

LAURA MCLEAN-FERRIS IT WISHES TO RUN

‘Nothing more alarming than these oozings,’ Jean Dubuffet wrote in 1946, ‘which stain anything placed under the picture in the dirtiest manner.’ He was writing a letter to the owner of one of his paintings, the writer and editor Jean Paulhan, who had written to him to inform him that the problem with the sweating artwork was happening again: material from the painting was dripping off the wall and onto the floor. Dubuffet responded that he had chosen this particular work for his friend because it seemed least likely to turn to liquid: ‘I am astounded. And with great unease I imagine what the other pictures are doing.’ He offers to take it back into his studio, to ‘cure it of its wish to run.’¹

Now there are new wet drips on the floor. In Isabelle Andriessen’s exhibition *BUNK*, uneven pools form beneath six large yellowish sculptures, uncertain hybrids of organic and industrial matter, which hang on white gallery walls in intervals at nesting height. Reaching to locate them within some kind of taxonomic system of form, I grasp at creamy mammoth bones, fragments of car chassis, or brackets for a gigantic piece of infrastructure long since removed. The drips on the floor are from something bright and gemlike that seeps out of them, vivid as Cool Mint Listerine. Small droplets of this liquid bloom on the undulating yellow surfaces, crusting over into tiny aquamarine crystals, which spread like neon moss across the objects. It is not immediately clear where the liquid has appeared from, where the holes are that allow it to seep through. Then again, I’m uncertain if I have ever taken the time to try and watch a bead of sweat emerge from the skin’s smooth surface, it rather slowly moistens then collects, swelling into a drip, before making its way towards the earth. The yellow sculptural forms, as smooth and plastic as they might appear, share a kind of permeability, a breathability, with skin. They are ceramics of a particularly porous kind, especially developed by Andriessen: they have been fired and glazed in a way that allows them to absorb moisture and also to secrete it. Attached to one of the six yellow sculptures is an aluminum appendage in the manner of a parasite or prosthetic organ. It seems to grasp the sculpture with need, like the face-sucking alien of the collective cinematic unconscious, though the nature of this ‘embrace’ cannot quite be typified as violent or parasitic. It is connected to two chrome-colored tubes that feed up into the existing architecture, ultimately connecting to a cooling system in another space. Water collects on the cold aluminum surface, sharpening the atmosphere and creating a thin membrane of dew: visual signals of chilling temperatures that do not require the confirmation of touch.

It seeps. Liquid moves slowly through the object, though ever downward. Slowly it breaks through the membrane, chasing the floor, even deeper beyond, to the lowest level. ‘Liquid, by definition, is that which chooses to obey gravity rather than maintain its form, which rejects all form in order to obey gravity,’ Francis Ponge wrote. Out in the atmosphere the liquid separates, crystallizes into chemical salts and vapor in the air. There, the latter can be absorbed, breathed in and out, before it travels to an area cold enough to convince it to turn back

into liquid, again, giving up on its airborne form and returning to the form of the droplet, clinging to a cold surface, before moving ever lower downward.

Installed at Centre d'art Neuchâtel, *BUNK* creates an observable network of atmospheric and material intra-actions. Each system of works is mutually dependent on one another and on the surrounding atmosphere for their forms, and for their unique duration: a second room includes another trio of sculptural forms—two clinging to rails installed on the floor and one to a wall—which are also connected to the central cooling system. These sculptures also appear to slowly bleed, sweat, breathe, and leak moisture and metals, creating new pooling forms of entangled elements in liquids, crystals, and airborne elements, secretions that created patternings in verdigris, gold, calcite, and rust, resembling painterly stains, spatters, blots, flecks, spills, and growths. In *BUNK*'s sister exhibition, *DORM*, which took place simultaneously at the De Pont Museum in Tilburg, a more heavily integrated infrastructure is employed to connect sculptures that include similar mechanisms and materials. A system of precise and orderly coolant pipes connect several individual floor-based sculptures, *Bunk Beaks*, to a central cooling system. The forms of the *Bunk Beaks* appear more elongated, streamlined, even more weapon-like. Several 'C' like ceramic forms, evoking the gape of an alligator, are coated in a black rubbery glaze. When installed, these bloom and drip with liquids a shade of radioactive chartreuse and soil brown that collect in a metal trench below, while a partner work in another room, *Necrotic Core*, gleams in a glaze of luminescent white, bright blue blossoms emerging on its surface like cavities on a new tooth.

