

Between Waste and Creativity Elsa Richardson

When Lucy first told me the name of their new film on show at Kunstintituut Melly as part of their exhibition 'Ooze' (9th June - 19th Nov 2023), I assumed that it was a reference to *Flush* (1933), Virginia Woolf's imaginative biography of Elizabeth Barrett Browning's cocker spaniel. Usually dismissed as one of the great modernist's lighter works, it is in truth a quite remarkable experiment in stream of consciousness that attempts to capture the multitudinous thoughts, feelings, and fleeting impressions that flash through the mind of a family dog. Lucy's film is, however, not about the adventures of a floppy-eared canine and its poet mistress. The title, *Flush 2023*, alludes to the dispersal of colour and the mechanism by which waste is expelled from the home, and its subject is the freemartin cow. As the film begins, I feel a hot crackle of embarrassment at my error, a mishearing that speaks of an attachment to real dogs—the cantankerous terrier that snores at my feet—and their fictional counterparts, which can verge on the mawkish. Yet as the camera follows the cows through milking, rutting, insemination, as animal's encounter technologies varied in sophistication from the metal gates that pen them to the delicate work of the laboratory, trailing fluids—shit, milk, blood, semen, piss—in their wake, my thoughts crept back to Woolf's experiment in non-human memoir. As hard as I tried to shoo the dog out the door, *Flush* kept nosing his way back in.

Perhaps what links these two seemingly incommensurate texts—canine biography and artist moving image—is attention. By slow track of a reluctant lollop, close-up of an extravagantly lashed eye, a gentle lick of the nose, muscular form silhouetted as the last of the day's light gathers itself in, we are drawn in again and again by the promise of intimacy with the film's bovine subjects. Overlaying these images is a poem that pays a particular kind of attention, biographical, that is not usually bestowed upon non-human subjects. It begins, like Woolf's *Flush*, with an origin story. Where the pedigree dog 'claims descent' from a family of the 'greatest antiquity', the freemartin was once devil 'cast', the animal's name is broken down: farrow, ferry, free: freemartin. Questions of genealogy and inheritance serve to locate cows and dogs as historical subjects, as creatures with pasts that can be traced and in possession of biographies that might be worth writing. The scientific language of reproductive management is also, as film and text acknowledge, a profoundly impoverished mode of address that exposes the limits of cross-species knowability. Poetry, a form better attuned to the productive potentials of the abstruse, offers an alternative approach to writing of non-human lives that revels in the messiness of our cross-species entanglements. The poetic authoring of *Flush 2023* allows us to glimpse the freemartin's existence beyond biological determinants. This is made possible by what Lucy describes as poetry's 'viscosity', forces of flow and resistance that—like the exchange of blood and hormones through shared placental connections—move meaning between categories and expose the contingency of concepts like fertility, productivity, sex, nature, and waste.

Reflecting on 'The Warm Decembers' (1978-1986)—her long verse novel that was never finished—Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick recalls that initial impetus derived from an:

idea that came to me dancing [...] a long Victorian narrative poem that would include both a man named Miles and a hound named Miles. The hound Miles would be epileptic. At the formal climax of the poem the hound Miles would have a seizure, in the course of which he and the man Miles would get their narrative points-of-view inextricably fused

This vision of mingling species speaks to Woolf's narrative experimentation with *Flush*, in which she attempts to encounter the world through the senses and experiences of a dog. As Cassie Westwood points out though, for Sedgwick the imagined border crossing that inspired 'The Warm Decembers' ultimately 'fails to materialise' and is preserved instead as the 'unrealized germ of the poem'. This note is one of many thoughts, images, offcuts that could not be incorporated into the poem, but which could also somehow not be thrown away.

It is to these discarded fragments that *Warm Decembers 2022* turns, a film that lingers in the interstices between creativity and waste, pressing at the boundaries that divide different bodies, states of being, interior and exterior worlds. It takes up the story of one of the poem's side characters Beatrix, who was orphaned as a child and is now navigating a difficult transition into adulthood, the trauma of which is made manifest by a painful bladder condition that causes her to experience hallucinations. Urine is the waste material running through the three works featured at Kunstintituut Mell, a bodily fluid that further entangles human with non-human. *Reproductive Exile 2018* explores the user experience of biomedical pharmaceuticals derived from the urine of menopausal women and pregnant horses; a fictionalised account of assisted reproduction in which invisible connections are formed by the production and sharing of animal and human sex hormones. Pulling at this thread once more, *Flush 2023* probes at what the affirmation 'mothers for mothers', might reveal of the interspecies intimacies that underpin modern edge reproductive science. 'Mothers for mothers' is a direct reference to 'moeders voor moeders', a Dutch urine donation programme that is operated by a major pharmaceutical company, which produces fertility drugs for use in humans and animals. Urine collected 'by piss men on their bikes' from pregnant women makes its way to the milking room, where cows are dosed with drugs purified from 'hot, fertile, urine streams/extra uterine, placental excretions' to prevent the kind of pregnancies that produce freemartins. The extraction of a particular hormone, human chorionic gonadotropin (hCG), for use in the management of non-human fertility not only points to the vast productive potential of waste, but it also extends the sentiment of 'mothers for mothers' across species lines.

