

# UNLIKELY

## Digesting Gut Feelings - A Conversation

By **ANDREW GOODMAN** and **TESSA LAIRD**

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*Gut Feelings* 2019, Dimensions variable, Video, sound, vibrating board, notes.

### ARTIST'S STATEMENT FROM CATALOGUE:

Translation/Resonance/Transduction.

*"I think of this translation of environmental factors through the sensitivity of the stomach (the so-called 'second brain') to the larger body and at the same time through this artwork into sound and vibrations not as translation in the traditional sense of a parcel of information exchanged between discrete entities, but as a transductive process. That is, it might not be merely the process of the clean transformation of forces as they pass through different bodies, but also a process that remakes bodies. For Simondon the resonance between these forces as differentials is therefore productive in a larger sense, drawing a becoming body into complex and emergent relation with the field, and charging the relationship with potential. It might also be a speculative process, a feeling out of the potential of this relationship that sets activity in motion, as forces and bodies are forced into relationships that open up questions rather than resolve them. In this sense translation might retain at its centre something of the strangeness of that which is translated, complicating rather than clearing things up, or perhaps folding them into each other, so that each unfolding parcel of information retains the creases and bent edges that are part of its complicated and intertwined fields."*

**Tessa:** *Gut Feelings* is a hybrid video and sound installation, where the viewer encounters a video screen playing a loop of 25 still images. Some of the images are quite easy to decipher, such as a bowl of soup, or a path with grass around the edges. Others, however, are blurrier or less obvious: an indistinct bed cover, or the back of a chair which will only look familiar to V-line train commuters. Perhaps of more interest than the rather unassuming photographs, is the sensation of vibrations, not to mention the occasional audible gurgle, coming through a speaker mounted approximately at stomach height. Could you explain what was happening in the images and the sound track and how/why you came to make the work?

**Andrew:** The piece was conceived of as a performative work in response to the *Translating Ambiance* call out and my conversations with the curator, Jordan Lacey, about various ideas. I started with the idea of utilising my body as the translator of the ambiance or affect of my environment, and thought about my stomach as an organ or 'sensor' that is easily affected by the environment -- both by bodily actions and by changes in mood. Initially I wrote a proposition and carried it out, which was to record one minute of the sound of my stomach on the hour every hour from midnight to midnight, and to take a photo with my phone of wherever I was in that minute. I chose a day with lots of varying environments -- beginning with a dawn run, then to work in Bendigo, to Melbourne by train and out to dinner, etc. In the exhibition this was then compiled into a 25-minute video shown on a TV screen, which consisted of the still images accompanied by the sounds, which were recorded by a very sensitive digital stethoscope I built. At some point I decided to add a second element, which was a Perspex sheet the same size as the TV screen that that hung above it. The Perspex had a large bass transducer behind it, so it vibrated in sync with the sounds the viewers were listening to without broadcasting much audio. The idea was that viewers would put their hands on the Perspex while listening through headphones, and the vibrations would enter their bodies in two ways simultaneously.

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**Tessa:** What is a transducer?

**Andrew:** A transducer speaker is simply a solid body speaker that has a pad instead of a cone, you attach it to a surface and it vibrates that surface. In effect, it can be used to turn aspects of architecture or an artwork into a speaker. Of course broadcast sound always vibrates or resonates with the architecture, but the effect is more pronounced. Originally I got the idea of using transducer speakers from *Space-Shifter* (2009), a fantastic work by Sonia Leber and David Chesworth, although plenty of other artists have used them. Since then I've utilised these speakers in many installations to make a very direct connection between viewers and the sound component of artworks that circumvent the parsing of sensation that takes place in conscious perception. By that I mean that the multi-sensory experiences of the body are larger than the consciously perceived or recognised sensory information, which in a sense is a second stage of the process of sensation-to-perception that discards (parses or filters) some of the experience of the world in order to organise and make use of this experience (to turn it into information). This means that there is an excess of sensation that sits between the self and the world, potentially disturbing these boundaries.

