

NEVER-DYING WORM

An exhibition curated by Marina Roy, with artworks by Abbas Akhavan, Raymond Boisjoly, Barry Doupé, Derek Dunlop, Kelly Lycan, Natasha McHardy, Heather Passmore, Ryan Peter, Fan-Ling Suen

The title of this exhibition refers to a line in Mary Shelley's novel *Frankenstein*: "I felt the never-dying worm alive in my bosom." Guided by new scientific discoveries and an obsession with breathing life into inanimate matter, the young, ambitious Victor Frankenstein brings to life an autonomous creature, assembled from disparate body parts collected from charnel houses and dissecting tables. He is inspired by outdated scientific treatises and by such discoveries as galvanism, whereby an electrical current appeared to bring to life the muscles of dead frogs' legs. Similarly, Frankenstein electrifies cobbled together human body parts into undeadness: "I succeeded in discovering the cause of generation and life; nay, more, I became myself capable of bestowing animation upon lifeless matter." With the creature's shudder into existence, Frankenstein is horrified by what he sees (he had hoped for a beautiful being), and runs immediately from the room into the night. He avoids his apartment until late the next day, dreading an encounter with the hideous creature. He refuses to take responsibility for this seething unpredictable life form he has unleashed into the world, and thinks that running away from it will somehow solve the problem. Confused, afraid, and ostracized at every turn, the monster stumbles about the world and is confronted time and time again by a repulsed, cruel and uncomprehending populace. Nothing of its appearance had ever been seen in the world. It is nothing short of bare life.

Upon learning whom the heartless creator is the angry creature decides to take his revenge upon Frankenstein. When an innocent maid is blamed for his brother's death, Frankenstein knows it is the creature's doing, and yet he remains mute, keeping his guilt secret. It is with this first murder that he feels the never-dying worm squirm inside of him. Here the worm could signify any number of things. One possibility is an interruption in the flow of reality, a glimpse into the abyss of the Real,ⁱ which will forever haunt the protagonist. Or one might also imagine the worm being the monstrous homunculus of his imagination. The more he tries to forget his grotesque creation, the more the creature sticks to him like glue, killing every person he ever loved, an act of revenge for not taking responsibility for his own creation.

Shelley's *Frankenstein* is a cautionary tale not only for the time in which it was written, but especially for our own era. Humans have treated all territories and life forms as things to conquer, colonize, control, and reconfigure. So long as the consequences of these actions can be framed as 'progress,' or remain invisible or conveniently ignored, then the humans can go on living (the privileged harbouring a tacit faith in capitalist pursuits of technological 'progress'). So long as surplus wealth can be produced under the illusion of enlightenment, then humans can forget the consequences of absurd and destructive actions. So long as new life forms created by the biotech industry can be pitched as furthering the interests of human life for the immediate future, then there is no need to question any ulterior motives or long-term repercussions. Perhaps the worm is something that precedes consciousness, or even creation, a genetic or mythic violence that is passed on from generation to generation. Or maybe the worm is the product of repression, the result of some law-preserving violence one conforms to.ⁱⁱ What happens when, when one least expects it, the worm is seen finally rearing its head? What does one see, and more importantly, what does one feel?

This exhibition was initially conceived as an exploration of unconscious materialism or a material unconscious. How do materials and objects within artworks convey something about what is repressed in the unconscious (subjective or collective), or how might materials or objects speak to the trauma or desire constitutive of subjectivity? However, as I re-familiarized myself with these artists' works, I found this concept of unconscious materialism wanting. How to convey something deeper still that relates to the crisis, not only in art or of the subject, but also in the world at large. This crisis relates to our relationship with materials, and how new affective relationships to matter can instigate unprecedented futurities. In focusing on abstract notions of progress and accumulation of wealth, we have neglected the rest of the world around us. Contrary to the belief we have inherited from centuries of philosophical and scientific discourse – that matter is inert, and that the best response to understanding matter is to unlock its secrets and mould it into ever-new useful configurations – matter exists as a heterogeneous, composite entity, vibrating with potential, deeply affecting our minds and bodies in unforeseeable ways. The same can be said of works of art. We tend to think that the artist controls materials in order to make artworks say something, but in actuality the materials speak to the artist (who responds to them rather unconsciously), and the finished artwork definitely has more effect on the human agent (viewer or artist) than the human agent has on it.

