Brand-New-Life
Magazin für Kunstkritik

www.brand-new-life.org
office@brand-new-life.org



Combination Acts: The Devil of Affinities

Coco Fitterman

The project *The Devil of Affinities* consists of a theoretical text, a poetic text and an imagined exhibition. The exhibition was scheduled to open May 15th, 2020 at the project space *Gern en Regalia* in New York and includes the artists Amy Lien & Enzo Camacho and Cole Lu. Due to COVID-19, it has been postponed for an uncertain amount of time. Unable to facilitate the exhibition as planned, I have reimagined the project for Brand-New-Life to forefront what has emerged from my study of these artists and their works in ensemble.

VII.

the quietest
little dog knows all
about howling.



> I am convinced that the dissipation of a single «phantom» is capable ultimately of modifying the structure of the grand abominable Truth – postulated though nonexistent – that nevertheless does, in its constantly changing forms, govern the universe.
>
> – Nicolas Abraham & Maria Torok

> I like the feeling of words doing as they want to do and as they have to do.
>
> – Gertrude Stein

The close reading which follows creates a theoretical layer that identifies some models for thinking through the mythologies of Manananggal and Geryon – which Lien & Camacho and Lu recreate in their works – from the perspective of these monsters. The poetic text arrives from an affective, embodied understanding of the space in which the monstrous perspective might exist. Following Lien & Camacho and Lu, the poems give voice to these voiceless monsters, and attempt to locate them where they might not be expected in our contemporary universe.



Amy Lien and Enzo Camacho, *MANANANGGAL HANGRY* (top half), 2016, modified mannequin and various materials, split into two halves, 96 x 70 x 40 cm. Courtesy the artists.

In a time of little faith, zero certainty and stultifying rage, my trust in poetic language is stronger than ever. Poetry can slide in-between, around and underneath the symbolic language

of prose, into and out of a semiotic undercommons. In Julia Kristeva's terms, the symbolic and the semiotic refer to two interdependent aspects of language. The semiotic is defined as the matriarchal aspect of language that shows the speaker's innermost drives and impulses. These unconscious drives manifest themselves in tone, rhythm and image. [1]

The semiotic aspect is suppressed not only by society, but also by the patriarchal aspect of language that Kristeva calls the symbolic. Symbolic language is always oppressive – it is the language into which oppression is written. Poetic language – that which can slip and flow and meander in-between the binary – has the capacity to rewrite, to reimagine. These twin aspects of language exist side by side, or perhaps layered one atop the other. In the work of Amy Lien & Enzo Camacho and Cole Lu, this layering comes into play to highlight, in each artwork, a queered, minoritarian perspective on a character from folklore – Manananggal and Geryon, respectively. In *The Devil of Affinities*, I draw on the capaciousness of poetic language, collaboratively, by responding to the artists' work. The poems and the images are intertwined; they exist in collaboration with each other and together they form an imagined exhibition.

The original touchstone for my project is the work *Manananggal* by Amy Lien and Enzo Camacho – an ongoing piece which uses the form of the titular demoness from Filipino folklore as a framing device. Herminia Meñez, a scholar and expert of Filipino folklore, provides a general definition of what Manananggal is, and a mapping of the mythological universe from which she originates:

> By day, the viscera-sucker appears as an exceptionally attractive woman with long hair and a fair complexion. By night, she discards her lower torso, hiding it under the sheets, in a closet, or among a patch of banana trees. Having converted her arms into wings by anointing her armpits with a noxious oil and being propelled by her now stiffened hair, she takes into the air, alights on a roof, and thrusts her long tubular tongue through the palm shingles to extract the viscera of her sleeping victims through their mouth, nostrils, ears, anus, navel, or genitalia. She stalks tuberculars and pregnant women because she is addicted especially to phlegm and fetuses, as well as to human liver and blood. After feasting, she returns home to rejoin her lower trunk before daybreak. However, if someone, usually her new husband, rubs any or all of the following – ashes, salt, vinegar, lemon juice, garlic, ginger, pepper, and other spices – on her discarded part, reattachment is impossible, and the viscera-sucker dies fragmented. [2]

