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Para

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Virginia Commonwealth University

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

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ABSTRACT

PARA

By William Matheson, MFA.

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2016.

Major Director: Javier Tapia, Painting and Printmaking

We are hosts, we are hosts and we’re deeply aware of it.

We are aware of the pollutants and particulates that exist in our air, aware of the growing presence of UVB radiation that touches our skin, aware of the microbes, bacteria and viruses that call our interiors home, more completely aware than we’ve ever been that to have a body contemporarily is to acknowledge a multiplicity that can be wholly uncomfortable and even alien: that we are hosts to so much seemingly unwanted material, sensation and life.
The prefix Para, originating in the Greek language, can connote something irregular or amiss (parasite, paranormal), or something beside or above (parallel, parameter, paralysis). In this way Para’s connotations exist in the realm of unease, whether in the form of incomprehensibility, or with an interior body/mind relationship that is precarious, or directly detrimental, as in the case of the parasite or the paranormal.

Para- in it’s many forms and suggestions becomes the framework for these two videos.
We are hosts, we are hosts and we’re deeply aware of it.

We are aware of the pollutants and particulates that exist in our air, aware of the growing presence of UVB radiation that touches our skin, aware of the microbes, bacteria and viruses that call our interiors home, more completely aware than we’ve ever been that to have a body contemporarily is to acknowledge a multiplicity that can be wholly uncomfortable and even alien: that we are hosts to so much seemingly unwanted material, sensation and life can be overwhelming.

These bodies, these conflicted, accelerating, unraveling, sensual, stunned, sleepless, excited, contaminated, parasitized and confused bodies must navigate our age of overstimulation, hyperobjects, ecological collapse, light pollution and personal disembodiment.

With green skin, seeping ooze and bodily oils, trying desperately to retain itself before the entirety is consumed.
We started with a single note, a minor note, plucked continuously in the 8th octave. I mentioned that I was interested in the minimalists like Reich or LaMonte Young, in achieving a certain level of repetition and abstraction, one where emotion was available, but simultaneously hypnotic and process based, one that behaved by rules that at times can seem inhuman. It should be like a growth form.

To work with the strings of the piano we removed the lid. With the board removed, I couldn’t help but think that I was looking at the organs, the veins of the piano, its meticulously designed interior that produces sound and life.
para·site

ˈpərə sīt/
noun

1. an organism that lives in or on another organism (its host) and benefits by deriving nutrients at the host’s expense.

The evolutionary path of the host in relation to the parasite has been one of flux and constant change. The current complexity of our defense/immune systems have arisen through a continuous dynamic of attack and counter attack, an odd relationship of invasion and continual reaction. Our defenses: the sebum and keratin in our skin, the mucus that lines our nostrils and throats, the acid that resides in our stomach, and even the density of our eyelashes; they are all adaptations to ensure that our systems, our bodily homes so to speak, are kept safe and in health.

Similarly the parasites, in an almost endless myriad of forms (in the wasp hymenopteran superfamily alone there are upwards of 2 million parasitoid variations) , have evolved in convergence to inhabit a living host, to reside in its environment. Parasites create pathways, whether through ingestion or perforating the external surface, to find passage.

into the body. Often the first move made by the parasite is one of multiplication, using the host as a vessel for reproduction. Since parasites often have shorter lifespans relative to their hosts, they have an advantage chronologically in this evolutionary arms race.

There is tremendous energy and resource allocation utilized by the host to keep the invader, the parasite out. One could argue that much of our contemporary immune system exists to ward off the parasite.

In many ways the parasite is the unease under the skin, the moving feeling of being a host to something foreign and detrimental that grows and gnaws at one from the inside. This inside; the anxiety that stems from the sensation that something foreign resides unseen on one’s interior.

