

Masterclass: The Ecstatic Being

From 20 to 22 October 2021, STUK House for Dance, Image and Sound welcomed the Curatorial Studies program of KASK for a co-organized masterclass about 'the ecstatic'. Lectures and talks with scholars, practitioners, and artists introduced the possible definitions and manifestations of the ecstatic. The students of Curatorial Studies gathered around the table to create a curatorial proposition around this theme, based upon the lectures of and conversations with the guest speakers. The results of this masterclass will be considered in the curatorial framework for the Artefact exhibition, taking place in February 2023. More than just a topical exploration, the masterclass provided a hands-on experience with the first research stages of creating an exhibition. Together, the participants discovered the pitfalls and possibilities of making an exhibition around such a broad topic. What is the 'ecstatic'? What specific topics can be distilled from this concept? How can you create a curatorial framework that is receptive for societal discussions and artistically enriching?

In her introduction, curator Karen Verschooren explained the context of STUK and the concept of the yearly Artefact exhibition. The practical framework in which she must work for each edition of Artefact was included in the masterclass assignment. The students had to equally consider the short duration of the exhibition, the available spaces, the context of STUK with a parallel performing arts program during the exhibition, the number of participating artists and works on commission in their final curatorial pitch. The general theme for the masterclass is a broad concept with a vast array of related notions and domains. Therefore, Verschooren first shared her own early interpretation of the theme, which germinated from the previous editions of Artefact. She approached the ecstatic as an experience that implies different ways of being in the world and activating bodily knowledge. During the masterclass, the ecstatic was explored further in several ways: from theory to practice, through philosophy, spirituality, and art.

Firstly, philosopher Stéphane Symons provided a theoretical foundation to the subject by looking into the perception of the ecstatic in Western philosophy. Can the ecstatic be the subject of philosophy, and should it be? Symons argued that the ecstatic was mostly described as a negative or chaotic experience, as Western philosophy fundamentally searches for systematic order in what constitutes life. He defined the ecstatic through the lens of respectively metaphysics, epistemology, anthropology, and politics. These four domains in philosophical thinking were used as four pillars to structure his argument. In his conclusion, he defined the ecstatic as a capacity of change through a transformative experience, in which a certain boundary or limit is crossed. Therefore, the ecstatic should be part of philosophy in different domains because the global society we maintain today is in desperate need of change and should employ every tool to create and capture transgressive energies. This lecture proved to be an important foundation for the students to see the theme from a structured point of view and made it easier to discern different elements or implications of the ecstatic. The ecstatic seems to be a capacity, rather than an experience, which could be individual or collective.

Secondly, the ecstatic was presented from the point of view of Zen Buddhist practitioner and former monk, Tom Hannes. From this conversation, it becomes clear how the philosophical interpretation of the ecstatic as a transgressive capacity

also coincides with its occurrence in spiritual practices. Ecstasy is not just one experience; it is rather an historical way of thinking about what it means to have a meaningful life. From a Buddhist perspective, one practices meditation every day to create an ecstatic experience which lasts throughout your life and is not a temporary high. Tom Hannes adds his own interesting perspective in the mix by explaining the axial perspective on the history of our civilization and by criticizing the Atman-Brahman axiology in traditional Buddhism, in which the act of meditation revolves around the reaching of the All in the form of Nirvana. However, according to him, the ecstatic experience of meditation is its transgressive potential to make you see things in a new perspective, with more mindfulness and gratitude, with more kindness and love. To explain this, Hannes introduces the concept of 'the interface self'. That self is not so much one's true inner core but is a mode of dealing with the interaction between what is inside and what is outside. Through meditation, you can become porous and relational towards everything around you. This approach could help us to understand and appreciate life and the world in a more ecological and healthy way.

Thirdly, the students were introduced to artists Shana Moulton and Grace Ndiritu, who have touched upon the subject of the ecstatic in their practices in different ways. Shana Moulton's film series *Whispering Pines* presents the adventures of Cynthia, the alter ego of the artist. Cynthia represents the good American woman, trapped in her kitsch aesthetic and the banality of life. She is looking for a transgressive experience. In this adventure, she is being guided by her mediators: an angel and a shaman. She uses crystals, meditation, yoga etc., trying to find more meaning in ecstatic experiences through mindfulness and contemporary witchcraft. In *Whispering Pines 10*, the screened film during the masterclass, Cynthia splits and shatters in pieces after she dreams about having a bigger existential purpose (saving the earth). These scenes visualize the idea that ecstasy is a form of becoming, not to be 'something else', but to cross a liminality towards something in process. Moulton explained more about her work during a Q&A. Grace Ndiritu's introduced three projects, with a special focus on her latest video 'Becoming Plants'. First, she introduced her projects *Healing the Museum* and *COVERSLUT*, in which she respectively tightens the screws of the political and social responsibilities of museums (specifically ethnographic museums) and the fashion industry. In *Becoming Plants*, her most recent work, the artist filmed a performance about controlled psychedelic drug intake. The performers took a very controlled and small amount of a specific mushroom, and the artist filmed the results on a specific location. The voice-over of a conversation with a psychotherapist explains the science of how our brain works, something we still know very little about. Ndiritu differentiates a state of bliss, which is immediate and immanent, from the ecstatic experience, which is more durational in the sense that it opens the world to you in a different way. Yet again the important idea that the ecstatic is a transgressive capacity rather than a short-lived experience is underlined, this time through the lens of art.

Finally, the students were invited to explore the topic departing from the lectures and their own point of views. Every day several hours were dedicated to research and brainstorming. A preliminary reading list was shared with the students in preparation of the masterclass, and the table was adorned with interesting publications on various interpretations and subjects touching upon the ecstatic being. The students were divided into two groups. At the end of the three-day masterclass, each group presented their curatorial concept and a list of artists they

would collaborate with for an exhibition on the ecstatic. By activating the students in this early stage of the process, it becomes possible to include the multiplicity of voices in the curatorial framework of the next Artefact exhibition. In this way, the masterclass also became an interesting exercise about curatorship, collectivity and sharing knowledge in an institutional context.

In preparation of the masterclass, a reading list was compiled by Stéphane Symons and Karen Verschooren. This reading list was allowed to grow throughout the masterclass. A shared Drive folder became a container for all the thoughts that went around. As the curatorial exercise and the masterclass evolved, there were also new documents, links and written graphs added to the curatorial research folder.

Gilles Deleuze, Dialogues II, pp. 36-51

Roger Caillois, Man and the Sacred, Chpt. IV, pp. 97-127

Walter Benjamin, Hashish in Marseilles, pp. 117-126

Hannah Arendt, The Human Condition, pp. 1-7 (Prologue)

From Picture Plane to Astral Plane. Shana Moulton's Whispering Pines -Time travel and the desire for a shared ecstatic experience.

Cis Bierinckx interview with Jeremy Shaw (Dutch text)

Cocaine and gold. Joachim Koester in conversation with Christine Vuegen (Dutch text)

<https://vimeo.com/489827179>

Books physically available to read on the table:

F. Scott Fitzgerald - The Crack-Up

Michael Pollan – This is your mind on plants

Olivia Laing – Everybody

Merlin Sheldrake – Entangled Life

Timothy Morton – All art is ecological

Ovidius – Metamorphoses (Dutch translation)

Wednesday, October 20

Welcome and introduction by Karen Verschooren

After a general round of introductions to meet each other, Karen Verschooren introduced herself and STUK as a house for dance, music, and art, where every discipline within the institution has a different coordinator. She also introduced her educational and professional background and the curatorial contexts she operates in. Verschooren has a background in comparative media studies, media art and Internet art. In the American professional context of the MIT in Boston, she quickly was confronted with the question as to what her specialization was - something that she hadn't reflected upon in much detail before. Therefore, she did the exercise of writing a manifesto: "what is it that interests me in art?" She would recommend this exercise to every professional in the art world because it triggers you to train yourself how to talk about your artistic interests. Through her experiences in the field, she developed a curatorial practice in which she pays attention to several elements:

- Structures and systems within society could be understood through visual art because art can be seen as a space to train attention. She was interested in looking at contemporary art as a time document. How can you have a sensorial and emotional response to this? It becomes more of an attitude than a direct knowledge transfer system because art trains your tentacles to understand society.
- As a curator, you fill in a position of service. You must be caring for the artist and artworks. Sometimes - especially in an institutional context - you might end up in a disparity between the artist and the cultural worker, which forces you to compromise. This is not the way she operates. Instead, she starts from the position of service and tries to find out what the best possible way is for an artist to show their work and how the institution could facilitate that. Sometimes it also requires a dialogue.
- Generosity should be a general attitude. Studio visits are gifts from the artist to the curator. When an artist speaks about their work, this becomes a form of generosity. To be able to continue the conversation and to give something back, she continues reading and researching the subjects that were discussed.
- The caring doesn't stop with the artist: it is also about the public. How the public goes through an exhibition, what they encounter first or last, dramaturgy and scenography are very important. The interplay between different works is very important. However, caring for an audience doesn't equal to dumbing it down to 'make it accessible'. The exhibitions and artworks should be free from dumbing down, but it is the curator's job to give entry points to the audience. The meaning of works and their references should neither be in plain sight, neither obscured. Instead, curatorship is about providing different entry points for the viewer to find out the different layers of meaning.
- There is no reason not to share your knowledge.

Even without major residency places, the art scene in Leuven is growing. Next to STUK, there is M Museum, and Cas-Co and BAC Atelier as smaller organizations for artist's residencies. In STUK, technicians create spaces, walls, and other infrastructure to accommodate the artists. Some artists require very sensory spaces, such as Omer Fast, who required the building of an entire apartment space within the exhibition space for Appendix (2017). STUK presents solo exhibitions and small exhibitions for local artists in the café. Next to that, there is Artefact, which is a themed group exhibition. First, Verschooren looks for a topic that is relevant in society and that many people might relate to without realizing it. The topics are always politically and societally relevant. She selects about twenty national and international artists. A major part of the exhibition consists of loans, but there are at least five to six commissioned works.

After the selection of a broad topic, the first phase of exhibition-making consists of curatorial research. During this process, the curator is mapping ideas. After creating a mind map with the different elements circling around the main theme, you can start looking for artistic practices. Afterwards, you can start a dialogue with a couple of artists, who's work will be the guiding principle for the rest of the exhibition. The previous edition of Artefact was titled 'Wired for Empathy'. This edition did not revolve around the art historical concept of empathy, pointing to the relationship

between the viewer and the art object. Rather, Verschooren wanted to open a discussion on how art can be used to appeal to people's empathic abilities. Empathy has a cognitive aspect (understanding the other) and an affective aspect (sharing emotions), but also an aspect of action. Inspired by Ubuntu, she departed from the idea 'I am because we are'. Humans are especially well-made to be empathic, so how can we learn to profit from these built-in skills? Artefact is still an exhibition in a festival context, so even if it could stay open for 3 months after the 5-week build-up, it still follows the 17-day program because it also takes up spaces for the regular programming of performative arts.

The purpose of this masterclass is to investigate the theme for the next edition: the ecstatic being or being ecstatic. We will do the research phase together. We will discover the meaning of the ecstatic in terms of vocabulary. This meaning can be distilled by thinking in different contexts: religion, sexuality and orgasm, drugs, and so on. Verschooren was initially inspired and drawn towards this theme after seeing the work *Phase Shifting Index* (2020) by Jeremy Shaw in Centre Pompidou. It is a work where Shaw sets people in the future to dance a choreography of transcendence. Every personage/participant has their own story. Then, everything comes together, and the image explodes. After seeing this, she started thinking about works with images of people being in forms of ecstasy. Another name that immediately popped up, was Joachim Koester. He works around bodily knowing and remembering through the occult. There is a lot of work in his oeuvre that would be hard not to show in the context of this exhibition. He made recent prints of microscopic photos of cannabis and cocaine, which made appear an interesting coincidence: the formal texture of cannabis is soft, whereas the textures of cocaine are sharp and hard, like the experiences these drugs induce. Another artist on the list is Suzanne Treister, who works about contemporary forms of magic. In works, such as *Hexen 2.0* (2009-2011) or *HFT The Gardener* (2014-2015), someone hallucinates on algorithmic patterns they are watching. Another example is the work of Melanie Bonajo, who investigates the ayahuasca ritual in her trilogy of films called *Night Soil*.

The entire masterclass is an invitation to work together, read, research, discover and dive into concepts and artistic practices that could be interesting for the development of *Artefact 2023*. It is also an invitation to hit the wall several times before something finally lands, which is a normal step in the curatorial process.

**Lecture by Stéphane Symons
(Centre for Metaphysics, Philosophy of Religion and Philosophy of Culture)**

The ecstatic in relationship to worldlessness.

The lecture of Stéphane Symons is an invitation to reflect together on different ways of thinking about ecstasy. The paradigms that some philosophers wrote about in the context of ecstasy might be interesting to use it to criticize and renew the definitions of this concept.

First, we go back to the *Metamorphoses* of Ovid. This is one of the most important source texts of the Western world. There is one paragraph from the first book, the story of Daphne and Apollo, which is important to read in the context of the ecstatic. "Before her prayer was ended, torpor seized on all her body, and a thin bark closed around her gentle bosom, and her hair became as moving leaves (...)." It is a story of

the rape of Daphne by Apollo (see also the legendary sculpture of Bernini from 1622 at the Galleria Borghese). The moment he touches Daphne's body, she changes into a tree. You see a transformation as a form of escape. Why do we start with Ovid? Because this is rather the beginning of a counter-tradition, more than the beginning of Western history. What we read here in his text was not picked up into the canon for a long time. It is about the idea that you can escape violence through the transformation into something non-human. In Western history, this was a huge taboo. Which is sad because this capacity to transform and modify is very important. Ecstasy also revolves around metamorphosis. Ecstasy is first and foremost a capacity to change – change being a moment in which you take distance from the identity you were identifying with before. This is transformation. What comes after this moment is less important than the capacity to distance yourself from this first moment. It is not about becoming something else, but the wish *not to stay* in the first phase. Especially in the twenty-first century there are challenges we are facing for which this capacity of transformation is very important. It is a bodily capacity, and Ovid already put his finger on this.

Ovid's book is about transgression and transgressive behavior, and about rape culture. It is a book that we should re-read in 2021. But it is also about a positive kind of transgression. The way in which Daphne escapes from Apollo is a transgression: she transgresses the identity of a nymph, the boundaries and limitations of a female body, to become something different. First, she is a zone of indistinction: she is both human and plant at the same time before she becomes a plant. And this first stage of indistinction is ecstasy. This capacity is always present in nature, it is not just a specific event, but rather a potential that is resonating within nature. Ecstasy has had a bad name in Western thought for a long time, and we'll try to restore its reputation. Ecstasy is not only about drugs or madness, or about losing touch with reality psychologically. It has nothing to do with world alienation. If you read Hannah Arendt's prologue, you read that alienation is really a bad thing. We'll try to prove her wrong and investigate more positive ways of how alienation can become a good thing.

When we go back to Ovid, we also must go back to the etymology of the word, namely the Greek word 'ekstasis'. Already in its Greek origin, the word refers to a type of transgression, because it literally means: 'standing outside of yourself'. Ekstasis is to stand outside of something, to go beyond my limits, what I then become and what new identity I can become. This is not about moving towards anything, but it is moving away from something. This etymological root is a guiding principle, but it also explains why ecstasy had such a bad name since the dawn of philosophy. The case against ecstasy is part of the DNA of Western thought. There are different arguments against ecstasy, departing from four domains or point of views: 1) metaphysically, 2) epistemologically, 3) anthropologically and 4) politically.

