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Ihnji Jon's Bubble Clash: Identity, Environment, and Politics in a Multicultural Suburb

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Abstract
Jon's article is a matter of how any event, interaction, or scenario works off all that precedes and follows it, how their very conditions of possibility are posed, not simply within the personalities, histories, or situations of a given context, but in the time underway, the multiplicity of indetectable transversals of responding to the entirety of the world at a given moment, which makes itself present in an unprecedented specificity.

So much for virtuous relationalities with non-human actors. In fact, to some humans in specific situations, non-humans can be a real pain in the ass. They can be noisy and shit in all of the wrong places. Nevertheless, their messy existence also prompts messy encounters among humans themselves. In this article, seagulls come to embody different kinds of human responsibilities and affects. Even the reason for their presence is subject to dispute, as some residents of this suburban Melbourne district, Dadenong, attribute the deluge of birds to the complicit feedings by some "nature lovers" to the proximity of landfills.

But the conundrum is more than a matter of attribution, as what to do about the seagulls constitutes a problematic that amplifies the very differences of time through which residents articulate themselves. As Jon points out:

> *Once we understand time as being relative to the topological spatial experiences that different human groups claim to be valuable, deciding which representation of time best serves the city and its residents becomes a difficult question—as it has to take account of the simultaneous evolution of plural interactive relations (e.g., human–nonhuman encounters; bird–building encounters; birds' historical migratory patterns disrupted by landfills* (28)

At the same time, such a problematic becomes an opportunity for rehearsal, for extending or curtailing the relative salience of particular discursive frameworks through which the phenomenon is understood and communicated—so that is less a problem to be solved definitively, but a way to

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extend the problem as an occasions for exploratory and experimental transactions among apparent contrastive and contested values.

Jon uses several strands of feminist geography to explore how such dispositions might be achieved. The literatures ranges from Marion Young's re-politicization of public life and contingent processes of arriving at justice to Patricia Collins intersectionality, where the individuation of experience is anchored in the multiplicity of transactions with others—and the extent to which different shares of collectively lived experiences are equally valued. Invoking Elizabeth Grosz, Jon also emphasizes that there are material conditions beyond the linguistic-centered basis of collective knowledge production. People are situated in real intersections of matter assuming different forms, constituting different affordances, outlining variegated exposures and possibilities of enactment. As materiality is mutable to varying degrees, and participates in various processes and phases of transformation—metabolic, crystallization, chemical, to name a few—there is something always already about to happen, a series of shifts that might take place, may be already taking place, or not. These moments of undecidability offer a horizon of potentialities that are not derivative from discernible path dependent processes.

Jon engages the limitations of all these theoretical formulations in terms of being able to precisely account for how people come to care for those they are not. She deploys *a transitionist pragmatism angle that focuses on the interactions between representations (discourses), topologies (spatial materialities), and virtualities (ideals) in the anticipation of a better future*. What comes to be valued is contingent upon the actual situations in which persons are engaged; the ways their interactions with others, human and non-human require a continuous recalibration of assumptions and performances, tactics to elicit and make visible what is expected and viable. A key question is how to curate both ritualized and unanticipated encounters —where a range of outcomes may be extracted from, nurtured, resisted, silenced, circumvented, or sustained. All of these dispositions are accompanied by a range of tools and affordances, embodying their

own limitations. Value is a complex process of intermediation that entails the conjunctions of the material and the linguistic. And it is these conjunctions that continuously rescale the frames of consideration—in terms of who can do what to the seagulls, and what the "proper" domain of the problem might be.

As Jon points out, distance and proximity, conventionally important vehicles of comparison, are then always fluctuating measures, never available to a single standard. Things can happen right next to each other and be completely impervious to what the other is doing; while events can unfold in different parts of the world and attain an intensive intimacy, where everything is staked upon the other. If once conventional understandings of space—inner, outer,—prioritized the sense of the unfolding of things in their illumination away from a vanishing point, of moving the lens of projection outwards from the screen on which representations were displayed—today we are really in a world where as Roy Wagner (2017) points out, the image in the mirror appropriates it for itself. It need not be connected to an origin; it need not be representational or have any discernible genealogy. It need not be transitive, linked, or leading to something else—either because it compresses a wide range of factors and differences in ways that foreclose a working out of proportions or because it deflects any available mode of articulation.