Crucially, Meñez makes the connection that the viscera-sucking creature is most popular and ubiquitous in «lowland Christian communities ... which were the first to be intensively missionized during the Spanish colonial regime from the early sixteenth to the late nineteenth century.» [3] Meñez goes on to observe that, for non-Hispanized animists living in the highlands, Manananggal is not gendered and is more often portrayed as a bird- or dog-like creature. This leads her to her argument that the feminization of Manananggal – the viscera-sucking, self-segmenting woman – is due to Spanish colonial influence.

Meñez takes her interpretation one step further to argue that the symbol of the female viscera-sucker emerges from the historical context of the encounter between the most powerful women in indigenous Filipino society – female shamans called babaylanes – and Spanish priests. In indigenous society, women had a lot of power and were treated as not only equal members but the main pillars of the community. It was the mission of Spanish priests to eradicate indigenous religions and customs throughout the archipelago, an agenda that necessitated the dissolution of trust among community members – the classic method of «divide and conquer» utilized by the oppressor.

Of course, the literal demonization of women based on their role in a community as the holders of medicinal / shamanistic knowledge and female sexual power is nothing new. We have seen it countless times as a tool for subjugating a community at large, notably in the Western world during the witch hunts in Europe and the Americas beginning in the sixteenth century. However, Manananggal retaliates against her oppression by literally cannibalizing the communities which refuse to accept her. Every day, following her night of bloody massacre, Manananggal returns to society as the «exceptionally attractive woman.» In this way, she survives by feeding off of her oppressors in secret.

In an interview about their Manananggal project, Lien and Camacho cite art historian Patrick Flores, specifically his chapter on «Polytropic Philippine: Intimating the World in Pieces» in Contemporary Asian Art and Exhibitions: Connectivities and World-Making. In Camacho's words, «A lot of the time in [Flores'] writing instead of saying the Philippines he'll say the ‹Philippine,› minus the ‹s.› I think for him it's a way to denote the idea of the Philippine as a theoretical model and not just a site where cultural production happens, not just a location.» [4] The theoretical model of the Philippine is exactly what Lien and Camacho engage in with their allegorical use of the Manananggal character.



Amy Lien and Enzo Camacho, *MANANANGGAL HANGRY* (bottom half), 2016, modified mannequin and various materials, split into two halves, 114 x 36 x 30 cm, dimensions variable. Courtesy the artists.

Though she is rooted in the time and space of the folkloric Philippines, she slips out of her historical context and into the present, resurrected. As if her contorting body froze in place during her time travel, she appears, in Lien and Camacho's rendition, fragmented – and yet, strangely kawaii. Her legs twist in a girlish, coy manner, and she wears half of a pleated school-girl style miniskirt made of some sort of plastic polymer. Her left shin is emblazoned

with what is immediately recognizable as the Yves Saint Laurent logo, but instead of YSL, the letters read ESL – the acronym for English as a Second Language. From the stub of her torso dangles a pink, fluffy rabbit keychain, commonly sold at stalls in Chinatown. Who is this Manananggal, where did she come from, and what is she doing in New York City?

Aesthetically, this Manananggal has affinities with other art objects made by artists who run in similar social circles – like Stewart Uoo. Uoo's gooey, dripping, discolored mannequins would, perhaps, be friends with Lien and Camacho's Manananggal.



Stewart Uoo, *Don't Touch Me (Bikram Yoga)*, 2012, polyurethane resin, ink, epoxy, wires, clothing, acrylic nails, accessories, ferrofluid, razor wire, hair, steel ball bearings, eyelashes, vinyl, 246.4 x 38.1 x 96.52 cm. Courtesy the artist.

