

**Ruth Rosengarten**

**Susanne Thémilitz: A Natural History of Drowsiness**

*... one cannot properly describe human life unless one bathes it in the sleep into which it plunges night after night and which sweeps round it as a promontory is encircled by the sea . . . Indeed, what one has meant to do during the day, it turns out, sleep intervening, that one accomplishes only in one's dreams, that is to say after it has been diverted by drowsiness into following a different path from that which one would have chosen when awake.*

Marcel Proust

Our sleep, Proust tells us in *Guermantes Way*, makes us human. It is in sleep that diurnal perceptions, or the tasks and intentions that burden the day, veer from their course and are swept in another direction: one that reveals that our true vitality, as human beings, resides in the mind. Put another way: not only does the psyche never sleep, but it is in our sleep that our psyche becomes most fully alive. For Proust, then, as for Freud, sleep is the medium through which human beings awaken to their unconscious.

If Proust wonders how, after such a sleep – a sleep that submerges our daily lives into oblivion – we wake up to inhabit our old self rather than any other, Freud rather astonishingly makes it clear that it is not the function of sleep to enable the subterranean life, but rather, the opposite: it is the dream that is the guardian of sleep. Our unconscious elaborations, in other words, on one level do no more than safeguard a restorative metabolic process that links us to all other living creatures. (While we humans are the only animals that suffer from insomnia or that talk about our dreams, we are certainly not alone in our need for rest.) In this formulation, it is in our very human sleep, the locus of our encounter with our buried desires, that we also return to an earlier creatureliness.

Susanne Thémilitz's work has always concerned itself with such creatureliness. With the eye for detail of an ethologist and the apparent dispassion of a taxonomist, in copious texts that accompany her teeming installations of hybrid or liminal beings,

she has itemised their inherent characteristics. And with the empathic imagination of a storyteller, she breathes complex life into them. Yet these imaginary lives are animated not by a psychology or a personal past, but by a history of belonging to a species. It is a history that imbues them with contradictions at once possible and implausible: paranoid, sympathetic, violent, well-intentioned, over-sensitive, they are perhaps loners, yet they live in groups; or they may long for affection, yet recoil from physical contact.

For all their creatural and taxonomic specificity, then, amorphous-featured and horned, edgy and vigilant, these beings are generic rather than particular. They also patrol a blurred frontier between the realms of the human and the animal. If one of the differences between animals and humans is that the former live in an environment, while the latter live in a *world* (a historical form of life),<sup>i</sup> for Themlitz, environment and world are not that neatly marked off from each other. In the contingent way she wrests order out of chaos, she underlines the tenuousness of the distinctions we use to classify our surroundings. Not for her, then, the Cartesian concern with identifying human life alone with representational thought: her beings inherit an extensive and subtle range of characteristics that renders them sentient, even reflexive, yet not fully rational. In this, they inhabit a post-Freudian universe: for if Freud outlined all that is most human in the unconscious (animals may be cruel, but they are not perverse), he also deposed humans from their narcissistic (and indeed hubristic) pedestal, in acknowledging what biological research, in particular Darwin's, had already discovered. Thus was 'man' stripped of the of the 'peculiar privilege of having been specially created, and relegated him to a descent from the animal world, implying an ineradicable animal nature in him',<sup>ii</sup> reintegrating repressed animality into the human, *zoon* into *logos*.

At the profoundest level, I am suggesting, and beyond their disarming humour and manifest concern with the mundane, Themlitz's works offers us the outline of a concept (if not a theory) of consciousness, selfhood, and empathy: one that queries the boundaries and contours of the human. In doing so, it takes the subjectivity of non-human beings to heart, bearing the ethical burden that such consideration entails. For if we do not conceptualise Being in cognitive hierarchies (privileging, in other words, a capacity for recursive thought), we are obliged to reconsider the scope of our empathy; our *feeling-into* the states of other beings. Arguably, our ascription of conscious states to ourselves requires, conceptually, that those same states be ascribable to others.<sup>iii</sup> Even within the narrower range of inter-human relations,

empathy requires both identification and separation: identification because our becoming of a self entails the recognition of other selves – in your state, I see my own; and separation because I can only feel *for* you if I perceive you *as* other.<sup>iv</sup> From this perspective, Themlitz's alien beings (part human, part animal, part extra-terrestrial), however comic, are also filled with pathos, and exist in order to elicit, or indeed test, our most human recognition: could we perhaps say they are placeholders for an ethical relation?

