

Encounters with Elemental Abjections, & Performing them

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It all started because of a group of hairy cows, officially known as Scottish Highlander, I used to bump into on my way to work at the fulfilment center at the port of Rotterdam, during the covid-19 lockdowns. This was my selected elemental encounter. My encounter has been reported through two different media: a compilation of six micro-stories, and a performance of those stories.¹

Here is the link to the tales (also attached in separated pdf)

[-The Robotic Hairy Cow: A series of highly sensorial encounters](#)

¹ The performance and tales are part of my long-term research project: Fulfilment Center Innocence: Intimate Tales of Cybernetic Labor and Racial Desire at the Port of Rotterdam. The performance was part of the Difficult Heritage Public program, presented on May 23th, 2022, at the Royal Institute of Art in Stockholm, which was part of the postmaster course Decolonizing Architecture.

The performance is set as an imaginary dialogue between a Mexican ex-warehouse worker which has recently been turned into a hairy cow and her Zionist ex-lover. The performance reenacts an imaginary encounter between both lovers years after their romance had ended. After a passionate night they discussed the reasons that led to their separation, namely: his extreme conservative and basically white supremacist ideology. During the conversation she recalls that just after their affair ended she became an 'essential worker', at a fulfillment in the Port of Rotterdam. Later on in the conversation the Mexican ex-warehouse worker now mutant, tells her ex-lover the story about how she became a hairy cow. She also touches upon how hairy cows in The Netherlands have also been used by the current Dutch neo-liberal government in their efforts for disappearing public spaces available for queer people to perform sexual activities, particularly cruising in a park in the south of Amsterdam.



From the Mexican traditions of diy and low cost materials, for the performance a made a Hairy Cow Piñata. The hairy cow becomes a mechanism that allows me to navigate the various layers and scales in which the affectivites of racism and its power relations take place. From the intimate space of the bedroom shared by two lovers, to the collective space of work, the fulfilment center, and the collective experience of structural racism as lived by racialized, mostly brown workers. The notion of memory is also important. The performance plays with a re-enactment of a lived experience. a moment in which two ex-lovers encounter again and recall and narrate again their memory of their romance. Of course such memories, particularly those of the mutant hairy cow have been contaminated, by new information related to 'class consciousness' and critical race theory, which apparently was non-existent years ago during their romance.



The recognition & mirroring of the Mexican brown immigrant into the robotic hairy cow, and further corporeal mutation speaks of two levels: the violence against the worker's body under capitalism and the implications brought by cybernetic labor to the racialized workers body. Quintessential of post-Fordist capitalist labor is the acceleration and high levels of engagement, physical and cognitive, required for its execution. In such engagement, the stretching (exploitation) of the body is such, it is turned into something else. In regards to the cybernetic interface, theorist of cybernetics (Fisher, Haraway, Deleuze & Guattari, to name a few) have stated that 'all bodies become cyborgs. By introducing the hairy cow/brown warehouse worker as cyborg, the project seeks to unpack the cybernetics of the racial experience and its affective dimension.





For the development of both the tales and the performance I was particularly influenced by two sources of the course: Choy's 'breathers and Morton's elementality. In Elementality, Morton talks about art as climate, particularly an understanding of art as infection, viscous givenness. Elementality as abjection. Although I certainly refuse Morton's take on Turrel's pristine atmospheric aesthetics found in a white cube gallery, to exemplify its notion of elementality as abjection ("art not as reified or distanced thing over but yonder but as infectious, viscous givenness from which one finds oneself incapable of feeling oneself"²), I am interested in Morton's 'elementality as abjection. But to find the elementality of the objects of the world: the undesired, the infected, the viscous, and by that I am talking about immigrants and the working class. Which brings me back to my encounters with the cows. most of which happens during the toxicity of coronavirus lockdowns. In which the color of my skin, my class and my condition as immigrant was forced to go to work to a contaminated building and face the hairy cows. This is the kind of elemental abjection I am interested in, and the fusions between contaminated undesired subject-object.



² Morton, T. 'Elementality'. (2015). Cohen, J. J., & Duckert, L. (Eds.). (2015). *Elemental Ecocriticism: Thinking with Earth, Air, Water, and Fire*. University of Minnesota Press, pp. 69-81.

I refuse to think the elemental through Turrel, I refuse it completely! I rather think in the elemental through my abject encounters with the hairy cows, an encounter amongst both abjects, and the theory-fiction that might come from that encounter. I am interested in the 'elementality' of the racial encounters, and in the what happens if we communicate those experience through art, particularly through fiction. It is precisely through fiction and the elementality that I find common ground with Morton. He distinguishes a commonality of relation between elementality and fiction, particularly realist fiction in the way both 'share and distribute affects'. Here Morton associates elementality, the fusion subject-object, with the spectre and the return of the repressed, "a repressed that keeps leaking back in". A similar take on fiction is what I attempted to explore with this performance. In this case the spectre or returned-repressed is encountered through the perceptual structure of memory of the mutant hairy cow/brown immigrant worker, who is now much more 'politically' armed, and capable to defend herself from the Zionist argument.



On the other hand, Choy's breathers fit perfectly in the fiction abjection I am trying to develop here, through this performance:

"Here is the unpaid cost: the externality," I remember him saying.
"These are real costs, but they are externalized, meaning they are not paid."
"But someone does pay," he continued.
"Who pays?"
He waited a beat, then answered himself.
"Breathers pay." Breathers pay.³

³ Choy, T. (2021). 'Externality, Breathers, Conspiracy: Forms for Atmospheric Reckoning'. in Papadopoulos, D., Puig de la Bellacasa, M., Myers, N. (Eds.), *Reactivating Elements. Reactivating Elements: Chemistry, Ecology, Practice*. London: Duke University Press, pp. 231-256.

Breathers are the abjects, and breathers pay. The mutant Mexican immigrant-hairy cow is a breather, that has paid. The real cost has been the violence against her body brought by Capital. And she has paid. Thinking elementality through the 'infection, viscous givenness' created by an abjection-fiction encounter, actualizes structures of feeling and knowing, for the racialized breathers, and might permeates new configurations of subject-object mutations.

