Next of Skin
—exploring kinship and liminal space through craft

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Abstract

My master project is centered around two main themes that overlap in my work; on one hand my wish to use the shared origins between species on Earth as a tool for discussing kinship and possible better, more empathetic futures and, connected to this, my lifelong fascination with transitional states. I explore these themes through the wordless language of craft. For my master project, I have chosen to do this by working with costume.

Quite naturally, these interests have led me towards post-humanistic theory. In this paper, I will discuss my understanding of this from a maker’s point of view. I will then go into my inspirations that come from an eclectic collection of sources (like science fiction and natural science) before I discuss my choice of costume as a medium to explore my themes. Following this, I go into my working methods and material where I explain my reasons for using silicone as craft material, and discuss the wordless languages of light, i.e. bioluminescence and biofluorescence. The last chapter of the text examines problems I’ve faced along the way and how I have worked to solve these, before I end by discussing the scientific concept of hybrid vigor in a craft context.

Keywords: bioluminescence, costume, jewelry, kinship, liminal space, natural science, science fiction, silicone, transition, wordless
Introduction

When I tell people that I keep parrots as pets, the default first question is almost always “can they talk?” I understand where this comes from, since it is a well-known fact that parrots have the unique ability of learning to mimic human speech. And yes, the most communicative of my birds, Astrid, can say a few words in Swedish. But much more importantly, what has happened in the 10 plus years since the flock of three came to live with my family, is that we have created our own language together. Not Swedish or Parrotish but something in between, a jumble of sounds and words that is indecipherable to others but clear to us.

This has taught me valuable lessons about what it means to share the world with others, and how alike we are. The will to make yourself understood is strong. Different species will learn how to communicate with each other if there are none of their own kind around. Astrid speaks differently to me than to the rest of her flock, and she has her own name for her mate Oskar (something that to my ears sounds like “Hm-ts-ts”). This is funny because it means that if I ask her who bit a chunk out of the door, she can tell on him. But parrots in the wild also do this; they have different sounds for each of their chicks, and the names stick for life.¹

I have no illusions about the premise of my kinship with Astrid; I know that she is essentially my prisoner. Could she choose, I have no doubt she’d rather be in her native South America than in a Stockholm apartment. (And had I known what I know now ten years ago, I would never have gotten birds.) But none the less, we have formed a companionship and it still amazes me that someone who is so fundamentally different from me—who weighs 150 grams, has a set of pliers on her face and can fly—can share so many similarities and inside jokes with me.

My relationship with my birds is one of many reasons I do what I do. The wish to communicate is strong in me as well, and I do it through the language of making. I believe this language can be equally as precise, and even more powerful, than the spoken and written. In the words of philosopher and political theorist Hanna Arendt: “Storytelling reveals meaning without committing the error of defining it.”² I believe in the power of craft as a tool for discussing important issues, and doing it with a tenderness that draws the viewer in.

My view on the world is that us humans are infinitely more similar than different to the other species on this planet. We are all kin and this is something I try to portray in my work. In this text, I discuss the background of this conviction and how I use theory and craft to center in on my research questions:

1. How can I use craft to evoke feelings of empathy and kinship for the beings we humans share our planet with?

2. How can I use craft as a wordless language? Which visual and tactile properties of my materials can I use to tell my stories?

¹ Virginia Morell, Parrotlet chicks learn their calls from mom and dad, www.science.org 2023-02-24
Image 2. *Astrid on the bathroom door*, Nina Johansson 2017
Background

Sculpting an understanding

My craft is sculpting. Whether it is in clay, polyfoam, wax, for casting metal or silicone - the sculpting always comes first. Since I was a child, it has been my way of understanding the world, of trying to make sense of it. When I sculpt, I travel to the surface of the material. If I am sculpting a frog, for instance, I sort of become the frog as my hands work their way around it. I understand the frog. This does not mean I work in a detailed, naturalistic way to try and replicate the frog. What I want to capture is the frog’s “frogness” for lack of a better word. This becoming of my sculpting amplifies the close connection I feel with the living things around me.

Image 3. Dream Beings Revisited #3 (detail), Nina Johansson 2020
Sculpting is also what led me into jewelry in my early 20’s. My brother, who was into techno music and arranged raves, asked if I wanted to make UV-jewelry and sell at the parties. Back then I worked in polymer clay, which was available in an array of fluorescent colors. I agreed to try, made an assortment of small creatures that I strung on elastic cords and hoped to sell at least some. The environment was completely new to me, and I knew nothing of the clientele. I’d made about a hundred necklaces and to my surprise they all sold out in an hour. The best moment of the night was going up on the mezzanine above the dance floor and seeing all of my pieces dance around down there, glowing in the fluorescent light.