The states we are in – anxiety, panic, jubilation, or even, and perhaps especially, simply being 'in a state' – suggest a relinquishment of control, a defeat of the ego: something has taken over where the will has left off; something has overwhelmed and smothered the will. For Themlitz's beings, who always seem to be moved by a will larger than that of the mere individual, a state of sleepiness might be both an apt metaphor, and a suitable new medium. Sleep, and waiting for sleep, is itself not an entirely new interest for Themlitz. 'For them', she writes of the Parasites, Outsiders and Dissimulators (2001), 'falling asleep is a sensational climax.' Indeed, that would be the case, for in general, she tells us 'they are well acquainted with insomnia'.<sup>v</sup> Sleep, as all insomniacs know, and as Proust's sweeping work minutely illustrates, cannot be willed: it is not our slave but our master. Before it, we are mere manikins, automatons. Equally, drowsiness cannot be summoned, however 'well acquainted with insomnia' one may be. It is that interstitial stage in which, no longer fully armed with consciousness, yet still immersed in the sensory impressions of this world, we prepare to meet all that is uncontrollable in our minds. Just like the attentiveness that is its opposite, I am suggesting, the state of drowsiness brings us up against our creatureliness, while simultaneously alerting us to all that, residing in the unconscious, is incontestably human. (In this, our sleepiness is like our sexuality, for nowhere more than in our sexuality are we so utterly like animals, and so radically different from them.)

Themlitz's short, evocative text accompanying the installation *Oh La La... Oh la Balançoire: Tentacular Microcosm* for the group exhibition *Imaginary Lives* at the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation (2004-5 – the other artists were Ilya Kabakov, Patrick Corillon, and Jan Fabre) opens a window onto her imaginative process. It weaves together a hypothetical narrative for the objects she has put together, a possible subject and character: did he or didn't he use that flying bicycle, amble through the monuments, water the tendrilled plants, see the trail of slime left by the snail? And what did he have to do with the spooky-funny organs, formless viscera neatly

arrayed? He collected states of mind, she tells us... or perhaps not, perhaps they invaded him. Certainly *she* collects such states. The illusion of narrative coherence is momentary: the story is one among many other possible yarns stitched together from traces, but the mood – the state – is all, and even that is mercurial.

In Themlitz's work, such moods are drawn from a memory archive that is more photographic than filmic: a sequence of stills, snapshots of recollected conditions. These are then re-invoked through elaborate, if precarious, mises-en-scene: tableaux incorporating made figures, bought objects, photographs, films and drawings, sticks and vegetation, pieced together into a habitat fit for the imaginary lives that people it. These habitats are always far removed from the slick or the urban, drawing us into a world that binds rural custom to the lives of animals themselves: there is something of the mole's burrow or the bird's nest in the assembled nature of Themlitz's installations, those creatures' eye for *objets trouvés*, their crafty contingencies for survival and reproduction.

The objects that establish the parameters of the creatural world chart the various stages (from the basic whittling of a stick, to the framing of a picture and hanging it on a wall) through which nature passes into culture, and in which 'raw material is combined with human labor and technology to satisfy cultured design'.<sup>vi</sup> But in colloquy with Themlitz's petrified or protean beings, they also invoke a process of natural history, not only in the habitual sense of the term, but also in the paradoxical meaning that Walter Benjamin gives it. For Benjamin, it is not that nature bears the imprint of history, or even that nature has a history, but that history itself appears in nature as transient. Just as ruins are testimony to the reclamation of culture by nature, so, more broadly, do all the artifacts of human history acquire an aspect of mute, natural being. For Themlitz, all objects seem to hover somewhere between such emergence and erasure, between quiddity and dissolution. Absence, or loss, is intrinsic to them.

Crucially, it is the rural idiom that Themlitz's installations conjure, that bears the stamp of a world now lost. If loss is ritualized and made legible in the traces of those activities that bind humans to nature, such memorializing has about it something of the nostalgic, or ironically sentimental (we see it in the gnomes and mushrooms too, with their profound Germanic undertones), as if purposefully turning a blind eye to the fragmented temporalities of modernity and technology. Pre-capitalist modes of production and consumption are summoned in multiple allusions to agriculture, or,

especially, to hunting and gathering, invoking, too, their temporalities. For if agriculture – the domestication of plants and animals – with its roots in environmental change and socio-economic competition, introduces the more sophisticated notion of deferred yields and satisfactions, hunting/gathering, which historically preceded it, brings immediate satisfaction or frustration and requires greater mobility, and a humbler existence cobbled together from available resources. In this sense, Themlitz's work might be seen to function under the sign of the hunter/gatherer.