This affinity is not accidental. For her survival, Manananggal must blend in with her surrounding society. In the daylight hours, she assumes an inconspicuous appearance, so that she can nocturnally prey on her victims. Her operation succeeds only when she is not suspected by her community. Lien and Camacho's Manananggal «blends in» with contemporary art aesthetics.

In her *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*, theorist Sara Ahmed writes about perception and orientation, and what the adoption of a queer orientation toward a subject might garner. Ahmed writes, «We are turned toward things. Such things make an impression on us. We perceive them as things insofar as they are near to us, insofar as we share a residence with them.» [5] When things are not near to us, when we do not share a residence with them, they become Others. Perhaps they become monsters.

Throughout the book, Ahmed offers the possibility of adopting a queer orientation toward a subject or object – a perspective that is queer because it requires a rejection of the naturalized «effect of towardness» [6] of any given thing. Beginning with Ahmed's logic that we only see what is in front of us, a queer perspective is one that opens up space for imagining the lives of things which are out of our sight. The monster, in other words, is deemed monstrous because it exists outside of our realm of experience, we do not «share a residence» with it. And thus, it must be vilified. A queer perspective might attempt to see through the eyes of the monster.

In the mythology in which she is anchored, Manananggal is less than human: a monstrous object. However, Lien and Camacho adopt a queer orientation to Manananggal by giving her a voice to speak to us, challenging the historical force which banishes her (and by extension, the populations she represents) to the realm of the monster. «Who you callin' ugly?» they ask.



Cole Lu, *In the last seconds, it is as if everyone leaped off the mount, hold hands. The end approaches like approaching ground. Like honey is the sleep of just. (Orthros)*, 2019, fiberglass, aqua resin, polyurethane, concrete, plaster, MDF, polycarbonate, 162.56 × 99.06 × 187.96 cm. Courtesy the artist.

In the historical and geographic landscape of Manananggal, social minorities such as women and colonized subjects become vilified as the monstrous social other. Cole Lu, in their recent body of work *The Dust Enforcer (All These Darlings Said It's the End and Now US)*, also explores a queer orientation toward a particular monster, this time from Greek mythology: Geryon, from the myth of Hercules's Ten Labors. The theoretical crux of Lu's *The Dust Enforcer* comes from the episode – as narrated in Geryoneis by the lyric poet Stesichorus in the sixth century BC – in which the hero slays Geryon, the three-headed monster, and steals his cattle as one of his ten Labors.

For Lu, it is important to ask questions about that which is generally taken for granted in this myth – namely, the monstrosity of Geryon, who is casually minding his own business until a bloodthirsty Hercules comes to slaughter his dog and only companion, Orthos, before doing away with him, stealing his cattle and then sailing away from the bloodied island toting the fruits of his conquest. Lu reads this event as a portrayal of age-old colonial power, in which mechanics of othering inscribe themselves as justification for the colonial act. Geryon, as the colonized body, is denied subjectivity and is portrayed only as a flaccid, dead character. For an interview with Living Content, Lu writes:

> Often, in western mythology–Greek mythology in this case–the internal monstrosity is always aligned with external monstrosity. There is this collective portrait of the monster buried as the seed of a social construction model of ‹the other›. It is establishing a fundamental moral value that someone who appears different from the western standard of norms is evil, hence deserves punishment or misfortune. [7]

Lu creates a self-projective identification with the «monstrosity» of Geryon as a queer, POC, gender nonbinary first-generation immigrant. To quote again from the interview, Lu writes, «my intention of applying – or more precisely of rewriting myth – is to provide alternative perspectives through the lens of the other: the monster, the demon, the evil; an alternative perspective that is apart from the conventional viewpoint that vilifies.» [8] The monster signals a glitch in a worldbuilding narrative: an explanation for a disturbing incongruence, a marking of yet uncharted water. What happens when we zoom in on the glitch?



