

MAILINGLIST

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# 13th Forum Expanded Exhibition: A *Mechanism Capable of Changing Itself*

by Anthony Hawley

Do You Need to Illuminate Your Dark Matter?

Marta Hryniuk, *Cold Body Shining* (2017)

Laura Horelli, *Namibia Today* (2018)

Kerstin Schroedinger, *Bläue* (2017)

Jen Liu, *Pink Slime Caesar Shift* (2018)

What exactly is a mechanism capable of changing itself? A mechanism capable of manufacturing its own metamorphosis? Perhaps it is a mechanism that could change itself, possess chameleonic properties, an ability and willingness to ingest multiple terrains. To put this into process requires a particular kind of self-scrutiny, not to mention a propensity towards constant shape-shifting.

The late American avant-garde composer Pauline Oliveros defined creativity as “the formation of new patterns, exceeding the limitations and boundaries of old patterns, or using old patterns in new ways.” Oliveros’s work is distinguished from that of many composers because her “scores” provide performers with only a very loose set of instructions. An Oliveros work lives in the performance—the pattern can never be the same because no two performances are ever the same and instructions often invite the audience to perform alongside “trained” performers. The mechanism is always changing itself.

Four film projects from the 2018 Berlinale “Forum Expanded” undoing sites, resituating history, exceeding the limitations and boundaries of old patterns by re-evaluating and illuminating ruins, depths, varied authorship, and the filmic surface. Their expanded forms and multi-dimensional terrain of materials and realities constantly undermining the ease of linearity: fictional beef, utopian publications, fishing routes, chemical disasters (both past and impending), performative bodies being projected on, voids, gaps, historical footage, quasi-historical footage, et al.

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Grainy black-and-white footage, a low electronic hum, something like a foghorn sounds, guiding ships through a veiled harbor. A hooded figure walking away from the camera across a bridge. Cut to black. Then, a flag flapping in the wind at night. A low female voice sings quietly, “I will tell you a story; a story about Walter.” Cut to black. An abstracted shot of blue, blue streaks, a voiceover in Polish. As it speaks, text appears in English over the blue: “Fuzzy film on my eyes.... Fuzzy film on the water.” The hum again, this time duplicated or amplified. Black. Then a view of the sea (from an airplane, perhaps) in black and white, and the Roman numerals VIII.

Where we are meant to begin is hard to say, as beginnings are intentionally interrupted with cuts to black in Marta Hryniuk’s *Cold Body Shining* (2017). Titles announce numbered sections out of order. The female voiceover moves freely between Polish and English. Images of terrain near bodies of water. Abstracted images of what may perhaps be a foggy horizon. Grainy surveillance footage of machinery, maybe an engine room inside a ship. Ports, harbors, hotels, passages in and out of the harbor. A figure works out, training by the bridge. A longhaired female floats, swims lazily in the water, her luxurious hair puddling around her. “The routes the herring take are not certain these days,” the speaker says in English. Shaky camerawork of low-tide beach, tiny waves lapping the shore. “One dependable sign that the herring are present is said to be myriad of scales floating on the surface,” the voice continues.

Much of Hryniuk’s seductively impressionistic two-channel video strings together narrative fragments about passage—especially passage in and out of a harbor and its waters. The film itself feels a lot like the unpredictable routes that herring take. Are we tracking fish? Or perhaps the story of Walter, a character who is suggested but whose story is withheld? Or is it the history and flow of information in and out of this port? Perhaps we are meant to move through forms surrounding the port—cargo containers, fancy port-side hotels with circular windows, the sinewy twists and turns of the engine room? At one point in the film, the voiceover says that she dreams of Chantal (Ackerman, presumably), who, in her dream, says to the narrator, “I have started to film all over the place as soon as I sensed a shot, without purpose really, but with the feeling that one day these images would weave into a story.”

Indeed, this poetic film’s subject might be the very weaving of stories as much as it is the figures within it. Or maybe it’s the poetic “trails” that stories leave behind them. What is to be ascertained from the tracks left behind, from the skeletal ruins of ships and the scales of herring on the water’s surface? During a crisp closeup of fish scales at the end of the film, the voiceover tells us, “Stretch forth your hands and touch them, and you will find your fingers covered with a greasy substance.” It continues, alternating between Polish and English, “If the greasy substance be separated from the dead fish, and placed on a plate of glass, it continues to shine in the dark.” What continues to shine in the dark? Is it the trails and imprints the body leaves behind? And, if so, what might we glean from them?

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Underground, face to the wall. A billboard in a subway station, framed by rectangular tiles. The shiny orange and tan tiles contrast sharply with the flat, newspaper-like quality of the billboard. Instead of an advertisement for the latest TV series, concert, or blockbuster film, there's something else: the front page of the former journal *Namibia Today*, reproduced to fit the billboard's precise poster dimensions. Next to it, filling another panel of the same dimensions, collaged material concerning the journal's history with the German Democratic Republic (which funded its publication). Plenty of space surrounds the collaged material: a single question and answer in black type, printed on strips of yellow paper cut haphazardly hover over an empty blue page.