1. The metaphysical case against ecstasy

The main question of metaphysics is: "what is being?" Metaphysics constructs one of the most abstract questions as to what being is. A lot of philosophers were interested in this question. The largest part of Western philosophy revolves around the search for 'being'. We use the word 'being' in the most different sentences. This 'is' a table, I 'am' here, and so on. This question was crucial since the presocratic philosophers and Plato onwards. If you look at the School of Athens, the famous fresco of Raphael in the Vatican, you will see that almost all the people on this fresco were thinking about

being. What philosophy should do, according to them, is to retrieve the essence of everything, and that is the form (morphè), which is the general essence that is then present within things. They want to establish the fixed identity that is common in all those things. Western philosophy is also about teleology. This is the idea that the world we live in, is a well-ordered organism. Everything that takes place has a reason (in a non-monotheistical way). They think there is an immanent order to the universe. It is about fixating certain things in identities and define what they are. This is already a first inkling into why metamorphosis does not play a role for these people. Metamorphosis is literally *beyond* form, the change that is not isolated in one form. Of course, this is totally puzzling for these philosophers because they want to fixate what *is* and they do not want to understand how something can become something else. They just want to understand what a computer *is*, not what you can do with it, or how it can become another object. Metamorphosis is problematic for them, because it creates chaos, whereas they want cosmos.

2. The epistemological case against ecstasy

Epistemology is the question as to what knowledge is, what worthwhile is in our quest for truth, and what should be disillusioned as lies. Epistemology is represented in Western philosophy by René Descartes, the proponent of rationalism. Ecstasy is also a problem for Descartes and the rationalist thinkers. He says: “cogito ergo sum”, which means “I think, therefore I am.” In this one formula you already retrieve negative impulses against ecstasy. Why? Because rational thought cannot fully grasp this phenomenon, this process of transformation. For Descartes it would be the seed of illusion, something we cannot trust. He thinks that everything we see with our senses are all illusions. They are not the basis of truth and knowledge. For instance, a wooden stick might seem broken if you look at it through a puddle of water, but it isn't broken and all we see is an optical illusion. Therefore, the information of our senses cannot be trusted. Everything about the body is not to be trusted according to Descartes.

3. The anthropological case against ecstasy

Anthropology is concerned with the question: “what is a human being?” What is the difference between non-human beings, animals, subjects, and so on? Anthropology created an inherent opposition or distinction between man and nature. In the book of Genesis in the Bible is written that God supposedly created man as the ‘master of nature’, as the ‘good housefather’ or ‘caretaker’ of nature. Man has a responsibility, so he shouldn't dominate nature. Still, in Christian thinking that saturates Western thought, man is still inherently different from plants and animals. His role is to use the nature as object, something that he works with, but there is a real hierarchy. Ecstasy as a transformation that resonates within nature, goes lost.

4. The political case against ecstasy

Politics revolves around the *res publicae*: the shared things that involve all of us (city, nation state). Political issues are common and shared by all. From the sixties onwards we see that the personal becomes political, but the individual is not something shared. Still, individuals also become an object of political decision-making. Hannah Arendt wrote about this political quest for meaning in *The Human Condition*. In Western thought, according to her, politics should always be understood as taking care of the *res publicae*, of the common things. For instance, how do we organize public spaces and how do we spend tax money? Arendt says that to keep politics constructive and to keep politics sane, we need to make sure that

everybody who lives in a polis or community, understands that he/she is living in the same world. The world is common to all of us. Of course, we are individuals but apart from this we should also realize that there is something we share: the world in which we live. This should be the sole playing ground of politics. Politics should not meddle too much in individual affairs. Cultural diversity, for instance, was also a private affair and not a political one according to Arendt, which is a very problematic viewpoint. It creates a philosophy in which racism is not considered a political responsibility, which it really is. But the credo is that we need to politically take care of the world we share. According to Arendt, world alienation consists of a retreat within the self and within individual affairs, which is a risk. Because then we think that the world is shared by all and that becomes the seed of meaning. World alienation is a way for Arendt to understand where it went wrong in history (referencing the Holocaust) and how politics became weakened. The answer to her own question: because we don't have a shared world anymore. So, ecstasy has a bad name in political philosophy too because ecstasy is about an individual way of transforming, an individual process.

However, there still is a countertradition departing from these same four point of views that argue that ecstasy is something positive. Can Western philosophy even think ecstasy? Is it not just something that we have to only see in the sphere of literature, art, or individual experimentation? Is it even a topic that rational philosophical thinking can talk about? We should take this question seriously.

From Plato onwards, everything that had to do with irrational behavior was put aside as non-rational. For instance, the daemon, a figure to which Plato refers a lot, was supposedly a semi-human semi-divine spirit that overtakes the human being and gives us inspiration. The daemon, which brushes against concepts like ecstasy, is not *only* negative. Still, the daemon will never be the subject of philosophy even if it is mentioned. Socrates had a daemon, according to Plato, so this being is not just making us mad or ill. However, Plato still doesn't take the daemon seriously as a subject for proper philosophy. Christianity, on the other hand, talks more about the original sin: in the garden of Eden Adam and Eve follow their bodily inclinations and they are expelled from paradise. This moment of expulsion is the moment in which all human beings got their hereditary sin. On account that we have a body, of course.

Everything about irrational behavior is depicted as sinful in Western thinking. Even Descartes would say that the body was a seed of illusion. He would say that ecstasy has to do with passions, and passion takes over our body and clouds over our thoughts. It is more machine-like or mechanical than a food for thought. In the twentieth century, you see a turn away from rationalist thinking through psychoanalysis. But even in Freud, who explains irrational and erratic behavior, ecstasy becomes something bad. According to him, ecstasy is a symptom of an illness, for instance of someone who has paranoia. Paranoia is the omnipotence of thought. It is a state in which you think that your thinking has an immediate impact on the outside world. His main case study is the very famous case study of the German judge Daniel Schreber. He was very ill: he thought that he was copulating with God through the sunrays. He wrote a memoir about this, in which he talks about his hallucinations in detail. It is a clear example of ecstasy and of world alienation (Arendt): he projected his own false lies onto the outside world. Even philosophers like Georges Bataille, who wrote a book about the importance of moments of ecstasy (*experiences intérieures*) does not think that philosophy can really talk about it

because philosophy is catered towards the rational organization of thought, body and thinking. There is no space for ecstasy in this domain because ecstasy is something that splits the human being, a moment of splitting.

Can Western philosophy think ecstasy? Yes, but only if philosophy is willing to radically rethink itself. Philosophy should transgress its own borders and be willing to take leave of all the concepts that it has identified for more than 2500 years. If you're willing to radically question the DNA of philosophy, only then ecstasy *can* become the subject of philosophical thought.

Let's investigate authors and thoughts who go against this canon. We'll use the same four point of views.

1. Traces of ecstasy in metaphysics

Nietzsche once wrote that man is an unfinished animal. For him, ecstasy is probably *the* key question of philosophy. His first book is about Greek tragedies, as events of Dionysian procedures and events. Dionysus was the God of ecstasy, intoxication, drunkenness. Apollo was the opposite. He was the God of rationality, of forms, beings, fixed identities and the one who made us optimistic that we could understand the cosmos. Nietzsche says that the Greek tragedy is the carrier of the Dionysian thought. If so, ecstasy becomes *the* building block of western thought. He corrects Aristotle, who also wrote a first book on aesthetics, about the Greek tragedy. But Aristotle doesn't talk about the tragedy as a theatre piece or as this wild event of debauchery. He talks about it as a text, written by a theatre playwright. He talks about order in the text so the spectator will not lose his attention. Nietzsche, on the other hand, talks about the wildness and the irrational nature of the event. Aristotle talks about the rationality of the text. Nietzsche's position has to do with the inability to come up with a definition of man: man doesn't have a form. Philosophers are always looking for a fixed identity. Human being is animal with reason, which is the most rational definition of human. But Nietzsche doesn't believe that it makes sense to look for a definition of the human being anyway, because he is the unfinished animal, the creature *par excellence* that can change and do something different, transform itself. Human is inherently not finished. Therefore, the only definition could be that human being cannot be defined. It lacks its own *morphè*.

This insight of Nietzsche was incredibly important for Western philosophy. He mainly influenced German and French philosophy through thinkers like Benjamin and Bataille, or Deleuze. Deleuze picks up on Nietzsche and considers himself his heir. Deleuze also says that humans miss a *morphè*. Subjectivity became a different word for the definition of human being in Western thinking. Subject and object are always put against each other with a clear hierarchy, even in grammar. The object can be used by the subject. Subject has desires and uses objects to fulfill those. The object is on the margins, and the subject is in the center. Deleuze proposes to get rid of this duality, this opposition, with words like *individuation* or *becoming*. *Individuation* is something that he separates from subjectivity. *Becoming* is the first concept of philosophy for Deleuze. It is not 'being' or 'identity', but our ways of overstepping our identity. In the book *Dialogues*, Deleuze talks with Claire Parnet about becoming, and how it is also present in plants, objects, animals and not just in humans. But because it is present in everything, the concept of becoming can link everything together. For instance, Deleuze writes about what he calls the *becoming-woman* of Henry James. This is not about the author Henry James identifying as a

woman to write his female characters. 'To identify' is not the right vocabulary to describe becoming, because there is no identification. What the becoming-woman of Henry James does, for instance, is to embrace the zone of indistinction between male and female. It is not about a man trying to think as a woman to write the identity, rather it is about combining both. This is becoming or another word Deleuze uses is *assemblage*: a constellation of different things, brought together, relating to each other. These two things might not have anything in common. When Henry James had his becoming-woman, it is not about him understanding the similarities between men and women. It is about overstepping identities; it is a plain of immanence. They might have nothing in common, but they can relate to each other. You do not have to identify shared qualities to be able to relate them to each other. 'Becoming' transcends the elements that are being related and the most different things can suddenly enter into assemblage with one another. He also calls it *dividuality*. Deleuze wants to get rid of the notion of individuality because it refers to the non-shared.

Everything in nature, because it is on the same surface, is shared. Purely because of being in the same space, makes it possible that several things can have a dialogue. It is also what happens when you place different artworks in a gallery space. Ecstasy for Deleuze is not a bad moment in which the subject is split and thereby collapses because identity is shattered (that is Freud). Instead, Deleuze interprets ecstasy as the capacity to split in a positive way. You leave identity and then you experience that you're not that different from a dead object, or a plant or tree. An example of this in real life is described in the book *Entangled Life* (on the table). This book is about fungi, creatures that are part of plant, but they are also structurally speaking not a tree. They live on plant roots, and they wouldn't survive if you take them away. Still, fungi themselves are not plants. Existentially and biologically, they come closer to soil, which is in essence something that we do not see as alive. The relationship between soil and plants is where the food is, so it is about pure relations. Even in our intestines there are fungi, and we wouldn't survive without them. Therefore, we are not that different from plants. Even our bowels work with the help of fungi, which comes very close to how trees work. This means that there is a non-human intelligence within us. This is a completely different way to look at nature. Dividuality is the capacity to take leave, split, divide, something good. It is not a trauma, but a positive ability. Change is not about becoming something, that is not the metamorphosis that Deleuze is talking about. It is the negation of what you are: "what am I not?" This question is the first step. This has to do with the biggest taboo in Western thought for Deleuze: maybe there is no cosmos, no order, no logic. Maybe all our vocabularies are just fictions. There is only transformation. Maybe for this reason we are also unable to predict what we will look like in a couple of years or decades, for instance through the effects of climate change.

Science and philosophy are looking for eternal laws and therefore think they can predict how the world will look like. But maybe this is impossible as nature doesn't follow eternal laws since it is all about transformation. That makes us modest. But it is a very affirmative realization that we can embrace this change. The concept that Deleuze uses to describe the lack of ground is *effondement*. This word combines the words 'effondrement' (utter chaos, something that is so overwhelming and intimidating that the human being is wiped out, the darkest corners of madness) and 'fondement' (the opposite, the ground of things that all philosophy were looking for, the logos, the rational logic behind everything). Effondement brings both together: if

we see that there is no fondement, we can positively think of assemblages that were not possible before in transformation. Art creates new sensations, so effondement is the positive embrace of effondrement. We derive our creativity out of the capacity to embrace disorder. All the philosophers who talked about this were hospitalized in mental institutions, but Deleuze did not want to call them ill or crazy. The books they wrote were so important and good, it illustrates how they used this creativity in the ecstatic transformation. They transgressed their borders, so it redeemed their irrationality. But it is also problematic because it gives ground to criticize Deleuze for romanticizing mental illness.

2. Traces of ecstasy in epistemology

The potential to change are for Nietzsche and Deleuze the building block of the universe, prior to *morphè*. You have small moments of forms, but what is first, is the potential to change. The *morphè* is only a small intermediate state of change. Georges Bataille asked himself the questions: how can we gain knowledge about the world in an irrational experience? How can we retrieve and establish a contact with the outside world? He uses the word ecstasis in its literal sense, as something that opens to the world along the lines from our daily banal experiences. He is most interested in certain experiences that totally interrupt this more rational interaction with the world, for instance ritualistic experiences. He is also interested in anthropology. Sociologist Roger Caillois described the sacred in a similar way as moments that are different from the profane. Moments that are isolated from daily experience. During those moments you are allowed to do what you are not allowed to do on a normal, rational day. People can become ecstatic and perform a ritual. They are illustrations of inner experiences. For instance, artworks as such for Bataille are tokens of inner experiences. In art you do things that are not allowed otherwise. Bataille describes it as the core of necessity: the ritual, the escape from banality, can organize the world in which we live. Sometimes all the possibilities are weighing down on us: how do we know what it is what we really want to do? Because all the choices that we can make, makes us passive. In the ecstatic, all these possibilities melt away and then there is a necessity. A good example is the experience of extreme danger. People who almost drown in the sea often describe it as a moment of extreme bliss, because you are almost reconciled with the fact that you can't do anything anymore: the lack of possibilities creates a moment of bliss because you are presented with the inescapable. He describes this as a religion or mysticism without a God. It is not about a dogma, it is a moment of limitation, but there is no religious content. It does have affinities with religion, because that also looks at faith and the inescapable, but not here.

In his book *Inner Experience*, Bataille talks about the formless. This is not *without morphè* but 'the formless'. Rosalind Krauss also wrote a book titled *Formless: A User's Guide*, in which she explains how the limited experiences Bataille describes reveal that part of what being human is about, is to reconcile with the fact that we are formless, without form. The formless nature of the body is used as a body of artistic performances, where you also have limit experiences and where you really come close to the border of the inevitable or of death. She also talks about the formless qualities of, for instance, art brut. She describes art as a transgression, seeking the formless beyond the form. For instance, if we look at the Olympia of Jean Dubuffet, we see that he pushes the figure of Olympia beyond it is cliché identity as a Gestalt to take it outside of the ideal sphere of the female body. Cy Twombly does the same thing with language: language is a human tool, an instrument to retrieve forms and

identities. But he uses language as Barthes described: with his left hand, ugly as a child, and therefore it comes close to graffiti. The most important tool to create forms is pushed outside of the rational realm and is a trace of the chaotic world. It makes that language is no longer important in our quest for meaning. It is ugly and looks at the limits of language. Post-minimalist art was a huge step after minimalist art: we don't see the objects of Donald Judd anymore, or industrial mathematical objects that help us project an order in the outside world. Post-minimalism is about the laws of gravity taking over and weighing down. Showing that within nature, there is a huge force of formlessness. This is how the artwork that Krauss describes from the perspective of Bataille, becomes the site of ecstasis. Whether it is the human body, or language, it is always seeking out the borders of formlessness. In *Man and the Sacred*, Roger Caillois talks about rituals as isolated moments in which human being takes leave of his instrumental behavior of daily life. There is this outburst of ecstatic behavior. In those limit experiences, you cover a non-human time, a mythical time: a space that is presenting itself as inescapable unavoidable. It is a short moment of transgression and the day after the ritual helps us embrace our normal logic even better. It helps us to accept and reconcile more with our normal daily life, so the transgression reinforces the order. This is something that we could criticize because it is a reduction of ecstasis: it isolates it and creates a mythical time of necessity.