From then on, jewelry was my game, there was something about it as an identity marker and amulet/talisman that resonated strongly with me, and the step to start working with metal was a short one. Sculpting things in wax and casting them is still a big part of my practice. This dual process keeps me intrigued and I don’t see myself ever growing tired of it.

During my years as a bachelor student at Konstfack, I started working with casting silicone as well. This process, while similar, does entirely different things. It keeps me on my toes as I can never be sure of what the outcome will be.

**Natural science as comfort and language**

In my work, I tend to find concepts in natural science and apply them to philosophical frames. This started when I was little and natural science was something I used to lean on to understand the world around me. People and their actions were often a mystery to me, and I found scientific rules to be soothing constants in an existence full of too many variables. I could depend on science as a framework, and I could rest knowing that there would always be an answer to any questions I might have, stripped of interpretations and hidden meanings. Endlessly fascinated by the mechanics I cannot grasp but that build the world.

The non-sentimental way the world-machine seems to work calms me. Nature mostly appears to experiment, keep what is useful and discard the rest over time. I feel honored to share my origin with
flatworms and ferns. I believe we are all siblings, parts of a whole. Sprinkled with stardust and in a constant state of changing and becoming.

The problem with us humans, big brains, opposable thumbs and all, is that we are greedy. Less is never more. But I do not think that we are different from other animals in that. I think we just have more possibilities to exercise power. And we are definitely too smart for our own good.

Of course, looking at the world through a scientific lens is not without its problems. The science that I build my world view around is a western one, my ethnocentrical glasses are firmly in place on my nose. Philosopher Donna Haraway coined the term “god trick” in her essay “Situated Knowledges: The science question in feminism and the privilege of partial perspective” in 1988. She describes it as a “conquering gaze from nowhere”, which I interpret as opposing the idea that science (or anything really) can be objective. Everything we think we know comes from our own perspective, and is colored intrinsically, if we speak in silicone terms, with our education, class, race, gender, age etcetera. We cannot ever claim to be free of these things, and therefore must understand that our being in the world shapes our view on it. In short, our knowledge is situated.

Coming to realize that my truths might not be truths makes me feel cheated and defiant. How do I come to terms with this god trick? Do I have to adhere to it, accept it? I still believe in the order of things. Can’t I do both, be both? Because of course there can be structures, but also in an organic world there will be things breaking those structures. There are no absolute truths, because nature itself is the wild card. This brings me joy, for as much as I love the order, I love the oddities more. I cherish the outliers; I am one myself.

Neurodivergence is the word du jour, but part of who I am. Memories from my childhood resurface in a different light when I view it through the prism of being “on the spectrum”. Standing on the outside looking in, but that this does not show. Being in disguise, a divergent, passing for “human” while feeling closer connected to snails than Homo sapiens. Might as well be from another solar system.

Theories and Inspiration

Oh Donna

Staying with Donna Haraway, as an avid science fiction-fan, I can’t really escape the famous cyborg she first described in her 1984 feminist essay “A Cyborg Manifesto”.

I will not claim to fully understand the cyborg according to Haraway, as her writings are often hard for me to decipher. I feel this way about many texts on posthumanism and I think that in part it has to do with how my brain functions. I am an artist after all, not a scholar. My understanding of things comes from a different, wordless place, and I would wager this is also why I get a lot of my inspiration and ideas from works of fiction. In fiction, a translation has already occurred that can

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serve as a starting point. And I am a magpie. I will collect shiny things; great quotes and fascinating facts, which makes me a killer at Trivial Pursuit, but maybe not all that well suited for in-depth academic excursions.

In an effort to better grasp Haraway’s cyborg, I read the chapter “Companions in Conversation” from the book “Manifestly Haraway”\(^5\) (in which Donna Haraway discusses the Cyborg Manifesto with fellow post-human scholar Carey Wolfe). This is when I come to realize how much the manifesto itself is also situated in a specific time and place. Written during the Reagan era by a child of the WW2 aftermath, there are so many things that go over my head and it makes me feel unhistoried. But that’s ok, because it highlights that discourse is everything, and it reminds me that the god trick is to be found everywhere, not least in the writings of someone who over the last 40 years has become an arguably (albeit reluctant) god-like presence in post-humanistic theory.

