

Nymphs of the Anthropocene: Four Inquiries Around Lynne Marsh's Work

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1.

We may be jammed on a particular frequency, but we've been hearing it everywhere: *abstraction, abstraction, abstraction*. Our *mot du jour*. It seems to provide insight into a world dissolved into flows and conspiracies, held hostage by retrograde identity retrenchments and an implacable impulse to self-diagnose (and perpetually log and image it) before the failing ability to imagine ourselves otherwise; a world of felt disengagements—the mismatch of scales and velocities—between our cognitive and affective capacities and all that swirls around and courses right through us, leaving us perplexed and depleted. In the end, of course, in its general usage, instead of elucidating current conditions, the word abstraction merely offers a little salve for our disorientation, a name for it, near it. The shadow cast by the term marks, we hope even as we know better, something like a jetty that will basin off, protected from wild currents on the other side, the cascade of dwindling bits we become as we decompose into our algorithmically generated lesser selves. After we aggregate all the things it seems to approach, abstraction clusters as the catch-all term for the aggressively anti-civilizational turn that capitalist production, itself capable of seemingly infinite mutation and devastation, has assumed. Its logic, having crept into every corner of our lives, now makes it acceptable to obliterate the very terrestrial platform that is necessary for its own reproduction—and ours. If once the counterweight of resistance and the possibility of an integrated existence wedged hope between us and total dispossession, these are days in which every horizon is obscured by the smoke that spews from the smoldering ruins of our emancipatory reserves.

The most striking feature of this inchoate understanding of abstraction is that it is not treated as a mental operation. It is upheld, instead, as something that is *out there* in the world. The intuition that it is a concrete thing tracks alongside a diagnostic tradition that runs from Marx to Alfred Sohn-Rethel to Paolo Virno. In *Intellectual and Manual Labor: A Critique of Epistemology*, Sohn-Rethel sets out to understand what he calls the “social synthesis” of commodity-producing society and the epistemology that emerges out of such a synthesis—that is, the actions and relations that allow individuals to coalesce into a sustainable collective and the

accompanying modalities of thought. (“How they [these individuals] *act* is of primary importance to the social network; how they *think* is of secondary importance.”¹) In commodity-producing societies, he proposes, the relations that sustain the social system are bound to the very exchange of commodities and money plays a mediating role defined by its capacity to level and quantifiably relate every other commodity. Exchange is the action of individuals trading on value that exists in strict separation of use. In other words, while the use of a thing can—how can it not?—remain in the calculations of those who acquire it, their actions are only guided by exchange and exchange-value. This is value that “exists nowhere but in the human mind but it does not spring from there. Rather it is purely social in character, arising in the spatiotemporal sphere of human interrelations.”² It is a *real* abstraction. It is practiced before thought; it is collective before it is individual; it is world-structuring before it is a conceptual distillation of concrete factuality. It is, in our days, perhaps also a mutating thing, in that our collective actions and private thoughts are now digested by the augmented intelligence of new computational apparatuses intent on governing social behaviors, dictating political scenarios, and regulating global exchange. Intent, in short, on reconfiguring the world, the very “spatiotemporal sphere of human interrelations,” to the benefit of corporate power and its attending classes. Something other than, or in addition to, exchange may be gluing together the current “social synthesis.”

Since Sohn-Rethel’s aim is to develop a critique of epistemology, he goes on to dig up the formal equivalences between the behaviors that make the social synthesis of commodity-producing society cohere and endure and the modes of cognition that such a synthesis generates. For our purposes, we can alight on the essential category of *real abstraction*, the kind of abstraction that structures the very ground and lineaments of our lifeworld. We can stay with the question of the social and epistemic alterations wrought by a change in the commodity form itself. In other words, how do changes in the commodity form impact social being—or rather what are the effects if value, in particular circumstances, can be generated elsewhere than in traditional labor? For instance, what happens when value is generated by the patterns and intensities of attention, in the mobilization of our cognitive and communicative capacities? What happens if the very morphology of labor changes along with the salient traits of production as the mind is externalized, “de-privatized”? When, instead of labor power’s actualization in a commodity to be exchanged, it is its potential—its capacity to develop new capacities, to be ever available to adapt to innovation—that is monetized and sold? More crucially, what happens to our general social being and our individual psychic and affective mechanisms?