Excess and ecstasy also had a lot of impact in psychoanalysis. After World War II, the concept of *jouissance* became an important subject in post-Freudian psychoanalysis. The orgasm in psychoanalysis is differentiated and opposed to the concept of pleasure. Pleasure is an emotion, one that comes out of the recognition of something in the outside world. If I am a white heterosexual male, I first recognize a female body and then I have pleasure if there is a sexual relation. This is obviously a very uninteresting way of looking at psychoanalysis. These classic categories are replaced by *jouissance* after the second world war: what characterizes the sexual drive is no longer what is recognized in the outside world and the pleasure that comes out of this moment. The most important moment in intercourse is the sexual orgasm because it suspends the borders between me and the outside world: I am not deriving my pleasure from the perception of something external. *Jouissance* is therefore called an affect and not an emotion. The affect is something pleasurable that comes together with a limit experience of anxiety. This affect overwhelms the human body, it is a non-human process that takes over our bodies for a brief moment. Out of these interests, *jouissance* comes from the theory of Lacan (who also wrote problematic things about sexuality such as a description of triangular oedipal relationships). With this Lacan paved the way for affect theory. It is an interesting way to investigate emotions, sexuality, and sexual orientation. Through affect theory you become aware that human beings are more fluid in their genders and sexuality than is described regularly.

3. Traces of ecstasy in anthropology

Anthropology traditionally lacks a responsiveness to the non-human. Today, however, we want to get rid of the opposition between man and nature. The literature about climate change and the Anthropocene should also be read from an interest in ecstasis. Why? Because it is a huge correction of this economical view of man versus nature. It is also a huge correction of this modern project where human rationality understood itself as an instrumental rationality. Human rationality presents itself as a means towards a certain end, and this end is dominating nature. Technology and science are tools or strategies to master external nature so this nature becomes

something that helps our goals, fuels for our cars, products that we can use to do something with. From the modern perspective, it has no agency of its own. The Anthropocene comes from a different point of view and says: the distinction between man and nature is a mistake. In 1994 Bruno Latour published his book *We Have Never Been Modern*. He wrote this before terms, such as climate change and Anthropocene, became part of a public jargon. In the first pages of the book, he describes what he reads in the newspaper of that day. He says that what he reads always confronts him with hybrids: things that are neither purely culture, nor purely nature. The holes in the ozone layer are also related to the economy and politics. The more Latour reads in his newspaper, the more he understands that human beings are always interacting with nature, and that it cannot be separated. The modern philosophy who thought he could master nature was wrong, because nature has a life on its own, has a rhythm on its own. It can never reduce itself to become object of technology and we must help nature escape from the claws of human intervention. Adorno and Horkheimer similarly wrote in their *Dialectic of Enlightenment* that nature is interacting with us, and is forcing us to respond in very macrocosmic ways through climate change, but also in very microcosmic spaces. This also comes back in *Entangled Life*: fungi are in the most intimate spheres of our lives. Nature has an agency of its own and will never be reduced to a mere object of manipulation. This way of thinking lead to a whole new domain in philosophy that we call speculative realism. It's a call to action to look at nature in its own function, and not just as a vehicle for human desires and ambitions. From this autonomous status there is always an impact on human being.

4. Traces of ecstasy in politics

With Hannah Arendt we define politics as the sphere of the public. This is still true. But it is more than that: it is more than the public because it is also the private. We cannot reduce politics to the private. Even if the personal is political, you cannot reduce this to it. Benjamin wrote an essay about his experience with hashish in the city of Marseilles. In this essay, he gives an individual description of his experience. The way in which Benjamin meant it to be read, however, was seriously political. What Benjamin tried to do is to define politics not so much as the ambition to change the world (an example of this is when we find an ideology we can agree on and implement its blueprints). Rather, Benjamin defines politics as a more abstract form. Politics is not about changing the world but looking into the world as something changeable. This is the first step that we can never forget if we want to try to change it. Sometimes we really think we are stuck in a horrible place where we cannot fight sexism or the economy. Benjamin thinks that politics starts when we get rid of these pessimistic ideas. He agrees with Deleuze that this involves looking at the world as something ungrounded. There is only a new set of eyes vis-à-vis the world in which we live. He was just describing a normal time Marseille and suddenly it becomes a fairytale. It is not ecstasis in the sense of escapism, but it is ecstasy with a sharpness of observation. Not being in space, he is in the same city where he was. He is looking to the different cafes and restaurants with different eyes. Whereas he criticized the big city as an anonymous creepy place, suddenly the city becomes an intimate, nice space. We can play and feel at home, we know how to respond to this. That is that ecstasy is not being outside of the world and in one's own set of assumptions, ecstasy is not being in space. We are responding to the world, we are in the world, but we are responding to the world in taking its metamorphosis seriously. Some quotes from the text: "Opening the world on one's own conditions", "Now began the game, which I played for quite a while, of recognizing someone I knew in every face", "I saw only

nuances, yet these were the same”, “Of how I was incapable of fearing future misfortune, future solitude, for hashish would always remain” – we share something, even if we have no common qualities. Nonetheless, because we are in the same space we can respond to each other, and there is an invitation to relate to each other. Ecstasy is being in the world, but the world becomes formless. In another essay, Benjamin described it with color perception. This is also the beginning of political awareness because we will always have certain things in common.

Deleuze says the same kind of things in his description of *a-parallel becomings*. Something else has something in common with me: this is not the relationship that Deleuze talks about. Instead, it is a relationship with things that go beyond *morphè* and therefore sets up assemblages. It is not about retrieving meaning in the world, recognizing something that I already agreed with in my mind, that I see in the world and confirms my thoughts. It is about relationships between things. Georges Bataille is a very French author: when Deleuze talks about becomings, he talks about American literature. French thinkers can't do becomings because they always write about isolated moments: the day afterwards life as usual continues. The inner experiences of ecstasis are isolated from the world, and therefore they are not taking it seriously, because, Deleuze says, it is always part of the universe, and it is here. Bataille says it confronts us with necessity, Deleuze corrects this and says: it confronts us with possibility. Everything can change and can become something else. For Deleuze writing and thinking and artmaking should be engaged and committed to those projects: “to be a flux which combines with other fluxes”.

Post-lecture conversation and questions with Stéphane Symons

As the lecture was very dense and philosophical, the students received five minutes reflection time to formulate a question. Karen Verschooren also proposed to cluster ideas and practices around the concepts from the lecture as a starting point for a first curatorial mapping.

Q: In *Prince of Networks*, author Graham Harman describes an experience of Bruno Latour. When Latour was driving in his car, he had an experience: nothing can be reduced to itself, which was an ecstatic revelation. How would you describe the difference between ecstasis and catharsis? Both are forms of transformation, so how would you distinguish them?

- The reference to Harman is an interesting to link to Latour. It is about rediscovering the most accessible thing around you and not to see ecstasy as an escape to ‘outer space’. Harman is a much better fit to how I look at it. Harman writes something that is recognizable for everybody: suddenly, the question as to why you are walking or travelling or doing something arises. These moments are powerful and can become transformative in many different contexts. To come back to the question about catharsis: catharsis also means purification. In Greek philosophy it is an important component to identify the moral component of an aesthetical experience. Aristoteles explains the effect of the tragedy to the spectator: at the end of the play, a character is punished for something unethical. It describes a careful balance between punishment and release, but the punishment is also suited for the crime committed. This idea of purification is a little opposed to what we talk about with ecstasis. Because with catharsis there are some lessons to be learned, so you are

looking to a moral law: certain meanings we all must accept and learn to live by. The big potential in this ecstatic experience, however, is leaving morality behind. For instance, Deleuze distinguishes morality from ethics because morality is cathartic. There are certain laws you must follow, they are not very concrete, but you must apply them in your life. Ethics is nothing that you can apply in your life and that you can be obedient towards, it is not a rule, you live it intuitively. It is not egocentric, but a certain relation does something positive with me, and another thing doesn't match. You also cannot predict what will work and what will not work. You can never extrapolate and turn it into lawful laws. The ecstasy story is more an ethical story, whereas catharsis is more part of a moral story.

Q: In shamanic practices there is the occurrence of what we call 'trance'. This is still a moment in which the usual world of the person in trance is overstepped: it is changing. It can be a moment in which we realize or discover something. Is it relevant?

- When does this moment of the sacred (Bataille calls it the inner experience) lose its purpose and when is it materialized? It is hard to tell, because sometimes people do not feel the drive to escape from daily life. They fear the moments that we have now described as the moments of release of excess, topsy-turvy moments in which we release our productive, creative energy. It is not a moment that all people long for. We should also not look down on that, so it is tough to say when such a moment is emancipatory and when it becomes something that is appropriated by the system. The problem that it is being appropriated is a real one. A lot of things that were once important tools of resistance, are now being marketed for capitalist gain.
 - They are often used by the norm, the system to speak with a higher force, outside of the normal world. They become almost required by the established system. The fact that someone is not completely conscious throughout trance is being used by that order. In Japan, there is a shamanic tradition of groups of usually women, in which rituals are performed and the group is detached from the rest of society. They literally live outside the margins, there is a physical separation. It is interesting that this is maybe also a form of ecstasy but very guided.
- A lot of female Christian thinkers were on the surface very devout, but when you read their diaries, there is an interesting border between religion and sexuality. It is much more than this devout type of religiosity, there is desire and a bodily experience of ecstasy. It is the opposite of what we would associate with Catholicism. It is part of the whole religion as an economy, but if you look closely there was much more going on, but people didn't look at it that closely. The blurry zones between the rituals and somehow the creative potential within it to emancipate you from the powers that control the rest of your daily life is what Deleuze calls *becoming minor*. Your behavior and your thinking take place in something that seems solid and in place for many years and that has a problematical working. But you do certain things that do not immediately show you as resistant. In rituals there is an excess of energy that does not flow back into what the community thinks what you are doing.

Q: What is then the 'right' ecstatic experience, when is it not instrumentalized? How does the ecstatic experience come about? It might be the result of taking a drug, or

part of a shamanistic ritual. There is still this moment for an individual and what the individual can do given these perimeters in a certain context.

- The ethics that I mentioned earlier is what really allows one practice to spill over to the other side. For some people, a shamanistic practice is just a way of being exploited, but for other people it is exactly what they need to appeal to a certain desire. It becomes for them a strategy of 'self-care', a political tool of resisting certain affects and embracing what you really feel.

Q: Who is the shaman? Is it one person or is it another capacity? It makes a big difference.

- In Japan, shamanistic rituals were usually performed with blind women. Somehow, they thought they could see things that people with vision couldn't see; their disability would make them capable of seeing other things. In Japan, there are shamans who use no substance. The trance is done with dance.
- It is not a limit you achieve when you do something out of the ordinary, it is a natural human capacity. Deleuze quotes the author Henry Miller: "you can get drunk on water." That is his way of saying: don't romanticize ecstasy, we can all reach it.

Q: If we look at the ecstasy of Teresa of Avila, we also see an ecstasy outside of religion. It was very spiritual because it represented the contact between earth and heaven. In the Bible there are a lot of other examples of ecstatic moments. The duality between man and woman is not mentioned in this part of ecstatic moments.

- What I did with philosophy, putting an argument and a counter argument next to each other, you can also do that with religion. You always have a countertradition for a tradition. The countertradition in the church is very female, it is mysticism, and really going beyond borders. They often casts aside all moral obligations. I would call it still countertradition, even if it took place within the catholic establishment.

Q: When Hannah Arendt writes about the collective experience, she creates a 'non-ecstasy friendly' theory. I don't remember if she mentioned something specific about ecstasy. It is an individual experience, but she does not mention that ecstasy can be also a collective experience. Public manifestations and body movements (in terms of the collective body) also give ecstatic experiences. An example of this would be, for instance, a rave party.

- Filmmaker Wong Kar Wai also talks about collective ecstasy, it is not just one human being, and it can be shared. I wonder if Arendt could have embraced this kind of idea. Because the collective experience that she values is not about intoxication, but about political action. It is not just 'doing' stuff, but it is about coming together and thinking together about what you want to do with society. For her, political action is political deliberation, and it is always rational. But even in a non-Arendtian way it is possible to find something political in collective ecstasy.
 - Two weeks ago there was a performance of Ula Sickle at STUK. Dancers separately danced in the space and broke down the movements of what is endlessly repeated, but at a certain point in the middle of the performance there was a text recital. It was very intriguing and talked about the reasons for escape, or the possible reason why you would like

to get lost in the drumming of something – it was about almost coming back to a self that is transformed throughout the experience. What drives individuals, collectives towards an ecstatic experience? If that many people experience the same urge or need, then it transcends the individual experience. Not everyone is looking for the ecstatic in the everyday. Apparently, this can work in similar ways, leading to a body of people searching for an ecstatic experience.

- I wouldn't downright call it apolitical either, as Arendt would do, because she would see this collective urge as the result of propaganda and a fascist politics. She would associate collective ecstasis as something exploited by political powers.

Q: If we would look into the subject of collective ecstasis through performative arts: is the suspension of disbelief also not a form of metamorphosis through collective ecstasis?

- Benjamin talks about the audience that goes to the cinema. He differentiates between a closed mass and an open mass. The closed mass is the fascist mob that understand itself as a unity by pushing outside everything that is different from itself. They identify with innate characteristics. There is also an open mass: example is the spectator and collective spectatorship in the cinema. There is no claim that there is a shared characteristic. The only thing they share is that they are looking at something outside of them (not within them), and they look upon the same screen. He described movies as moving images. What they share is that they all look at the same movement. In the cinema, you're forced to follow the rhythm of the moving image. You could say it is a collective ecstasis. Art is the place where this can happen because we talk together about things in classrooms, cinema's, theatres, museums. It used to happen in churches.
 - The chorus had a very active part in the theatre in Greek tragedy to represent this function, but they really played the part of the polis, the democracy. It was another form of theatre that we will never experience today. On a critical level it has been paired to *Dancer in the Dark* (Von Trier) where there are choruses on the train. During medieval times in Europe, theatre was played on chariots with religious representations of the Life of Christ, and everyone was following it. Still in church, some of the movements of the priests are related to this collective following of the theatre chariots.

Q: Ecstasy and love is something we all share. Ecstasy comes close to what love could be or is. Some thoughts?

- It not that you fall in love with something from the outside, somebody that embodies your idea of love, because that would be very narcissistic. Then there is not even a relationship. The love that we all hold dear has this ecstatic quality. It feels safe and dangerous at the same time.