**Tessa:** Are you saying that vibration is always felt unconsciously, while other kinds of sounds are always parsed consciously? Does this relate to the concept of unsound? I'm also interested in this in relation to the idea of the centralised brain in contrast to the idea of consciousness as a dispersed network. In your artist's statement you refer to the discourse of the stomach as being a 'second brain', and certainly, *Gut Feelings* foregrounds this organ as being a much more active agent in the composition of your work, ahead of eyes, as your photos are not visually 'compelling', but operate more as placeholders; and ears, which are less engaged than the haptic sensations felt in the body whenever there are gurgles and rumbles in the sound track.

**Andrew:** I think in a broad sense I'm saying that the registering of sensation in the body is always larger than the perception of the sensation. Conscious perception only involves certain aspects of the very complex and multi-modal sensory system of the whole body in communication with its ecology. Perception parses the sensations into more intellectually 'useful' and separated components. For example, a bass drum sound that you feel on your skin and through your feet as well as in your ears is perceived and conceptualised primarily as a recognisable sound, but it has other kinds of engagement

some extent at least, escape the parsing and loss of richness that the process of perception necessarily imposes. I should add that I'm referring to 'normative' perception here, for many neurodiverse people the parsing may be much slower or less complete, leaving them more open to the excess the rest of us miss out on (though it may or may not be a pleasant experience). And of, course, other living beings may register much of what is unsound for humans as perceivable sound and/or approach sensation-perception quite differently -- I'm thinking of the octopus as a classic example, with a very distributed and independent series of nervous systems that seems much less centralised than the human model.

I like the idea of eyes and ears as 'placeholders', and definitely that was my thinking in this artwork, although in a sense I don't want to discount any type of engagement, but simply to broaden the possibilities. Initially I was interested in the idea of the stomach as a second brain (see Michael Pollan's *How to Change Your Mind*,<sup>1</sup> for example), but I've really gone off that idea now, as I see it as very neuro-normative. That is, it seems to me that it's another misguided attempt to 'locate' consciousness in an organ, even if we are thinking beyond the brain per se. But both radical philosophy and contemporary neuroscience (neuroscience that isn't mired in cognitive reductionism), suggest that consciousness is ecological and eventful and cannot be meaningfully located in the biological activity of any organ.<sup>2</sup> I think that cognitive reductionism is ethically dangerous as it leads to biopolitical ideas of 'curing' non-normative ways of living, which always take a supposed 'normal' state of perception as their model, rather than embracing and valuing a wider range of possible modes of interaction and learning how to enrich our lives through learning from neurodiverse knowledge and practices. This is true also of notions of neuro-plasticity, which celebrate the ability of a non-normative brain to 'fix' itself back into the normative model: it's a very neo-liberal aspirational narrative of self-help.

**Tessa:** OK so thinking of the neo-liberal aspirational narrative of self-help, and the 'stomach as second brain', we see a flowering of obsession with digestion: suddenly everyone has food allergies, you are defined by what you *don't* eat, and fermentation has become the holy grail of self-actualisation. But I don't just see blind self-interest in operation here (and besides, that would be hypocritical since we're both vegans with various allergies!). It's not just 'my body is a temple', but, 'my body is not my body, but a biome'. That is, the whole body is a site of multiple flourishing ecosystems, not just one entity with clear boundaries and an individual subjectivity that rules over it like a kingdom. People are becoming more aware that they are assemblages of all kinds of bacteria, positive and negative, and that foods themselves are active 'agents', if I can use that word without raising your hackles too much. Also, it's worth mentioning that the backdrop to this project included amazing conversations with SenseLab collaborators we met in Brazil last year, including artists that had practices specifically related to food.<sup>3</sup> Jorge Menna Baretta introduced us to his idea of 'sculpting the landscape' through what we choose to eat. When we choose to eat monocultures that destroy ecosystems we are creating a feedback loop that is detrimental both for the environment and our bodies, whereas when we nurture appetite for those crops that are part of thriving multispecies ecosystems, we help 'sculpt' a more harmonious landscape. At multiple levels, the growing, gathering, preparing and eating food, are themselves considered as modes of artistic practice. In our conversations with Jorge and Alexis Milonopolous, the term 'appetite' came up a lot, meaning much more than a craving for food. Knowing that Alfred North Whitehead used the term appetition, and that he is a huge influence on your work (and on the SenseLab in general), I was wondering if you could elucidate any threads of connection there? Also, the idea of 'digestion' took on more nuanced meanings in our conversations with Jorge and Alexis, as being very much a collaborative, and multi-species affair. So I think it is interesting that you have chosen to work with your stomach, as it gestures towards all of these ideas without necessarily being too literal about it.