These are the questions that haunt Lynne Marsh’s installation *Anna and the Tower* (2014). They hover spectrally like the wind turbines in fog on screen. They are embodied in Anna’s performance of labor without outcomes. It is her performative virtuosity—to pilfer a term from

Virno—as such that matters, rather than the actual choreography of planes landing and taking off. While *Anna and the Tower* initially seems to present a rehearsal for an actual situation to come, it reveals something altogether different to a sustained gaze: no situation is coming and none is ultimately necessary. The performance, the ability to develop new capacities as she adjusts to ever refreshed requirements, is what makes Anna desirable to a predatory system of economic relations that now, instead of only counting on bodies that wear and tear their musculature, sustains itself on the endless extraction of psychic and emotional energies.

This is how Virno diagrams such a situation:

What are the principal requirements of dependent workers today? To be accustomed to mobility, to be able to keep up with the most sudden conversions, to be able to adapt to various enterprises, to be flexible in switching from one set of rules to another, to have an aptitude for a kind of linguistic interaction as banalized as it is unilateral, to be familiar with managing among a limited amount of possible alternatives.³

All requirements, he goes on to point out, that we don't learn in the workplace. Instead, what is demanded is our mobilization of innate cognitive and communicative capacities, born as we cannot help but be in the house of language. It is our generic baseline, attributes that we universally share, that are incorporated into the process of production. Living labor no longer simply provides the muscle to complement the rivets and dials of synthetic machines: living labor has been transfigured into fleshy machines. David Cronenberg is obviously our Goethe.

2.

Virno is writing about something like the prehistory of our times. The appropriation of our cognitive and communicative capacities by Capital is the “primitive moment” of what we are stuck with now, which is something like William Burroughs's terrifying “control” instantiated through global digital networks, edging out all other possible arrangements of the world but the one it pedals. What is extracted from us these days, the fruit of all the soul-draining, is incorporated into the intelligence of new computational apparatuses, machinic agencies that have established new forms of algorithmic governance and controllable futures for the self—or what used to be the self and is now just a profile constantly fed back what it already is. The augmented intelligences—a kind of corporate pseudo-singularity that syphons our inventiveness even as it reduces the spaces in which it can unfold and the resources it can feed on—that emerged from the computational and logistical enveloping of the entire globe now regulate social behaviors on mass scales; they organize life in such a way that their despotic arrangements are opaque to those they guide day in and day out. Anna, we are sure, posted on

Instagram during the breaks in filming, extending her time of production, turning herself into another vector and another prosthesis of the cybernetic matrix.

Walter Benjamin famously wrote that urban shocks were mitigating mechanisms for the truly shocking ways in which workers' bodies were disciplined by the factory. Virno turns this on its head. It is the proliferation of urban shocks, he says, that prepares us for new forms of labor. The constant instability of the city trains our cognitive and communicative capacities for the flexibility that work now demands. Erratic experience prepares us for the workplace expectation of constant modulation. The city trains us for the new needs of production. But something has become unhinged in this arrangement, as we've moved to a next-level reality to face what are perhaps next-level real abstractions. In the smart city, no metropolitan shock seems more potent than our public, compulsive derealization of ourselves in a constant performance without substantive end. We TikTok ourselves to ever thinner versions of who we are, slimmed of predicates and strangeness. It's hilarious that we were once called users: now, we are mere witnesses to—and fodder for—a process of perpetual self-aesthetization completely indistinguishable from a good gutting.

Is there a remedy for this evisceration? In a text published anonymously in 2004, "Le bel enfer," we are reminded of the extent to which our world is parceled, constantly separating us from the vital sources upon which our generic capacities would draw to organize and perpetuate a rich existence. Embedded in environments that never stand still, our very constitution should be a never-ending process, full of gains. In concert with these environments, we should become by constantly becoming other, by conjugating with the things out there that are not us already: the things that are ours in that they are no one's. Instead, we are delivered to a fractured landscape that forces us onto either side of its rifts, to one closed position or another, delivering us to the institutions that manage these divides. Once an analogue process leveraging class power differentials, this is now automated and machinic. Our beautiful AI hell.

