

Which Witch is Which? and/or Summertime

November 6 – December 18, 2010

www.whiteflagprojects.org

What is magic? And / or DST: There is a theory and cruel (10 translations)¹

By Ajay Kurian

I. Black Boxes

In 2009 there was a total of 10,010,861 flights around the world. The year prior, 10,713,099. Regardless of news reports, the number of flights has increased by at least one million since 2001. In other words, flying has remained one of the most common forms of travel and has been for several decades. We teach our children that flight is a commonplace form of transport, another way for people to move from place to place: we walk, we bike, we drive, we take trains, and we take planes.

Most of us, however, don't understand precisely how a plane or a jet works. We normally don't take the time to comprehend or remember the history of flight, and how for several millennia flying was only a distant dream. From Daedalus to Da Vinci, flight occupied the hearts and minds of man, finally seeing its culminating success in the Wright Brothers. The machines that now dominate the airways, however, bear only the slightest resemblance to the Wright brother's initial breakthrough, further lengthening the receipt that accounts for the present day version of Boeing's newest model. To protect ourselves from the world's overwhelming infinity, we inevitably simplify its objects, participating with them without understanding every loaded part that maintains them. Simply put, we take them for granted.

Bruno Latour has called this process of simplification a "black box," borrowing it from the language of cyberneticians. Things are not unified materials or essences, they are created through a variety of interactions and alliances that happen with varying difficulty. Latour's black box shrouds this complexity to create an understandable and unified whole, but can only persist if there aren't any hiccups or malfunctions. Once the black box is opened, disturbed, or disrupted, we see the other materials that were previously hidden. The black box's formation, like its dissolution, usually takes some time.

Latour uses the history of DNA to define the creation of a black box. Though we now address DNA as a double-helix, for years this was a controversial topic among the scientific elite. They furiously debated its structure until slowly the dispute settled into the agreed upon fact that it was, indeed, a double helix. Latour tracks this development to point out that even the most basic and guaranteed truths had to fight for their place, eventually finding enough allies to weather the most formidable dissenters. In this case the shouts of protest have more or less come to an end, but Latour's reality can never be fully stabilized. There is always the threat of any black box being opened once more. With the help of Latour and Graham Harman, Latour's loudest ally and critic, we will see that the most interesting and confounding results are not the governing structures of the real, but what can emerge from them and how they can alter our age-old distinctions. Finding what crawls from these disturbed black boxes will be our final goal, but for now let us content ourselves with keeping a watchful eye on the looming figures emerging. We must be patient, as we walk down this strange and unlit space, awaiting the turn of every switch and trusting that there is indeed a guide.

¹ The title of this essay began as "Which Witch is Which? and/or Summertime: A Theory of Monsters." I thought it appropriate, however, to funnel this title through the website called *Bad Translator!*, which takes whatever you type in and translates it any specified number of times, sloughing off bits of the original title as each translation changed the input slightly. Thus, after 10 translations, we have the present title.

II. Democracy of Objects

A black box disintegrates once dissension has found an army great enough to overtake the previous concept's forces. We can think of the strange hold that antioxidants have had upon 21st century domestics and science. It is only within the last several years that we've reconsidered this black box of functionality. Antioxidants, in many cases, have been proven to be completely ineffectual, not helping or hindering the body, but certainly not the wonder-molecule that they had been made out to be for so long. Because of the authority that certain industries tend to have, pharmaceuticals being an obvious example, certain ideas can go unchallenged. It is only until we disturb these authoritative black boxes that we see whether they hold up or not. Such an example as antioxidants also highlights that there are multiple non-human actors involved in shifting paradigms. Though corporations, industries, and humans are involved, we cannot forget that Latour's democracy of objects does not discriminate between sentient and non-sentient beings. Antioxidants can create a new politics just as much as a Senator from California. Latour makes the express claim that any privileging of one matter over another is simply a dogmatic adherence to a priori principles. He would instead argue for a complete liberation of matter. The machinery of the airplane is no less real than the ideas we have about planes, which are no less real than the ideas that tigers have about planes, which are no less real than the minerals that are eventually purified to become the metals used to make the plane. What differs is their strength.