Q: Ecstasy or being ecstatic is more like a capacity than an experience. The examples that were being given were examples of becoming ecstatic through external stimuli, but to what extent can it become induced purely from the own body, for instance with bipolar people?

- There was a slide in the presentation about Aby Warburg. He was somebody who was diagnosed with bipolarity (at the time it was called schizophrenia). He was hospitalized and suffered immensely; he thought the food that he got was the body of his child etc. But he described in his diary of the mental illness that he suffered that he could use it as a tool to look at artworks. He used this experience for his art historical approach. The renaissance paintings he looked at are harmonic and anthropocentric. But when Warburg looked at them, he singled out the details, for instance the hairs of the nymph in the birth of Spring, the folds in the clothes of the goddesses. For him, they are not harmonious, they're revelation of this power of the world to always change and renew itself, because he focused on movement. After the long silence of winter, there is an outburst of energy in spring – this technique had for him enormous therapeutic quality. He was also released out of the hospital. The solution came out of his problem.

Q: The ecstatic could also be reached through meditation or breathing exercises.

- I read a book called *What Is Breathing?* In it, the author describes the breathing exercises of Buddhist monks who can survive in very cold temperatures because they start breathing very fast and suddenly do things they couldn't do.

Research time

These hours during the masterclass are reserved to research, discuss, and reflect about the theme to work on a curatorial pitch together. During research time, the students had to think about concepts for the exhibition and start connecting the dots in two groups. Karen Verschooren gave an example of her notes and mind maps in her introduction to her own curatorial practice and invites the students to be inspired by this method. With the basic understanding of ecstasy as a form of transformation, as a capacity rather than experience, how could you explore the subject as an exhibition? It could be for instance, the relationship with plants and animals, or more the idea of ecstasy of love, or how you could train ecstasy, and so on. It is important to find a point of entry that is not just interesting on a personal level, but also what could be interesting for the audience on a societal level.

The first group first thought out the subject individually in silence, before brainstorming together. They gathered around one computer to look at images, share artistic practices for inspiration and to make notes together. They put together their ideas in graphs and mind maps on paper to organize the structure of the possibilities around 'the ecstatic'.

First, they explored several topics that they found interesting, such as the topic of love as a manifestation of ecstasy. This could be divided into two spheres: the mental sphere or the bodily/sexual sphere. How could they be related to each other? In situations, such as clubs, raves or concerts, there might also be the ecstatic feeling around collective love for a shared interest. There is a reference to Julia Kristeva and her theories on affect and fetishism: affect can be strong and painful, but in the end, you feel pleasure. Ecstatic feelings can also be induced through substances, such as drugs. In performance art, there are interesting possibilities to find practices relating to this. An example is an artist who urinated in public and invited other people to urinate together. The idea of collective ecstasy is quickly a topic that interests

everybody in the group. Other ideas related to collective ecstasy were political rallies, cults and cult leaders, mass suicide, the body as vessels, shutting off through technology or social media, surgical fetishes, drug abuse or self-medication through drugs, the immediacy of ecstatic experiences versus ecstatic becoming. The ideas around collective ecstasy quickly leads towards a discussion about power. Religion and spirituality seem to use this mechanism very often: coming close to God in monotheistic religions, yoga, etc. The group also reflects about non-Western forms of ecstasy in this context. There was the earlier example of shamanic groups of women in Japan. However, the group understands that there are lot of things in common with Western practices in essence. There also seems to be an interesting connection between religion, sexuality, and the female body. Teresa of Avila is good example for this. Women are usually believed to have more intuitive powers, so they are quickly connected to the spiritual, the ungraspable and invisible. Another line of thinking is the idea that everything is connected in nature, for instance through networks like those of fungi. It relates to the idea that ecstasy is the potential to mutate from one form into another. The group share some artistic practices. Afterwards, they work on a graph that represents the different spheres in which the ecstatic can be: it can be individual or collective, mental or in the body, etc.

The second group started writing down ideas individually, to present them to each other for a brainstorm. They asked each other many questions to guide each other and feedback ideas. Following up on the concept of ecstasy as a transgressive potential, the human urge towards escapism is quickly a subject on the table. Related to this, there is a discussion about fear: during transgression or metamorphosis, fear is an emotion that comes up. When crossing a border, it might also be necessary to leave the emotion of fear. The question as to what induces ecstasy arises. Using the mind to transcend a physical space and using visual art to go beyond the rational act of looking interests the group members. How could your other senses play a part in perceiving visual art and culture and how could this induce an ecstatic feeling when looking at art? How could you activate the senses of visitors in an exhibition? Some other related ideas that were discussed, were speculative realism and the realization that everything is malleable and renegotiable, the splitting of the self during an ecstatic experience, identity, and climate. Environmental topics are interesting to touch upon within the context of the ecstatic, because the new environment is desynchronizing the human being and we need to fundamentally renegotiate the way we live. Individual ecstasy is not relevant anymore in that case, because it is about the actions of an entire species. The group reflects on the title of the masterclass 'the ecstatic being' and suggest they should change it to 'the ecstatic becoming'. The concept of memory comes up as something that plays a role in the ecstatic experience: with regards to a past we have, an archive, there is change, and then future. This idea is criticized in the group because it represents a linear and teleological way of thinking, which is the exact philosophical opposite of the ecstatic when it is interpreted in a transgressive way. The group returns to their idea about the senses and how to activate them in an ecstatic experience. They argue that it might be interesting for a visitor to explore this ecstatic being, because it is about transcending yourself. There is no need to have different forms of art that each speak to one sense (e.g., sound art or olfactory art), because even a painting could activate different senses. A group member mentions that in Arabic philosophy, Avicenna had developed a different set of senses than the five senses we speak of in Western culture today. There are five external senses (touch, smell, taste, hearing and seeing), but also five internal senses (common sense, retentive imagination, compositive

imagination, estimated power and memory). The notion of interpassivity is mentioned: where someone else or something else becomes a medium for you to experience something. For instance, when you scan a book, you still have the feeling that you have read the book. Kafka couldn't drink cold beverages because of an illness, so he would go to cafés and enjoy the experience of seeing other people drink it. As these things relate to semiology and psychology, the group tries to come back to the core theme of the ecstatic. There seem to be three themes on the table: one related to ecology, another related to memory and another related to multisensorial experiences. Eventually, the group chooses to work around the senses.

Time to pitch! Both groups pitch their ideas and had to present a concept text to further develop towards exhibition design.

The first group had not found a title yet, so they called their proposal 'the thing in process'. They further developed their ideas around collective ecstasy and they made two graphs: one exploring the individual and collective ecstasy, the other exploring collective agency and non-agency. What types of ecstasy could be in these realms? Mental illness, for instance is non-agency and individual. Partying and doing ecstatic things in a group triggered to think about this more. Religion is collective and agency. Then from the axis of the individual, when you have an individual form of ecstasy and you still have the agency to control that, that is defined by the group as meditation. It creates a state where one can enter the ecstatic stage individually, through the guidance of someone or something else. However, you cannot pin down collective and individual ecstasy through shamanism because you have no guarantee when or how the trance really takes place. We were triggered by the idea of the translator of the ecstatic moment. The shaman is the mediator during meditation or trance, the cult leader is the mediator in a cult. Mental illness stood out, because there is no agency, but then this idea of a mediator doesn't really apply, or it could be your own body. It also not something that is experienced collectively in the sense of simultaneously. Multiple people can experience it, but not in the same circumstances. What if the mediator is not present, how does this affect the experience of transformation?

The second group pitched their ideas around the fear of the unknown during a transformative experience. How would it be possible to ease people into a fluid, transformative and out of the daily experience of ecstasy? They approached ecstasy as something positive, something that can restructure and renegotiate the way in which we see the world and create new relationships between the spectator and the artworks. The experience of senses that are not strictly visual could be a tool to recreate ecstatic experiences for the viewers. The difference between five internal and external senses is explained. This broadened the possibilities of catering for a form of ecstasis that would help the viewer to gain new insights into multiple knowledges, perceptions, ecologies. They used the words senses and ecologies as two main fields, but then they didn't want to specifically use ecology because of its environmental connotations. This pitch led to an interesting discussion on the problematics of the ecstatic in opposition to an exclusively positive stance on the ecstatic. Creating a multisensorial exhibition that aims to give the viewers an ecstatic experience is very problematic, because it is manipulative and maybe not wished for by the audience. It is interesting as a thought experiment, because it reveals the point of view of the beneficiaries. This is a good example of how you can really dig into all aspects of a concept during the first research phase, hit the wall and retry and refocus until you

come up with something that is artistically and societally interesting and possible in an institutional context. Also, inducing an ecstatic experience through art immediately puts forward clear multisensorial works. However, a painting could also speak to other senses. One way to escape the problematic aspect of this proposal, is to go back to understand the ecstatic as a capacity of transgressing instead of an experience. Perhaps what is desirable is not going in the ecstatic experience, but maybe there is an aha-moment of “I too might have the capacity for transgression and ecstatic experiences.” Ideally that realization doesn’t come intellectually.

Thursday, October 21

Screening of Shana Moulton’s film Whispering Pines 10 (2018)

**Lecture by Tom Hannes, former Zen monk, therapist, coach
Zen Ecstasy**

What can ecstasy mean to us, through the lens of Zen? Tom Hannes is a zen buddhist practitioner and teacher for over thirty years. He dropped out of being a buddhist monk, is now married and works as a researcher in philosophy at the University of Eindhoven, researching the link between Buddhist awareness, techniques and philosophy and ecological awareness. This lecture could be on the nature of ecstasy and its philosophical background. Even though ecstasy is experiential, ineffable, and indescribable as an experience, still there is always in some form a philosophical background attached to it. The experience and the conceptual framework in which it is experienced and expressed later can create the effect and even the memory of the ecstatic experience.

What is ecstasy and what do we mean by it?

We need to start somewhere. Instead of just looking at the dictionary, Tom Hannes looks back to the proto-Indo-European roots of the word. This is a linguistically reconstructed language that is at the source of most European and Indian languages. Our ecstasy comes from the prefixes ‘ek’, which means ‘outside’ and ‘sta’, which means ‘stand’, ‘be firm’ and ‘make firm’. If you see it like that, ecstasy means to rule out and move out of that which is firm, to move out of what is known and what is fixed. This is a situation that can be for the better or the worst. If you lose things, it becomes chaotic and disorderly, it can be totally disruptive (e.g., people with psychosis). But ecstasy can also be positive, because if you move out of what is known, it helps you change your perspective. It helps you regain a new ground later. These are two different evaluations of the ecstatic experience. This reflects historically also in the Ancient Greek world ‘ekstasis’. The word ecstasy here meant ‘to move away from the proper place’ – yet again a double possibility. To move away from a conservative point of view, it is a horrible experience. If you look at it from a more progressive point of view, if you’re a kind of person who aims for change and make things radically different than before, this moving away could be very promising. In the early Christian tradition, God mixed in with the Neoplatonic way of thinking and ecstasy became trance. This is more the meaning we tend to give to it too. It is very individualistic to link the ecstatic to God. This is not only happening in Western cultures and history. It is also recognizable from the Indian point of view. Around the sixth or seventh century BCE, you will find the ecstatic experience in Brahminical culture. You will recognize the Dutch word ‘adem’ for breath in the name of Brahman because it refers to the essence of your true self you can find

through meditation. With this true self you can reach Brahman, which is the all. it is a cosmic principle, the universe and the spirit that guides the universe. In our hyper individualistic era, we have the similar thing: in which we go into ourselves, be locked up into our experiences and create a sense of totality (a 'wow'-experience). These things follow the same structure: the structure of imploding into my own experience, which has an explosive experience. You go into yourself, you implode, to explode in an expansive sense of life and existence. This kind of thinking is what you find as well in Buddhism, certainly if you think about it without the clichés that we are used to think of.

The Buddhist cliché

Buddhist ecstasy would be to let go of yourself and so reach the true nature of existence. You let go of all your attachments and thoughts and you can go through to true existence. This is the basic idea of ecstasy along those lines. Ecstasy is not just one experience; it is rather an historical way of thinking about what it means to have a meaningful life. Everything that we are talking about right now goes back to the axial tradition in philosophy. This is the background of what it means to live a meaningful life. Even the way in which we look for ecstasy is influenced by this concept. We must go back to very early archaic civilizations to understand this. They started roughly 7000 years ago and ended roughly around 11 700 BCE. We are talking about the blueprint of the meaning of life, but how to find this meaning of life? Ecstasy has a place in this story. Hannes is aware that he should be careful in making claims about this topic because there is very little scientific evidence for it. Everything we know from archaic traditions is based on indigenous cultures and archaeological findings. There are three main lines or characteristics that come back in these archaic traditions. The most common thing about these traditions is the fact that they are very different, but still, it is easier to work through similarities.

1. The meaning of life is found in the collective

Archaically we are not looking for the meaning of life by sitting and thinking about it. You can find it by partaking in common rituals, to help safe and protect the tribe, the collective and the environment of the collective, the territory. That is what the meaning of life is: to protect the community. You can still find this sense in the conservative reflex, which is getting stronger today. The conservative mind is not so much about "how can I fulfill the meaning of my life," but rather: "how can I help my community, how can I be patriotic?" How can you be a good part of your society? How can you be a good father/family man? The meaning of life is not found within yourself, but in the way you relate to a community, expressed by rituals, laws, and moral values that are fixed.

2. The natural environment is animistic

Everything, every phenomenon has a similar kind of soul (*anima*) as a human. Human beings can communicate with spirits, good or bad, but also with animals, totems, objects and even phenomena like the weather, heat, hunger, or illnesses. Those are all beings with a soul you can interact with. This created a very narrow and intimate relationship with your direct environment. But this is only the territory of the tribe, not yet the universe, not yet the whole. We can still find a lot of these things in mythology (e.g. Greek mythology, where it is normal for nature, phenomena, gods and humans live together).

3. The archaic life is a tragic world

There is no escape, no final solution. It is never going to be 'right'. Within this conflicting world, the meaning of life becomes to bear it, to be heroic and to sustain your community as long as you can. The Viking Berserkers are a good example of this. Berserkers were warriors who went into a frenzy and started fighting ragingly in ecstasy and were therefore powerful fighters. They didn't just kill anybody; they killed their collective enemies. They were ecstatic in giving themselves to the battle because they were giving themselves to the community. Some psychologists think similarly about our experiences today when we go to pop concerts, for example. When you go to something really niche, the audience collectively really goes into it, and you go in ecstasy. This creates a sense of togetherness with those who like that music. Or the way in which fans of certain sports club are in a happy frenzy when their club wins. That is the archaic way of having an ecstatic experience.

To understand the Buddhist cliché and to form his own argument, Hannes takes us back to the axial period. The axial period is a period in which a kind of philosophy, religion, and spirituality that we still know today started to arrive. It arose due to the advent of agriculture, and it took place from around 11 700 BCE until 1945. Agriculture came when a new climate hit the earth (the Holocene). New kinds of societies grew in the form of big chiefdoms, kingdoms, and huge empires. That created a new kind of blueprint for and radically changed what it meant to lead a meaningful life. To understand what happened, we're looking back into the three pillars of archaic life and how they changed into something new throughout this axial period.