In my interpretation, Haraway’s cyborg serves as a metaphor for the increasing hybridization of our bodies and societies, where technology continues to become an ever-bigger part of our lives and the lines between nature/technology/human are continuously smudged. Technology, like humans, is not inherently good or bad and the organic and inorganic are not opposites. Technology is not teleological, the purpose it was designed for does not have to be its continued purpose. One quote in particular stands out to the magpie in me as it touches upon my thoughts on kinship and multilayered identities and bodies:

“...a cyborg world might be about lived social and bodily realities in which people are not afraid of their joint kinship with animals and machines, not afraid of permanently partial identities and contradictory standpoints.”\(^6\)

On kinship and animism

This leads me into a common thread in my practice; my wish to illuminate and elevate natural processes in general and transient states in particular. I feel a great tenderness and I am humbled by the way things fit together and work together. I want to make visible phenomena of natural science, but through a lens of myth and mystery. My wish is to make people pause and reflect on the components of life, to translate the awe and excitement I feel, for us to be able to get closer to this world, but also each other and ourselves, with tenderness and respect.

We are all beings of and on this pale blue dot,“ a mote of dust suspended in a sunbeam” as cosmologist Carl Sagan put it.\(^7\)

The world we live in is fragile, immensely beautiful and under enormous pressure. How can we make changes happen? Even though I think humans will not act on anything until push comes to shove, I

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still feel the need to try and reach out through my art. I portray natural events in a way that strives to form an emotional connection. I use concepts as ladders into the mind. I am a sucker for metaphors.

If we can feel that we are all siblings, that we belong here together, I think that we might be able to save each other. This is the foundation of my work. From this position, the step to animism is short. Animism (from Latin: anima, 'breath' or 'soul') is the idea that everything in the world, be it animals, plants or elements possess a "spirit". Animism is not considered a religion in itself but is at the heart of many indigenous belief systems. I am drawn to animism because of its clear connections to my feeling of siblinghood with all earthlings. The personalization of animals and plants gives them their own agenda. And even if I do not believe that a rock is a sentient being, it is surely easier to speak of ecology and our responsibilities towards other beings if we adopt a narrative in which we are all kin, distinctly bound together. If I am you, it is a lot easier for me to want to protect you.

Animism is based on mythos and magic, but in my mind it connects to science because it too speaks of sets of rules that might be invisible but are still very much there. Even if I do not know exactly how gravity works, I will still feel it if I fall on my face. And magic, if it’s real, will work even if you don’t believe.

I sometimes feel caught in between the scientific and the magical, as if they were opposites pulling me in different directions. But of course, this is where my keen interest in science fiction comes in, as it is often a place where science and magic intercept. And as author Peter David proposes in the science fiction novel Excalibur 3: “Perhaps science, in the final analysis, was simply magic with delusions of lack of grandeur.”

On magic, fantasy, horror and science fiction

By now it is probably getting clear that many of my resources and inspirations come from pop culture, and most specifically fantasy, science fiction and horror. Fiction in general can breach the gaps between the academic and the magic and create inspiring in-between spaces, and fantasy could be argued to be a modern equivalent to the long traditions of mythology. Fantasy embraces the impossible. Science fiction on the other hand represents the world as it could possibly become.

Science fiction also discusses contemporary issues from alternate viewpoints. An example of this is the short story “Bloodchild” by sci-fi writer Octavia Butler. It is a dark coming of age-story about Gan, a young human on an alien planet that is dominated by an insect-like species called the Tlic. The Tlic cannot reproduce on their own, so Gan and other humans become carriers for their eggs. The story employs themes like symbiosis, oppression and gender roles and speaks about breached

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11 Octavia E. Butler, Bloodchild and Other Stories (second edition with new stories), New York: Four Walls Eight Windows, 2005, p. 3-32
boundaries and interdependence in a mesmerizing and unnerving way. Butler’s theme of alternative ways of existing is a crucial point that seems to be a common focus for all storytelling that intrigues me; If not like this, how?

From jewelry to costume

In the eight years since my Bachelor in jewelry, I’ve done a variety of different things. Through a friend and colleague, I got into working with costume. To me, the step from jewelry to costume was logical, as I feel costume has such a strong connection to the transformative states that are at the center of my practice. This is why I’ve chosen to make costume for my exam work. I believe that the mix of human and “other” that I want to explore will work very well with the immersive possibilities of costume as the interface.

