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The Life Inertia – Vibration, Sound Sculpture and Transhumanism in the Technological Reliquaries

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Abstract

This article focuses on the series of works entitled 'Technological Reliquaries' by Paul Thek made between (1964-67), and their propensity as (un)sound sculptures. I would like to introduce the notion of Thek's work being a concern of vibration, and thus a series of sound (or unsound) sculptures. Following from the themes of morbidity, inertness and life itself that are embodied within the Technological Reliquaries, I would like to extend this understanding to one of *speculative resonance*. Vibration, energy and electromagnetism are discussed in relation to entropic processes of change that determine the meat pieces as sound works first and foremost; or as AUDINT collective have argued, that of '*unsound*'. Sound sculptures have historically been understood in relation to the development of performative and time-based installations in Western art. Thek's *Reliquaries* are an extension of this, where their unsound is projected through their dilapidating, vibrational forms. The specifically transhuman nature of these works relates to the morphology of humans with technology and the fluidity of one to the other, where the processes of entropic vibration are the only thing that separates (and connects) the two. Transhumanism and sound sculpture are argued as one and the same through their processes of morphological change, entropy, and concern for a speculative electromagnetism.

Key Words

Vibration, Entropy, Sound Sculpture, Unsound, Transhumanism, Paul Thek, Technological Reliquaries, Speculative Resonance

Introduction

*"I am a hybrid denatured human - hybrid of the bio-matrix of the corporate medical industries.
My death has been postponed until further notice."*

John A Douglas and Nadege Desgenetez L'Intrus No 1 and L'Intrus No 2, Spare Parts:
Rethinking Human Repair Exhibition 28 February - 12 May 2019 Science Gallery London.

This article focuses on the series of works entitled 'Technological Reliquaries' by Paul Thek made between (1964-67), and their propensity as (un)sound sculptures. These works, also known as his 'Meat Pieces', are a succession of wax meat and human limb sculptures encased in Plexiglass. Known as some of Thek's most renowned interventions, the fake flesh, gristle, pores and bubbling red sinews, stand in stark contrast to the clean compactness of the manufactured plastic boxes that the clumps of body are installed within. The clean lines of the containers are reminiscent of Minimalism and Pop Art whilst contrasted with the gritty reality of the extant Vietnam war, a deliberate memorandum by Thek of the disconnect between American art world elitism and the violent acts the country was partaking in at the time.

It is through the anatomical, organic and seemingly unfinished nature of these meat critiques of conflict and the emptiness of contemporary modern art, that I would like to introduce the notion of Thek's work being a concern of vibration, and thus a series of sound (or unsound) sculptures. Following from the themes of morbidity, inertness and life itself that are embodied within the Technological Reliquaries, I would like to extend this understanding to one of 'sympathetic resonance' (Trower, 2019: 24), an opportunity to see a compound inertia and vitality within the pretend flesh, that is vibrating and changing, beyond the acetate cages in which they sit. Indeed, the plastic boxes are also unfinished, decaying/becoming too, denoting the lack of split between the human and machine, the defunct binary of the organic and inorganic that lands us in the contemporary world of 'transhumanism', the concern for human evolution through technology.

Vibration, energy and electromagnetism are discussed in relation to entropic processes of change that determine the meat pieces as sound works first and foremost; or as AUDINT collective have argued, that of *unsound* "which extend[s] audition to encompass the imperceptible and the not-yet or no-longer audible" (AUDINT, 2019, 1). The specifically transhuman nature of these works relates to the morphology of humans with technology and the fluidity of one to the other, where the processes of entropic vibration are the only thing that separates (and connects) the two.

Resonance has been argued as a 'phenomenon of conjunction', the blurring of the boundary between subject and object (Davis, 2019) and it is through Thek's visceral encryption of death, decay and life within these pieces, that this essay seeks to unravel the nature of vibration, energy, sound and unsound within his early anti-Vietnam work.

The connection between sound sculpture and transhumanism will be interrogated through their shared concern for morphological change, the flow of electromagnetism, and the movement of time and entropy within both.

This analysis of Thek's meat works, hopes to show his importance as an artist in understanding the organicness of the transhuman, the role of vibration in breaking down artificial boundaries and binaries, and what it means to be a being (or non-being)-in-the-world, at all. The pieces are ultimately argued as petrified and inert vibration, transcending their role as sculptures to communicate kinesis through their morphological autonomy as amputated transhuman objects.

The discussion will be interjected with scenes from a conversation between Paul Thek, Susan Sontag, and a pacemaker, of which is my own. The choice of these works has been inspired by my own practice and the experience of living with a pacing device installed to regulate my heartbeat.

THERE WERE MANY REASONS WHY WE COULDN'T CARRY ON THAT DAY. I FELL TO
MY KNEES AND REMEMBERED NOTHING BUT THE SCREAM OF WHAT MIGHT BE
AHEAD.

WE WERE THE DIRT LEFT OUTSIDE, THERE WAS NO SUCH THING AS PURITY
WHERE THE CLEAN CONTOURS OF THE LINES THAT DREW US WERE MANUFACTURED
AND COLONISING ALL MINDSPACE.

DESPITE MY AVERSIONS, I DECIDED TO PUT MY WORRIES TO ONE SIDE AND
JUST SPEAK TO HIM, AND HER.

MY LEFT LEAD WAS DEFUNCT AND I FELT SELF-CONSCIOUS OF MY
IMPERFECTION.