1. The collective environment was replaced by the individual. The meaning of life could now be found in the individual. I look within myself to find the meaning of life. It started as philosophers and religious prophets started thinking for themselves, often in seclusion, meditating under a tree, or hiding in a cave, or wandering around in a desert to try to find or hear the voice of god or to find the true nature of existence. Instead of gathering with the community to find the collective meaning of life, one started looking within oneself to find universal truth. This is ecstatic. This has effects on the way we deal with our natural environment.
2. Animism made way for the quest for harmony. With Plato, the idea that the ecstatic effect of the individual should be harmoniously good and beautiful arose. Everywhere is all good, is all perfect, is all benign and beautiful. The trouble is that, when we look around and into ourselves or just to daily life, nothing is all good. Instead, there is a lot of trouble and confusion. If the actual deep truth is supposed to be good and harmonious, there is a distinction between the nature around us and *the* truth. You cannot find sacredness in nature because sacredness is found on a deeper level.
3. The tragedy of life is liberated for the sake of progress. Life becomes an arrow: we liberate ourselves out of misery, we make progress, we awaken etc. This thinking is about finding access to the deep truth, the ecstatic. This becomes the sense of philosophy and religion in our actual age. The end of the Second World War is proposed as the end of this process, because that is the moment that the world is confronted with the first atomic bomb. Often it is said that then the new era of the Anthropocene started.

In the Buddhist cliché there is a difference between a useful and useless life, which is the definition of a soteriological approach to life: if you die and have lived a good life you go to Nirvana. It is all about liberation and finding a way out. But even though there is this cliché, you can argue against it. So how can we go against this cliché? Hannes deconstructed the axial Atman-Brahman matrix in his lecture as follows.

In the beginnings, the buddha was not about that liberation path. Therefore, Tom will deconstruct the axial atman-Brahman matrix. The problem with Buddhism, especially in the West, is that it is very little understood what it is about. The old Atman-Brahman axiology, which represents for Hannes the Buddhist clichés, is projected onto Buddhism today, which is something more various and different than these traditional viewpoints. To uncover non-axial aspects of Buddhism, one must go back to the original teachings of the Buddha. They are interesting from a philosophical point of view, but they also might prove to be highly valuable to develop a sense of meaning of life that is ecologically sound and that is related to another, more contemporary, kind of ecstasy.

Buddha is an historical figure, who lived somewhere around the fifth century BCE in a very anxious time in India. Empires became republics, republics became empires. One of the things that was rapidly changing was the religious scene. Brahminic priests were seen as the safeguards of liberation and the meaning of life. This started to be challenged by a movement called the Samara, homeless priests. They didn't belong to any cast. People who belonged to other casts started to look for the meaning of life by themselves, radically. Most of them were beggars who wandered in the jungle. This was then something very dangerous to do, it was a matter of life and death. People were acting as animals, mooing around as cows, people defecating, barking, and walking on all fours in public, copulating on the streets. This kind of radicality was around at that time, also with a very intricate and solid radical philosophy. One of the people who was walking around then was Buddha (or 'the enlightened one' as named later by his followers). He came from the warrior caste and was destined to be the political leader of a small republic. He dropped out and became a monk. He followed different leaders but none of them worked out for him. Therefore, he devised his own teaching, called Buddhism. In this, he deconstructs the whole axial Atman-Brahman matrix himself. The matrix says you have to go within to find the all and in that ecstasy you find liberation. He had no writings, but he talked and taught people, who created a oral history of his sayings and wrote second-hand sources. One of his talks is the Brahmajala Sutta (a talk about the net of Brahma). The net of Brahma was an old Indian metaphor for reality. Reality was the net of Brahma in which everything is connected to each other. In each knot there was a jewel, cut in such a way that every jewel reflected every other one. In his talk, the buddha changes that word. Instead of the holy net of God, he turns it into the 'God trap': a fishing net in which people get caught in God-thinking. He enlists sixty-two wrong views of the Brahmanic ascetics, who all come to the same conclusion. They sit down, have some ecstasy awareness and they see essence. When they are wise men, everything is fine and good. Instead, Buddha says: if you keep translating your ecstasies into the concept of "I see god and everything is fine," then you are simply a fraud who is making things up. His readings have three important characteristics:

1. Whatever you experience, it is impermanent. This is said in the meditation on the Tilakkana. Everything will change.

2. Keep in mind, watch, or witness that everything is co-dependent. This does not mean that everything is linked to one another, but it means that every characteristic, everything you feel, and touch is like a crossroads of many situations, many circumstances, many causes: you are produced by causes, impossible to oversee. Instead of saying “this is me”, you say “at this point, I am feelings, value judgements, thoughts, the pressure in the air, etc.”
3. Everything is imperfect. You will never ever hit upon any experience that is perfect. We use the word perfect, but it doesn't cover everything. Everything always lacks something or has something too much. Buddha keeps challenging his students.

We can all understand this now, but this was groundbreaking to say in the time of Buddha. A Brahman was supposed to be completely free and perfectly happy. Only if you hit upon that kind of eternal and autonomous sense, then you would meet Brahma and be happy. But instead, Buddha says to pay attention and sit down and meditate and feel what is really going on. You'll see the opposite of the purely happy Brahma. This is connected to Zen: beyond the world, to true self, by being non-dualistically one with all. This is in fact Brahminic because meditation is the exact opposite what buddha was talking about. Meditation, however, can also be a place where you sit down and have a nice me-moment. It is a kind of diluted way of staying within that axial Brahminic ecstatic sense. You sit down and just feel perfect where you are, for a while. It is so popular today because we need it. We are working so hard, and we have been producing so much and the workforce is so horrible and hectic, that we need this moment. But at the same time, it is not the kind of ecstasy that comes out of seeing everything as impermanent, co-dependent and imperfect. Instead, it is Brahminic. So is there a way to be happy in life, to find meaning in life? What is there? It sounds nihilistic, but again it is safe to say not to panic.

Finding my true self and my true passions and in this way breaking out of a dull meaning of life is in its core the matrix shared by Christian, Hindu, Buddhist, Greek, modern, neoliberal, and other viewpoints. These are all many different philosophies that seem so different, but still seem so similar somehow. What happens if you drop out of that? The Buddha has been accused of being nihilistic very often and made it rather difficult not to think about it as nihilistic. It was very difficult not to slip into that dramatic part. If you stick to these three characteristics, what happens? If you live in a Buddhist way, you can have many ecstatic experiences, but how do you conceive of them and how do you put them in good use? To answer this question, one must move in difficult territory. Not so much because it is philosophically difficult, but because it is so very experiential that it is difficult to explain it and still be truthful to the experience. The keyword or key concept to know what this is about, is to return to the word 'self' and to see what kind of 'self' comes out of that Tilakanna meditation. Hannes calls it the 'interface self'. It is not the self as the true inner core, but as an interface, something in between the body and what happens in there and the outer world. That self is not so much my true inner core, but is a way, a mode of dealing with the interaction between what is inside and what is outside.

Bruno Latour is very strong about no longer using the word 'nature'. He dislikes this word, as in fact a lot of environmental philosophers do today. Because the sense of nature is the same thing as this axial outer world. One of the reasons why it is so difficult to be ecologically aware, is because you think of nature as 'out there', the totality and then we think of things that are necessarily good, necessarily

harmonious. If I am in contact with myself, then I am totally natural (good, harmonious, healthy). This thinking takes away the whole true natural situation. But instead of nature, Latour advises us to use the 'critical zone'. The ecological critical zone is the zone in which life takes place. On top of the earth and the beginning of the space. Hannes also refers to the concept of 'doughnut economy' of Kate Howarth to explain himself. Somewhere in between there is a thin layer between the ecological needs and the social needs. If you do away with the ecological needs, your economy will disappear. If you get rid of social needs, your economy will collapse too. One of our Flemish ministers said a couple of years ago that "no trees will grow on an economic graveyard." It is the exact opposite: no economy can be where there are no trees. If you think of the market as the all, you lose sight of the critical zone. Instead of thinking of the self as this core (my true inner core), you can think of it as an interface, a relation, a mode, that takes care of the interactions between the inner world and the outer world. I might be as close to my body as I can, but I don't really know what it is and how it works. The outer world doesn't need to be meaning-full. I can live in a perfectly absurd world without being alarmed (there is no meaning in life) but meaning in life doesn't live within you or outside of you. It is in the interaction between your inner and outer world. These are two ecstasies that you can experience when practicing early Buddhist meditation in two directions.

First you have dhyana (Indian word, means sullenness, concentration). In Chinese it is translated as Zen, which means focused concentration. You move away from the outer world to focus on something simple and to make interactions as low, as produced as possible. You can do all kinds of breathing: you can turn it into spectacular breathing to reach a certain result. You can have long, short, deep breathing. Breathing is something to focus on. It doesn't matter if is long, short, happy... it is something that you can bring your attention to, to implode. To take away, reduce, interaction with the outer world. In that way your mind can become very calm, to the point until it is empty. The thumbs are lightly connected in the lap, on which you can focus. These are very simple, normal things that you can keep coming back to, so your mind is very calm. One disciple of Buddha was good in dhyana and could hold it for very long. He asked Buddha: "am I enlightened yet?" The Buddha answered, "No, you're just really calm." Whereas in another context this guy would have been a guru! The non-essentialism in meditation is important: become highly calm and concentrated is something you must do first. Only then are you ready to do the other thing. The other thing is to come from this calmness and look about. This is called Sati. Sati means dimension. So instead of concentration it is observation. Instead of focus, it is about panoramic awareness. You are just aware of many things; There is the willingness, the openness to pay attention to whatever hits you. That kind of willingness allows another kind of ecstasy, which we could call expansion/explosion. In your awareness of yourself in the world, it is as if all the walls around you drop.

There is also the ecstasy of the not-self, which is a scary one. This is about being *not* firm. Ecstasy is about moving out of the firmness and Buddhist awakening is awakening to the fact that I am not firm. I am rather an instance of interaction between the inner and outer world, but also between me and other, between my culture and others. If we learn to live *in* this and drop the ideas of there being a meaning somewhere else, the meaning of life suddenly becomes clear. That kind of getting out of yourself, immediately leads to a meaning of life that revolves around the improvement of relations – not just with yourself but with anything else. This

gives an inkling that we might find a third and new way of thinking about the meaning of life based on ancient non-axially interpreted Buddhist ecstasy.

1. Instead of the gateway being the archaic collective, the tribe, and instead of the meaning of life being in yourself, in the truth, ecological reading of Buddhism is *relational*. Ecstasy is un-appropriately linked: I am a network of things happening at the same time, but I have some leverage, I have some liberty and the more I practice being calm, the more that freedom expands so I can do something with it extatically. It is a kind of ecstasy, but it changes the way you feel constantly. Something is changed, hugely. It makes it a lot easier to live an interrelational live.
2. The relation with the outer world is not animalistic or dualistic, it is spectral. Even though we are nothing but relations, it doesn't mean that we are all the same. It obviously means we are not. We are spectral, un-appropriately unique, 'thus'. You may have access to a person, but you don't know everything about them. We are phenomenal, spectral, in itself. That is another kind of ecstasy, of being uniquely and very precisely and unnamably this. This comes from a tremendous source of love, compassion, and kindness.
3. I am not going to move to a final heaven or final awakening. It is not about reaching a particular mental state or insight, it is a practice. It is something that you do all the time, in two ways. We use the metaphor of the recurrent circle (seasons, rituals). The soteriological way of thinking was about moving out of the circle and to work towards progress. The third model or metaphor is the adobe, which is the metaphor of being a nebula, a space where everything can pass through. You sit down in meditation, and you are just a welcoming space. Any kind of stimulus can arise, you pay attention and you let it go. This is what we usually call meditation: allow everything to happen as it is. But there is another kind of meditation that buddha thought. Two dramatic priests once came to ask for his advice. They wanted to go to the heaven of Brahma and asked how they could get there. Instead of mocking them, which he usually did, Buddha tried to give them a meditation that still used the idea of a Brahma heaven but remained close to what he thought was the meaning of life. You sit down, don't move, calm your breathing, and thought. To go to Brahma heaven, you look for a sentiment of love or kindness or compassion or sympathetic joy (being glad that somebody else is happy). You feel a sense of kindness in your body, and you arouse it until it feels the whole of your body. And then make it being: radiate it out of you, in front of you, the back of you, left right up and down. Sit as if you are a star radiating those things. The first meditation is a porous cloud, a cosmic nebula that you can condense in a star can radiate and can dilute itself into porous cloud. That means that there are two meanings of life. If you care to think along those lines. There is the interface south. We can practice in two ways. Separately, but at the same time, I can practice in becoming more porous (more tolerant, being less shielded off, being less in harness and be more like part of this intricate network of influences of circumstances or conditions that I live in). Just feeling the relations, you don't need this all to be filled with it. It fills you, gives you a sense of direction. The other sense is that of the more starlike emanation. If you practice this radically, as if they're of the greatest importance, a matter of life and death, something changes. A lot of questions drop. Meaning of life becomes that, those things. Much more important than wondering 'am I an enlightened being or not'. It is important to practice every day.

Post-lecture questions and discussion with Tom Hannes

Q: When we are talking about archaic times, the meaning of life, and the community versus the conservative, it seems that most contemporary conservative groups are not thinking in animistic ways.

- That is one of the great mysteries of contemporary conservative values and groups. This is a huge debate. I don't know much, but I will tell how I feel. First, contemporary conservatism cannot be archaic animism. We live in a different world today. Apparently, it depends on the bacteria in your gut if you're conservative or progressive. Even the small animals within your gut tell you who to be. I think that if conservatives were merely conservative, they would be inclined to a kind of animism, without having to believe in God or thinking they can talk to trees. If you think of nationalism and the blood and soil sentiments, you don't have to be a Nazi to be touched by the landscape of your own country. That is a kind of animism, to be in love with your own soil, the place you were born. You would expect the die-hard conservative to be very ecologically concerned. As it happens they are the ones who make it most difficult to create a proper kind of ecological awareness. This blocks in a lot of ways the natural way towards animism that would normally give rise to an ecological concern. However, neoliberalism puts every ethical concern in the market, it is almost a religion, and this is blocked. We are not particularly concerned that Flanders is having less trees, but the world needs billions of more trees. This is very difficult for a genuinely conservative mind to think globally. They will always think or feel or react locally, within the tribe's territory. These are things that block the animistic tendency that you would expect with contemporary conservatives. Even if it is there. For a progressive person it is almost impossible to feel very hot about patriotism.

Q: We have been talking about ecstasy as a moment of losing yourself and becoming something else, which is quite disruptive and in the best of situations emancipatory and beneficial to both the person experiencing it and their surroundings. This concept of maintaining a low yet constant ecstasy in daily life is quite interesting. In terms of temporality, it is interesting to look at ecstasy not as a moment but as a lifelong pursuit.

- They are not necessarily opposed: this more or less comes down to the whole rhetoric of enlightenment or awakening. You can have short flashes of ecstasy and that can be disruptive or inspirational to move on onto a path and see them as a kind of motivational force. But it becomes a lot more interesting, in fact, when that kind of ecstasy becomes sustainable. And there is residue that stays with you all the time. That happens when you drop the idea of having to reach a particular goal, but still practice. It is like walking, swimming, or breathing. Even if you're in a daily life of ecstasy (low level), you can still deepen and develop that sense to have more creative peak ecstasies, they can be nice but also very challenging or quite disruptive.

Q: The arrows around the self in your graph point towards outer world and inner world, but what about this relationship the other way around?

- The idea of wanting to define the meaning of life starts from the self, even though it comes from the outside. I used this model because we started with

ecstasy as moving out of yourself. But of course, there is a constant interaction in all directions. There is also the interaction of the outer world and the inner world without the self knowing anything about this, that happens all the time. The moving out from your own self, it does require – even though a lot of it comes in – an explicit opening up from your awareness and self-awareness towards the outside or inside.

