

Arrhythmic Excitements

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We parasite each other and live amidst parasites. Which is more or less a way of saying that they constitute our environment. We live in that black box called the collective; we live by it, on it, and in it.

--Michel Serres, *The Parasite*

With the parasite, there is no conversation to be had between a you and an I, only the creative sens(ing) of a we. This “black box called the collective,” where the we lives, interrupts communication with the generative liveliness of noise itself. This noise consists of the indeterminacy of bodies in encounter. Serres asks: “‘We’: what does that mean? We are precisely the fluctuating moving back and forth of ‘I.’ The ‘I’ in the game is a token exchanged...The ‘we’ is made by the passing of the ‘I.’ By exchanging the ‘I.’ And by substitution and vicariance of the ‘I.’”ⁱ For Serres, the collective is not a sum of “I”s, but the renewed capability for becoming other to ourselves. He calls this “ecstasy,” or difference from our equilibrium. Ecstasy: literally to be beside one’s self, in a state of suspense. Traditionally in communication, the black box is an image of mediation, what stands between sender and receiver and facilitates or disturbs communication depending on the level of static or noise. Serres’ black box of the parasite is something utterly different: it is the relational ecology itself, where life happens.

From the outside, Andrew Goodman’s *Orgasmatron* is all campy fun and playful lures—oversized, artificial and suggestive: an inflatable crawlspace, a held breath. Once inside this zone alive with sound, colour and motion, it invites you to stretch out and stay a while, suspended in waves of sensation. In this soft machine, comfort lures the visitor’s body into indistinct boundaries that open onto a parasitic potential we-ness, through which other forces and energies may be activated. Soft machines produce novelty in the form of relation. Through the *Orgasmatron*’s vibrational ecology, where the complexity of the machinic environment offers as many relations as possible in provisional and modulatory fashion, the visitor is invited to sense relation itself. A slippery and dispersive attentiveness is enacted in favour of the clarity of interaction, blackboxing the happening itself. Soft machines like this one are artificial pods, metamorphic zones suspending habitual relations of time and space to maximize points of relations, contact and suspension.

At first glance, this clearly seems like a machine that *does something*, its futuristic materials, strange emissions and clean lines evoking a science-fictional quality of speculative effect. But it is also a machine of, to borrow Brian Massumi’s phrase, *something doing*.ⁱⁱ “Something doing” is another naming the becomings of relational ecology, of landing in the excluded middle of the inbetween, a vague wave of variance. Stimulated by visitors, the *Orgasmatron* rumbles and murmurs, pulses and shivers to activate the inbetween of a shared and deranged equilibrium. Scavenging from a host of science fictional sources, Goodman also parasites from the cult classic

film, *Barbarella*, helping himself to a host of sounds, images and sensations. Remapping the soft machines of that film, he borrows a quality of *undulation* from Durand Durand's "excessive machine," if not the form itself. As Durand Durand threatens to pleasure Barbarella to death, he traps her in a machine that ripples over her body in regular, metrical waves. But like all evil scientists, Durand Durand knows that control over matter comes from conversation, and he hedges his bets, doubling his actions with a narration that attempts to fix Barbarella's fate. But the soft machine jams: between Barbarella's soft moans, her excessive body edged with sweat and the smoke signals that the machine sends up as illegible signs of love, the noise of arrhythmic excitements overwhelms communication and everything breaks down. The relational ecology parasites: (be)coming. Waves are felt as forces, not forms. Goodman's *Orgasmatron* reactivates this undulation through foldings and unfoldings, incorporations rather than conversations, science fictioning.

What is the disrupting factor in the *Orgasmatron*? What stirs it to life? The body of the visitor, responding to the lure: "do you want to come and play with me?" But what is a body? Serres writes, "The parasitic relation is intersubjective. It is the atomic form of our relations".ⁱⁱⁱ A body both is, and is becoming. A body has a compositional coherence, but only because a body's very nature is in its propensity to hang together. This sensed togetherness is what also invites the body to come apart, to stretch and loosen its boundaries in an ecstasy of the difference from equilibrium. In the "Excessive Machine", Barbarella rides the waves and redistributes intensity in relation with the machine, not just in reaction to it. Threatened with a deadly coming designed to destroy her, she instead takes part in a lively becoming that redistributes affects, exploding the ecology and generating a new plateau. Excitation goes over the edge, producing a visible state of relaxation in Barbarella's body. Relaxation is the sign of a new system of relation, a dispersion of energies. Goodman calls this *bifurcation*, a variancing of the soft machine. In the *Orgasmatron*, stages of excitement shift the system through sensors and relays, through the something doing of the visitors. That *something doing* is not strictly intentional, but a tuning into the body's propensity for becoming other to itself. Fields of noise make of the entire body a hearing organ as suspension blurs points of tactile contact. Tactility reroutes through the ear, crosswiring the sonic and the haptic: touch becomes noisy. A rhythmic interval is activated between the *Orgasmatron* and the visitor. Neither is the parasite; both are the parasite. Serres writes: "The action of the parasite is to go to the relation. It instinctively goes to the mediations, occupying them all". Greedy and gluttonous, the parasite is what helps itself to encounter, to excess.

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- ⁱ Michel Serres *The Parasite*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1982: 227.
- ⁱⁱ Brian Massumi, *Semblance and Event*. Cambridge: MIT Press, 2011.
- ⁱⁱⁱ Serres, 8.