

**The Sixth International Conference on
Transdisciplinary Imaging at the Intersections between
Art, Science and Culture**

DARK EDEN

Sydney, AUSTRALIA: 6 - 8 November 2020

Conference Chair: Professor Paul Thomas, Art and Design, UNSW Sydney
Co-Chairs: Dr David Eastwood, Art and Design, UNSW Sydney
Dr Chelsea Lehmann, National Art School, Sydney
Proceedings Chair: Dr Edward Colless, VCA, University of Melbourne

**A shadow zone, a spectral landscape, a cemetery, zombieland.
The debris of an old image culture, or compost for a new one?**

The cultural moment now dubbed “Contemporary” is defined by the networked saturation of images. By the diffusion, dissemination and inundation of frictionless image production. By image hacking, image consumption and image commerce on social media and in platform capitalism. By 24/7 crisis news, doom-scrolling and misinformation spread by web influencers. By CCTV and drone surveillance. By massive multiplayer online gaming. By “deepfake” hoaxes and simulations that augment reality and contribute to the relentlessly cynical campaigning of our 21st century political twitter “newspeak”. Is not this cornucopia and unprecedented availability of mediated imagery a kind of Eden? If so, it is a dark Eden. Metaphorically fertile as a forest that is so thick with its tentacular edicts that the light that penetrates cannot escape its web; or perhaps, and more likely, that its mutated growth is now dependent on a black rather than bright light. Its darkness might be that of the pall of ash-filled smoke shrouding a burning continent.

Conference papers addressed the general topic from any angle (direct or oblique), but were asked to consider at least one of the following areas:

- Expanded image
- Remediated image
- Hypermediacy
- Expanded film
- Imaging science
- Computer vision
- Networked image
- Immersion
- Speculative realism
- The invisible, the subliminal, the inaudible or subaudial
- Infraworld
- Enlightenment and the post-truth era
- Augmented reality
- Artificial intelligence, or intelligent systems



Careful Whispers of The Butcher, or the Dark Image of Thought

Stephen Loo



Stephen Loo
The Chore of Jack and Jones (Jones), 2020
Mixed media, acrylic on canvas, fabric, thread, paper
106 x 106 cm

‘Blackbird singing in the dead of night /
Take these broken wings and learn to fly.’

Paul McCartney wrote *Blackbird* for the Beatles’s famous *White Album* and was inspired by the 1968 Civil Rights Movement of black Americans. The situation in the US was, as we know, synchronous with the series of student occupation protests in France against capitalism, consumerism, American imperialism and the power of traditional institutions.

The literal image of the song is dark. Birds, black against the darkness of night, without the light of day, are invisible to the eye. Their song however produces images in thought when night falls where the darkness punctured by sonorous light. Analogously, the multitudes assembled in '68 protests appear to thought as salient images in the brightness of day. It is the computational world's massive hyperobjectivity and its resonance with social media that provides this grid of visibility for the smooth images to thought of the protests, while its algorithmic reasoning and machine learning categorisations remain dark like a nocturnal groundswell of affective solidarity and practical self-organization.

I argue that resistance movements and the operations of the concrete togetherness of the multitude provides another relation between image and thought that is dark, one that is other to what is hidden from thought such as the operations of planetary computing above. This is what Deleuze and Guattari in *What is Philosophy* call the 'image of thought.' An image of thought is 'the image thought gives itself of what it means to think, to make use of thought, to find one's bearings in thought.'¹ What actually is the nature of this 'image'?

Rather than the protesting multitude providing the visibility of resistance and therefore a clear image representing the justice sought, and rights fought for, I am interested in, and much of my current research-based practice is concerned with, the multitude as a non-totalisable image, where its operations between entities – human, non-human, material, object and place – do not coalesce into a new collective or political imaginary. Such a conception leads to the notions of truth, justice and rights within political action having no preordained image *to* or *for* thought, but in fact it is *in this darkness of the image that thought confronts itself on what it means to think*. This is however not to say that is not possible to be politically active, but to become-active in this situation we must be 'inconspicuous,' elude representation and thus control. Becoming politically active means participating in micro-events or small undertakings that precipitate new spacetimes, concrete and actual togetherness, resolutely based in *this* world, and not any transformed or other ideal worlds.²

I argue that there is a way of seeing actual political action in the gatherings of the multitude that provide thought with an image of itself, operating in the midst of entities and agents whose extensive properties, sensible and computable relations between them, are broken, fragmentary, partial, indeterminate and non-correlational, as the dark 'image' that lurks as an impossibility for what we know as thinking. Such art practice throws into contingency – more so immanence – the actual bodily, sensorial, psychoanalytic and algorithmic means of political liberation, proceeding by a decentring of the human in the conception of thought, as that found in the relationalities of 'data-body', 'body-matter' and 'matter-thought.'