In other words, space, as well as the "globe," is not where we think it is, and we are not where we think we may be. Not dissimilarly, residents of Dandenong may not only have different positionalities in relation to seagulls but may also inhabit completely abstracted worlds that touch accidentally—or through the repeated iterations of accidents—if at all. What is the locality which passes for the designations of locality on municipal maps?

There is another matter at play in this issue of localization. One that operates more through imposition rather than extraction. It concerns the maneuvers to set the terms, to impose the solutions. The inclination to establish the conditions through which others are always found wanting, insufficient, as the basis to offer the ameliorative—to cure, aggrandize, maximize, scale up, increase yield and

value. Regardless of whether residents assume an ethical position regarding the sanctity of seagull life, or more instrumentally view the seagull problem as not a matter of seagulls but of improper municipal decisions and shortcuts, Dandenong's future inevitably does not rest on incorporating their presence in ways that might compromise economic investment.

All knowledge may in one sense be local knowledge. Knowledge is generated by local histories, specific forms, and instances. But as Bernard Stiegler (2018) points out, particular localized knowledge has been generalized to the scale of biospheric locality. The way in which this up scaling is made possible is to reduce the terms of such knowledge to the kind of data that is amenable to computation, and the elimination of that which is not. Thus, another paradox ensues whereby the dominant knowledge no longer functions as knowledge but information. Information, which when circulated and imposed, has the effect of reducing the capacities of all localities, turning them into "points" (identities) along the same line, subject to measures of comparability and proportion, more or less, with the subsequent contestation of becoming more than what is lesser. Understanding one's place in the world then proceeds by always making reference to that with which one is apparently not. My guess is that Dadenong is inextricably linked to a constant chain of urban regeneration policies and future scenario planning.

Stiegler argues that only a diversity of local knowledge, engaged in a genuine contention of standpoints, possesses the wealth and the strength to produce genuine leaps. Here, differences generated, are *different*, in that there is no ready language to account for and incorporate them. So they are marked initially by intensities and thresholds rather than conceptual categories. They act as sources of illumination that enable a visualization of the space in which distinct enactments are seen and felt as having a relationship with each other. That which comes from the inside, the indeterminacy generated by the operations of the apparently familiar, are extruded, projected onto an outside, so that they may be either disattended to or defended against. At the same time, that which emanates from

a larger surrounds can be selectively folded in as either an active countervailing frame of reference—that which is established as a living negation, that to which we orient ourselves in opposition to—or as an implicit resource for the ongoing revitalization of cultural orientations themselves.

So, there is a double projection at work, working from the inside-out, and the outside-in. In other words, *the middle.* Here, turbulence is a default condition. But one that responds to the volatilities entailed in the profusion of informational technologies that are now far exceeding the capacity to manage the implications of their ubiquity. Just witness the current obsession with *crypto* as a means of maximizing the ubiquity of virtual, purportedly unmediated transactions, replete with intense speculations of metaverse "property" yet to be even identified. Where hundreds of millions of dollars can simply dissipate in a matter of moments due to the inability of the technical instruments to "manage" demand. Where value becomes simply the "registering" of individual aspirations to constantly reposition themselves in terms of an increasing number of others attempting to do the same thing.

In general, infrastructural sufficiency is no longer adequate to stabilize long-term volatilities, and perhaps, more importantly, neither is infrastructure nor the technical confined to what we have always assumed them to be. Basic urban functions, such as the efficacy of drainage or power relay systems are then increasingly contingent upon a wider range of contingent factors and adverse feedback loops. Intensifying agitations in face of insufficient systems, climatic and political events, lead to compensations that often further exacerbate instability, and thus additional rounds of debilitating compensatory action. The seagulls forebode scenarios reminiscent of Hitchcock.

