

# CENTER for EXPERIMENTAL LECTURES

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New Windsor, NY  
<http://experimentallecures.org>

## ***Tick Check. It's Chronic.***

by Taraneh Fazeli

Taraneh Fazeli: Hi all. So, I want to start by thanking Joseph, Gordon, and Nick for their support today. While the web is enumerable, I hold gratitude for collaborators of all kinds. Particularly the Canaries, and Park McArthur and Tina Zavitsanos, who contributed works from the *Crip Time* series you'll see in a bit on these screens. Also, my appreciation goes to Olga Dekalo and Catherine Czacki for turning me on to some source texts used today.

Due to the effects of a recent bout of illness, these days public speaking and many other things proves difficult for me. This was the catalyst that opened me up to the support of others—while I knew conceptually that I did not agree with the valorization of independence over dependency in our society, this past year the messy interconnectedness of personal and collective care was made material in a whole new way for me. With this in mind, I've asked for a little help from my friends today.

*From the audience:*

“Get well soon.”

“Sorry you're sick.”

“Hurry up and get better. We miss you.”

“I worry. You really should take better care of yourself.”

“You work too hard.”

“I never get sick.”

“I'm lucky, I haven't taken a sick day in years.”

“What can we do to help you feel better?”

Taraneh Fazeli: If you examine the grammatical structure and content of these sentiments, you'll see that they typify our cultural understandings of illness. Some contain moralizing expectations of self-management, differentiate between collective and individual wellbeing, reflect labor's antagonistic relationship to debility, or see illness as a discrete event, rather than understand wellness on a continuum. In comparison, the last remark emphasizes collective efforts.

As of yesterday I've been in this body 35 years. This past year, spent in a body that didn't feel like my own, dragged on, circled back, unfolded with no regard for the stricture of the work week or compulsory ablebodiedness. You see, I was a chronically ill youth, and after years of shuttling between specialists and fighting HMOs for care when doctors hinted at psychosomatic causes, I was eventually diagnosed with an auto-immune disease and recently had a flare that resulted in a series of illnesses. Auto-immune diseases differ but are generally defined by an immune system that is literally confused as to where a body starts and where it ends--unable to differentiate between itself and harmful foreign agents, it begins to "attack" itself. Some might say such permeable bodies and leaky guts make those with auto-immunity kinds of first responders, litmus tests of our society and environment's wellbeing.

Through this experience I've been working with others who want to re-envision collective wellness by considering how the porous body in states of debility and disability can provide new possibilities for collectivity, privileging interdependency while also negotiating and maintaining difference through radical kinship and forms of care. A current curatorial project "Sick Time, Sleepy Time, Crip Time: Against Capitalism's Temporal Bullying" proposes a consideration of the states of debility, disability, aging, and rest as potentially resistive to capitalism and other forces of oppression.

## II.

"It's no accident that so many women artists have handled the tackling of waste, maintenance and cleaning up after civilization. Nature or nurture? Women identify with "nature," not because of "essentialism," but because we share with nature the dominant culture's attempts at control." That was Lucy Lippard channeling Mierle Laderman Ukeles

Mierle, who is perhaps most well-known for her longtime Artist-in-Residence role at the New York City Department of Sanitation in which social reproduction became a realm for artistic action, wrote her *Manifesto for Maintenance Art* in 1969. In it she put the seemingly tedious and repetitive maintenance (or its corollary care) in opposition to the sexier forward-looking focus on development in avant-garde and industrial production.

In a recent interview with *Art in America*, Mierle reflects on how, right before penning that text, she was making giant inflatable sculptures that could quickly be tucked away with little planning, linking that choice to how balancing the demands of being a mother and being an artist left her too spent to exert much care. But the sculptures didn't work. They melted. They cracked. The elements of the world inevitably came in and required her to rethink them. Enter maintenance work. This is where she departed from her contemporaries Judd and Serra in how they lifted processes of production out of the culture they came from. As she said, "maintenance is trying to listen to the hum of living. A feeling of being alive, breath to breath. And I know that that has to be a part of culture."