In this paper I will briefly outline two performance-based art projects that fraternize with the dark agencies of bodies, human or non-human, with the noise of the riot they produce; not by listening to it, but by feeling its vibrations as a (body)-politics of lower frequencies, and the immanent, improvised and contingent dark images of thought they produce. This is thinking confronting itself with what has been negated by day-science, forgotten by philosophy, dismissed by law and revealed-in by psychoanalysis. And these patterns of intensity are one with the laughter of the idiot, glitches in computational enclosures, cuts to continuous individualization, and hence the possibilities of escape into the nighttime emissions of thought. I argue elsewhere³ that such openings of new territories for affectuality reconfigure the conception of justice, or more accurately jurisprudence⁴, not as the interpretation but creation of laws, where a transcendental concept of rights – the right to life – gives way to a negotiated one – the becoming-right *is* life.



Stephen Loo
The Chore of Jack and Jones (Jack), 2020
 Mixed media, acrylic on canvas, fabric, thread, paper
 106 x 106 cm

In Macartney's *Blackbird*, there is nevertheless an image, that given by the forlorn bird song. With its melodies and rhythms, repetition and improvisation, the song calls up a territory, which is not merely of the community of birds nor the space governed by the acoustic range of song, but a milieu or what Jakob von Uexküll, the father of comparative biology, calls *Umwelt*.⁵

The *Umwelt* is emergent from the coupling of sonorous qualities of the birdsong, with multiple other entities, whether human, non-human or spatial, in the environment. The song, as matter, 'intra-acts' (after Karen Barad), in an activity that counterpoints (related to what Deleuze and Guattari call 'counteraffectuation'⁶) with other matter, whether they be neighbouring birds, flora, insects, atmosphere, colours, smells and other environmental processes; perhaps also with presence, sentience, and what we humans know as consciousness.

Imagine the song of the blackbird as a new technology, cutting through the night, counteraffecting particular entities as if in an impersonal symphony. The impinging song precipitates new creative ways of acting (politically), providing the possibilities to thought of what are 'our broken wings,' the fragments left after the agencies of correlation in our digital economies and their techno-sonic refrains, revealing the violence done to matter by the language, science and law which provide bodies and subjectivities their coherence by day.

Many of my art-performance projects concern eating and a fascination with food. More specifically, I am psycho-physiologically interested in the mouth and its equivalents in other organisms. Here is an image to thought that transects the two projects which follow: the mouth is a 'geological' opening: *geo-*, from Old Norse *gjá* meaning 'ravine,' is related to Old English *gionian*, meaning 'to yawn.' The mouth works as

the threshold between the inner realm of the organic body, and the Earth as its outer environment significant to the organism.



Stephen Loo
Careful Whispers with the Autonomous Meridian Sensory Response Orchestra, 2020
Performance still
RMIT Gallery, Melbourne

Melbourne, May 2019. *Careful Whispers* is an orchestral noise-scape of a performative banquet for six that triggers the human Autonomous Meridian Sensory Response (ASMR). The work can be conceived as the auto-regulation of individual diners in a socio-institutional environment as they are co-constituted between the *anima* of food and the *animality* of nourishment. *Animation* is defined here as unstable sensory engagement that produces a radical space-time matrix which is vibrational; enhancing or decreasing our capacities for agency in the world, based on the choices made in relation to what we masticate and ingest. It is a biopolitics that is a coming into relation of the gap between death and life.

ASMR, the tingling sensations or goosebumps behind the head or neck, or the warm feeling that spreads down the back and through the body, are triggered by certain sounds whispering, tapping, rasping, and eating. ASMR and other parasympathetic responses in the human body constitute thinking that by-passes the cortical brain. So do other performativities of the mouth: the cough, the gag, the yawn, the gulp. All are associated in some way with involuntary reflexes while with eating and speaking – coughing while gagging to restore breathing, yawning to oxygenate blood and expel carbon dioxide from higher metabolic activity of over-eating. All are autonomous responses which on one hand clear the air(ways) for better breathing, and on the other, cut the (discursive) air, a ‘gag’ that literally fills the void of speechlessness from momentary difficulties in sense-making.