With irrepressible wit and unfailing lightness of touch, Themlitz also forages the work of historical artists – Georges Méliès, Constantin Brancusi, Kurt Schwitters, Hannah Höch – or, indeed, aligns herself with a genealogy of contemporaries that includes Ilya Kabakov, Tony Oursler and, perhaps most pertinently for their quirky humour and formal diversity, Fischli and Weiss. But the works, however heterogeneous, bear her own idiosyncratic signature, the stamp of something that amounts to a world-view. For underlying the fabricated universe of changing morphologies, is a singularity of vision, but one that favours, above all, transformation, potentiality. The 'finished' installations seem, then, anything but completed. Protean, open-ended, they have about them a beguiling (if somewhat misleading) sense of improvisation.

With each body of work or installation collating a broad array of materials and media (clearly, she is of a generation of artists released from the constraining demands of medium specificity), Themlitz creates, then, a self-contained world. The mad flair of the cosmogonist is tempered by an innate benevolence that domesticates the strange. When maintaining the figures relatively small, she keeps alive this demiurgic connotation, so that the mutant beings are quite literally creatures, *her* creatures. (The concept of 'creature' here, defining not only all that is living, but also all that has been *created*, brings in its wake a series of onto-theological terms: creation, creator – but also creativity.)

However, in *Estado de Sono*, the coherent universe is not that of a creatural habitat, but of a psychic disposition. From the materialization of that which cannot be materialized (our states are, of course, the distillation of our subjectivity), we also cannot detach the allusion to a collectivity, one that is politically organized and that inhabits a particular territory. A state: a polity. Seen this way, sleepiness takes on another dimension. Are we being invited to place the life of the imaginative mind, the mind suspended on the verge of a creaturely, obliterating, or indeed dream-filled

sleep, at the heart of our political thought and vocabulary? Does the idea of sovereignty, integral to the political and territorial notion of a state, play any part here?

It is tempting to cast one's speculative net in this direction, not least because 'creatureliness' has been theorized by some (notably by Giorgio Agamben, but also in Walter Benjamin's kindred notion of 'bare life') neither as a life whittled down to its minimal components (where biology – the 'animal' – would be conceived as coinciding with that minimum), nor as a Hobbesian state of nature (a life lived thus would be 'solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short'<sup>vii</sup>); but as life subject to sovereign power, or as life exposed before the sovereign exception. Put otherwise, in a secular world, the theological relation is politicized: the relation between a creature and a sovereign god is transformed into a relation between a sovereign power and its subjects.

Yet there is nothing in Thémelitz's installation – nothing, that is, other than the unease generated by faceless, not altogether-human beings immobilized in a precarious environment – to suggest this in any direct way. In vain might we search for politics (or indeed for sexuality – those twin poles of obsession of so much contemporary art) in Thémelitz's installation. Here, as ever, her work flirts with, and then eludes, conceptual captivity and offers a tantalizingly mute analogy between one self-contained, autonomous system, a system governed by its own laws, and another.

In *Estado de Sono*, in making figures that are life size – figures that mimic the visitor's own body scale – Thémelitz diminishes the creatural dimension that had previously played such a central role in her work, now bringing us closer to the domain of simulacra or automatons, a proximity heightened by her decision to dress these figures in real (used) clothes. In effect, the clothes substitute any other material that might be chosen to approximate flesh (say clay, polyurethane, silicone or plaster) and remind us how, confronted with clothing as a form of interpellative mimicry, we are prepared to relinquish the need for many other mimetic indices. (In different ways, artists as diverse as Louise Bourgeois, Robert Gober, or Tony Oursler have understood this). In short, confronted with our own scale, we not only recognize the human, but are satisfied in our desire for such recognition, by an old anorak, a skimpy shirt, a pair of trousers or old trainers.