Q: in other words, for an ecstatic experience to be more sustainable or more in-depth, there is the need to focus deeper on the Sathi from the Dhyana.

- From a Buddhist perspective, yes. There are of course other ways. From a Buddhist point of view, or the practice as I know it, there is really the requirement of Dhyana and sati, the quietness and the openness, the implosion, and the expansion. Otherwise, the Sathi alone doesn't change an awful lot. It becomes so very calm, you can develop the confidence to really be open to things, which otherwise remain closed to you.

Q: I am interested in this distinction between how an ecstatic experience is generated from outside stimuli (on the one hand you can take a drug or have an encounter), but what you're talking about is a self-induced ecstatic experience. A lot of people do drugs because it is so easy and scientifically you can explain what happens to the body and our happiness hormones. In this practice you talk about, it takes practices and sounds fascinating, but what does it do from a scientific point of view?

- During the nineties I still read those studies, but then I dropped reading them. But there is a lot of research. I am not up to speed with the science on the matter, but it is there, and it is not that difficult to find. Especially in the mindfulness regions – which is not quite the same – but it has been researched. I don't really agree with your first remark that the things that I talk about are self-induced. The kind of meditation I talk about only sets the conditions for it to happen, but don't induce them. It is not intrusive, this experience. It is so not intrusive that it grows on you. You get the amount of ecstasy you can deal with. Instead of being overwhelmed by stuff that you have no place for, you grow into it, and it becomes sustainable in that way. It is like eating breakfast. If you think of it as a lot of work and discipline, it becomes very hard. If you think of it as something that belongs to what you do in a day, then it doesn't become hard at all. I never had the urge to meditate. I never liked it. But it just has become normal to do it, so it changes me all the time. One of the things that has changed is that it has become very easy for me to do it every day.

Research time

Today the focus will be more on the research of artistic practices that would fit into the curatorial concepts that each group decided to work around.

In group one, where collective ecstasy and the role of the mediator in this process had been the focus, there is an immediate continuation of the brainstorm of the previous day. Some things that came to mind were the dancing plagues in the sixteenth century, the Flemish Coca-Cola-hysteria in high schools in the nineties, mass hysteria and radiation. Yesterday, the focus of the group was more on instantaneous moments of ecstasy, whereas the lecture of today inspired them to think more about low frequency, yet constant ecstasy. The first artistic media that

came to their minds was video and performance art. The group questions their Western point of view and starts to think about different experiences or interpretations of the ecstatic, for instance in Chinese performance art. Other examples of artists that came to mind were Pipilotti Rist, a Dutch artist who used drumming to create a trance during a performance, a Mexican performance artist. Someone proposed to look also at indigenous artistic practices from South-America as a possible point of view to bring in. Every group member tried to bring in their own backgrounds and knowledge of non-Western ways of approaching the theme. The idea of the mediator comes back into the discussion in the sense that an artwork can also make you aware of your presence or your place in the world. An example is Japanese artist Shimamoto Zo, who used brushworks in a specific meditative way. The group makes a shared Drive document with links and names of people. They ask each other questions to see what the best approach is to come up with names, do research and keep on finetuning the theme at the same time. They decide that they can spin the web around the ecstatic more broadly and go for that approach.

The second group starts writing down and researching names of artists individually. Afterwards, they share the names they found and discuss together. As they're focus was on the sensorial possibilities of ecstasy, but also the fear that is part of a transgressive experience, some practices revolve around murder, psychology, and negative forms of ecstasy to counter an exclusively positive discourse. There are examples, such as Marina Abramovic, Chris Ofili or art that is in that adrenaline-fueled transgressive part of the ecstatic experience. The question as to how one can evoke the same emotions of an ecstatic experience through art remains. The realization that having an ecstatic experience in an exposition might not be desirable, evokes new questions about what kind of artistic practices should be represented. Other examples of artistic practices that were mentioned were Hilma af Klint, symbolist and surrealist artists, Maya Deren, Anne Duk Hee, Margarita Maximova. To add non-Western perspectives, a student presented several Iranian artists, such as Gargi Raina. The discussion leads further towards ideas around technology.

Q&A with Shana Moulton

Q: Does ecstasy relate to your work as a theme?

- I really connected almost everything you summarized about the lectures in the masterclass and really understood this idea that we're a swinging pendulum. Every episode my character in *Whispering Pines* goes through this emotional pendulum. The resolution is finding this ecstasy, whether this all related to the atmosphere or finding a kind of spiritual moment after escaping her mundane reality. She finds this ecstasy and then comes back. It is always from high to low. There is also an episode where she meets people in a rave. There are very depressed moments of solitude, or personal moments of ecstasy. Dance being a part of this ecstasy. Somehow this identity is part of that, being one with your body, what is an awkward or painful body, connect to it through touch. I really connect this character of Cynthia, this alter ego to ecstasy.

Q: Cynthia always falls. She literally falls back in the mundane reality of objects, senses, practices that promise heaven and sometimes she doesn't even get to a certain point. There is always this fallback of the superficiality of a mundane life. Why can't it be emancipatory for her, why can't this transgression of the ecstatic experience be less than temporary?

- Well, the first reason is because it is a series and I need her to come back into her mundane situation. Therefore, it is a cycle that is happening over and over again. Sometimes this happens in the episode. Personally, to me it is also the moment where I could manage to negate the cynicism or the skepticism, so there is the temporary. It is a more gullible or naïve version of me. When I feel that skepticism fall back in, she's back in her reality.

Q: Taking the right soap for your bath, taking a pill, ... Ecstasy is very consumer-driven and short term and it kind of seems that it doesn't apply a lot of effort for the promise it entails, which makes it already from the start.

- Yes, but the aesthetic of my films is also adapted to this. It is almost like a commercial, I have always liked tv commercials. There is the jingle, which is appealing, and afterwards there is the feeling that I am trying to sell you something. Cynthia's world is like that too.

Q: What happens after *Whispering Pines*?

- It goes on! There is a new episode, called *The Invisible Calm Is The Mystic Seven*. It is set in a mausoleum in Washington state. The episode starts out in her house doing breathing exercises. She accidentally inhales the objects in her house and her objective becomes to remove the objects from her body, just like in the game of Dr. Bibber. After, I (Cynthia) am at this mausoleum amongst wild choirs. There are seven columns, but one is missing. I think in masonic symbology it represents the unfinished work that we do after we die. Cynthia becomes an air purifier and whales come out. So that film is just finished and now I am having a little break and dealing with school stuff.

Q: I thought *Whispering Pines 10* was the end of Cynthia!

- Yeah, I try to do away with her, but I keep on having ideas with her!

Q: One thing I noticed in your work, is that you use commercial objects to explore identity. It's a way of fixing problems about yourself you didn't know you had. I remember thinking about buying an air purifier, even if I don't have any lung problems. I did look into it because I thought it would make my life better. I keep thinking of Epsom salt or bath bombs and things that are supposed to be good for you, but you don't know why you need them.

- You put it so well. The same goes for Cynthia: it feels as if these things will solve your problems and make you a more complete human being. This is the fantasy of a better life, parallel to wanting to improve myself spiritually or physically, staving off age and finding the perfect face cream, finding the one spiritual practice that would make me more actualized and a better person. I love that you mention air purifiers because a lot of things are visually fascinating, it is not only about the advertising and the function of the object, but also the aesthetic. The air purifier looks like a portal! It was a visual opportunity that for me to visualize modernist sculpture, like Hepworth or Moore. It also reminded me of a moment when I was a student: I rejected the aesthetic of my mother, one similar to Cynthia's, when going to art school. But then I realized that her aesthetic was so commercial, that I should embrace that with all its problems to find the magic in that form of commercial or lowbrow décor or aesthetic.

Q: You say that the air purifier looks like a portal and a sculpture at the same time, which links back to the formlessness that Stéphane Symons mentioned in his lecture. Ecstasy means losing firm ground, transgressing into the every-changeable and losing form. These sculptures promise a transgression or metamorphosis that kind of embodies the promise that it entails within the object itself.

- Air purifiers are really magical. They are circle or oval. I don't really think it actually purifies anything, but it looks so promising.

Q: How do you designed the sounds and wrote the music of the film? It is very precise, but also makes it funny.

- In episode 10 it was really in collaboration with a composer, who was singing. Before I worked with found music. It was live performance, I was interacting with a projection, it became a video that came on the internet. We worked on these projects together.

Q: I'm wondering, Cynthia always reverts back to her mundane life as in a sitcom. If you would need to think of a sustainable way of keeping her in the works, where she would find a solution or a way to deal with her ailments that is not consumerist, how would you have her act? How do you envision the end of Cynthia?

- She's not going to come out of the loop before I do! The consumer loop is the ultimate thing that aids us trying to find spiritual enlightenment. Until I find it, she's not finding it. How does it end? I guess when I die! I allow her to change and to remain. Even though it sounds limiting it has been very liberating for me to have this springboard or structure to put in everything I find interesting. She is treating fires in California now, which is a personal battle for me. She's always dealing around existential questions in life.

Q: We were talking about ecstasy as more about the relationship between things and being in the world that is formless and ever changeable and taking metamorphosis seriously. Thinking about the relationship between man and nature and going beyond the distinction, even the term 'nature' makes total sense and kind of sits in that more sustained form of becoming more porous and more open towards the other world and to understand. Not as an order of things, but in ways of creating relations. It seems as if Cynthia's coming closer to that.

- Nature is not a sort of construct anymore. This idea has been pierced by the fires and the floods. That definitely is a new practicality for her. We filmed right where a wildfire had been up above my parent's place. The whole story is based on the environmental activist Hill, who climbed an old sequoia tree and stayed in the top for over two years until they promised not to cut it down. Activism is also so symbolic. It was widely covered in the US and felt almost as a durational performance. That is what I envision myself doing as an artist, linking art and activism. In this case it was about me wanting to do that.

Friday, October 22

Q&A with artist Grace Ndiritu

During the introduction rounds, Grace Ndiritu is explicitly interested in why the students enrolled for the curatorial studies program. She notices that some people were interested in fashion and textile, so she proposes to change the order in which

her projects are discussed and parts of her films are screened. Three projects will be introduced: Healing the Museum, COVERSLUT and Becoming Plant.

Healing the museum came from Grace's literal frustration about museums ignoring what was going on in the world outside. The idea was to bring new energies into the museum. Grace calls these non-rational methodologies, and other ways to bring people into the museum. It also a way to work with the objects, with the space and with the audiences in the museum.

Q: Why in your opinion are museums dying?

- Because they should be connected with what is going in the world and they are not right now. There are many different types of museums and they all might have a different foundation as to why they were built, what types of collection they have. But what they all have in common is the political connection in their building history. They can't shut off and pretend that they don't have a responsibility today. They are fluffy places, just a way to fluff up your feathers. It didn't necessarily actually give the public what the public needed from a museum. There has to be some connection or conversation about that.

Q: To dive into methodology: you talked about shamanism, meditation etc. It requires practice to come to an ecstatic experience. A shamanistic practice has specific rituals connected to it. Could you speak more about how you apply these methodologies in the museum, how you organize it, could you describe more in detail how these processes go and how we should imagine them?

- I only ask people to do what I have done myself a hundred times. I studied textile art in England and then I made videos in Amsterdam. Informally, as a child, I have developed deeply ritualistic practices. I connected to animism. That has always been there. Then, I started to train formally (going to guru's, retreats...). I have lead a double life for many years. People were very closed or judgmental towards shamanism. Then I decided to bring these practices more formally into my practice and lead 'rational' people in shamanistic practice. I did this with drumming and trance drumming. It would always be for a political purpose, or a social reason, it wouldn't be without meaning. My idea was that you can find different answers through these methodologies instead of finding the same answers using the left brain. Everything is always about consuming, distraction, entertainment, but I think that the museum can be a contemplative space, like a park.

Q: Could you speak more about how you bring together those audiences? You try to find people who are rational and you try to make them have irrational experiences?

- You know, most people are agnostic or atheist, they believe in a physical reality first before they believe in a spiritual reality. So, I will show you a photo of a performance I did at the Labo of La Villette in Paris as an example. They were organizing a festival on mental health. Through this performance, I wanted to talk about the different aspects of mental health: the individual mind versus the collective mind. You need the collective mind to heal the fragmentation of society (terrorism, ecological crisis through climate change), because these are all signs of how disconnected our minds are from nature. These performances were ways to connect your mind to a 'bigger' mind one that was holistic was important. Another example of a performance was A Mill

for my Ancestors. I worked with two groups in Brussels. One group consisted of refugees and migrants. Another group consisted of people who worked for the EU parliament, NATO and the UN. I gave them free meditation classes and gave creative visualization classes to the workers. Refugees and migrants have more physical instability and poverty, so their sessions revolved more around calming the mind down. People at staff agencies might have very comfortable lives, they have another kind of stress, namely the lack of creative space in their bureaucratic jobs. I had someone from the terrorist department, a high judge from Lille doing the asylum cases, ... People came to the classes and at the end we did a shamanic performance. The project was focused about healing through food shamanism and meditation. Everybody had to lay on the ground. Normally these types of people would never meet socially, only when there is a problem. And they would lie on the ground. Through this act and being together in the space, all the power dynamics would change, because it didn't matter if you were a judge or a cleaner: a body is a body when you're doing a shamanic journey. A lot of them would say things that had to do with climate change. That was really interesting, because it meant that they all had an interest in common. Many amazing things came out of that. We could organize a conference, during which I asked people to bring food from all over the world. 90 people came. I invited a shaman to come and show images of their brain scans when they were in trance. I also invited a medical doctor to talk about eating together as a form of healing. I also invited people from the parliaments to discuss shamanism as a healing modality within the EU. Now mindfulness is accepted as a prescription that doctors give to people.

Q: During the previous days we focused on ecstasy as an individual capacity to transgress, transform, a way of becoming. You don't speak of ecstasy explicitly, but you talked about a trance experience, which is a collective experience and leads to a collective moment of healing. So that is an interesting take on it. Do you see this trance experience also within the notion of ecstasy?

- Are you talking about the bliss state? It can be different than trance because it is a different state. If you talk to a Buddhist, there are different layers of this state of mind. The idea is that you are transcending, you can travel to different places, get different types of information, different worlds, let's say. Whereas reaching bliss is something you can do it in this world, right now. Bliss is more connected to oneness and ecstasy. It is like a physical transformation. I wouldn't put those things together. Like, they can connect, for instance if you take ayahuasca. When I took this drug, I had a blissful experience, it was all about Buddhism and more than that, an ecstatic experience. What other people normally see is hallucination and scary stuff. It really depends on a person's background, on what they are taking, why they are taking it, the preparation etc.

Q: What type of museum are you actually dealing with in Healing the Museum? You have a lot of different topologies of museums. Are you focusing on art museums, or also ethnographic museums, for instance? What kind of museums require healing?

- You could say all museums! But specifically ethnographic museums, the AfricaMuseum in Tervuren for example. The ethnographic museum in particular has to do with how we value objects. Normally we value them monetarily, then culturally, then spiritually. In ethnographic museums this is problematic because all objects, even ritual objects are meant to be staying in

a display. These objects need to be activated in rituals or by nature. The healing of those museums is of a much deeper process, you could say. This is an image from a project I did at the Goethe Institute. It was a long-term project of two years, organized by Jana Haeckel. A group of artists, activists, museum directors, scientists and academics went to different museums. I brought the group of people together and I led them through a meditation. We did sitting and talking meditation and discussed my essay. What came out of it was very powerful. There is a gem collection from Congo. There were scientists and artists who got physically upset during the performance, because we were meditating in the room with blood diamonds.