Cole Lu, *Supposed old old age might show grow old to show what it meant the soul is made of wind instead of warm red liquid (Crossing River Styx)*, 2019, Cold cast bronze, 76.20 × 160.02 × 2.54 cm. Courtesy the artist.

I believe that, by zooming in on the monster, the mythological space that these artists hold in their work allows for a re-imagining of the myths they reference. To access this reparative rendering requires holding, in yourself, a both-at-once-ness. The queered perspective happens when the original object is held in mind simultaneously with its art-object double. Hopefully, this text assists in performing this action. I try to engage with this holding space in between the layers of the original myth and the art object, where reparative reading can happen, in my poems. Poetry is the ideal form for this type of radical imagining because, as Pasolini wrote, poetry is unconsumable. Poems reject assimilation into systems.

We find ourselves now in the belly of the beast, so to speak. Various interlocking systems of oppression – depressingly familiar – scrape away at our tenuous cultural script: poverty, illness, deadly xenophobia and racism, economic collapse. The fear, in the U.S. and elsewhere, of our current slow burn into fascism, into reactionism. To empathize with the monster, as Lien & Camacho and Lu do, is to resist these systems, if only for a moment. It is to affirm the spaces, throughout history, wherein these systems have rendered their victims into monsters, and to reevaluate this rendering, to imagine a different one. Tackling the concepts I wish to explore in *The Devil of Affinities* requires a collective effort. I cannot do it on my own, I need help from my friends.

Download *The Devil of Affinities* PDF [/assets/Uploads/Coco-Fitterman-The-Devil-of-Affinities-2020.pdf]

the devil of affinities



"By day, the viscera-sucker appears as an exceptionally attractive woman with long hair and a fair complexion. By night, she discards her lower torso, hiding it under the sheets, in a closet, or among a patch of banana trees. Having converted her arms into wings by anointing her armpits with a noxious oil and being propelled by her now stiffened hair, she takes into the air, alights on a roof, and thrusts her long tubular tongue through the palm shingles to extract the viscera of her sleeping victims through their mouth, nostrils, ears, anul, navel, or genitalia. She stalks tuberculars and pregnant women because she is addicted especially to phlegm and fetuses, as well as to human liver and blood. After feasting, she returns home to rejoin her lower trunk before daybreak. However, if someone, usually her new husband, rubs any or all of the following—ashes, salt, vinegar, lemon juice, garlic, ginger, pepper, and other spices—on her discarded part, reattachment is impossible, and the viscera-sucker dies fragmented."

—Herminia Meñez

The Manananggal is a mythological monster originating in the Philippines. She takes the form of one woman in two halves. You don't see it at first. She just lives near you, or comes close to you. You don't trust this neighbor. Despite seeing her on a routine basis. It's something about her communication, which is strained and full of holes. And her appearance, which is incongruously attractive. Her desire seems to rise like a swollen polyp beneath the garble of her words and skin. You suspect it's an ugly thing.
Who you calling ugly? When a woman's life is at stake (it's never not), then you can become a femicide tool.

Trail her with your suspicion, you misogynistic-xenophobic cop brain. Watch her creep into the forest at night and lurch stiffly. She scans her surroundings to make sure she is alone. Her body rips in half at the waist as though from an internal bomb detonation. Her legs remain perched on the ground, while her torso begins to levitate, sprouting wings and a long tubular sucking tongue, designed for penetration and extraction. This torso flies back towards the village, in the direction of prey.

Now you have evidence of her terrorizing. She sucks the viscera out of sleeping villagers, as her own organs dangle from an open wound. She sucks unborn fetuses out of pregnant women, while her own uterus is in shreds. Whatever is inside is pierced, dissolved, slurped up, aired out, passed through a twisted metabolic process that makes no sense. Her split body is a crack in our community.