I find it useful to associate the gag as a dark image to thought, with Barad’s notion of the ‘agential cut’ in the relationship between thinking and the determination of matter.⁷ An agential cut is a performance that draws boundaries to separate and differentiate matter, but forms new relationalities that are not *a priori* to

the cut. In the cut, there is no possibility of predicting eventualities, nor the form that matter takes in differentiation, except to reinforce the cultivation of a capacity to respond to and transform.

An ‘intra-action’ of matter occurs with the cut, whereby the determination of matter is emergent with the cut. A paradoxical temporality therefore exists in an agential cut: it determines not only matter that comes after the cut but that which precedes it, providing a nonchronological presentation of time; as opposed to what occurs in an ‘inter-action,’ where identities of matter exist in an already predetermined form, as relations that preexist the action.⁸ Agencies brought in relation are only distinct in relation to their mutual entanglement; they do not exist as individual elements, nor those who/that which are related. Matter therefore is ontologically indeterminate on one hand, but agentially creative and generative on the other.

The gag, as with the cough, sneeze, swallow, and other sounds of eating, are agential cuts – dark gaps in the animation of life and events of disruptive differentiation – that actualize the determination of matter and confrontations to thought, through representation and abstractions, that transform worlds. In the cut, there is no possibility of predicting eventualities, nor the form that matter takes in differentiation, except to reinforce the cultivation of its capacity to respond and transform, that is, the capacity for ‘political’ action in this world without universal or transcendental conceptions of truths or rights.

So, what I hope to experiment with in my performance-based work is the entanglement of thinking and the (truth of) matter which philosophy and science have historically attempted to separate. Humans have often thought they can think matter, and not how matter can possibly be determined by thinking, and what dark image this provides to thought itself.



Stephen Loo, 2019
The Bucher of Nang Lerng, 2019
Performance still
Nang Lerng, Bangkok

Bangkok, November 2019. As twilight falls, and the streetlamps light, the butcher's cleaver glints as it hits the pig leg on a chopping block, and the main street of Bangkok's Nang Lerng district reverberates with the sound of splintering bone and the swish of metal slicing through flesh. The unnerving silence of blood dripping is followed by a barely audible soulful strain of a folk song sung by a 90-year old grandmother, whose only income is derived from being a 'foot tickler' as a cure for insomnia. The sizzle of the coal-fired stove and the tinkling of a mobile garden cart are her only musical accompaniments.

Nang Lerng is an ancient gastronomic centre of Bangkok, whose marketplace and culinary traditions have long provided the taste vectors of Thai cuisine. However, a recent change to the monarchy has led to a redefinition of the sovereignty of the land. Commercialisation of Crown land and gentrification has had a devastating effect on the community who are being pushed out of the area, undermining cultural and social sustainability. The irony here is that the people whose livelihoods are organised around food provision, do not have enough to eat themselves.

The Butcher of Nang Lerng is a work that does not proceed through an insistence of universal human rights to inhabitation, but is an experiment on what Tim Morton in his keynote for *Dark Eden* (TIC2020) called the 'truth-feel' of rights. This is the understanding of rights which is not transcendental nor ahistorical, but attuned to the immanent modes of existence of people who are provided with rights. Events such as the *Buffalo Filed Festival* imbricates the algorithmic visibility afforded by the digital economy, and the legalities of the laws governing the city, with subjectivities in the community, so moments of compossibility of these conditions can be grasped, no matter how precariously or momentarily. These are instances of building pure conviction to a feeling for the law and language, and a belief in this world, which I see as micropolitical moves that may acquire universal validity at a time to come.

The sounds of the butcher and the strains of cooking, the vibrations of flesh, food, and eating, normally accepted as private, personal and domestic, are now amplified and spatialised. Heard through the streets and striking at bodies in new ways, the acoustic work aims to conjure new territories of citizenship, and a re-thinking of food and spatial justice that fold back to provide dark images to thought itself. This the constitution of the subject in jurisprudence, lies between being spectral and intensive; but nowhere in which perception of the image, hearing of discourse and the determination of matter are properly mastered – the twilight zone between laws of the day and dreams of the night.

