

7.3 **Facemasks and the Emergence of newness: a field guide to the creation of an object**

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× **Abstract**

What does an art installation made from face masks tell us about the relation between the process of research and the unpredictability of social life? The absence of ready-made solutions to social problems requires the re(de)fining of the modes of engagement of encounters with the world. Through a focus on the event, this paper presents a field guide to the creation of an art installation as a case study of the process of research, its entanglement with the more-than-human and chance. The process of creation of the art installation is presented in relation to an epistemological corpus woven together by its recognition of *aesthesis* as a disruptive form of conjunctive sense perception and collective prehension. Following the views of radical empiricists and contemporary philosophers of science, this paper advocates for an implicated approach to research via the event, attuned to the influence of *chance* and collective experience within the *polis*.

Keywords: event, situation-ethics, covid-19, research process, creative interaction.

340

1. **A Field Guide to the Creation of an Object**

Because there are no ready-made solutions to problems such as environmental crises and pandemics, the creation of *speculative objects* via the engagement of *aesthesis* provides an implicated manner of perceiving issues through direct encounters in everyday life. Through the situation-ethics of attunement to the intricate ensemble of more-than-human relations, *aesthesis*, the disruptive classical Greek term for sense perception, calls for the use of heuristic approaches to research that feature direct encounters with the world.

This text's objective is to serve as a field guide detailing the reflections of the process of creation of a mobile art installation presented via video-presentation in the panel '(Good) Collapse under the Empire': *Humanitarianism, Collaborative Production/Consumption and Sustainable Development*. This text is inscribed in the experimental and speculative practice of a productive approach to research. Far from neutral, knowledge is neither fixed nor directly assigned to objects and situations, requiring the sensibility of *aesthesis in actu*. This affirms the senses' reliable contact with reality, and assumes that episteme is plural, multiple, affective, changing, in perpetual flux, without losing its power of being evident (placing episteme within life itself). Moreover, the social and consensual quality of sense perception deindividuates the experience of research allowing for the stimulating and often unpredictable influence of collaborative approaches throughout its process. The reader is invited to view the video-presentation which accompanies this text (see references).

Have there ever been truer utterances than *the medium is the message*? The possibilities and affordances of the medium of video-presentation provides the venue for a synesthetic mode of presentation and reception of the art installation, which, due to pandemic restrictions, could not be materially displayed during the conference. In the context of this presentation, the juxtaposition of images and reflections provide new ways of seeing, hearing, and feeling the object, also allowing ideas to be presented in new ways.

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The process of creation detailed in this text relies on a local methodology concerned with the variegated, plural, and emergent qualities of objects and sites. This approach to research seems to violate the sacrosanct rule of the sociological canon: thou shalt not manipulate thy research data... that is, the belief in the immutability and immobility of research – of research as ossified: an objectified form resulting from a set of predetermined parameters and *a priori* categories to be recognised within a (flattened) field of experience. The bottom-up approach defended by the situation-ethics of a radical aesthesis breaks with this modernist interdiction and its concern with making spatial claims over the representation of social life. This, in turn, offers distinct methodological opportunities capable of activating the *possibles* encountered in the real. In short, this methodological ‘transgression’ calls forth an attention to the details encountered within the everyday which in turn reconfigures one’s sociological practice. Considering this, the text of my presentation attempts to convey *in situ* theoretical reflections that are autochthonous to the event of creation of a *speculative object*: a mobile art installation created from face masks. This text homes in on the event as a ‘case’ to reflect on the process of creative interaction, inscribing the creation of the object in a DIY approach to scholarship informed by the complex, heterogeneous, extra-ordinary and relational qualities of exterior social reality.

2. A Topological Field of Disruptive Knowledge

The speculative object composed of face masks has many special features. Notably, the masks no longer seem to fall under the categories of an imperial system of knowledge and governance of human society. By virtue of the event, the creation of this object diverts the masks from the hold of a global semiology, as well as from their material emplacement within a global network of prolongment and circulation of commodities that invades the totality of the world’s singular localities. The creation of the object entails a removal of face masks from their semiology and tasks. Better yet, the creative interaction alters the face masks’ form (cf. Bateson, 1979).

