

# THE END OF DETOX - VISUAL MYTHS AND ESTRANGED DUALISMS

## ***The End of Detox - Visual Myths and Estranged Dualisms by Nana Adusei-Poku***

From Nana Adusei-Poku's lecture at Les Laboratoires d'Aubervilliers (21 April 2012)

When a human Body is confronted with toxic substances it has an immediate reaction. This first reaction was recently verbalised by a friend of mine, who happens to be an artist and was exposed to toxic steams in her studio; when she recognised the physical effects she immediately felt: "Oh my good- I have to run away!" So if we should run away from Toxins, why are we so fascinated by them and even sometimes deliberately consume them? I am not only talking about drugs that help our body and conscious to a different kind of perception of time and space, or toxic steams that make us run away, or Botox that represents a part of an idea of beauty, vitality and its industry. I am referring to Toxicity like the theorist Mel Chen - as a figure of thought, as we will explore shortly (Chen 2011). So instead of running away I would like to invite you - and Pauline Boudry and Renate Lorenz are my partners in crime here - to go towards the Toxic and explore its potentials as well as its obstacles. I would also like to emphasise, that I consider my following elaborations as a proposition and set of questions rather than a finished argument.

### **Estranged Dualisms**

The film *Toxic* is characterized by disruptions and disarrays of our perception. It seems to open with the performance of photographs on an empty stage. The screen shows pictures that are based on anthropometric visual framing - mug shots - of bodies with various masks. The technique of Alphonse Bertillon's anthropometric system is thus referenced through the photographs and at the same time turned into the absurd. Because the types that we encounter are unclassifiable and deny themselves to be lined up in a specific order. The sound that escorts the change of slides plating the screen appears like a click from a camera and provokes to ask who and what is photographed? Out of this rhythmic balance of sound emerges movement behind the curtain. The spectator glimpses glitter through the transparent drapery. The stage itself turns into a photographic studio bordered with plants, when Werner Hirsch enters the stage, which is covered by Glitter-dust and something that looks like dried grass- probably Cannabis. A voice from the off begins to literary fill the scene. Ginger Brooks Takahashi announces the title of the film, the individuals and their function in the production as well as objects and substances involved or present and the location of filming.

The spectator is allowed to ask, did the film - the performance - start yet? Who is actually performing? The photographs, that show bodies with masks are static despite offering a humorous play with colours, forms and norms? Or is it the glitter snoozing Werner Hirsch, who is in constant movement creating a puzzling narrative of plant shadow play? Or is the beginning Ginger Brooks Takahashi's voice from the off that announces various toxic substances, which are involved or maybe present in the production. Boundaries are constantly crossed, the realm of the stage, the performer and producer, the light of the projector that weaves a net structure on Werner Hirsch's cigarette holding hand that moves plants between the screen and the projector.

The performance appears to be out of order, our perception is disturbed by the body of the photographer, who steps on stage - the photographer becomes a source of irritation an intruding object, that seems not to belong in the scene while photographing Ginger Brooks Takahashi - though communicating and performing on the sonic level through the overlapping sounds of the camera and the projection.

The unclean floor opens the question if the event is already over and if we as spectators encounter an aftermath of a blissful, vibrant or even ecstatic event. Did we miss it and are left with the cleaning up-with the part of Detox? Is this a post- Warhol construction of a youthful narcissistic boundary breaking event? A notion that is aroused i.e. by the erotic connotations of stockings hanging from the screen. Is the party over? Are we allowed to ask when hoovering - the profane and domestic act of cleanliness - becomes the realm for a pleasurable activity performed by Takahashi. Glitter trash, cigarette butts and other addictive substances are part of a domestic performance that reminds on Julia Kristeva's notion of the abject. The abject as the expression of a subject or object that breaks the order and has to be collectively abjected (Kristeva 1982) - to re-establish or stabilise the imagined purity of cultures or identity. In example: Pebble stones in a garden are culturally accepted and even considered as beautiful, whereas pebble stones in a bedroom have to be disposed. This example shows that the ideas of orders within culture are interrelated with locality and space. Nevertheless I am not stating that these positions are static- I would rather like to highlight that our bodies and objects change their cultural position depending on location and their surrounding. The logics of race and racism or gender binaries means something different in France than i.e. in Ghana. The relational aspect of categories are created through constantly performed dualisms-object/subject, body/mind, man/women, hetero/homosexual, able/unable, these dichotomies are based on the production of difference. This also means that we constantly orientate- and here I am referring to Sarah Ahmed work (Ahmed 2006)- ourselves towards objects and bodies and I would equally argue that we do the same thing with ideas and concepts.