Thek, Critique and the Technological Reliquaries

"My work is insulting to our sense of the humane [...], insulting to art history in terms of the subject matter, only people who want to be ruffled can truly appreciate what's happening in modern art. In that way it's sado-masochistic."

Paul Thek cited in Holland Cotter Thek's Social Reliquaries *Art in America* 78, no. 6 (1990), 138.

Paul Thek known as an 'artist's artist' for a critical authenticity and aloofness that many creatives may relate to (Thek in Cotter, 1990: 128). He was born in New York's Brooklyn in 1933 and is described in texts and accounts of him as a person, to be a beautiful-looking figure,

an encapsulating character of intensity and sensitivity, a very sexual and sensual person. Susan Sontag described him as the 'most important person in her life' (Cotter, 1990: 138), Thek having a presence and telling that was inscribed upon those he met from his good looks through to the pull of his practice.

Most of the work that Thek made is no longer in existence, having been either destroyed deliberately or in transit and lack of storage, and largely due to Thek's very site specific and temporally based pieces. Thek is known to have been the artist to develop the genre of installation art, where the work itself is put up and taken down within the fabric of the exhibition space, and rarely exists outside. It was around the same time as the development of installation pieces that sound works also entered Western visual arts. Some of his most famous works such as the wax effigy of himself, *'The Tomb'* (1967) (see Figure 1) was later to be lost in transit, built within the confines of the Stable Gallery in New York.

Figure 1 Thek Studio Shoot Thek working on Tomb Effigy (photograph by Peter Hujar) (1967)

This absence of conservation is testament to his fraught relationship with the art world, and his critique of it. Making some of his most prominent pieces during the 1960s, he was to be mainly forgotten later in life other than some posthumous acclaim and regard for his influence in retrospectives and similar art historical reflections. As one critic stated, "*One has the feeling that art history has purposely misrepresented Thek—or left him out entirely*" (Kelley, 2003: 14) due to his anti-commercial stance and vocal dismay of the American art scene particularly, making him not the choice representative of his oeuvre.

As a deeply religious person, Thek was a self-proclaimed Catholic, the connection to his faith and the spiritual percolating into his work through his concern for the corporeal, mortality and reverence for the putrescence of life. He is known to have once told curator Harold Szeemann: "*Art is Liturgy, and if the public responds to their sacred character, then I hope I realised my aim, at least at that instance.*" (Belonsky, 2013). Despite the seemingly traditional connotations of his religious persuasions, Thek was openly expressive of his bisexuality at a time when it was neither legal nor socially permissible to do so. He was known to have relationships with men and women, notably Paul Hujar, Joseph Raphael, Peter Harvey, as well as his oft more-than-friendship with cultural critic Susan Sontag. Sontag's famous text *'Against Interpretation'* (1966), was dedicated to him, inspired by his response to her intellectualisation of art and distance from practice, where Thek was to have proclaimed himself against any of her attempts at interpreting his work, extorting: "*Susan, stop, stop. I'm against interpretation. We don't look at art when we interpret it. That's not the way to look at art*" (Moser, 2019: 203).

Figure 2 Paul Thek Susan lecturing on Nietzsche (1987)

Her essay *'AIDS and its Metaphors'* (1989) as a reflection on the then pandemic was also dedicated to Thek acknowledging his HIV diagnosis and later fatal battle with the onset of AIDS itself, dying of related illnesses in 1988. Reflecting his premature demise, death (and therefore themes of life and vitality) was an inevitable force within Thek's work, redacted and reflected

through the materiality of the body that he so viscerally displayed within his meat pieces: *"Thek believed that death and decay were a part of life"* (Lynn Zelevensky in Venkatasubban, 2011).

At the time of making Thek's most iconic series of works, the 'Technological Reliquaries' (1964-67), and inspiration for this essay, the United States was ensconced in war with Vietnam, whilst the pretty sleekness of the Minimalist and Pop Art movements, and within these, sound art perambulations, would not have given this story away.

The organicness of Thek's dripping and burgeoning (whilst decaying) meat pieces of this period, have been understood as a deliberate move to contrast with the vacuity of Minimalism; the unreal purity of the Sixties movement that only shrouded the ongoing violence on bodies; the death and decomposition being experienced during the Vietnam War. The containers of these seemingly bereft limbs were encased in the hyper modern material of Plexiglass, the almost void space of the pristine shapes in stark contrast to the organic debris of the dismembered flesh. In his own words, reflecting on the political nature of his sculptural interventions: *"In New York at that time there was such an enormous tendency toward the minimal, the non-emotional, the anti-emotional even, that I wanted to say something again about emotion, about the ugly side of things. I wanted to return the raw human fleshy characteristics to the art"* (Belonskey, 2019). His dismembered remnants of past bodies have been seen as specifically meditative of modern death in the nuclear age, a time not long after the dropping of the nuclear bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki, and a direct critique of aggressive American foreign policy (Johnson, 2014: 221). His positioning at odds with the commerciality of the art world at the time was recognised by Warhol who allowed one of his silk-screened Brillo boxes to be used as pastiche by Thek in his *'Meat piece with Warhol Brillo Box'* (1965) (Figure 3). The famous *trompe l'oeil* of Warhol's household cleaning container replaced the usual Perspex and was filled with the wax-made red muscle and tissue, a demonstrable ridiculing of high art and low reality.