The object is a kinetic art installation that transfigures the configurational qualities of space. More than the alteration of private space, the object seems to transfigure exterior reality by emancipating it from the hold of a projected social model unto the city. This process reveals gravitational centers, or sites of lively exchange within the city. Through this, one encounters the material grounds of society, no longer sacrificed, as Piper would say, to the exigencies of system. Moreover, the affordance of the mobile sculpture resituates one within a conceptual and material world that is both entangled with and extraneous to a global – Serres would say ‘martial’ – ordering of the world.

As noted, the event that is presented to the viewer via this text and medium of video-presentation foregrounds an experiential practice. Through this I wish to develop a form of scholarship based on the invention of thought *in situ* and *in actu*. I argue that this evidence the compresence of different social modalities in the local spatiality and objectal details of urban social life. Through the engagement of sites, one attends to the phenomena of rareness encountered therein.

The skeins of a body of scholarship from pre-Socratic philosophers (Empedocles, Democritus, Protagoras, etc.), to the radical empiricism of James, the base-materialism of Bataille, and to more contemporary thinkers such as Serres and Deleuze and Guattari, can be said to thread together a field of knowledge that recognises and engages the relational aspects of aesthesis. Considering this, I wish to disentangle the forms of knowledge of categorically distinct social models as entailing different relationships to physical reality (indistinctly natural and social) and to manners of *sensing*.

Reading Lucretius’ *De Rerum Natura* (2000) as a discourse on physics that remains *in* and *of* the world, Serres contrasts the dualism of the ‘Venetian’ and ‘Martial’ epistemes, and of the *foedus naturae* and *foedus fati* – their respective forms of contract with the world. From this perspective, the current hold of global capitalism on the planet stems from the trajectory of a Martial order of society which federates the world, thereby ordering its spaces and its global *episteme*. Contrarily to this, a Venetian episteme, based on an accord with nature, affirms the senses’ credible contact with the world, and pertains to an autarchic model of society. Other similar prosopopoeia can be found elsewhere, such as in Ishmael Reed’s *Mumbo Jumbo* where Set represents an *autocratic* order of society characterised by a hatred of nature and an obsession with discipline and war, while Osiris represents an *autarchic* model of society based on an accord with nature, theatrical practices that engage *aesthesis* through music and dance, and agricultural knowledge. These distinctions entail different relationships to knowledge. To this effect, Serres states that: “Either knowledge is a system (...), or it is only plurality. Space in general is homogeneous and integrated, or it remains scattered, flowering and

furnished with local singularities. Everything happens by necessity, or everything happens by chance. Two mathematics regulate these two states of things: one, global and prolonged; the other, of singular varieties" (Serres, 2000: 188).

By virtue of a particular manner of being at work with the object, can face masks evidence their entanglement with the latter heterogenous form of knowledge, as well as with space as local, flowering or generative?

3. If the Mask no Longer is a Mask, What Does it Do?

We are used to the watertight and global concepts of over-arching theories which claim a hold on reality. Curbing this hold is what Cooper has in mind when referring to 'anti-classification' as a heuristic exercise which "should in principle be vulnerable and not be watertight" (Cooper, 1978: 50). Put simply, "anti-classification means seeking and stating existing differences as opposed to enclosing entities in boxes and hierarchies of boxes" (Cooper, 1978: 49). By enclosing the world, over-arching theories betray a primary concern with the ancient idea of law, that is, with overdetermination, control and absolute mastery (Serres, 2000: 67). In short, they are concerned with power and order rather than with the qualities of objects of study, such as the hyper-complexity of local sites of sociality, indeterminacy and uncontrollability, chance, deviation from the laws of system, the open, the exception, emergence and newness. These qualities are precisely what evade overarching theories of the urban. Can the event of creative interaction, by engaging *aesthesis* through creative interaction, mark a shift toward a heterogenous form of knowledge?

The art installation made from face masks evokes Bataille's notion of the *formless*:

*A dictionary begins when it no longer gives the meaning of words, but their tasks. Thus, formless is not only an adjective having a given meaning, but a term that serves to bring things down in the world, generally requiring that each thing have its form. What it designates has no rights in any sense and gets itself squashed everywhere, like a spider or an earthworm. In fact, for academic men to be happy, the universe would have to take shape. All of philosophy has no other goal: it is a matter of giving a frock coat to what is, a mathematical frock coat. On the other hand, affirming that the universe resembles nothing and is only formless amounts to saying that the universe is something like a spider or spit (Bataille, 1970, p.217).

