

Producers-Parasites-Hosts

Annabel Howland

Producers-Parasites-Hosts is also part of
Get Lost – art route from 22 June to 22 September 2018

Exhibition in the entrance hall and corridor of
VU Amsterdam
Main building
De Boelelaan 1105
1081 HV Amsterdam
The Netherlands

From 22 June to 8 October 2018

Opening times Main Building VU
Monday to Friday: 07:00 to 23:00
Saturday: 08:00 to 18:00
Sunday: 10:00 to 18:00

Essay “Do you read me? Really read me?” by Clare Butcher

“Together we are an ecosystem and the ecosystem needs to stay in balance. You need different parties. If a market-maker runs the system it's no good; if a broker runs the system it's no good; if there's just an exchange, or just a bank it won't work either. You need all the parties & balance between the parties. An imbalance in the ecosystem can create illiquidity in the market, more volatility, whereby the average person is way worse off.” A marketmaker

Do you read me? Really read me?

A certain literacy is needed to understand some matters. Money matters. Money matters and also the surprisingly (and sometimes disturbingly) related ecologies of scientific and artistic research. It’s their abstraction, you see (and don’t see). Their symbolic agility. The power of words which operate in these spheres to shape the imagination and with that, perspectives on reality. As philosopher Franco “Bifo” Berardi reminds us, money and language “are nothing and yet they move everything. They are nothing but symbols, conventions, `fl a t u s v o c i s`, but they have the power to persuade human beings to act, to work, and to transform physical things”.¹

It is within this web of interrelated agencies, actors and things (organic and man-made) where Annabel Howland’s `P r o d u c e r s - P a r a s i t e s - H o s t s` entangles itself. Since the time of the global financial crisis in 2008, working closely with a number of specialists such as evolutionary biologist Toby Kiers and econometrist Albert Menkveld at VU Amsterdam, and London-based economist Tony Curzon Price, amongst many others, Howland has traced and traded narratives leading from “stories of lasers, kidneys and chemical compounds [to] microbial cooperation and human debt.”²

Over various iterations `P r o d u c e r s - P a r a s i t e s - H o s t s` has morphed from performative lectures accompanying edited sonic records of interviews with key players in this story at the Athens Biennial (2013); to handmade schematic gouache paintings, textual quotes and petri-dish renderings at the Pompgemaal in Den Helder (2015); a publication entitled `f u n g i`, a light box with mycorrhizal fungi in a plant root and sound piece `C e n t i p e d e G a m e – O n C h e a t i n g` at Kunsthal 45 (2015); and more recently, a triangulated mapping of community garden collaboration in Het Rode Loper Festival (2017).

Throughout this evolution, Howland interrogates the practice of hosting within institutions and nature together with the intimacies of survival between fungi and the market – which are, in the end, not dissimilar. As fungi evaluate their host organisms by their capability to provide sugar, the notion of corporation comes to mind as one entity becomes efficiently colonized by another – making the relationship between host and the hosted increasingly malleable.

The shifting scales of the project’s manifestations speak to Howland’s insistence on making legible the precarious conditions in which many live, breathe and work. Her inscriptions of handwritten, microscopic, as well as seemingly invisible macrostructures, materialize her research process while also reflecting on the monetary value of aesthetic display in a changing art market. The money is also here.

While we are in the space, let’s see and listen. The entrance hall you’re in features a number of window panels displaying fragments of the visual research outlined above, as well as four one-eared headphones. Two by the entrance hall windows and two by the windows opposite the student information desks. The soundscape is vast and varied, traversing the project’s previous edits via subjects like “pigeons, to flags, to cables, to microwave dishes on towers, information dark spots and flash crashes, dark pools, transparency and lit markets.”³ There’s a lot to hear. And you will have four months to dip in and out of the ongoing conversation. To read and think the material differently. Back to legibility. The specialization of language required in many fields (otherwise called “jargon”) can often seem opaque

and even exclusive. Isn’t opacity sometimes more useful than transparency though? According to Andy Haldane, the former Head of Stability and now Chief Economist at the Bank of England, the number of global financial languages is so vast it quite possibly exceeds the number of spoken human languages. Haldane also notes that, “a common language is known to increase dramatically bilateral trade between countries, by more than 40%.”⁴

There is, however and as always, another reading. One that’s more risky, more ambiguous, more messily political in its ambitions. Poet and philosopher, Édouard Glissant’s praise for opacity provides a useful counterpoint in and through the efficient, dark-pool workings of global markets. Glissant places non-transparency next to not-knowing and the fear that this generates within an Enlightenment-indoctrinated world. He asks whether – in a contemporary time, full of complication and contradiction – the West will move towards a more entangled approach to the world in a participatory way, or one that’s still based on “old impositions”.⁵ “Even if,” he says, “we should have no illusions about the realities, their facts already begin to change simply by asking this question.”⁶ By seeking a relation to things unknown, to difference, to the opaque, we invite the possibility of multiplicity which is a poetic force, one that opens up rather than closes down relationships. And which, as “Bifo” reminds us is a force in “excess of language...a hidden resource which enables us to shift from one paradigm to another.”⁷

