

## **(Corpore)oceanographies**

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*WHEREAS the ocean is a place of possibility*

*there can only be possibility when there is an absence of knowledge*

*the ocean is a body of water*

*the body is a place of possibility*

Chloé Maillet & Louise Hervé's beautifully measured short film *Un passage d'eau (The Waterway)* (2014) offers up a tantalising proposition: if the ocean is a place of possibility, then what if it is able to offer us a way of extending the duration of our lives and of transforming our spiritual and bodily selves? The film poses an exploration of the transformational powers of the ocean as the narrative moves between the day-to-day action at a seaside resort, a worker's experience on an industrial trawler and a well-presented group of retirees who are interested in the mysteries of Atlantis and in the nature of mortality. The aging president of the Atlantean diving club, along with his elegant companions, explains that giant clams and lobsters don't suffer from age-related genetic degradation as we do. Instead, they regenerate, renewing themselves for hundreds of years so that they grow larger and larger until they are killed, harvested, or become sick. This regeneration, perhaps, is the key to eternal life.

Each of the three groups is visually interconnected: the crisp, clean and controlled palette of the resort's health spa, in its light blues, whites and greys, sits against the unbalanced, dirty, industrial lines of a thrumming trawler that belongs to subaquatic archaeologists who are looking to preserve the remnants of ancient shipwrecks. The boat's creaky pipes and dripping grates in turn resemble those of the humming plant rooms of the calm, quiet swimming pools in which the retirees take the waters, loosening their joints in the mineral baths and undertaking aquarobics in a peaceful indoor setting that looks out to the more unruly ocean. The circularities and movements of water and the ocean are highlighted in deliciously proportioned static framing and meditative long takes, which emphasise the rhythmic movements of boats, bodies and water. Close-ups on the muscular hands of one of the spa's massage therapists as she kneads away at the calves of a woman indicates, clearly, that the capacities, boundaries and limitations of the embodied self are to the fore.

This expansion of affect and capacity is made fleshy and tangible when a handsome, beautifully coiffed older woman named Ondine undergoes a remarkable evolution: she is wrapped in white sheeting and covered in therapeutic mud at the spa, then takes to her own bathtub where she transforms into the same sort of enormous, lumpen fish that was inadvertently dredged up by the archaeologists. A key tension underlining this, which is highlighted through the visual emphasis upon deeply tactile anti-aging treatments that 'liquefy' the body, is that regeneration and rejuvenation are not the same thing. There is a degree of wry ambivalence as to whether this grotesque ichthyomorphic rebirth is really what Ondine was seeking; after all, her new, grey-green, slimy and spotted form hardly goes with the rest of her tastefully decorated house, and her clumsy slump from the bathtub is comic in its awkwardness.

Moments before the pisciform transformation, the camera lingers on a small, kitschy piece of shell art, much like the other pieces of gimmicky tourist tat that occupy the opening credits: the shell-encrusted jewellery boxes, the clumsily varnished yet jaunty crab-people, the garish hand-painted sculptures ornamented with scallop shells, all set against a rich sea-green background. While each of these items speaks to a sort of child-like fairy-tale engagement with the collectible products of the messy, unknowable depths of the sea, this piece, in particular, is rich with allusion and allegory: it is a small, ivory-coloured figure of the Virgin Mary, surrounded by the shells of tiny clams, scallops and sea-snails, back-lit by a small yellow light couched in an pearlescent abalone shell, and placed between a mirror and a statue of a cartoonish, grinning dolphin mid-leap.



Still from *Un passage d'eau (The Waterway)*, HD video, dir. Chloé Maillot & Louise Hervé (2014)

Apart from the sculpture's reverential attributes – here, a dainty Mary of the waves, the blessed virgin of the sanitised, domesticated sea – the sculpture explicitly recalls

Renaissance artist Sandro Botticelli's *The Birth of Venus*, a painting that is now so over-rendered and reproduced, plastered on everything from shower curtains to mousepads. Botticelli's painting has the beautiful, naked and improbably-proportioned Venus brought to the shore in a large, vulval scallop shell. Yet its representation of Venus Anadyomene – the well-worn motif of the adult Venus rising, birthed, from the sea, which acts as the source of the constant renewal of her virginity – does not include the baser aspects of her generation. The sea foam from which Venus-Aphrodite is born(e) was the product of the castration of sky-father Uranus, whose genitals were severed and thrown into the sea by the titan Cronos. Thus, the (re)generation offered by the body of the ocean, and the parthenogenesis that binds Venus and Mary, is linked to both devotion and violence: the closed circle of perpetually-restored virginity and allusion to a lack of carnal knowledge is juxtaposed with the violent destruction of the generative organs. The Latin and Old French etymologies of the word 'virgin' ties the term explicitly to the chastity and piety of women, not men, and usage over time has come to situate the fetishized virginal body as unknowable and unknown, implicitly feminine, nascent and sexual, and a signifier of possibility – even if that possibility is at the expense of the woman herself.

