

“Geographies of Contamination”

DAVID ROBERTS ART FOUNDATION (DRAF)

Our moment seems to be characterized by a drive toward the dissolution of the hierarchical subject-object relation in favor of a “flat ontology,” in which all things and matters (human or not) are situated on the same plane of existence. Cocurated by Vincent Honoré (director of David Roberts Art Foundation) and writers Laura McLean-Ferris and Alexander Scrimgeour, “Geographies of Contamination” was a snapshot of an art field in which new materialisms and post-Internet theories flourish.

The best entry into the show’s framework of dedifferentiation and pollution of diverse systems, which the notion of “contamination” sought to encapsulate, was Rachel Rose’s video *Sitting Feeding Sleeping*, 2013. The work’s first sequence of images—footage of a crashing helicopter followed by jellyfish swimming in the blue sea of an error screen—sets the scene for the frenzied entanglement of the technological and the organic, life and death, that unfolded throughout the show. In *Sitting Feeding Sleeping*, video fragments from cryogenics and robotics laboratories and shots of zoo animals are punctuated by disruptions of images, sounds, and documents of the work’s own making (e.g., mouse clicks, editing snapshots, reflections on a laptop screen). While Rose’s dark and poetic work is undeniably riveting, the flat ontology immanent to its seductive alloy of the technological and biological provokes questions as to what might be lost, perhaps too readily, in contamination—a question that seems no less pertinent to David Douard’s animistic installation combining two works, *So’ Suckle to Mom* and *So’ Suckle to Gro*, both 2014, in which these registers fuse and part uncannily. What is lost, or rather discarded, is the human subject, whose absence is stressed strongly in many of the show’s other works.

Obstructed or covered in plastic sleeves, Magali Reus’s “Parking,” 2013–, is a deadpan series of folding chairs that are hostile to human occupation. Michael E. Smith’s sculptures (for instance, *Meat Wad*,

2013) evoke visceral part objects of surrogate bodies. Renaud Jerez’s bandage-wrapped pipe constructions, which belong to his new installation *Pain Corp*®, 2014, recall a sick, fragile body in the process of dissolution, an image that resonates with the decaying matter of Olga Balema’s fountain sculptures, including *Alchemy*, 2013. Baguettes are awkwardly stuck into or bandaged onto Jerez’s pipe constructions: futile phallic prosthetics of a stale vitality that decomposes as uneventfully as dry bread. In contrast to the nostalgia for the body with which this work is tinged, Nicolas Deshayes’s large friezes radiate the perverse sexual charm of the inorganic. The faint yellowish surfaces of *Cramps*, 2014, vacuum-formed foam reliefs, shimmer repulsively and alluringly, the slick bulk of matter tantalizing the viewer to touch it.

If the emphasis on thingness and materiality—on the level of the exhibition as a whole as much as on that of many of its individual works—is inscribed into the vexed horizon of a post-human world of objects, the show was at its best where “contamination” became tangible as the digital reconfiguration of (art) objects and subjects alike. Here, “contamination” functioned as the disruption of systems whether bodily, social, technological, or economic. Marlie Mul’s trompe l’oeil “Puddle” sculptures, 2013–, are breaks in the flow of movement. In his mobile sculptures *Souvenirs 1–3*, 2014, Neil Beloufa explores the circulation of artworks and their underlying economies of staging by showcasing means of mobility and presentation (e.g., wheels, framing structures) or by reusing parts of his previously made works. In turn, Sam Lewitt’s value-card-interspersed stacks of electronic waste (from the series “SVFS (Stored Value Field Separators),” 2012–, engage with the transmission and interruption of (economic) value in art as much as with art itself as currency. If we look at “contamination” from this perspective, couldn’t the disruptions, breaks, and breakdowns that afflict the media of many of these and other contemporary practices be brought into focus as materializations of much larger systematic dysfunctions?

—Jenny Nachtigall