Here, turbulence is not only palpable but a prevailing condition. In part because of the exhaustion of the bifurcations that characterize the relationships between human and nature, human and (non) human, white and black, being and having, primary and secondary qualities. Every urban politic has been oriented toward mediating the false ontological distinctions ascribed to these

divides. Insufficient for conceptualizing the contemporary urban domain, turbulence is *both* a condition of unimpeded capital accumulation, increasingly through the dispossession of experiential and conceptual anchorage, and the affective correlate of needing to start in *the middle of things* as the operational procedure to navigate the assemblages of massive carbonization, artificial intelligence, logistics, overproduction, value inflation, social media(tion) and infrastructural collapse that characterize the urban today. Subsequently, turbulence comes to characterize the socio-psychological situation of the urban inhabitant—always having to readjust, recalibrate without recourse to anything but the most truncated of convictions—as reflected in the resurgence of nationalist and identitarian sentiments.

What does it mean to act from the middle? Far from a position of stabilization, of balancing out bookended extremes, the middle finds itself incessantly undermined as stabilized terrain and rather "finds" itself, conversely, as a medium of unsettlement. Look at all the global middle classes who, having evacuated the rough and tumble communalisms of the street in favor of disciplined adherence to performances of respectability, must assume greater levels of indebtedness in order to stay in place—a place that is going nowhere. All intensifications of the declarative, that epistemological maneuver that attempts to settle matters once and for all, to pin things down, no longer provide the guarantees for an ongoing existence, which was their legitimation.

From interoperable data to algorithmic determinations of definitive positions within shifting combinations of variables, from the logistical maximizing of value to the droned zeroing in on any target, the impetus to define, settle, and circumscribe both ironically and cruelly unsettle anchorage, location, and confidence. As urban residents change houses at rates close to changing clothes, where households spread out across multiple locations, where residents are incessantly in motion attempting to seize opportunities or avoid being seized by bad decisions and excessive obligations, an unsettling of inhabitation coincides with an intensifying dread that no matter what gets done it will be insufficient to ensure any kind of future. What does it mean then to act from the middle of such turbulence, where the

proficiencies to categorize and contain across more expansive registers—from the nanoscales to planetary ones—exhaust the very reservoirs of those non-probable, incomputable, chance, and virtual relations that propel invention and ward off atrophy.

I largely agree with Jon's emphasis on the transitional nature of identity formation and its impetus for finding new ways of interweaving multicultural differences as reciprocal affordances that might constitute a new form of economy. Yet, today's conditions of *generic instability* point to the ways in which protracted histories of practice– through which the details of how the material and technical bases of cities have been articulated, disjoined, converted, juxtaposed, and amalgamated in both parallel and intersecting vectors of force—no longer are capable of holding the city together nor of being rejiggered and readapted to increasingly volatile atmospheres—climatic, financial, political. The specificities of materials, actors, and technicities are not constellated into patterns or evidence of macrostructural maneuvers. They figure their own *alliances*. Strange relations are being "designed" anyway, and what is important is not to try and settle things down, but to move with them, and learn how to modestly, without grand expectations, to turn or steer them into specific possibilities that often only accidentally present themselves.

This is what I think Jon is attempting to say: That this is a matter of how any event, interaction, or scenario works off all that precedes and follows it, how their very conditions of possibility are posed, not simply within the personalities, histories, or situations of a given context, but in the time underway, the multiplicity of indetectable transversals of responding to the entirety of the world at a given moment, which makes itself present in an unprecedented specificity. Any event, scenario—no matter how insulated, specific, power-laden– takes place in the midst, in the simultaneity of multiple other events. Each exerts impacts beyond the locales and boundaries that would structure their relevance and the ways in which they would be conventionally attended to.

Again, the key consideration here is to circumvent the anchoring of relationality in any predeterminate overarching sense of attachment and

fantasies of everything tied together in some supra-positional subject or subsuming ecology, as stereotypically characterizes certain strands of Anthropocene thought. Our technical imagination still is firmly linked to the *additive*, to what new knowledge and tools can be brought to the table. When the more relevant challenge perhaps is how to bring things to end; how to subtract from the world the obsession with maximizing, to subtract the search for status and recognition, and rather live as *unrecognized* and *inoperable*.

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