—Amy Lien and Enzo Camacho

0. reminder:

it might look like it's trying to kill them but it's trying to kill you

actually it's
ordinary it's rather
extraordinarily
to wrap my brain
around it. it's like
you don't see it at
near you, or comes
something about her
which is strained
who are you calling
you who are the
you need to sit with
like, figure your shit
say.



nothing out of the
that the ordinary is
violent. i'm trying

amy and enzo said.
first. she just lives
close to you. it's
communication,
and full of holes.
full of holes? it's
problem. actually.
this feeling and,
out. it's like they

like honey is

the sleep of the just.

I. el demonio de las comparaciones

just like some places belong to
the way the dead were told to die

not like that

maybe it's time

to reconsider

the harmony between desk and desk
chair

like

how many sub-minimum wage gargoyles

panhandling watery fear

in this trap

if inching lava is the sleep
of the anxious

if you feel
destroyed
let us talk



and how a time machine is like a cave

II.

A reversal might be a natural object, like a tree (so-called) or the creaking of a word (when it splits), like a house removed from its context.

When it splits and turns around and creaks.

There might be a kind of creaking happening in the reversal (though I'm so tired, I might be too tired to notice). That is one house I don't want to look back into (come to think of it), though it was less of a house and more of a reliquary (I can't fathom the fact of it).

Religion is the shadow of the obvious and it hurts that I never needed anyone but I need help now.

The only place I've found to retire into is Reversal

(I haven't covered it in Sameness and it is in no sense beautiful). In no sense. Sometimes I live inside of it, right inside, pink of illusion, devil of affinities. Some days I wake up completely covered in it, wrapped in it like cling wrap, call it being swaddled, call it having been created for this place, call it waking up with an extra 15 pounds on your chest, call it whatever you want.

The only place I've found to retire into is Rupture. The Inferno (all that it is) is seductive and warm but it's not just that I like it down here (which I do).

It's not just that I like it down here but you can call it that (call it what it is, a temporal machine, the time that remains, an eschatology of the poem). Call it the thing that saves and punishes, the Citation, as Benjamin saw it, call it back to its origin.





III.

The only place I've found to retire into is

depraved difference. Every city I go,

there are piles of it. Dirt. Like a grammar. Dripping

its silver tap (what does it do, that drip)

down Night's little raw Spine. Maybe it was that

raw silver tap that sustained Crisóstomo

through his discovery of what *really* happened to his father's remains

(they were exhumed, then deposited in the river)

that rainy Night at the San Diego Cemetery (call it

a spell, call it a two-at-once-ness).

And I don't have the privilege of un-seeing that.



IV. art makes me less crazy

it should be looked at more
and discussed less
it's an honest joy
to be shocked by beauty
in 2020
i was shocked when your gf was caught stealing
from Whole Foods
i was thinking of a line
by Lorine Niedecker

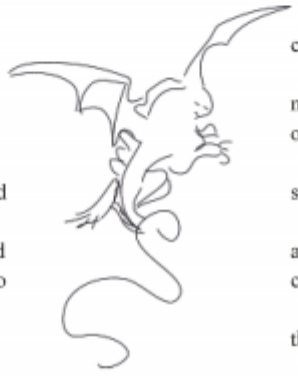
I've been free
with less

Poetry
the less than less
the first of something
how long does it last

V. how long do things last?

Cole.

chilling
with objects
in your studio
like cooling carcasses
horned and clawed



after class

you tell me
the omasum,

the third stomach of a cow,

is called a book
it is also called the bible

many things are called the bible

handbook for the killing
this is discussed
in various sources
on the subject of
an expensive form
all new thinking is loss
on the subject of the new
all newness is old
words
and tones
recycled
and derived
over time
like glass
smoothed by the ocean
smooth but ancient
fossils of a corrupted and failed modernity
like they say—

contaminated.

