

(note: text written for White Walls Journal (2008 Issue on “diagrams”). Essay (after Marx) accompanied two versions of three diagrams).

THREE DIAGRAMMATIC RESEARCHES AND 11 THESES ON HYPER-NATURAL ENTANGLEMENTS

spurse

As practitioners interested in nature how do we engage with the world? Many contemporary theories of experience assume that there a fundamental divide between the world as it really is and how it is for us. This supposed divide, between us as fully socially and historically constructed beings, who understand the world through our socially situated position, positions nature as being an unreachable world somewhere out there. This is fundamentally untrue to our experiences -- does not a breeze stir us as we walk -- stir us more that being simply an addition to a poetic tradition of reflections and interpretations of the wind? Are we thus conscribed to simply interact with our constructed representations of an ungraspable real? How has it become that our engagement with nature is now to be one of only analyzing and critiquing the various forms of historically contingent representations we are assumed to live within. The deep irony and threat of such a position is that the very possibility of action and engagement is limited to critique and a critique of representations at that, or belief –ideologies that insist on refusing the world -- and this in a moment of global crisis.

These views gain much of their critical power from a critique of various forms of realism that rely on a direct and unmediated relation to the world: the world is what it is, we observe it, and the facts that we derive from observation are true because of it being the case that the world is this way. These views are shown by social constructivism to be historical, contingent, reliant on human practices, and thus not true. In either case, the world is something less- either a world fleeced of contingency and uncertainty or a world bereft of power. But why must the world disrobe?

We would like to propose that there is an alternative approach to the question of how we engage with the world that avoids the scylla and charybdis of these forms of realism and nominalism. We do engage with the world and not simply our representations -- and that this engagement is a wondrous, complex and situated entanglement -- which we are part of through being part of its dynamic and continuous creation¹.

¹ We, as spurse, do not claim to be the first, nor the best in developing an alternative. We have drawn on the work of many thinkers, and researchers. Bergson, Whitehead, Deleuze, Latour, DeLanda, Protevi, Margulis and Stengers have all been crucial to our thinking. In addition to this we have engaged in significant experimental research over the last ten years through a number of projects. This current research is based upon work we did at the Indianapolis Museum of Art in 2006 “The Center for the Study of the Collective”.

11 thesis on natural entanglements

1 To be in the world is to be involved in change. To interpret is to act, to act is to act collectively, and all action involves change. There is no position outside of having an effect -- when Marx stated: "the philosophers have only interpreted the world in various ways; the point is, to change it" he was right in regards to what people assume, including himself, in regards to interpretation -- but absolutely incorrect in assuming that change was conceptually distinct from interpretation. To interpret *is* to act, to act is to change.

2 Entities, things, and organisms that act are collective entities. It is never a question of the individual versus the collective -- it always a question of collectivity and the emergence of a specific form of collectivity. The human is a good example of this -- it is an organism that is the product of the symbiotic collective union of over five hundred species (and this is just the beginning of its collective). Things, entities, and organisms are embodied, embedded, and symbiotic.

3 Entities are complex assemblages that cross many borders and boundaries -- biological, technological, social, and material. An assemblage is composed of relations of exteriority -- which is to simply say that entities are composed of heterogeneous parts that are detachable and re-attachable -- and that the relations between these parts are distinct from the parts themselves. If relations are separate from terms, then relations have their own distinct reality. Relations can change without the components of an entity changing. An entity is thus a whole that is distinct from its parts -- and is fundamentally irreducible to its parts. This brings us back to the point that assemblages cross the seeming boundaries of the biological, social and technological -- if entities cannot be defined by what is internal -- a relation of interiority -- then the distinctions between the natural and the cultural are trivial. To think in terms of assemblages is to think in terms of the co-production of collectives -- what form of collectivity is worth having?

