

Corner College

Kochstrasse 1 • 8004 Zürich

Spooky Action at a Distance (Artes Mechanicae and Witch's Cradle)

A group exhibition at Corner College with **Amélie Brisson-Darveau, Andreas Marti, Conor McFeely, Mareike Spalteholz.**

Opening on **23 April**, finissage on **22 May 2015.**

Both at the opening and at the finissage, there will be a sound intervention, *Lointain* (2015) by **Brandon Farnsworth, Benjamin Ryser and Hannah Walter.**

Curated by **Gabriel Gee** (TETI) and **Dimitrina Sevova** (Corner College).

The exhibition is organized by Corner College in collaboration with the TETI group (Textures and Experience of Transindustriality).

Curatorial Text by Dimitrina Sevova

Magic is an art of radical immanence, but immanence is precisely what has to be artfully created, the usual regime of thinking being that of transcendence that authorizes a standpoint and a judgment, the art of magic has been disqualified, prosecuted.

(Isabelle Stengers, *The Cosmopolitical Proposal*)

Magical criticism as a manifestation of the highest stage of criticism.
From Walter Benjamin's note "Criticism as the Fundamental Discipline of Literary History," in his diary *The Destructive Character* (1931)

Intro-action!

With this exhibition we are trying to perform and materialize a new agency or to re-work the agential conditions of possibilities, as they bring creativity, criticism and resistance both to the practices of art and to daily life. Through these agential conditions, magical criticism is a practice of diffraction and agential separability, to be understood not as separation but as deviation, as making new connections and new commitments. My curatorial proposal is to follow here Karen Barad's concept of quantum mechanical entanglement, where "diffraction can be a metaphor for

another kind of critical thought," which can be employed in the practices of Arts as well, to provide new insight into the notion of performativity, and how it matters.

In the collaboration on this exhibition with co-curator Gabriel Gee, who gave the initial drive with his idea of *Artes Mechanicae*, as a result of which we bring on display the works of Amélie Brisson-Darveau, Andreas Marti, Conor McFeely and Mareike Spalteholz, my curatorial effort is to engage the context of the project with feminist thought and practices through which we can activate the aesthetic perception and polemic discussion between the spectators and the art objects, and the space created through their relational structures. Another idea that troubles me is how an exhibition and art practices can be infused with *magical criticism* (Walter Benjamin), and how they can be a way to approach agency, e.g. the agency of unknown *witch actants* (Isabelle Stengers) or *agential realism* (Karen Barad). In the chemistry of magical criticism, the agents or catalysts are the critical mass that link the artistic practices to realism and materiality without being directly part of the art objects. They embody and embed their ability to manipulate objects in the performative aspects of traveling fluxes of matter and culture. Through artist practices and their art objects, the Arts' actants can empower the spectators to feel and sense what it means *to stay with the trouble*. (Donna Haraway)

Talking about the materiality of art practices and the actants of magical criticism brings us to the idea that discourse did not start with language, but with material forms, as in Foucault's *prison-form*. In this fashion, the artists critically incorporate in their installations in the exhibition industrial forms like moving images, elements of interfaces and of their ideological superstructures as well as historical materials from technological apparatuses and scientific and cultural dispositives, re-enacting collected parts in a new network of relations, where the material production and the performative stream of non-semiotic signs and characters trigger new agency. This is thus an expression of radical empiricism that can engage the spectator with phenomena and their material performativity, as in what Rosi Braidotti calls *double vision*. Which means that an exhibition produces both aesthetic relations and alternative forms of knowing, and opens towards perceptions of the oppositional consciousness or counter rationality and its micrologics, where one can abandon and reject the dualistic tradition and its practices of making such oppositions, between critique and creativity, or analytics and aesthetics.

In times of the Anthropocene and Capitalocene, their dispositives and synthesis of power-knowledge, science-technology, labor-capital have reached their limit, and their crisis cannot be overcome by just re-thinking them. New relations may arise by casting the spell of magical criticism and activating the new agency of witch actants in the ecological, social, and cultural environment. Let's call our exhibition proposal a visionary alternative constructed by situated objects, knowledge and concepts in-between art, aesthetics, politics, and science. In this proposal, *magical criticism* and *agential realism* are practices of combination driven by

subjectivity, creating self-organized patterns of cultivating differences. My wish is that the context may embrace Stengers' cosmopolitical proposal, where one can take a feminist perspective seriously, as a feminist engagement with the subject matter, with the curatorial, with art practices and the space of the exhibition, inspired by a speculative feminism that provides the ground for a new materialism – i.e., a radical materialist metaphysics within material thought and the materiality of the art practices, that makes critical thought perform and take shape in its practical expressions in the entanglements of the materialized objects. In our dystopian non-localization we must create a situation in which one can grasp the fatal hinge between science and capitalism, which produces the techno-scientific knowledge economy and increased militarization. Some hope may come from an ethos of care, which is a matter of care, created with care.