Evoking institutional or organized sleep groups, the titles *DORM* and *BUNK* suggest sculptures in a state of hibernation or *dormancy*. Yet the exhibitions are also stages for significant material transformations and concatenations of events that occur at a pace too slow, or at times too microscopic, for human viewers to view as a performance or action, as such. Andriessen's sculptural architectures are installed at the beginning of an exhibition's duration, inaugurating a time-based script that is realized by materials. When left 'to run' (in both the mechanic and drippy Dubuffetian senses of the word), what is brought forth is at once a painterly composition, a lively-seeming flourishing, and evidence of the atmospheric porosity and the ecosystemic dependency on which humans, too, rely. That humans share the air that they breathe with each other, as well as non-human creatures such as bats, cats, deer, minks, and pangolins, has been virtually impossible to ignore in recent years due to the prevalence of a pandemic. Still, in cultures that emphasize individualism it is challenging to represent and image this codependency, this more soupy understanding of the material impact of all things on each other. In the face of environmental and social crises, and new developments in micro and macroscopic knowledge, figures such as Caroline A. Jones have suggested philosophies of being such as 'symbiontics,' which 'avoid the apotheosis of the one in favor of that continuous condition of convivial codependence that is life—beginning from our ancient endosymbiotic couplings and continuing through to our ongoing incorporations of viral lysogenic forms.'

Andriessen's sculptures do give form to a co-dependency, offering sets of entangled material processes and feedback loops, but curiously, perhaps darkly, they seem to exist in an environment that is suggestive of an absence of human presence and, perhaps, an absence of interest in the human actor. On a basic level, this is because the processes by which the sculptures continue to transform, the leaks, the poolings, the rusty creaks of crystallizations and tidemarks, are generally perceived as evidence of human absence: of dereliction, abandonment, and neglect. In inhabited spaces, puddles are mopped up, spills wiped away, surfaces are wiped or dusted down. The patterns of salts, metals, condensations and evaporations that occur in webs and striations are reminiscent of environment in which humans have not recently intervened: rock pools covered in lichens and flat mossy fronds, abandoned buildings open to the elements, where grime, mold, and animal fluids have accrued and spread. Like those abandoned spaces, the oozes, leaks, and spreads from the sculptures are indexical—they mark the time that has passed since the sculptures were installed, and, in some cases, since they were connected to cooling systems or water sources.

However, biological life is not quite the driving force for the growth of these spreading granules, which are evidence of a more chemical, metallurgic form of proliferation (albeit encouraged into activity in collaboration with a human artist and the curators, installation teams, and other workers in an exhibition space). Andriessen's exhibitions involve some degree of flattening between forms of agency, both alive and not, but also draw attention to the materiality of all things, including the human viewer. As Jane Bennett put it in her influential book *Vibrant Matter*, 'If matter itself is lively, then not only is the difference between subjects and objects minimized, but the status of the shared materiality of all things is elevated.'² If all elements have this kind of 'agential,' rather than 'subjective,' effect, the effect of this demonstration might be

to de-emphasize the subjectivity of the human artist and their collaborators, and of the primacy of biological life itself.³ Such material shifts in the work might be created by agents of the type described by Jessica Riskin in *The Restless Clock* (2016). In narrating a history of the debate over the liveliness that makes ‘things’ tick, Riskin describes ‘agency’ as an intrinsic capacity to act in the world in a way that is neither predetermined nor random: a form of action that appears to originate from within the thing itself.⁴ *It wishes to run.*

It’s in this way that Andriessen’s exhibitions propose a form of art beyond human governance. In a moment of apocalyptic imagination, we imagine scenarios in which *BUNK* and *DORM* can keep spilling and changing, keep producing. There we can watch entropy unfurl on the spaces of art, for materials to take the reins without us, to keep turning to mess, spills, amalgams, admixtures, fumes. Paradoxically, perhaps Andriessen’s exhibitions show us a speculative environment of art-making that will arrive if, as a species, humans are unable to accept their current states of codependence and entanglements, and indeed toxicity, an unbeloved point of connection between all things. As the poet Juliana Spahr writes about our shared atmosphere: ‘How lovely and doomed this connection of everyone with lungs.’⁵

- 1 Jean Dubuffet, letter to Jean Paulhan, dated January 15, 1946, published in *Jean Paulhan à travers ses peintres* (exhibition catalogue) (Paris: Grand Palais, Editions des musées nationaux, 1974), p. 96
- 2 Jane Bennett, *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2010), p. 13
- 3 Terms and theories developed primarily by Karen Barad and fully explored in publications such as *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham, North Carolina: Duke University Press, 2007)
- 4 Jessica Riskin, *The Restless Clock* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016) p. 3
- 5 Juliana Spahr, *This Connection of Everyone with Lungs: Poems* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2005), p. 10