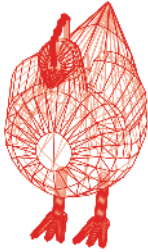


A Sensitive Matter:



An Interview with Sanford Kwinter

Scapegoat: We were perusing Google 3D warehouse—the online repository of digital 3D SketchUp models uploaded from all over the world—and we started cracking up when we saw countless 3D wireframe chickens! Soon the laughter subsided and we considered the lifelessness of these animals with their hollow forms, the reduction to “meshes,” the crudeness, the details the designers chose to model, as we orbit around them in an infinitely precise, contextless space. These chickens look like they are composed of and captured by chicken wire! In addition, these 3D models remind us of an early essay by James Joyce entitled “The Universal Literary Influence of the Renaissance.” In it Joyce writes, “one might say of modern man that he has an epidermis rather than a soul.” With the increasing talk of architecture as *skin*, is it equally absurd reducing chickens, architecture, or the city to these models? Does all modern life have only an epidermis?

Sanford Kwinter: The “mesh” and the (by now) sweeping “epidermal” reduction are inseparable outcomes of a single general process in our culture. To this process we have given the name “modern”: the rationalization of existence with a view limited to the need to emancipate us from superstition (“belief”) but without broader concern for the inevitable destruction of the very human ecology that brought our species its incredible

success: the cultivation of the “magical” aspects of existence’s enduring, and arguably permanent, mysteries. We cultivate these sensations and states—and simultaneously hide them from our vigilant rational selves—in ritual and symbolic activity but also in everyday practices such as music, food, dreams, sports, sex, religion, gambling, even reading.

No human culture does not maintain provisional access to what lies beyond the techniques of reason, access to what the nervous system knows by dint of its transpersonal history (in earlier states and organisms) and supra-personal extensions into its environment and social world (a prodigious and reciprocal sensory engagement with the ambient surround that neuroscientists are only beginning to map today). We typically imagine that we “think” and “feel” and “perceive,” as if we were both subject and origin of the experiential events that make up our lives, but in fact what thinks, feels and perceives is a substance that is at once “us” and is fully embedded in the world, a “sensitive matter” (to quote Denis Diderot) that sends and receives to and from the ambient realm beyond our strict physical boundaries. The Renaissance, as we know, is largely what made us modern, it is the regime that hyper-invested in the “eye” (perspective) and in the psychological monad (the “individual”)—as part of a system of separative technologies and practices. Although “the soul” is certainly partly a construction of the Protestant Reformation of the latter part of the same era (god henceforth

watches and disciplines each of us individually), Joyce clearly means that the “ambiguities” of inner and outer life and the innovations that result from their interaction, are being lost to the one-dimensional characterization of human destiny by rational technique that was already exploding in the early twentieth century. But the “epidermal fallacy” which was the price of our modernity, is in my view already beginning to fall away a hundred years after Joyce, provoked by a generalized crisis that is fully ecological in scope.

SG: I'd like to discuss further this “sensitive matter” by which we think *through* space. It seems to me that the brain has several outlets to report itself: through language (in the confession box or on the psychoanalyst's couch), or through chemicals and images in the neurological scan. Could “space” be another kind of mind? And by this, might we shift from the “brain,” that is subject to measurement, to the “mind” that constitutes a space for thought? Nietzsche already said that the most philosophical questions are what food we eat and what kind of air we breathe, are we on a mountain or by the sea? because different thoughts emerge in each case. But if thinking, feeling, perceiving happens externally, then the city emerges as a mind (or nervous system?). As you have written, it is a form of “incorporation.”

Secondly, what you wrote made me think of another Joycean concept, *metempsychosis*, that is, “the transmigration of souls.” Literature can create new kinds of subjects, or endlessly bring back Hamlet or Jesus in disguise. These souls are ways of orienting oneself in a world, and they need bodies, our bodies, to be effectuated. Is this another way that we are embedded in a history in a perpetual conversation or *sacre conversazione* or still life with ghosts? Does the city similarly need literature to orient itself in the world, to make it live?