Figure 3 Paul Thek Meat piece with Warhol Brillo Box (1965)

These encased mutilated artefacts were undoubtedly to influence later artists such as Damien Hirst, Otto Dix and Berlinde de Bruyckere. Other works from around the world. The pieces not only comment on American politics and creative industries but also are an effigy of science, humanmade technological advancement and the processes of industry. Originally shown at the Stable Gallery and Pace Galleries in New York, the group of meat pieces of the Technological Reliquaries were later exhibited as part of 'Paul Thek: Diver, a Retrospective' October 21 2010 - Jan 10 2011 at the Whitney Museum of American Art (see Sussman and Zelevansky, 2010).

Looking specifically at some of the sculptures, we can see how the organisms contrast with the surrounding plastic. Figure 4 *'Untitled (Meat Piece with Flies)'* (1965) brings us to the hapticity of death, where what appears to be a ligament or almost spinal remnant is being returned to the earth as the flies enjoy the morsel on which they feast. A less than subtle narration of the immortality of flesh, apparently human but possibly otherwise, Figure 5 *'Meat Sculpture with Butterflies'* (1966) similarly suggests a metamorphosis and parasitic extension of life beyond the

mutilated form, and perhaps a transformation reaching beyond, with and through the supposedly inert synthetic frame.

Figure 4 Paul Thek Untitled (Meat Piece with Flies) (1965) and Figure 5 Paul Thek Meat Sculpture with Butterflies (1966)

For the purposes of this exposition of Thek's work, the 'Untitled (Four Tube Meat Piece)' (1964) in Figure 6 is of interest, bringing together machine, flesh, cables, grids, tubes and all things mechanical and organic. Behind a protruding metallic glass cage, a giant slab of red meat cascades from a mirror behind it - it is caught in a trap, as if cut off from another body, or cut *out* of another body and encapsulated within the confines of its' prison's contours. The work seems to emanate reliance, dependence, where the reflective backdrop suggests a history, a past, a state of being transformed into that moment - that slab of meat, inert and solid, and yet it moved before. The flesh is petrified, it feels frozen, where life is removed and yet duly present through the state in which it has been captured, both metaphorically and within the wax material that Thek has chosen to use. There is an echo to the meat form as something within and without it reaches beyond its metallic confines.

Figure 6 Paul Thek Untitled (Four Tube Meat Piece) (1964)

The translucence of wax is a reminder of the layering of skin, Xerox upon Xerox of porosity between bodies and their external worlds, where they are just one moment away from one another, intermittent in the quantum field and merging, bifurcating. This is a bodily threshold, "... *inseparable from passages to the limit as changes of state, from processes of deformation or transformation*" (Deleuze and Guatari, 2003: 407). According to De Kooning, "flesh is the reason oil paint was made", some who was an inspiration of Thek's, as well as Jasper Johns. John's work is present within Thek's - the encaustic translucence of the oil paint, found on chopped up body parts such as found in his 'Target with Plaster Casts' (1955) reminiscent of the waxed and frayed dermis of the meat artefacts (Amy, 2014: 38).

"BE CAREFUL NOT TO MISREPRESENT ME" SHE SAID, OVER THE BROW OF HER SPECTACLES AND THROUGH THE MIST OF BROWN WAVES THAT FELL ABOUT HER FACE. SHE HAD BEEN WRITING ALL MORNING AND HAD BARELY HAD A CHANCE TO CHECK ON DAVID. DAVID WAS HER SON, AND ONE THAT MOVED BETWEEN PLACE TO PLACE WITH HER LIKE A SHEEP, OR SOME KIND OF PLAYTOY.

SHE PRETTY MUCH IGNORED ME, BECAUSE HE WAS THERE.

PAUL WAS TALL, ARYAN-LOOKING WITH A SLEEK FRAME. HE SEEMED QUITE MAGICAL, DIFFERENT - VERY SENSUAL, AS IF I COULD FEEL HE WANTED TO TOUCH ME. HE SAT BY THE WINDOW, STROKING THE ARM OF THE CHAIR HE WAS SITTING IN - NEW YORK SUNLIGHT STREAMING IN. HE SEEMED CAUGHT IN AN INNER PROCESS, AS IF THERE WAS A SUCCUMBING TO SOMETHING, A SURRENDER.

The Lonely Transhuman breaches the Subject-Object

“With equidistant, parallel yellow lines running down the glass (thereby allowing us to measure the contents), these sci-fi reliquaries seem to have been brought back from a grim future, when human and animal life will be reduced to nothing more than hermetically isolated lumps of meat.”

Michaël Amy The Meat Sculpture of Paul Thek *Sculpture* December (2014) 36-39.

There is a metallurgy to the *Untitled (Four Tube Meat Piece)* that despite its confines, communicates an air of freedom, within that cage, where it almost feels a relief to be separated, telling the viewer of a binary of reliance that is one of independence. It is so reliant on those metallic tubes, and yet it has been released from whatever it was connected to. It is its own body. The tubes invite us in to relate, to move in and celebrate with this lonely morsel that was once a part of, experiencing the world entirely to itself. And yet clearly determined by its correspondence to the machine, the cage as its identity, its life-force that might have run through those allegorical veins, has left - and it seems relieved.