Artists have had access to this ontological democracy for decades now. Robert Smithson's sculptural concerns attempted to foreground a prehistoric sense of time - perhaps most famously displayed in *Spiral Jetty* - a time not necessarily given for humanity, but perhaps one beside it. By wedding his practice to entropic movement, growth, and desires, Smithson found new spaces for a democratized poetics of objects in the widest sense (including what might even be a dematerializing object).

On the other side of the spectrum sits Liam Gillick, affording art a wider net for a kind of production that began with 1960s Conceptualism and its taste for language. Gillick discusses what he calls the "discursive" in a variety of different forms, debatably to the point where we might detect its stretch marks, but for our purposes his sharpest point remains that:

[S]tatements are also events. Statements depend on the conditions from which they emerge, and begin their existence within a field of discourse. Statements as events are important within the discursive—they provide a "location" from which to propose a physical potential beyond the immediate art context. Putting a statement into play will create an event 'at some point'—or a series of events projected into the near future to recuperate the recent past.

Gillick's position on textual work is particularly illuminating because it allows one to understand his egalitarianism towards artistic production. Alongside this textual practice, he creates sculptural scenarios, videos, books, music, he curates exhibitions, and more. His practice is not limited or limiting. At once, the truly parasitical nature of the artist comes to the fore - an artist has the license to do what he or she wants, as long as the necessary work is done to carve the channels from project or profession to an artistic practice. This is more difficult than it seems and cannot be taken lightly. The work required is sometimes so great that territories remain out of reach forever, or seemingly so. Saying that these connective possibilities exist does not advocate artistic irresponsibility, but highlights that art has expanded its scope and possibility with every generation. Gillick's practice remains a touchpoint for this expanded mode of thinking.

In his wake are the questions of what constitutes an artist's practice, but perhaps more interesting is what constitutes the other players in the artistic field. What is the role of the critic, the curator, the writer, the thinker, the director? How are they different and/or how are they not? Rather than the artist tunneling into the preserve of these individual professions, what is stopping the curator or the critic from preemptively digging towards the artist? We have seen glimpses of this before, but not without a lifted eyebrow. This kind of derision, however, seems only to hinder creativity and artistic production. What if we were to respond differently? Jeopardizing the place of artistic practice will not collapse the idea of the artist altogether, but will perhaps radically change the way we think of art-making, creating new problems and arenas of interest for people to pursue even further.

Most importantly, we must regard the great sweep of creation, process, and address that artists have utilized. They have proposed not only objects past the human, but also insisted on the objecthood of statements themselves, that the text or the idea is an object with a reality ontologically the same as that of even a crystal. Philosophers, though occasionally welcome bedfellows to artists, arrived quite late to this understanding.

III. Models of Reality

For much too long, philosophy treaded the water in the gap between humanity and the world. Most post-Kantian philosophers, with a few impressive exceptions, have endeavored to say that our understanding of the world is as it is *for us*. In other words, the world is dependent upon humans, and humans are dependent on the world. Quentin Meillassoux has termed this reciprocal relation as “correlationism.” Thus, even when we consider the beginning of time, or the cooling of the Earth, the correlationist would take the position that we cognize that moment in time as it is for us in the present. Meillassoux’s controversial but fascinating project is to find a way around this correlationist step.