SK: I have always felt strongly the need to confirm Nietzsche's case for a “physiological” philosophy but never felt I could grasp it within a single frame of commitment until I began to study the nervous system as a universal *material* destiny. I am amazed that you bring this up here because nothing anticipated it and yet it is uncannily apt. So to address the parts of your question that might apply, let's first take the idea of “space.” I used to lecture on West African music and aesthetics (these were rather fun and easy lectures to follow as there were extraordinary, immediate demonstrations of difficult concepts made available in wonderful musical passages that go persuasively straight to the body and leave no residue of uncertainty). In those lectures I used to sneak in a slogan that I secretly hoped would be taken up by the generation that was in the design schools in the 1990s: “*matter is the new space.*” But what you suggest here is not simply that active “matter” is space but rather that because it is “active” and endlessly interactive, it might well operate as a kind of transpersonal “mind.” The question this presupposes is whether we can talk usefully and precisely of the mind as something located transversally across the entire sphere of biological experience. There is strange and compelling evidence that this is the case. Ever

since the late 1980s, since the initial publication of Ilya Prigogine's "3rd wave" thermodynamics (*Order out of Chaos*), or even much earlier within the first attempts to theorize life before the conceptual innovations of the late nineteenth century allowed life to become a scientific project within the domain that came to be known as "biology," the problem of how exactly matter "knows" has been an acceptable problem. What is fantastic is that we know that matter "knows"—there is no controversy about this—we just don't know *how* it knows. "Life," in sum, is matter that knows reliably, stably, and continuously over time. We don't like to apply the term "mind" to it, but then again, we don't even know how to apply the concept of "mind" to the brain yet! It is of more than passing significance that certain medical researchers—one can cite Stanislav Grof and Rick Strassman as only two—have found in a vast number of subjects undergoing deep neurochemically induced brain unification, credible and in some cases confirmable testimony of memory and intuition of material knowledge outside of the temporal and spatial limits of the ordinary understanding of "person." In sum, what is often called "ecstatic" or peak experience, or by anthropologists "transcendent" experience, is typically achieved by some sort of reversal of the differentiation processes that humans undergo over the course of education and rearing (and through the abundant adaptations to these influences by the nervous system). But the original matter of which we are made, and much of its original organization, is still there. Certain

techniques—such as meditation, exercise, technical breathing, even free-diving it turns out—can activate the pre-individuated pathways and provide a profound experience of existence's continuum. Is this space? Is this time? Is it mind? We can't claim any of these yet for sure, but it is certainly matter and it is certainly real. With respects to what I once called "incorporation," the science and theory on this has developed enormously since we first published our book by that name (*ZONE 6: Incorporations*, 1993). Today the theory of neural plasticity, and of the "primary" and "secondary repertoires" suggests that yes we do endlessly match our sensing apparatuses to the stimulus we receive. But this also helps us understand how and why we modify the world endlessly in order simply to force our bodies and minds to fire endlessly "differently" to transform experience and in so doing to transform ourselves. If I have lost track of "space" this is where I have rediscovered it.

I am heartened by your invocation of "literary ghosts" as virtual beings that can endlessly inhabit us and transform us, like a vast storehouse or archive of possible souls. And they are exactly this! Naturally we need to de-theologize the concept of the soul but we also need to recover the ancient concept of the soul as movement of internal *organization* and interior experience. The ancients had clear access to many of the "body states" that we have regrettably left behind, and they conserved in the concept of a soul the principle of responsive transformation. In time this

forgetting came to be a political problem as it deprived humans of a sense of their legitimate and imaginative mutability. There is no essential or legitimate difference between real humans and those created within literary or mythic contexts: we are here to create and to feel what has not been made or felt before, and we access this realm of the not-yet-known through literary as well as other experiences of consciousness. Joyce found Bloom and Daedalus, and even Molly and the transpersonal *riverrun* in himself.

Like you, I too think of “the city” reflexively whenever I want to be reminded that “architecture” needs to be understood as more than mere buildings. The city after all is the *realm of souls* in endless instigation and foment. Some neuroscientists—I can think of at least one, Wolf Singer—believe that the substrate of the Brain may be to Mind as the City is to ... Life itself.

