

HORRIBLE SUCCESS: FRANKENSTEIN, HYPEROBJECTS AND CONSEQUENTIAL MONSTROSITIES

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It's the end of the world as we know it

It's the end of the world as we know it and I feel fine

Michael Stipe, REM

This catchy 1987 refrain by Michael Stipe captures something of the spirit of our times, three decades on. As around the planet bursts of enthusiasm erupt commemorating and celebrating Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein: or the Modern Prometheus*, there is a coinciding uneasy sentiment that our Promethean tools, our sciences and technologies, have not only enabled miracles but also created monstrosities. Indeed, 'Promethean technology leaves us torn between our salvation and our extinction.'¹ The 'I feel fine' is reflective of apathy, passivity and absence of widespread action to counter the consequences of the monstrous progeny of consumer, capitalist, industrial and new technological societies. In a crippling gesture of powerlessness it is as though it is OK to 'feel fine' here and be ignorant to the 'not so fine' for others, over there.

For the environmental philosopher Timothy Morton these times are the end of the world as we know it, or knew it, or indeed thought it. This is to be taken as the finality of the concept of 'world', along with 'nature', 'environment' and 'horizon.' Morton writes, 'The end of the world occurs when we no longer have a meaningful horizon against which events take shape';² 'Concepts such as world are plausible only when distinctions between *here* and *there*, or *foreground* and *background* are possible.'³ In other words, it is no longer possible to think that our actions here have no effect on what happens over there and vice versa. We do not exist in our 'own world' separate from the greater ecologies. Global warming is all encompassing; it does not happen 'over there', it is right here, right now, we are all within it, breathing it in, regardless of whether we feel fine. In this understanding, the concept of 'world' is akin to simulacra, a construction removed from the lived symbiotic reality. There is no sense in saving this

concept, but rather there is an urgency to acknowledge and act on our embeddedness within and our entanglement with the fellow human and non-human and the forces and substances that not only surround us but also flow through us, pollute and caress us.⁴

Throughout *Frankenstein* Mary Shelley delves into ideas as relevant today as they were 200 years ago. The current zeitgeist could be described as a 'Frankensteinian moment'. This is not the 'it's alive' moment popularised by Frankenstein films, but rather a drawn-out interest in 'aliveness', a parallel era of monstrosities, an intensified period of inquiry, debate and change concerning questions and perceptions of life and how human and non-human bodies are understood. In her circle, Shelley was well acquainted with the sciences, or natural philosophy, of her time and privy to the latest discussions concerning theories of static electricity, alchemy, materialist versus vitalist views of life, theatres of anatomy, body snatchers and anatomy laboratories. This led to a fictional text of vast richness spanning intellectual distances across the sciences, religion, gender, philosophy, ecology, ethics, animal rights, human rights, technology, evolutionary speculation and class. Such a complex text has been reduced to simplistic understandings and misunderstandings in popular culture, broadly theoretically dissected in the humanities and wielded in scientific journals and in the media as a modern myth of the dangers of cutting-edge science. As a gothic tale of nascent science-fiction proportions, it has splintered through society like a cultural hyperobject and, just as did Victor Frankenstein's creature, has taken on a life of its own.

What is so endearing about the story is how it has become and continues to be the default label attached to new and provocatively framed developments in science. In conceiving the creature Victor Frankenstein turns 'away from alchemy and the past towards science and the future – and is rewarded with his horrible success'.⁵ He proceeds to make the creature in absolute isolation, beyond the eyes of a community of peers. As such, *Frankenstein* is not only the first creation story to explore scientific experimentation within the literary sphere; it also presents an intricate discussion about morality and the ethics of both the experiment and experimenter. This dual focus drives its meanings within and beyond the biological sciences, enabling it to become not only a multifaceted meme but also an ethical benchmark for scientific experimentation.

An age of monsters is one required to be addressed by both art and science.⁶ Within the sphere of contemporary arts many artists reflect a concern with the ethics and implications of new scientific developments. There is less anxiety about the individual scientific Frankensteinian experimenter and greater concern with questions about bodies and life more generally, as well as the role of governments, corporations, pharmaceutical companies and the general entropy of industrial-capitalist consumer digital culture. The exhibitions *HyperPrometheus*, curated by Oron Catts, Eugenio Viola and myself, and *Biomess*, curated by Robert Cook, are part of *Unhallowed Arts* – a Perth-wide cultural program of exhibitions, talks, performances and a major conference, *Quite Frankly: It's a Monster Conference*, all pooled together by SymbioticA, the Centre of Excellence in Biological Arts at the University of Western Australia. This book features essays from the curators and invited speakers, conference keynotes and artist statements. The text is intended to explore the broader field, responding to themes within *Unhallowed Arts* and more specifically the *HyperPrometheus* and *Biomess* exhibitions.