What do these sculptures tell about the nature of being human, being transhuman? Heidegger's statement that the *"essence of technology is by no means anything technical," but rather something 'po(i)etic'*" (Heidegger, 1977: 13) is resonant when we consider the meat pieces, and the manner in which the work arguably induces a oneness to synthetic and alluvial matter, the creative and productive processes at play within and through the making of the sculptures. Despite a partitioned appearance of plastic and organic matter, there is a lack of distinction between the human and machine, the technological and the organic, played out in Thek's reliquaries. At what point does one entity become another, appears to be clear through the spatially emplaced plastic encasements, and the contrasting atrophy of the wax; and yet these pieces raise the question of whether the contents and the container are indeed separate at all. A grounding thinker as to our interconnectedness with technology is that of Donna Haraway, her 'A Cyborg Manifesto' (Haraway, 1991: 149-182), first written in the 80s, a call to consider our lack of distinction between ourselves and our electronic devices; that we are just as organically enmeshed with them as we might be flora and fauna, perceived as separate to humans or as 'nature'. As a rally cry against the violent separation of dualisms, the mind/body, white/black, male/female, human/nonhuman, Haraway describes the relation between the organism and machine as a 'border war' (Haraway, 1991: 150) animated through her powerful text that sought to overcome patriarchal constructs exerting power over the female form; a new feminist-technological ontology free of biological and ideological constraints.

Haraway describes a cyborg as a "cybernetic organism, a hybrid of machine and organism, a creature of social reality as well as a creature of fiction". When looking at Thek's meat sculptures, where the meat ends and the Perspex begins can become less obvious. This itinerance of one being the other that poses questions of form, a morphic movement that is entropic and a kind of sublimation (Leslie, 2015).

Haraway's work is foundational in the now highly influential multi-disciplinary, multi-practice project of posthumanism and the questions posed in her manifesto for techno-genesis have become increasingly prevalent as we continue to face the impact of our relation with the natural world. Recent formulations of posthumanist feminist philosophy 'new materialism' has been come through the work of Haraway's earlier work. New materialism posits that there is an aliveness and alertness to seemingly inert matter, that further breaks down barriers between the human and non-human to the quantum, electric and energetic level (see Barad 2007, Braidotti, 2019). Within this, 'transhumanism' which is of specific relevance to the human/machine interface, is alertly displayed in the Reliquaries. Transhumanism has alternating tenets, however a general understanding alludes to evolutionary human development in relation to technology and our incorporation of the machine within the human body. The body is a key site for the transhuman, the space of poiesis whereby as technologist Max Tegmark argues, we will move beyond Life 2.0, "*life that evolves its hardware but designs much of its software*", to Life 3.0 "*life that designs its hardware and its software*" (Tegmark, 2017: 39). For some transhumanists, of central importance is 'morphological freedom' (see Roden, 2015: 14-15), the freedom of physical and mental form through technologies used for enhancement of the body. This was explicitly expressed in the 1998 Transhumanist Declaration of the World Transhumanist Association under article 4:

"Transhumanists advocate the moral right for those who so wish to use technology to extend their mental and physical (including reproductive) capacities and to improve their control over their lives. We seek personal growth beyond our biological limitations."

The body is of course continually central for Thek. Thek's concern for the corporeal is indelibly connected to his visit to the Capuchin catacombs of Palermo in 1963, where he was imprinted with the image of "*8000 corpses ... used to decorate a room, like flowers.*" (Thek in Amy, 2014: 39). It is within this fascination for vital processes and their ending, the life cycle, death and decay and the genesis of life itself, that these works speak to a transhumanism, perhaps seeking to overcome or redefine the boundedness of the flesh, and can be described as transhuman in themselves. What transhumanism tells us about sound in sculpture we will come to shortly.

Transhumanists such as Nick Bostrom, Ray Kurzweil, Ted Chu propose a benevolent future aligned much to a Nietzschean *ubermensch*, the superhuman who can overcome all; technology being part of "*evolution as the key to release from constraints of our biology*" (Chu, 2014: 13). Ted Chu stated, "*We can have faith in the posthuman future because, if we examine what we know today and keep an open mind, we can perceive a movement in the universe toward higher levels of complexity and consciousness that is as convincing as experiencing the power of love of the beauty of the natural world,*" in relation to his vision of a CoBe (Cosmic Beings) (2014: 27, 364-373).

Within debates between experts, there is believed to be a moment of technological intelligence explosion where technology will outsmart that of humans to create a 'superintelligence' at such a rate of evolution akin to the Industrial and Agricultural Revolutions; this is known as the

moment of 'singularity' (see Bostrom, 2014 for a general discussion of singularity and the pros and cons of a transhuman future). When we consider this superhumanity in relation to the meat works, perhaps there is a moment of reflection where the vulnerability of the pieces comes to the fore, and how in a lot of instances transhumanism may only be about human repair as opposed to human-techno superfluity.

A version of *homo technologicus* (Warwick, 2016: 199–208) and a critique of culture's exclusion of technology is found in the writings of 1950s sociologist Gilbert Simondon who states "*the opposition drawn between culture and technics, between man and machine, is false and has no foundation*" (Simondon, [1958] 2017: 15). He speaks specifically of the mode of existence of technological objects, as those which extend from the human but he also infers an autonomy expressed and inhabited by those objects, almost as subjects. This 'hylomorphism', matter and form and the confluence of human mind with technology coming together as "*ontogenesis and the conditions of an individuation (placing into relation form, information, and potential)*" (Simondon, 15), takes us back to the Thekian meat slabs that infer a cut and estranged body elsewhere, and yet are similarly appearing content and whole in themselves.