342

If what Bataille says is true, the *base materiality* of the splatter of excretions and the tangle of the spiderweb are perhaps closer to reality than the autocratic and ontological machines that govern academic production and condition imperial forms of knowledge. The splatter and tangle are in fact the main qualities of this art installation created via the event. Bataille's thought enables an understanding of the kind of event that is needed to create an object that breaks with the hold of an imperial semiology over the masks insofar as to create this object, one has to take the masks beyond their limit! As such, the event itself is tasked with the transgression of the limits of the usual. To refer again to the condition of splatter and tangle, entanglement becomes part of a method of research, or rather, one becomes entangled if features a different figuration of the real that I call: the diar-r(h)éal!

Bataille's point is that to transfigure one's emplacement within the social world and to activate a discrepant form of knowledge, one cannot take this act of transgression lightly. It is not a benign act merely 'performed' without diving headlong into the experience, but one which carries specific requirements (for e.g. the adoption of different disposition that breaks with a cognitive frame of mind): one needs to skyrocket, so to speak, through the confines or enclosures of the 'society of labour' (cf. Bataille, 1973). In this sense, to engage the surplus of elements which exceed the projection of an order unto physical reality, one too must cross a limit that is both material and epistemological by accepting the risks of the experience. As Hunter S. Thompson might say, considering the situation, a gonzo method of research might in fact be the only remaining sensible approach.

Let us consider that the event itself becomes a gravitational center that is exceptionally freed from the constraints of the usual. As such, it possesses transfigurational capacities. Indeed, there is nothing usual about the event. Exceptional things are drawn to it and by chance happen. In this sense, the event takes one down into the world. I will now attend to the process of creation of the object.

4. The Birth of the Event in the Interstices of Edmonton's River-Valley

The city is more than the capture of matter and space that defines its enclosures, it has its extensions, its surround and also, its interstices (cf. Simone, 2017; Harney & Moten, 2013; Serres, 1991). In Edmonton, Canada, there is a small island, where the North Saskatchewan River reaches the center of the city that may be considered one of the city's interstitial spaces. It is a site that evades strict surveillance, where one may enter in a form of *conjunctive contact* with that which is *more than* the City of Edmonton as the projection of a political order unto space. This small island offers a more intimate encounter with the material grounds of the city. Interstitial spaces evidence informal sites that evade an absolute capture of space. Further, there is something ludic about the island. This favours an awareness of other possibilities – a certain ebullience and effluvia – encountered in interstitial spaces. The river, which divides the city in two, may be taken to be the city's true heart. Moreover, it is a gravitational center, imparting a feeling of liveliness that mixes the natural and the urban. The eddying stream and natural enclaves have an attractive quality making this island the first site of the creation of the object.

5. Masks and the Emergence of Something New

For over a year, face masks have invaded the sites of everyday life. The masks have become part of the everyday, gathering as excess and trash in the city. Less commented upon is the availability of the masks for other uses.

In the context of a creative practice, the masks were originally used to deal with the accursed share of spilled paint as part of preparatory rituals for street art interventions. So it is that the indirect manner of working with the masks defined a technique for the active engagement of the sites of the city via the event of creation of the art installation.

What does a mask do, what is its task? To contain, like class, to set a limit, to recode the face (cf. Deleuze & Guattari, 1972). But once altered by paint, the masks look more to me like a manifestation of *clinamina*. Clinamen is “a term which refers to an unpredictable swerve in the fall of atoms into their place, such that atoms then collide and initiate new formations” (Harris, 1990: 74). The spontaneous deviation of atoms – of existents – initiates the creation of new worlds, further relating the manner of engaging *aesthesis* to the natural processes of collision-and-emergence within situations encountered in social life.

343

Masks come neatly individuated in the laminar order of the box. Interweaving the masks seems to alter the form and behaviour of the object, freeing it, so to speak, from its task of having to be a 'mask'. The surfeit of masks piled together turns the object against itself. This leads them to suggest changes of appearance, from a snake to the heavy-weight champion's belt, and to the exuberant mane of an otherworldly ceremonious mask. The box was burned for good measure, marking a point of no return in this process of transfiguration.

6. Ludic Incursions into the Event

It is much less remarked upon those processes of entanglement have their own becoming whereby the tangle only continues to exhibit new formations. However, it is important to note that removing the object from its semiology and designed affordances does not entail its destruction. Rather, it becomes available for something new and indeterminate. One could claim that the masks are a form of active surplus, lending themselves to the becoming of the object. In this process, the qualities and capacities gained by the quasi-object exceed the measure of one's actions upon it.