### Visual Myths and their aftermath

Ideas can create a disruption - and different narratives as Edward Said has shown with his essay on *Travelling Theory* (Said 1983). Equally exemplify Lorenz and Boudry in their letter that accompanies the film, that ideas about the bodies of Others become materialised when they show the police photographs of so called Pederasts from the pre Anthropometric era. The way in which these individuals are portrait does not differ from the way Cartes de Visite where produced at that time. These images additionally exemplify the way in which anthropometric photography - with the classic mug-shot- has become a constant point of visual reference for culturally sealed identities - I mean the moment in which an individual becomes turned into an anthropological object. A theme that is a point of reference in this years Paris Triennial and offers the opportunity to reflect on the French colonial history. The question of representation and the way in which stereotypes have inscribed themselves into the western visual vocabulary challenges the audience to reflect on their own perception and cultural identity. A challenge still- if we consider that a certain critical engagement with identity politics and self-reflection is needed in order not to fall into the pitfall of pure consumption, exotism and Othering that some of the pieces in the Palais de Tokyo may offer as well. I think that Rancière's emancipated spectator (Rancière 2008) certainly needs foreign aid from those bodies that were culturally rejected, but this argument would open up a different discussion which is why I would like to return to *Toxic*.

The background projection in *Toxic* plays with the cultural notions and aftermaths that are part of the colonial project and are still exercised in the tradition of criminal photography. Ideas about the human body, about a culturally constructed we and the Other, exotic and normal are related to Alphonse Bertillon's technique that has become the iconic way to depict the truth about a human body. These photographs - historic or contemporary "help to discredit the very notion of objectivity and call into question the supposed transparency of the photographic record" (2003, 165) as the visual culture theorist Brian Wallis has pointed out.

I understand photography as well as the film in its temporality that is embedded in a belief-system, which follows the idea about truth and time as Roland Barthes has framed it (Barthes 1981). But photography as an idea of something that connects the animate and inanimate is an aspect that should be emphasised because it highlights our morbid desire for Toxic substances. The past - thus the historical - that is related to notions of death and momentariness elevates photography and film as an evidence of life into a constant reminder of our transience.

Anthropometric photography is the point of departure in the film *Toxic*, although the types that Boudry and Lorenz present are unfamiliar and grotesque - I am reminded on the hegemonic system that this kind of visual sealing has produced and how vivid it still appears. My perception is intoxicated through certain visual belief systems and I establish myself on this visual basis (Alcoff 2006), but I am equally produced by the Gaze from the outside that fixes my body within a culturally and historical position in the world.

### Interviewing Werner Hirsch

This Gaze is questioned through *Toxic* when at the assumed end of the film, the spectator is confronted with a classical interview situation. An interview usually follows a clear script. When the person starts to talk, we assume that this person will talk about a relevant topic, or is an expert in a specific field or a figure of authority that we have to listen to.

In a portrait documentary about a specific important person - we even think that we can get to know a deeper inside, get a glimpse of who this person really is as the perspective centres and rests on the body of the interviewed. The form is simple: a question precedes these situations and sometimes the audience hears a voice from an off, but usually we don't hear the voice, we don't even know who the interviewer is unless that person represents an authority herself. But there appears to be something wrong, when we encounter Werner Hirsch the performer telling us about a dream - in which Hirsch dreams of the revolt of the technicians of the film, who appear to be trapped in a place of silence. Hirsch questioning creates an oppositional dynamic to in example Shirley Clarks Film *Portrait of Jason* (1967) in which the former white dancer Clarck shot a portray of Jason Holiday in one night, asking question out of the already described off position. Jason Holiday a self proclaimed Black gay hustler functions like a solo entertainer which results in a violent dichotomy of spectacle and audience, because Clarck reproduces a white voyeuristic gaze that investigates the Black male body. So in opposition to this kind of portrayal challenges Werner Hirsch the power dynamics that I have just described.