"Le bel enfer" enlists an unlikely ally: Aby Warburg. "Against all aesthetics," the text proclaims, Warburg sought to show that, contained even in the image, in the most anthropomorphic representations of Western art, there were points of irreducibility, extreme tensions, energies which the work withholds and invokes at the same time, that there is "life in motion" even in the immobility of Renaissance statues. And that these forces, these "formulas of pathos" are able not only to touch us but to *affect us*... We say that there are everywhere, integral with the real, with words, with bodies, with sounds, images, and gestures, similar points of irreducibility where forms of life, man and his world, perception and action, being and its determination are *not* separated.⁴

These forms-of-life are where separation succumbs to the collective intensity, the historical sedimentation, that is conjured. Or not conjured, but swirls in them like freed energy. It is not

that those who inhabit a form-of-life “are animated by that past, but that the same form-of-life assembles them into a constellation, haloes them, passes through them.”⁵

We wonder if, like Virno, the writers of “Le bel enfer” are also pondering options available only during the prehistory of our times. Are those points of irreducibility and extreme tension so readily available anymore? Does an aesthetic idea of freedom still organize our everyday simulation of a life? What if the option to inhabit our determinations in particularly productive ways is no longer on the table? What if we now use our capacity to constellate with vital energies to forge ever more destructive tools we apply to ourselves by sacrificing our strange edges to machinic intelligences that, solely interested in a kind of governance that enlarges their agency, continue to feed on our organs and attributes? What if our “subjugation to apparatuses” is total? What if Warburg’s nymphs now withheld, skeptical of their audience, some of the “life in motion” they hold in reserve? What, in that withholding, is their lesson for us?

3.

Nymphs, common wisdom says, are personifications of nature. What kind of nymphs would our times require, when nature (whatever that is) has evolved into a space or dynamic of proliferating contingencies and truly unexpected surprises? What might personification mean, in light of a global economy of profiles, in a world where unmoored mimicry has relegated personhood to a vanishing form? What do the nymphs of the Anthropocene look like? Nymphs drawn by the pull of a collapsing earth system and quartered by the compulsion to incessantly add to their social media accounts, to upload everything down to the most uninteresting minutiae of their day, to perpetually share their location and interests, all to feed the machinic brain. Nymphs bound to a time when the division between natural and social histories is denuded as a ruse sprouted from a world where the instability of earth systems and the proliferation of new capture mechanisms meet in the planetary scale that computation has achieved, in the amount of energy this ubiquitous computing consumes, the waste it produces, and the ubiquitous surveillance it deploys. Nymphs beholden to a matrix of high-tech corporations and logistical networks that have, for the most part, supplanted the State (no one is too eager to take on police functions) while carefully reincorporating it when convenient. For instance, when this matrix needs an entity that can mobilize climate change initiatives and resilience discourses without destabilizing the existing socioeconomic order; an entity that can explain to us, in surefooted state-speak, how Miami will be forever and we shouldn’t mess too much with the way things are. Instead, we should focus on becoming better survivalists ourselves: we should step in as the replacement infrastructure rendered necessary by the

State's abnegation of its duties, in its inexplicable and unbreakable enthrallment to every call for deregulation.

The cogent thread that ran through Warburg's impressively heterogeneous collection of images of nymphs, which serves as the potent cultural referent and inspiration for Marsh's *Ninfa Atlas* (2021), was that, while each version of the nymph was beholden to the historical determinants of its epoch, it also manifested a residual "afterlife" in the flow of the culture across these epochs, the transmission of imagination as a fundamental ontological aspect of the human. Let's call them vessels of the *general imagination*, understood as the live wire that connects points of irreducibility, flashes of integrated existence. But how does the general imagination manifest now, in a world whose new and unstable operating system proliferates contingencies instead of crystallizing patterns; a world in which an "afterlife" as sedimented meaning and contained tension in images faces irrevocable interdiction? If we said it once, we've said it a hundred times: climate change designs the obsolescence of Holocene art.