This exhibition as a hexagram

This exhibition is a knot or an entanglement of six positions and their intra-acting agencies of phenomena of ontological disjunctions and speculative commitment to neglected things. These performative temporalizations draw invisible lines in the form of a hexagram of extra relations in the fourth dimension between the traced objects, ideas and their modulations, as the present birth of affective facts. As all assemblages, the collective artistic and curatorial endeavors in this exhibition are a product of transversal relations and forced movement. It is the affirmation of the movement or the second movement in itself, and correspondingly a matter of care, as Stengers might say – something artfully created to disturb, trouble or confuse “the usual regime of thinking.” It is an affectual and sensual vortex, a web of little events that is able to de-familiarize how one looks at something else, which is a sobering process in which what was understood as normal, as good behavior that serves as a protection layer against empathic reactions, is dispersed. Here, with Donna Haraway, it is time to prolong the process of de-familiarization with a series of de-normalization, in order to destabilize the world of thinking with other thoughts, or the world of images with other images, or the world of art and the finesse of the liberal arts with the return of the notion of *Artes Mechanicae*, as an act of resistance. As Deleuze said, speaking of Bach's speech act: “his music is an act of resistance, an active struggle against the separation of the profane and the sacred. This act of resistance in the music ends with a cry.” Magic is an art of radical immanence, is *la vida loca*, the carnivalesque that comes from a critical mass or multitude, where the agency of witch actants generates the miracle of slowing down, without which there can be no creation, no generative radiation of resistance. “A return of the Arts reveals much in the way of study and praxis, as we soon become aware of the manifold arts that cease to inform (or perhaps marginally) the revolutionary practice of living *la vida loca*.” (Raiders of the Lost Arts, *Tactical Magic Manifesto*)

The techniques of slowing down, which also bring the idea of coming back, are a call for action that embraces “the crisis as a new form of discourse” to abandon the premises of material progress of a society based on techno-scientific information. It “demands immediate convolution of all discourses and disciplines,” to turn away one’s dazzled eyes from the blind spot left by looking into the sun in our melancholy and loneliness and try to undertake the journey back, to return home – to the Earth not as a goddess, but as a model for worlding, i.e., to the body, to the mundane and small sins, to the plane of truth outside the norms. To slow down is to express a disappointment and disillusionment with the medium of traveling at great speed in the sky of heaven – which in any event makes no sense, since there is neither outside nor inside.

Coming back home, which means returning on the ground with its formless and muddy functions, is Donna Haraway’s proposal. It can be taken seriously as an alternative concept to those of rationality, which is the basis of the rationalization of all aspects of life that leads to cognitive commercial operations in the knowledge economy. Along this line, we urgently have to re-read “pre-scientific” and non-rational knowledge and practices that can be the beginning of a counter-movement to the Copernican revolution, making space for prayer, contemplation and knowledge to take place. The legending of the fabulations of science fiction and scientific fact this time does without the heroic stories of the walking signifier. If one comes back home, is rather a reverse engineering, a releasing of stigmatized thought, a mind journey back from the universe or universalism to the kakosmos (Bruno Latour) and then to the immanence of the radical plane of consistency of the cosmopolitical proposal, where the political affirms the cosmic, which is not equivalent to any particular cosmos. Stengers’ cosmos, like Nietzsche’s, is an event (a cosmic event or becoming). In the cosmos and cosmopolitics there are no representatives. They can protect us from an *entrepreneurial* version of politics, not limiting pragmatic thought or emotional, intellectual and material skills to the logic of the scientific organization of the labor, accumulation, extraction, producing technology for profit. According to Donna Haraway we have to go back to the Middle Ages to investigate the formation of the market and the accumulation of wealth.

Often, the revolutionary aspect lay not in the act of invention itself, but in its technological refinement and application to political and economic power.

