

Ways of Unpredicting the World

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For the Etruscan pirates, chemistry started from within but its existence was registered on the surface, so to speak; explicit or ontologically registered decay was merely a superficial symptom of an already founded decay, decay as a pre-established universal chemistry.

— Reza Negarestani, *The Corpse Bride*

More often than not, Vincent Scheers's artworks convey a sense of grinding inexorability, yet with a subtle and humorous touch. Each of his artworks, fundamentally ecological in kind, generate temporalities of their own, tearing up institutional surfaces with tremendous perceptual abysses without succumbing to unnecessary pathos. The "laws of nature" they mobilize are staged and put to work through carefully crafted dispositives involving a series of "natural" agents you wouldn't necessarily expect to be part of an artwork: bacteria and fungi, acetic acid, bronze; nettles, wasps, mallard ducks, mosquitoes. Actual oxidation and (not so) virtual devoration are key forces of this theater of irredution and cruelty; a theater to which Scheers patiently—and, to a certain extent, even serenely—adds novel and surreal scenes, scenes that unfold as many bewildering variations around Konrad Lorenz's classic ethological study on the natural history of evil, *On Aggression* (1963), a history of captures, prehensions, and mutual possessions from which, obviously, no one returns unscathed.

Vincent Scheers's beginnings as an artist bear the irresistible charm of this raw, literal, and yet strangely tender desire for the irreversibility of carnal entanglements. Imagine the following scene (from 2017):

This was my first solo show. The idea was to translate a positive memory into a small physical inconvenience and in this way attach this memory to this annoyance, ultimately making it less annoying.

I got in contact with the department of epidemiology of the University of Leuven to do research, but also to see if they could provide me with disease-free mosquitos to conduct my experiment. They were very excited to participate and agreed to provide me with a batch of disease-free *Culex pipiens molestus* mosquitos.

After half a year of research, I was granted a residency at OKK Berlin (<http://www.kritische-kunst.org>) to make the final exhibition. This consisted of several elements. A number of drawings I made while in Brazil were shown, about comparing a tropical disease to the feeling of being in love. In the center of the exhibition space, there was a small cage in which the mosquitos were kept. Visitors were encouraged to put their arm into the cage to get bitten. Furthermore, the lab I built to grow the mosquitos was shown but concealed partly, and in a separate room a video installation showed macro footage of the mosquito larvae filmed by red light.¹

This retroverted tale of a tropical malady is how Scheers describes *Exotism*, an exhibition staging, as the subtitle goes, "the production of a selective memory." Many of the constitutive elements that would populate the artist's future work are already at play here. Note the presence of a fully operational, if partly concealed, reproduction laboratory, something that echoes directly with the mold incubators and other technological apparatuses that the artist would be experimenting with later on. In fact, the whole exhibition space was to be conceived as an ethological laboratory staging the disquieting encounter between humans and mosquitoes as unsuspecting enactors and relayors of tropical memories. Also observable was the obstination with which the inconvenience of it all is made annoyingly palpable—and irreversible. The atmosphere in the exhibition must have been tense. Tense enough that, as Scheers recalls, some attendees, caught by a feverish tropical frenzy, or perhaps outraged by the fate reserved for the mosquitoes, decided to form an *ad hoc* mosquito liberation front and

release them all from their domestic enrollment by destroying the box in which they were contained.

Act as you wish, so long as this cannot be easily undone. As a result of the actants' work, certain things do not return to their original state. A shape is set, like a crease. It can be called a trap, a ratchet, an irreversibility, a Maxwell's demon, a reification. The exact word does not matter so long as it designates an asymmetry. Then you cannot act as you wish. There are winners and losers, there are directions, and some are made stronger than others.²

Bruno Latour's early work around the invention of the technique of pasteurization resonates closely with Vincent Scheers's imaginative machinations. The excerpt quoted above evokes the game of claims constantly at play out there "in the wild," as if pointing to yet another version of the history of natural selection (including that of memories). But more interestingly, perhaps, it also emphasizes the importance of the invention of different techniques and artifices, the necessary dispositives and apparatuses employed for the purposes of *revealing* nature's "secrets," epistemological modes of emplotment to showcase otherwise invisible or barely noticeable interactions between agents.

