

A conversation between
Bridget Riggir and Dan Nash

Bridget Riggir (BR): Fiction is increasingly a contemporary art tactic, especially science-fiction. It's to do with the possibility of imaging, increasing a desire for, and actually constructing, change. What function does world-making take in your practice? Unlike these sci-fi/ techno trends, your fiction is less future focused, more surreal: what you call "weird fiction".

Dan Nash (DN): The language is similar to horror or "weird fiction", it's about ambiances, about forging a path between the known and the unknown; comfort and madness. I want it to be an intense process, even if it's just fun and transportive. Raw material in fiction forges ahead, making test-worlds that you can decode, like a weird simulation. I have always had an interest in the grotesque side of materiality. For me, Alphonso Lingis takes the philosophical inspection of materiality to interesting places. Lingis uses fictional tactics to express a fluid phenomenology, speaking from the perspective of bodily functions and fluidity, compositions needed to oppose the rigidity of contemporary subjectivity—a state of being which comes about through having to suppress our form to maintain coherence in the system.

BR: The use of fiction and sculpture or objects together makes a strong image-world. The two in reference to one another create an ecology rather than a system of discrete reference points, allowing for audiences to construct alternative worlds prompted by the artist. When you talk about your sculptures, both 'channels' and 'cages', you use the word tool. I'm wondering 'a tool for what'?

DN: Sculptures add realism to a text. In this show they stand as forms of openness and enclosure, so when you read the text you have this constant reference to imprisonment and enclosed concepts, but then you also have 'the directional' through channels and escape routes. They are not just metaphorical or symbolic forms, they are forms that regulate the movement of material and bodies.

BR: You're kind of placing the viewer in an active diagram, supplying both rigidity and escape, showing the limits of the coherent contemporary subject and the

possibilities other than this at once. How are these test-worlds tools for the desire for difference?

DN: The fiction tries to express something experimental and offer some kind of relief.

BR: This often describes the material process of a subject undoing or transforming, should the audience start to desire those movements and those forces?

DN: Or fear them. Lingis talks about the Neoliberal subject as existing constantly in danger. We are so anxious because we perceive ourselves as being always in peril. We fear that if we enact freedom we would end up in prison or drown. Change needs to occur both in the physical world as well as in thought.

BR: It excites me to think of art as having a distinct function and to think of art as a technology capable of making real change. The theorist Simon O'Sullivan writes about art's capacity to engineer change when it engages both logic and affect as well as present conditions and future possibilities. Calling this the diagonal or myth-science, he claims that when aligned correctly, art can increase desire for and construct change. Your narratives are often set on islands, the island is kind of this classic trope of the individual's power or agency.

DN: Or the individual faced with itself. I became interested in the island after reading Lingis's writing on Michel Tournier's *Friday, or, The Other Island* which replaces the imperial master narrative of Robinson Crusoe with an undoing of the subject, where everything is unwritten to the point where the person, Robinson Crusoe, can feel himself tunneling through plants, connected at all levels to the fractalised self-similarity of nature. That was really exciting for me to read that kind of intense relation between bodily processes of input/exchange/secretion and the elemental/environmental and how this could be significant in understanding the subject as being already implicated in much larger dynamics.

BR: Quentin Meillassoux writes about “creative death” instead of “reactive death”. Reactive death being what happens when the subject disappears and becomes a void. It is the death experienced when you become the subject of the machine or the substance of capital. Like the other Speculative Realists, imagining from the position of a naught subject, he argues that the subject might choose its own creative death by self-severing from all images, and becoming-material in the dissolution of those habitual limits. This embrace of annihilation would not be a death as we know it, but the loss of limits as they are given or assumed. Ray Brassier, also from the SR camp, says “think as though annihilation has already happened, write culture as though we are extinct.”

DN: In my essay *Channels*, I wrote about coming into the world from infancy. I describe the process in a very Freudian way. You’re in this unbound zone of pleasures and sensations and you’re completely tied to the things around you. At this stage you’re not differentiated from your environment and, in the essay, I discuss how you emerge out of this and become positioned within culture and adopt its postures. It’s a form of complicity that allows you to survive within the system. But I forgot to describe the reason why I talked about that. It’s because this is a human-decided limit in itself and it really privileges restricted visions of possibility. In order to attain some semblance of universality it requires simplifying our subjectivity: the subject of the world today is so fixed, flat, so regulated in order to be equipped to deal with the world as it is.

BR: By choosing to think that we are not really living, we choose to stand in the position of nothing, perhaps from the position of death or annihilation, so you start from ground zero, building both Self-images and subjectivities from nothing. By imagining an ideal or different subject, in the act of speculation we begin to construct it—culturally, materially and conceptually— or at least we construct a desire for it.

DN: Could we make the generalisation then that maybe there are less moments of intensity and difference for the Neoliberal subject? Is this what renders it dead or annihilated?

BR: We can use complexity theory to think about subjectivity as a system, or a programme that has adapted to live in sync with or inside of the system of capital, so habituated to this that its limits are not its own but those of Neoliberalism. By understanding subjectivity as a construction primarily made up by the objective effects of an era, this traditional Self-image appears as myth. When we understand our own programming we might also realise that the subject is wholly rewritable, that we can and should reprogramme our habits and limits.

