

Couple Goals at The Body Shop **by Niekolaas Johannes Lekkerkerk**

What is the basic unit of reference for the human in times at which the boundaries between nature and culture as well as object and subject have seemed to become increasingly porous? When identities are thought of as fluid, and selves are fragmented into different marketable data sets and informational codes, indeed it seems difficult to uphold a holistic and stable image of the human. At the same time, we seem unable to escape or overcome our anthropomorphic tendencies at will, and as much as we are trying to develop and reapply ourselves as post-human, as an enhanced and extended species, we are resubmitted to the body immersed in radically immanent relations. According to philosopher Rosi Braidotti: [...] *We always imagine from our own bodies – and why should we, considering that we still live on a planet populated by humanoids who think of themselves as humans, in different ways, with different points of reference? Our very embodiment is a limit, as well as a threshold; our flesh is framed by the morphology of the human body, it is also always already sexed and hence differentiated.*¹

This schism of aiming to extend beyond ourselves, all the while remaining inextricably bound to the body, to our fleshed existence, may be equally observed in the work of Janina Frye, who questions the figuration of the human body precisely through and by means of the objects it employs to extend into and apply itself onto the world of different material agencies and the interrelations they put forward. In her exhibition *Kiss off life* we come across different stations and sculptural assemblages consisting of objects, materials and semi-finished products that stem from a medical, and, to be more specific, an orthopaedic background, in the shape of prosthetic objects and elements. Transposed to the time and space of the exhibition, these prosthetic elements become constituent actors in a choreographed play in which the body is latently absent. Surely, we position our visiting bodies to these sculptural constellations of shifting nature and proportion, but perhaps more as sudden partakers in a mesh of floating, suspended, breathing and moving elements, more than as embodied subjects to become part of the prosthetic equation.

The latter is somehow beyond the point as Frye seems to want to engage us in a thought-experiment concerning the liminal space to be inhabited between the human body on the one side, and the prosthetic extension and addition on the other. What

happens in the intimate and intermediate space of a condition in which the human body and the prosthetic object come to merge? Does this condition allow us—if “allowing” is what we are after in the first place—to uphold the subject-object division and continue to speak about relative autonomy between respective parts and entities, the body vis-à-vis the addition of the prosthesis?

On first approach Janina Frye seems interested in the theories coinciding with the philosophical movement of Speculative Realism, and in particular Graham Harman’s Object Oriented Ontology (OOO), attempting at rejecting an anthropocentric worldview and liberating the object from our persistent attempts at endowing the human figure with the capacity to be the basis of a reconstruction. In other words still, to advocate the loosening of thought from the constraints of human phenomenality, and the mental building blocks we add to make sense of the world. As a key concept of speculative realism we find the idea of ‘flat ontology’ as formulated by philosopher Manuel DeLanda: [...] *while an ontology based on relations between general types and particular instances is hierarchical, each level representing a different ontological category (organism, species, genera), an approach in terms of interacting parts and emergent wholes leads to a flat ontology, one made exclusively of unique, singular individuals, differing in spatio-temporal scale but not in ontological status.*² In this view every object equally exists, but they do not exist in the same way or have the same kinds of causal powers. Thus a flat ontology accounts for objects that sit on an equal footing as self-organizing units, this time without the interference or the addition of a hierarchical pecking order attributed by humans.

Praiseworthy as this thinking exercise may be—as, indeed, look at where the human objectifying the world has brought us—a problem that is often underscored with the speculative realist thinkers is their inherent lack of grounding, an absence of a situatedness from where they are speaking. They either shatter the Kantian mirror and claim an unobscured and transparent worldview, or they try to turn the mirror around and observe a world in interaction with itself, but what about the specific figuration of the slabs of matter, these bodies we inhabit, that allow us to think these things in the first place? To elaborate further with Braidotti: *The so-called speculative realists tend to be paradoxically dis-embedded and dis-embodied: they are really speaking from nowhere, though they try to hide it. They are unable to account for where they are speaking from. To me, however important it is that we concern ourselves with a-subjective or non-human*

*matter, the politics of locations of the subject is something we cannot let go. What we should be speaking about are extended minds, distributed cognition, experiments with forms of affirmative relational ethics that take these parameters into account.*³

The feminist theory of the politics of location seems important here, briefly defined as the act of consciousness-raising about the place from where you are speaking and acting, beginning with one's own particular role in the scheme of things. Thus, different than the assumption of universalism—as overly present in speculative realism—it seems crucial to start from the fragments of one's own body. In the case of Frye's work, it may be worthwhile to think along this axis (rather than to fantasize about certain implied binary dialects such as object and subject, masculinity and femininity, or natural and man-made for that matter) and start to think in terms of gender, sex, class and age as to confront the societal implications of hybridized and fragmented bodies and its application of prosthetics. Perhaps to think of prosthetics as a matter of care and support as a way to extend oneself into a world better read as a monistic ontology; in the Spinozist tradition, where there is no longer any distinction between human subjects and objects, all present within a nature-culture continuum. Where the objects made by human labour do not differ from those objects found in nature. It is precisely this amalgamation of bodies and material agencies that is of interest here: the touching points, the contact between technology and the flesh to spring new and ticklish relationalities. It means embracing the nonlinearity of our posthuman times, the further fragmentation of ourselves, and the permeability of our bodily boundaries. *Human, all too human, these extensions and enhancements of what bodies can do are here to stay.*⁴

—

1 Timotheus Vermeulen and Rosi Braidotti, "Borrowed Energy," *frieze* 165 (2014): 130–3.

2 Manuel DeLanda, *Intensive Science and Virtual Philosophy* (London: Bloomsbury Academic, 2013), 47.

3 Timotheus Vermeulen and Rosi Braidotti, "Borrowed Energy," *frieze* 165 (2014): 130–3.

4 Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013), 197.