The enigmatic virginal Venus has lent her name to one of the more macabre explorations of the female body: the Anatomical Venus, a term given to a type of European wax anatomical model of a young, beautiful woman, which was designed to 'reveal' the inner workings of the female body and make female anatomy comprehensible. The life-sized, dissectible models, which were popularised in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, were made to be as aesthetically pleasing as they were informative so as to highlight all the 'wonders' of God's creation.<sup>i</sup> They appeared in both museums and travelling shows as a far more salubrious (and sweet-smelling) way of learning about anatomy than poking around in a decomposing body. They were ostensibly designed to educate; and, like the plastic 'Visible Woman Assembly Kit' models made by the Renewal Products Company around 1960, they imparted anatomical information in an accessible and tangible manner. Nonetheless, their emphasis upon idealised and aesthetically pleasing female forms mark them as lurid, idiosyncratic fetish objects steeped in (necro)eroticism. Adorned with real hair and eyelashes, they were laid in glass cases for the entertainment and elucidation of the spectator. These so-called Sleeping Beauties and Dissected Graces would

beckon with a smile; one idly toys with a plait of real golden human hair; another clutches at the plush, moth-eaten velvet cushions of her case as her torso erupts in a spontaneous, bloodless auto-dissection; another is crowned with a golden tiara; while yet another has a silk ribbon tied in a bow around a dangling entrail.<sup>ii</sup>

The hyperreal Anatomical Venus is the perfect copy of a certain feminine ideal that has no original: a beautiful, ruined and phantasmic body that is perhaps the apotheosis of the female body made intelligible – that is, knowable. The figure, which often (of course) held a gently nested foetus, creates its own scientific and aesthetic knowledge of female anatomy, which marks woman – the 'dark continent', and the troublesome Other to the male default –

as something that can be probed and fondled, caressed and admired, and demystified whilst draped in the abject trappings of an eroticism that intermingles life and death.



The Anatomical Venus, from Josphenum, Collections of the Medical University of Vienna  
<<http://www.josephinum.ac.at/?L=1>>

While the waxen Anatomical Venus posits a body that is fixed, knowable, docile and hyper-feminine, Dorota Gawęda and Eglė Kulbokaitė's *She cannot, does not want, and is ready for anything* (2015) articulates the curious, fleshy, sensuous castings or leavings of a generative unruly cyberbody that cannot be truly 'known' or conceptualised in a world of linear time and tangible spatiality. In the static form of the Anatomical Venus, female sexuality is fixed, 'properly' cis-gendered, and reified in a manner that condenses it into a morbid artefact. It is, at the very least, honest in its obsession with the pacification of the phenomenal, mutable female body that sits in opposition to the construction of the rational, in-divisible and implicitly male individual. On the other hand, in *She cannot...* the cryptic traces of the desirous and unbounded cyberbody are made flesh, literally, in the packaging of paua in bags of blue ice gel. The absent 'owner' of these sticky, decomposing cast-offs is present through text and abstraction.

As spectator-participants we are left to bridge the gap between the physical artefact(s) and the enigmatic 'she' who emerges from the North Pacific Ocean in Gawęda and Kulbokaitė's text *for a future IV: but what are we if not alive?*, which featured in the online exhibition *C R A S H* (2015) on newscenario.net, a digital curatorial platform for conceptual and time-based work. The text, attributed to collective moniker d3signbur3au, describes a blue-tinted post-human figure who is wounded, growing, and interconnected, her "self-sustaining and self-reinforcing"<sup>iii</sup> embodiment operating at both nano- and macro- levels. This sensuous and fundamentally unknowable body decomposes and recomposes in the generative space of the ocean, embroidering the natural and the synthetic together in a manner that expands the capacity of both and allows sensuality to spill forth, rather than close in upon itself. This body's dynamism and lack of fixed definition is part of its power and strength.



Where the openness of cyberspace is highlighted, conceptually at least, as a promising space of expanding information and oceanic potentiality,<sup>iv</sup> the physical offering of the paua-flesh also highlights the regulations and limitations placed on the body. This is not only present in the physical act of the acquisition and bagging of the actual shellfish (which, in this case, was carried out by the female curator and Physics Room Director), but in the systems of laws, conditions and limitations that surround the collection of paua itself, such as the existence of fishing quotas, the restrictions surrounding the collection of immature specimens, and so on. As such, the articulation of these cyber-leavings, with all their slick blue allegories of sensuality and fleshiness, become entrapped, again, in a net of restrictions and privations that sit in opposition to the freedom suggested by the most utopian articulations of the digital body.