But as in any evolutionary development, there is also something remarkably, even fantastically specific here as well: the fact that the tapeworm possesses no digestive system of its own, but while residing in the digestive system of its host, absorbs nutrients through partially digested food, or the fact that certain subsets of barnacles attach themselves to the reproductive organs of crabs, thereby rendering them infertile and diverting the stolen energy to their own growth². Often these parasitic life forms

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exist directly in relation to one other species, specializing acutely on only that one other creature.
Throughout, there is the interaction of the hand: the hand that introduces the wasp to the hornworm, the hand that sets the parasitism that I film in motion; the hand in the confines of a warm lab, lit evenly by fluorescent lights, punctuated by a yeast like smell that I cannot put my finger on. I realize that it is coming from small cheese textured bricks- maybe food for the hornworms.

There is the hand that enters the house, embodying the role of the specter, opening the door, letting the light come in. Of course without alteration, makeup or effects we know that the hand is not what it is trying to convince us that it is.

There is the hand that pulls back the cover of the piano to expose the strings, to show the interior, the inner body of the piano: its organs.

There is the hand that enters the ink and the oil and submerges.

With each there is the intertwining of creation and manipulation.
Viruses

Over the course of two visits to the lab of Dr. Kester, an entomologist specializing in the study of parasitoid wasps here at VCU, I filmed the interaction of said wasps (Braconids) with tobacco hornworms. I wanted to capture the moment of parasitization: when the wasp injects its ovipositor (a highly specialized tubular organ through which eggs are deposited) into the abdomen of the hornworm to release its offspring. It initially looks the same as a standard wasp or bee sting, but the process that it leads to is far more peculiar and unnerving.

In light of the constant evolutionary development of both parasites and their hosts, the wasp has evolved with a highly specific virus called the polydnavirus, which substantially weakens the targeted host's (the hornworm's) immune system make them more receptive to the wasps young. The polydnavirus resides in the oviduct of the wasp- and is oddly enough a parasite in its own right, albeit one that greatly benefits the wasp. It is in fact so beneficial that the polydnavirus is actually incorporated into the wasp's genome\(^3\). It's an odd reversal of benefits to be sure.

The hornworm becomes the unknowing host for several weeks to the growing wasps, obliviously continuing its voracious, eating cycle. Inside the body of the hornworm the

wasp’s young don’t yet fully compromise their host. They feed off the hornworm’s insides, while avoiding vital organs, ensuring that it does not die until they are fully ready to emerge and pupate. By the end of this one sided relationship the hornworm will have ballooned substantially, often becoming much larger than its initial size.

This is when the process enters its more known, horrific state. The wasp larva chew their way out from the body of the hornworm and begin the process of cocooning. The hornworm, no longer needed, slowly dies. Though this is certainly stated anthropomorphically, it must be a rather unpleasant way to die.

While watching the process, filtered through the magnified 50 mm lens of the camera, with the wasps landing on the hornworm’s abdomen, inserting their ovipositors, the worm writhing around, in vain trying to remove the aggressor, I wondered what this experience was like as well as how to respond. Does the hornworm feel pain? Research is currently divided on whether a relatively simple organism like the hornworm is capable of nociception (sensory nerve cells that respond to damage or harm by sending signals to the spine or brain)- sensing pain in a way that is complex. Could it be that witnessing this process unfold is akin to watching something automatic and conditioned?

My initial interest in the relationship between the species had to do with the body, with this natural event that has filtered itself into popular media and contemporary horror
representations. Perhaps most famously in the case of Ridley Scott’s *Alien*, the creature is essentially a human scale parasite, ovipositor and all. This type of parasitism, the creature or life form that begins to exist inside of us, often without our knowing, touches on many deeply ingrained fears; the fear that there is something we cannot see in our interior, the fear that we are not in fact clean, that we can be host to something perceived as abject or sickening (tapeworms, botfly larva etc.) Metaphorically there are also connotations of repression and the subconscious: something mercurial and damaging that grows and gnaws internally before finally surfacing.
A small physical form, the size of small grain of rice, iridescent and bright, the color of the moon, the color of curdling milk grey, working its way out, growth cocooning, a process towards wings and flight in the air.