## III.

So, as Timothy Morton has said, let us "lose nature, but gain ecology"

Since Lyme disease was discovered some forty odd years ago, it has become the second most common infectious disease in the US next to Chlamydia. It is caused by a bacteria that deer ticks can transmit to humans via their bite. While there is no definitive diagnostic test for Lyme and it can masquerade as other illnesses (including auto-immunity and depression), when caught quickly it can often be treated with antibiotics.

It is a contentious disease. Its exponential rise seems to implicate human's irresponsible land practices that have produced out-of-whack ecosystems. Also, there is a growing contingent of those that, even when diagnosed, remain chronically ill after treatment. For those people there is no getting better soon—you see, the medical establishment refuses to recognize or support Lyme as chronic.

A recent *New York Times* article proposes an equally contentious repair to halt the rise of Lyme: the reintroduction of cougars into the Northeastern ecosystem. You see ticks get Lyme from the animals that they feed on, primarily mice and chipmunks. Rodents thrive in landscapes fragmented or otherwise disturbed by human development. Human development has limited predators like wolves or cougars, so deer are now everywhere and, as they feed, they clear the woods of

underbrush that allow small predators like the weasel or fox who eat mice and chipmunks to survive. Despite the fact that far fewer people have died from attacks by big cats than deer-involved auto crashes in the past hundred years, let us ask Harambe: what kind of approach are the prevailing voices in our society more likely to consider harmful, systemic maintenance like cougar reintroduction or development of a new truly harmful agent like DEET?

So, what are we to do with the hungry “anthropological machine?” In Giorgio Agamben’s book *The Open*, he examines ontologies that allow for the nonhierarchical co-existence of all forms of life. Perhaps most relevant tonight in this field is the radical dehumanization of the image of nature that plays out in the *umwelt* of the tick.

Referencing the work of twentieth-century zoologist Jakob von Uexküll, Agamben suggests that there are an infinite variety of perceptual worlds. He says “We imagine that the relations a certain animal subject has to the things in its environment take place in the same space and in the same time as those which bind us to the objects in our human world. The illusion rests on the belief in a single world in which all living beings are situated. Uexküll shows that such a unitary world does not exist [...]”<sup>1</sup>

These environment worlds known as the *umwelt* are constituted by different organism’s broad “markers of significance.” For the tick they are the odor of acid in the sweat of all animals, the temperature of thirty-seven degrees which corresponds to blood of mammals, and the typology of skin, all markers which indicate at which point the tick is to fall from a blade of grass, embed, and begin feeding.

This environment world is different than the objective space we see a living being moving in, called the *Umgebung*.

Agamben details:

There does not exist a forest as an objectively fixed environment: there exists a forest-for-the-park-ranger, a forest-for-the-hunter, a forest-for-the-botanist, a forest-for-the-wayfarer, a forest-for-the-nature-lover, a forest-for-the-carpenter, and finally a fable forest in which Little Red Riding Hood loses her way. Even a minimal detail—for example, the stem of a wildflower—when considered as a carrier of significance, constitutes a different element each time it is in a different environment.<sup>2</sup>

Agamben, in his reconstruction of the tick’s unknowable world, suggests that we humans might learn something from the functional unity of ticks and other small organisms with their environments. As he says, “The tick IS this relationship: she lives only in and for it.”<sup>3</sup>

IV.

As we close this evening and prepare to go on into the night, to the campfire and onto our beds, take a moment to turn to the person next to you and perform a ritual newly minted in the past forty years: a tick check... Also known as a Hudson Valley hookup!

While a resident here at Shandaken, in the bathroom we used a small mirror to glance into crevices we barely knew we had. Instead, consider asking your neighbor to inspect the underside of your knee or graze the nape of your neck. Ask them to not focus on containment and threat, but to consider our functional unity with other non-human organisms by engaging in this small act of care. Gesture towards the unique spatio-temporal coordinates of other beings—both human and non-human. Consider the influence we, as humans, have on the tick or the bacteria that move alongside (and within) us in their unique perceptual worlds and, in turn, the affects we have on each other.

Take a moment to consider your so-called discrete body and recognize how recognize how we get by with a little help from our friends.

<sup>1</sup> Giorgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004), 40.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid, 41.

<sup>3</sup> 47.