Jewelry can also have transformative, liminal qualities, and the lines between costume and jewelry are not always sharp. The act of putting on jewelry can be ritualized, represented here by the work of Dutch jewelry artist Frank Verkade. Pictured is his Serpent mouthpiece from the collection Paradise (2016). Made from maplewood, cotton and gold-plated brass, it has a highly stylized yet tactile feel. Verkade’s work morphs humans into hybrids where the organic and the mechanical merge. Reading through his artist bio, I feel that we have many shared interests, and it intrigues me how similar outlooks can produce vastly different bodies of work.

Both jewelry and costume as liminal space has a long history, for instance being used in ritualistic practices the world over as a way of transforming into another, be it animal or spirit.12

A contemporary artist who works with costume as liminal space is New York-based Saya Woolfalk. She has created a fictional species of plant/human hybrids called the Emphatics in a continuous project that began in 2012. Coming from an Asian/African American background, Woolfalk says: “I always wanted to create a project that would allow me to think about cross cultural relationships and hybridization but did not want to use my personal story or standard tropes of multiculturalism.”13 Woolfalk’s work is colorful and vibrant and carries a strong hopeful vibe. The idea that the future of

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12 Encyclopedia Britannica Online, shamanism, dress and equipment, www.britannica.com 2023-02-06
our world could possibly become more caring and empathetic as cultures, societies and species get more and more intertwined is soothing at the same time as I feel her work is a call to action. Translating these ideas into costume is an interesting way of working, as it carries the narrative all the way onto our bodies themselves.


Working with costume and a folkloristic/”shamanistic” esthetic is British mixed media artist Ita Drew. Her master project at Konstfack was titled The mythic sense of self and in it she explores what she calls “personal mythology” translated through tactile ceramic costumes and sculptures. As she performs in the costumes, she brings the viewer into a mythical landscape full of unknown symbols, drawing power from being present in her own work and interacting with and within it. Seeing her work in the 2022 spring exhibition at Konstfack made it clearer for me that I want my work to be activated by a body, but perhaps not my own.

Image 10, 11. The mythic sense of self, Ita Drew (2022)

I’ve previously worked with Shirley Harthey Ubilla who is a dancer and performance artist. She has a visceral, animalistic presence in many of her performances that resonates strongly with my intentions for my exam project. So, when I decided that I wanted to make a costume for my exam project, I approached her and asked if she would be interested in being part of it. To my great excitement she said yes. The plan is that Shirley will wear the costume I make, and I will film her moving in it.

For Next of Skin, I have made a plaster cast of Shirley’s body that allows me to build the costume directly on it. This makes me understand it in a much deeper way than if I was for instance working on a mannequin of the right size. Working like this does not only mean that the costume fits her perfectly, but also that it fits only her. It is not simply a question of measurements; Her body is where my work is born. And as a human body isn’t perfectly symmetrical, but my costume pretends to be, there is a lot of fine tuning happening to form a harmony between the two.

Dressing Shirley in the costume is a ritual, an intimate act. Her body is the birthplace of my costume, and where it gets activated. But it is a mutual exchange since the skin-tight costume seems to merge with her body, transform it and create it anew.

With costume, there is of course a clear within and without, it could be seen as a corpus object filled by the human body. But in this project, I see it working in three distinct ways; Costume activated by body, costume as entity and the interface where costume and wearer meet.
Exploring the merging fields of costume and other art and coming as I do from an appreciation of science fiction, two more artists to mention are Iris Van Herpen and Casey Curran. Iris Van Herpen is a Dutch fashion designer, known for fusing technology with traditional haute couture craftsmanship. Her multi-layered and surreal creations invoke feelings of other worlds, from deep sea to deep space. Her pieces are showstoppers, worn by many famous faces and performers, like Björk and Lady Gaga.

Casey Curran is an American sculptor with a background in metalwork, whose work often consists of a multitude of laser cut pieces, arranged together to form airy, morphing clusters. He works with kinetics, using small servo motors to make his work move. It’s no surprise that Van Herpen and Curran have done collaborations, as they have a shared esthetic and Curran’s work lends itself well to not be only sculptural but also worn as costume.

While they both make thought-provoking and visually striking work, I find myself missing something when I look at it. The touch of a hand is never visible, even though I know Van Herpen uses hand sewing to assemble the delicate laser cut silk pieces. (I’m guessing this would be the norm in fashion though). I become unsure of whether what I’m looking at is a physical item or a 3d rendition, which is something that has become more and more common, and bothersome for me in recent years as I flip through social media. I’m longing for imperfections, marks left by craftmanship. The work is amazing to behold but there is a sterility to it that leaves me a bit indifferent. Being a maker, I realize that what I’m missing is tactility.