(Wikipedia, entry on *Medieval technology*)

Spooky action! {at a Distance}

The main title, *Spooky Action at a Distance*, is one of the favorite examples and re-appropriations of Karen Barad’s from the history of science and specifically the history of quantum mechanics, of something that had a negative sign, which she turns into a positive. It was an expression of sarcasm by Albert Einstein, at a moment when he doubted the power

of one of his own thought experiments on the quantum entanglement between a pair of particles (a pair with a common history) and quantum non-locality (in which the pair would transmit information across cosmic distances, instantaneously). Einstein ironically used this expression coming from magic, in a series of polemic public discussions with Niels Bohr, who took up Einstein's thought experiment to refine the principles of quantum mechanics. The consequences of the thought experiment were later verified in laboratory conditions, proving that Einstein was wrong to mistrust his own intuition, and quantum entanglement is a phenomenon that can be observed, and is the basis of co-called *quantum teleportation*. With agential realism, a combination of quantum mechanics and feminism, Karen Barad takes up the thread of material thought and the performativity of matter in the direction of performative heterogeneous universes of non-chronological time in her ethico-polemic drama of quantum mechanics and justice, by saying that in performativity, materialities of space and non-linear and concrete time are relationally created, where differences are made and unmade in the invisible real, in the phenomenon of the performative intra-action of self-making and self-organizing in an ongoing process of materialization of the relations of many agents. Indeed the real obstacles are encountered when a phenomenon has to be generated into a picture; the picturing is what has troubles, as in the *SF – string figures* theory and practice of Donna Haraway, or any other kind of materialization, including art practices. In the exhibition we take this trouble zone of picturing and its problematic performativity as a starting point.

Spooky action at a distance! Do we just have to keep spooky action, without a distance, when we try to grasp intra-activity? Action at a distance is an Art of magic as it has the power to affect things far way. Its spells can heal, give hope and make crops grow at a distance. Haraway's argument of the "material-discursive" character of all events comes close to the Art of magic, where an object can be moved or changed without mechanical contact, but by being physically touched by the virtual, i.e., in a non-local interaction of objects that are separated in space. Following this, Bruno Latour asks if "along with distance, objectivity is gone as well, or at least an older notion of objectivity that was unable to take into account the active subject of history." Without a distance, how can agency be shared with other subjects? Let's turn distance upside-down and consider it to produce not an objective force but a purely subjective force. Unlike in Newton's law of gravitation, the affect of distance is not a matter of attraction, not the action of a purely objective force. Intra-action entanglement is a space of proximity, a metamorphic zone in which the process of distancing can perform itself, understood as disjunction and separation and dividuation between the mass of the infinitely small. Intra-actions is time is out of joint, where the concept of distance brings back the notions of difference and becoming, as it gives direction to time in irreversible processes, without which a political proposal cannot sustain itself. Distance is the play of the weak forces, or the nomadic drive, as it is the small series of silent knocks of fictitious or false forces that in the old

models of physics act on the frame of reference from outside, which in the intra-active are subjective and internal rather than external. It is a mock action shaken by laughter, the humor of truth as the intellect and cogito are produced in the events of movements, as proportions of relations, which are proportions of movement and rest. Is Cogito stupid? jokingly asks Deleuze.

Metamorphic zone and the witch actants

If there is art, it is because chemical "actants" are defined as "active" without their activity being able to be attributed to them; it depends on circumstances and it is up to chemists' art to create the type of circumstances in which they become capable of producing what the chemist wants: art of catalysis, activation, moderation.

(Isabelle Stengers)

The term *agential* or *actant* or even in the more radical and confusing proposal of those unknown *witch actants*, which Stengers takes from the chemist's art, as it is still in-between alchemy and chemistry, not yet being contemporary chemistry, which she contrasts to the mechanical model. The chemist's art has manipulative dispositions, these feeling of strangeness are the hesitating scales of temperature, something that can be attributed to the character of all Arts and their avatars. Her reference to chemistry offers a technical, non-normative formulation to this issue, which makes it closer to the non-normative practice as a nature of art, or the undisciplined transversal creativity of life. Witch actants need the temperature to increase in order to activate their catalytic properties, and dissolve themselves to enter into proximity of the *metamorphic zone* in order to inspire the vertigo of the event, understood not as immanent to something else, but immanent to itself, as intra-active in itself. The witch actants catalyze an active struggle in life and resistance, bringing an irreversible antagonism and combat to every point "in a mode that gives the issue around which they are all gathered the power to activate thinking, a thinking that belongs to no one, in which no one is right." (Isabelle Stengers)