SG: Thank you for those wonderful insights. Some of them remind me of Joseph Beuys’ “How to Explain Pictures to a Dead Hare.” Paraphrasing, he says that art is there to expand the organization of sensory perception, to further develop our creative potential. The hare, and with it all of nature, are parts of us, organs without which the human being cannot live. And it turns out that we have lost a loving relationship to the plant world, the world of minerals, and the world of animals that are integral to our evolution. Your point about the modification of the world to transform experience—to transform ourselves—is provocative, and brings in an idea of life composed of the organic and inorganic environment. Returning to the Renaissance once more, it occurs to me that it is misnamed. Only superficially do we see a re-birth of classicism. What we really have is the Birth of Man, or perhaps, The Death of Ecstatic Experience! A mathematical account of the divine is the new “bridge” to the transcendental—or rather the new “pier,” a *disappointed bridge*! In Padua, bodies are further individuated into organs in the dissection theatre ... these bodies no longer know how to dance.

And so, I’ve been meaning to ask you about Humpty Dumpty, the egg. Let’s imagine he did not have a great fall—he hatched! At once exceeding his shell and the border wall of the kingdom. But the King’s men, and King’s horses can only see fragments. Is this what Foucault’s end of Man will look like? Going unnoticed, erased, “like a face drawn in sand at the edge of the sea”?

SK: Clearly I agree with Beuys. His entire project was born from a “non-ordinary” intuition during wartime in which he experienced the extension of death into life and matter (notably felt and fat) into mind as if these were two overlapping drawings on a single plane. And yes, in many ways the Renaissance—we learned in graduate school to use the term “renascence” if the bourgeois assumption of capital-R Renaissance didn’t fit one’s instincts about it—nearly did us westerners in. There is a prominent school of thought in musicology that sees the invention of equal “temperament” in music—rationalizing the harmonic series out of existence—as having the exact purpose you describe, to retune us

(and the world) and to remove the ecstatic from musical experience. In sum, providing access to the ecstatic is exactly what music is for. It is widely remarked and never explained that there is no human culture that does not have music, and especially no culture that does not tap the harmonic series to alter its essential mental and sensory disposition to the world. I dealt with the mathematization of the divine in my first book (Nicholas Cusanus, Giordano Bruno, Filippo Brunelleschi, and so on) and therefore won't elaborate here other than to suggest that even mathematics had an ecstatic dimension in those days, such that Paulo Uccello was able to exclaim, even in the presence of his beautiful naked wife beckoning him to bed: "Che bella cosa, la prospettiva!" The rigor and sterility of numbers was a still later development.

As far as Humpty is concerned, I am pretty certain that no one has ever proposed before that he simply hatched (and this is therefore now my favoured theory). I always dismissed the English political interpretations as utterly shuttered to the unequivocal reality and centrality of the birth-and-death dyad in children's nursery phantasmagoria. *Of course*, your hatch theory explains the egg and its sublimated terrors! Clearly no labour of wrights or militia could derive an egg from a hatched form, for that is the irresistible logic of differentiation. We all remember how Deleuze and Guattari used the egg as a model of immanence and virtuality (and de-differentiation)—as the body-without-organs. We also know how early biologists (embryologists)

such as Driesch, Roux and Spemann played with eggs to understand how the first steps toward a fully hierarchically organized being could emerge from a homogeneous mass. (The answer was that the cues and instigators were sought and found in the ambient flow that surrounds it.)

Foucault knew well, as did Beuys, that (our version of) "Man" is but one of a near-infinity of points on a spectrum that humans might occupy provided they manage to change the context within which s/he is formed. What looms large in all this today, and you allude to it strongly in your evocation of the "border wall of the kingdom," is that we are already changed foundationally once the boundary between conventional "life" and what lies beside, before and beyond it is dismissed. A sage once referred to this another way; he described the foundations of eroticism as "the assenting to life even in 'death'." Hence the ecstasy of orgasm is traditionally referred to by the French as *la petite mort*, a temporary loss of what?—of *routine consciousness*. A loss that can be achieved in manifold ways.

SG: Your phrase "rationalizing the harmonic series out of existence" (maybe deliberately) recalls Joyce's famous passage from *Portrait*: "The artist, like the God of creation, remains within or behind or beyond or above his handiwork, invisible, refined out of existence, indifferent, paring his fingernails." The "dead" parts slip away: fingernails are discarded and eventually the entire body is

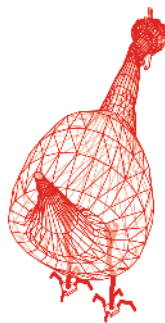
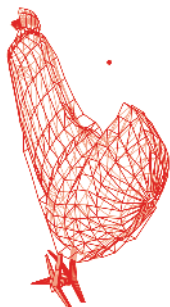
discarded. The artist is all around but nowhere to be found.

