

**HZT**

**SODA**

**202 Essay**

**Mariana Nobre Vieira**

**April 2018**

## The wormhole project – A case study

A wormhole can be visualized as a tunnel with two ends, each at separate points in spacetime (i.e., different locations and/or different points of time), or by a transcendental bijection of the spacetime



continuum. A wormhole could connect extremely long distances such as a billion light years or more, short distances such as a few meters, different universes, or different points in time. (*in wikipedia*)<sup>1</sup>

I will use the wormhole as an access point into an artistic performative practice focused on the selection of a container for research and its consequent unfolding into a kaleidoscopic complexity both in content and form, considering that “Art has never been an attempt to grasp reality as a whole—that is beyond our human capacity; it was never even an attempt to represent the totality of appearances; but rather it has been the piecemeal recognition and patient fixation of what is significant in human experience.” (Read, 1955)

This will entail making reference to findings in the fields of art, science and theory which fueled the worm container along the process of research. This is an attempt to decompose my artistic process and procedure, unfolding theoretical and practical findings on which I have grounded this work and arriving at a practice of revolving things around to compose with that which is encountered along the process of digging things up.

### Where to start? How to keep going?

"There are events. I never act; I am always slightly surprised by what I do. That which acts through me is also surprised by what I do, by the chance to mutate, to change, and to bifurcate." (Latour, 1999)

---

<sup>1</sup><https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wormhole>

Just like through a wormhole, when research begins one is taken by surprise to unexpected terrains and realizations. This research began with the will to become a worm.

The becoming of a worm originated in a specific event. It began as an installation inserted into the foyer/bar of a dance festival. Worm costumes were created and inhabited this space as a call for an action of dancing from the ground, without legs, beings confined to horizontality. A wish to tamper with the social space of the festival, giving agency to those who refused to stand up tall and righteous.

As can be read in the worm manifesto: — **DON'T GIVE UP YET — THERE IS A LIMINAL WAY — BECOME A WORM — GIVE IN TO GRAVITY — LAY DOWN — CHILL THE FUCK OUT — BECOME A WORM — RENDER HUMANITY EXTINCT — FERTILIZE — BECOME A WORM — NO MORE STANDING UP FOR IT — BECOME A WORM —**<sup>2</sup>

Considering my role as a performance artist dealing with authorship more concretely, I was interested in self-effacement as a strategy to access different ways of performing the self in an event surrounded by the question of providing visibility to alumni from a master program named Solo, Dance, Authorship, of which I am also a part of. This also implied being open to alterity by inviting other artists to perform and use the wormhole installation and fill it up with video and sound art.

On a conceptual level this consideration evolved into the following research question: “How to use the performative space as a ground to speak about human limitations (such as being aware of and suffering from existential and social angst yet being able to do very little about it) from a distorted perspective?” And formally to the question of “How to expand this experience from an event such as a festival unto other performative instances?” Both concept and form kept being developed and researched alongside each other

---

<sup>2</sup> Installation Video documentation: <https://youtu.be/pysKRCBcJGQ>

over time, and what follows is as an attempt of exposing the paths pointed out by the worms.

But why keep going with an animal or a worm at all? “Animals are a conduit into those ‘excluded sites’ from which, according to the emergent discourse of posthumanism, the definition of humanness is carved” (“Animal Rites” 509). According to Chaudhuri, these excluded sites include, “the lunatic, the child, the freak, the woman, and the deviant.” (Giannini, 2012)

The worms relate to the excluded sites of refusal and the wish to put a halt to the frenzy of reality. “Modernized and modernizing humans are not physically, psychologically, scientifically, and emotionally equipped to survive on their planet.” (Latour, 2010) But when humans cease to breathe they go back to the ground, decay into bacteria and are eaten by worms. What if we were to accelerate this process and turn into worms before going down to the ground? What can be the knowledge produced from the standpoint of a human being rejecting the status quo and diving into worminess? Could the becoming of a worm provide a starting point for another manner of performing the human?

Through these questions and findings I became interested not only in considering humanity’s general predicament [(“In a sentence: Life is bad, but so is death. Of course, life is not bad in every way. Neither is death bad in every way. However, both life and death are, in crucial respects, awful. Together, they constitute an existential vise—the wretched grip that enforces our predicament.” (Benatar, 2010))] of being faced with death, war, patriarchy, power games, inequality and so on and so forth but in thinking of an approach that could propose another order, accessible through humor and an absurdity matching the ludicrous existence of a human being. Hence the worms function as a site for facing the short comings of existence and the notion of becoming a worm can be understood as a playful yet impossible invitation to overcome them.