The *metamorphic zone* is the area of uncertainty and quantitative disjunction between time/space, a zone of creation and fusion of the ontological horizon, a zone of possibilities to "slow down reasoning and create an opportunity to arouse a slightly different awareness of the problems and situations mobilizing us." (Isabelle Stengers) What is performed here gives matter to produce "objects able to resist objections (that's where objectivity really comes from)" (Bruno Latour), objects of resistance and invention that contemporary science has to learn how to go back to. In this the Arts are superior to science. In the process of investigation, which is both analytic and creative, we can grasp this process of going back. What can return from it is the sign, convoluted drawings, strange hieroglyphs, literary creatures, even mystical symbols – all these actants, always partial, being part of something else, inseparable

from their own shadow, inhabit the imaginary from where flaming signatures and turning tails of serpentine tear the real, making their twisted individuating lines appear (all that indivisible mob that comes out of the opened Pandora box) – a frightful milieu of derision and wickedness with the soundless noise of the flapping wings of “a terrible joy” and “a delightful horror”, the swarm becomes real companions in the *metamorphic zone*. All these actants are rather formless before they become actors or protagonists. They are still phenomena and ready for an unlimited set of metamorphoses and interpretations, that can be thrown against an anthropocentric argument about *points of view* and *comprehensions* based on a naturalization like the *scientific world view* aimed at protecting and designating the status and supporting the chain of hierarchy.

Metamorphic Zone and SF – String Figures of Care

A *metamorphic zone* is a space of intensities in which intro-actions take place, the process of something that takes shape vanishing and ephemeral, and tend to disappear, a performances of agential separability of units and creating new bifurcation of fabulation, invention, and modulations of planes of consistency. Agential realism and its milieu of actants generates diffraction, which “is about heterogeneous history,” and unlike reflection that makes symmetry, it rather distorts or convolutes the image. These magical substances perform miracles – not the reflections of the game of mirrors, but real cuts and dividuations. In the Deleuzian paradigm, “fabulation is a superior concept” because it activates “the powers of the false” in the process of generating truth, evoking the performativity enacted in play between “the three avatars – percept, concept, affect.”

There is an obvious connection between Bergsonian and Deleuzian fabulation and Donna Haraway’s fabulation, which is a conceptual part of her practical and theoretical proposal *to stay with the trouble* and her *SF – string figures*. They are a matter of polemic combat, not so much of composition but of techniques for producing com-post, a muddy and earthen concept of recycling and mixing science and culture, virtual and real, organic and non-organic in a spin from scientific fact, speculative fabulation, science fiction, so far, speculative feminism, SF – as mechanisms for envisioning the future and nurturing the vegetation process of immanently growing new concept and ideas. In French, *soin de ficelles* – care of/for the threads that weave the virtual and the real as two sides of existence, which infuse each other in a constant process of actualization. It makes the ontological/imaginary skeleton of her trans-disciplinary biologies – EcoEvoDevoHistoTechno, which also evokes all kinds of female monstrosity and imaginary like medusa, ouroboros, etc., in a kakosmic mix with all form living organisms, a multi-species becoming without strong boundaries between organic and non-organic components of the reality of a body, structure, environment. The idea

of adapting Haraway's concept of SF, as non-Euclidean figures, to the metabolic features and dispositions of a group exhibition, might sound heretic.

Magical criticism with its actants as well as SF – string figures, is the practice of touching and being in touch, troubling the terms of the Anthropocene in order to resist the Capitalocene, with small portions of infection of direct contingency with the ontological-virtual-imaginary. The Art of the good physician has never tried to avoid small portions of infection, has never become a hygienic and sterile practice. Indeed, it is the infector in small portions to permeate the structure with small ontological events and frightful little horrors. Donna Haraway insists that infection is necessary to complexity, in the sense that immunizing agents need to create antibodies in order to build and sustain a structure, to resist the logical apparatuses of the technoscientific governmentality, ruled and automated by the invisible power of algorithmic rationalizations, with its highly refined methods of control and medialization, as they are the producer of the scale of global synthesis of knowledge. We really need to learn that what sustains life is the environmental phenomena at the micro scales.

