

Clémentine Coupau
Trapped Pavlovas

Otherness at Touch

'Trapped Pavlovas', the title of Clémentine Coupau's exhibition at new jörg, is borrowed from feminist sociologist of science and technology Susan Leigh Star's poem *The Net*. Best known for her concept of boundary objects, according to which information can be shared between different communities, with each holding its own understanding of the representation (1), it's in Leigh Star's poetry where her thinking on the inter-relatedness of technology and life is most captivating and pure. In *The Net*, she writes: 'my best friend lives two thousand miles away / and every day / my fingertips bleed distilled intimacy.' Written in 1995, long before the smartphone changed our understanding of constant connectedness, these farsighted lines speak of affective ways of traversing distances by means of technological communication. Whereas Leigh Star as an academic found recourse to poetry at the margins of her scientific work, Coupau as an artist invested the scientist's broad conceptual apparatus to navigate her own personal experience of long distance femxle friendship.

Across the exhibition space, Coupau placed six metal bars seemingly threading in and out of the walls of the space, thereby revealing the invisible infrastructure that affords connectedness (2). The railings can be read as support systems onto which to hold on to – as indicated in the artist's series of Tamagotchi-like objects that are suspended from the rails, in which Coupau further explores technologies of longing. Here, prints on glass, recalling the sleek surfaces of screens, reference lines from Leigh Star's poem are enclosed in resin-filled oyster shells. Rather than mimicking contemporary communication devices, Coupau blends various sensory, material and conceptual regimes. It's here where, *inside* the ocular-centric regime of visual technologies, gestures of touch meet gestures of licking – and sensualities merge. In short, reclaiming vision by giving body to *touching visions* (3). While the pieces remind of candy, known in Germany as *Schleckmuscheln*, served in real and plastic seashells that are supposed to be licked out, they also bear resemblance with the shape of a vulva – crossing the lines between the playful and the sexual. By using oysters which the artist collected in an oyster harbour in the South-West of France (her home region where some of her ancestors worked as oyster farmers), she touches on their importance as natural water filters as well as the invisible labour behind this bourgeois commodity. Oysters as a recurring motif in Coupau's work also speak to the idea that containers – such as shells – are the true carriers of meaning (4).

Boundary Object (2021), a series of five glass prints, placed alongside the railings, expands on the discursive understanding of language within these technological spheres. Here, the selected text fragments from *The Net*, which Coupau first drew in watercolour before printing them on glass and coating them with glass paint, appear as sticky words – both through the visual appearance of the sleek surface as well as in their *addressment* of the viewer by featuring sentences such as 'your body is filtered here' or 'soaked with

information'. Emerging from the black background, however, the coloured typography eludes a one-sided reading. It's within the arrangement of the different sentences and words where the reshuffling of matter and meaning — of particles and words, of affect and discourse — becomes most apparent.

Instead of working within a predefined framework, Coupau's practice – comprising film, installation, drawing and prose – constantly pushes boundaries, and she is most interested in those thinkers (such as Leigh Star) who also defy easy categorization. Trapped in one of her shells, the phrase 'otherness at touch' is probably the most adequate to serve as a metaphor for speaking about the artist's work (not incidentally, one of Coupau's own sentences). Concerned with the technology of longing embodied by smartphones and similar devices with their curved edges, sleek surfaces and nice haptics that make the process of addiction so easy, Coupau considers not only the fear but also the potential of alienation. When all the communication devices we know have failed us, when haptic experiences lost their intensity due to digital exploitation, ghostly oysters might be the only ones left to answer us – and wouldn't that be nice?

– Carina Bukuts

(1) Star, S. L. & Griesemer J. R. (1989) Institutional Ecology, 'Translations' and Boundary Objects: Amateurs and Professionals in Berkeley's Museum of Vertebrate Zoology, 1907-39. *Social Studies of Science*, Vol 19, Issue 3

(2) Star, S. L. (1999) The Ethnography of Infrastructure, *American Behavioral Scientist* Vol. 43 No. 3 377-391

(3) Puig de la Bellacasa, M. (2017) Touching Visions, in *Matters of Care, Speculative Ethics in More than Human Worlds*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press

(4) Le Guin, Ursula K., (1986) *Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction*

Clémentine Coupau, born in 1988, is a French artist who lives and works in Brussels. She works across different media such as writing, object making, filmmaking, drawing and collage. In her practice she mainly draws on feminist literature and figures to address intimacy, kin- and friendship; in her works she invites ghosts, fictional characters as well as a range of other non-human entities. She is interested in challenging dominant regimes of knowledge and technology by adopting a magical and speculative approach. She studied at the Städelschule, Frankfurt (DE), where she was a student of Simon Starling and received her M.A. from the École des beaux-arts de Bordeaux (FR).

www.clementinecoupau.cc

Carina Bukuts is an editor, writer and curator. Since 2018 she has been working as an editor at *frieze* magazine. She is co-founder and editor-in-chief of PASSE-AVANT, an online magazine for contemporary art and discourse. She has curated exhibitions at Künstlerhaus Bethanien, Berlin; Center for Contemporary Art, Tel-Aviv; Frankfurt Airport, and most recently co-founded and curated *Balade*, a public art exhibition in Berlin. She grew up in Santa Barbara (USA) and now lives in Berlin.