Latour, on the other hand, takes a different route by simply disregarding the divide between human and world and thus makes what we might consider an artistic step forward. Graham Harman, who has made an extraordinary case for Latour’s position as one of the great metaphysicians of our time, flatly states that “Latour’s *first step* in philosophy is to dismiss the very two terms that the correlationist wants to combine. Latour no more defends a human/world correlate than a solid/liquid correlate or a primal rapport of beasts and birds.”² Reality for the correlationist is one that relies on the model of the degraded copy, the distorted mirror. Outside us is the world, and it is through our limited senses that we apprehend and warp it. Only through self-conscious rationality are we able to make a clearer picture of the *true*, or more precisely, as the world is *for us*. This theory of reality can be labeled as one of correspondence, where the real is hiding behind the veil that we must continue, with some vanity, to pull away. Latour’s theory of reality, on the other hand, insists that:

There is never an immediate visibility of the fact, but only a series of mediations, each of them translating a more complicated reality into something whose forces can more easily be passed down the line. Though a skeptic might claim that these mediators are mere utensils that can be tossed aside at the end, there is no such thing as transport without transformation. Truth is *nothing but* a chain of translation without resemblance from one actor to the next. To focus only on the end-points is to distort the meaning of truth.

This translational model of truth and reality will be familiar to artists that grew up after the Pictures Generation. With their slick appropriations, re-printings, re-dos, and copies, there has been a greater awareness that our world is not one in which we asymptotically approach the real, but one where we circulate among contingent realities, where we trade images, reinforce pictures, and address not the confusion of the real with the simulated, but redefine them. One is only different than the other with respect to how it allies itself in the world. This poses an interesting thought experiment: When a fiction is able to live past its given script, how can we continue to bar it from becoming real?

IV. Reena and the Rhinoceros

In 2004, Reena Spaulings Fine Art opened in New York. The name was created by two artists, John Kelsey and Emily Sunblad. Though initially quite fragile, Reena Spaulings eventually asserted itself in the New York art world, and was even able to become an artist in her own right. Soon, this new figure named Reena Spaulings was landing solo shows with other established galleries, and finding herself in quite a venerable situation. Within just a few years, her life became so notable that the artist collective, the Bernadette Corporation, used her name to title their *own* novel. Reena’s life was becoming less of a mechanism controlled by two artists and more of a separate entity. This newfound glimmer of autonomy complicates our initial tendencies to evict the fictional from the real. With acclaimed solo shows, work in several collections, Reena’s autonomy grows as rapidly as her relations. To ask which is which, or to simply say that one is reality and the other is fiction is to miss the point. She has become a black box, but this does not mean that her identity or reality cannot be contested - that the black box will remain unperturbed. A future artist may successfully revolt against the ease in which we accept Reena Spaulings as an artist, as a character, an entity to take seriously.

In an essay on visual culture and the printing press, Latour explains that facts change not because of error being so easily corrected, but that “[t]he accuracy of the medium reveals more and more inaccuracies in the

² Graham Harman, *Prince of Networks: Bruno Latour and Metaphysics* (Melbourne: re.press, 2009), 124.

message, which is soon jeopardized.”³ When Latour speaks of inaccuracy, it amounts to an object losing its tenacity in the world; however, before falling into isolation, an object can find other ways of existing, creating an alternative form of resilience, and reforming its previous reality for another.

Let us recall Dürer’s magnificent rhinoceros. As the story goes, Dürer never actually saw the animal. The rhino was to be a gift for Pope Leo X from the King of Portugal, Manuel I. Unfortunately, for the rhino, the ship was lost at sea and the animal never made it to the Pope. This lost gift catalyzed a series of alternative exchanges that would forever change the image of the rhinoceros and the power of the imagination. Dürer, without one referent, simply relied on another: the sketch and story of an artist who *had* seen a rhino. Dürer’s iconic image of the rhinoceros, printed and circulated for over 300 years, was born out of a series of convoluted but important translations to become what we know it as today. Despite obvious mistakes in physiognomy, Dürer’s rhino achieved a gravity that images could previously not achieve thanks to the new mobility created by the printing press. The local story or wonder could now be illustrated and seen by people far and wide, giving more strength to the witness and the circulated image. The printed rhino’s cosmetics did not change overnight, but little by little other images of rhinos became more popular for their more mimetic translation of a rhino’s appearance. Despite the fact that Dürer’s image slipped into the waste bin of discarded myths, it nevertheless maintained its power as a highly original and influential work of art with an illustrious reality and history. Images require continued affirmation to maintain their circulation in the world. Without our implicit nod, the black box of any image is disturbed, and we begin to think that the image could be different, more “correct.” The image then drops into smaller arenas of circulation, and in rare cases, disappears without a trace. Most often, the reality of the image is maintained through more minor circulation patterns, just as Dürer’s rhino has been in the annals of Art History. Therefore, when we describe the difference between reality and fantasy or fiction, one can think of it as a difference in circulation, not a difference in kind. In a lengthier passage, Latour describes shifts of content and corrected errors.

