

Bruised Features

Essay by Stacey Ho

In 1666, at the tender age of 19, philosopher and mathematician Gottfried Wilhelm Leibniz published *De Arte Combinatoria*, proposing a universal system that would represent all thoughts and concepts as a series of simple components whose validity could then be calculated.

In other words, it must be brought about that every fallacy becomes nothing other than a calculating error, and every sophism expressed in this new type of notation becomes in fact nothing other than a grammatical or linguistic error, easily proved to be such by the very laws of this philosophical grammar. Once this has been achieved, when controversies arise, there will be no more need for a disputation between two philosophers than there would be between two accountants. It would be enough for them to pick up their pens and sit at their abacuses, and say to each other (perhaps having summoned a mutual friend): “Let us calculate.”¹

Pierre Savart’s 1768 engraving of Leibniz is surrounded by an austere, rectangular *trompe-l’œil* frame in which the resplendent cloak worn by the eminent philosopher and mathematician mischievously escapes from the image’s illustrated border. Considering the complexity of this image within yet another frame, that of a 13-inch high-resolution laptop screen, I cannot help but pity Leibniz’s famous plea of *Calculemus!* as even the clothes on his back refuse to be confined to logic.

Working from this portrait, artist Stian Ådlandsvik commissioned a tailor from Leibniz’s birthplace in Leipzig to recreate his errant cloak. However, rather than wrapping a figure of flesh and bone, this time the enamelled structure of a Mercedes sedan peeks out from the pin-striped fabric of a business suit. By conflating car bodies with human bodies, *Portrait of Leibniz, after Pierre Savart*, proposes a speculative world where we may consider human and non-human entities on an even playing field. However in this equation, more than the distant gaze of the philosopher or the shiny chrome of a vehicle, it is the fabric of the cloak that acts as subject and agent.

The cloak is a condensation of time. Metaphorically, it enfolds the totallizing rationalism of Leibniz’s era with the neoliberal forces of production at work in this one. In actuality, it embodies many other kinds of time, for instance the accumulation of a tailor’s skilled and unseen labour that, through a series of gestures, transforms cloth into garment and knowledge into material. Time materialized through the tailored cloak consequently mirrors the calculus developed by Leibniz to pinpoint temporal elements such as change, motion, and velocity within a frozen, timeless instant. I want to know more about the tailor, put a face or a name to this gesture. Stian emails me pictures of a man marking fabric with tailor’s chalk and pinning in corners of material. He is wearing a blue shirt, sneakers, and glasses. Across this distance, I imagine him living and working.

The cloak’s production as the humorously perverted copy of a revered and brilliant original also speaks to the delirious proliferation of pirated goods and media at present, one aftereffect of a commodity fetishism which must continually produce and reproduce narratives of genius

and innovation. Adrian Blackwell describes this phenomenon in his 2013 essay “Shenzhen—Topology of a Neoliberal City”:

Today when entering Shenzhen from the Hong Kong subway, visitors pass through the Luohu Commercial centre, which sells counterfeit products made in the PRD [Pearl River Delta]. The fabrication of fakes (shanzhai) has certainly served an important role in this process, allowing factories contracted to make brand products to continue production when their orders dry up and new factories without contracts to open shop. But under Postfordism it has also become more difficult to point to an “original.” The world’s largest computer and phone manufacturers are not brand name companies, but subcontractors such as Foxconn, Hon Hai Precision, Quanta Computer, and Compal, each of which has, or has had, large manufacturing centres in Shenzhen, and each of which is currently moving at least part of its operations either inland to Chongqing or Chengdu, or outside China to Vietnam. The Taiwanese giants make products for multiple brand name companies, and each brand contracts multiple subcontractors to manufacture its products. Finally, the subcontractors are not only responsible for manufacturing, but also for research and development. So in this context copying is not the opposite of invention but its necessary complement.²

HSTND-2341-B refers to the model name of a flat screen tv. Layers of pink, teal, and grey coat the surface of a painting that is scarred with mysterious traces. The shape of these impressions, with their precise alignment of curves, angles, and pockmarks allude to forms that are mechanical in a familiar way, but also abstracted. Disassembled over the surface of the canvas, forms are extracted from parts of the screen. A DVD player and a combination printer/scanner form the basis of two other paintings. These objects are necessitated by a world given over to mediation. However, here their function is obscured, leaving only traces that seem to rust into the canvas.

The process of disassembly meditates upon the labour practices imbued in these commodities and the people who made these machines. Compare the work of the tailor to the work of the assembly line. The arduous working conditions of the technology manufacturing industry, as reported on in major centres such as Shenzhen, is comprised of repetitive movements and consecutive overtime shifts. As the object is dismantled, it reverses this process of production, again showing, like with Leibniz’s cloak, the time and labour inherent in each object. The distance between producer and consumer in the global supply chain is palpable in the abstracted scars on the surface of the paintings. However distance does not mean we are not implicated in each other’s lives. Rather, it is these conditions that bind us together.

In Hong Kong, many artists are concerned with such distances, blurring boundaries delineated by state lines while simultaneously exploring them. When parts of the Frontier Closed Area between Hong Kong and China first opened up in 2012, artist Samson Young spent two years along the border, recording vibrating fence wires and the flowing Shenzhen River to produce compositions and graphic notations for his *Liquid Borders* project. Morgan Wong’s *That’s How I Used to Know I Have in Fact Crossed This River* (2015) recreates the smell of the Lowu border crossing between Hong Kong and Shenzhen, a mixture of human oil, sweat, metal, grass, and fuel. As the influence of the Chinese mainland grows ever more tangible in Hong Kong, difference is preserved in the immaterial realms of sound, smell, and memory.