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**Andrew:** Absolutely, thinking about your biome, or perhaps thinking yourself as one component of a biome rather than the owner of one is a great step to thinking ecologically -- across scales or registers and expressions of life, seeing eating as a transduction of the world or perhaps symbiogenesis with an ecology. I guess you could also see it as a way of 'translating' the world into a hospitable environment and/or making relations to certain aspects of the environment with which you share an appetite - the creation of an *Umwelt* in Jakob von Uexküll's sense of the word<sup>4</sup>. I think that works as

style of digesting, so each has a perspective or way of translating potential relation through its particular actions.

To return to obsession with digestion (in many hands though probably not yours) it can suggest a kind of puritan disgust with pleasure or attention to our bodies, though of course disgust at the way this is marketed and sold to us as self-improvement is an issue. At the better end of the spectrum maybe it implies attention to ecologies, moving with the appetites of bodies and biomes?

You mentioned foods being 'active agents'. The concept of an agent is one that I have a bit of a problem with, as it can imply a discrete entity that then acts -- that precedes the action or event in other words -- rather than thinking an entity as an immanent composition or nexus of relations. This is comparable, I think, to positioning yourself as a 'body *with* a biome' rather than a body *in* a biome. In fact the key question that arose for me from this artwork was to think how to explore the idea of a sonic biome -- the world as a series of sympathetic resonances from the micro (quantum) level to the cosmic (the echoes of the big bang still traversing the landscape). Mae Wan-Ho writes a lot, from a quantum biological level, about the super-fast communication between muscles that operates via resonance rather than electrical nerve signals: a whole world of relation operating via sympathetic vibrations.<sup>2</sup> I think I was interested in exploring this body-to-body, stomach-to-stomach. Whitehead's term *appetition* isn't one I understand well, he seems to use appetite or appetition to refer to a grasping of an abstract potential or 'more-than'<sup>6</sup>: perhaps then it's a lure or tendency to want to become more or different to what you are, to embrace novelty through enriching relation. In relation to *Gut Feelings*, maybe once you sense the vibrations through the Perspex this is a lure (or alluring): there's a certain pleasure in this feeling of intimacy it gives?

But while saying all this, most of this intellectual thinking was reflective. In starting the piece I just thought that as I have an oversensitive stomach that makes noises, and a stressful life, this might be a way of proposing a simple method of making a work that utilised the transductionary potential of sound across bodies or the resonance between bodies but that wasn't focussed on sound as an aesthetic experience: that wasn't exactly 'sound art'. That is, I wasn't that interested in the result -- which I assumed would be completely boring (and the images *were* boring) -- but more in the process of making, becoming aware of my stomach throughout the day etc. I thought there would be more variation in the sounds than there was as my digestion is a little dodgy at times, so that was disappointing, but the effects of the touch-vibration in the final work were a great surprise to me.

**Tessa:** I guess you have done a few works that operate like traditional conceptual art pieces, in that they employ an enabling constraint which may not lead to an exciting aesthetic outcome, but are propositional experiments. In this case, it did lead to an unexpected outcome, a kind of gut-to-gut relation between artwork and viewer, while, as you say, not being particularly 'interesting' visually or sonically. What interests me in your work, particularly in relation to the call out, which was about ambiance in 'natural' and 'urban' spaces (with scare quotes in the original), is that, rather than thinking at the scale of the city versus the wilderness, or thinking how you might make work responding to the built environment and what sits outside or beyond it, you've actually gone inwards. It's easy to fall into a kind of nature/culture divide when we imagine cities and the wild spaces that surround them as binary opposites, when of course they are utterly entangled. We should also remember to think on a scalar level, and to acknowledge that there are wild spaces inside ourselves, whole ecosystems with natural rhythms, and chaotic irruptions analogous to those of the exterior world. Your work operates as a nice reminder that ecological thinking doesn't have to be about what's 'out there', but is always-already about what's happening inside you. This foregrounds the role of the body in all of this, not in relation to the city per se (although that's obviously happening, as your V-line train and tom yum soup attest to), but almost as its *own* city, its own teeming microbial metropolis...