[T]he old texts are spread everywhere and can be gathered more cheaply in one place. But then the contradiction between them at last becomes *visible* in the most literal sense. The many places where these texts are synoptically assembled offer many counterexamples [...]. These counterexamples can be added to the old texts and, in turn, are spread without modification to all the other settings where this process of comparison may be resumed. In other words, errors are accurately reproduced and spread with no changes. But corrections are also reproduced fast, cheaply and with no further changes. So, at the end, the accuracy *shifts from the medium to the message*, from the printed book to the context with which it establishes a two-way connection. A new interest in “Truth” does not come from a new vision, but from the same old vision applying itself to new visible objects that mobilize space and time differently.

Erin Shirreff’s photographs and videos lasso the accuracy of medium and message into one project. By highlighting the given indices of the book format, Shirreff has made a fruitful practice of endeavoring to show how the book itself is not a neutral translation of an image - it creates an experience all its own. Her video, *Ansel Adams*, is a series of hundreds of photos of an Anselm Adams photograph, but rather than simply re-photographing the work (a la Richard Prince or Sherrie Levine), Shirreff addresses the transformation of the image through its new format as a book. The image becomes bound by the restraining shadows and glares of the book’s natural bend. When all the photos are sequenced together, they form a near seamless atmosphere where the lights and darks of the book’s curved page now register as shifts from day to night, changing the image into cinema. Barnett Newman “remarked that the history of modern art is a ‘struggle against the catalogue.’⁴ It appears that the struggle has ended. The book is not an error, nor is it a degradation of the artwork it attempts to illustrate. It is simply different. “No transport from one point to another without transformation.” This world of translation does not allow for any abstracted or separated truth. Shirreff’s works maintain that what we consider the artwork and what we consider its mediated experience are not completely different. The experience is not the same, of course, but both are already part of a series of translations. Susan Sontag brilliantly describes it:

The powers of photography have in effect de-Platonized our understanding of reality, making it less and less plausible to reflect upon our experience according to the distinction between images and things, between copies and originals. It suited Plato’s derogatory attitude toward images to liken them to shadows - transitory,

³ Bruno Latour, “Visualization and Cognition: Thinking with Eyes and Hands” *Knowledge and Society Studies in the Sociology of Culture Past and Present* (Jai Press vol. , 1986) 11.

⁴ Peter Schjeldahl, “The Art World: Big Bang,” *The New Yorker* October 18, 2010: 94

minimally informative, immaterial, impotent co-presences of the real things which cast them. But the force of photographic images comes from their being material realities in their own right, richly informative deposits left in the wake of whatever emitted them, potent means for turning the tables on reality - for turning *it* into a shadow. Images are more real than anyone could have supposed.⁵

We can no longer insist on the clear lines between what we might consider reality and what might be fiction. When given time to interrogate the world, we should do so by using a kind of blind empiricism - feeling for what we can without preconception or dogma. This strategy is akin to those in the highest level of theoretical physics, allowing them to compile the strangest of possible worlds filled with strings, holograms, and extra dimensions, but it is also quite apparent that this model appeals to artists as well. The practice of art is a form of inquisitive disruption, where the world's black boxes are constantly pried open.

