

## **SPACE REIGNS SUPREME**

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*Curator: Michèle Thériault*

Barely distinguishable from the milky-coloured background, a visibly pregnant, irregularly shaped blob wriggles and contracts, its unseeing orifice slowly dilating and pushing out a glimmer of pinkish mother-of-pearl, followed by the beginnings of a rounded form. This protracted spawning culminates with the ejection of a glossy, otherworldly larvae, while not far off, a sort of pod, also white, gradually splits along its length in a long moulting process. In its opening shell lies an oblong fruit—unless it is some sort of bladder, or a chrysalis emerging from its cocoon. Although it remains perfectly still, this organism, clearly in mutation, emits flashes resembling the Northern Lights, as if carrying within itself the shimmering seed of future wings or scales.

These processes of spawning and moulting, entirely computer-generated and presented on separate screens, are part of Montreal artist Philippe Hamelin's most recent series of works, entitled *Vivariums* (2017). Biodome enthusiasts will be familiar with these glass cages that imitate an animal's natural habitat, and will also know that, more often than not, the price of observing a mantis or tarantula is the fact that the creature refuses to put on a show. In transposing this structure into the potentially infinite space of computer-generated imagery (CGI), Hamelin has created a sort of meta-

vivarium: an ecosystem of animated images that both puts on display and questions its own dynamics, between the subject and object of seeing, the artificial and the organic, the baring of intimacy and the withdrawal into riddle. This essay aims to map out the incongruous but rigorous logic of such an ecosystem, beyond these eponymous works, through the pieces presented on the occasion of Hamelin's solo exhibition at the Leonard & Bina Ellen Art Gallery.

When observing living things, the key is patience and attentiveness to detail. The same is true for Hamelin's works, as the 3D animation techniques he employs couldn't be more unlike the feverish special effects of video games and Hollywood blockbusters. Through a meticulous reconstruction of the most detailed textures and movements of organic life, these animations allow for an entirely different type of immersion that, by way of slowness, repetition and looping, gives rise to bodily sensations of latency, hypnosis and even torpor in the viewer. Out of these artificial paradises, metaphors for the psyche, sometimes flashes an apparition, hallucination or mirage. In the monotony of a polyhedron spinning in front of a variegated background, something comes undone, suddenly gesticulates, demands to be looked at—as if you had made eye contact with the glimmering gaze of a reptile hiding in the shadows.

The asymmetrical form featured in *Camouflage bureaucratique (prédateur)* (2013) doesn't, however, limit itself to mechanical spinning. Its decelerations, accelerations and off-balanced axis of rotation—indeed, everything in its roundabout course—seem to be calculated to attract, and perhaps entrap the eye. This illusion is reinforced by wormlike motifs covering both the gyrating object and the background, and flowing out of the digital realm to a wallpaper covering the very real wall of the exhibition space. These patterns mimic the security markings on the inside of envelopes that both protect content and suggest its presence: a camouflage that hides through showing, and that seizes the gaze in its optical vertigo while holding a mirror up to it, in the manner of a Rorschach test. *Tell me what you see and I will (maybe) tell you who you are.* Now, it is no longer clear *what* is spinning. The polyhedron? My eye? Or perhaps the striated space of which

they are both but moving reflections? Who can state with certainty that the difference between the animate and the inanimate, the virtual and the real, is one of degree, and not of essence?

It is precisely this confusion that Roger Caillois analyzes in his reflections on animal mimicry, of which camouflage is one of the primary manifestations. This confusion pertains to the distinction between the organism and its habitat: in his 1935 article "Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia", Caillois defines mimicry as "a real *temptation by space*", that is, a process of "*depersonalization by assimilation to space*".<sup>i</sup> *To imitate the other* thus embodies a *becoming-other* giving rise to both a loss of individuality and a convergence between the living and the lifeless. For Caillois, this law of metamorphosis applies not only to the animal kingdom, but also to what human psychology identifies as personality disorders, as well as to the mimetic strategies induced by artistic activity. While forms and their environment in Hamelin's works generally share the same digital nature, there is no escaping from the muddling of identity that the object presents to me. *I don't know what I am seeing*.

Camouflage is thus the manifestation of a desire to escape from the grip of identity. *To no longer be oneself*: loss of life force, fusion with surrounding space, trance, *ek-stasis* (a going outside of oneself). Such metamorphic states, where the organism is already both itself and an other, are to be found throughout the *Vivariums'* spawning and moulting processes. Likewise, the ceaseless roundabout and contagious delirium of *Les amis (à l'infini)* (2014/2017) bring about a similar dissolution of individuality. The more one is taken over by this effervescent fever and its monotonous throbbing, the more the distinguishing features of these glowing, purple-maned, sleepwalking bodies seem to shed, leaving only remains, dead husks emptied of all substance. These bodies are deformed in their awkward dance, in turn swelling, becoming excited and flattened, at times melting into the background and reproducing themselves from one projection to another, like cells in an acid-coloured plasma-space for which they have become, like Caillois's schizophrenics, "the convulsive possession".<sup>ii</sup>