The interview already appears to be out of order through Werner Hirsch's opening-narrative about the dream, because Hirsch confronts the interviewer and the film team with the construction of the interview situation itself, it resembles a police interrogation- s he claims. The Body of the interviewee becomes a voice that talks towards an almost absent silence, the camera becomes the universal eye - zooming in and out of Hirsch's hairy décolleté, zooming out like distancing the spectator from Hirsch's body when the interrogation becomes more tense. As spectators we are left in the dark- and only know that something maybe a conversation or dispute must have happened before this shot was taken.

We are trained to listen, we (as an audience) rarely question ourselves about who else is involved in the production of a film document. In my reading of *Toxic*, Pauline Boudry and Renate Lorenz ask essential questions though the re-enactment of Jean Genets BBC Interview from 1985: What does it mean to break the order of things? What are the Boundaries of Representation and where does dis-identification start and what are its obstacles as a political project.

Something is queer about the images and performances Boudry and Lorenz confront us with, about the bodies in the projection and about the affect that the film produces. I am using queer in a doubled sense - on one side I follow Jose Esteban Muñoz definition of Queer when he says: „Queerness is a structuring and educated mode of desiring that allows us to see and feel beyond the quagmire of the present“ a reminder of Werner Hirsch almost present dream world and further Muñoz says „Queerness is that thing that lets us feel that this world is not enough, that indeed something is missing. Often we can glimpse the worlds proposed and promised by queerness in the realm of the aesthetic“ (Muñoz 2009, 1). Toxic thus stands as a proposition for instability.

On the other side stands queer in my reading for “a practice of identity (de)construction that results in a new type of diaspora consciousness neither grounded in ethnic identifications nor referencing a however mythical homeland” (2011, xxxvi) as Fatima El-Tayeb has framed it and offers a transnational perspective. Drawing on a longer debate in Queer theory that orients itself on a phenomenological approach that is supported by the set of animate/ inanimate, subject/object or human/nonhuman discussion Queer in this reading is complicated by Mel Chen’s introduction of Toxic as form of existence between the animate/inanimate paradigms of phenomenology. Chen asks an essential question in her text “Toxic Animacies, Inanimate Affections” about the relational bonds and intrinsic dichotomies through which Western thinking about race, hygiene, sexuality and the nation state are structured, by identifying a phenomenological structure of thinking that depends on the idea of animate and inanimate. Toxicity creates a bridge following Chen between these two paradigms and thus helps to think through Lorenz and Boudrie’s piece on another level. Chens intervention and focus on Toxic can be read as the starting point of Walter Mignolo’s concept of Epistemic Disobedience as post-colonial practice (Mignolo 2000). Because what Mel Chen criticises in phenomenological work like Sarah Ahmed’s or her predecessors Husserl and Merleau-Ponty is the distinction between the animate and the inanimate- Body/Object relations. *Toxic* estranges this dualism and challenges us to look for systems of thought that embrace the multiplicities of our existences.

A challenge that I see reflected in the film when the camera turns to the producers of the film showing Karen Michalsky, Renate Lorenz, Pauline Boudry among others. This movement represents the constant interpellation for change and deconstruction of orders or I could also say Norms and Normativity. Hirsch literally and visually articulates a dream, a desire for a utopian vision and sets it into motion. Future, imagination, desire and temporality meet in this very moment and demand for a democratization of the Visual Realm.

The interview situation serves as a construction within the construction of the film to question the orders and hierarchies, positions of power, valid bodies, animate and inanimate relations and authorities. If we apply Toxicity as a theoretical figure - or as a tool for a deeper investigation- it becomes apparent that Toxic has less to do with substances than with ideas and ideologies that affect substances and matter. Toxic substances travel undetected, cross national borders, infect and affect our bodies and establish power systems. The ideas of racial and sexual hierarchies though performed differently is a global phenomenon, thus if we consider these hierarchies it is apparent that they have an effect on everybody involved. Ideas about the bodies of Others- about orders of things are part of a definition process which the poet and philosopher James Baldwin coined in 1984 by saying that: “The power to define the other seals one’s definition of oneself - who, then, in this fearful mathematics is trapped?”.