V. Monsters (yes, Monsters)

This blind empiricism sometimes leads to the strangest of creations, unforeseen thingamajigs, awe-inspiring sights, gruesome, even horrifying beasts, and a world of concepts and ideas that are Frankensteins of thought. We can now turn our eyes and minds towards those previously mentioned edges of Latour's black boxes. Once we disturb these forgotten clumps of reality, we see that each is filled with its own creatures, its own beasts and demons. Some may evaporate immediately, unable to survive without finding relevant allies, but others will become legion, and destroy the prison that held them, organizing into what will eventually stabilize once more into yet another black box. When we reorganize a reality previously thought sound, the results are monstrous. If we are able to link the most aberrant of concepts to one another through the necessary work, then we become monster-makers, taking strange pieces and bits, some more appealing than others, and create something entirely new, something that is monstrous in its newness. Latour's realism is a philosophy of monsters.

The etymology of "monster" is long contested. Though we normally follow Cicero's directions towards *monstro* - meaning "to show" - we can take an alternative route that his contemporary Varro gave towards *monere*, meaning "to warn." This warning is another way of engaging in the blind empiricism that artists and thinkers have fought towards by suggesting that the world and its parts give us reason to be warned, to be every so slightly afraid or suspicious.

Objects of all kinds - and this is Latour's shortcoming - are always more than their relations; their potential monstrosity lies in this very fact. No matter how much we may exhaust an object, whether it be tangible, conceptual, textual, or otherwise, it always has more that is, as Harman would say, withdrawn. This withdrawal is where the monstrous may hide and dwell.⁶ Such a perspective is a way of giving reality its fangs back, or a way to become child-like once more and address the world as if it held all those strange terrors and dark corners. Many of us once feared the dark and what lurked there, thinking that every creak and squeak was some *thing* that gingerly anticipated our slumber. Of course now we know better, but the things that frighten people as adults are different: stem cells, thinking machines, the Islamic invasion. Tragically, these fears are frequently addressed in ways just as thoughtlessly as a child's. Nevertheless, by acknowledging the world filled with monsters, we can then take up the ethical task of deciding which ones deserve our fear and disdain and ought to be vanquished and which we should encourage or promote.

To diminish the pejorative effect of the word monster, it's worthwhile to track its history with wonders and prodigies. This confusion between wonders and monsters is largely due to the slippage between the meanings of wonder and fear. Throughout the Middle Ages, there was a distinct effort to excise wonder and the marginal from thought and inquiry. This was primarily because wonder was seen as a human defect that would halt inquiry rather than goad it onwards, and therefore should not taint the philosophic mind. According to many Medieval philosophers, philosophy's role was towards addressing the universal, not the particular. The marginal, where nature might be seen to have fouled up, should not be of any marked concern. If anything, this perspective only reinforced that fear would then be associated with wonder. The Christian writer John Damascene of the 8th century, created his own "typology of fear" that could be broken down into six categories, including "wonder, amazement, and

⁵ Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York: Picador, 2001) 179.

⁶ Harman, Graham. "The Horror of Phenomenology," *Collapse IV: Concept Horror*, ed. Robin Mackay (May 2008) I'm heavily indebted to Graham Harman's thought and his wonderful elaboration on "weird realism." His writings have been nothing short of inspirational and on more than one occasion were foundational.

‘agony’ or shocked surprise.”⁷ Later, in the 13th century, the German writer Albertus Magnus continued this line of thought connecting wonder with the unfamiliar and resolving that “the heart flees the unfamiliar as it flees the bad and the harmful.”⁸

The history of monsters cannot be seen as linear or particularly clean. Its sinews were various and each held sway differently among different groups and locations. The secular understanding of monsters has as long a history as its religiously tinged counterpart. Augustine, perhaps most interestingly, creates a democracy of monsters by clarifying that it is all within God’s power and marvelous will to create what he does. In the end, “Augustine’s entire treatment of wonders [...] culminated in the argument that there was no inherent way to distinguish between apparently commonplace and apparently marvelous phenomena, since all depended directly on divine will.”⁹ Here we have one of the first mentions of monsters as the umbrella for all other such wonders.