This is a two-way exchange: pregnant hormones are used to stimulate fertility in cows, but as a field of knowledge endocrinology has long depended on the animal as a key experimental subject and a proxy for the human. There is, as we glimpse

Reproductive Exile 2018 and Flush 2023, a violence implicit in this 'use' of non-human bodies. Alongside experimentation with the freemartin, the origin story of the hormone is bound up with the life of a small brown dog, not unlike the Elizabeth Barrett Browning's spaniel. Around the turn of the twentieth century the Department of Physiology at University College London played to a series of experiments that lead to the discovery of hormones, which involved the vivisection of dogs. These were undertaken by brother-in-law scientists, William Bayliss and Ernest H. Starling, who while investigating the relationship between the nervous system and pancreatic secretions found that, contrary to long-held orthodoxy, the former did not influence the latter. Instead, it appeared that the pancreas was encouraged to produce digestive juices by chemical messengers that originated in the walls of the intestinal lining and whose communications were delivered through the bloodstream. To test this hypothesis, the collaborators turned to one of the laboratory's dogs. Having anaesthetised and sliced open the animal the scientists first isolated and disconnected the nerves that linked the intestines with the brain. They then proceeded to inject the animal with hydrochloric acid, which mimicked the effect of gastric movement and even though the essential nervous connections had been severed, these movements still prompted the pancreas to begin secreting digestive enzymes. Drawing on this research in a lecture to the Royal Society of Physicians in 1905, Starling coined the word 'hormone' from the Greek 'to arouse or excite' to describe how 'activities and growth in different parts of the body' could be stimulated by the excretions of seemingly remote organs. Endocrinology—a discipline whose etymology vows to sieve, sift, sort through the clutter of our fleshy interiors—relies on permeability of the boundaries between dog and scientist, fertile cow and pregnant human.

Like the placental injection dying technique we see in the lab in Flush 2022, a dog lying on a table, eviscerated but still living, speaks to something scopophilic in the scientific imagination, a desire to see, to examine, to expose, whatever the cost. There is a quite different relationship between seeing and knowing staked out by Lucy's films, which employ a variety of imaging technologies to enter the inaccessible. Where the vivisector opens the body to unmask its workings, Lucy's work probes interior, often interstitial, spaces: the endoscope that threads its way down the alimentary canal, the radio waves of the MRI that produce subtle anatomical images and the 'flows of ink' into a placenta, that could be cow or human, mapping out the territory shared by twins. Cameras also follow the path taken by evacuated bodily waste through sewers and drains that strongly resemble the tracts and tunnels of the digestive system. Information travels between these interior sites: questions of flow and blockage pertain not only to individual guts and urban drainage networks, but also to understandings of creativity. Thinking is, for these films, a metabolic and digestive process. In common with the 'great mounds of feed metabolised' in Flush 2023, poetic production is a matter of consumption, absorption, and evacuation.

These are wet films. Soundtracked by hot milk hitting concrete floors, by urine that soaks bed clothes, water that drips and flows, liquids that squirt, rush and spill over, they activate the fluidic to think about the movement of ideas beyond the strict binary oppositions of male/female, scientific/imaginative, interior/exterior and human/animal. In these moist worlds, viscosity, the measure of a given liquid's resistance to flow, serves as a poetic mechanism that signals both circulation and blockage. Clogs in the system often prove more generative than states of flow, sticky intersections where one is forced to sit with difficulty. 'The Warm Decembers' exemplifies the creative potential of getting stuck. Still unfinished after nine years, Sedgwick described the poem as the record of a 'crisis in writing', a slow-burning creative calamity that required she stay with the mess. Lucy's films are invested in the meanings made by congestion, by ideas that cannot be incorporated, by boundaries that remain uncrossed and by the intimacies that prove impossible to forge. Nowhere is this starker than in our relationship with the non-human world. Perhaps the beginnings of Sedgwick's 'crisis in writing' can be traced back to the unincorporated tale of 'man named Miles and a hound named Miles'? The melancholy of this missed connection is echoed in *Flush*. When Barrett Browning and her dog first encounter each other in an overstuffed Victorian drawing room they fail to communicate, as Woolf describes: 'She spoke. He was dumb. She was woman; he was dog. Thus closely united, thus immensely divided, they gazed at each other'. Flush 2023 also worries at the incommensurability of the promise of modern science—knowledge of the freemartin as an experimental subject—with the universe of bovine experience that this occludes. The gestural marks made by the mounting gomer promise insight into the cow as a desiring creature, but the information they impart—who is ready to be inseminated—reveals only the value of the animal body to the fulfilment of human ends. What might those marks mean to the heifer?