HyperPrometheus offers a portal into Anthropocene and Frankensteinian thinking. As well as commemorating the bicentenary of the publication of *Frankenstein*, it addresses how the original ideas presented in the book manifest in various guises within the sciences and broader society today, as seen through the lens of contemporary art. Within an urgent 'Frankensteinian moment', *HyperPrometheus* is not necessarily tied to the anthropological dogma⁷ of humanism found in *Frankenstein*, but also considers the role of non-human creatures in this mess we call living. The selected artists either reference the novel directly, or tangentially engage futuristic speculations and ideas of what life and living is/means in the twenty-first century.

Beginning with the novel, **Erin Coates** nods to *Frankenstein* as a feminist critique of science in an installation titled *She Lives*. She explores an alternative narrative thread of the resurrection of the discarded female creature created by Frankenstein. For Coates, this creature's body is reassembled by entities of the deep ocean and then self-animated to realise the potential of female empowerment, otherwise absent from the story. **Lu Yang** takes a humorous look back at early Galvanism, of which Shelley was familiar, and experiments with the electrical animation of bodies.

Luigi Galvani, the early practitioner of bioelectromagnetics, famously used an electrical current to make the leg of a dead frog twitch. Yang remixes Galvani for the twenty-first century in a video clip where a midi controller is used to make many dead frogs twitch their legs to the beat. Making an explicit link to Prometheus is *OCTOPLASMA* by **Thomas Feuerstein**. This sculpture takes the form of a liver made monstrous through its hybridisation with octopus-like tentacles. The liver was made by/with chemolithotrophic bacteria eating away at the sculpture, analogous to the eagle eating Prometheus's liver.

In light of thought around the Anthropocene, it is unsurprising that 'the *Frankenstein* myth has increasingly come to incorporate and be identified with nonhuman animals.'⁸ In echo of this, Morton writes that, 'Art can now only be an uneasy collaboration between humans and nonhumans.'⁹

This is explicitly reflected in *HyperPrometheus* with artworks such as Feuerstein's. It is also apparent in *Sentinels*, a work by **Nina Sellars**, made and presented with living adipose cells. Sellars combines ancient symbolism with contemporary biological science and provokes

thought on the pan-spatiotemporality of hyperobjects through juxtaposing the ancient Greek kouros with an adipose tissue-cultured kouros. **Tarsh Bates** takes us to the more intimate space of *Candida albicans*, as it lives and thrives in the pattern of gothic wallpaper. Here a micro-organism that is ever present, invisible to the eye and both benign and inflammatory within host bodies, is cared for and used as artistic material.

From the micro to the macro and considering the consequential monstrosities of our era, **Erich Berger** and **Mari Keto** question our responsibility for the monstrous hyperobject of nuclear radiation. Frankenstein was overcome by crippling repulsion and rejected his creature, and this mirrors the rejection and denial of nuclear waste and of the repercussions of nuclear technology. In the work *Open Care*, Berger and Keto ask us to care for a monstrosity that yields debilitating consequences for humanity and other life forms on planet Earth.

TO EXAMINE THE CAUSES OF LIFE, WE MUST FIRST HAVE RECOURSE TO DEATH

SHELLEY, MARY. "FRANKENSTEIN."

Turning to the ecology of the planet then, *Frankenstein* is in part an analysis of ‘the horrifying but predictable consequences of an uncontrolled technological exploitation of nature.’¹⁰ Today there is burgeoning research into synthetic biology as a field of biotechnology concerned with designing and engineering previously non-existent biological systems. In *Designing for the Sixth Extinction*, **Alexandra Daisy Ginsberg** questions the role of synthetic biological devices as a solution for a dead and dying ecosystem, and speculates about the real-world application and ethical consequences of synthetic biology as saviour (or monstrosity). **Olga Kisseleva** then turns away from the synthetic to the organic communication of trees. In *E D E N* she transforms the encrypted molecular communication of trees into a pan-geographical open network.

Hayden Fowler brings our attention to the creatures of our world with the work *New World Order*. Here ideas of genetic engineering and environmental decay are considered through a dystopian, Frankensteinian landscape inhabited by uncanny birdlife that are either synthetically engineered or have evolved through mutation. Either way, these strange hybrids echo other hybridised bodies throughout the exhibition, as seen in the works of **Daniel Lee**, **Sam Jinks** and **AES+F**, each of whom present monstrous assemblages of human and non-human.

