

# Introduction

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**M**osaic 53.1 is a general issue, and it struck me immediately on rereading the range of essays that make up the volume just how demanding interdisciplinary work can be, both on its authors as well as its readers. The very different textual ecologies that each of these essays instance pose a variety of obstacles to comfortable habitation, let alone ease of entrance. Subject matter itself can be prohibitive, even if a title exerts an attraction, and of course, the use of theory itself can be as much a repellent as a lodestone. Indeed, at the risk of misreading through extension Judith P. Saunders's wonderful essay, "The Poetry of Thomas Lux: Biophilia Meets Theory of Mind," it is tempting to say that the possibilities of entering into dialogue with any one text, let alone moving between all of the texts in the issue, are fraught in the extreme.

Saunders approaches Lux's poetry through a mix of evolutionary biology and cognitive theory, and this makes complete sense given Lux's "eccentric," wide-ranging, zoocentric subjects. Yet just how many times I had to read this essay before anything really sunk in—before I finally settled into it—I cannot say. In any case, I am so glad to be in the company of "the breathing and heat / of a billion writhing / and alive things" that Saunders highlights in Lux's poetry (61). What an essay! And what a revelation it was when I finally read Saunders saying that projection is an evolutionary

trait. This was something I could hold onto. Of course, the sensitive critic in me who has carefully nurtured the capacity for imaginative engagement with works of art and literature rolled over in his grave at the thought. Daisy, my border collie, never a reader of what Saunders calls theory of mind (ToM), but ever attentive to my gestures—especially the minutia of facial expressions and the donning of outerwear—increased in stature. None of which is to say that projection and its deep connection with what Derrida calls teleopoiesis is to be put aside for some other critical operation, only that it is inseparable from processes of evolution—an in-built capacity for translation we have developed—and is perhaps all we really have at hand for critical interdisciplinary work.

Saunders tells us that Lux “encourages readers to employ their evolved mind-reading ability—a theory of mind calibrated, ineluctably, to the *human* mind—as a tool for interpreting the mental worlds of animal species that are physiologically and cognitively very different from *Homo sapiens*” (58). She tells us that “he invites us to regret our entrapment in subjective modes of apprehension” (69). And she would urge us to repeat the exercise in spite of the origins of this peculiar form of fitness adapted to survival. Thus my earlier point concerning the different textual ecologies of the present issue, and an “evolved cognitive specialization” (56). I will exercise further to stage an encounter with the work of Korean artist Haegue Yang, which features on our front and back covers. Entering into dialogue with Lux’s texts and Yang’s installations are very different problems, but it seems to me that the same basic evolutionary mechanisms that Saunders describes are crucially at work. Before going into this, allow me to introduce the other excellent essays in the issue.

Philip McGowan’s carefully shaped essay, “Elizabeth Bishop’s Work of Fire,” opens the issue. Out of allegorical obscurity, the author brings into visibility an elemental reading of Bishop’s 1947 poem “At the Fishhouses.” Using preliminary drafts of the poem, against the backdrop of psychoanalysis and religion, and with the aid of extrinsic sources, McGowan centres his analysis on a unique form of repetition, showing that for Bishop the work of fire is performed by water. In “Finster’s Finger: The Trans-Generational Art of Howard Finster,” Eyal Amiran performs an exceptional set of readings of select works by Howard Finster. Foregoing the easy temptation to read specific objects, places, or events in Finster’s version of American folk art as forensic evidence, Amiran turns his attention to a pattern of repetitious situations and immersive environments that are incomplete in and of themselves. Here he zeroes in on the peculiar importance that Finster allots to ecstasies of sound, feelings of warmth, and passivity. Deftly swinging between perceptual readings and auditory sensations, and carried along by a plotline that is as riveting as any episode of *CSI: Miami*, Amiran suggestively points to primal scenes that might have motivated Finster’s obsessions,

yet ultimately leaves these origins enigmatic. With trans-generational seduction at the heart of the narrative, my experience of Bernini's *Ecstasy of Saint Teresa* (1652) will never be the same.

