

ISSUE 14
WINTER 2018

OSMOS

MAGAZINE



DONNA HUANCA



Installation view of *EPIITHELEAL ECHO*, Julia Stoschek Collection, Berlin, 2017

Touch is the earliest sense to develop in the human embryo. Scientists say that as early as eight weeks, the unborn fetus begins to explore its self and surroundings through the network of sensory receptors on the surface of its still mushy skin. From this point on we are inexorably stimulated with neural signals, as our sense of touch cannot be shut off in the way our eyes can be closed or ears covered.

Our largest organ, skin forms the contours of our bodies. Lacan locates subjectivity in the moment of recognizing ourselves in a mirror, our fleshy exteriors clearly demarcated visually by a largely consistent expanse of matter that stands in contrast to the floral pattern sofa, wood floors, or whatever other objects exist in our imaginary nursery's reflection. Kristeva alternately understands subjectivity as forming through the slow infantile process of determining what is inside and outside the skin; we locate ourselves through coughing on our mother's milk or throwing it up, brought about by our parent's hand patting against our back. The notion of our skin itself as a fixed boundary is complicated when we recognize that it (ideally) has a lifetime much shorter than our own. Our epidermis is constituted through a continual process of programmed death; keratinocyte stem cells multiply through cell division and migrate superficially to the skin's surface, slowly cornifying to become corneocytes, aka "terminally differentiated" or biologically dead cells that then basically flake off and become food for mites.

It is on and from this surface that the artist Donna Huanca makes her work. In her large-scale performances, models wearing thin layers of nylon are covered in fertile blotches of body paint, latex and other fragmentary garb, emphasizing and embellishing the outermost façades of their being. Moving at a measured, almost glacial pace, her performers are often described as doll-like, externalized to the point of becoming quasi-objects. Over-inscribed, the bodies end up in excess of themselves, however, and the exteriors slowly peel away, the paint rubbed off against panes of plexi through the familiar process of desquamation in which our skin itself is removed, accumulating over the duration of an exhibition as paintings composed through exfoliation. Huanca's alien creatures also molt, and the artist assembles their exuviae of rubber exoskeletons, leather hides, horsehair wigs, and clothing, still formed to the curvatures of an anterior body, in startling, almost-anthropomorphic totems that do not so much point towards death as to a kind of asexual propagation.

While the relationship Huanca establishes between the body and its object-artefacts clearly defiles the clean notion of a unified and stable body-image, the externalized traces of the body are not exactly abject either. Rather than detrital throwaways, which in their alterity allow the performers to in turn constitute themselves, her static works are imbued with a vital materialism that holds a continued ability to reciprocally affect and be affected by their living counterparts; for example, *NERVE ENDINGS / ASTRAL LAYER (Blind Spot)* lined the contours of her recent Zabłudowicz exhibition "Scar Symbols" with 40 infrared sensors, triggered by the body heat and movement of both her models and the collection's visitors. Combining vibrotactile and auditory stimulation through a mix of sub bass frequencies and recorded bells, whistles, found audio, and recited texts, the piece is activated and felt contingently in relation to the amorphous constellation of bodies within the room. At its center is an armature draped in large sheets of latex and leather, which ripple and pulse when approached, a reminder that the body is not only form, but a material conduit of energy and sound.

The tensile system of relational vectors that Huanca sets up finds a description in Erin Manning's *Politics of Touch: Sense, Movement, Sovereignty* (2007). Understanding touch as a reciprocal exchange, she writes, "When I reach to touch you, I touch not the you who is fixed in space as pre-orchestrated matter/form. I touch the you that you will become in response to my reaching towards. Our bodies are at once indissociable and in excess of the regulatory norms that govern their materialization and the signification of these material effects"¹. Her project collapses the binary ontologies of self and other into an ontogenetic process of becoming, in which to touch is to always simultaneously be touched in return.

This unstable understanding of the subject, which is always in the process of in-forming, is less a Batailleian knocking of form off its pedestal as it is a theory of the subject as being continually constituted contingently by its environment and the multiple potentialities found within it. The subject thus becomes dispersed and sticky, its skin extended into the world. Rather than a straightforward fossilization of performer into sculptural artefact or painting, the various components of Huanca's installations communicate through feedback loops and symbiosis. In fact, components from a sculpture or painting are often cannibalized in later works or installations, always susceptible to further digestion or recombination. In this sense I think of her practice as akin to the process of anastomosis found in fungal mycelial networks, through which individual spores extend branching, thread-like hyphae to form a reticulating but singular clonal colony. Huanca's objects and performers are merely the visible, fruiting mushrooms atop a larger, interconnected and extracorporeal body.





Installation views of *POLYSTRENE BRACES*, Kim?, Riga, 2015-2016



Installation view of *BLISS (REALITY CHECK)*, Peres Projects, Art Basel, 2017