When I’m thinking of my costume, I know I want it to be able to “do” things, but I want it to feel organic. I don’t want kinetics or a battery pack. I see it before me being worn, activated by the body of the dancer and becoming her second skin; morphing her into a being that is not only human. But I also see it without the body, sloughed off on the floor like when a snake has shed its’ skin. A liminal entity in its own right.
So how can I make my costume “whole”? How can I use it to visualize layers of stories in one piece? As always when I’m unsure, I go back to my soothing place—the mechanics of the Earth itself and its inhabitants.

**Material and working methods**

**On bioluminescence and biofluorescence**

Since the basis of my project is centered around kinship, I’ve thought a lot about communication between individuals and species, and how I can find a way to work physically with this. What came to mind when it comes to wordless communication were the visual languages of light. Bioluminescence and biofluorescence are very common ways of communication in nature. It’s estimated that a staggering 76% percent of deep-sea creatures use bioluminescence in one form or another.\(^\text{14}\)


Also, many plants and animals fluoresce under ultraviolet light. Quite recently humans have found out that this doesn’t only go for invertebrates and birds, but mammals as well. The reasons for this are still mostly unknown, but it makes me think of the aforementioned rave parties from my youth, and how so many people there would dress up in fluorescent clothing and face paint. I always figured that this was a way of communicating visually, in an environment that was so loud it actually became completely silent. The girls there felt to me like deep-sea creatures, glowing, signaling in the darkness.

Image 17. Fluorescent adornment in *Homo sapiens*, Greenie Green (2022)

This memory got me thinking. Since I want my costume to be somehow interactive but feel organic and “whole” in the sense that I don’t want to use an added power source, one way towards this is to work with light. Changing the surroundings will then impact and alter the experience of the piece.

Drawing inspiration from this, I am currently working with UV- and afterglow pigments, to create pieces that can tell different stories in different types of light.

Image 18, 19, 20. *Cthulucene* (same piece in three different lights), Nina Johansson (2022)

**Silicone and transformative states**

The main material I have chosen for my master project is silicone. I stumbled across it years ago during a project about dream states, and became enthralled with its possibilities. As a material, it can hold so many stories. It is soft, body like, heavy. (It has a history of being used to portray flesh, bodies, in prosthetics as well as the film industry and other fields of art.) It is translucent and you can tint it or cast items into it. It has an ambiguity that I feel is hard to match; You do not really understand what it is if you just look at it.

It also fits my chosen imagery, which explores the borders between beauty and the uncanny, the unpleasant and eerie. The transient states that are close to my heart.
The hybrid nature of silicone

Mimicking these metaphysical properties, in terms of chemical structure, silicones fall somewhat in between typically organic and typically inorganic compounds. Although silicones can contain organic components, they have an inorganic silicon-oxygen (Si-O) backbone and are defined as inorganic or hybrid substances.\textsuperscript{15}

Silicon makes up 27.7 percent of the Earth’s crust, making it the second most abundant element and surpassed only by oxygen.\textsuperscript{16} The most common silicon compound is silicon dioxide or SiO\textsubscript{2} (quartz/sand). So, silicone is rock crystal, and endless beaches at heart.

Silicones’ link to rock crystal is poetic for me, since the transparency of the stone is mirrored in the silicone I work with, and it has such a strong connection to jewelry. The translucency, not quite here or there, and yet both at the same time. The prefix “trans” as in transparency, transition, transit. Transmutation. The being in between. Trans dimensional. This is where I linger. In the in-betweens, the liminal space. Be it the concept of nightly dreams or the way an insect transforms in its chrysalis.

\textsuperscript{15} GSC (Global Silicones Online), \textit{what are silicones}, www.globalsilicones.org, 2022-05-03

"Whether we are based on carbon or on silicon makes no fundamental difference. We should each be treated with appropriate respect."  