The meat pieces have before been described as 'anti-objects' that have no specific semiotic reference outside of themselves (Sifkin, 2011: 103-105). And yet this discussion so far infers a breaking down of object as subject, and vice versa, reminiscent of object-oriented-ontological understandings of reality that seek to account for the existence of the external world despite our human difficulty in accessing this outside of our own perceptual limitations. This goes back to Immanuel Kant's determination that we cannot perceive anything outside of ourselves without the filter of our own minds; or as philosopher Amy Ireland surmises, "*the transcendental conditioning of experience itself is a degenerative noise that degrades the clarity of its external input, rendering it unintelligible and ultimately inaccessible to internal modes of apprehension*" (Ireland, 2016: 222). Considering this, how can we know if there is an animism within those meat pieces, if we are always constrained by our consciousness? Recent realist thought would inhere that we can only *speculate* on any sentience within the meat pieces, accepting our preceptive confines, whilst not ruling out the possibility of such, nor seeking to define and prescribe what that sentience may be like (see Meillassoux, 2008; Harman, 2010; 2016).

The loneliness of the meat within the plastic confines, incurs an empathy, a concern for the health of the half being, or the cauterised full being, found within those synthetic encasements. Just as Simondon ([1958] 2017: 16) describes,

"The machine is the stranger; it is the stranger inside which something human is locked up, misunderstood, materialised, enslaved, and yet which nevertheless remains human all the same. The most powerful cause of alienation in the contemporary world resides in this misunderstanding of the machine, which is not an alienation caused by the machine, but by the non-knowledge of its nature and its essence."

“SO, ARE YOU IN SOME WAY CONNECTED TO A HEART?”, HE ASKED ME, APPARENTLY OUT OF NOWHERE AS I WAS IMMERSSED IN HIS THOUGHTS, THE CHAIR, THE SUNNY WINDOW, AND WHAT WAS GOING ON BETWEEN HIM, AND HER.

“OH, YES, WELL I AM INDEED, IT'S STRANGE TO THINK I KNOW. I PUNCTURE TWO CHAMBERS”, I EXPLAIN, IT ALL SEEMED AN ODD DISCUSSION IN WHAT SEEMED A SMALL TALK SETTING.

PAUL LOOKED AT ME AS IF I WERE AN ALIEN, A STRANGE OUT-OF-BODY, OUT-OF-HUMAN BEING. MAYBE THAT'S EXACTLY WHAT I AM. HE SEEMED FASCINATED AND PERPLEXED, NONETHELESS.

Sound Sculpture and Transhumanism

The concern for the posthuman and our relation with technology has been no less the specific subject of contemporary art practices, through the work of other artists such as Patricia Piccinini (2016; 2017) who question the ethics of biotechnology and the animal-human relation, and Stelarc (2006-Present) who works with prosthetics and robotics to promote his own transhumanism. Similarly, the 'bioart' of the Tissue Culture Art Project and Spela Petrič's 'Plant-Human Monsters' are examples of contemporary artists who play with the human/nonhuman binary by producing art that self-creates. See Tissue Culture and Art Project (2014); Petrič (2016). But how does transhumanism relate to sound sculpture? And how can these pieces of pretend meat be anything but emitting noise and vibration?

Sound sculpture is an area of sound art and sound studies that has not had as much focus as other sonic manipulations. There is a concern for the materiality of sound (Keylin, 2015: 183), the physicality of sound-making, the totality of aesthetic experience created by the pieces as well as an ability to engage the audience on a visceral level (Partch in Keylin, 2015: 187). A wider context of sound art in which sound sculpture sits has been described by Cox as “a practice situated between and beyond music and the visual arts” (2018: 1). The difference between sculpture, sound art and sound sculpture are all points on this continuum of materiality that can easily collapse into one another, demonstrating their capacity to be one and the same.

In the West, sculpture changed its perambulations over the course of the sixties and seventies where performance crossed over into non-permanent sculpture events. By the end of the Seventies, sound, light, energy and motion were seen as part of the media that could be incorporated into a visual arts toolbox. Paul Kos' 'The Sound of Ice Melting' (1970), a piece created during the same political backdrop of the Vietnam war as that of Thek's meat pieces, included a twenty-five pound block of ice surrounded by eight microphones, as if a press conference commonly reporting on the events of the war at the time. This piece crossed the

division of performance and sculpture, where the movement of the ice into water through recordings of the drips was reminiscent of the Zen practice of *koan*, the sound of one hand clapping. Kos' work is the kind of sculptural installation that Lucy Lippard referred to as a 'dematerialisation work' where "the artists' refusal to objectify or solidly alters the conventional expectations for sculpture as something durable, discreetly formed or built, balanced from part to part, or substantially refined in numerous ways" (Lippard in Kelly, 2020: 9).

The role of time, and the movement of energy, is central to the inclusion of sound within sculpture. Len Lye, famous for his 'tangible' sound pieces such as *Fountain* (1959) and *Universe* (1963-76), describes the difference between an 'intangible' piece of sound art that harnesses the direction of the wind, over his 'tangible' works that require mobilisation: "Tangible motion tends to be rhythmic and vibratory, while that of the free-hanging mobile tends to move to a beauty of chance tensions, such as wind, touch, heat, and so on" (Len Lye in Kelly, 2020: 18). Within Lye's work, amongst others such as Max Neuhaus, Oswaldo Maciá, Takis, as well as Fluxus artists Yoko Ono, Nam June Paik and George Maciunas, sculptural practices that employ sound as a medium there is a desire to assimilate and expose the movement of energy as a fundamental force of nature. This challenge to acknowledge and work with 'sonic flux', that which is the flow of matter-energy-information (Cox, 2018: 2), as something to be channeled and captured in sculptural form, is central to the concern of sound sculpture, and most certainly the sculptures of Thek's meat effigies through their propensity for unsound which will be discussed shortly. This juxtaposition between the gathering of sound as an object, or as a moment in the effluxion of time, brings us to a question of sound object as discussed by Bonnet: "*What remains, then, is to understand how sound can-and must-become an object. and why. Equally, it remains to be determined how it becomes objectum. throwing itself before perception so as to become audible*" (Bonner, 2016: 101). This question of whether sound is an object, brings us back to the space of indeterminacy, the movement in between, where the immaterial becomes material and vice versa.