Fig. 3: *VNS Matrix: All New Gen*, 1995 <<https://www.accaonline.org.au/exhibition/vns-matrix-all-new-gen>>

Both *but what are we if we are not alive?* and *She cannot, does not want, and is ready for anything* recall the aggressively and playfully utopian cyberfeminisms that emerged in the 1990s which explore the idea that the potential anonymity and the freeing no-space of the digital is an environment in which the hierarchies of race, class and gender might be disrupted and dismantled in favour of the subjugated, oppressed and excluded. In terms of the intersection of art, politics and technology, this approach was exemplified and spearheaded in the confrontational and witty work by pioneering Australian cyberfeminist artist collective VNS Matrix (1991-7), whose installations, events, and online activities probed the connections between gender, technology, and systems of power and domination.<sup>v</sup> Claudia Springer, in discussing the possibilities of cyborg feminism(s), cybersexualities and the sensual pleasure of the body-technology interface, similarly writes

of the powerful contradictions inherent in the dual drive to eroticise technology and escape the body.<sup>vi</sup> The fixity of wax in the dead-alive Venus and the physical and conceptual capture of the body that it implies gives way to the emancipatory dissolution of the flesh as it encounters another form of spatiality and continuity. Instead, escape and eroticism become intertwined in a manner that foregrounds the possibilities of bodies – be they our physical bodies, cyber-bodies, bodies of people, bodies of water, or composite assemblage-bodies.

Yet, the liminality of the digital and the possibilities offered through the unfolding of the somatechnic interface offer both possibility (for the revolutionary re-imagining of the concrete notion of ‘category’ ) and threat (to both the vulnerable and those who have always benefitted from hierarchies, structures and strictures). This is because empty spaces, spaces of possibility, are also spaces of contestation. Those with the most to ‘lose’ in such a utopian dissolution or redistribution of privilege, that is, those who have traditionally benefitted from ‘the way the world works’ and who see the increase in rights and capacity of others as an inherent decrease of their own, are those who most vigorously and violently work to reinscribe the hegemonic power structures that support and facilitate such physical, political and conceptual violence. Likewise, if emancipation is predicated on the erasure of boundaries and the fixity of identity, there runs the risk of erasing the powerful, enriching differences that so inform identity through the creation of a smooth, homogenising flatness. One can only hope for blue-fleshed cyberfeminist superheroes to spring up against the toxicity that is fed by the sheath of anonymity and the presumption of inherent, rightful ownership of place, so that the liminal spaces of the interface offer more to the dispossessed than to predators and misogynists.

The ocean, then, like the digital, is a space of possibility insofar that we know so little of it, including its boundaries and its capacities. Like fictional explorers such as Captain Nemo, or real day discoverers such as the scientists who measure gargantuan subsurface waves<sup>vii</sup> and those curious oceanographers who gamely drop microphones down into the farthest, unexpectedly noisy depths of the Mariana Trench,<sup>viii</sup> we can conceptualise the ocean as one of the last frontiers. Such attempts to ‘know’ this oceanic body, as well as our exploratory understandings of our own phenomenological and erotic bodies, might occur through representation and measurement, through allegory and expression, and through theorisation and exploration, but these activities also serve to highlight how fragile and insufficient our understanding really is. Like the Atlantean explorers of *Un passage d'eau (The Waterway)*, we are driven by curiosity and optimism and yet must be cautioned by the notion that such possibilities - reinvention, regeneration, and rejuvenation, be it terrestrial or digital - may present themselves in wondrously unexpected and challenging forms.

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<sup>i</sup> Joanna Ebenstein, “Ode to an Anatomical Venus,” *WSQ: Women’s Studies Quarterly* 40:3&4 (Fall/Winter 2012): 346.

<sup>ii</sup> Ebenstein, “Ode to an Anatomical Venus,” 346-7.

<sup>iii</sup> d3signbur3au, “for a future IV: but what are we if we are not alive?” accessed May 9, 2016, artviewer.org, <http://artviewer.org/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/d3signbur3au.pdf>.

<sup>iv</sup> ... yet one that weighs only 50 grams! See “Internet ‘weighs the same as a strawberry,’” *The Telegraph*, accessed May 9, 2016, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/technology/internet/8865093/Internet-weighs-the-same-as-a-strawberry.html>.

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<sup>v</sup> See the Cybermanifesto for the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, by VNS Matrix: “We are the modern cunt / positive anti reason / unbounded unleashed unforgiving...” “VANS Matrix / Cyperfeminist Manifesto,” accessed May 9, 2016, Sterneck.net, <http://www.sterneck.net/cyber/vns-matrix/index.php>.

<sup>vi</sup> Claudia Springer, “The Pleasure of the Interface,” *Screen* 32:3 (1991): 303-323.

<sup>vii</sup> “Researchers Unravel Secrets of Hidden Waves,” MIT News, accessed May 9, 2016, <https://news.mit.edu/2015/unravel-secrets-internal-waves-0506>.

<sup>viii</sup> “Deep-Sea Audio Recordings Reveal A Noisy Mariana Trench, Surprising Scientists,” The Two-Way: Breaking News from NPR, accessed May 9, 2016, <http://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2016/03/04/469213580/unique-audio-recordings-find-a-noisy-mariana-trench-and-surprise-scientists>.