

Presentation: Art in Translation

The video work *Blodlopp* (blood circulation) came about during a double residency in 2012 at Fremantle Arts Centre and SymbioticA (an artistic laboratory dedicated to the research and hands-on engagement with the life sciences at The University of Western Australia). The work was planned on the premise of exploring how the concept and application of the immune system can be translated as a culture-historical blueprint to contemporary social relations with the help of costume art and applied performance.

In this presentation I will first address the notion and use of the immune system and its possible applications. After that Amanda will comment from her angle of artistic approach. *Amanda will add a few points relating to her take on the process of production and how the materials related to environments they were filmed in along macro and micro levels of intuitive cellular behaviour.*

My interest in the immune system derives from previous research in East Africa where I looked into how community theatre is used as a mode of HIV prevention. The AIDS pandemic, on its smallest scale, is a hide-and-seek game with a communicable virus that operates imperceptibly, and develops asymptotically, lives off its hosts until it kills them behind the disguise of local diseases. HIV/AIDS took over the old epithet of syphilis as “the great imitator” in epidemiology. So the shadow theatre of the HIV virus is quite mysterious.

“Language is like a virus from outer space”, William Burroughs and later Laurie Anderson claimed. If this metaphor is inverted it becomes epidemiological rather than linguistic and thus reads: “virus is like a language from outer space” – and given the abstract, shadow-like imposition of the HIV virus, it reads like a revelation without a known grammar, author or narrative to victims and experts alike. If viruses are like words and diseases are like grammar, then the translation of its language ought to be found in the immune system. In the case of AIDS, however, no translation scheme has been applicable so far – it is as though the HIV virus indeed is from another world. (Today we do have ARV medicines against AIDS but here I’m talking in strict immunological terms.)

Even in more worldly encounters the gap between host and alien can be quite severe. We know this from colonial occupations in the Americas which killed around 90% of the indigenous populations mainly due to European diseases. In Western Australia the mortality rate was slightly less dramatic for Aboriginal groups, probably due to the vastness of the country. If we go back to 1829 when the English seafarers reached what was to become the Swan River Colony in what is today known as metropolitan Perth, captain Charles Fremantle declared the area English before he had even seen an indigenous person. Along with admiral James Stirling, Fremantle and fellow military personnel primarily wanted to grab the land before the French did and find out whether the land was fertile enough to be profitable for British farmers. Eventually they spotted indigenous people along on the riverbanks and inland, but they paid very little attention to them. As long as they were friendly, the English exchanged some

casual gestures and petty goods with them, but as soon as they showed signs of aggression due to land appropriation or other reasons they used arms to punish them. This eventually led to what can only be described as an attempted genocide of indigenous people in Western Australia and not least numerous Noongar tribes in the Swan River Colony.

What interested us was that the colonial invasion appeared to have happened without any sign of interest in the host population. There seems to have been no mutual perception – a blind encounter where the intruder had no interest in seeing or understanding the host and where the host neither grasped the purpose of the visit nor had a defense in place against it once it turned belligerent. In other words, it was like a pathogen that entered a body in the sole interest of exploiting it for its own purposes.

What happens with the immune system when a pathogen invades a body is that it first attempts to identify the intruder and then consults the so-called innate immune response, which takes care of minor and generic injuries within a day or two. This response system has been genetically inherited from the host's parents. If the innate immune system fails to recognize and remove a pathogen, the so-called adaptive immune system kicks in, for instance in the face of an influenza virus. The adaptive immunity goes beyond the host's family and reaches across vast culture-historical domains. In Western Australia, however, the adaptive immune system among the indigenous hosts came back with no records about the English agents. No matter how deep it dug into the archival gene bank of the acquired immunity, the memory cells remained blank and so, *mutatis mutandis*, when the pathogenic assault resulted in mass deportations of indigenous hosts, out to the concentration camps on Rottnest Island, the chained victims in the dungeons died more often from flu than other forms of violence.

The immune system is meant to protect us from “everything foreign”, as one book in immunology puts it. Hence, any pathogen is sought up for identification followed by an appropriate response, most often aggressive with elimination as a result, but sometimes a more friendly reception followed by a sort of quarantine, or, in some cases, indefinite co-habitation (which is the case, for instance, with the colonization of benign strains of bacteria that inhabit the gastrointestinal tract). In light of this we were curious about the paradox that the integrity of the immune system can only become more adept and stronger through encounters with those who are unfamiliar to us.

However, this doesn't seem to apply to the case in Australia. In the video you see the red pathogens and the egg-like cells, the receptors hanging from their bodies and the different sites of confrontation. But the power relations don't follow the logic of the historical narrative I just described. The cells seem to be the dominant force whilst the pathogens appear to be subordinate, as if the indigenous hosts managed to overcome the assault.

However, Blodlopp is not an historical work but a contemporary one. When Amanda worked with the filming along the coast she was thinking about the flotsam and jetsam in relation to the in between and border space of the shoreline:

the unseen residue of an immune system applied to a larger more ambiguous body. The notion of flux in the landscape and the human body draws attention to a particular kind of uncertainty, vulnerability and transition in this case, similar to the notion of Dante's work where those who can't go to heaven or hell are stuck in a state of perpetual limbo. It's a hint to a colonial struggle, an allusion to the unseen bodies and settlements that occupy the Australian landscape, the displaced and mistreated ghosts of the past that can now be understood on the level of molecules. So Amanda's work goes against any structured notion of how cells and humans should behave in favour of a more undertermined and intuitive response to the landscape and the component parts at the time of filming (the unseen, is made visible in one way or another).