“So, just as it was not impossible for God to set in being natures according to his will, so it is afterwards not impossible for him to change those natures which he has set in being, in whatever way he chooses. Hence the enormous crop of marvels, which we call ‘monsters,’ ‘signs,’ ‘portents,’ or ‘prodigies,’; if I chose to recall them all, would there ever be an end to this work?”¹⁰

Suffice to say that the history of the monster - its usage and its origins - cannot be flattened into a simple “othering” and making it nothing more than our enemy. The monster held many places in early to late Medieval culture and continued into the Renaissance. We can recall a number of moments (our present one included) where the monster is precisely this “othering” term that easily villainizes another culture or people. However, as the subject’s understanding of the “monster” grows, more links and possibilities surface (perhaps economic links being the most important), while disgust or hatred recede. The monstrous other, through various means, becomes an ally. What we can gather from this is that the word monster might initially foster profound hostility unless we realize that we ourselves are monstrous, that we are containers of monsters just as much as anyone or anything else. Freud has taught us as much, but so have many others. Today we can even hear it on the radio:

Sasquatch, Godzilla, King Kong
Lochness, Goblin, Ghoul, a zombie with no conscience
Question what do all these things have in common
Everybody knows I’m a muthafucking monster

Jay-Z bellows from a recent track title *Monster* by Kanye West. West, Jay-Z, and Nicki Minaj, give us a song with trembling, grotesque energy that is bent on convincing us that each of them, in their own right, is a muthafucking monster, primarily because of their inhuman ability to rhyme and metaphorically rip their opponents apart. The song’s success, however, hinges on the listener’s ability to feel like a monster *with* them. If the song is too “other”, too outside the realm of the listener, then it simply falls on dead ears without the necessary symbiosis to drive a track to platinum status. It’s through the rappers’ identification with the monstrous that the public at large is able to understand what it can mean to inhabit that role, a *becoming-monster*, as Deleuze might say.

Lil Wayne, similar to Kanye’s anthem, calls himself an alien. His most recent album is fittingly titled *I Am Not a Human Being*. Yet even before this latest pronouncement, we find Wayne taking the extra-terrestrial as his home in his track, *Phone Home*. With a piano refrain reminiscent of *The Twilight Zone*, Wayne crackles in, “We are not the same, I am a martian...”. His voice, his rhymes, and his demeanor are indeed strange enough that people have begun to wonder about his status as an Earthling, but without our understanding or ability to lyrically and musically follow Wayne, there’s isn’t any way for him to be “the greatest rapper alive.”

Contemporary hip hop has constantly given metaphorical license for people to become more than just human. Its lyrical violence, when done well, creates a space for the listener to rearrange or destroy our meager understanding of the human for something that is indeed much larger, stranger, and stronger. And as Nicki Minaj closes out the track, she clarifies the appeal: “Now look at what you just saw/This is what you live for!...” We are in awe of these performers, and despite our deepest curiosity and inquiry, they remain puzzling, withdrawn. The monstrosity of rap is only one way for us to realize our own. Along with artists, sociologists, anthropologists, and

⁷ Lorraine Daston and Katharine Park, *Wonders and the Order of Nature: 1450-1750* (New York: Zone Books, 1998), 113.

⁸ *ibid*

⁹ *ibid*, 40.

¹⁰ *ibid*

scientists constantly draw lines from the human to different creatures and things, reorganizing any comfortable taxonomies of the world we might have. We must look at all regions of thought to discern our place and others.