COVERSLUT is an anti-sweatshop project of fashion design and performances with refugees. The criticality towards the fashion industry is reflected in the captions on the clothes. The clothes are for sale through a 'pay what you can'-system. The introduction is followed by a video of the project.

Q: I think that everything in your practice overlaps. It is very interesting that you worked with refugees for COVERSLUT, because they are in a different state of mind, so they can make time and give energy to focus on this. You are giving them this other state that otherwise they would not have had.

- In Ghent, we organized a psychedelic movie night. Instead of a normal catwalk, we danced the collection into being and then watched psychedelic movies together, wearing the clothes together.

Q: Are you a one-woman business, or do you have a whole organization with staff behind it, how does it work?

- I am a one-woman business, but I do work with and in local communities. I found a textile studio called Manoeuvre in Ghent and we did the first collection with them. We focus on democracy, race and class, and that means that you have to have people from different backgrounds to work on the project. It is not just to look like it as Benetton did, but it actually is that. Manoeuvre already had experience in working with migrants and refugees. We would mix them with the graphic design department of Sara de Bondt at KASK. I would mix different groups together and they would come with designs from the ecological group. Both groups have different levels of education. Migrant women from Turkey obviously didn't go to art school, and they were more into craft and handcraft and embroidery, which is very meticulous work. All the art students love abstraction and are highly conceptual. When you mix these two groups together, you get an unusual way of working. I came up with specific themes (e.g. psychedelic movie night, where we would tie dye all together). We also worked with a student who was the main seamstress and would teach some of the other women to do the sewing that was needed. Just to illustrate that I am not doing all the work, but I guess I am the creative visionary behind the scenes.

Q: How do you practically organize the work with refugees?

- The idea is to have an anti-sweatshop. We worked together with OCMW for the migrants, and we got some financing from the city and from Flanders Arts to pay my fee. Everybody gets paid something. I lived in Rabot, in the neighborhood in Ghent with the Turkish ladies. We invited all their families to

come to the park in Tondelier, really in the heart of the community. In terms of fair practice, it is important that everyone gets paid. If you're thinking about a 'pay what you can'-system, it is of course a complicated business model.

Q: How do you measure the impact of this model on the longer term?

- Some events were 'pay what you can', other events we did with DJ's or dancers and there would be a 'pay what you can' entrance fee, but you would get a bag for example. We did several events on the Poppositions Art Fair. We also installed a 'pay what you can'-button on the website, so we had to get a software designer to make this button. People could pay every amount from 1 to 10 000 euros online. Sometimes we would give free postage, sometimes we would add the postages and in this way we experimented with different economies to see what would happen. Right now we have all the collections of COVERSLUT with 'pay what you can' in Arcade gallery in Brussels. Marijke De Roover has a solo show in the front. We are planning to do COVERSLUT in London.

Becoming Plants is introduced to talk about the ecstatic being and psychedelic experiments. In the video, a psychotherapist explains how your brain works and what happens when you take a psychedelic drug. A group of performers took a little more than two grammes of a certain psychedelic mushroom. After a cozy cushion session of talking, drawing, lying down, they suddenly transform into naked dancers in an industrial building.

Q: I want to start with a simple question: how did the film come about, what was the inspiration, the starting point?

- I was always interested in the healing of the mind, but also from a collective point of view. This film came about through my interests in mental health, and how in our collective community there is also a politics and an economics involved with this. I gave the psychotherapist specific questions about the scientific aspects of the mind: how data is stored, the chemical compositions, but also of the implications of mental health in society. How is consumerism affecting us? It is really about healing on many different levels.

Q: There is a reference to mysticism and a self-induced ecstatic state. Is this kind of transgressive, ecstatic state also a way to heal?

- It works in two ways: in order to have an ecstatic moment, a state of melting or transcending in a good way, you need good mental health. You need to be a stable healthy person to let go and try it. Otherwise, you end up in psychosis. You cannot switch it off and you cannot tell the difference. It is a fine balance between these ecstatic states. Bipolar people also experience a high, ecstatic experience, but they do not experience oneness, which is a healthy form of melting into existence and being part of other beings. After this ecstatic experience you understand you're one with everything, but not in a pathological way. It is not detrimental. It is quite complicated and the psychotherapist in the film talks about psychosis because she works with people who have drug-induced psychosis. Spiritual practices and yoga are a part of the healing method. Especially people who do it at home without gurus, can switch on something that they cannot switch off. These practices are not entertaining, not funny, they are very transformative.

Q: It touches upon something that we stress: is the ecstatic experience something you can regulate? What I find interesting is that it is not just about external stimuli. Maybe it is also something that can be trained somehow.

- Yes, everybody has a capacity to it, with a good health and good mental health. Everybody has the capacity to tap into neural pathways. Everybody can have spiritual experiences, but the intention behind it is as important as the actual experience. If you just take ayahuasca for fun, it will be a very different experience from doing it in a ritualistic way or for a bigger purpose. You get different consequences from that, physically, energetically, chronically, ... You could literally train everyone. I was discussing with the shaman and showing her brain scans because we wanted to show that there was an actual scientific basis to this. But if you go into the Google way into doing things, or this fashion of having everyone micro dosing (Google started it with their staff in order to be more productive and creative for productive reasonings), then you're just part of the machine: taking products for the capitalist system.

Q: What do you expect when you do these shamanistic practices? What do you hope will happen? Do you hope to change people, like the staff of the EU to do something professionally to help refugees? Do you hope something will change, to heal the museum, the world?

- It is very different. For some things, specifically with that one, was about healing socially. It was the beginning of the refugee crisis and just after the bombing of Brussels, so it was a specific political time. It would be great, but you don't know if this would happen. Some people investigate for themselves to continue doing shamanistic practices. I was very interested from the point of view of a project I did earlier, called The Museum of the Future. Through shamanism or meditation through my former institute, I am interested in the holistic way of thinking about things, how institutions organize the social field around them for the long term. Obviously these people from the performance still had to go to their work and they spoke about it with their colleagues. I recently wrote an essay 'The Healing of America', about the US election. It was a commissioned essay. In 2012 I was living in London, and I quit everything to live in these communities. I went to live in off-grid, in permaculture communities, in monasteries, in forests. I also met a lot of spiritual peoples again at that time. This really impacted my coming out in the artworld as a spiritual practitioner and integrating this into my work. You know, this idea of healing, after what happened in the election and now especially with the pandemic many people in the artworld had the time to think what was important in their lives. Off-grid living is coming up and healing is now a topic in the artworld that wasn't in the artworld, and I am happy to have played a part in that. Things can change, not overnight, but slowly overnight. When I speak to art students, I can speak with them about topics they wouldn't be interested in a couple of years ago.

Q: So what you do has a trickle-down effect.

- Yeah, and it shows that something changes in the collective consciousness. That comes from Marian Williamson, who was running for presidential nominee last year as well: she has always been talking about healing and politics in the seventies and everyone would just laugh and dismiss her. But

now things are changing. Now it breaks through. So there is some change, you could say.

Q: In the context of the art world, I think of the theory of Pascal Gielen, who makes a graph of positioning different practices relationally. To reformulate my question: how is your practice relational?

- In the way I get my ideas, for instance, because it is very different than most artists get inspired I think. Most artists go see shows, read books, watch TV, sit in their studios for hours. I spend most of my time doing spiritual practices and travelling. I do read some things, but I kind of channel my ideas. I have always done this since I was a kid. There is a sense of ownership that is very different. Yes, I am a human being where these ideas come through, but they don't belong to me as if I am the creative genius. They belong in this bigger creation story. I am always interested in deep time, and that everything we make today is still related to cave painting. It creates humbleness, your little thing is nothing in the sense of deep time. In Plant Theory for Plant People in Aberdeen, for instance, I worked with a local community and we made costumes together that went into an exhibition. The participants had so much fun, that they want to meet again. Now I am thinking: if they meet again, the project has a specific focus on ecology and working in a specific way. I am the founder, so if they want to continue that's cool, but the focus would be still on ecology. However, I wouldn't be there to dictate the performances. Or is it better if they invent their own name and own concept? What happens if you start something and people continue? Is it like being a curator at large and give them the framework and just let them get on with it? Maybe that's better in the plant case. With the new phase of COVERSLUT in London: I don't want to be there every day hands-on, like in Ghent. Instead, I am thinking about legacy projects where other people can run it.

Q: I kind of relate to the idea that the artist is not the sole genius, but I connect things that come to me. Channeling your ideas into the world was not taken seriously at all in the conceptual art world. To come back to Becoming Plant: yesterday we spoke about the holistic experience as the ecstatic with former Zen Buddhist monk Tom Hannes. As a producer I would hold my heart: what if something goes wrong in the production of such a film, because you can't guarantee someone to have a blissful performance?

- The first thing on repeat is that everything I ask people to do, is something I have done before. Secondly, I work with a psychotherapist myself before they work with the participants for an intake. I spoke about them to ask the right questions to the dancers and did a psychological screening myself. And the participants have once or more than once had psychedelics and had a good experience. These were safety boundary things. Safety was also in the way we set up the set: we created a safe, soft space. It was just me and the camera person in that small room with them. And we would meet the day before for meditation experiences and meeting each other. It wasn't a shock. The day of the trip, it started around twelve, and they met and did the ceremony in this cozy room. We went then outside to a specific place with grass, but outside the eyes of the public world. There weren't a lot of people on the set, so people to have the trip. We also wanted to have them high but without the risk of having an ego-death, so we limited the dosage. If you go

past the point of ego-death in an unsafe or unguided way, it can be a problem. I just wanted to go to the point of high, visual stimuli, but not like it being an existential issue. The dosage was very important and we spent a lot of time on that.

Q: In the film, the drug use is clearly contextualized and framed, so it is difficult to criticize the film for the celebration of drug use. But do you counter such an innate or dumb critique when it comes?

- That's why we talk about the good and the bad side of drugs. We talk about psychosis and the actual issues that can occur when you take drugs, so we don't glamorize it. Micro dosing is becoming glamourized. Now there are trials everywhere from the FDA because people started saying that it was a good thing. Therefore, it is important to have that contextualization of working with psychedelics and how to work with them.

Q: We also talked about drugs in the context of instrumentalizing: when is it reinforced in daily life or daily routine or when is it used in the neoliberal economy to be more productive? Or when is it really used as a transformative experience to use it to make you go forward? It is always instrumentalized with a purpose, the only question is whether that goal is set by the individual themselves or not?

- I think you confuse instrumentalization with intention. Every time you do a shamanist experience you have to have an intention. Being an artist is almost like being a philosopher, you might make something or not, it is like experimenting. So yes, this thing about art schools and how they are being instrumentalized by neoliberal strategies in terms of creativity. It can also be managed, some schools have business managers who know nothing about art or art history. It is the same with psychedelics and if you mix all of that together.

Q: Did you find inspiration from the British fashion revolution? The captions on your clothing pieces reminded me of Catherine Hammet and her slogans. She is famous for a picture with Thatcher, where she is standing next to her and wearing a shirt with the slogan "58% don't want to perish."

- I know Catherine, so I'm sure this picture should be in my subconscious. But I'm also inspired by a whole mix of artists and fashion people. You can read the book, we did a publication around it.

Q: Who was the psychiatrist you worked with for *Becoming Plants*?

- She is a shy person and not famous, so I am not sure if she would want people writing her. She doesn't have any publications. She really works with everyday patients on wards. She is not a researcher. There are other famous psychiatrists who write about this.

Q: Do you believe institutions are capable of change?

- One of the most interesting panels I joined was in Frans Hals museum in Holland. It was about this question exactly and it had Ute Meta Bauer, Maria Plaza Lazos from Arts from the working class, ... It was really interesting to have this huge conversation coming from museums with a global perspective. One of the questions was: are we able to ask this from museums? I feel like we don't ask *enough* from museums, because museums belong to us, they belong

to all of us. They are run by people and people are capable of change. It is like we blame markets for things, while we actually invented those structures and markets, so of course we are capable of it. It is more about if we have the intention to change it or not. I didn't want to be sitting in bourgeois nonsense, and I grew up in an activist household. So doing this art thing didn't make sense. It doesn't have to be pragmatic; it can be playful. I think it is possible to change all these structures. It just takes the will to do it and obviously resources: but resources are allocated by will and people seeing a need for change and getting the general public on their side as well. There is a disconnection where the general public still thinks art is very elitist, maybe that will always be like that and maybe it won't change. I don't know, and these are important questions that you guys should answer as curators.

Final Pitch Time

It is time to wrap up the three-day masterclass. Both groups will pitch their curatorial proposals, after which they will receive some feedback.

The first group made a PowerPoint presentation. The title of the exposition is 'Ecstatic Mediating'. Their proposal investigates the ecstatic being and the role of the mediator. This is the working title. Do you have agency over your ecstatic experience? Would the non-agency of an individual always lead to psychosis or meditation? A collective experience of ecstasy could lead to mass hysteria or cults but can also be found in dance parties or football matches. The group focused on four rules depicted in a graph, which guide the main concept of the mediator or what the main thing about the ecstatic is. They chose different artists and presented the chosen works or practices broadly. Every group member presented one artist.

- Aurelie Belair: A lot of her sculptural objects really deal with the connection between two worlds that normally stay separated from each other. The exposition would include more performative works she made. She also has long sculptures that look as if they were manipulated to be elongated, a visually explicit reaching out. Her performances are also aligned to the concept of medium. From there, the group went to different directions and selected other artist-based ideas.

Q: What is her background?

She's a French artist and she comes from interdisciplinary art. Even her objects deal with ecstasy. She is very interested in this shamanistic way of thinking because she also collaborated with a shaman when she wanted to make a consultation about how to do a purification of the space, for example. She also goes in her private life to a shaman to heal her when she has problems. Therefore, the work is connected to her personal life. When she moved to Brussels, she bought a new apartment with a studio space. She wanted to make some space for her practice from the beginning, because she used to work before in a squatted place in the countryside in France and she wanted to create the same aura in her new place. This video is about that.

- Marcin Dudek: He dives into his personal history of being a hooligan in the Polish football scene to make his artistic practice. He is based in Brussels, and does performative work, collages, more installation works. He constantly delves from this personal history. What we found very interesting is that he represents the collective agency ecstasy moment, for instance in his collages you also really feel an aesthetic moment that is interesting to show in an

exhibition. An ecstatic being is often connected to the feminine, especially in Christian theology. But it is also good to focus on this idea of male collective aggression. In this case this work really represents this collective moment, but he also has a big body of work with a lot of performances and more of these collages. He works a lot with the smoking lights. In this case the relation to the medium is not really an object, but a situation people are finding themselves in and trying to search. This common space they share with a certain feeling they have and they increase in its intensity with an ecstatic experience. In this work he amalgamates faces from different crowds, he created an abstract collage of the faces of police officers and fascists; This work really gets to the point of the love for the own team and the hate for the other team, where there is a mass collectiveness. It all kind of becomes one. He likes to see, to envision police and fascists in the same kind of space.