Julia- the clarinetist, mentions that with the overhead fluorescent lights turned off, with her performance now illuminated only by a LED flashlight, the shadow of her hands covering the wall, moving rapidly with the 5 note loop, she is having a sense of interaction with the project more fully- that her shadow contains some of the uneasiness associated with the death process of the caterpillar in relation to the growth of the wasp. Growing and moving in a similar way.

Gradually we work on letting the notes die as well, letting the air that passes through the reed arrive at a point where there is hardly a discernible sound.
Why the wasps?

I had a dream of a colony, of travelling upwards into the hive, as if my eyes were detached from my head and had floated slowly into this space, this buzzing frenetic space.

I awoke disturbed, with a rippling feeling on my skin.

Why the wasps?

When I was younger I was fascinated with the development of toxicology; how an organism could develop venom through the evolution of proteins derived its immune system and digestive enzymes; to develop tools of predation from the compounds that kept their bodies functioning and healthy; maneuvering molecules that are infinitely complex, with shapes that are designed to precisely lock onto proteins in the victim’s cells, to precisely target its ion channels.

Toxicity, development, adaptation, growth.
4.

**Every house is a haunted House**

In order to maintain smooth functioning (for humans), and to maintain the smooth functioning of this very myth of smooth functioning, a whole of violence is required behind the scenes on every level, social, psychic and philosophical. In every respect we’ve been trying to sever ourselves from other lifeforms—remember, you have them inside you and you couldn’t exist if you didn’t, and there’s more of them inside you than there is of you, so this is a major deal, this violence. But this is impossible. For instance, you mention how architecture has since about 1900 been based on vectors of pollution flow—gotta keep the bad air out, for instance, so you need air conditioning. But when you think about things at Earth magnitude, at that scale, where does it go? It doesn’t go “away,” it just goes somewhere else in the system. Nature, if you like, is a sort of fourth wall concept by which we try to separate the human from everything else, and it functions in house design at every level… Feeling like you are covered in all kinds of spooky stuff as you sit in your flat

-Timothy Morton

The house has corollaries to the body: it exists as a site of protection, with endless borders that implicitly rely on keeping certain unwanted elements out, to maintain

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stability and cleanliness/health. The house is meant to be rid of waste (shit, excrement, garbage) and other life forms (insects, rodents) in the same manner that our bodies are meant to be free of parasites, of viruses and germs, of unwanted life.

But our architecture and homes remain continually haunted and inhabited by presences and remnants of things unseen, by spores and fungi, by the bacteria and residue of previous tenants both human and otherwise, by the pasts of things unseen or out of our time frame.

In some ways the house, apartment or building parallels the hornworms plight. Neither site, the body or the house, with its myriad of advances, defenses and immunities can entirely be rid of the pest, the parasite, the specter or the ghost. Space invariably becomes contaminated and compromised.

In Edgar Allen Poe’s The Fall of the House of Usher the narrator and two other guests residing in the eponymous House of Usher gradually lose all stability and sanity in the confines of the architecture, as if the house, down to a cellular, even microscopic level alters their inner chemistry and makes them aware of something startling and terrifying. It’s not that the house is singularly possessed by a demon or monster, but rather that the entire house is alive and growing outwards, exerting itself onto the consciousness’s of its inhabitants, its hosts. Similarly the sentient life form from Tarkovsky’s Solaris literally reconfigures the conscious experience of the astronauts in a way that is both
jarring and frightening, or the actual haunted/living house in Obayashi’s psychedelic and deeply surreal film *Hausu*, which literally consumes its inhabitants through objects such as a piano or grandfather clock.

Interactions with life outside of regimented parameters can be troubling: the knowledge that unseen in all of us there exists something deeply alien that can subvert and alter us is discomfiting.

*Humans are horrified by the idea that the body, like the house, may not be as airtight a container against foreign agents as we imagine; that they too are part of and constituent of ecology. The internet abounds with lists of disturbing invasions of the living body, from fir trees and pea plants growing in people’s lungs to maggots crawling inside of a man’s scalp. These stories are able to make our skin crawl, to disturb us in a way that few other things can because, deep down, we know that we too are filled with foreign bodies. Whether microflora in our stomach or viruses in our bloodstream, the human is always already thoroughly non-human.*

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I choose the bathroom as the place for comparison to the conflicted contaminated body.