The Unknown

Last year I found myself stuck in my visual choices. I kept repeating old things and stayed in my comfort zones. Slowly, I started to realize that my “understanding through sculpting” also kept me locked in and stopped me from expanding my mind. It dawned on me that the reason I felt frustrated with my project was that it did not include any elements that were unknown to me. This led me to experiment with geometrical patterns found in nature, because this is something that intrigues me, mainly because I see it as a language I don’t understand. I began with the hexagon, since it is a mathematical shape that can be found in many places, from honeycomb to tortoise shells. I had already decided to work more with patterns and tessellation, so it seemed like a good place to start. I began by cutting out small hexagons in metal which I then used as “cookie cutters” on a rolled-out sheet of oil-based clay. This took forever and felt odd to me since the sculpting part of my work will normally be quite quick and breezy, which keeps me going forward. My plan was to make a pattern of small hexagons and then make a mold to cast it in silicone. After two weeks, I had a pattern that was about the size of my palm, and felt I was going nowhere. Back to the drawing board it was.

Image 22, 23. Process pictures of hexagon shapes, Nina Johansson (2022)

Realizing that if I continued to sculpt everything myself, it would still not be the unknown presence in my work that I was longing for. I started looking for physical patterns that I could sample and mold, and honeycomb seemed like a good place to start. I made plaster molds of a sheet of beeswax and then reversed it as well, so I had two molds, one positive and one negative. This proved to be exactly what I was looking for. Working with a very stretchy silicone and pouring it as thinly as possible, I ended up with a mesh of silicone that could be manipulated like a fabric. And in the reversed mold I could work with making pixelated images by pouring different colors of silicone at a time. Of course, the honeycomb patterns I work with are not actually made by bees. It is a scaffolding made by humans to put in beehives for the bees to continue building on, so that we can harvest their honey. Wild bee colonies have a distinctly different outer shape, but the hexagonal cell pattern is the same.

From the honeycomb I continued on to fractals. Fractals are typically two dimensional in structure, but when I found a 3d-rendition of a Mandelbrot fractal, amusingly named “Mandelbulb”, I felt like I had struck gold. The shape was flower-like but alien, and I could feel my mind almost curl around itself when I saw it. This was the unknown I’d been looking for. A friend helped me 3d-print a Mandelbulb in different sizes, and I’m currently in the process of molding it and translating it into a silicone casting. This process allows me to control some parts of the shape, while others remain a mystery.

Image 24, 25. Honeycomb mold and casting from honeycomb mold, Nina Johansson (2022)

My next step is to sample other mathematical shapes found in nature, like romanesco broccoli. It grows in a logarithmical spiral, so the plant forms a natural fractal. It’s also a hybrid (between broccoli and cauliflower) which suits my theme quite nicely.

Eventually, these different “unknown” components will come together with some “known” to form the costume I’m making. My plan for the spring exhibition is to make a film in which Shirley wears the costume and interacts with and within it. The light in the film will shift between daylight, ultraviolet and dusk/darkness, to emphasize the different pigments cast into the costume. The soundtrack I imagine will be a distorted mix of animal and nature sounds, to form an unrecognizable and hopefully otherworldly ambience. The film will be projected in large scale on the wall in a darkish room, in which the costume itself will also be present. The costume I imagine as half-laying on the floor, a cast-off hide left behind after the molting process of an animal. Translucent but colorful, the remnants of a vivid dream, or the image of an entity in waiting; yet to take form.

On hybrid vigor

As stated at the beginning of my paper, sculpting and understanding the world through the act of forming it is an integral part of who I am. But it is in the silicone translation of my sculpts that something important happens. It becomes fluid, soft, translucent. Working with it as jewelry and costume makes it able to expand and be explored by more senses. This has led me to the scientific concept of hybrid vigor.

“Hybrid vigor is the increase in certain characteristics like growth rate, size, fertility, yield etc. of a particular hybrid organism over its parents. /.../ Hybrid vigor occurs because the hybrid offspring’s traits are enhanced due to the mixing of genetic contributions of its parents.”

So, hybrid vigor basically states that hybrids will be healthier and “better” than its parents. I believe the same is true in craft. If my sculpting is cross bred with other art forms, it becomes more interesting and able to achieve more things.

In my work, hybrid vigor occurs in the translation between materials, and in the crossover between artistic fields. My way of thinking changes when I bring other fields into my practice. Working with costume is very different than working with jewelry, even though the two share many points of contact. Costume brings in other minds and other bodies in a distinct way. And as the performer wears the costume, it will affect the way they behave and move. Adding audio and video further amplifies the hybrid vigor. The experience will be immersive and richer, and my work in the midst of this will become so much more than if it is on its own.

I believe that this way of working will help emphasize and visualize my dream; to blend humanity with animality and “beyondness” and speak about our shared origins.

