

In defense of experimentation

I've been working on a project about *artext*, a magazine founded in Melbourne in 1981. Although I've read a lot of the magazine, it is amazing how much I missed. As I sat and catalogued the contents I came across two articles in particular that attracted my attention. The first of the articles, "Body Fluids" by Didier Gille and Isabelle Stengers, was published in issue 26 in 1987 and translated by Paul Foss. The second article was written by Foss and printed in issue 71 in 2001, a gap of sixteen years. Foss took over as editor of *artext* from Paul Taylor in 1984 and worked as the editor and publisher until 2002 (he now runs *artUS*). Titled "Phantasm: No Punding Zone", his essay is almost invisible. It is not entered on the contents and it occupies only a double page spread. These essays seemed to be about something similar, companions.

Gille and Stengers wrote "Body Fluids" in the beginning years of the AIDS crisis. The uncertainty surrounding the disease caused hysteria and fear. As they note, people infected with the virus instantly became "a member of the menacing hoards". Infection swiftly and automatically transformed an individual from comrade to enemy. So-called risk groups such as homosexuals and intravenous drug users were vilified. Their supposed transgressions which had 'allowed' the disease to come into being, and then to spread, came under scrutiny.

Rebuking this prejudice, Gille and Stengers argued that disease is a by-product of experimentation and change, and, perhaps, an unfortunate but necessary accompaniment to social and political transformation. They write that "explorations, conquests, commercial ventures and changes in lifestyle punctuating the history of mankind were accompanied, like some clandestine understudy, by the history of epidemics".

Gille and Stengers highlight a grave misunderstanding. They make the case that rather than being the cause, the person with the disease is the discoverer. "[The] so-called risk groups are in a sense the 'advance scouts', the first to be stricken by a danger threatening everyone, but also who can report it and alert others to it". In this role, like the explorer reporting back the menace of wild animals, those who take the risk of dangerous experimentation do so for a reason. They are looking for fertile ground, new ways of living, ways that might or might not be more productive. In this regard we should applaud those living dangerously.

This ideation of risk makes possible a far more productive, and I believe optimistic, relationship to the experience of danger and death. As Gille and Stengers proclaim – "we can recognise, down through the ages, the subversive insistence of this question of those who agree to expose their body to danger, not in the name of a country, religion or conviction, but for an abstract, faceless idea".

The discourse around drug abuse seems to engender hysteria not dissimilar to that of AIDS, and where the drug is administered intravenously, these realms meet. The findings of a cost-benefit analysis of drug abuse are all too readily assumed. This can in part be blamed on a lack of research into the creation that drug abuse has engineered.

Over the last two or three months I've had a number of conversations about drug use, and what it is. Outside the narrow parameters of 'fucked up' or 'high', there seems to be difficulty in theorising the experience. No one seems to address what is produced through this activity, what it is that makes it such a foundational or instrumental experience. Amongst friends, acquaintances and colleagues it has been discussed as many things; an alternative to the banality of suburbia, another option to all those 'options', a different way to inhabit time, a pain killer. And I imagine it is all these things and probably more.

In "Phantasm: No Punding Zone", Foss argues that drug abuse is a "totally aphasic, anoetic production". This might explain why it is so difficult to describe what is produced through amateur pharmacological experimentation. At the edge of consciousness, this almost unthinkable production lies outside a classical understanding of what we aim to 'achieve'. Foss points to "the advantages (and possible abuses) of the determination of 'speed freaks' to derange their senses as far from higher cognitive functioning as inhumanly possible". What is it that might be gained through this flirtation with mental dysfunction? To use the example of methamphetamine, where long term abuse leads to a vegetable mental state, what might be learnt from an insight into this degradation or rearrangement of the human cognitive function?

Foss suggests a methodology for the analysis of the productivity of drug abuse. He argues that "[only] through the speculative reconstruction of narcotic rapture can its monumental successes and failures be read". Rather than the sober recollection of narcotic experience, perhaps we can try and imagine the experience as it is, not as it was. The 'hallucinatory body' of drug abuse is not a fantasy but a reality, and perhaps we need the possibilities of this body.

What these articles by Gille, Stengers and Foss offer is legitimacy for risk. We can eschew hysteria and fear. We can avoid the useless dualisms of healthy vs. unhealthy or good vs. bad, and the untenable proposal of cost-benefit analysis. We can then address without constraint the pressing and unavoidable concern – what has been made, what can we make and what will we make through dangerous living?