The starting point for the sci-fi genre is most commonly not that of “once upon a time” but of “what if?” I think of Octavia E. Butler asking “What if humanity’ was

overcome by a disease driving its reproduction instinct to the limit?”<sup>3</sup> Or Nnedi Okorafor: “What if Lagos (Nigeria) was invaded by Alien life forms?”<sup>4</sup> as well as Ursula Le Guin: “What if humans could inhabit a world where nothing was to be owned or possessed?”<sup>5</sup>

I am also reminded of Donna Haraway’s call for more Sci-Fi: “The quest for positive social and cultural representations of hybrid, monstrous, abject and alien others in such a way as to subvert the construction and consumption of pejorative differences, makes the science fiction genre an ideal breeding ground to explore our relation to what Haraway (1992) describes affectionately as ‘the promises of monsters’.” (Braidotti, 2006)

So: What if humans could become live sized worm monsters?

A human does not know what it is to be a human does not know what it is to be a worm does not know what it is to be a worm does not know what it is to be a human does not know what it is to a worm does not know what it is to be a (...) But I argue that a human which considers the potential of becoming a worm can perhaps arrive somewhere unexpected.

## **The process**

“For the writer, embodiment and inwardness are essential tools, and also the best way to know—or to imagine—what it’s like to exist in a posthuman body, to think with a posthuman brain.” (*in Four Legs Good: Animals and the Posthuman by Mikita Brottman*)<sup>6</sup>

Entering into a worm costume allowed me as a performance artist to self-experiment out of humanity and into weaving worm statements and considerations that would not have emerged otherwise. The worms began their work in the foyer of a dance festival but soon they started going outwards,

---

<sup>3</sup>Reference to the series of novels in *The Patternist Series*

<sup>4</sup>Reference to the novel *Lagos*

<sup>5</sup>Reference to the novel *The Dispossessed*

<sup>6</sup> in <http://hplusmagazine.com/2012/01/26/four-legs-good-animals-and-the-posthuman/>

allowing me to conduct experimental videos derived from placing them in different public spaces and social contexts such as a Christmas market, the Tate Modern, a UCLA Laboratory specialized in research done with the *C.Elegans* worms, an office, a backyard or a living room<sup>7</sup>. In parallel they enabled for a series of texts and to be woven and taken to performative events, from a drag show to a birthday party and a TV talk show setting<sup>8</sup>.

All these performative experiments were accompanied by further readings and research on worms, revealing ever more information on their potentials to be a speculative site for a post humanist escapist performance experience, bearing in mind controversial statements such as Donna Haraway's slogan of "Make kin, not babies! It matters how kin generate kin." (Haraway, 2015), which I would extend to saying that it matters how one tries to escape and into what one tries to escape.

## **The research**

It is curious that very few cultural references (popular or otherwise) are made to worms. No Disney movies, no famous cartoons, no known theatre pieces or musicals, no fables. Are they too simple an organism to be worth referencing or taking seriously? Or maybe too scary an embodiment?

Up to date the only significant worm I came across was Edgar Allen Poe's conqueror worm, which coincidentally invades a theatre play ("The Tragedy: Man") swallowing everyone in its wake.

"But see, amid the mimic rout,

A crawling shape intrude!

A blood-red thing that writhes from out

The scenic solitude!

It writhes!—it writhes!—with mortal pangs

---

<sup>7</sup> See a video example: <https://youtu.be/oruNvqrGFkk> and as a written example: [https://docs.google.com/document/d/1EwwHEuCjrXMwd2WBIVfbGDypRCHslxsy\\_qx5foxGsro/e/dit?usp=sharing](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1EwwHEuCjrXMwd2WBIVfbGDypRCHslxsy_qx5foxGsro/e/dit?usp=sharing)

<sup>8</sup> See Pinpoint TV on: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IIIYBaWEZN8>

The mimes become its food,  
And seraphs sob at vermin fangs  
In human gore imbued.

Out—out are the lights—out all!  
And, over each quivering form,  
The curtain, a funeral pall,  
Comes down with the rush of a storm,  
While the angels, all pallid and wan,  
Uprising, unveiling, affirm  
That the play is the tragedy, “Man,”  
And its hero, the Conqueror Worm.”