In the context of the event, opening the “open constitution” of the city (i.e., the city as more than an enclosure), altering one's own demeanor, manners of sensing and using the body, are all integral aspects of the creative interaction. In this regard, humour is of great recourse. It was Bakhtin who claimed that laughter would destroy the authoritarian feudal order; that laughter could bring another age into being (Hebdidge, 1988: 243). This remains true, yet with the pandemic as atmosphere, opening the mouth, laughing, and howling gain a heavier significance. The mouth becomes a dangerous zone of psychosocial eruptivity and contagion. The ceremonious un-containment of the mouth thus serves as a ritualistic gesture within the event. These ludic gestures aim to add to the energetic potency of the object, defining a creative direction otherwise unimaginable from a logical perspective.

The aim of ludic gestures is to generate momentum. The exuberance and craziness that are the mark of excess play a stimulating role in this event. The ludic demeanor harnesses a momentum where energy is not squandered gratuitously but focused unto the object, that is, at the edges, or point of contact, between human and nonhuman. I call this focused expenditure. Through focused expenditure, excess is inscribed in the event as part of the technique of creation of the object. By means of excess face masks are taken beyond the limit of their semiology; bodies are taken beyond the limit of cognitive rationality, and the sites of the event become gravitational centers available for the emergence of something new. Via this practice, one works with excess at the service of the creation of the object in preparation for the event's main moment of eruptive 'expenditure'.

7. Creative Interaction: The Eruption of the Diar-r(h)éal!

The relational forms of sensing the city through *aesthesis* as creative interaction are an ongoing problematic that is explored via the event. A vacant field adjacent to Edmonton's 105th Street – a main artery leading to the city's downtown – served as a site for the culmination of the creative interaction. The object, affixed to a retaining wall, has been the recipient of attention and vital energies throughout the night. It has now gained a state of quasi-autonomy from human volition.

The manner of working with the object must once again be specified as occurring indirectly. The object comes to be through the *collision* of projectiles of paint with the retaining wall. In this sense, the masks "paint themselves", so to speak. The uncontrollable splatter of paint affects the becoming of the masks which in turn express their affect. Marking a return of repressed sensibilities, one may refer to this scene as diar-r(h)éal. Just as new formations are initiated through the collision in the swerve of atoms, and, just as for Gadamer (1998), *aesthesis* entails a collision with reality, the object is born of the collision between the projectiles of paint and the wall.

Within the real, the creative interaction evidences the compresence of the intangible and the material. Officially, the vacant field is considered inert – dead space frozen in time until future commodification. Due to its context and interstitial quality, the site's own states of volatility take part in the creation of the object.

Strung on the wall in the splatter of dripping and mixing colors, the masks temporarily transfigure this local site. Beaming affect in the night, it is a bright spark provoked by lively exchange and haptic interaction. One could say that the site is *eddying*: it becomes a gravitational vortex, implicating one beyond the measure of the creative gesture by virtue of its affective qualities. Ancients might have referred to it as a site of apparition (cf. Serres, 1987) – more contemporarily, one might recognise this process as pertaining to the invention of place. In this sense, the event evidences the eddying of emergent qualities in lived social spaces – despite their so-called enclosure within global networks.

A manner of working enabling the involvement of chance in the creation of the object is defined via the event. The influence of chance in the production of the intricate details of this sculpture warrants future investigation. This project is thus situated in a field of study where prediction and control are, in principle, taken as impossible (much to the contrary of the popular belief held by the canon of social sciences). Bateson and Serres (along with contemporary scientists such as Brillouin, Monod, and others) demonstrate that scientific knowledge is in fact concerned with the unpredictable, the rare and the outstanding (Bateson, 1979: 40-41; Serres, 2000: 78). The aura of the art installation – that is, the ways in which it calls forth perception – seems to transfigure the social world on an intimate level. It poses questions which require the sharpening of our senses, placing the perceptibility of reality, the presence of episteme in the world and the materiality of the collective polis within circles of entanglement and relation. More than the Benjaminian wish image of a classless society wedded to the elements of primal history (Benjamin, 1999: 4) – although this may correspond to the imaginary of the object – the mobile sculpture is the harbinger of a different reality that the creation of the object provokes.

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