I see many parallels between Latour's insistence on the apparatuses and methods of dramatization of the myriad of earthly agencies of the Anthropocene and Vincent Scheers's gently disinhibited—and most importantly, *disinhibiting*—relation to processes of transformation, corrosion, devoration, and decay. "It's a question of moving on from the vertigo of power to the simple, banal positivity of forces,"³ as the French philosopher would say. And this positivity, just like selective memory, is the object of a production—precisely that which results from the workings of *dis-positives*. Latour reminds us that we shouldn't neglect the artistic and historical dimensions inherent to any attempt to weave the various threads of our geostories. Closely aligned with Donna Haraway's call for encompassing enough narratives for our troubled time, he suggests that: "The great paradox of the 'scientific world view' is to have succeeded in *withdrawing historicity* from the world. And with it, of course, the inner *narrativity* that is part and parcel of being in the world—or, as Donna Haraway prefers to say, 'with the world'."⁴ We know that in the last years of his life, Latour was very much interested in figuring out how to mobilize the resources of art to make his contemporaries more sensible to the current planetary collapse. And I think that Vincent Scheers's work somehow answers that challenge to bring about the inner narrativity of processes and things, through the many carefully crafted situations it harbors. Or again, and "in a larger sense," we could say alongside Timothy Morton in his seminal *All Art Is Ecological*, "nothing is un-designed."⁵ This paradoxical insight is crucial, I believe, to engage with the deep temporalities that are piercing through the artist's work.

To be clear: nowhere in Vincent Scheers's work do we find any trace of pedagogical or activist intent to make us more aware of what could be done to improve our earthly conditions of existence. And his art certainly doesn't foster any kind of hope either. If anything, his artworks tend to be aggravating, in a bittersweet way that I personally can't help but feel is most enjoyable. And yet, by cleverly staging and entangling in poetic and unsuspecting ways a variety of natural and civilizational processes with one another, he

subtly brings us into a regime of perception that fundamentally challenges the belief in a stable, predictable, and, ultimately, de-animated earth championed by a restrictive scientific worldview. What is at stake here, both in scientific knowledge and in the type of art that Vincent Scheers favors and cultivates, is a certain dexterity for dramatizing or “theatralizing” relations between elements and, by doing so, altering durably our relation to them. Or in the words of Robin Mackay, editor of *Urbanomics*, a publishing house specializing in cutting edge speculative art and philosophy: “What is achieved by the most skilled plotters is a kind of stereoscopic—or *multiscopic*—way of looking at things, one that is able to shift between different information-spaces, different *theatrons* . . .”⁶

His latest series of artwork, entitled *Grooming*, presents numerous examples of such skillful use of elaborate technical apparatuses to generate disturbing artistic protocols, challenging the viewer to question the very edges of our current civilizational continuum. *Self-Fulfilling Prophecy* (2023), for instance, is a powerful iteration bringing together mythopoetic powers and the all too concrete powers of chemistry. In Vincent Scheers’s own words:

The work consists of an original bronze ornament representing the head of Silenus (a Greek demigod). Silenus was a mythological figure who was known for turning into a sort of oracle when drunk on wine. In his oracle state, he then began telling ugly truths about existence, for example: “Sometimes it’s better not to have existed at all.”

In the work, the bronze ornament is placed in a glass container filled with wine. Oxygen is added to the wine, which speeds up the process of turning it into vinegar. Vinegar essentially being acetic acid then slowly dissolves the bronze. One could argue that the story of Silenus hereby comes full circle.

A strange alchemy is at play here. Of course, the tone of the work is unmistakably acerbic. One is reminded of another type of inconvenience, that of *being born*, as Emil Cioran once famously proclaimed. The artwork can also be read as a technically sophisticated *vanitas*, a traditional type of allegorical work that compels the viewer to reflect on the inevitability of death and the transient nature of earthly achievements and pleasures. The dissolving effect of the acetic acid on a culturally charged historical artifact made of a relatively precious metal no doubt reminds us of the inherent ephemerality of our attempts at cultural inscription—and in this particular case, of our pretenses to ritualistic divination. And yet, for a reason that perhaps only engages the writer of this essay, but that no doubt has to do with the fact that the Earth we live on and all the natural processes it is made of can no longer be simply taken as a stable and predictable backstage on which the human drama would unfold; this artwork also triggered a naturalist meditation on molecular compositions and the very nature of minerality. And that’s where I particularly appreciate the unpretending freedom with which Scheers generates complicity with organic and inorganic materials; the way it stays with the ambiguous and unresolved trouble of living; his peculiar humor as he stages daily abjections and other fanged noumena. For entering in the orbit of Scheers’s work no doubt brings us into proximity with all material forces actively transforming and shaping the Earth we live on, in a way that mostly defanged post-humanist discourses will never manage to.