“Question:” it reads. “Do you remember any area of disagreement on certain issues with the GDR?”

“Haindongo:” reads the strip below, “No. The only thing which is not a disagreement was that when we had to close the ‘Namibia Today’ because of internal reasons the GDR was disappointed and gave all assistance possible to continue it.”

A slow voiceover begins, in German, “I left Namibia when I was eighteen. ... The political situation was unbearable.”

As the German voiceover continues, the second shot: a closeup of another billboard with different collaged material. Third shot: a wider frame of this material and a different cover from another issue of *Namibia Today*. The camera pans slowly away from the wall to stop at a Black man (presumably the one who delivers the voiceover) in a stark white sweater, standing and reading. The man stares intently at the text of the book as the voiceover continues. Engrossed by the text, he stands motionless, only his eyebrows moving occasionally.

About halfway through this particular moment, the voiceover—which, up to this point, had been recounting a personal history—switches from German to English, reading aloud an excerpt from *Namibia and Germany: Negotiating the Past*: by Reinhardt Kossler. The text hints at the storied and complex relationship between Germany and Namibia: “Ever since Namibia gained independence in 1990, her relations with Germany have been marked by intensity, close cooperation, and heated debate.” Behind the man, slightly out of focus, a young, white couple chats while waiting for the next train to arrive. It does; they hug. The woman boards the train.

Among the many wonderful aspects of Laura Horelli's *Namibia Today* (2018) is its state of suspension. Throughout Horelli's short film, seven people—Namibians with a connection to the GDR, or former East Germans involved with the liberation party SWAPO—remain almost unmoving, as if stuck in the subway station as trains and travelers come and go. However, they are not trapped. If anything, the train's coming and going, coupled with the camera's slow, sweeping shots, emphasize the very openness of the subway station—its depth, its exits, ways in and out. In the background, we see signs announcing trains' imminent arrivals. We hear buzzers and bells

signaling doors opening and shutting, trains entering and leaving the station. In short, we experience constant flows—of movement, sound, color—that announce this container as a passageway. However, these seven individuals remain, bordered by their own memories of Namibia during the height of its relationship with East Germany and various surfaces and materials in the *Schillingstraße* station. While the physical place may be a means to come and go, the vehicle of memory keeps things suspended between facsimiles of an old utopian periodical published by the GDR—an entity that no longer exists—and windows, mirrors, marketing signage from current events, not to mention the facades of history encircling the relationship between Namibia and East Germany during the 1970s and '80s.

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We open in an empty parking lot, an industrial backdrop. Smoke rises over the vacant space. The camera lingers motionless here. Then it cuts to an alternate view of the scene, trees and a rocky slope flanking the building we just saw. After that, another empty space, a field, and then a sign, in Italian, warning of video surveillance as the camera itself surveys these industrial quarters and production sites. All the while, several sheets of paper placed on the ground inside these industrial spaces, characters positioned quietly in the landscape.

After about three minutes, a subtle but important transformation occurs: the shot on screen suddenly appears projected onto a wall, tinted in spots with a deep, rich blue. The film shifts back and forth between the shot on screen and the shot projected onto a wall, tinted blue. The second time the shot materializes as a projection, a woman stands in front of it. She puts on a fluorescent yellow pinny over her shirt. The next shot on screen (as opposed to the shot of the projection), the woman previously dressing in front of the screen enters the frame wearing similar clothing.

This back and forth between shots and “shots of shots” establishes the singular structure for Kerstin Schroedinger’s *Bläue (Blueness)* (2017), a 47-minute film in which the artist combines images of production sites in the “pharmaceutical-chemical” industry in Basel, Switzerland, and Seveso, Italy, with performance recordings featuring the artist in front of the same footage. Blue—specifically the blue of the chemical industry—is the subject of Schroedinger’s intriguing hybrid and, as the film progresses, the sheets of paper featured early in the film reveal themselves to be developing cyanotypes. While Schroedinger uses the cyanotype process as a durational framework to construct the film, the “latent time” in the cyanotype process (the time between exposure and development) becomes symbolic of a larger latency: “the period between a hidden event and the appearance of a visible reaction to it,” recites the character during her performance. The film is as much about “blue” as it is about exposing what lies hidden in the history of certain chemical blues and their material outcomes on the body.

Seveso, a site tied to the historical production of Prussian blue and its dye, is central to the film. About two thirds of the way through the film, a voiceover in Italian recounts “partial memories”

from the Seveso Disaster on July 10, 1976, when an accident at a chemical plant leaked a massive amount of dioxin, one of the toxins in Agent Orange, into the environment. What first emerged as a cloud above a pharmaceutical factory revealed itself as TCDD in animals and people. Thousands of animals died and hundreds of people were exposed to dioxins and suffered chloracne, as well as other health risks. But a period of uncertainty ensued after the initial disaster and “a history of lies,” as the voice calls it, “ensued.”