Having said it again, it is also true that the tendency to disintegration surely forges new modes of cognition. One day we will know what to do with them, how to filter imagination through them, tap points of irreducibility, and bridge artificial separations. We will learn to re-enchante the world in the throes of meltdown; as we gain experience in hiding our attributes from the roaming capture machines of augmented non-organic intelligences, we will figure out how to rewrite the terms of our confinement in the wall-less, open-air prisons of corporate hegemony. This is not scripted as something waiting for us down the road. A potentiality in the current state of affairs, it will be activated as soon as we conceive, anticipating it, the present conditions' oversaturation and collapse. Happiness is in us, Goethe wrote, even when we are not up to putting ourselves through what is required to find it. But for now, AI's sunless dawn.

One day, too, we may be able to reconstitute a public sphere. As of now, it is shattered into innumerable empty atoms, each compulsively registering everything that happens to it across multiple platforms, constantly adding to the swelling intelligence of new apparatuses, to their world-eating predictive modeling and swarm shepherding. As these empty and dispersed atoms, we are the sputtering output of technologies of individualization and individuation—slowly dismantling these technologies where they are not already merely scattered parts—that were once at our disposal. We are reduced to practicing an endless aesthetic operation on ourselves: seemingly restless, our search for a form is only a flight from it—disintegration. The more intense the compulsion to perform ourselves, the more unhinged the need to perform for others, the smaller the dividend. It all generates a centrifugal force without telos. The gyre widens, widens, and widens erratically; the center, indeed, cannot hold. It is all insignificant episodes with no guiding thread, without pattern. It's all passions wasting upon their

articulation, smoothly and uselessly: there's not even a hint of an exalted profligacy that rubs against the realms of the sacred. The more one conveys aimlessly about oneself to the world, the more one contributes, in seeming paradox, to its de-pluralization, to the regressive de-differentiation of the real. It's as if we have been ordained to denigrate ourselves through uninteresting expenditure rather than monastic abstinence, compelled to become dwindling figures of unrestrained self-abasement. We seem only inexhaustible when it comes to injuring ourselves, dragged along by renewed exercises in mystification and the inertial pull to reproduce ourselves, to subsist somehow. We are so tireless, in fact, when we train the crosshairs on ourselves that we turn into a social force: we aggregate an egregore that feeds on us, not only grinding all nuance and weirdness into flavorless jerky but putting ever more distance between us and the world.

4.

Writing about Warburg's nymphs, Giorgio Agamben reminds us that the nymphs of the Fordist mode of production were made in a small, dirty apartment in Chicago. The age anointed a humble dishwasher, Henry Darger, with the task. Digesting and highjacking forms of mass communication, Darger appropriated the little girls that obsessed—and continue to obsess—advertising and transfigured them through manual and mechanical means (photographic enlargement and tracing) to generate the Vivian Girls, sprite creatures who channeled the soul of an age. Modernity, its flows and blockages, and far more than Darger's fifteen-volume narrative, titled *The Story of the Vivian Girls, in What is Known as the Realms of the Unreal, of the Glandeco-Angelinnian War Storm, Caused by the Child Slave Rebellion*, are coded into the parade of little girls with little penises that fill his drawings. Agamben understands the Vivian Girls as a new species—the *nympha daegeriana*, “the nymph enslaved by evil adults.”⁶ We take them for the clairvoyant allegories that they are: our natural capacities, our secular souls, imprisoned by the mode of production. John Ashberry wrote a long poem dedicated to the *nympha daegeriana*, which begins like this:

A great plane flew across the sun,
and the girls ran along the ground.

The sun shone on Mr. McPlaster's face, it was green like an elephant's.⁷

How would a book of poems dedicated to the *nympha anthropocenica* begin? Is poetry a good medium to try to say something about her? What medium is? Agamben finds the coincidence between the elaboration of Warburg's project and the birth of cinema of the utmost importance, both beholden to “the problem of the representation of movement.”⁸ Our times are defined by a kind of movement that differs from the aftereffects of the image, both on the

retina and in memory, which Agamben has in mind. The movement that troubles us, instead, is the transmission of the data extracted from living bodies to aggregating machines that enlarge their intelligence by shrinking the world of the bodies they mine. Poetry, proposes Franco Berardi, is a way to return sensuality to the general intellect, which machines constantly siphon. If only things were thus.