Many of today’s debates concerning human bodies, especially those deemed criminal, have to do with DNA. In *Probably Chelsea* **Heather Dewey-Hagborg** and **Chelsea E. Manning** critique the reductionism of DNA profiling. Whistleblower Manning sent Hagborg samples of her DNA with which Hagborg created 30 different portraits. This demonstrates the multiple stories DNA can tell and the fickleness of claims to truth based on DNA forensics.

A familiar utopian speculation about escape from the ruins of ecology and from material embodiment involves virtual technologies and robotics. The body within the technosphere is explored by **ORLAN** in *La liberté en écorchée [Skinned Liberty]*. In this video, medical imagery is used to represent the artist’s body as flayed and, as such, symbolically relieved from stereotypes and prejudice attached to skin. **ORLAN** slowly crouches down then rises, taking on the stance of the statue of liberty. It is a contested freedom, however, as is made evident through *StickMan* by

Stelarc, which celebrates the obsolete body, with the body overcome by control through robotics. Here the remnants of a performance enables the audience to interact with a miniature stick man to effect the movements of the larger exoskeleton stick man once attached to and manipulating the movement of the body of Stelarc.

Stelarc's ideas are reflected in the performance work of **Justin Shoulder**. In *Carrion*, Shoulder embodies a hybrid cyborgian creature spouting polemical futuristic words as its body jolts and morphs beyond human before our eyes. Finally, **Kira O'Reilly** brings us back to the female body, where life, still, for all humans, begins.

The associated exhibition as part of Unhallowed Arts, *Biomess* at the Art Gallery of Western Australia, reflects some of the ideas and monstrosities of *HyperPrometheus*. It is a collaboration between Oron Catts and Ionat Zurr as the Tissue Culture & Art Project with Western Australian Museum and the Art Gallery of Western Australia. *Biomess* critically celebrates the messiness of life within the language of objects of desire. It is about the hubristic and monstrous acts of the commodification of life. In the exhibition two rooms mirror each other; one contains preserved specimens and living organisms considered 'un-normative' and the other contains hybridoma cells – hybridised cells of two different species fused together – 'designed by humans in the name of "progress"', yet 'dependent on human technology for their survival'.¹¹ The exhibition challenges preconceptions about categories, classifications and understandings of life and its impact.

Morton frames these times, the nascent years of the twenty-first century, as not only the 'end of the world' but also the era of hyperobjects. He talks about being lost inside hyperobjects as these invisible forces that insidiously impact upon and within us, like plutonium, or global warming, or plastic. They are 'massively distributed entities that can be thought and computed, but not directly touched or seen'.¹² They define the period of the Anthropocene. Hyperobjects make us palpably aware of an ecologically troubled era in which there is a greater demand than ever for awareness, responsibility and accountability, as against denial, hypocrisy and inaction. A plausible start date for the Anthropocene is around the time Shelley wrote *Frankenstein*, during the 'year without a summer', with a darkened sky over

parts of Europe resulting from the eruption of the Mount Tambora volcano in Indonesia. This was the end of the Romantic period (1780–1830), which was witness to the beginnings of industrialisation, the release of greenhouse gases and depositing of a new layer of human-made materials onto the Earth's surface.

In writing *Frankenstein*,

Shelley saw that new technology alone was not a threat, but that ethical problems could arise when humans use technology for wealth, status, or sheer ambition without thinking carefully about the possible dangers of their work.¹³

In a ruthless grab for power over life itself, Victor Frankenstein feverishly launches into his work saying, 'I began the creation of a human being'.¹⁴ Contrary to popular belief the singular being created is not assembled and resurrected from human body parts alone: 'The dissecting room *and* the slaughterhouse furnished many of my materials [emphasis added]'.¹⁵ Frankenstein's monster is a new species, an interspecies hybrid. The sacred (hallowed) yet illusory boundaries delineating the human from the non-human are transgressed in an unhallowed act. Following this the novel in part asks if there should be rights afforded to non-human, sentient creatures. This is a hot topic of animal studies. To add to this, current scientific understanding does not view the boundaries between human and non-human as so strict (or indeed sacred) to begin with. The human is not simply human but, following Lyn Margulis, a holobiont,¹⁶ already a – potentially monstrous – assemblage of different species. We are only made aware of the monsters within when they disagree with our corporeal comfort, such as an aggravated stomach microbiome or candida turning to thrush.