I'll be seeing you
In all the old familiar places

things have been doubling
Twinning
maybe it's time to go home
or maybe it's the future
fucking finally
that thing is happening
in the dark
facts are bigger
more bulbous
some kind of splitting, happening, somewhere.
it feels
porous
diffuse
like the old man
lurking around campus
just staring

Artforum magazine

I dream all night.

VI. we agree that it's fucked that Hercules pulled up to the red island and slaughtered Geryon and Orthrus and stole his lil red cattle and peaced out but what are we trying to do about it



I've been free with less

Calvino wrote something about how, in a world becoming ever more inferno-like, we must identify what is not-inferno and give it space, make it endure. Something like that.

I don't think it was very nice of Dante—in his Inferno—to place Geryon, that little winged creature, in the shadowy abyss between the seventh and eighth circles of Hell—the circles of violence and fraud.

On the little winged creature, Anne Carson writes:

> *Geryon is the name of a character in ancient Greek myth about whom Stesichoros wrote a very long lyric poem...some eighty-four papyrus fragments and a half-dozen citations survive, which go by the name Geryoneis ("The Geryon Matter") in standard editions. They tell of a strange winged red monster who lived on the island called Erytheia (which is an adjective meaning simply "The Red Place") quietly tending a herd of magical red cattle, until one day the hero Herakles came across the sea and killed him to get the cattle. There are many different ways to tell a story like this. Herakles was an important Greek hero and the*

elimination of Geryon constituted one of His celebrated
I'VE BEEN F□□ ED

WT□ □ED

Labors. If Stesichoros had been a more conventional poet he might have taken the point of view of Herakles and framed a thrilling account of the victory of culture over monstrosity. But instead the extant fragments of Stesichoros' poem offer a tantalizing cross section of scenes, both proud and pitiful, from Geryon's own experience. We see his red boy's life and his little dog. A scene of wild appeal from his mother, which breaks off. Interspersed shots of Herakles approaching over the sea. A flash of the gods in heaven pointing to Geryon's doom. The battle itself. The moment when everything goes suddenly slow and Herakles' arrow divides Geryon's skull. We see Herakles kill the little dog with His famous club.

VII.
the quietest
little dog knows all
about howling.



[1] Julia Kristeva, *Revolution in Poetic Language* (New York: Columbia University Press), 1984.

[2] Herminia Meñez, «The Viscera-Sucker and the Politics of Gender,» in Meñez, *Explorations in Philippine Folklore* (Manila: Ateneo de Manila University Press, 1996), 68.

[3] Ibid., 69.

[4] «The Movement of Manananggal: Amy Lien & Enzo Camacho in Conversation with Levi Easterbrooks,» Asia Art Archive in America, http://www.aaa-a.org/programs/the-movement-of-manananggal-amy-lien-enzo-camacho-in-conversation-levi-easterbrooks/ [http://www.aaa-a.org/programs/the-movement-of-manananggal-amy-lien-enzo-camacho-in-conversation-levi-easterbrooks/].

[5] Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Duke University Press: 2007), 27.

[6] Ibid.

[7] Cole Lu, *Living Content*, https://livingcontent.online/interviews/cole-lu/ [https://livingcontent.online/interviews/cole-lu/].

[8] Ibid.

COCO FITTERMAN

Coco Sofia Fitterman is a writer from New York. Her work has appeared in *The Brooklyn Rail* and *Shitwonder*, among other publications. She has performed at HKW, MoMA PS1, American Medium, and other venues in Berlin and NYC. Her chapbook *Say It With Flowers* was published by Inpatient Press in 2017, and she has recently graduated from New York University. She writes and reads on art, death and love in the age of worldwide destruction.

This contribution is licensed under the CC-BY-NC-ND License 4.0 International (Creative Commons, Attribution, Non Commercial, No Derivatives). Images and videos integrated into the contribution are not included in the CC BY-NC-ND License. For any use not permitted by legal copyright exceptions, authorization from the respective copyright holders is required.

doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.13930108