(Poe, 1903)

But worms are all around us.

### Pinworms

“The pinworm has a worldwide distribution and is the most common helminth (i.e., parasitic worm) infection in the United States, western Europe, and Oceania. The prevalence of pinworms is not associated with gender, nor with any particular social class, race, or culture. Pinworms are an exception to the tenet that intestinal parasites are uncommon in affluent communities.” (*in Wikipedia*)<sup>9</sup>

Spread across the world, it looks not upon the race gender or social status of its host. Before this project began I was invaded by pinworms and re-infected three times in a row. Pinworms tickle their host’s anus night after night, rendering sleep a confused and tormented - The perfect starting point for a performative action aiming at an escape from the conundrum of a human being constantly looking up the world’s miserable asshole.

---

<sup>9</sup> [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pinworm\\_\(parasite\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pinworm_(parasite))

## Earth Worms

Earthworms eat bacteria and poop out compost: The philosopher's stone decomposing trash into food for plants. But who would imagine that they are also the foreground of the agricultural revolution?

"The plough is one of the most ancient and most valuable of man's inventions; but long before he existed the land was in fact regularly ploughed, and still continues to be thus ploughed by earth-worms. It may be doubted whether there are many other animals which have played so important a part in the history of the world, as have these lowly organized creatures. " (Darwin, 1882)

I would propose to reconsider Darwin's statement by considering that the agricultural revolution was not a man or woman's invention, but merely a learning derived from close observation of what was already done by worms and so many other animals who for millennia have roamed the earth.

Through these findings I became aware that by destabilizing what it is to be a human and a worm or a worm in a human or a human in a worm costume I am also proposing a practice of blurring the lines between worm and human, nature and culture, human and animal and their agencies. In my work I realized I did not wish to mimic or try to emulate a worm, but to understand what a costume of a worm can do to a human. I found echoes of these considerations (or did they emerge from them?) in Jane Bennet's considerations "In a vital materialism, an anthropomorphic element in perception can uncover a whole world of resonances and resemblances-sounds and sights that echo and bounce far more than would be possible were the universe to have a hierarchical structure. We at first may see only a world in our own image, but what appears next is a swarm of "talented" and vibrant materialities (including the seeing self). (...). In revealing similarities across categorical divides and lighting up structural parallels between material forms in "nature" and those in "culture," anthropomorphism can reveal isomorphisms."(Bennett, 2010)



## C. Elegans

C. Elegans are nematodes widely and extensively used in scientific research. The types found in laboratories are self-replicating hermaphrodites whose genome and neural pathways have been fully decoded. They are cheap, reproduce quickly and seem so far to be tolerated by animal rights activists. It is interesting to note that after decoding the human DNA, researchers have found out that drugs for diseases such as cancer have different effects on patients depending on their microbiome. "The activity of cancer drugs changes depending on the types of microbes living in the gut, according to a UCL-led study into how nematode worms and their microbes process drugs and nutrients. (...) The team, (...), developed a new three-way screen based on C. Elegans. This worm is commonly used as a simple model for human metabolism due to its evolutionary similarity to humans and its comparable relationship with microbes."<sup>10</sup>

By being a worm in a lab<sup>11</sup> and learning about its contributions to humanity I felt drawn to Haraway's considerations of the oncomouse, much akin to the C.Elegans who have been extensively genetically manipulated to serve research purposes: "The oncomouse is the techno-body par excellence: it has been created for the purpose of profit-making trafficking between the laboratories and the market place, and thus navigates between patenting offices and the research benches."(Braidotti, 2006)

In the wormwhole project the worms claim recognition as human extensions. Similarly to my process of artistic investigation I found here a parallel regarding the use of a container such as a C.Elegans worm in laboratories as a way of diving into a world and finding ever more fractals which keep humanity busy with different lines of research.