Like phenomenology’s strongest advocate, photography played and plays an intrinsic role in the definition of bodies including ourselves. Which bodies are considered as photography worthy and if they are photographed within which kind of framing and what kind of purpose? From Alphonse Bertillon’s criminal photography, that branded itself into a cultural perception of types - to Anthropometrics in the Colonies - we appear to be infected, intoxicated by them to the extent that we establish ourselves in relation to them- as Frantz Fanon has vividly pointed out in his essay “the fact of Blackness”. An example of how iconic these visual myths are is an anecdote from my time as a pupil in 5th grade when we were looking at the human races- The biology book showed three mug-shots- the Europid, Negroid and Mogoloid type. My close friend who is Korean, me and a white blond student were synchronically picked to exemplify the visuals in the book.

Boudry and Lorenz’s installation next to the film challenges visual framing by setting scans from the criminal photographic archive into spotlight. The scanned Cartes de Visite play /perform themselves, the archive becomes agency that allows the spectator to encounter photographs that don’t fit into the system of classification and thus create a counter-narrative.

I have emphasised that the bodies that we encounter in the film and the photographs are sealed within a visual double bind. But the projection within the projection elevates a multiplicity of orientations- we are pulled out of the hegemonic and heterosexual grid. I am using heterosexual drawing on Judith Butler’s notion that “Heterosexual genders form themselves through the renunciation of the possibilities of homosexuality, as a foreclosure which produces a field of heterosexual objects at the same time as it produces a domain of those whom it would be impossible to love”(1997, 87) If toxicity as a figure describes the space in between animate and inanimate within a set of estranged dualism, it offers the queer utopian potential to break these impossibilities.

### **The end of Detox - Intoxicated thoughts**

Werner Hirsch’s indignation to be in the midst of entering the norm- to enter the museum, the gallery and thus art spaces arouses the essential question where and how political resistance against normative orders can be performed. I am reading this argument as a practice of performed dis-identification in

the vain of Muñoz's and Butler- which means not a counter identification but rather as failure of identification or slippage that potentially opens a moment of disruption and reorientation. A reorientation towards Toxic rather than a practice of Detox- that performs an idea about purity. When I started to think about *Toxic*- the first thing that I encountered is the message by mainstream media - to Detox. The Detox Fasting, Detox Diet, Detox Pills, to detox appears to generate Happiness - adheres to a promise of beauty and vitality. Detox advertisements that promote extremely gendered, racialised subjects have to be considered as part of a hetero-normative gendered hierarchy system, which targets and promotes white female bodies. This body which is supposed to be clean, fertile and a symbol of life can be traced back to medieval literature and reflects Christian belief systems. Very close to the female body that I have just introduced offers Chen a reading of the discourse on Thomas the Tank Engine. A cartoon figure that was produced as a wooden toy and aroused a scandal in the US as it was exposed that the paint on the toy was contaminated by heavy lead. A toxic substance, which had found its way into the toy that had been produced in China. Thus the Toxic substance and the location of the production stand in a racialised dynamic - the child that was represented in the Media as a Blond Boy had to be protected from the evil foreign forces represented by the migrated substance. I would like to propose the end of Detox and embrace its queer utopic potential because the figure of Toxicity proposes the possibility to challenge our way of thinking. Toxic and Toxicity is a process like life itself and thus there is something queer about the situation and the process of the film much more than about the performing bodies that we encounter. It is the situation, the act, performance or in other words the process/action that becomes queer- Toxicity is the result of a process that is part of a reaction and this within a network of interdependencies. Renate Lorenz and Pauline Boudry challenge us as spectators to realise and accept the fact that we are part of the installation, we are the interrogators that haven't revolted yet and appear to remain in the positions that society has left us with. Werner Hirsch calls on us to break the order of things and despite the fact that we may never be able to leave ideologies realm as Louis Althusser has framed it we may be able to change ideology itself by accepting that we are part of a constant decay and that there is no such thing as purity on any level. In the wider realm of this Triennial, *Toxic* challenges not only hetero-normative framings and racial logics Pauline Boudry and Renate Lorenz examine and challenge the fears and fantasies that continue to enchant us to the extent that we are each obliged to be bearers of materialised visual phantasms and their fictions of identity.

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