Much like the morphological change inherent within a sound sculpture, a transgression of corporeal boundaries where to perceive sound, the waves must enter the human or other bodies – are also a concern for the philosophy of transhumanism. It is in this sense that the connections between transhumanism and sound sculpture become clear. This desire for change in formation, to extend the self, to manipulate matter in order to remonstrate the basic quanta of what creates the self, and the other, is a use of vibration and energy that despite their inertness, are within the meat sculptures. Their silent stasis is a reminder of an amputation, a snapshot in the flow of waves and particles that lead us to electromagnetism, entropy and vibration.

Electromagnetism, Entropy and Vibration

“Animation animates the animated.”

Esther Leslie *Liquid Crystals - The Science and Art of a Fluid Form* (London, Reaktion Books, 2016), 30.

The urge to self-perpetuate, the precocious character of life, is asseverated from the meat sculptures through a force of reproduction that connects the technology with vibrant corporeality, that of electromagnetism, and its preponderance in time. This transhuman desire for morphological autonomy is perhaps not entirely altered to the processes that change and degrade the sinewy flesh stumps calling their own space amongst the veneer of their (also) artificial surroundings. This machination of form and dilapidation confers a ‘sadistic geometry’ and ‘putrid finesse’ as described by Robert Smithson in relation to the *entropic* art of the Sixties, “...its temporal decay, dislocated architectures, and biological disarray” (Smithson in Johnson et al, 2014: 221). According to artist Amanda Beech (2013),

“...Artworks that further establish the condition of entropy as the formless matter of life [are] another form of empirical fascination with the stuff that makes up our world and a focus on modes of sensory encounter in time and space. These latter practices privilege the life of objects in the world that exists, where the objects of art ask us to consider our own mortality and finitude cast in the new light of a global ecology of the object.”

Entropy has been a source of inspiration in artistic practice aside from within the work of Thek, most famously in Robert Smithson’s *Spiral Jetty* (1970) and his writing ‘Entropy and the New Monuments’ (1969) where he speaks of minimalist artists who seek to produce work ‘against the ages’. More recently Anya Gallachio has exemplified this concern for the forces of decay with her own installations, such as the decomposing flowers of *preserve ‘beauty’* (1991-2003). Aesthetic theory has also had an ongoing conversation with emergent processes, such as Rudolf Arnheim’s now classic work *On Entropy and Art: An essay on order and disorder* (1971). Entropy is the scientific thermodynamic evidence of the arrow of time through the corrosion and impairment of bodies stratified over an aging process. In that sense, everything is a manifestation and process of decay, death; Deleuze even identifies the act of thinking with dying, however, Ray Brassier disagrees stating, “*the experience of dying defies the law of entropic explication governing physico-biological extensity and marks the apex of psychic life as a vector of negentropic complexification*” (2007: 194-95) If *positive entropy* is the process of decay, thus *negentropy* is the generative flipside to this coin, an impelling force of poietic replication that strides on, despite all, creating one moment to the next in production of the next iteration of life (or difference and repetition to place it in Deleuzian terms, see Deleuze, 2001). Simondon speaks of the peculiar determination of negative entropy in relation to the machine ([1958] 2017: 16),

“The machine, as an element of the technical ensemble, becomes that which increases the quantity of information, increases negentropy, and opposes the degradation of energy: the machine, being a work of organisation and information, is, like life itself and

together with life, that which is opposed to disorder, to the leveling of all things tending to deprive the universe of the power of change.”

Entropic processes (whether positive or negative) are an emergent motility that enfold revealing plasticity as instability, occurring just as we might imagine a ‘substance between two states’ (Didi-Huberman, 1999: 208-11) or ‘phase transition’ of movement between “... *solid, liquid gas: [the] schoolbook-familiar states of matter*” Leslie, 2016: 26). Entropy impels us to think further as to what point matter arrives at itself to coagulate within quantum changes the point one ‘body’ becomes another, and if this negentropy is animism inscribed and preceding material form to create life, or if life force itself comes from matter. New materialist Karen Barad’s work on the void refers to the performative character of matter, quantum changes that produce ways of being and knowing (Barad, 2010). Thek’s sculptures invite us to ponder these almost theological questions, his connection to a spirit of his understanding daubed upon the shapes that he has made in a ‘Godly’ form. The morbid is also a persuasion of vitality, the catechism of the anatomical, through the atomical, highlighting the (lack of) split between the meat organisms and their fabricated containers.

Interestingly, Marxist art historian Esther Leslie sees animism and technology through industrialisation as almost opposing forces: “*Both animism and industrialism are human systems of praxis and belief. In this much they are mirrors: animism and industrialism both elicit ensoulment and things [...] Industrialism is the negative force of animism*” (Leslie, 2013: 140).