In Woolf's *Flush*, the poet's dog is baffled by the black inky marks his mistress makes on the page, because he is engaged in a different kind of poetic composition, a practice borne of the nose rather than the eyes. Humans know, she writes, very little of the 'world of smell', but for Flush 'Love was chiefly a smell; form and colour were a smell [thus] to describe his simplest experience with the chop or biscuit is beyond our power'. A reminder that non-human animals possess forms of sensory knowledge closed to us, it is also a provocation towards the other ways of seeing and knowing that Lucy's films traffic in: the placenta 'sensed' with ink or the intricacies of a protagonist's reproductive system explored through a manufactured avatar (named Evatar). There is something in the use of technologies like the endoscope to see the body from the inside out that resonates with the psychoanalyst Wilfred Bion's use of the gut as a metaphor for psychical processes. In *A Memoir of the Future* (1975) he imagined what it might be to take an intestinal view of himself:

Suppose I used my alimentary canal as a sort of telescope. I could get down to the arse and look up at the mouth full of teeth and tonsils and tongue. Or rush up to the top end of the alimentary canal and watch what my arse-hole was up to. Rather amusing really. It depends what my digestive tract felt about having me scampering up and down the gut all night.

Adopting this bottom-up perspective on the self was, for Bion, one approach to the problem of what he termed 'undigested facts': memories, feelings, sensations, and other fragments of psychic matter that get stuck in the system. Lucy's *Warm Decembers 2022* is clogged with unmetabolized experiences. Spurred by Sedgwick's leftover ideas, the indigestible waste of a 'crisis in writing', the film is occupied by forms of leakage and constipation, creative, bodily, and psychological. Enacted through the bladder of Beatrix, at once too porous and too retentive, its visual language is that of containment and flow.

In the film's opening monologue, Cassie Westwood, reflecting on her own transition wonders: 'What will I keep of what used to be me? What will be staying with me whether I like it or not?'. Probing at the messiness of living with Bion's 'undigested facts', *Warm Decembers 2022* is occupied by questions of interstitially in relation to sex, gender, and identity. In *Reproductive Exile 2018*, interstitial space emerges in the problem of 'hyperstimulation' that can occur when the ovarian follicles are over stimulated by urine-derived hormones used as part of assisted reproduction, resulting in the movement of fluid into a third space in the body, where nestled between cells it bloats the belly in a brutal parodic pregnancy. The generative possibilities of the interstitial are most clearly realised in the body of the freemartin. Altered by the flow of blood across from their male twin and pushing at biological binaries, the 'infertile heifer' substantiates Anne Fausto-Sterling's description of sex differentiation as a process that is always ongoing. Going further than simply defining gender as a construct, Fausto-Sterling argues that what makes biological sex—namely the endocrine system—is itself a product, at least in part, of cultural and environmental factors. Acted upon by myriad environmental, political, economic, and social forces, this porous endocrinological vision refuses the comforting fiction of the autonomous body and instead points to our profound enmeshment with the world. In *Warm Decembers 2022*, it is the creature that lives in Beatrix's lungs—voiced by bagpipes and backward pull of cello bow—that exposes the limits of the self; there lurks *Mycobacterium tuberculosis*, the microorganism that kills her mother and lives on, gestating and reproducing. Made up of organisms that are us but are also not us, we are all—as Cassie has it—'creatures with seams and sutures', defined by multiple, contingent, patchwork natures. As part of her research for *Warm Decembers 2022*, Lucy spent time at a sewage treatment plant in Berlin where scientists are engaged in an unceasing battle with sludge. The Sisyphean task of stabilising this waste material, a riot of bacteria, fungi and protozoa, reveals something of the work that involved in maintaining the fantasy of the human-animal divide. Along similar lines, recent efforts to map the human microbiome have found that living with 'companion species'—dogs, cows, protozoa—means sharing their bacterial flora and fauna. It is to bacteria that we might turn then to realise the kind of cross-species intimacies dreamed by biographies like *Flush*, posited by Sedgwick's poetic ambitions and explored in these three films.

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