In the words of philosopher Alan W. Watts:

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“You didn’t come into this world. You came out of it, like a wave from the ocean. You are not a stranger here.”19

Conclusion

In this text, I have discussed my interest in natural science and how I use it as a scaffolding to center my ideas around. Going back to my research questions:

1. How can I use craft to evoke feelings of empathy and kinship for the beings we humans share our planet with?

2. How can I use craft as a wordless language? Which visual and tactile properties of my materials can I use to tell stories?

These questions have merged in my exam project. I have come to realize that perhaps it is all about language and communication after all. Craft in itself is a world of material languages, and my specific one seems to be the translations that occur between materials as I sculpt, mold and cast. As in any translation, meanings will be lost along the way and new ones introduced (and not every hybrid will show increased vigor). What I have tried to do in my project is to create an amalgamation of languages to form a new one, cast from silicone and light. I feel that for the most part I have gotten where I wanted, but as my project is not yet finished, the outcome is still uncertain. I have attempted to use craft as a tool for empathy and understanding, but when I try to view my visual choices from the outside, I find that perhaps the tenderness I speak of is mostly present in my care for details. What others will make of the costume and film I cannot say at this point.

There is also the unknown/liminal element that occupies my mind. Sometimes I struggle with this as I need it to be present, but it can also make me uncertain at times. I try to remind myself that there are things that cannot be looked at directly, but only through peripheral vision.

Researching for the paper has led me down rabbit holes, the biggest one being post-humanistic theory. As I have discussed in the text, I am a maker, which is where my understanding comes from. And again, connected to language, I have realized that because these theories are at the center of many contemporary discussions, the field is constantly changing and the vocabulary with it. This makes it difficult for me to keep up. I have found myself lost at times, but I feel that the research I’ve done has served me well as it has allowed me to expand on my own ideas through the writing of others.

I feel that my choice of working with costume in this project has been beneficial, as costume in this context presents a new way of thinking for me and it has opened my mind to new working methods. This is something I will be exploring further. I have continued working with silicone as my main material, which has broadened and deepened my knowledge, but also led to some tough realizations; Silicone is often seen as a more environmentally sound alternative to plastic. This is true to some extent, but silicone is definitely not unproblematic. While it does not have the fossil origin that plastic has, to produce it you need to melt the raw material which uses vast amounts of fossil

fuel. Compared to plastic, silicone is still a better choice, since it has a long lifespan, is chemically stable and does not produce microplastics. I regard silicone as the lesser of two evils, and I am always on the lookout for other materials that can be used in similar ways but have a smaller carbon footprint.

Looking back, what has been the most problematic for me in my project again has to do with communication. I am not used to being the driving force behind a project that employs different people, and I have not done a very good job of communicating clearly with the ones involved. The time frames have had to be pushed around, which means that I have not had the specific flow in the work that I envisioned. Coming to terms with these shortcomings has been a great lesson for future projects.

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Image reference list

Image 1. *Van der Waals’ forces*, Nina Johansson (2023), own photo

Image 2. *Astrid on the bathroom door*, Nina Johansson (2017), own photo

Image 3. *Dream Beings Revisited #3 (detail)*, Nina Johansson (2020), own photo


Image 17. Picture of rave girl, photo: Greenie Green (2022), https://www.instagram.com/p/CdG-i2-I3no/?igshid=MDJmNzVkJmY%3D, 2023-02-26

Image 18, 19, 20. *Cthulucene* (same piece in three different lights), Nina Johansson (2022), own photo


Image 24, 25. *Honeycomb mold and casting from honeycomb mold*, Nina Johansson (2022), own photos


Appendix

Examination

I have mostly fond memories of my examination. I was very stressed before, and was working on shortening my presentation right before, so I did not feel safe to talk freely for fear of losing track of things. I ended up reading it straight from the paper which of course is not really the desired method. But I am ok with it since it was more important for me to get everything right than to come off as a relaxed speaker. I got through it and the following discussion with my opponent, Katja Pettersson, was very friendly and I do not feel like I got very many hard questions. (It is a little difficult to assess how it went, since the stress caused me to forget a lot of things almost immediately, and I am not yet at a place where I want to listen to the recording of it.) One reflection on the opponent, who had three respondents that day, is that I feel like I had the friendliest and most relaxed experience. I think a lot of it has to do with shared viewpoints and a sort of common ground regarding the topics at hand. My friend said: “It was like watching two nerds have a nice conversation” and I think that sums it up well. My other classmates who had the same opponent had different, perhaps harsher experiences. The relaxed mood could also be a result of my opposition being the last of the three. I got some good suggestions on reading and interesting questions from the audience as well, which I am very happy with. The only thing I can remember being criticized is my setup for the examination exhibition, which I have no issue with since it was very last minute, and I agreed with the questions raised. I was working on my final piece right up until the last minute, and it showed. Time management is a problem for me, also in relation to the exam- and spring exhibitions.