In "Should the Subaltern Clean?," Sonja Stojanovic raises the question of domestic help in contemporary French fiction to a new level of visibility. Her sharp eye for the question of labour would seem to bleed into a wide thematics of work, which at certain moments tackles the inequities of performance under working conditions. That we always occupy the fictive space of the well-kept room, and that we imagine the housekeeper to be a woman of colour, goes to the heart of the matter. What we encounter here are not the narratives of the ultra-rich, whose primary worries are that housekeepers in their homes in Miami, Davos, and London are not working while they themselves are in the Maldives, but the pettiness of an international bourgeoisie who must live with their labour. In "Anthropocentric Ableism and Virginia Woolf's *Flush*," Sebastian Williams provides a historical account of ableness and speciesism in the early twentieth century through the lens of Woolf's fictional account of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's dog Flush. And in "Queer Kinship in the Work of Nathalie Djurberg and Djuna Barnes," Erik Fuhrer leans on the work of Donna Haraway to tackle inter-species coupling.

Working well beyond the threshold of identity politics, Mike Marais's essay, "Uncertainty and the Time of the Stranger: Michael Ondaatje's *Warlight*," begins plainly enough by isolating Ondaatje's recurrent trope of the stranger and staging his argument through the problem of naming. Very quickly, however, we are plunged into the thick of the complex interrelationships that define the novel's characters and are thence pushed to the ragged edge of the self where "one" bleeds into what Marais calls "imperfectly understood strangers" (99). Fragmentary, incomplete, and open to the past and future, here Marais beautifully unfolds the precariousness of others by virtue of highlighting selective passages and close reading. His brief comments on surprise as entry to the self "by burglary" via Levinas (100) are enough to warrant reading this essay alone.

Finally, we publish the winner and runner up of the *Mosaic Emerging Scholar Essay Prize* in honour of Dr. Dawne McCance, the journal's editor from 1999 to 2017 and recent Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada. The theme for this year's prize was Textual Politics, and the referees, who included Tina Chen, Dawne McCance, David Watt, Karalyn Dokurno, and myself, received a good number of strong submissions. Helen Plevka's "Musical, Lyrical, Universal? Neruda's *Amor* into Barber's *Lovers*" is a study in interdisciplinary, cross-cultural, and inter-medial translation. Working with a knowledge of literary and musical tropes, Plevka analyzes the relations between word and music. Perhaps the most interesting insights of the essay revolve around the

subtle relationship between Barber's command of Western tonal music and the recalcitrant power of Neruda's poetry. Lastly, in Annika Pattenaude's "Fabled Difference: Approaching Race in Marie de France," the author provides a string of compelling readings of medieval societal relations through fables and their animal actors. Pattenaude opens up the possibility of a double-edged reading of fables that speaks to a range of social tensions using the optic of what she calls a phenomenology of orientation: dreams of upward mobility are pitted against the voice of control and the maintenance of social rank in feudal society.

The work of Haegue Yang, which features on our covers for this issue, has increasingly come into visibility over the past ten to twelve years. Today she is a fixture on the international art scene, with exhibitions at the MoMA, The Bass, Miami Beach, the Art Gallery of Ontario, the Tate St. Ives, MCAD, Manila, and the MMCA Seoul in 2020 alone. I would describe the primary trope of her practice as being rooted in the self and its relations, the patient observation of which tends towards activism at critical junctures. As an extension of this basic orientation, one also notes attempts to bridge the gaps between private and public life, and finally a range of works that are deeply etched by the problem of identity and especially the latitude for contact between people, things, animals, materials, and so on. In its latest phase, the artist's work has also doubled down on the problems of technology, environment, and the itinerant lifestyle of the artist in demand. But none of these issues are absolutely new for the artist. Updating, pushing, and revising motifs is the norm, and a bewildering mix and match of old and new projects abound in this corpus, as does a pattern of dialectical inversions and a variety of chiasmic crossings that have of late proliferated into a multiplicity of densely interwoven narratives. Yang, who came of age in Korea in the late 1980s and 1990s, sees herself as a unique product of her generation, a generation specifically wrapped up in consumerism and the accelerated processes of modernity that gripped that nation during these years and marked off her orientations and worries from those of her parents' generation (Yang, "Diving" 116). Her work has always been overlaid with issues of inter-generational and cross-cultural desire, exchange, misinterpretation, and blinding, the importance of which seem to have solidified around her experiences as a young artist and foreign student in Germany while studying at the *Städelschule* in Frankfurt.