The novel is also a call upon humankind to care for its creations, however ugly, monstrous, messy or uncomfortable they may be, to take responsibility for and seriously consider the successes, failures and the fuzzy zone in between of Promethean sciences and technologies. It is also a call for the acceptance of difference. With Frankenstein's creature, Shelley 'dredged up a bogymen which had been constructed out of a cultural tradition of the threatening "Other" – whether troll or giant, gypsy or Negro –

from the dark inner recesses of xenophobic fear and loathing.¹⁷ Predictably, mass rejection follows suit. This is a familiar and tired narrative (and parallel reality) that demands different responses and alternative storylines. While Promethean technologies have enabled humankind the illusion of separation from the rest of the world, with the 'rest of the world' at the disposal of industrialised nations, it is no longer an illusion, or indeed a reality, that can be viably sustained.

It might not be useful to think of 'world' in romantic terms; there is, however, still a need to think of the planet Earth, especially given that 'the certainty of what counts as nature – a source of insight and a promise of innocence – is undermined, probably fatally.'¹⁸ Critical to *how* we think of Earth and how we think through ideas of world and worlding is a deeper ecological awareness about human existence as not separate from the world and its various entities but veritably entangled.¹⁹ In the Australian context this would mean more deeply listening to First Nations people's knowledge and traditions of connection to the land. Echoing this, Morton, borrowing from Bruno Latour, calls for a 'geophilosophy'. This is a philosophy that does not think simply in terms of human events and human significance. Instead it posits a symbiotic reality, a messy and permeable reality. In this sense worlding becomes holistic and flattened, over there *is* here and our core ideas about existence shift from debilitating states of denial, hypocrisy and inaction, from impotent reactions of melancholy, disgust and horror, towards respect, empathy, an ethics of care and responsibility, across the spectrum of human, non-human and the strange and uncanny things we call monsters.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Hartmut Bohme, “All is lithogenesis”. Of stones, rivers and deep biospheres. The Prometheus works of Thomas Feuerstein’, in Sabine Adler (ed.), *Thomas Feuerstein: Prometheus Delivered*, Eres Stiftung, Munich, 2018, p. 104.
- 2 Timothy Morton, ‘What Does Hyperobjects Say’, 28 December 2012, viewed 12 June 2018, <<http://ecologywithoutnature.blogspot.com.au/2012/12/what-does-hyperobjects-say.html>>.
- 3 Timothy Morton, ‘Poisoned ground: art and philosophy in the time of hyperobjects’, *symptome*, vol. 21, nos 1–2, 2013, p. 39.
- 4 Laetitia Wilson, in *Lea Kannar Lichtenberger: Distorted Truths*, exhibition catalogue, Spectrum Project Space, May 2018.
- 5 Brian W. Aldiss & David Wingrove, ‘On the origin of the species: Mary Shelley’, in James Gunn & Matthew Candelaria (eds), *Speculations on Speculation: Theories of Science Fiction*, The Scarecrow Press, Toronto, 2005, p. 183.
- 6 Conversation with Elizabeth Stephens.
- 7 See Cary Wolfe, *What is Posthumanism*, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis, 2009.
- 8 Sean McQueen, ‘Biocapitalism and schizophrenia: rethinking the Frankenstein barrier’, *Science Fiction Studies*, vol. 41, no. 1, 2014, p. 121.
- 9 Morton, ‘Poisoned ground’, p. 50.
- 10 Anne K. Mellor, ‘Making a “monster”: an introduction to Frankenstein’, in Esther Schor (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Mary Shelley*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2003, p. 9.
- 11 See Ionat Zurr & Oron Catts, *Biomess*, in this book, pp. xx–xx.
- 12 Morton, ‘Poisoned ground’, p. 37.
- 13 Ann Jurecic & Daniel Marchalik, ‘Dr Frankenstein’s bioethical experiment’, *The Lancet*, vol. 389, no. 10088, 2017, p. 2465.
- 14 Shelley, Mary, *Frankenstein*, Clydesdale Press, New York, 2018 [1818], p. 54.
- 15 *ibid.*, p. 23.
- 16 Lynn Margulis, ‘Symbiogenesis and symbiogenesis’, in L. Margulis & R. Fester (eds), *Symbiosis as a Source of Evolutionary Innovation: Speciation and Morphogenesis*, MIT Press, Cambridge, MA, 1991, pp. 1–14.
- 17 H. L. Malchow, ‘Frankenstein’s monster and images of race in nineteenth-century Britain’, *Past & Present*, no. 139, 1993, p. 103.
- 18 Donna J. Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature*, Verso, London, 1991, p. 194.
- 19 Wilson, *Lea Kannar Lichtenberger: Distorted Truths*.