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## **RESEARCH GESTURES**

Voice

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# The Thingness of Artistic Research

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Perhaps in the space allowed, a demonstration of my argument will work better than a description.

Like the film of a mysterious pod depositing its seed in the oral cavity of a space-ship engineer, and its fully formed fetus later bursting forth through his stomach wall, late modernist Conceptualism inserted its seed into Academia, and then gave birth to Artistic Research (AR) in this fertile ground.

Art as ‘expression’ or ‘concept’ (e.g. Sol Lewitt’s “The idea becomes a machine that makes the art”) had played itself out by the turn of the century. Highly educated middle-class audiences sought out information-based art with roots in other knowledge systems. AR filled this gap.

AR has proven itself difficult to assess by Academia’s traditional standards, made more difficult by the introduction of “performative writing” into AR dissertations. One of the most startling effects accompanying the arrival of AR has been the advent of indeterminate metrics in educational institutions that for centuries had been repositories of rigorously articulated examination-based regimes of knowledge power.

In the sphere of art, AR has arguably found easier acceptance, transmuting the broad spectrum of daily life and identity politics into aesthetic forms. It is precisely this capacity to mutate and absorb all sorts of heterogeneous data that has also led to AR’s resuscitation of modernist art forms in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century: visual art, performance art, installation, and systems art (now community-based and socially engaged art). Artistic Research has infused these movements with new life, based on artists’ commitment to research and ‘thick description’ (Gilbert Ryle via Clifford Geertz).

But to return to the scene of the university, Artistic Researchers have been asserting the validity of A.R.’s aporic ideals in the very institutions from which art practice had long been exiled to the technical academies as ‘an activity of the hand’, rather than the brain. And ironically, we have been demanding that the degrees are awarded by the University, despite the aversion felt by many of our fellows toward all forms of institutional legitimation.

AR’s agonistic entrance into the educational system reminds me of a game I used to play with art critic, Lee Weng Choy in Singapore. He and I would watch films on Sunday mornings and then discuss them over lunch. The game opens step-by-step, a bit like Russian *matryoshka* (nesting dolls): each starring actor’s character

is contained in –and contains– those that historically follow. To take a simple example: the resolute *Gandhi* (played by Ben Kingsley), haunted by his own violent impulses, is found again at the psychic core of two other equally resolute personae: the *Sexy Beast* (2000, dir. Jonathan Glazer), Don Logan, and the Iranian émigré Massoud Amir Behrani trapped in the *House of Sand and Fog* (2003, dir. Vadim Perelman) of America.

Or consider the 1982 grade-B sci-fi flick by John Carpenter, *The Thing*. An alien species is found frozen in the arctic ice by a Norwegian mining company. Released from the ice, it proceeds to parasitically invade and duplicate nearby earthlings, humans and sled-dogs, at two research stations. *The Thing* was released in 1982, within a year of the appearance of Jean Baudrillard's *Simulacres et Simulation* (1981). A prescient if parodic forerunner of the recent theoretical turn toward 'new materialism', *The Thing* combines the ineluctable real with Baudrillard's "hyperreal precession of the simulacrum".

The 'Thing' simulates its victims, not through a process of reproductive DNA encryption, but by analogically copying one cell at a time. It takes hours to complete a perfect cellular copy with the right number of fingers and toes in all the right places. But the 'Thing' keeps getting interrupted at particularly grotesque moments of the compositing process, so bits of dogs and humans and gallons of infectious bodily fluids flood the station. The process isn't reproductive, it is mutative in the manner of the metastasizing (From Greek μετά + στάσις = displacement) process of malignancies, FX, language, signs. The on-going mutation process by the Thing results in ever more complex compounds, incomplete composites (or we should we say 'composts') of the two main bio-signifiers available at the field station: humans and canines (probably with a few cockroaches and rats in the mix).

*The Thing* snatched its core concept from the 1956 sci-fi thriller, *The Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, in which the citizens of an American town are taken over by another brand of immigrant alien pods. The nefarious strategy of the alien invaders (read 'communists' or 'McCarthyites' or 'foreign immigrants') to take over 'our town' was discovered by the good Doctor Miles J. Bennell, who had a trained eye for (ideological) symptoms and mutations. But he knew that his knowledge was available only so long as he remained autonomous. Once snatched, his eyes would be alien eyes. Invasion and simulation would then morph into complete assimilation.

So, a generation after *The Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, we find Dr. Bennell morphing into the science officer, Dr. Blair, of *The Thing*, who is first infected, not by the alien, but by the same realisation held by Bennell, that the 'Thing' will inevitably become another thing, and then another, until it becomes 'every thing'. There are no exceptions to the logic of compositing and 'assimilation' (simulation + assimilation).

I'm suggesting here that this pluralistic logic of unending performativity, inf(l)ection, absorption, mutation, compositing and assimilation constitutes *The Thing*, the film game with Lee, and Artistic Research.

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