Thus, in a number of early works that read as Fluxus-inspired performances, we often see her learning the ropes of the European tradition, one of many versions of how one might engineer a new life in a new country and in so doing leave one's past behind. An early work that also betrays the scale of the artist's ambitions, *What I'd*



1. Haegue Yang, *What I'd Love to Have at Home*, 2001. 4 sets of metal shelving (Otto Kind AG), 1 sofa (Egon Eiermann, 1968). Installation shot from *Self as disappearance*, Centre d'art contemporain – La Synagogue de Delme, France, 2010. Photo by OH Dancy, © Centre d'art contemporain – La Synagogue de Delme. Courtesy of the artist.



2. Haegue Yang, *Storage Piece*, 2004. Wrapped and stacked artworks, Euro pallets. Installation shot from *Alterity Display*; Lawrence O'Hana Gallery, London, UK, 2004. Photo by Lawrence O'Hana Gallery. Haubrok Collection, Berlin.

*Love to Have at Home* (2001) is perhaps the best example of these concerns. Faced with the dilemma of exhibiting work in an extremely large commercial gallery space, Yang devised a plan to have the gallery coordinate the temporary lease of a number of sofas and shelving units that were purpose-built for Günter Behnisch's German parliament in Bonn and designed by Otto Kind. How an acute problem of filling a large space is shot through by Yang's private fantasies for home décor and cross-wired with the modernist anonymity, proportions, and design of German public life would later serve as a template for an ongoing series of works where she borrows furniture from private collectors in the cities in which she exhibits to create something of an ongoing sociological analytic of private taste. Like *What I'd Love to Have at Home*, *Storage Piece* (2004) plays on a similar, though inverted, set of worries about space. In this instance, the crisis of storing works that every artist faces is pragmatically solved by bundling and packing a diverse set of small, precious early works together on four palettes and

showing them as a single work. In so doing, a make-or-break solution to the problem of lacking space showcases the latent problem of a hidden or repressed “state of being” beneath the surface of things (Yang, “Script” 349). It embodies the shrinking possibilities of the self in the face of economic strain and the colonization of space by capital. And yet *Storage Piece* still manages to act on a poetic whim, for it thematizes the problem of presentation by overcoming a certain fetishization of material issues by telescopically incorporating the reigning hegemony of *Konzeptkunst*.

It should be clear that all of these works that are grounded in both the desires and worries of an increasingly global, urban, and cosmopolitan society are in no way identical to what Saunders describes as biophilia and a theory of mind. Yet the intimate nature and unique tactics for coping with life’s little pressures that Yang makes palpable in these works go a good distance in smoothing the way for acts of identification to take place where little if any common ground is offered up for show. It is as if her *poietic* solutions to issues of space in the contemporary world somehow mirror paradoxes that we ourselves have faced but only wish we had acted upon. More importantly, they show that she, like us, is divided against herself and that on the other side of a mirror where we live lives another life. In the wake of these early works, the process of identification and its various privations are accentuated, both through an array of moveable figure constructions composed of lights draped on IV stands and the use of suspended Venetian blinds to make small closes or semi-private spaces. Experimenting with these two components would become an integral part of the artist’s signature style, up to and including her steely cold and sobering mechanical ballet for blinds shown at *DOCUMENTA* (13) in 2012. Yang tends to work through her motifs again and again until a kind of exhaustion and pessimism sets in. Nadirs like *Approaching: Choreography Engineered in Never-Past Tense* (2012) never fail to strike up correspondences. But then, Yang’s “edgy lyricism,” as Fergal Gaynor has described the artist’s work—a lyricism whose “formal affect stops at the edge of becoming explicitly referential, even though one can clearly see there is something personal, or maybe existential at stake”—is a rule.

