

HOW IS IT MADE?

Beyond Matter: Phantasmagoric Fluid

PÁDRAIC E. MOORE DISCUSSES 'ECTOPLASM,' AN EVENT HE INITIATED AT 1646 PROJECT SPACE LOCATED IN THE HAGUE, THE NETHERLANDS.



Peter Hujar, *Paul Thek Masturbating (I)*, 1967; 1987 The Peter Hujar Archive LLC; courtesy of Pace/MacGill Gallery, New York and Fraenkel



Lucy Andrews, *Proximity*, 2016



Adham Faramawy, *SXCN00DZ*, 2015; photo (detail) by Marian Cramer

Bert Jacobs, *Many and One* (before), 2016Bert Jacobs, *Many and One* (after), 2016

'ECTOPLASM' was a one-off, nocturnal event hosted by 1646, a project space in the centre of The Hague. The event, which comprised performances, screenings, participatory actions, readings and physical objects, was the culmination of a curatorial residency I undertook at 1646 in 2015. In addition to a programme of exhibitions, 1646 hosts artists talks, screenings, lectures and events, providing a platform for experimental art practices as well as short-term residencies for foreign artists and curators. The residency provides participants with both a working studio and living space. I was delighted to spend time in The Hague, the administrative capital of the Netherlands. As well as the appeal of the city's ever-expanding arts scene, the Gemeentemuseum also houses several key works by one of my favourite artists, Piet Mondrian. While one isn't obliged to present a public project at 1646, I was eager to share some of my recent research with new audiences. 'Ectoplasm' brought to fruition the dialogues I had developed with practitioners from the Netherlands and further afield.

The term 'ectoplasm' was first used in late-nineteenth-century occult circles to describe the supernatural substance that allegedly emerged from the bodies of psychic mediums. Descriptions of the substance vary widely, from "vaporous" to a "plastic paste; bundle of fine threads; membrane with swellings or fringes" or a "fine fabric-like tissue".¹ Some claimed that ectoplasm possessed electrical properties, emanated a luminous glow and was capable of forming into hands, faces and other body parts. Many spiritualists, scientists and artists viewed ectoplasm as a phantasmagoric fluid that could bridge material and immaterial worlds and provide a means of communicating with other dimensions. Some parapsychologists believed ectoplasm might even hold the key to revealing the deeper underlying structures of the universe, beneath and beyond matter.

A key document in the history of ectoplasm is *Phenomena of Materialisation* by German physician and psychic researcher Baron von Schrenck-Notzing (1862 – 1929), which was first published in English in 1923. The book, which features extensive photo documentation of ectoplasm emerging from the orifices of mediums in a state of trance, is a fascinating testament to the eroticised dynamics of séance rooms in the early twentieth century. Moreover, these images underscore the fundamental duality of the concept of ectoplasm, which is on one hand portrayed as ethereal, even divine, and on the other as an all too tangible matter and abject bodily emission.

In the early twentieth century, investigations led by the Society for Psychical Research exposed cases in which materialisations of

ectoplasm had been fraudulently staged. Combined with a growing mistrust in the reliability of photography as scientific evidence and the ongoing advancement of the rational scientific viewpoint at the expense of the spiritual, this led to a general scepticism towards physical mediumship in the popular imagination. Since then, the notion of ectoplasm has been revived episodically in the realms of popular culture and film, most notably in Ivan Reitman's 1984 film *Ghostbusters*, in which the substance is depicted for comic effect as viscous goo, denoting the residue of a haunting. However, the original notion of 'psychic matter' (as a material of infinite possibility, capable of connecting dimensions) has come to be viewed as an aberration and the result of a temporary loss of reason during a less-enlightened age.

The artworks presented in 'Ectoplasm' were distinguished by their volatility, liquidity, malleability and temporality. These physical works were activated, destroyed, conversed with and worn as clothing over the duration of the happening. While diverse in character, collectively they resisted a finished or static state in favour of an explosive materialisation of energy – something that was set in motion by the artists but existed beyond them. Made from plaster, metal, wood and various resins, Bert Jacobs's nine-metre-long sculpture *Many and One* (2016) closely resembled an ectoplasmic protrusion which obstructed movement within the exhibition space. Half way through the event, audience members were requested to smash this structure, a process which revealed seven smaller sculptures that they were invited to take with them. Lucy Andrews's work *Proximity* (2016) comprised an automated hand-soap dispenser – the sort designed to reduce contamination through contact – which 'sensed' the presence of a humanoid rubber finger that was periodically activated via a rotating clock hand. This delicate assemblage gradually produced a viscous substance strongly redolent of bodily fluids, which oozed from a glass shelf onto the floor, forming a pool that expanded as the night wore on.

These two sculptural pieces were accompanied by Adham Faramawy's video *SXC NooDZ* (2015) which depicts a nude male in a psychedelic shower scene involving neon-coloured slime. Faramawy's distinctive visuals are at once seductive and repugnant, combining the fluidity of the digital age aesthetic with something primal and gestational. *Female Sensibility*, a video produced by Lynda Benglis in 1973, depicts, in explicit close-up, a sexual encounter between the artist and her colleague Marilyn Lenkowsky. *Female Sensibility* interrogates the boundaries between erotic visual material and

prurient sexual commodification. This threshold was also interrogated in the photograph by Peter Hujar entitled *Paul Thek Masturbating* (1967) which became an important touchstone in my research and was widely circulated in the event's promotional material. Ultimately, *Female Sensibility* engages feminist sexual politics through methods of self representation. In the context of 'Ectoplasm' the screening of this significant work confronts the highly sexualised nature of much spirit photography in which animated substances issue from (somewhat passive) female bodies (2).

Live performances were provided by Sam Keogh, Daniel Vorthuys, Jessica Worden and Big Hare. Keogh began by holding a one-way conversation with one of his artworks: a mixed media sculpture with the appearance of bleached, dead coral. His performance, which drew on the fields of marine biology and haute couture, among other things, was punctuated by impromptu forays into the assembled audience, creating temporary catwalks for his eclectic costumes. The slide show and spoken word performance from Vorthuys drew on classical literature, 1990s cinema and rock music to produce a narrative delivered in a raucous, grandiose style reminiscent of 1960s beat poetry. Jessica Worden's equally dynamic *Echo/plasm* (2016) was ectoplasmic in both content and form. She performed her text (a compilation of medical examinations, pseudo-scientific studies and accounts of material phenomena) with great variations in her vocal expression, alluding to the corporeality of language.

The night climaxed with a live musical performance of experimental electronica and theatrical special effects provided by Utrecht-based band Big Hare. This transformed the performance space into a dance floor upon which participants and audience were unified. Ultimately, this experimental event acknowledged the dynamic that an audience brings to an artwork while also emphasising the subjectivity of an individual's physical encounter, underscoring the fact that there is no substitute for experiencing smell, sound and sensoria for oneself.

Pádraic E. Moore is a writer, curator and art historian currently based in Brussels and Dublin (padraicmoore.com).

Notes

1. Gustave Geley quoted in Guy Christian Barnard, *The Supernormal; A Critical Introduction to Psychic Science*, 1933, Rider & Co, London.
2. American artist Mike Kelly addressed the subject of ectoplasm in his 1994 book *Photographs/Sculptures* when he stated that the development of the 'money shot' in pornography arose from the reading of earlier spiritualist photography, specifically the genre that depicts the medium exuding ectoplasm.