Spring exhibition

The spring exhibition was difficult. I made some last-minute decisions which was a gamble that did not turn out well. I must track back a bit to explain. My plan, as stated in my paper, was to make a film in which Shirley would wear the costume I made. The light in the film would shift, to emphasize the different pigments cast into the costume. The costume itself I imagined as half-lying on the floor, accompanying the video; a shed skin left behind after the molting process of an animal.

What happened when time came to shoot the film was something I did not foresee. Since my way of working has changed so much in the last year, I forgot to take the new materiality of the silicone into consideration. The result was that I was not happy with the costume. The colors were too bright, and it did not at all resemble the second skin I envisioned. It was clearly just a costume. It took me some time, but after reviewing the footage, I realized that there were parts of it that I could work with. These parts were the ones shot in darkness. I decided to make a video using just the dark clips, which led the project into a more dreamlike and poetic place. I am not unhappy with this per se, and I learned a lot from this unexpected fork in the road. But this also meant that I did not want to display the costume at all, which in turn made me want to make something new to replace it. I decided to make a full silicone skin, resembling a cast-off skin from the creature in the video. A mannequin became the scaffolding for it, and I built shapes onto it. I then coated it with silicone and pigments before I pulled the skin off from the body. The molt became a tangible presence and afterglow of a creature. Translucent but colorful, the remnants of a vivid dream, or the image of an entity in waiting; yet to take form. The issue with the skin is that it was not finished until the day before our exam exhibition opened, so I had not put any time in my schedule to test out how to display it. Looking at these images, my problem becomes quite clear.
The skin on the mannequin is striking, a body holds it up, while the molted skin is limp and very hard to display. So, I struggled. I ended up draping it over two podiums and put a very colorful pile of samples on the floor. The video was shown big on the wall, and the room was lit with UV-light that shifted to darkness and back again. It was not ideal, but I figured I would have time to make something better for the spring exhibition.

But the spring exhibition became massively underwhelming. The room I got assigned was so far from the main paths that few people found it. And because of the setup inside, (three alcoves with black curtain dividers) no curation could really happen. The works were very disparate.

I knew that I needed a dark room for the video and pieces to work. And while it was quite dark, enough light still bled over the sides from the other installments for my work to become washed out and hard to see. I had made a last-minute gamble and stripped the setup from everything but the skin and video (I initially thought I would show a lot more work) and when the skin sort of died in the light, it just became nothing. I was so disappointed; I had worked so hard over the course of two years for this? The first days of the exhibition week were painful. I had no conversations about the work, no press or interest, nothing.

But I came around after a few days. A discussion with my professor, Anders Ljungberg, helped me gain some much-needed perspective. Working “from the inside out” like I do, can of course make you more vulnerable than if the work is not tied so deeply to your inner core. Doing so can also create a place where you are so much in your own head and feelings that you cannot see your work from the outside. With the skin for instance, I know what she is, I know what she can be. But she needs the right setting for this to happen. She needs the right light to shine. (But don’t we all?)

Now I am ok with it. Even if I fell at the last hurdle (which is becoming a pattern and something to watch out for and learn from) due to exhaustion and miscommunication, I still feel proud of the hard work I have done, if not the outcome (at this stage). I can see that my foundation is strong. And I
have the rest of my life to figure the other things out. These last two years, I have learned so much more than I could have ever imagined. I am quite excited to see where it goes.

**Now what?**

The future is uncertain. While I had hoped it would be clearer this time around, I am still not sure what to build with the tools I have gotten. But I remain hopeful that I will find my way and that I will be able to keep the friendship and conversation going with my CRAFT-classmates, because we are such a nice and motley crew, and I can honestly say that I have a soft spot for everyone of them. We have an exhibition coming up on Craft Week this fall, which I am very much looking forward to. Leaving Konstfack will be hard for me. It is my home, and I have always felt safe here. But of course, there comes a time where you need to set sail and go into uncharted waters. So, bring me that horizon.

As has become tradition, I will of course leave you with a quote. This one comes from the late great Carrie Fisher:

“Stay afraid, but do it anyway. You don’t have to wait to be confident. Just do it and eventually the confidence will follow.”