Blinds and abstract figure constructions make their first appearance in *A Series of Vulnerable Arrangements* (2006-09). Here these components variously exaggerate as well as blur the line between sculptural figure and spatial environment. On the one hand, the figure is hypostatized as a discrete entity—thus her well-known anthropomorphic light sculptures—but these abstract constructions are always hard to entirely separate from a range of technological props like spotlights, standing fans, heat lamps, humidifiers, and scent dispensers. No doubt the point just is that variable species of figures abound, at times furry, sprouting vegetal life, perfumed, adorned with jewelry



3. Haegue Yang, *Approaching: Choreography Engineered in Never-Past Tense*, 2012. Motorized aluminum venetian blinds, powder-coated aluminum hanging structure, steel wire rope, cable, module box, DMX recorder. Installation shot from *dOCUMENTA* (13), former freight depot, Kassel, Germany. Photo by Nils Klinger. SBS Prism Tower Art Collection, Seoul.

or seashells, or surging with electricity. This bewildering array of types typically confronts the beholder in awkward social groupings, with Yang exploiting the cold, alienating space of the contemporary white cube for its metaphoric yield. With a gesture to Jean Luc Nancy's *The Inoperative Community*, this is what Yang calls "a community of those who do not have a community [...] a community of the plural that shares nothing but ongoing self-examination and a strange kind of optimism" (Larsen). The impermanence of the airport departure lounge is as close at hand as the morbidity of the extended care unit, or the shallow bonds of consumption which link consumers while shopping. Sometimes the figures combine their draped strings of light with small Venetian blinds to betray a certain modesty, but also to make space for themselves in these exposed public places.

On the other hand, *A Series of Vulnerable Arrangements* hinges on environments and thresholds constructed from Venetian blinds known the world over for their mundane and generic form of privacy. Like the odd social groupings of which the





4. Haegue Yang, *Series of Vulnerable Arrangements – Gris out of Black and Gris out of White*, 2009. 2 IV stands, casters, light bulbs, cable, zip ties, terminal strips, rope. Photo by Kukje Gallery, Seoul. Private collection, Baltimore, Maryland.



5. Haegue Yang, *Series of Vulnerable Arrangements – Voice and Wind*, 2009. Aluminum venetian blinds, powder-coated aluminum hanging structure, steel wire rope, fans, wind machines, scent emitters. Installation shot from *Condensation*, 53rd Venice Biennale, Korean Pavilion, Venice, 2009. Photo by Pattara Chanruechachai. Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum, New York; purchased with funds contributed by the International Director's Council, 2011.

light sculptures are a part (as well as make us part), economies of scale have variously taken hold of these domestic thresholds, transforming micro-enclaves of private space into what can only be described as hyper objects bordering on cultural enclaves, often with the geographic proportions of the nation state and haunted by historical narratives of the *longue durée*. *Blind Curtain—Flesh Behind Tricolore* (2013), made expressly for the artist's first large scale institutional exhibit at the Musées de la Ville de Strasbourg, is a good example. At 460 x 700 x 150 cm, the monumental scale and colour of the hanging construction approximates what one imagines to be the undreamt of *unite d'habitation* that Le Corbusier never designed for the city. Behind the visually unstable surfaces of the construction—at times porous, at times opaque, and always composed of infinitely complex perspectival combinations of planes, spaces, and further thresholds—one cannot shake free of the fiction that somewhere inside, concealed and dissembled, resides a living thing. Urged on by the constant moiré effects of the overlapping planes, *Blind Curtain* makes one move, by which I mean that it impels one to find ever new ways to look at, into, and through the



6. Haegue Yang, *Blind Curtain – Flesh behind Tricolore*, 2013. Aluminum venetian blinds, powder-coated aluminum hanging structure, steel wire rope. Photo by Mathieu Bertola. Installation shot from *Family of Equivocations*, Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art, Strasbourg, France, 2013. Leo Shih Collection, Taichung.

construction—i.e., cross a changeable but otherwise intransigent border, which somehow echoes that border the city of Strasbourg straddles.