This resembles. Nothing. It only resembles. This self-contained resemblance, designed to disorient the gaze, is underpinned by a mechanism shared by all the works in the exhibition: transit, transfer, transposition—dislocations that initiate and accompany metamorphosis. One of the works in the *Sci Fi Haïkus* series, indeed entitled *Translation* (2012), presents an alternation between 3D animation and videotaped sequences that gives rise to effects of transfer and mutual contamination. This infinitely porous movement between forms and mediums privileges the production of what Walter Benjamin, during the same period as Caillois, called “non-sensuous similarity”: existing outside of identity-based resemblance, this is the immemorial human capacity to activate correspondence throughout the natural orders, so as to grasp the the ungraspable, the unconnected, and to “to read what was never written”.<sup>iii</sup>

*Scène 2 (découpage)* (2014-2017) presents the opportunity to use this capacity for the purpose of *mediation*. At first, this work seems to be an unsolvable puzzle: a CGI animation explores a landscape of scarlet meat resting on a light-coloured fur surface; a video probes the rush of water taken from the deck of a ferry; the two projections are played in succession, accompanied by an orchestral soundtrack interspersed with silent pauses. Some viewers will recognize the original soundtrack to Godard’s *Contempt*, others will instinctively feel the sun-drenched sensuality of the music. Confronted with this especially baffling installation, one must take on the role of the haruspex, those diviners of Antiquity that read in the entrails of slaughtered animals. Without being able to predict the future, I, for one, perceive what I might boldly call a vivisection of the scopic drive: it is the very *desire to see*, vector of all visual perception, that is here brought down to its fundamental state of lifeless meat and primordial bubbling.

A comparable dismantling of the gaze is described by Jacques Lacan in his commentary on the anamorphosis used by Hans Holbein in his iconic painting *The Ambassadors* (1533): in breaking with the continuity of representation, the formless outline floating in the lower part of the painting opens up a space outside the linear geometry of perspective, a labyrinth characterized by what Lacan calls “the point of

light—the point of irradiation, the play of light, fire, the source from which reflections pour forth.”<sup>iv</sup> The viewer is thus forced to avert her eyes from the painting and give up on solving its riddle in such a way that, in the interval of a sideways glance, this anomaly might transform itself into the image of a skull. Likewise, the animated sequence in *Scène 2 (découpage)* unfolds according to a singularly serpentine, almost tangible visual movement: the cluster of meat is approached from the side, slowly, almost hesitantly, and examined along its entire length, as if being *sniffed by the eyes* in a back-and-forth caressing movement. This visual exploration is punctuated by coloured filters that mask the meat while unveiling a relief or texture. —And this mesmerizing soundtrack that leads you, almost against your will, to follow the undulating path of this loving gaze...<sup>v</sup>

Hamelin transforms the gridded space of computer-generated imagery into a labyrinth, a shimmering wellspring of intensities where everything seems to be able to turn itself inside-out as easily as a glove, transforming into an *other*. This is a space with neither outside nor inside: an in-between space, a *milieu* where ambiguity, semblance and simulacrum reign supreme. In this interstice, Hamelin’s artworks move about of their own will, like points of light in a constellation reconfiguring itself over time, as if the artist wished them to be ever open to influx and cross-contamination. Indeed, from one exhibition to the next, Hamelin’s works multiply and divide, sometimes amputating and fragmenting themselves, only to eventually come back together, much like those mimetic animals that are able to adapt from one vivarium to another, and take on the contours of their surrounding space. Such plasticity surely stems from the desire for nothing to remain fixed and stationary, so that, ultimately, *space might reign supreme*.<sup>vi</sup>

Translated from the French by Simon Brown

## NOTES

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<sup>i</sup> Roger Caillois, “Mimicry and Legendary Psychasthenia” [1935], trans. John Shepley, *October*, vol. 31 (Winter 1984), 28, 30. Caillois developed his reflections on mimicry notably in *Méduse et*

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*Cie* (Paris, Gallimard, 1960), published in English as *The Mask of Medusa* (New York, C.N. Potter, 1964).

<sup>ii</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>iii</sup> Walter Benjamin, "On the Mimetic Faculty" [1933], trans. Edmund Jephcott, in *Selected Writings 1927-1934*, ed. Michael Jennings et al. (Cambridge MA and London: Belknap Press/Harvard University Press, 1999), 722. The adage quoted by Benjamin is originally from Hugo von Hofmannsthal.

<sup>iv</sup> Jacques Lacan, "The Line and Light" in *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*, ed. Jacques-Alain Miller, trans. Alan Sheridan (New York and London: W.W. Norton & Company, 1978), 94. It is certainly no accident that Lacan developed his theory of the gaze through his own reading of Caillois' research on animal mimicry.

<sup>v</sup> For this piece, Hamelin in fact meticulously reconstructed the lighting and camera movement from the second scene of *Contempt*. Nevertheless, the idea here is not so much to *cite* Godard's film, but rather to use it as a *mask*, the riddle of which is only hinted at.

<sup>vi</sup> The phrase that provides the title of the present essay, "space reigns supreme" (*l'espace règne*), is borrowed from art historian Elie Faure, excerpts of whose writings Jean-Paul Belmondo reads in the opening of Godard's *Pierrot le Fou*: a starting point, from which I have chosen to flow and doubtlessly *dissemble*.