**Andrew:** Firstly, in regard to conceptual art, I was fighting my urge to make interesting or aesthetically pleasing sound -- just make a proposal that's a challenging undertaking and therefore takes up your conscious faculties, and see what happens, as you say. At the very least it will have traces of the process, and some kind of logic to the selection of sounds divorced from an over-coded creative expression. It was interesting the way it intruded into the day -- I had to record three times in front of students, twice during a department staff meeting, and so on, so the proposition created a certain focus and shift in the normal activities I engaged in, bringing different aspects into awareness. This of course also transformed the nature of those occasions and spaces in interesting ways, folding together artmaking and work/transport/the everyday in ways that were sometimes

Secondly, I like the idea of a biome as a metropolis, with its own energy or agency rather than just being a series of parasitic entities.<sup>7</sup> In terms of the urban-nature divide and some translation or transport of the affect of one into the other, I don't think my work explores this as much as the interior-exterior 'divide' and blurring, and I guess I was trying to complicate this through a folding process. Folding as in a play between multiple environments, not just urban and natural, if such a division exists, but folded through the body: external (environment), internal (stomach), external (gallery), internal (body of the viewer). Of course this always happens with sound that is recorded, transported and listened to, but rather than the supposed 'purity' of recording with a microphone into a recording medium and then replaying through a speaker, by folding it through the body, the material presence -- the signaletic materiality<sup>8</sup> -- starts to become palpable. And then, as I discovered through making the work, it folds multiply into the body of the viewer to make itself felt palpably again in a different way -- an exterior stomach-vibration pressuring or operating on the internal workings of another body. You could think of it as an assembling (rather than assemblage): eight o'clock plus tom yum plus stethoscope plus ambient noise plus stomach. I think, maybe, that what we might ask of an artwork that explores perception and sensation is that it makes evident -- maybe by slowing down or amplifying -- some of the processes by which we parse (or translate or transduce, or maybe digest although that sounds too final for what I'm trying to express) the world?

**Tessa:** I think to digest something only sounds final if you're not thinking of digestion as a process among many other processes... there's no finality because what's being digested continues to transform, even as it exits the body. Going back to the idea of a transducer, in your artist statement you say you're more interested in the concept of transduction than translation, and you cite Gilbert Simondon. What is transduction, and how might you apply it to processes such as digestion, or indeed, the digestion of an artwork?

**Andrew:** As I interpret Simondon, *transduction* is the process of coming into being (actualisation or individuation) of an event through a gathering of formally disparate elements and potentials into a coherent form or pattern of importance that becomes its own 'event'. I say 'event', after Whitehead, to indicate that it could be what we think of as an object or something more ephemeral such as a sound or vibration, a thought or emotion and so on. The possible difference between transduction and at least a normative concept of translation (which is not to say that is how it was explored in the *Translating Ambiance* exhibition), in this context at least, is that while translation could suggest a direct correlation between two already actualised things or a representation (a word in two different languages for example) that could flatten or homogenise the differences between the two, transduction is a process where the differences between these two things are 'held' in a differential tension to create a new, third position or separate event: novelty in other words. In the context of vibration or sound transduction, somewhat like diffraction (which is one possible iteration of transduction), speaks of resonance, the differences between vibrational events that resonate against each other.<sup>9</sup> However, having said that, I think those differences always creep back in -- a sound played in two different spaces will reverberate or resonate differently and create a new experience, as different light sources might combine with colours in a painting in a gallery to create a different perception in a viewer -- so I don't mean to imply that transduction and translation are dichotomous. For me at least, there might be a slightly different emphasis between the two. I think there might be a subtle difference between the two approaches that is also quite political when thinking about a non-prescriptive interactive connection between an artwork and a viewer. That is, I would like to think that whatever term is used, the idea is to open up potential experience for the viewer rather than replicate or represent an experience of the artist -- to tap into the excess in some way that reopens us to the world. And of course ideas of affect and ambiance do that exactly -- rethink the body in relation to the transpersonal environment, and how the two inform each other. There is a political imperative to experiment differently with affect or ambiance in that we live in a system in which affect is manipulated very successfully by state power to model and constrain potential, so we need to reimagine it as an emancipatory power.<sup>10</sup>

There's much more that could be said about resonance as a primary creative force in the universe. At a more prosaic level in *Gut Feelings*, I would rather not think of the vibrations simply entering the body of the viewer via ears and hands and being *interpreted*, which always suggests that there is a correct interpretation, that these events are stable or already resolved, and that there is no potential for further individuation. Transduction, however, suggests that the resonance between the internal vibrations and rhythms of a body and those recordings of my body's stomach vibrations might immanently and temporarily create a new and at least somewhat collective or ecological transindividual body.