Your remark about “Man” as one possible position brings us back to the vanishing point in perspective: projection lines meet only on the picture plane, in the world, they are parallel. The vanishing point is simultaneously a single point and infinite space (in some sense, so is the pupil?). The subtraction of this perspectival point, of the unity ($n-1$), and the change of position alters this space and literally “understanding” as the situated-standing-among.

One more question I would love to hear your take on: is there a space between life and non-life (like your description of the two overlapping drawings on a plane), and if so, what kind political, technological, literary, or architectural forces act on it? Could we conceive of this as a contemporary battleground?

SK: For Joyce, the novel represented “a field” in which autonomous forces and actors were set into motion as if to semi-freely interact—hence *Ulysses* as a *textual* Dublin—and in which the “author” relinquishes, even if only ceremoniously, much of the command-and-control we saw in the space of the nineteenth-century novel (this was a function of Joyce’s, and the modern novel’s, hyper-focus on *heteroglossic* language ... and on the fluxes of internal time consciousness). In sum, Joyce’s project was precisely to dismantle the rational-realist novel, its landscape, its metaphysics, and its psychology. Its purpose was to free human beings from their confinement within inherited “humanistic” boundaries and limitations. We are certainly not “post-human” now—nor will we ever be; that is because we were never precisely “human” either (Foucault’s essential insight) outside of a momentary, intense system of coercion. We are biological actualities, with open-ended and unknown capacities—arrays of matter in the throes of individuation (Simondon). For just these same reasons, the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries did away with one-point linear perspective and returned to the uncontrived reality of the picture plane as *the* reality of painting.

I agree that it is the agony (and the ecstasy) of our era to navigate the universe of ambiguities as to where life and mind and matter begin, overlap and end. In my own lifetime of following scientific developments and thought, I note the remarkable shift that has taken place as even physicists detour toward the “qualitative” dimensions of our material cosmos. I also note, with both increasing fascination and sobriety, the growing embrace of the Hindu-Buddhist theory of nature as a continuum of articulated vibration from which all form is drawn—a more and more general espousal of the univocity of being. We are experiencing a significant shift of understanding of our world, and the impetus that is driving it is none other than the need to engage, and no longer simply to con-jure away, the cryptic enterprises of Nature. This attentional disposition, shall we say, from the perspective of “Deep History,” has always been our species’ endowment. Just imagine how we might be able to enhance this engagement today given the panoply of tools and concepts and techniques at our disposal.



**WORKS
REFERRED TO
IN THE TEXT**

Georges Bataille, *Eroticism*
 Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*
 Denis Diderot, *D'Alembert's Dream*
 Ross Duffin, *How Equal Temperament Ruined Harmony (and Why You Should Care)*
 Gerald Edelman, *Bright Mind, Brilliant Fire: On the Matter of the Mind*
 Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things: Archaeology of the Human Sciences and Madness and Civilization*
 Stanislav Grof, *Beyond the Brain: Birth, Death and Transcendence in Psychotherapy*
 James Joyce, *L'influenza letteraria universal del rinascimento, A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man, Ulysses, and Finnegans Wake*
 Sanford Kwinter and Jonathan Crary, *ZONE 6: Incorporations*

James Nestor, *Deep: Freediving, Renegade Science and What the Ocean Tells us about Ourselves*

Friedrich Nietzsche, *Philosophy in the Tragic Age of the Greeks*

Ilya Prigogine, *Order out of Chaos: Man's New Dialogue with Nature*

Gilbert Simondon, *L'individu et sa genese physico-biologique*
 Wolf Singer, *Der Beobachter im Gehirn*
 Daniel Lord Smail, *On Deep History and the Brain*

Rick Strassman, *The Spirit Molecule: A Doctor's Revolutionary Research into the Biology of Near-Death and Mystical Experiences*
 Unknown, *Humpty Dumpty*

Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism*

Bruce Wexler, *Brain and Culture: Neurobiology, Ideology and Social Change*