Augustine's embrace of the world as wondrous or monstrous is precisely where we ought to begin, not necessarily out of religious fervor for the wonder of God's creation and perfection, but because this wonder addresses reality more poignantly. We are not necessarily in control of our reality, of what we apprehend. We are not simply the site of our five senses capturing the world and taming it. The world will remain resolutely wild, and it is therefore our concern to brave it, understanding that we must not be fearful in the face of horror, nor simply transfixed in the face of wonder.

In constantly reformulating the world - how we see it, how we exist within it - artists have remained a threatening force. Though, in an era when the world is so monstrous without our even pointing it out, the monsters that are perhaps more interesting or unsettling to point out are the ones that take more time to uncover; the black boxes that are most difficult to pry open tend to have the strangest materials inside. They are the most familiar, and therefore when we see them come undone, it may not be frightening per se, but it is uncanny.

VI. Recursiveness: the Quiet Monster

The South African novelist J. M. Coetzee has made a career of creating minor but fascinating complications to disrepute the separation between truth and fiction. His books, particularly his most recent, including *Diary of a Bad Year* and *Summertime*, appropriate several literary forms that, by definition, pride themselves on their more immediate truth telling. In Coetzee's hands, the forms of the journal entry, the confession, the essay, and the interview, become the sites of fiction, thereby directing our attention to their suspended truth value. Compounding this, Coetzee often uses his own biographical information for his main characters, so much so that we can never tell whether the character is a surrogate, a fiction, a combination, or something completely dishonest. Coetzee has fashioned a network of truths, some of which can be substantiated outside the book while others remain interior. This combination of reality and fiction has been the unspoken given of all novelistic literature, but Coetzee's distinction is his ability to create a wonderfully compelling *recursive* novel, one that is not so bent on tricks and literary mobius strips, but that nevertheless handily dismantles an easy understanding of how we can commit to a truth. His project has inspired a slew of interesting moral questions regarding the ethics of such works and the place of the author. This new regard for the authorial position is interesting after much certainty over its disappearance. A better way to formulate the state of the author is through works like Coetzee's. Recursion in literature and the visual arts invigorates new places that the author can hold - none so stale as an attempt to regain an old throne, but one that treats the author as yet another moving part in a larger discursive field. Though not monstrous in any conventional sense, this recursive move forces us to unclench our grip on the real, and defining what it might be beforehand, therefore allowing for surprises and spaces of undecidability - perhaps more accurately depicting a world that has more in common with probability and randomness than with accuracy and quantifiability.

Leigh Ledare's photographic projects deftly navigate this territory through both images and text that incorporate both him and his mother. Ledare provides meandering pathways to the various subject positions one can hold looking at his code-breaking photographs. In a past press release, Ledare described how this body of work began:

I decided one Christmas to make a visit home after not seeing my mother for 18 months. After arranging to meet at her apartment at a specific time I knocked on the door. A few minutes later the door opened and she was standing there naked, smiling at me with her hands on her hips. She asked me to follow her to her room while she got dressed. As we moved down the hallway to her room she began speaking to someone. On her bed, a young man, almost exactly my age, was sprawled out naked. He rolled over to see me, saying hello, before rolling back over on his side and returning to sleep. I saw this as her way of announcing to me what she was up to at this period in her life, almost as though to say take it or leave it.

One cannot read this as a simple admission of fact, though we would like to. In fact, when telling me about his work, Leigh told the same story. It's not that I believe Leigh to be a liar, only that I think what happened to create this body of work has traveled so much and been so many different places that the stories Leigh tells must only be one part of the larger narrative that these photos strategically document. The work's complexity depends upon the roads both in and out of the photos, ending up as a monstrous display of photos across one wall, each creating

pathways to the other in variously clear and oblique ways. Redressing the site of the maternal with unnerving sexuality marks only the beginning of an engagement with Ledare's project. It is not reducible to its taboo, nor does it function despite it. Ledare's emotional and psychological cartography is one bent on redrawing much of the map, while still relying on previous marks and indices of erasure. Speaking of each photo as a new location, if we are to walk from one to another, looking back is already enough to change the previous location - it is a map that is dependent upon those who walk within it.