4 All Entities are material practices, ecosystems and territories. Entities -- things, tools, concepts and organisms, for all of their crucial differences, are expressive material practices. These practices are part of systems, networks and ecosystems -- which are historical, dynamic, unstable and responsive. Yet they exhibit resiliency- they have forms of order and organization that are stable within specific environmental dynamics. These could be called habits -- the robust habits of specific systems.

5 Habits are achievements. It is a great achievement to have lungs, or a distinction between public and private space. Habits emerge as relations inside a complex evolving assemblage. As such they are a form of coproduction that leads to a robust collective. And the form of collective that is such a practice is best termed *institution*. Habits, we could say, are the constant practice of producing institution.

6 Institutions are not simply organizations that are imposed upon us or within which we are forced to work. The collective and its distributed practice of an evolving institution is dynamic, contingent, and open-ended. Freedom involves, as Spinoza so carefully articulated, understanding the causal nature of our bondage. We would understand this as knowing the collective (human and non-human) forms of becoming that we both are and

are agents within -- becoming and belonging -- the two key creative qualities of institution.

7 Reality is, then, a co-constructed achievement. Yes, constructed -- but not in the sense of social constructivism. Here is where we wish to most strongly separate ourselves from standard forms of realism and its social constructivist critics. Reality and the facts about reality are constructed -- but this makes neither of them either fixed or relativistic. Rather, construction involves complex forms of consultation and activation of forces across both human and non-human realms. The world is a participant in our development of facts, systems and truths -- and it is, like us, changed by these facts, systems and truths -- for concepts too have agency. To be well constructed is a question for our actuality. When we wander out into the world and engage with a bird perching on a bench beside us, we are changed by this experience, and so is the bird by our reading of bird lore. Agency. This world is for us an issue of widening and shrinking assemblages of collectives that are becoming institutions deeply enfolding and unfolding within the pluriverse. Institutional constructivism rather than institutional critique.

8 Agency is everywhere and agency is everywhere distributed agency. This is to say that everything affects and is affected by everything else. Everything has the potential to affect and be affected -- this means all forms of assemblages -- concepts, things, organisms, events, practices etc. As Deleuze says, following Spinoza, we do not know what a body can do. Stratify. Vary. Fold. And in this it is best to see events as being emergent and autopoietic -- agency cannot be located and in a singular position or fixed moment. It is not a question of where the beginning is, but where to begin.

9 If classical views of experience are skeptical of mediation -- mediation being so often seen as that which contaminates pure experience -- for us mediation is fundamental to the very possibility of experience. All action requires systems of active mediation -- mediation is what breaks habits and systems -- what pushes a systems towards otherness -- newness -- the dark night of the future. Mediators -- our ambassadors of difference. In evolutionary biology this process is called exaptive -- defining an expressive material event that is outside of (hence *ex-*) adaptive behavior (habit). Matter as expressive, auto-poetic, emergent and *exaptive*. Entities are affective and auto-poetic transformers -- triggers -- of systems.

10 Our movements within this world -- our entanglements are emergent -- new and irreversible. We are involved in the production of the future in our actions -- our collective becomings and practices of institution are always at the edge of rupture -- this world -- this hypernature, that involves everything is not fixed -- does not have an ideal state it is in, coming from or moving towards... -- the universe is radically contingent. Its stability is temporal. It is fully open to transformation.

11 Life is thus an ethics of collectivity, institutional production, and spaces of situated sustainability -- belonging. Belonging? Yes, belonging -- but not in the sense of identity or representation but rather belonging in relation to that great Spinozian question: what a body can do? How does a hybrid complex of multiple forces and systems -- moving across and beyond the biological, conceptual, technological -- sustain a becoming that

is open? What can a body do? This form of question is not one of simply interpreting the world -- or having a world that is composed of differing interpretations, rather it is an experimental question -- how do things compose and recompose, fold, unfold, and refold? Belonging, that is emergent, multimodal, multiscaled, heterogeneous, and nested, in asking: What new linkages can be sustained? What new infoldings can be welcomed? How do we begin then? Perplexity, curiosity, and active experimental consultation...