With its relationship to both cleanliness and simultaneously waste and excrement, it becomes a site intertwined with both beauty and the abject.

In horror movies the scene of becoming aware of infestation, possession or mutation often takes place in the bathroom. Like the bedroom, it is a place of overwhelming intimacy.

Often, there is a mirror above the bathroom sink, a mirror where one can see one’s own face, one’s own eyes and mouth after shitting and pissing.

I move my hand towards the doorknob, in a way that rudimentarily, even clumsily suggests a ghost.

Later in editing I notice that there is an S written on my hand, a reminder for the day to come.
Paul Virilio argues in his compact and unsettling work, *The Administration of Fear*, that the speed and acceleration of contemporary life, place and scale has created a terrain of fear and in-hospitality, where the body can no longer maintain itself. Ours is an age of disproportion and excessiveness. We inhabit the absolutely paradoxical space of taking pleasure while retreating.

“We are facing the emergence of a real, collective madness reinforced by the synchronization of emotions: the sudden globalization of affects in real time that hits all of humanity at the same time, and in the name of progress. *Emergency exit*: we have entered a time of general panic.”

Virilio speaks continuously of contemporary finitude, of reduction and singularity as a primary source of current unease and anxiety. Currently the speed at which reality moves, both literally and metaphorically, renders life more and more uninhabitable.

“In the face of this acceleration of daily life, fear has become an environment, even in a time of peace. We are living in the accident of the globe, the accident of

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instantaneousness, simultaneity and interactivity that have now gained the upper hand over ordinary activities.”

In many ways this project is concerned with metaphors for an unraveling contemporary body, one that has accumulated too much and is in the process of becoming uninhabitable, that is host to something that has the properties to undo it. Something that renders the body ineffectual and startled, constantly trying to maintain speed and composure in an environment that becomes hostile.

Amidst an arena that is overwhelming, a landscape that reduces, Virilio outlines what he sees as something crucial and important that is lacking from contemporary existence: diversity. Temporal diversity, Chrono diversity and Eco diversity. Acceleration quickens progress, but lessens outcomes. Though the acknowledgement of our bodies as vectors for multiplicity can be unnerving, the alternative, the eradication of everything that does not conform to our parameters- the tapeworm, the botfly, the wasp, the hookworm, the parasite in its myriad of forms- would be disastrous. Multiplicity and complexity, even in the form of the parasite or invader is necessary.

Virilio describes these many diversities as being a sort of rhythm, a “melodic line” that is shared by species of all forms and presence. In concurrence with vocabulary belonging to that of music Virlio sites tempo, and pace as being a necessity to generous survival-

7 Virilio, 45.
melodic line that is not dependent on a singular speed or acceleration, a melodic line that is multiplicitious and varied, a melodic line that perpetuates diverse life and experience.

“We have broken the melody that was called life in common for the sake of the communism of affects.”

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8 Virilio, 89.
Since December, a small detail from Piero Della Francesca’s fresco The battle between Constantine and Maxentius has been sitting above my computer, specifically a small detail of a man either in the throes of a deep pain, perhaps dying (conversely it is possible that his peculiar expression is one of ecstasy, of beatification, of orgasmic pleasure). Little by little the image entered the project, becoming a part of the mercurial mixture of body oils, inks, paints and disinfectants such as hydrogen peroxide that make up the abstractions in the work, the images that suggest a flowing, fluid, contaminated-growing interior. I still smile when I see the image, I still haven’t come close to understanding it. What does that peculiar expression truly host?
I begin compiling all of the recordings together, the sounds that Charlotte and Julia created. Editing is repetitive, the same segment seen fifty to a hundred times in an hour. It begins clumsy, abstract, without function, tempo or rhythm.

Gradually a rhythm is established, the overlaps between the process of parasitization and the process of sound production. Two growth forms creating a rhythm paralleling one another.

Two screens sitting at 45-degree angles, not touching, paralleling one another.
PARA
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