In February I joined a soundwalk led by artist Tsz Hin Cheung around the theme of boundaries. The walk took place in the New Territories, Hong Kong just across the border from Shenzhen. After busing through a busy new commercial district made to serve cross-border shoppers from the mainland, and walking through the quiet village where Cheung lives, we came to rest on top of a hill scarred with burned-out brush in Hung Lung Hang, an area slated for development. Cheung seemed resigned to the fact that the village life that he grew up with will eventually disappear due to land development. He said that when he was young, his mother taught him to recognize the difference between Hong Kong and Shenzhen at night by searching for the lights coming from the Hong Kong skyline. However today, both sides look the same. Looking out toward the high-rise towers of Shenzhen, it felt impossible to encapsulate this endpoint in the story of global capitalism, nor could I ever fully understand the lives entwined within this narrative or my relation to them. Yet I was here, implicated and embedded, and this presence within distance was extremely palpable.

While with *HSTND-2341-B*, the commodified object disintegrates to reveal the labour that held it together, in another sculpture, a different kind of energy engages with material to free it from its use. The cross section of a steel beam forms the letter “I” or “H”. This structure allows the beam to bear weight in construction. However, playing around in a forge, the process of hammering allows the steel to take its own shape so that it may escape the rigid form of the beam. The top and bottom of the “I” gradually fuse together, while the connecting web of the beam is swallowed up completely. Heated and cooled countless times, the result is a beam with an anomalous flattened pancake at one end. In contrast to the severe I-shape of the beam, the pancake is wonky and imperfect, marked with the strikes of a hammer.

There is pleasure in the action of hammering, which is reflected in the open-ended form of the pancake. Assisted by the heat of the forge and the energy of the hammer, the steel takes on a new tack, eluding a definite shape, much as Leibniz’s cloak covertly evades its frame. Perhaps the steel of the car in Ådlandsvik’s portrait of Leibniz answers back to the tailor by refusing to conform or be cloaked. I imagine pancake cars and buildings made from pounded steel, morphing like dilapidated architectural incarnations of the T-1000 android from *Terminator 2*. Here, the boundary being crossed is not between producer and consumer, but instead, through recognizing the agency of material, the binary of living/non-living is questioned.

Interrogating such boundaries reflects recent conversations in new materialism that consider the vitality of matter and its will to create its own form. Extending from a feminism that considers how subjective experience may be shaped in a plurality of ways through historical and radical interpretations of racialization and gender, new materialist thinking seeks not only to trouble binary categories of woman/man and colonized/civilized but also of animal/plant/human and life/death. Less acknowledged in this emergent field is how such discussions are preempted and enriched by the knowledge traditions of non-Western and Indigenous peoples. Kim Tallbear addresses how current discussions around new materialism and object-oriented-ontology should forefront Indigenous thinking in a 2015 keynote address entitled “Disrupting Life/Not Life”.

Indigenous thinkers have contributions to make to conversations in which human societies rethink the range of non-human beings with whom we see ourselves in intimate relation and precisely because of the varied ways in which Indigenous peoples relate possibilities for being in the world. The advantage of Indigenous analytical frameworks that are not secular [...] is that they are more likely to have kept sight of the profound influence in the world of beings, categorized by Western thinkers, both the church and science, in hierarchical ways as animal or less animate. Now that theorists seek frameworks for dismantling those hierarchies we should remember that not everyone needs to summon a new analytical framework or needs to renew a commitment to the vitality of so-called things. Indigenous standpoints that didn't construct hierarchies in the same way should be at the front edge of this new work, conversing with it and bringing additional insights.³

Speaking to non-secular frameworks and specifically to an Indigenous metaphysic, Tallbear breaks down a final dichotomy, that which privileges empirical knowledge over spiritual beliefs and practices. Ådlandsvik's body of work, rooted as it is in the autonomy of materials and our relationship to objects, is augmented by such considerations. A final piece that touches on both lightness and weight speaks in its own way to the metaphysical. The solid form of a low, concrete podium is split by a feather duvet that has been sliced open. Resting on the podium is a pair of sneakers with a meteorite delicately mounted inside the sole. Relying on poetic juxtaposition as well as the process-based explorations more prevalent in previously discussed works, we are confronted with the impossibility of feathers splitting stone, the impediment of mobility by an object from out of this world. I slip the shoes onto my feet. The iron of the meteorite weighs upon my step and digs painfully into the my foot. But also, it reminds me of possible worlds that exist just beyond the edge of my experience. Walking in these shoes, I stumble as I take a leap of faith.

1. Rucker, Rudy. *Mind Tools: The Five Levels of Mathematical Reality*. Houghton Mifflin, 1987.
2. Blackwell, Adrian. "Shenzhen—Topology of a Neoliberal City," *Shaping the City: Studies in History, Theory and Urban Design*, edited by Rodolphe El-Khoury and Edward Robbins, Routledge, 2013, pp. 278–308.
3. Tallbear, Kim. *Disrupting Life/Not Life: A Feminist-Indigenous Reading of Interspecies Relations and the New Materialisms*. 28 February 2015. University of Kentucky, Lexington KY. Keynote Address.