Jimmie Durham has pointed out that it is more productive to “make the object talk, on its own, with me, and with the audience.”ⁱⁱⁱ I would go even further and say that the object itself says plenty that the artist was never even conscious of. On the one hand materials have a life integral to human development. Buried in materials and objects is a memory of how human subjectivity has been shaped in myriad ways. On the other hand, materials have their own histories, and their own forms of expression. There is material intelligence in the world, and it is not necessarily dependent on humans for its existence (as if it were contingent on humans to unlock matter’s untapped potential). The idea of matter being inert dead stuff to be manipulated and made useful to humans has dominated thinking for centuries. Such thinkers as Freud and Bataille have postulated that, long ago, starting at some unknown moment in the Paleolithic period, perhaps even before tools and artistic expression were conceived of, matter was understood as animate, possessing power outside of human agency. And now that we have arrived at a turning point in biological evolution, this great biopolitical paradigm shift instigated by human greed, fear, and curiosity, it seems exceedingly urgent that non-human agency be brought back into the picture. This exhibition approaches materials and objects with this non-human agency in mind: a desire to open human thinking radically toward the vitality of all matter, which could serve as grounds for a new political ecology.^{iv}

There is a tendency to think that human culture has made everything into second nature, and that nature has very little effect on us anymore. But things do have an effect on us. Think of the weather and shifting tectonic plates as examples of nature’s effect on human development and history. Think of the microorganisms that outnumber our human body cells. Each of us is a walking ecosystem, one-tenth human cells and nine-tenths other microorganisms. Alien life forms have colonized us, unbeknownst to us, and we could not live without them. Worms are a case in point. Jane Bennett writes: “the human immune system depends on parasitic helminth worms for its proper functioning.”^v Elsewhere in her book, she explains Darwin’s discovery of the earthworm’s integral role in the health of the planet; it is not a mere biological automaton, but an intentional being, essential to human survival. Healthy soil is ensured through its being processed through the worm’s digestive tract. Bennett goes on to say that worms “make history by preserving the artifacts that humans make: worms protect for an indefinitely long period every object ... which is dropped on the surface of the land, by burying it beneath their castings, a service for which archaeologists ought to be grateful to worms.”^{vi} There are of course instances where worms can be nuisances. I remember one of my first medieval literature classes. The professor had brought in an old medieval codex, painstakingly handwritten by monks, in which whole lines of writing had disappeared. Parasitic worms had eaten laterally through a line of text, leaving behind gaping fissures (the pages were made of goat skin which attracted parasites).

To most the worm is an abject thing. Compared to us, it is a primal life form, its mouth and anus barely distinguishable from one another. It is ugly and burrows tenaciously yet pathetically in the dirt. It is filthy, leaving behind a mucous trail. It feeds off decaying matter such as corpses. Yet Nietzsche writes: “You have evolved from worm to man, but much within you is still worm.” The worm is abject perhaps because we know this somehow. The idea of a never-dying worm is perhaps related to this consciousness of our proximity to the worm, to the creature. But as conscious beings we have sublimated this reality out of mind. Sublimation, or the process of idealization or repression of instincts and drives, could be understood as the process that reifies everything under the logic of instrumental reason. The same happens with matter. Matter is transformed specifically for human use. To desubliminate matter would entail seeing the world as an assemblage of vibrant matter-energy and giving agency back to non-human actants.

The artworks within this exhibition reveal the multiple forces at work on matter (violence) and within matter (as vibrant potential). Through conscious and unconscious manipulation of objects, images and materials, the artists reveal these forces at work: multiple forms of material intelligence bloom from strategies of defamiliarization and desublimation in an attempt to represent what is unrepresentable, or beyond the pale. The material turn in art speaks to this new consciousness of the power of things to not only affect us, but to strike back against the impulse toward crass exploitation.

ⁱ The Real is that which is outside language, resisting symbolization. It is that which is impossible to imagine and integrate into the Symbolic. Frankenstein's creature is shunned from society but is still part of the symbolic realm, in that it was imagined and created by human ingenuity. The "worm" inside Frankenstein approaches the Real however, in that it could signify that which outlasts all humans, and yet haunts us from birth: e.g., the brute material creatureliness of our being amidst the sense of a void which precedes symbolization and the ordering of perception. The worm here could also relate to Frankenstein's guilt, which points to the type of greed and irresponsibility that haunts our present biopolitical era: the shirking of responsibility vis-à-vis the new material life forms being unleashed upon the earth, regardless of the consequences. The worm is also related to the Real in that we have difficulty facing up to the notion of death. Not only does Frankenstein's creation point to the greed of scientific breakthroughs and their attendant fame, but in many ways points to the human desire to defy death.

ⁱⁱ These two notions of mythic and law-preserving violence are central to Walter Benjamin's essay "Critique of Violence", Reflections, NY: Schocken Books, 1978.

ⁱⁱⁱ Jimmie Durham interview with Miwon Kwon, Annette Michelson, Michael Taussig, Jimmie Durham, Phaidon, 1995, p. 119.

^{iv} Jane Bennett, Vibrant Matter: a political ecology of things, Durham: Duke University Press, 2010.

^v Ibid., p. 120.

^{vi} Ibid., p. 96.

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