This form of metonymic realism does not require multiplicity and redundancy. On the

contrary, very little attention to individual detail is necessary. Themlitz acknowledges this economy of realism by omitting physiognomies altogether, realizing that to specify a face – to have to settle on distinct features and expressions – would be to particularize in a way that is entirely inimical to her desire to extrapolate characteristics or a mood out of anonymity and collectivity. (It must be said here that the artist's obsessive reiteration of her own physiognomy, whether in photographs, drawings, or films, operates in much the same way. They are neither expressive, nor portraits, but, on the contrary, signs that sponsor abstraction and generalization.) Here, as in all her other works, Themlitz remains defiantly uninterested in a narrativized, individual psyche. A bucket, a funnel, a balaclava, a beekeeper's visor all stand for heads and, however bizarrely, describe social persona, with the added benefit of making us laugh, even if uneasily.

In opposition to the metaphoric world of the miniature, with its allegorical time, such metonymy maps the time of the made scenario perfectly onto the time of everyday life,<sup>viii</sup> so that we seem transported *into* a world, or – more appositely – into a state. The strategy of using a one to one scale in *Estado de Sono* was site sensitive, site induced: the exhibition space at Culturgest in Oporto is notoriously difficult to work with, being ample, high-ceilinged, fragmented, and highly ornamented. With this change in both scale and material, a number of other things are radically altered. In the first place, the role of spectatorship – our role – often implicated in Themlitz's work, either by the diminutive scale of her figures, or by the point of view implicit in them (looking up at us, as if we viewers were ineluctably imbued with a clumsy gigantism), immediately shifts. From being spectators, we are transformed into co-dwellers whose spatial existence contributes to the determination of the contours of the installation. We are invited, in other words, to occupy the space, just as they – those strange bodies, those solid, yet spectral, simulacra – do. Such an invitation to participation breaks one of the oldest of gallery protocols, one that, even in installations, is frequently implicit in the physical distance between viewer and work of art. With such proximity induced by the literalism of scale, the viewer becomes not only a conspirator, but also an actor and a walker, discomfited by the verisimilitude of the figures, their intransigent immobility.

Here, then, the human scale, the mimetic replication of our bodily postures and gestures frozen in three-dimensional snapshots, the staging of small scenarios of human isolation or relationality, all create a sense that we are moving amidst life that has been eerily arrested, half familiar, half oneiric, like the seemingly random

thoughts that flash in and out of our cognition before we fall asleep. Plastic funnels and tubes simulate and replace the sites of mobility or of vital bodily functions, provoking a shudder of strange recognition, as if we were confronted with an image of something that we already knew, but could not quite remember. What we have, here, are bodies whose functions have been mechanized to their convenience, not by science and technology, but by a simple array of household implements (it is here, in this impish extemporization with the commonplace, that Themlitz's work most closely approximates Fischli and Weiss's). Flesh becomes simulacral, but lest we fear being absorbed into a brave new world of glamorous, artificial bodies that exceed our own, Themlitz punctures the work with characteristic humour: the headphones, the vacuum-cleaner or garden hose, the ridiculous bucket-heads, all suggest that whatever has replaced organic life has had to rely on a capacity for ingenious improvisation with objects that are readily to hand, and has landed up with a less than perfect – and often hilarious – (non)functionality. Yet whatever else they do or don't achieve, however different from the neurotic, shapeless clay creatures (the ranks of the Lonesome, Sullen and Self-Absorbed, or the Parasites, Outsiders and Dissimulators, these awkward, arresting bodies query the boundaries and relevance of the authentic, human individual.

If Freud's notion of the uncanny, the *Unheimlich*, has been frequently invoked in discussions of Themlitz's work, it is surely to these, the most realistic, and yet most absurd, of her figures that it is most accurately applicable, perhaps because they most disconcertingly blur the boundary between authenticity and replication, between the human and the non-human. Freud's discussion of the uncanny is, like his method of analyzing dreams, a particular case in his conviction that what appears to alight upon us from the outside world is usually a return of – and to – something drawn from a repository of repressed fantasies or memories. For Freud, the *Unheimlich* is the name for everything that ought to have remained secret and hidden but that has come to light. The word he uses invites associations with both homes and secrets. As the surfacing of what had previously remained unacknowledged, the *Unheimlich*, then, describes something that, while being familiar or even intimate, unleashes unease.