One of Lynne Marsh's nymphs—Gustine—is an older woman dressed in millennial-pink boxing shorts and sports bra. Between passages of an abstracted space referencing a video-capture studio and stock images suggesting the view from the garage door of many CrossFit gyms (roads, parking lots, and industrial buildings lined with razor wire), she performs gestures suggesting workout. She recalls, in fact, the contemporary compulsion to exercise, to work on one's self and body and, crucially, to broadcast this breath-punctuated journey through 5G networks. "You can and you will! Five more burpees! Yes, you are better because you showed up. You showed up for *yourself*" —shouts the trainer, another contemporary nymph, we can imagine standing where the 100+ cameras capturing Marsh's footage can't get to her, as she pans her own iPhone's camera around the fitness studio, producing video for her TikTok, so as not to fall behind in the production of daily content. These days, Warburg's nymph lives in a studio apartment, in one generic city or other, where she carefully arranges her fig houseplant and yoga mat against a white wall to create a zen Zoom background as she wonders how she'll afford groceries this month, now that bread is \$8.99. She is all this banality, but also something that fails in transmission. Something that fuzzes out, misaligns. Gustine seems ensnared, at times, in the clutches of glitch-repetition, of moribund gesturality. She delivers us to some edge of expression, or past it. Something about her doesn't compute. What do her movements mean? Do they mean?

The *nympha anthropocenica*, if she is to be an elemental spirit as Warburg claimed of all nymphs, now is the "personification" of capacities we naturally possess, for which we are hunted. She is a treasonous cypher, an indeterminate bit of information, a semantic scramble—an unmoored atom in constant withdrawal even as it participates. She moves toward an undisclosed location without being in random drift, putting more and more garbled layers between her and all the machines that have been fired up to track and mine her. She flees as she endeavors, perhaps uselessly and as a last resort, to generate a form-of-life that coheres past the edges of a social synthesis structured to shrink her. She has to be noise in the system, as the old metaphor goes. Crackle and hiss, dead space, defunct data, a kind of aneurysm in the machinic brain. Not the Glissantian natural opacity that neoliberal institutions and their curators are so obsessed with, but an artificial beaming of erratic and incoherent signals. She is the general imagination performing only negative moves, articulating sinkholes of

sense, on the way to finding an elusive integrated existence that negates both renewed and new forms of alienation.

This performance of negative moves and misdirection becomes all the more tangled as the demand put on her, the contemporary nymph, cuts beyond constant self-disclosure: she has to be prepared to save her own skin as our world's operating system now only outputs contingencies and surprises, never pattern and meaning. She must not only generate data to be extracted but also be ready to safeguard the existing social order by training herself to survive all that is to come: floods, draughts, blackouts, and empty supermarket shelves. Think of how governments' and nonprofits' grantmaking now welcome—if not demand—that neighbors and communities increase their preparedness to endure disasters autonomously by developing their capacities, through scenario enactment and role-playing games, to provision food, energy, water, and communication during and after cataclysmic events. The demand, if not the ultimatum, put to the nymph—and to us, too—is that she become social infrastructure. This is how she knows that she should, instead, become sabotage and flight, that streak of reason that organizes itself to feel for exits.

NOTES

1. Alfred Sohn-Rethel, *Intellectual and Manual Labor: A Critique of Epistemology*, trans. Martin Sohn-Rethel (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2020), 4.
2. Sohn-Rethel, 16.
3. Paolo Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude: For an Analysis of Contemporary Forms of Life*, trans. Isabella Bertolotti, James Cascaito, and Andrea Casson (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2004), 84–85.
4. “Le bel enfer” was originally published anonymously in a collection titled *La fête est finie*, which appeared alongside Lille2004. See <http://lafeteestfinie.free.fr/enfer.htm>. The text was later attributed to Tiqqun. An English translation can be accessed at <https://illwill.com/the-beautiful-hell>.
5. “Le bel enfer,” unpaginated.
6. Giorgio Agamben, *Nymphs*, trans. Kevin McLaughlin and Amanda Minervini (London: Seagull Books, 2013), 18–19.
7. John Ashbury, *Girls on the Run: A Poem* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1999), 3.
8. Agamben, 21.