At some point, the self-fulfilling prophecy of inexistence displayed through the chemical process of metallic corrosion reverts. A rewilding process of our perceptive habits is at work,

as the dissolution of cultural existence suddenly makes space for another type of existential drama, that of the slowly evolving composition metals and minerals. Incidentally, the field of geology is currently experiencing a profound epistemological shift, as we are discovering bacterial life kilometers deep into the core of the Earth—microbes and bacteria feeding on rocks, literally. And that has a direct incidence on how we conceive the formation of metallic compounds populating the Earth’s core and crust:

Life, in particular microbial life, has forged a large quantity of Earth’s minerals, which are naturally occurring inorganic solid compounds with highly organized atomic structures, or, to put it more plainly, very elegant rocks. Today Earth has more than 6,000 distinct mineral species, most of which are crystals such as diamond, quartz and graphite. In its infancy, however, Earth did not have much mineral diversity. Over time, the continuous crumbling, melting and resolidifying of the planet’s early crust shifted and concentrated uncommon elements. Life began to break apart rock and recycle elements, generating entirely new chemical processes of mineralization. More than half of all minerals on the planet can occur only in a high-oxygen environment, which did not exist before microbes, algae and plants oxygenated the ocean and atmosphere.⁷

Rewilding from Within and Without

Let’s take a step back from this unabashedly cosmic, planetary perspective and approach the vitality at work in Vincent Scheers’s oeuvre from a more localized, if devouring, angle. Another way to characterize this whole *Grooming* series—of which *Self-Fulfilling Prophecy* is a part—is through the recurring tension it showcases, to paint it in broad strokes, between wilderness and the katachonic forces of domesticity. This tension is fully on display in *Wild* (2023), which uses tar lure to depict a cartoonish animal trapped in an enclosing circle; or in *Landscaping* (2023), where the sentiment of claustrophobia and entrapment is induced by means of a train track circuit assembled on a suspended table.

This core tension around rewilding and domesticating is cleverly encapsulated in the title of the series itself. Grooming first suggests keeping things clean and tidy. This generic activity rapidly extends to the animal kingdom, where it can mean brushing or cleaning the coat of a domestic animal, like a horse or a dog. And more interestingly for sure in the context of Vincent Scheers’s general ethology, grooming also refers to how animals themselves ritually maintain one another’s bodies or appearances (we speak in this case of social or mutual grooming). Therefore, grooming, quite literally, extends the realm of the intimate, the protective, the ritual, and the domestic; although not without a potential sense of threat when extended to the befriending of children (think of online grooming, for instance). And as one can already expect, Scheers’s unruly inclination rapidly pokes through, highlighting how the domestic can rapidly turn into a “toxic relationship,” as suggested in *Threshold* (2023), a series of paintings that represents plants in a greenhouse using a combination of “natural” and synthetic pigments. As the artist explains:

Plants in a botanical garden are encouraged to grow to their maximum potential. When the plant, however, reaches the threshold of the institution (the roof), it is suddenly violently cut off. This is similar to what we would call in psychology “a toxic relationship.”

Interestingly, the synthetic pigments used in the composition also include bleach. Bleach is a generic name for disinfecting and sterilizing products typically used for cleaning because of their bactericidal properties. The disinfectant agent happens to play a crucial role in the artwork series. In *Untitled* (2023), flowers are immersed heads-down in a transparent vase that contains a mix of water and bleach. With his usual taste for ambiguous states of indeterminacy, Scheers explains that flower shops add a small amount of bleach to the flower’s water to kill bacteria, which helps to keep them fresh for a longer period. However, he writes, “too much bleach bleaches out the flowers’ colors. In this work the flowers inside are simultaneously preserved and dissolved.”

The institutional role of bleach as a disinfecting agent in Vincent Scheers’s work only comes to full expressive power in negative, when contextualized in relation to his other defining occupation, as a nurse. In *Incubator Studies* (2023), arguably one of the artist’s most iconic artwork and part of another series of work entitled *History of a Criminal*, watercolor portraits of dandelions are laced with a layer of nutrient agar, and then enclosed in steel-framed incubators that regulate heat and moisture, thus creating ideal conditions for hosting and growing the special mixture of molds and bacteria that Vincent Scheers has collected from various public spaces. The result is both a series of seemingly imprisoned and rapidly degrading paintings; and the accelerated flourishing of molds on the surface of a particularly conducive canvas, thus becoming the proliferating anti-hero of this peculiar arrangement, depending on one’s perspective. In a way that echoes the early work in which he had cultivated a colony of mosquitoes, the incubators are now hosting swarming life forms that are generally considered hostile to human activities. This manner of accelerating decay through controlled means yet again triggers a perverse joy as it playfully counter-effectuates the usual institutional norms of preservation and cleanliness, especially in a museal and exhibition context. Vincent Scheers’s explication is worth quoting *in extenso*, as it offers an inestimable angle on how his art practice is embedded in a peculiar relation to the all-too-natural experience of decaying bodies, yet rarely brought to the fore in most artistic contexts:

The inspiration for these works came in part from my experience of working as a nurse. I work with paralyzed patients, helping them in their daily lives. Because these people are often sitting or lying down for longer periods of time, they start to develop wounds. One of my jobs is to clean and take care of these wounds, a process which involves a lot of disinfecting and making sure everything is sterile. In this sterilization process, a lot of useful bacteria are killed as well, which creates its own set of problems.

The incubator also serves as the anti-version of a device found in most big institutions. When a contaminated work arrives at a museum, it is put into a decontamination room, a specially designed space which is filled with a toxic gas exterminating all life forms inside.

In the incubator studies however, life forms are encouraged to grow and populate the work.

This conceptual and artistic rapprochement between molds and canvas and bodies and bedsores is deeply moving. Vincent Scheers's work is enmeshed in the dynamic interplay between organic and inorganic forces, inviting us to reconfigure our understanding of art and its relationship with the world, away from any sterilizing conventions, following a meridian of devoration that shares more than one affinity with Brazil's anthropophagic metaphysics.⁸ In a time where art is often expected to conform to preestablished narratives and institutionalized definitions, Scheers facetiously disrupts these expectations by immersing us in a landscape of transformative, animalistic, and entropic energies. His insistence on aggression, corrosion, and dissipative forces serves as a poignant reminder of the latent, abject forces that lead toward perishing and decomposition, omnipresent in his work.

In conclusion, I'm reminded of the baroque details of Etruscan punishment as told by a "leper philosopher" who wrote extensively about processes of putrefaction and decomposition, Reza Negarestani. The chemistry of decay turned into an ancient torture device: sometimes, indeed, one feels like it would have been better to not have existed at all.

A living man or woman was tied to a rotting corpse, face to face, mouth to mouth, limb to limb, with an obsessive exactitude in which each part of the body corresponded with its matching putrefying counterpart. Shackled to their rotting double, the man or woman was left to decay. . . .

Although the blackening of the skin indicated the superficial indifferentiation of decay (the merging of bodies into a black slime), for the Etruscans—executioners gifted with metaphysical literacy and alchemical ingenuity—it signaled an ontological exposition of the decaying process which had already started from within. . . .

The philosophy of Ideas and the science of being qua being are fundamentally built upon putrefaction and act in accordance with the chemistry of decay.⁹

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¹ "Exotism," *Organ of Critical Arts*, June 2017, <http://www.kritische-kunst.org/exotism/>.

² Bruno Latour, *The Pasteurization of France* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1993), p. 160.

³ Bruno Latour, “Préface de la nouvelle édition,” in *Irreductions* (Paris: La découverte, 2001), p. 8 (my translation).

⁴ Bruno Latour, “Agency at the Time of the Anthropocene,” *New Literary History* 45, no. 1 (2014), p. 14.

⁵ Timothy Morton, *All Art Is Ecological* (London: Penguin Books, 2021), p. 79.

⁶ Robin Mackay, “Stages, Plots, and Traumas,” in *Futures & Fictions*, ed. Henriette Gunkel, Ayesha Nameed, and Simon O’Sullivan (London: Repeater Books, 2017), p. 89.

⁷ Ferris Jabr, “The Mysterious, Deep-Dwelling Microbes That Sculpt Our Planet,” *The New York Times*, June 24, 2024, <https://www.nytimes.com/2024/06/24/magazine/earth-geomicrobiology-microbes.html> (my emphasis).

⁸ “I asked a man what Law was. He replied it was a guarantee of the exercise of possibility. That man was called Galli Mathias. I ate him.” Oswaldo de Andrade, “The Anthropophagic Manifesto,” in *Where to Sit at the Dinner Table?*, ed. Pedro Neves Marques (Berlin: Archive Books, 2014), p. 103. “Antropofagia is commonly understood as the self-attributed name of the Brazilian modernist vanguard of the 1920s, which famously reemerged in the post-war Brazilian artistic counter-culture” (p. v).

⁹ Reza Negarestani, “The Corpse Bride: Thinking with Nigredo,” in *Collapse #4* (London: Urbanomics, 2008), pp. 130–31.













The history of the criminal (2021)
mountainbike, found taxidermy duck, steel
180 x 120 x 40cm