Choreographed and stationed within the architectural space, the figures in *Estado de Sono* are linked and articulated by a series of found and assembled objects in dynamic, if apparently precarious, equilibrium. A set of empty bee-houses wistfully strikes a resonant note of loss and absence, while winking at canonical sculptural



works of geometric abstraction, like Donald Judd's 'specific objects'. The rudimentary form of a house, obsessively reiterated in Themlitz's work as a safe place of storage and shelter, or, set on stilts, transformed into a granary or observation post, is here the only closed and stable form, a kernel of interiority in an otherwise centrifugal spatial organization. Canes and taut strings create a frail architecture binding the horizontal plane to the vertical, thus addressing one of the biggest challenges that the complex architectural space, cruciform in ground plan and with a mezzanine floor and a high cupola, poses to any artist. (The second challenge – how to deal with the revivalist art nouveau floor pattern – is met with apparent nonchalance in the ease with which Themlitz's discreet objects occupy the floor space, like pieces on a chessboard.) Ladders and wooden pallets, frequently-used items in the artist's material archive, are, here, not so much vertical structural units (as they were, say, in *Oh La La... Oh la Balançoire: Tentacular Microcosm*), but rather, skim the horizontal plane, creating a course of slatted gangplanks and platforms joined in potential kinesis. (Such kinesis was differently explored in the chaotic improvisation of *Of Subterranean Life*, also of 2006, at the Casa da Cerca in Almada). The entire spacing and arrangement of bodies and objects is suspended, linked like a chain reaction waiting to happen.

This sense of precariousness and potential is hyperbolized in the metal bed frame, harnessed by messy tangle of ropes to a billowing white parachute, neither properly open, nor entirely closed, and steering the viewer's gaze from the horizontal plane to the vertical. Straining to become airborne, the bed hovers at a jaunty angle close to the ground. Plastic mineral-water bottles serve as hopeless counterweights, or indeed buoys, while plastic bags clipped onto washing lines become pennants or sails, flapping to the breeze of our own motions. In this gamut of materials and spatial events, the viewer is met with the clanging of opposites: gravity and suspension, heaviness and weightlessness. And, in a neat inversion of expectations, while the figures themselves are rooted to the spot, all the structural or architectonic elements that furnish the room seem to have trouble remaining firmly on the ground. Being drawn to follow the stations in this circuit and commune with its strange, not quite human inhabitants, the viewer's attention is conducted up into the air (where also, on the roof of the house, children's tricycles are gelled into immobility by a layer of white silicone, signifying the transformation of found objects into 'art'), and then down again. The work seems never to settle into stasis.

This balance between groundedness and suspension or flight is not a casual by-

product of this installation, but of its very essence. It is, I would hazard, the materialization of a state of somnolence; a spatialization of the body's own experiences in its passage from wakefulness to sleep. Flying, falling, the inability to run or even paralysis – all frequent corporeal motifs that befall the subject's apprehension of its **own** body in sleep, or indeed as it awaits the first stage of sleep – are here conjured in the relationship between the fixedness of the figures and the contingency and precariousness of the objects around them.

What Thémelitz gives us a natural history of drowsiness, one that highlights the transient relationship between fixity and lightness, rootedness and flight. Here is potentiality precariously captured. And if indeed, it is in our sleep that we reconnect with both our creatureliness and our humanity, *O Estado de Sono* works to keep both at tantalizing arm's length.

Ruth Rosengarten, 2007

i Heidegger's distinction is useful, between animals as being poor in world (*weltarm*) and humans as world-forming (*weltbindend*).

ii Sigmund Freud, *A General Introduction to Psycho-Analysis*, ed. and trans. Joan Riviere, New York: Doubleday, 1920, p. 296.

iii This point is made, in his quarrel with the Cartesian view, by Peter F. Strawson in *Individuals: An Essay in Descriptive Metaphysics*, London: Methuen, 1959.

iv This is a hugely reductive précis of phenomenological arguments around empathy, hinging about the status of the Other as s/he is revealed to the subject, in the writings of Emmanuel Lévinas, Edith Stein, and Alain Finkielkraut, among others.

v Susanne Thémelitz, 'From the Private Life of the Parasites, Outsiders and Dissimulators' (2001), in *Paradise*, Germany: 2004, p. 65-67.

vi Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses*, New York and London: Routledge, 1993, p. 232.

vii Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, (1651), Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998, p. 84.

viii The connotations of the temporality of miniatures are discussed by Susan Stewart in *On Longing: Narratives of the Miniature, the Gigantic, the Souvenir, the Collection*, Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1993, p. 65 ff.