For the voices in the film, the latent period between partial and “total” exposure becomes rich territory, if not the focus of this piece. This is the case with the Italian voiceover examining the Seveso incident, as well as Schroedinger’s performances. First, in the case of Seveso, the “partial history” is revealed as such by chemical evidence: animals placed in supposedly “chemical-free” zones to test dioxin levels who died shortly thereafter. Second, when not creating cyanotypes on screen, the central figure in *Bläue* spends much of the film performing in front of projections, dressed in reflective athletic gear, holding a plank position, and transforming her body into a kind of photographic surface. Here, she recites a powerful, multi-layered text meditating on surface reactions, the production and suppression of feelings, the often-violent making and suppression of images, Prussian blue as a “toxin and antidote,” and the post-industrial body as a byproduct of the chemical and pharmaceutical industry. As she holds a plank position, the text she speaks is also projected onto her body. “In this process,” she says, “I’m transforming the surface of my body into a screen, a blue screen. I’m now a living photograph.” In this multiplicity of surfaces, voices, and concerns, *Bläue* in its entirety becomes a kind of long exposure, unearthing hidden social histories and voicing political and social agendas behind material conditions of various “blues.”

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“Where you headed?”

“Bit further along the road.”

“Are you meeting someone?”

During this opening sequence of Jen Liu’s *Pink Slime Caesar Shift* (2018), a programmatic, matter-of-fact female voiceover makes casual, off-camera inquires. A second, haunting voice answers, whispery, warped, computerized, and stilted. At first, the highly synthetic voices seem at odds with the landscape the film opens in—a body of water, hunks of concrete, the sound of raindrops on the river. But the woods in this scene seem to have a similar density to those in Kerstin Schroedinger’s *Bläue*. Could it be we find ourselves in a similar post-industrial landscape?

As the film opens, a figure in a heavy, white-hooded suit wanders into the frame, on the other side of the riverbank. Dressed as she is, she might be there to perform some kind of chemical cleanup or waste removal. In the next shot, it becomes clear she is trying to find something: continuing through the woods, she searches, pausing occasionally to dig through dirt or to part tall grass. The camera lingers on her gloved hands probing underneath a hubcap. She shines a light down a

concrete tunnel. A natural soundscape—birds singing, grass crunching beneath her feet, crickets at dusk—marks her journey. About ninety seconds in, the polyphony of affected voices increases as the figure turns to the camera and speaks in a voice that sounds as if heard through covered ears. We can't understand her, but she seems to want to communicate with us.

Indeed, much of Liu's wonderfully strange *Pink Slime Caesar Shift* seems to be about trying to communicate. The film's description identifies the premise as "four proposals to alter the DNA of mass-produced in-vitro hamburgers to carry secret messages of labor insurrection on behalf of Special Economic Zone factory workers in China." Moving between cool dystopian landscapes—some real, other computer-generated—the film immerses us in an unsettling world, which revolves loosely around issues of labor insurrection in China, and issues of beef shortages, proposals to alter the DNA of mass-produced in-vitro hamburgers, not to mention secret messages hidden inside the fake meat to improve the lives of workers in Special Economic Zones throughout China. Like Schroedinger's *Bläue*, *Pink Slime Caesar Shift* sometimes addresses traumatic industrial conditions inside these zone. "On her employment contract, her employers indicated there were no industrial hazards involved in her work. But she developed Leukemia."

What is perhaps so unusual about Liu's work is the way in which it so adeptly slips between various tones. On the one hand, the opening sequence in the woods and subsequent animated scene is chilling in its distance. It's hard to know exactly what we're watching in the animated sequence, but something like a slightly clumsy-looking, computer-generated worker slides in, out of, and around dark landscapes.

Later, the film takes a lighter tone as six women sit in silence around a table and a voice offers colloquial couples counseling. Various shades of pink cover the walls, and they themselves wear grays and whites tinted pink in what might be a seminar room, break room, or waiting room outside an office. The mischievous tone is hard to pin down. Is it part infomercial? Part manual? The sometimes haunting or even horrific conditions the voice details are at odds with its monotonous delivery. Throughout, this voice moves through language from actual couples' counseling sessions, text from worker-education documents, sales pitches for scientific equipment, documentary recordings, and poetic, meditative excerpts from a hodgepodge of materials, including Anne Carson's *Red*.

But perhaps this complex tone is precisely what's needed to apprehend the historical depths Liu and the other filmmakers here set out to expose. "Do you need to illuminate your dark matter?" the voice asks at one point. The answer, these four filmmakers put forth, is a resounding yes. If we are to be a "mechanism changing ourselves," then we need to do precisely that: "illuminate our dark matter," no matter how uncomfortable it may be.

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Anthony Hawley is a multidisciplinary artist and writer. Recent solo projects were presented by CounterCurrent in partnership with the Menil Collection & Aurora Picture Show; Spazju Kreattiv in Malta; and Central Features Contemporary Art in Albuquerque. In 2018, Print the Future will publish *Drawings for Donald*, a year-long daily drawing project. Along with violinist Rebecca Fischer, he forms one half The Afield, a performance collaboration for violin, video, electronics, and more.

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