Ledare is an example of a fruitful recursiveness, where the potential closure of a system is nothing if not the impetus for a strange and radical openness. The possibility of art turning in on itself can lead to rather banal pictures and work, but this is only when the work limits the conversation to *just* itself, a system that attracts only the smallest audience. Ledare demonstrates the positivity and possibility in the recursive and perhaps revels in the gaps in communication that keep the story not necessarily incomplete, but tailored; not static, but circulating.

We mustn't mistake these gaps as a failure to communicate precisely - communication is based on multiple parameters where even a space is content, since the hole in a larger fabric still determines how we see it. Likewise, context cannot be separated from differentiating the smaller and subtler threads of meaning. It is a hendiadys of the macro and the micro.

VII. The Truth of the Relative

The artwork as a discrete object has been reconstituted by practitioners of the last 30 years, from Allan Kaprow's Happenings to Tino Seghal's dance choreographies, to Liam Gillick's writing - works that maintain some sense of boundaries while discarding traditionally tangible materials. These artists make it clear that content is determined by a wider net, and objects are more than just things we can touch. This should alter our approach to an artwork that *is* a tangible object. Thanks to these immaterial gestures, we realize that it, too, has its performance within a context and a place and time that perpetually inaugurate its particular sense. What determines meaning at one point may give way to another depending on location and time. But rather than handing meaning over to pure relativity and play, it is important to remember that this is "not a relativity of truth, but, on the contrary, a truth of the relative."¹¹ This relative truth is built not simply by what we wish to designate the world, a failed and feeble anthropocentrism, but by all actors or objects of the world. Meaning is constructed by our place, but also by oil's, by vegetation, by computer chips, but sun storms, and floods; by ideas and politics, speeches and screams, color and form. We are not the arbiters of sense, but experimenters within the experiment, translating our findings just as much as any other actor. It is when we begin to understand the other translations of the world that we get a better picture of it, not because it is inherently more truthful, but because we see more connections that create a stronger truth. So when we see that antioxidants don't fight cancer on a cellular or molecular level as we once believed, we realize that this particular object is addressing the world differently than we once thought. But, using antioxidants as an example foregrounds the contentious nature of my statement. Several studies say precisely the opposite of what I'm taking for granted, and would have the data to apparently prove me wrong. These are the battles that need to be waged for a truth of the relative to come into being. It is not based on what we want, though it may begin that way, but it is only through work and wars that certain black boxes finally come into being, such as DNA being a double-helix.

The monstrosity of the world rests in our power to contest truth at any given time, to reformulate the old or challenge it. It is what drives our greatest efforts in human rights, art, philosophy, and science. We are able to create ourselves anew over and over, to embrace our chimerical being. To face such unknown vistas takes bravery, but one that knows its limits and values its moderation. As Copernicus radically changed our place in the world, so, too, does Craig Venter today. Mapping the genome and beginning to take on the challenges of cloning man or creating synthetic life is probably frightening to the majority of society, but now that the possibility exists, we must endure these new conceptual difficulties and see how our map has been redrawn, to rethink ethics and our place amidst other living things. Rather than playing out a politics of binaries, offering the worst of what debate has to offer, a more interesting and obvious position would be to locate ourselves in a series of interconnected networks of ideas and information, where the possibility of even the slightest connection between opponents might bring upon a more engaged and useful conversation. Though we cannot attest to any anodized certainty, we can address the world differently, so that we are not its only actors, and where the monstrous can steel us towards perpetuating the dissolution and inevitable creation of black boxes, and a more creative and courageous life. ■

¹¹ Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *What Is Philosophy?* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996) 130.