- Jorge Manes Rubio: He finds contemporary occurring practices of shamanism in Korea today to work with. The title of these particular works is 'Mediator'. If we want to categorize his work, it would be an individual voluntary experience. But of course, with shamanistic practices, the individual has an effect on the community. They are always in liminal spaces between collective and individual, between voluntary and involuntary. This is about finding a channel through which to communicate with the dead or the spiritual realm to find answers. In this case the mediator is both the object or the person who has this capacity.
- Helen Anna Flanagan: one of the group members already worked with her. There is something in her practice that is related to collective hysteria. She creates film installations about cultural and social phenomena with a political undertone. For this film, which is a collaboration from 2019, she took the story of the mass hysteria that enveloped Belgium around Coca Cola. There was a highschool where some children drank Coca Cola and they got ill. The news coverage was quite extensive, and multiple schools in the same area had the same problem. However, there was nothing wrong with the drinks. A main symptom was spontaneous collapse. The collective fear caused this mass hysteria. As a collective you can also enter this aesthetic experience. This is a more negative fear, which is also a side part of the ecstatic being as well.
- Chloé Arrouy: The shaman could be part of the individual non-agency. Her objects are made because she is fascinated in sadomasochistic practices of torture. To do so she is making sculptures which are seemingly usable, but they are not. The chair for instance, it is too small, but it looks lovely like from a fairy tale dimension. It is also very sharp at the end. She is a French artist based in Brussels. She finished ERG. She started in painting but now she discovered more her fascination with objects and metal. Another important part of her practice is metalwork, a craft that is dominated by males. For her it is important to join this craft as a woman. Here, torture relates to the individual wish for ecstasy, and individual fetishes.

Then the group asked themselves the question: which artists do they feel are being left out? That were mainly performances, so they thought of organizing a performance program next to the exhibition. Stina Force is an artist from Amsterdam. She makes a performance in which she drums for one hour. She enters a state of ecstatic being. Discoteca Clandestina was an Italian music collective and religious group that was proposed by Anna Stoppa, the coordinator of the program. They create collective ecstatic experiences. They have a religious

practice that takes the form of a DJ-set. They play their own music. They design it for this specific purpose. They encourage people to dance or just hang around in the space. They can go on for six hours and tune into the crowd: as long as the crowd can keep going, the musicians go on too. At the end of six hours, they can 'ascend'. There is no drugs involved, it is all through this feeling of bliss, sharing a space and feeling like a common body. Bert Jacobs made a performance about carwashes and the feeling and experience of being trapped in the giant machine.

In the part of the performance program we could commission something.

Discoteca Clandestina is funny to include because they take their religion seriously. They call their practice 'hardcore religion'. They have created diagrams like the group did to show how this form of ascension works. There is a scientology-like thing that is created through their experience. The DJ as a mediator is something that can be collaborative, which they do as a duo or with other DJ's to create new versions of their music. It is a collective framework where they collaborate with other people to make their own followers ascend.

The group also would add workshops linked to the performance program for visitors, to learn about the ways to find ecstasy. Like ecstatic dancing, tantra, ritual. Ecstatic dancing is now very much in fashion because it is about completely freeing yourself and reaching the ecstatic state without drugs. It is also interesting to have the audience engage in this, because there is not a risk due to a substance. Since STUK is also a house of dance, it might be a nice context to focus on this program. At the end of the presentation follows a last example: Rossi Summers who gave a tantra session in Tic Tac gallery. There are no videos or pictures of the performance because everybody was naked.

Feedback:

Very interesting starting point. The graph made it very clear. I had the impression that it was less about the role of the mediator than rather about power dynamics: who gets to have the ecstatic experience and who not? On the one hand it is about exploitation, recuperation, but also about ecstasy as an emancipatory potential. Especially with the work of Marcin Dudek it also raised issues of gender and class. But then other works show also how powerful the mind can be in influencing others. As an entry point it is very relevant, because it shows how we approach the ecstatic in daily life. Because we might think about it more esoterically, but hooliganism for instance, mass shootings, things like that are very gendered again. Very interesting entry points, but still it seems to be less about mediation than you first proposed.

- I guess our thought process began with the mediator as someone who helps you in the ecstatic experience. We focused on artists who have a message that needs to be conveyed through something else. Us curators, we are also kind of mediators of this, but also what we are trying to say by putting these artworks in place. Maybe power is a clearer read thread, but I still feel mediation is at the centerpiece of it all. It kind of became focused on shamanism and that didn't feel right, because an artist is a mediator, a curator is a mediator and we didn't want to go all into that way of thinking.
- I think that looking to the ecstatic from the point of view of power is amazing and it runs through a lot of the things. Shamanic practices, for instance the Korean one, is interesting because it raises questions about power. If we switch to the concept of power, we would probably select other artworks. The point is that what we were sure about this axis, but then what the focal point was, has always been very mobile. Mediums and mediators are something that

art has in common with ecstasy. But really the central point of this could be everything.

- What is interesting is your focus on this pendulum we thought about. I liked that you focused a little more on the negative side of this relationship. Also, this negativity or darker aspect of ecstasy, also related to sexuality, that goes very far from the religion point of view.

I would agree with that, especially talking about Marcin Dudek. The violent ecstatic also made me think of what Tom mentioned about the Viking Berserkers. Which also makes me think of the contract you create. Even if you beat the shit out of each other, there is a weirdly safe space. What I also found interesting going through the artistic practices, for me some were very far to put on a longlist of ecstasis, which is really intriguing, because it means that I am not seeing things that you are seeing. This means that you just must adjust your own mind frame, which is super tricky to do, but it is quite rewarding when you achieve this, however you can only really achieve it through lengthy debates and conversation; you can really push through on the debate for certain artistic practices and a matter of advocating for artists who you really believe in. Also, what I thought was an interesting way of evoking the ecstatic and all its dimensions with its focus on mediation or power in the artworks but kind of leaving the possibility for an ecstatic experience in the exhibition itself. It is a very safe and interesting choice, but probably the only possible one.

- To react to the last comment about not addressing directly to evoke the experience in the exhibition: at a certain point we were thinking about objects and how objects can be mediators. Some of the artworks we were working through had nothing to do with ecstatic experiences directly, but were just objects that push us in a state or help you get into a mood or induce a way of thinking or a position of your body that allows you into an ecstatic position. And then we went back to idea of the mediator.
- I really liked the example of the relics from the other group, because I feel that it could belong in the exhibition. I really liked that it was based in Leuven, that you take something from the local context. It also says a lot about the local context of the ecstatic.

The second group did not depart from a written text or presentation. They shared some images and websites of artists, while explaining their proposal. For the proposal they wanted to pinpoint a specific chapter within the discussion on ecstatic being. The title would be 'The ecstatic being and remnants'. A lot of the practices they investigated were related to moments of creation or transgression, or they embodied the capacity for change – the body embodies the creation of ecstasis. Every group member presents their own suggestion for an artist or artistic practices.

- For one of the group members, who studied art history, the most obvious starting point was the history of church visitors in the Middle Ages who would have ecstatic experiences of looking at relics of saints. This is very interesting in the context of Leuven, because the Church of Saint-Peter has a lot of relics, and they work a lot with them. Those relics are still present there, but we don't have those experiences anymore where we could pass out in front of the bones of a saint. The group developed this phenomenon further with other examples of objects that might induce and experience of ecstasy.
- The example of another group member was the Swedish painter Hilma af Klint. She made huge abstract paintings which she created in 1906 during a

spiritualistic session and painting them. It is really the moment you would go in ecstasy that she represents

Q: Could you elaborate a little bit more on her practice?

I am thinking about it through our concept, but I am not sure if you are familiar with her paintings. She painted huge abstract paintings. During the spiritualistic sessions she was receiving a spiritual message and making these paintings. So, it is from a religious experience that she makes them.

- Another group member presented the artist Sara Ghods. She is from Iran, and one of the students previously worked with her. Most of her works consist of new media, installation art. She experimented printmaking, illustration, sculpture, jewellery making, in different mediums. She studied the intersections of different sciences in her installations. Her works have dark comedy about rituals from our society. The reaction of people to the past, present, and future. What is interesting for the topic of ecstasy, is the materials she uses, the way she installs, the size, and the eye-catching and glowing materials she uses, which bewilder the audience. There is also a fragmentation of the image, which is something that came up during the lectures. She creates this effect by installing prisms in front of a television screen.
- Another group member proposed David Lifthinger. He is one of the more performative artists that they would propose within this ideas around the possibilities of the relic. He is an artist who works with new media and uses light and the technology of TL beams to produce sounds with them, which gives a weird, rhythmic drumming effect. It is also related to what we in a club-setting would call an ecstatic practice. He uses a combination of traditional elements and classical music. It also has this religious connotation to it.
- Another artist is Martha Krzeslak. The group doesn't know her practice very well, but they like the pictures. Maybe not this project, but there are other projects. There is this dreamlike hallucinating quality in the installations in the scenography of her installations that is relative to that dreamlike notion of ecstasy, especially the space works and the objects/relics that would have this spacious quality.
- Another artist is Dodi Espinosa, who is an artist from Mexico. His work is inspired by his cultural background, but also these ideas of syncretism in a positive sense. In this context he would be an artist who would be interested in engaging with ecstasis as a theme, so it would be a commissioned work.
- Céline Mathieu, another proposed artist, made sculptures under hypnosis. She made the sculptures from plasticine, something that cannot solidify.
- A Latvian artist, Arturs Virtmanis, created a series called The Dust of the Universe. In this series he explores the intermittent short-lived artworks and investigated different thinkers with quite opposing visions of the world and his work is about metaphorically drawing a fragile line between worlds. The black ball is a balloon that would eventually deflate or explode. It has a metaphorical link to ecstasis.

The title of the exhibition would be 'The Remnants'. It would collect objects that embody or refer to the ecstatic experience, or the spaces that could refer to it.

Feedback:

It is a good entry point to not start from bodily practices or performances and focusing on objects or remnants, but it also gives the opportunity to have an exhibition that entails more objects, sculptures, things to walk around. We would be part of the ecstatic being, so it would allow you to address the complexity of the word of the ecstatic being or ecstasy. We have learned that it is quite difficult to define what it actually is, it is many contradictions at the same time.

I agree that the focus on the objects is a clear entry point and a fruitful one at the start of the development of the exhibition. Looking at film or video art feels more natural to me to do, but you always aim to have a certain balance. The fact that you started from the objects let you find diverse artistic practices. You look at the link to music, but also immersive environments without forcing an environment that induces ecstatic experiences. It is the remnants of ecstasy, so you don't force the viewer into an experience they didn't ask for. It is difficult to create a safe space that allows you far enough. It was really interesting to start from religion and then it comes to the trends, like the club setting comes in. I would be looking into the more commercial side. If you would really focus on the objects, or objects as remnants of, it feels like a very honest way of having ecstasy. But there is definitely also a darker side that could be addressed. It is all very friendly, you stayed on the blissful side of the matter.

- It also looks a bit back on Shana Moulton's work, like the objects or the air diffuser to invoke a sort of ecstatic experience. That's also what came up as an ecstasy-inducing thing.
- It is interesting because all the different aspects and entry points we heard about can be applied to objects: shamanistic objects, capitalized objects, objects for which you need to take drugs.

Another thought: how did you guys come to this group of people? This is an exhibition that we develop, but how would you let these objects communicate with each other? How should a visitor navigate through them? It feels as if in one's experience, mind and body needs to make sense. Some artworks can't really sit together and some might have very strong relations. Did you get a chance to look at that? How do you make a whole out of things?

- You can distinguish different kind of domains of ecstatic experience. You can have a religious experience, through hypnosis, more material through the senses. So in that way in made sense that you can tap into these or conceptualize different domains you point towards. I don't think we thought about the works talking to each other in the space at all.
- What is difficult as well especially with the religious part is that the relics were placed in specific spots where the windows or the architecture of the church related to each other. If you want to put them in a white cube, you will lose a big part of the original experience.

If relics is the starting point, that also counts for all the experiences. It is like taking an ecstasy pill from the club context.

Time to wrap up

The students were pushed faster than one would have to make an exhibition in real life. It was a very fruitful masterclass, with many great ideas and suggestions. To return the favor, Karen shares what she has been working on. She is only working on the framework for now. She shared a graph in which she tried to assemble what Stéphane Symons explained in his lecture. He started from metaphysics,

epistemology, anthropology and the political. His first question to western philosophy explained how that contradicts ecstasy in terms of being rational, especially in the Western focus on the mind versus the body. Ecstasy is about these dualisms being given up for a responsiveness and the body as a vehicle for thought. She circled around these ideas to come to the center of what the ecstatic might be. The concept of *jouissance* and its relation to affect theory is very interesting. Verschooren made another graph where she tried to connect a couple of sentences from the lectures, which had a common conclusion: ecstasy is about making relations. Tom's ideas brought us one step further, because of a value judgement. You could become more porous or more radiant. A last graph functions as a residue container. Ecstasy should be understood as a capacity to transform and to metamorphose, but to have a good experience you need a stable health. As the capacity to transform is inherently present in a human being, it is possible to transgress daily routines. This is where a 'slow' rhythm of ecstasy is possible.

Verschooren also is stuck in her process of connecting the dots of the concept, namely with the thinking about the value judgement: when is ecstasy good or bad, how do we know it and who will tell us? So, the consequences and the means through it happens is important. Grace Ndiritu also pointed towards the intention: what do you want to get out of it? If you look at the chemicals or the soul of the plant, they are key thoughts to really consciously think about value statements about the ecstatic experience. Because you will need these elements as arguments to ward off critique about the glorification of drugs for instance. There is the excess of bliss, the idea of the emancipatory; the experience that leads to a further understanding of the world and your position in it, or what is instrumentalized to maintain order. These are an attempt to capture a lot of different thoughts that passed through the lectures. Choosing the artistic practices, chapters and different outlines is for the next step in the process.

Comments and feedback:

I find it interesting that your approach is about the conditions that you need to have before you start an experience for it to be positive and the other group focused on the remains and what is left after.

- I think I stayed very close to the lectures for now. I am not really working with it yet. Because if I don't do the groundwork first, I will get unhinged. I need to go back to the map to work through it. It is just the first baby step.

You mentioned you are intrigued by the notion of *jouissance* from Lacan, and I think there is an entryway to drugs in this. Because he provides an entry point of surplus joy, it is not real *jouissance*, inspired by Marxist surplus value and introduced into the concept of *jouissance*.

- I find that in all of the conversations that we had, that there is a value statement about the experience itself. If it is just the trip and blissful moment in that trip, and it doesn't do anything else, there is a value added to that which I am not sure how to relate to.

But it might be interesting to get rid of this value judgement, right? Lacan also presents this in his graphic of desire, it is just a functioning graph but not a judgement.

What is the timing of the project, how will you continue, and is this a normal way of working?

- No, this was a very scary way of working for me. Usually Artefact is a yearly exhibition and has a fast development chain. I have a steep learning curve when I start and I do talks one on one because there is a lot of knowledge around. I have conversations with people I usually know already, or experts in the field of the subject. There is no artefact in 2022, so it gives me more time. I can talk and open up about a topic that I don't know something prior about. So thank you for doing that experiment with me. I have a couple of months to further think about the concept and artists' research. I usually try to give the artists in commission at least 9 months, which means that in spring I could start the conversation about the commissions. And to be able to do that I need some idea of the loans, so I will need the full puzzle before really handing out the commissions. More and more I also start having conversations with artists. I choose 5-7 artists that I find crucial and afterwards it becomes a snowball.