



## THIS IS THE SOUND THAT BIRD MAKES

I am told, “*What Do Stones Smell Like in the Forest?*” is an autofiction, and the second chapter in a series of speculative works reflecting on the affective relationships between sentient bodies and objects.” While this description suggests textuality, the work will be made public under different forms: a two-channel video installation of an opera performance; a series of performative gestures in a small enclosed dark gallery space; this book in your hands; and perhaps others of which I am not yet aware. I have seen the score of the libretto, read its lyrics, and heard the mezzo-soprano, Marie-Annick Béliveau deliver its words in extension and rupture of their assumed-by-me cadence. I have visited the set while three dancers, Mary St-Amand Williamson, Karen Fennell, and Maxine Segalowitz, performed their relation to sculptural objects that work as masks, as a chorus clothed in sky blue, tie-dyed costumes under a bath of pink light. During production, I witnessed assistant Edwin Isford roll the dolly, arrange



the horizon line of drapery, and fix into photograph the ongoing actions and ways. Instead of a textuality, Chloë Lum and Yannick Desranleau are engaged in what anthropologist Timothy Ingold describes as a textility of making, more akin to the complex creation of a textile, with its surface perceived as singular that in actuality is constructed of many strands, multiple labours, and a complexity of skills.


With this in mind, how do I engage something I have never seen before? Writing in response to an uncompleted work of art is all collective potential intertwined with myriad opportunities for error. Reconsidering the parts one has seen or been told of, a writer begins to build in their mind how an artist will assemble together this teeming possibility. This text then too is an autofiction. Ideals are entertained, ontologies challenged. By privileging the processual over the final product and engaging forces, flows, and material transformations, the work of Lum/Desranleau becomes a series of relationships between multiple actors, not all of whom are human. “It is a question not of imposing preconceived forms on inert matter but of intervening in the fields of force and currents of material wherein forms are generated.” The things are all coming together.







The composite assemblage required to bring together sound, light, objects, performers, and text is most often seen as the form of theatre, with its deeply constructed and carefully maintained hierarchies of labour. Historic challenges to this form have been well integrated into studio art lexicons since early modernism and most often celebrated by individual names, like Artaud, Cocteau, and Brecht. The multitude of bodies required to push collective concerns forward are recuperated into a celebration of the individual in the western canon that often suggests a deep misunderstanding

of the authors' practices and intents. Case in point, Brecht's *Threepenny Opera* was arguably collectively produced, a collaborative reworking of Elisabeth Hauptmann's translation of John Gay's *The Beggar's Opera* with music by Kurt Weill and others. This collective authorship expanded the audience to its authors as they also became witnesses to the process. This multiplicity was a key component of what Brecht called "Epic Theatre," thickening the language normally used to describe formative western historical narratives, like Homer's *Illiad* and the *Odyssey*; for Brecht, the epic was, most importantly, in opposition to the dramatic. Epic theatre did not argue for a suspension of disbelief to narcotize its viewers, instead it asserted a technique of alienation, or *Verfremdungseffekt*, to demand a more engaged and intellectual role for the audience. It was a role based on exceptional observation that entered the arena of relation. More importantly, the intellectual role the audience played did not separate out the mind from body but instead pushed the audience into sensation. While Aristotle asked and answered, "Why is it that, in the absence of external objects, the senses do not give any sensation, although they contain fire, earth, water, and other elements of which there is sensation? This happens because sensibility (aesthetikon) is not actual but only potential." Brecht sought to actualize that potential.

*What Do Stones Smell Like in the Forest?* is epic in this same way. It is not the narrative of men overcoming territory and of war but of a woman becoming foreign to herself, externalized, and distributed as her body transforms through chronic illness. This involves a coming to know as her body shifts in velocity that necessarily alters her relation to objects and actions built for bodies of a different frame rate. Bodies move at such different speeds as velocity is determined by



the matter at hand. The experience of speed is not shared. The exquisitely trained bodies of the dancers resist the stillness; they begin to cry out, muscles cramp, and refuse it. With Golem's synchronicity no longer aligned with certain modes of production, she begins to operate in a state of hyper-aware relation. She appears monstrous in her shift outside of capitalist formation—she has arrived at an alien state—but like the Golem she is named for, she is handmade, both equally held together and undone by the gravitational pull of the earth and other forces—largely social—that were previously unfelt.



Johanna Hedva articulates some of these social forces in her revelatory Sick Woman Theory. Drawing from Hannah Arendt's definition of the political as anything that occurs in public, Hedva describes how in the failure of certain bodies to be public, they are not considered to be political. However, their absence is not of their own choosing. If we consider the barriers built into the constitution of publics, whether physical, temporal, linguistic or phenomenological, we see how limited our field of perception has become. Lum/Desranleau expand that field with colourways that exceed good taste yet start to be felt in the mouth. They launch active objects and sonic constructions that operate in unique registers outside of populist musicality even when directly engaging canonical structures like opera, art history, and other fine arts traditions. When I look at the Golem in *What Do Stones Smell Like in the Forest?*, Louise Bourgeois' *COVE* comes to mind. While its corporeal forms like organs externalized become unified in stone, Lum/Desranleau's Golem carries the weight of her own. Bourgeois' *COVE* conjures the unnamed 'Lot's wife' of the Christian bible, who turned to salt when looking back at the threat of the world manifested by the city of Gomorrah. But the material

transformation of beings does not undo their potentiality, 'Lot's wife' has been effective in forms of social control for thousands of years. Lum/Desranleau's Golem not only looks back, but at us, and towards the chorus that at times amplifies her concerns or confirms them. When describing her appendages, she says, "I look at them as if they belong to someone else." Chorus answers, "They do."

The body is good business  
Sell outs maintain the interest  
Remember Lot's wife  
Renounce all sin and vice  
Dream of the perfect life  
This heaven gives me migraine  
This heaven gives me migraine  
This heaven gives me migraine

Lyrics, *Natural's Not in It*, Gang of Four, 1979

This entropic complexity of bodies underlines misogyny, ableism and other flaws of human-centric practices as a series of conditions that Lum/Desranleau address in their collectivized practice, shifting focus from the immediate result to the continuum of their oeuvre. Much has been made of the origin of Lum's and Desranleau's earlier creative outputs in punk rawk and noise music, most notoriously together in AIDS Wolf, then into silk screen poster production as Seripop, and now Lum/Desranleau. This fetishization leads to a common misconception that their practice is antagonistic—to see the presentation of different models of sounding and making and being as counter to various worlds instead of being participant in them, or even as possibly world-making. This binary positioning suggests at best a failure of imagination, but ultimately points to the

intellectual laziness required to see difference as opposition instead of presence. Lum/Desranleau are working towards a more radical inclusion, one that is able to consider not just what something *is*, but what something *does*. This move to acknowledging the perceived static as active, regardless of speed or material actualization, is the true constant of their work.