DN: Does it make it easier because it's so programmed? I suppose it's easier because there is such a need for it.

BR: The visibility of our programming, in the ways we have physiologically and subjectively adapted to Neoliberalism proves that there is no essential nature or sacred map for the human.

DN: How do you see writing figuring into this process?

BR: Call it writing, drawing or sculpting, (call it engineering, even), it is to do with ontological thinking specific to posthumanism where the symbolic and the material coalesce. Language and material affect, inform and give form to each other. And so speculative practices imagine difference with the aim of locating it in the present. I think it is really a political exercise: to start imagining the annihilation of humanism, or of those Self-images we have inherited. What Reza Negarestani calls the "Labor of the Inhuman" is a programme of constant image-making that conditions the constant constructing and reconstructing of the Human's Self-image. Michel Foucault said that modern humanity itself is just an equation on a chalkboard which can be re-written. While in his understanding, we await the force of history to erase this face of humanity by way of an event, Negarestani argues that we have the agency and the power to conceptually create the event and the erasure ourselves.

DN: And this makes way for a freer subjectivity. These philosophies all seem to presuppose something in order to make the changes. It often comes back to capitalism or the rigidity it produces and so the project becomes one of pushing against this.

BR: It's useful to think of rigidity as an image. That's the culture in which the infant suddenly learns of its limits and boundaries and the distinction between object and subject through cultural narratives. The subject Self-defines through the rigid limits of certain images, usually from classical humanist ideals. So yes, capitalism presses the subject one way, we also keep ourselves another way, ignoring the potential of our own malleability.

DN: Combining logic and affect, reason and romance is exciting. Not only are you kind of building this conceptual power from the logics of the system, you are also building these intense fantastic escape routes. If we start understanding this potential, we come to realise that those small changes—that is, the smallest of deviances—have an effect.

BR: I think we understand how the global affects the local in a hierarchical way but not how the local is incorporated into the global in less linear ways. I mean the *really* local...

DN: I'm interested in Rosi Braidotti's idea of the nomadic subject because it re-emphasises the human subject as something really important, reimagining it as a powerful tool. Braidotti's idea of nomadic subjectivity inspects the subject's ability to intuitively read nonverbal traces of others. It's kind of a speculative idea of being hyper-attuned to subtlety.

BR: I think it's more about programming an anti-anthropocentric attitude, about learning that we aren't central to everything, and that much lives on and is defined without us.

DN: But then these ideas are also upholding the agency of human consciousness, because it's all about the capacity of conceptualisation. If that is a product of human consciousness, then anthropocentrism is not really done away with then, is it?

BR: Recently it's become clear that human consciousness isn't actually that powerful of an agent. We tend to understand history as the outcome of a set of collective conscious acts. But global warming and the increasing reality of trans-species

extinction, as an involuntary consequence of human behavior and our slow destruction of the earth render visible a history beyond human intentionality. The scale of geological change unintentionally caused by human action rewrites how we have conceptualised our agency and its role in history. The conscious subject—brimming with guiding intention—no longer survives if the entire history of the modern human or “human civilisation” can be classified by unintentional effects.

DN: I often wonder if learning and understanding the root of our desires and behaviours gives us any ability to change them. That’s a real psychological/ psychoanalytical problem. What facilitates the leap from the epistemological level of ‘knowing’ to the ontological level of ‘becoming’ as malleable plastic subjects?

BR: Knowing is, in and of itself, a constructive and constitutive process. Knowledge and learning construct and shift components within the system. But this process is not goal orientated.

DN: But then how do you know what to say or imagine? Do you continue to say the same things?

BR: At this point we don't know what to say. Humanity-as-a-commitment is a project without end. There is no determined form or point at which we can claim that this commitment is over. It is the assignment of re-drawing our own image without objective conclusion. This also comes back to acknowledging the lesser agency of human consciousness, we are not that in control, we can't rely on linear mechanics with controlled outcomes, like cause and effect, because outcomes might be deferred. We can only experiment. We think we're beings of teleology, of goals, but we're not, we're just tumbling around like everything else essentially. First you make space for new things to come in. Desiring a different future would be a start.

DN: It seems so obvious at the moment, our choice of direction is so hapless. How can it be chosen? I reckon one way of acting outside of limited postures is to be fearless. I've always really appreciated transgression and its history as a way of deprogramming but it's been so commodified.

Bridget Riggir is a curator and writer living in Tāmaki Makaurau, and is currently a Co-director at RM gallery. She studied Art History and Media Studies at The University of Auckland, and in 2016 completed an MFA at Elam School of Fine Arts. Her thesis *Imagining Impossible Subjectivities* explored the revisionary potentials of imaging and imagining difference, assigning critical culture the propensity to construct new worlds, and new ways of being in the world. Invested in this function of art, fiction, poetry, philosophy, community, and the curatorial, Bridget's practice is, currently, driven by the political capacities of the speculative and affective, and the image's role within discourses of Posthumanism.

Curated by Tendai John Mutambu

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