Avanzino, Peter, Dir. *Parasites Lost*, Season 3, Episode 2, TV Series. Fox Network, 2001.

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Massumi, Brian. *99 Theses on the Revaluation of Value*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018.

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*Consciousness*. New York: Hill and Wang, 2009.

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Varela, Francisco. "We're Naïve About Consciousness" in *Conversations on Consciousness*, ed. Susan Blackmore (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005).

Von Uexküll, Jakob, Dorian Sagan, and Geoffrey Winthrop-Young. *A Foray into the Worlds of Animals and Humans, with a Theory of Meaning*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010.

Whitehead, Alfred North. *Process and Reality*. New York: The Free Press, 1978.

## FOOTNOTES

1. Michael Pollan, *How to Change your Mind: What the New Science of Psychedelics Teaches us about Dying, Addiction, Depression and Transcendence*. London: Penguin Books, 2018. ↵

2. See Paul L. Nunez, *Brain, Mind, and the Structure of Reality*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2010; ↵

3. Based in Montreal, the SenseLab is an international network of artists, activists and academics, writers and makers, from a wide diversity of fields, working together at the crossroads of philosophy, art, and activism. [<https://senselab.ca/wp2/>]. At the SenseLab *Minor Movements* event in Sao Paulo, 2019, we met Jorge Menna Baretta, whose project for the 2017 Sao Paulo Bienale *Restauro* <http://bienal.org.br/post/4355> introduced the concept of 'sculpting the landscape'. Alexis Milonopolous, who was a collaborator in *Restauro*, has been developing concepts of hunger and appetite in relation to important Brazilian texts, Oswald de Andrade's 'Cannibalist Manifesto' (1928) and Eduardo Viveiros de Castro's *Cannibal Metaphysics* (2009/2014). ↵

4. Jakob Von Uexküll, Dorian Sagan, and Geoffrey Winthrop-Young. *A Foray into the Worlds of Animals and Humans, with a Theory of Meaning*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010). ↵

5. Mae-Wan Ho, *The Rainbow and the Worm: The Physics of Organisms*. Singapore: World Scientific Publishing Co., 1993. This quantum communication is echoed in the entanglement of quanta across vast expanses of the universe, activity which some

*Spots*, 81-2; Paul L. Nuñez, *The New Science of Consciousness: Exploring the Complexity of Brain, Mind and Self* (New York: Prometheus Books, 2016). ↵

6. Whitehead, Alfred North. *Process and Reality*. New York: The Free Press, 1978, 33. ↵

7. For a very clever popular culture iteration of this idea, see the episode of TV series *Futurama* entitled "Parasites Lost" that explores this aspect of the biome, and satirizes the stomach-as-second-brain idea). *Parasites Lost*, Peter Avanzino, Dir., *Parasites Lost*, Season 3, episode 2, Fox Network, 2001. ↵

8. "Signaletic material" is the material presence of the medium of transmission, the pixels, waves or lines that bears or transmits the signal or message. ↵

9. See: Gilbert Simondon, "The Genesis of the Individual", in *Incorporations* edited by Jonathan Crary and Sanford Kwinter, 297-319. New York: Zone books, 1992; Muriel Combes, *Gilbert Simondon and the Philosophy of the Transindividual*. Translated by Thomas LaMarre. Cambridge and London: MIT Press, 2013; Adrian MacKenzie, *Transductions: Bodies and Machines at Speed*. London: Continuum, 2002. ↵

10. See Brian Massumi's work on this ontopolitical force which "operates by preemption...dip[ping] into the field of emergence" Ontopower not only constrain and models like biopower, but also "incites" emergence into certain forms that can be captured, such as inciting fear in order to exploit it politically. Massumi, Brian. *99 Theses on the Revaluation of Value*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2018). 63. ↵



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