically vibrant in spite of being exposed to drastic changes of temperature and humidity, the Gwion Gwion were revisited in 2010 by a team of scientists led by Jack Pettigrew. The study found that the surface – painted between 40-70,000 years ago – had been fully colonised by a ‘biofilm’, in which the main agents are a cyanobacteria and a black fungus. Symbiotically replenished, cannibalising their predecessors and reproducing in situ, these colonies of micro-organisms co-produce a process of permanent self-painting, by which the dating of these striking figures must be situated on a timeline warped between the deep past and a radical contemporaneity. Their authorship is halved between a primordial artistic intention, a technology of making pictures and an alignment of symbolic gestures that we can only speculate upon, and, on the other hand, a chemical or aesthetic metabolism by whose vigor the paintings continuously re-engage themselves. Complementarily, the cyanobacteria releases a weak acid in its photosynthesis, so that the figures maintain their contours by etching their ‘frames’ into the quartz wall onto which they are painted.

The Gwion Gwion intersect antonyms and collapse binaries, while their idiosyncratic temporality of form perturbs chronologies, the distinction between what these pictures are and what they mean. They invite a broad reconsideration of contamination: by conventional museological standards, the paintings would be considered infested – lost irredeemably, confabulated in art-historical lament and ekphrasis. Yet their contamination is identical to their purity and integrity. Lascaux – the ‘Fig. 1’ of Western European imagination, of art’s advent and the institution of its history – tells a different story of impurity and safeguarding. When visitors flocked to this cave to witness ‘the birth of art’, the encounter between the ‘bodies’ of paintings and those of visitors had an unforeseen consequence: in conjunction with changes in the climactic conditions that had sheltered the paintings, micro-organisms carried in the breath of visitors infected the works, which began to deteriorate. Sealed up in 1963 into a reverse image of Plato’s Cave, one where only the initiated are admitted, Lascaux II was copied into an artificial excavation, modelled with 500 tons of concrete and ornamented with reproductions of the original paintings. New micro-organisms brought to Lascaux II by new generations of visitors are beginning to have the same deleterious effect on the replica paintings, coated with the formlessness of algae and calcite that French archaeologists call ‘the green leprosy’. It is likely that Lascaux II will too close, which might lead to the creation of Lascaux III or to an exclusively digital existence for the paintings. The copied paintings, seen by more than originals sheltered from both lay sight and microbiological infestation, have infiltrated the normative sphere of heritage. Lascaux II was one of Baudrillard’s prime examples of the ecstatic life and bad eternity of simulacra, of duplications that render artificial both original and copy. With the relapse of ‘green leprosy’, Lascaux II would come to represent the hyperreal par excellence, a replica so convincing in its mimesis that it fulfils even the original’s conditions of destruction.

A metabolism where life is breathed into art and vice-versa, agent and object of a continuous curation – to which we are not indispensable – the Gwion Gwion are their own reproduction, in both senses of the word. To borrow once more from Celan's poem, they are 'inscrutable witness' to a different ecology of signification: they crystallise other rapports between origin, purity and genealogical 'descent', between sight, speech and touch. Their microbiological activity creates a conjunctive tissue, a vascularised copula, between terms and domains we tend to consider distinct, or on whose distinction the emergence of modernity relies. They are both distant past and contemporaneity; formless matter and the thought that wrests meaning from it; life and art; auctorial intention and environmental adaptation; consumption and excretion; painting and sculpture; cave and singular museum; advanced science and primitive ritual (the Aboriginals inhabiting the area say that a small bird attends to the paintings, repainting their fine lines with the blood that gushes from its beak). They set a stage where conventional contrasts enter collaborative relations, where oppositions and oxymorons animate new forms of sense-making.

A Breathcrystal looks at antonyms in symbiosis, at oxymorons as new forms of intelligibility, at semantic anamorphoses where opposed terms interlock, or denote one another. The works it brings together hybridise materials and perspectives, distances and regimes of representation, purity and residue: they place – to extend Alfred Russell Wallace's definition of dirt – matter, sounds and signs 'in the wrong place'. Air is pushed out of animal lungs by the weight of the plaster cast, so that the casts take on the appearance of wings in flight; a replica of a Greek statue is employed as chalk to mark a journey on foot from Amsterdam to Lascaux; the body of a filmmaker is a screen for the projection of a film, binding work, its maker and public in a singular mode of intimacy; the words of Antonin Artaud are heard within the mouth and chest, filtering enunciation and comprehension through the body; a surgical graft and an octopus mirror one another as entities both comprehensible and alien; two city plans that should have nothing in common, as they originate in different realms of the same national psyche, are superposed in a study of their unsettling ideological complicities; the 'emaciated bloatedness' of colonialism and capitalism are infected by the very ballast they sought to regulate and discard... These and other works in the exhibition and the accompanying film screening at the Irish Film Institute function as 'scenes of recomposition': recuperating or incorporating foreign bodies in the constitution of their wholeness, muddying or parasitising what had been a transparent geometry, working as material thresholds or allegorical passages between identities and what these identities need to exclude in order to maintain their confines. Order and disarray, the clean and the adulterated, the proper and improper signify one another, in fraught juxtaposition.