It didn't take long for the colonizers to set up their own defense system in the invaded territory. They appropriated the most productive land for cultivation, transport and safety – and this often overlapped with the beaten tracks of the Whadjuks and other indigenous tribes in the area. The fact is that these contact zones have remained contested grounds to this day and there is little or no interaction going on between the hosts and agents, as anyone can bear out by a visit today. Aboriginal individuals and groups are mostly seen in urban heterotopia, whilst white people have established residential areas, industries, administrative centres and educational facilities across the most vital Aboriginal settlements. Other fairly isolated agents are the tourists who tend to hang out along the coastline, as can be seen at the end of *Blodlopp* where you get scenes from Cottesloe Beach. Cottesloe was a crucial settlement for Aboriginal people who used it for seasonal fishing and to fetch fresh water from its cliffs. So this is another contemporary non-contact zone.

The Australian journalist and activist John Pilger, who recently released the documentary *Utopia* about the Aboriginal condition, has called the culture-historical divisions in Australia a case of "apartheid". (It's interesting that the first visit by Captain Fremantle was described as follows: "Under the watchful eye of Lieutenant Henry, a party of twenty-four men from the Challenger erected shelters, planted vines brought from Cape Town and dug fort-like trenches to ward off any unexpected attack." They were of course fully aware that they also brought apartheid from South Africa to Australia, but may not have realized the long-term consequences.) There are various circumstances for Aboriginals that are worse today in Australia than they were for black and colored people in South Africa prior to 1994; few white Australians ever get in touch with Aboriginal individuals and as recently in July this year Tony Abbott commented on the historical and international relations of Australia in the following way:

"Our country is unimaginable without foreign investment. I guess our country owes its existence to a form of foreign investment by the British government in the then unsettled or, um, scarcely settled, Great South Land."

This is not a rogue pundit or business maverick talking, it is Tony Abbott, the current prime minister of Australia. Despite the fact that there are hundreds of settlements documented on pre-1788 maps of Australia he audibly stated that the continent was unsettled upon the English arrival.

The ethnic divisions in Australia have shaped the public opinion and activism in a quite performative sense. In Canberra the Aboriginal opposition has established a so-called tent embassy since 1972, in response to the rejection of Aboriginal land rights by the current government. And when we were carrying out our residencies in 2012, Noongar activists initiated a tent embassy on Heirisson Island in central Perth. The action was a reaction to governmental claims to extinguish most of the native title land in South-western Australia and after a shameful attempt by the government to compensate the indigenous population for their loss of land in cash. The occupiers on Heirisson Island were evicted after a month or so but the conflict remained in the public eye by the time we had our exhibition opening at Fremantle Arts Centre (1500 people).

The tent embassies are part of a change in activism along with the more recent Occupy movements. These are initiatives that no longer position themselves on the fringe of dominant systems; it is no longer a matter of protesting something you do not want to become – this double negative that seldom lead to anything positive, except under very acute circumstances. Instead the embassies and occupations are long-term performative claims that insist on rights and enact alternative regimes, a counter-cultural formation that is commonly discussed in terms of “prefigurative politics” by David Graeber and other researchers in connection to Occupy Wall Street.

This is also the way I see *Blodlopp*; not as a metaphor that relies on the existing order of things, but as a radical alternative to it, a mode of perception of what is going on in the places it explores, as seen through a microscopic lens of public life, or perhaps from outer space. So the video shows what is *actually* going on with social relations in Perth; the other version that you see as a tourist or a resident is just a dressed up reality that adheres to a crass economic and centralized civic order, which curtail the historic and spiritual dimension of the place. *Blodlopp* shows the world through a diachronic lens that oscillates forth and back in time and with a focus on health as a preferred way of understanding social relations.

Ultimately the work shows signs of an auto-immune disorder, which occurs when the body turns on itself and the immune system attacks and destroys healthy parts of a body by mistake. It's a systemic breakdown, a fundamental miscommunication, a corporeal short circuit. Auto-immune diseases, such as diabetes and arthritis, are on a steady rise today and there is a peculiar correspondence to their macro-political counterparts, that is, self-destructive threats to the planet's health with the proliferation of nuclear weapons; global warming as well as the global financial meltdowns.

That analogy can't be resolved in this presentation, so let me wrap up what we are dealing with, namely the basic modus operandi of the immune system's response in terms of and in the milieu of culture-historical threats. Again, this operation involves the triangulation of a host, an agent and an environment that permits interactions between them, but without environmental conditions that allows for interaction, the response will inevitably be aggressive between the

host and the agent. The English colonizers not only claimed the land but also its governing system, hence they invaded a body and brought their own immune system with it. But without a reconciliation of the environmental issues they will inevitably suffer from a cultural immuno-deficiency.

In response to this, the video work shows hybrid versions of cells and pathogens, who end up on Cottesloe Beach, among tourists and recreational fishermen, followed by the final segment which shows bacteria that kills off cells. The latter process was staged in a SymbioticA laboratory and introduced an aggressive e-coli bacterium to Amanda's own blood cells in an in vitro experiment, that is, in an artificial culture medium in the form of a solution, under a microscope equipped with a camera. This is to show how a peaceful co-habitation between host cells and external pathogens is impossible without mutual benefits in their environment.