On the front cover we show an installation shot of Yang's *Boxing Ballet* (2013-15), which examples further modified versions of Yang's basic motifs: theatre, mobility, and animality. The work is perhaps best understood as an ensemble piece for audience, figure, and ground. In comparison to Yang's earlier works, *Boxing Ballet* minimizes the beholder's separation from the figure and maximizes a relational interaction encouraged by an integrated theatrical environment modeled on the work of Bauhaus master Oskar Schlemmer. With pink and black backdrops spatializing two acts of Schlemmer's three-act *Triadic Ballet* (1922), the unmistakably curious, robust, and robotic bodies of Schlemmer's figures take centre stage (Cubiñá and Lynch 6). In the image an individual moves, or more specifically pulls on, one of five of Yang's figural

adaptions. These so-called *Sonic Figures* are armoured in a reactive coating of small golden bells, which hastens an identity with both machine or automaton as much as animals. With gestures to Sophie Tauber-Arp's wearable art, these discrete ensembles, which both entice respondents with the charms of musical touch as well as alarm both subject and object to the issue of contact, not only inch Yang's work towards the utopian dimensions of modernism, but also set the stage for a special kind of encounter. The crucial question? Something like, how does one respond rather than react to touch at a primordial level? If at first overcoming the pragmatic obstacles to connection and community were the artist's bread and butter, increasingly Yang has turned to the early twentieth-century avant-gardes in order to find ways of re-wiring or re-imagining the bonds of kinship that exist beyond the spectacle of difference and range between physical interface, the tinkle of a discrete bell, and what is otherwise considered background noise.

Finally, on the back cover we feature Yang's current work on show in the Marron Atrium at MoMA. *Handles* (2019) both literalizes a pragmatic activist bent that has always been present in Yang's work and at the same time runs away from us by giving form to the increasingly fragmented, disorienting, and abstracted life-worlds we all inhabit. Signs of technological mediation and reproduction are broadly disseminated, dematerialized, and placed out of reach. More importantly, handles mounted both on an assortment of sonic objects as well as on the wall promise attachment at the human scale, which the larger-than-life sculptural figures deny and which the scattering of image shards on both ground and as background seem to prohibit altogether. And yet, if abstracted and broadly dispersed, it does not seem a stretch to suggest that all of these concrete objects, sounds, and images are the very stuff of public space. The sounds of birdsong recorded by journalists in the DMZ intent on hearing conversations between leaders during a summit between North and South Korea typify the general schizophrenia of the piece, which is further accentuated by the intermittent presence of the work of Korean composer and political prisoner Isang Yun and references to the Armenian mystic George Gurdjieff (Yang and Comer). Thus, at the centre of the installation, one is drawn to the star-shaped *Sonic Gate—Law of Nine*, presumably fashioned on the model of the mystic's eneagramm. If the figure calls up Da Vinci's image of the Vitruvian Man and worryingly replaces this monument to anthropocentrism with absence and the framework of a kind of medieval exercise rack, then it also casts a spell over the discrete parts, gathering things up into a multi-planed and faceted cosmology. Given this structure and these parameters, it would seem that the self and its relations are here shot through with a set of issues that shoot holes in Da Vinci's version of exceptionalism and turn specifically on states of being

that bleed into spiritual mists and across other ragged edges. So often objects or texts confront us, but also shade off into innumerable histories, hierarchies, types of reproduction, and more primordial (read: symbolic) forms of unity.

We need handles to conceptualize these relations that exist on so many levels and lie dispersed across the disciplinary fields making up the realm of public discourse. Thus, the handles on the inside rim of the *Sonic Gate* all but beg to be used. Something of the sort is also offered up in the essays that make up this general issue.

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