In brief, *The Butcher of Nang Lerng* draws upon another of Deleuze's enigmatic relations, this time between eating and thinking⁹, in order to think feel rights associated with the fight for spatial justice in Bangkok. Deleuze, in *the Logic of Sense* discusses the eating intagliated between two immanent conditions; as a determination on a metaphysical surface, which I choose to interpret here as its spatio-temporal relations rhythms, taste, vibration and other alimentary and affectual occurrences that are not predicates of the action but dimensions of multiplicities¹⁰; and as a verb in language, as in 'to eat', that brings eating from the metaphysical surface to neomatic expression, viz. to thought.

The Butcher experiments with inhabiting this dark gap of intagliation, as agential cut, in the context about thinking justice, and (not to overextend the appropriation) 'eating justice' as a practice of jurisprudence. The work 'slows down' the forcing of eating into neomaticity (thinking), by amplifying the metaphysical resonance of eating, more specifically by paying heed to the sound of eating and the alimentary system, so eating is not immediately projected into thinking, and conversely to force thinking to disappear into eating: a dark image to thought.

It is the sound of food and eating, which lies on the metaphysical surface of the event that forces thinking to confront its own dynamic genesis. Human beings and other non-human animals are already replete with hearing capacities, and the resonance and vibrations are already sensed through different capacities. These

vibrations have not disappeared onto thinking, but they by-pass the cortical brain, in order to attend to a thinking that does not insist on language and words. This is ‘the struggle for the independence of sound’ to be disengaged from the voice high above, to consume / devour thinking, as an acknowledgement of the multiplicity already always within the concept of rights.

I believe this may be what the organisers of *Buffalo Field Festival* mean when they say their events are attuned to the specificity of the ‘spiritual’ in a place – that is, an opening up new unnamable sensory experiences, or micro-perceptions which arrive by feeling around in the dark for the appropriate the language and the determination of sense-meaning. Events like the *Careful Whispers* and *The Butcher* loosen the sutures which by day bound the constitution of the subject, to be released at the gap, the gag, the agential cut that is the dark night of thought.

Notes

¹ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchill [trans.], Verso, London, 1994, p. 40.

² Kathrin Thiele, ‘To Believe In This World, As It Is’: Immanence and the Quest for Political Activism’, *Deleuze Studies* Vol. 4, 2010, pp. 28–45.

³ See Stephen Loo, ‘The Butcher of Nang Loeng: A transversal biopolitical ontology of the space of resistance’ in Nikolina Bobic and Farzaneh Haghighi (Eds.), *Routledge Handbook of Architecture, Urban Space and Politics* Vol. II, London, Routledge [forthcoming].

⁴ Gilles Deleuze and Claire Parnet. *Dialogues II*. Eliot Ross Albert [trans.], Athlone Press, London, 2002.

⁵ See Jakob von Uexküll, ‘A Stroll through the Worlds of Animals and Men: A Picture Book of Invisible Worlds’, in *Instinctive Behaviour: The Development of a Modern Concept*, Claire H. Schiller [trans.], International Universities Press, New York, 1957.

⁶ Deleuze and Guattari call ‘counteraffectuation’ an activity which restores the connection of the actual to the virtual, thereby losing the hold that existing ways of thinking about the present have over our action and opening up space for the emergence of new ways of thinking and being. See Paul Patton, ‘Immanence, Transcendence, and the Creation of Rights’ in *Deleuze and Law*. Eds. Laurent de Sutter and Kyle McGee, Edinburgh University Press, Edinburgh, 2012, p. 27.

⁷ See Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*, Duke University Press, Durham, 2007.

⁸ Karen Barad. ‘Quantum Entanglements and Hauntological Relations of Inheritance: Dis/continuities, SpaceTime Enfoldings, and Justice-to-Come.’ *Derrida Today* 3, no. 2, 2010, pp. 240–68 (276).

⁹ Deleuze discussion of to eat/to think proceeds from a discussion of the psychoanalysis of orality through a rereading of Lewis Carroll’s Alice Gilles Deleuze, *Logic of Sense*. Trans. Mark Lester, Athlone Press, London, 1990, p. 240.

¹⁰ Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. *A Thousand Plateaus*, Continuum, London and NY, [1980] 2004, p. 290.

Author:

Stephen Loo is an architect, philosopher and artist. He is Professor of Design at UNSW. His research, teaching and practice is at the transdisciplinary nexus of design, philosophy, art, performance and science. He has published widely in architecture and design theory, biophilosophy, posthumanist ethics, ecological humanities and experimental computational and digital thinking. He has a performance-philosophy and expanded painting art practice and has shown in Paris, Berlin, London, Sydney, Hobart and Adelaide.