

SENSING THE UNNAMABLE: A CONVERSATION WITH BENY WAGNER



Let's talk about *Outside*, your latest video work, which constitutes a strong voice in the exhibition space. Could you tell me more about the research process behind it?

I was researching and reading about the human digestive apparatus. Human digestion and metabolism, in general, have always been fascinating to me on various levels. At a certain point I realized that I often used digestion as a metaphor for a wide range of things. It was interesting for me to find out that the digestive system is, after the cardiovascular system and the central nervous system, the first part of the body that forms in the womb. So before any other parts of our bodies are formed, any surfaces or boundaries, the passage is formed through which the outside world moves through our bodies. For the first few weeks of an infant's life, before it can really sense or respond to external stimuli, it is essentially little more than a digesting organism: a passage.

Advances in microbiology and biochemistry are redefining how we understand life, human beings, biological diversity, etc. and actively putting into question many of the foundations on which Western science and philosophy have been built. What's interesting to me artistically and philosophically is that this research makes it very difficult, if not arbitrary, to make clear divisions about what is *inside* and *outside*. The living human body, a micro-ecology, is nothing if not the continuous and fluid passage of substances on a range of scales. So this was kind of the starting point that I approached this work with.

Everywhere from cognitive science to philosophy we read about the importance of hearing as the first sense developed in the foetal stage, but the image of the digestive tract being formed at an even earlier stage seems to be an even more resonating one.

I read somewhere that all the new research on the human microbiome is leading people to reconsider whether the digestive apparatus should be considered the body's 6th sense, now that we're beginning to grasp its role in the absorption of external stimuli. I think this is a great idea and have adapted it for myself. It's a powerful way to start untangling the limits of our other sense perceptions and an opening towards sensing that might lead to new and unexplored realms. At the same time, like most scientific, technological, and philosophical advances in history, a new reconfiguration simultaneously opens new forms of freedom and new forms of control.

Jonathan Crary's book *Suspensions of Perception* outlines a shift that happened in the 19th century, where rapid scientific advances were made towards an understanding of the human senses. In contrast to the preceding centuries, where vision had been understood as stable and neutral, increased physiological and biological research showed vision and hearing to be fragile, uncertain, and deeply affected by other bodily processes, such as digestion. Crary describes how, with increased labor mechanization and the beginnings of what we understand as 'attention economy', a whole range of scientific and pseudoscientific techniques were developed which created certain standards of perception while pathologizing all unstable forms of perception which did not meet these standards. Crary quite brilliantly outlines how capitalist labor molded its subjects through the senses, creating subjects that would reconfigure their senses to meet and be able to endure mechanization. This is the sense in which perception was 'suspended', externalized, made foreign to the erratic subject.

I think there's an interesting parallel between this historical and ongoing process and a relationship that could emerge, or is already well underway, regarding human digestion as a sense perception. Once it is widely accepted that digestion is a sense perception, what forms of control will be implemented to further manage populations and conform personal idiosyncrasies towards a particular standard useful for power? In a sense I believe this has always been the case: power has always formed and evolved through its subjects' intestines—agriculture and its socio and geopolitical extensions have been the foundation for every

power structure throughout history. But today's advances in microbiology and biochemistry offer new and extremely precision driven, unprecedented forms of manipulation. This is something I'm in the process of researching and developing for future work.

The conceptual lense of metabolism that you assumed lends itself well to the analysis of various economic and cultural instances. Can you talk elaborate more on how you interpret this notion?

The use of metabolism as a term for economic and cultural processes is almost as old as the study of metabolism itself which was first applied to animal physiology in the late 18th century. Karl Marx famously analysed the 'rift in the metabolism between man and nature' brought on through capitalist production. I recently read Jason Moore's *Capitalism in the Web of Life* which I found very thought provoking. He takes issue with the popularized term 'metabolic rift' and instead suggests 'metabolic shift'. I'm probably not doing him justice in this reduction but he essentially suggests that metabolism is a reciprocal process. Rather than thinking of this relationship between capitalism and nature as something that can be severed, capitalism and nature are in constantly shifting coevolutionary metabolic relations.

In that sense it seems that metabolism is the very condition of life. Metabolism occurs on many scales and points of exchange that all interact on some level but are impossible to grasp as a whole. How do we understand the relationship between metabolism on the cellular level, on the scale of the human body, on the scale of infrastructure, large eco-systems, the planet, etc. Metabolic processes connect these different scales of activity but in ways our own body, with its very limited scale of perception, is unable to grasp. I think moving image, as occupying the intersection between the body, technologies, and the perceivable world, has the potential to create affective experiences that allow us to experience those shifts of scale on some kind of emotional, physical, preconscious level.

At the same time metabolism is something that evades precise definition or quantification. It is always moving, always constituted by a great range of heterogeneous factors. Moving image, or the types of moving image I'm interested in and want to make, share much with this always moving, undefined, unquantifiable quality of metabolism.

I got to know your work in 2017, during your solo exhibition in KRIEG Hasselt. You presented there, among others, the video *We're All Here*, which shared similar 'metabolic' qualities with *Outside*. It would be interesting to discuss the connection between these works, of which both seem to unearth the foundation of the anthropocentric model of the world.