Why should we take “magic” seriously?

Of course neither the palavers nor the witches' rituals are models to be copied; but they may give a taste for the practical challenge of political ecology as it is a matter of enlarging politics not only to things but maybe also to what would artfully enable us to gather around things.

(Isabelle Stengers)

The clandestine knowledge of alchemy was indeed women's hand on scientific practices at home, a tool of social and intellectual boundaries, not so much between those who are in the know and those who are not, but rather marking the public and the private, where the secret had to be kept. In early Christianity, alchemy was dominated by women. On many medieval engravings, alchemical scenes are depicted as woman's work in a line with a great range of care activity, like washing, cooking, gardening, which at the time were predominantly female and not socially prestigious activities, associated with women's skills and domesticity. Only later did it turn into an exclusive, sectarian, privileged, male-encoded secret society. Unlike male alchemist practices that aimed at creating the philosopher's stone, or turning cheap metal into gold to gain power and prestige, the practice of female alchemists was interwoven with the practices of daily-life magic healing, based on practical and experimental knowledge coming from radical empiricism. As women were excluded from the system of medieval knowledge, they drew theirs from observation, from the secrets of the economy of life. Paradoxically enough, these experiments and the heterogeneous character of women's science and self-cultivation at that time, were to lay the foundation of modern science.

Women alchemists were collectors of secrets previously passed on by word of mouth, and created the first recordings of prescriptions and recipes in textual form, with the precision of Arachne's tracing and tightening threads in the drawing of lines, or passing the needle through the surface in small stitches, in weaving and embroidery where even a small departure from the instructions is likely to destroy the pattern. These textual practices of notes, notations and instructions brought the text into a new stage, even to the beginning of writing science fiction. Unlike alchemy, which was appropriated into modern science, magic became a practice of rebellion, of non-normative behaviors and heretical movements, which led to the criminalization and destruction of the witches in the collective prosecution of peasants disobedient to the authorities. The historical amnesia covering magic and witchcraft, their extermination as part of the extreme violence of authoritarian and colonial domination, are the foundation of the modern capitalist system which produced not only classes but gender polarization, domination over women, excluding them from a great range of professional activities and social life, as Silvia Federici meticulously investigated in *Caliban and the Witch*.

Witch's Cradle

During the witchcraft persecutions in Europe, Inquisitors are said to have sometimes put an accused witch in a bag, which was strung up over the limb of a tree and set swinging. When witches learnt about this punishment they experimented with it themselves and found that the sensory deprivation or confusion of senses induced hallucinatory experiences. A similar swinging motion has long been used by shamans and dervishes and is sometimes known as 'dervish-dangling'.

(Encyclopedia of Occultism and Parapsychology)

In the course of the witch hunts in Europe, witches re-claimed the technology of their interrogation and torture and put them to use for "ecstatic flights of fancy and inward journeys to altered states of consciousness" (Center for Tactical Magic) to distort the space/time and create the event horizon of an altered political state.

In the exhibition project, *Witch's Cradle* is adapted from a silent and unfinished film of around 12 minutes made by Maya Deren in collaboration with Marcel Duchamp in 1943. Both shared a long-term interest in alchemist science and the occult. Deren's own interest in ritual and altered states of consciousness would later lead her to become an initiate of Haitian vodou. In their collective movie, components of the choreography and non-linear time structure of Deren's *Meshes of the Afternoon* (1943) combine with hallucinogenic elements of Duchamp's *Anemic Cinema* (1926) and his experiments with intuition, the cold literariness of the movement of the fragments and the invisible lines in the fourth dimension, which he materialized and made visible with string, rope, thread and knots, from the suspended objects of his *Shadows of*

Ready-mades (1918) to *Sixteen Miles of String* (1942). The film echoes this latter installation, initially called *his twine*, that Duchamp made as an intervention at the opening of the previous year's show *First Papers of Surrealism*, the first major Surrealist exhibition in the US. Duchamp unrolled his ball of twine to prepare entanglements in which the visitor would encounter obstacles and difficulties in approaching the paintings, as their gaze would be trapped and distracted in a web. These difficulties or destabilizations of viewing, the change in perceptions and new sensual experience can be linked to the Donna Haraway's *SF – string figures* and her concept of staying with the trouble.

With this exhibition we wish to trap the spectators' gaze in a web of new relations and insights into its hexagram.