Perturbations happening at the molecular level break down boundaries, making nonsense of the ‘border wars’ Haraway propounded, creating fissures in our understanding of ourselves and the larger ecosystems of the world around us. At the quantum level we therefore are speaking of movements across a ‘field’, one that is electromagnetic and excites animation. Energy artists have harnessed this curious force, the American composer Alvin Lucier during the Sixties who explored brainwaves and natural radio as a material in his practice; James Turrell’s use of light electromagnetically as well as both Robert Barry and Linda Henderson’s ‘antiretinal’ art, purporting “*..visual art occup[ys] but a tiny patch (visible light) of the electromagnetic spectrum and that the rest of the spectrum was open to artistic possibility.*” For a discussion of these energy artists, see (Kahn, 2013: 4-9). If that is the case for the art they were unravelling back then, then so too will the meat pieces be existing on levels of electromagnetic activity that we are unable to see with our limited sensory faculties alone; and therefore the same for all other creative fabrication too. These magnetic impulses happen at the vibrational level where one fluctuation gives rise to next round of material and immaterial consequences.

The more accessible level of electromagnetism is the mechanical energy of sound; “*the deceptive [tip] of an iceberg’ vis-a-vis the vast, inaudible electromagnetic spectrum*” (Sciarrino in Trippett, 2018: 229). Vibration, unless felt, is otherwise imperceivable, and has been described by research collective AUDINT as “*such augmentations, which extend audition to encompass the imperceptible and the not-yet or no-longer audible, [...] unsound*” (AUDINT, 2019: 1). This invisible and inaudible movement opens up an entirely other world of poietic engagement where the apparently docile Thekian muscle is in fact dancing and teeming with kinesis. Gaston

Bachelard has expanded on this in his exposition of Pinheiro de Santos' 'rhythmanalysis', whereby the movement of matter at the level of vibration creates realities at the physical, biological, and psychoanalytical strata. Vibration itself is the very force of life, whereby (2016: 138):

"if a particle ceased to vibrate, it would cease to be. It is now impossible to conceive the existence of an element of matter without adding to that element a specific frequency. We can therefore say that vibrational energy is the energy of existence."

Bodies, human, transhuman or otherwise, function as conductors for the passage of the unsound, abjuring any physical or other boundary. The mutilation of those bodies within the gallery space seen from a vibrational level is more a conversation between each isolated extremity, revealing a network of one affected body domino-ing to the next affected body (Massumi, 1987: xvi). These apparently cut off parts are talking to one another, and talking to us. Bodies as sites of communication can be traced to the first order cybernetics of Norbert Wiener in the Forties and Fifties, the scientific study of control and communication within the bodies of animals and machines (Trippett, 2018: 199-261). Where these boundaries fall refer to what has been described as a "certain rhythmic density, a threshold [...] crossed in the process of individuation, producing a body in excess of its constituent particles" (Goodman, 2010: 91). What brings us closer to the meat pieces is their calling, their dissected frontals as sirens that go undetected to the human eye and ear and yet we know we have been moved; they stir the transhuman within us to call back and be as one. This resonance is like a hand held out, a touching of affinity and tenderness across synthetics and tendons.

Resonance itself brings two formerly separate systems (bodies) together through an energetic wedding that is mediated by frequency (Davis, 2019: 201). *Resonantia* in Latin, means *echo*, the "magical doctrines of sympathy [...] ancient correspondence between microcosm and macrocosm enshrined in the hermetic doctrine 'as above, as below'" (Davis, 2019: 201). Thek's meat pieces are not just sculptures, nor sound sculptures but *unsound sculptures* - echoing, their calls reverberating across the thermodynamic continuum in physical annihilation (a lot of them being no longer in existence as works). But this echo goes on, like an impenetrable soundwave still coursing through the universe indefinitely.

Maybe we are speaking of a heartbeat pulsating within the chasms of Thek's sculpted forms? The heart implies a vitality, a compassion, an emotion. A chasmic hole where a heart has been just reveals a deadness, the necessity of that organ even more compelling, whether physically or in immaterial and symbolic form. This 'sympathetic resonance' (Trower, 2019: 24) reminds us of the biographical details that entrenched Thek's life, where an appetite for drug use and later being hit with serious illness, stood as barriers to us hearing his reaching out, his echo and his resonance. Not only can we be transported across the external divisions of these sculpted forms that he made, through the sonority of his work; but we can also feel Thek's demise within those grisly silhouettes themselves.

“SO HOW OFTEN DO YOU GET OUT FOR SOMETHING LIKE THIS?”. HE WAS INFERRING THE SITTING IN THE COFFEE SHOP, AS IF TIME HAD STOOD STILL AND ANDY WARHOL WAS GOING TO STRIDE IN WITH OFFERS OF THE FACTORY AGAIN. THEY WERE THE OLD DAYS WHEN THEK WAS IN THE US, BEFORE HE TOOK OFF FOR EUROPE TO DISAPPEAR, AND MOST OF HIS EARLY WORK WITH HIM.

SUSAN STOOD UP AT ONCE AND WAS SUDDENLY DISTRESSED BY MY PRESENCE. “I WANT THIS DEVICE OUT OF ME. OUT OF HERE. WHY DO I HAVE TO FACE DEATH IN THIS WAY?” I THOUGHT THAT WAS QUITE A STATEMENT, I NORMALLY JUST FORGOT WHO AND WHAT I WAS BUT THEN TO BE REMINDED IS LIKE A BOLT OUT OF THE BLUE.