At the time I was working on *We're All Here* I was interested in how an ecology might be understood. Ecology, as I understand it, is not confined to the study of organic matter but refers to the study of relations between actors, how these relate to one another, and how these relations lead to some greater organizational form. Sometimes people think of ecology as specific to the idea of nature and see this in opposition to cultural or technological infrastructures. In contrast, I view all kinds of relations as ecological whether they be technological, organic, or human. And of course, the study of ecology has a long history of being applied to cybernetics, genetics, sociology, media technologies etc. Ecology, for me, is maybe the study of the space where technologies and organic matter intersect, overlap, and coevolve. In that sense, *We're All Here* dealt with displacement and how displacement forms new ecological conditions: the man is hiding in the forest, the chimp is clinging to an electricity pole and neither seem to have a clear relationship to the environment they're in but their very presence reconfigures the relations possible in that environment.

In both films, for each thing that is revealed, something else is hidden. *We're All Here* uses the forest as a place of low visibility. In a dense forest we can't see very far, but at the same time, we go to the forest for clarity—psychological or spiritual or whatever. The digital manipulation is not to say: the forest or the image is artificial, but rather to explore this push and pull between what is visible and hidden in both the forest environment and the space of image construction. *Outside* moves through digital visualizations and recordings of spaces that are both profoundly intimate and repulsive to us but that we're unable to explore without tools of visual mediation

Outside brings in an important element of physicality to the exhibition about statelessness, but it is a paradoxical, mediated physicality. It emerges from the compilation of material, including found footage, digitally generated animation, etc. Can you tell more about your use of moving image as a medium?

In both *We're All Here* and *Outside*, I'm exploring the limits of visual perception as it relates to the surface of the moving image. In both of these films I'm dealing with the surface of the image as uncertain and undefined - trying to create sensations that are not exclusively visual. Parts happen beyond the image and parts happen before. This is maybe something that is difficult to describe in language or that description might take away from. But I want to use the image as something porous as well as something decentralized in relation to both space and time: a way through which multiple scales, times, and spaces coexist. One of the things that I find so powerful about moving image is that it's capable of bringing together many different, seemingly disconnected spatial and temporal constructions. My films are always packed with layers of information and if one chooses to, they can be extracted. But my goal with making films is not to communicate information, but to communicate to the senses in ways that are not clearly quantifiable.

When I found this footage of the police cam and chase, I was kind of amazed that this single captured moment contained so much of what I was trying to get at in *Outside*. The man, with nothing to lose, is able to hide from the police in plain sight (in a sewage treatment facility) because he has crossed the threshold of the law (he is both trapped in waste and free from the capture of the law as long as he stays trapped in the waste). But, in my mind, he has also crossed the threshold of language, and this is what this footage conflated in a way that was so fascinating to me. The police officer keeps yelling (frantically) at the man to tell him his name. Why does his name matter of all things?! Why at this moment does the policeman need to know his name? What is the relationship between the law as a powerful system of boundary enforcement and language as the kind of foundation for all boundaries? The history of law enforcement is the history of private property, or more basically of production and guarding the means of production. But the law, in a sense, disintegrates when it comes to waste. The law refuses to cross the threshold between production and waste. Here, our own point of view, through the police cam, is the perspective of the law. We, as active observers, embody that closely intertwined relationship between sight, language and law enforcement. This relationship between the eye, language and law is something deeply fascinating to me and that I'm constantly exploring, deconstructing, and reconfiguring through my films.

I find it captivating how *Outside* comes into dialogue with the exhibition space of ISELP; the movement down the digestive tract finds parallel in navigating the exhibition space, following the 'spine' of the building. But at the same time, due to the—at the first glance—controversial imagery, the work has proven itself to be a difficult one to locate in the space and especially in relation to other works.

I can understand how some 'graphic' parts of the film make hard to display in some ways. In a sense, my perspective on human waste is that it is something outside of language—language being one of those cultural tools that both creates and enforces boundaries. It is something we understand as vulgar, a process or a material where our cultural standards and achievements break down, where the boundary between humans and animals or other life forms becomes fragile. We have very precise and very developed language surrounding the things we produce and consume: we name them, visualize them in high definition, and own them, and the ways we do this make up a great deal of our personalities on individual and collective scales. But waste, the other end of that process, is in many ways, the unnamable. It is relegated to the periphery and pushed outside of representation. We often don't know how to manage it—which in the time of the Anthropocene is becoming an increasingly catastrophic problem. We've now covered enough of the Earth to realize there is no 'outside'. I'm kind of touching on that scale by reducing the problem of waste to the most fundamental unit of the body. Perhaps there's a relationship between the repulsion of our own waste and our inability to manage pollution or nuclear waste etc.

The filmmaker Ben Rivers watched it and responded that he was delighted to call it the shittiest film ever made and mean that positively. It's a weird thing on my side to have made this shit product I'm now distributing as an extension of my own name and practice. Like I made a film about shit and of course I want it to be shown so I send it around but am essentially sending people shit. Who wants that? And who wants to be placed next to the shit film? I've been trying to understand my relation to that. Of course, I'm aware that there's an element of provocation, but at the same time that's the least interesting thing to me about it. I also accept that it's likely that a majority of people who see it might not engage with the more nuanced ways that it's communicating through. These things are always outside one's own control.