Bringing us to the context of this particular commission at the Vrije Universiteit, Amsterdam and the not-so-poetic relation of education to debt. In Fred Moten and Stefano Harney’s work on `T h e U n d e r c o m m o n s : F u g i t i v e P l a n n i n g & B l a c k S t u d y` they observe that as opposed to credit, which is asocial, “debt is mutual. Credit runs only one way.”⁸ And while the pressure of debts to society are commonplace amongst fugitives, students, artists, the colonial “politics of debt without payment, without credit, without limit” remain largely intact,⁹ and often without regret: “Everything I did was within the rules...the blame lies elsewhere...the system went wrong” as one interviewee in Howland’s archive describes the post-crash attitude of those who contributed to it.¹⁰ There is an evolutionary dilemma at work it seems between the allowances of “the system” and the site of learning. To this dilemma, anthropologist Anna Tsing asks, “How do lovers of fungi practice `a r t s o f i n c l u s i o n` that call to others? In these times of extinction, when even slight acquaintance can make the difference between preservation and callous disregard...we might want to know possibilities of vernacular science, that is, knowledge production in which ordinary people can participate.”¹¹

It is in this participative entanglement that we find ourselves Producers, Parasites and Hosts of poetic indeterminacy: an indebtedness which can and `s h o u l d` be negotiated with the power of a vernacular literacy which is at once capable of reading, knowing and relating across different paradigms.

Clare Butcher

1 Franco “Bifo” Berardi, “Emancipation of the Sign: Poetry and Finance During the Twentieth Century”, in *E-Flux Journal* #39, November 2012, <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/39/60284/emancipation-of-the-sign-poetry-and-finance-during-the-twentieth-century/>. Last accessed 11/06/2018.

2 See Annabel Howland’s website: <https://annabelhowland.nl/project/producers-parasites-hosts-athens-mix/>. Last accessed 11/06/2018.

3 Annabel Howland, email 11/06/2018.

4 Andrew Haldane et al, “Towards a Common Financial Language”, www.bankofengland.co.uk/publications/speeches, 2012, p.1.

5 Édouard Glissant, “For Opacity”, in *P o e t i c s o f R e l a t i o n*, trans. Betsy Wing. Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1997, pp. 189-194.

6 Ibid.

7 Berardi, *ibid*.

8 Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *T h e U n d e r c o m m o n s : F u g i t i v e P l a n n i n g & B l a c k S t u d y*, New York: Minor Compositions, 2013, p. 61

9 Ibid, p. 64.

10 Annabel Howland, *P r o d u c e r s - P a r a s i t e s - H o s t s A t h e n s M i x*, 2013.

11 Anna Tsing, “Arts of Inclusion, or, How to Love a Mushroom”, *Australian Humanities Review*, Issue 50, May 2011, pp. 1-10.

Art and science at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam

Through public art projects and exhibitions, Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam (VU) actively works to engage audiences in its core activities of education and research. VU Amsterdam believes it is important to stimulate interaction between the arts and sciences because of the ways in which they complement and augment one another. Where science strives after objective knowledge, art delves into subjective experience. Together they bring about a deeper understanding of ourselves and the world around us, and this can change the world.

Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam: Looking further

Since its foundation in 1880, VU Amsterdam has stood out for its distinctive approach to knowledge. VU is an open organization with strong links to people and society. What matters is not just the acquisition of a greater depth of knowledge, but also a broader one. We ask and expect our students, researchers, PhD candidates and employees to look further – to look beyond their own interests and their own fields; further than what is familiar, further than the here and now.

Wende Wallert, curator and conservator Art

Get Lost – art route

`P r o d u c e r s - P a r a s i t e s - H o s t s` also forms part of GET LOST – art route until 22.09.2018. GET LOST – art route generates art in public space by partnering organizations in Amsterdam Zuidas with artists. For this edition the artists were invited to reflect on the notion of Code of Conduct.

Project: `P r o d u c e r s - P a r a s i t e s - H o s t s`
Artist: Annabel Howland
Essay: Clare Butcher

Voices, sources, references and other contributors to `P r o d u c e r s - P a r a s i t e s - H o s t s`:

Toby Kiers, University Research Chair and Professor of Mutualistic Interactions, VU Amsterdam
Albert Menkveld, University Research Chair and Professor of Finance, VU Amsterdam
Victor Caldas, post-doctoral associate AMOLF & VU Amsterdam
Gijsbert Werner, Junior Research Fellow, Balliol College, University of Oxford, former PhD student VU
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Andrew Haldane, Chief Economist, former Head of Stability, Bank of England
Helen Goossens and Jos de Putter, Backlight/Tegenlicht - VPRO Dutch Television and other bankers, market makers and economists

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