The Technological Reliquaries as Inert Vibration

“It is as if echo becomes a sonic term related both to transformation, transmission, and alterations.”

Erik Steinskog *Afrofuturism and Black Sound Studies: Culture, Technology, and Things to Come* (London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 13.

The Reliquaries as vibrational beings are a powerful call to the unsettling of binary constructs of “... *presence/non-presence, audibility/non-audibility, and life/death*” (AUDINT, 2019: 5), where there is a blurring of the boundary between subject and object (Davis, in AUDINT, 2019: 102), object and object as well as being and knowledge. The two become interwoven to the point where there is no clear sight of a material and immaterial split between the physical and the meaning produced as a result.

If unsound and resonance operate across all milieu of life, then how can we frame Thek’s meat pieces as anything unique to other apparently inert matter; particularly in the case of works of art? Could not it just as easily be said that Malevich’s black square is a form of vibration, or Tracey Emin’s bed is a sound sculpture? Maybe this can be said, but what is of specific reference to the meat pieces in relation to their resonant capacities and potentiality as sound sculptures, takes us back to Simondon’s understanding of the technical object.

The technical object in Simondon’s eyes, harbours some autonomy from the human mind, through having taken form in the physical and external world. It is through this morphological sovereignty that the nature of existence as a technical object can come about. Within the meat pieces, there is almost a recognition of their own power of compassionate *speculative* resonance within their unfinishedness that suggests a hylomorphism away from the original corpses from which they have been dismembered. It also suggests a confluence in Simondon’s

theory, where technological production defies an entropic falling away, at least of the decrepitude and corrosion of an object, as opposed to the life propelling movement of negentropy. The decaying and deforming processes are a performance, although not inauthentic, whilst their stillness also is their message. Just as Esther Leslie describes the phenomena of liquid crystal, “*petrified unrest proposes at one and the same time the frozen and the fluid, stillness and movement, the static and the fizzing*” (Leslie, 2016: 75), there is a petrification and inertness that suggests a void, a non-space where the movement of entropy and even electromagnetism is stalled. Thek’s meat slabs create an inordinate juncture for the viewer to experience the kinesis of their bodies, the melting of human/machine binaries, whilst similarly a frozen capsule of inert vibration that reverberates both sound and sculpture (Keylin, 2015: 182-190).

Figure 7 Paul Thek While there is time, let’s go out and feel everything (1987)

The almost melancholy constitution of the works brings us back to the short-lived exuberance of the life of Thek himself. In a style much as their maker, their quiet stature ushers to the fore the true politics of science, the body, future, and extinction itself, and the need to overcome epistemic barriers that block us from living harmoniously in the world. Just as was daubed across one of Thek’s later acrylic pieces as he become increasingly unwell later in life, his Technological Reliquaries are imperceptibly and *unsoundly* inviting us to ‘*While there is time, [...] go out and feel everything*’ (1987), Figure 7).

The vibrational level of these sculptures, their capacity for inverted *unsound*, through their clear stasis, reminds us of that which lies beneath all layers of perception, where Labelle talks of vibration as a primary sensing that unfolds the individual body toward a ‘common skin’ (Labelle, 2010: 134). A shared path for morphological change, the flow of electromagnetism, and the movement of entropy exemplified within the transhumanist unsoundness of Thek’s work, is not just a story of a series of installation works, but a speculative story of human connection, oneness, matter, and the very constructs of life itself.

THEK AND I SAT TALKING FOR HOURS, SUSAN HAD DECIDED TO TAKE HERSELF OFF TO THE NEXT PARTY, THE NEW HUBBUB. DAVID WAS WITH HER OF COURSE. I COULD SEE THAT PAUL WAS TIRED OF THOSE SCENES, AND TIRED OF LIFE ITSELF, SOMEHOW. HE HAD SAID HIS ARMS ACHED AND HE HADN’T EATEN PROPERLY FOR SOME TIME. HE WAS STRICKEN WITH LESS THAN A HAPPY INCOME AS HE HADN’T PRODUCED WORK TO SELL FOR SOME TIME.

“YOU SHOULD MEET MY TECHNOLOGICAL RELIQUARIES, SOME OF THEM HAVE GONE NOW BUT A LOT OF THEM ARE STILL AROUND”, HE SAID, ENCOURAGINGLY.

“YES”, I SAID, “I HAVE ALREADY MET THEM. I AM ONE.”

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Declaration of interest

I confirm that this is all my own work.

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Figures

Figure 1 *Thek Studio Shoot Thek working on Tomb Effigy* (photograph by Peter Hujar) (1967)

Figure 2 *Susan lecturing on Nietzsche* (1987) – Acrylic

Figure 3 *Meat piece with Warhol Brillo Box* (1965) – Beeswax, painted wood and plexiglass, 35.6 x 43.2 x 43.2 cm

Figure 4 *Untitled (Meat Piece with Flies)* (1965) – wax, flies, Plexiglas on white pedestral, 51.5 x 37 x 27 cm

Figure 5 *Meat Sculpture with Butterflies* (1966) Plexiglas on white pedestral, wax, and butterflies, 51.5 x 37 x 27 cm

Figure 6 *Untitled (Four Tube Meat Piece)* (1964) - wax, metal, wood, paint, glass, plaster, rubber, resin, and glass, 40.9 x 41 x 14 cm

Figure 7 *Paul Thek While there is time, let's go out and feel everything* (1987) – Acrylic on newspaper 56.5 x 69.5 cm