---

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/news/news-articles/0417/200417-How-gut-bacteria-change-cancer-drug-activity>

<sup>11</sup> See video here (password: labworm) <https://vimeo.com/264605492>

## **To conclude**

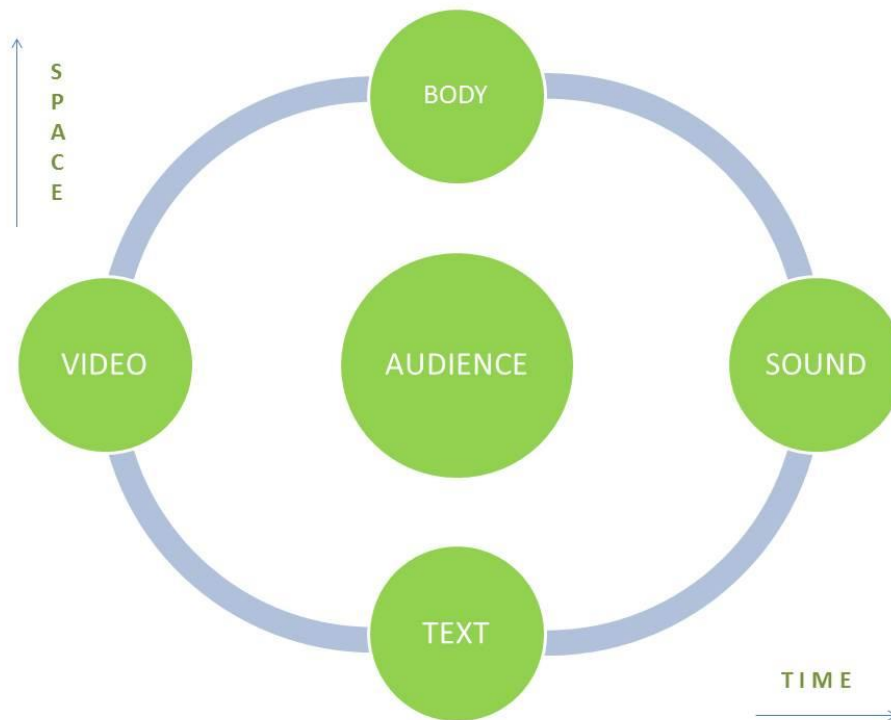
Through worms I have arrived at a series of performative actions that are being translated into the wormhole, an immersive performance space where the audience is taken through the myriad of findings encountered and by a set of arguments I make for the becoming of a worm as an absurd alternative to humanity. This artistic research has been fueled and backed both by scientific and academic as well as self-experimenting research into the becoming of a worm in a series of different contexts.

The wormhole project is thus turning into a live hybrid blending performance with video sound and theory, taking the audience into journey through findings, realizations and the possibilities granted to a performer from within inside a worm costume in terms of movement qualities as well as the potential to temporarily withhold their usual self.

Researching into worms was an overwhelming process, one which had to be translated into the work. The process also posed a series of questions leading to decisions made towards the presentation mode of the work:

1. If I am proposing horizontality and the audience is not to look down on worms they should lay down with them on the ground.
2. If the audience is to lay down how to allow them to look into what is happening without providing a frontal or univocal frame? By projecting oversized videos on the walls and filming and projecting the movement of the worms live.
3. How to keep an articulate performative dramaturgy without falling into a narrative or of didactic idea/message? By using a very concrete form of enunciation and having the worms be interviewed live by humans, flipping the sites of knowledge production/dissemination, taking the textual elements out of a storyline/narrative mode of enunciation into a factual one.
4. Since the worms claim the right to “chill the fuck out”, how to generate a chaotic multilayered yet relaxed performative environment? By devising

task based scores for performers, whereby each one of them knows where to go but improvises the way to get there.



And so emerged a multi-media platform filled with movement, video, sound and a horizontal setting for immersion and alienation out of humanity into a worm and its hole. “XenoFeminism seizes alienation as an impetus to generate new worlds. We are all alienated – but have we ever been otherwise? It is through, and not despite, our alienated condition that we can free ourselves from the muck of immediacy. Freedom is not a given—and it’s certainly not given by anything ‘natural’. The construction of freedom involves not less but more alienation; alienation is the labor of freedom’s construction.”(Cuboniks, 2015)

The question is not whether we are alienated. The question is how or through what. The theatre is always a space for alienation; In the live arts context we always know that we are watching a show, a performance, an attempt of one or more people communicating their obsessions. But what happens when as a viewer we are so overwhelmed that we have to acknowledge the need to make constant choices in between the materials being presented rather than expecting an author to order everything out for us? What happens when the

space of the theatre and the studio refrain from giving us an illusion of security, considering that “(...) the essence of the creative is the letting-go of what is in one's mental "possession," so that the new can arise in its place. In a sense, the very opposite of security.”(Foreman, 1975)

I see a performance installation setting as a manner of dealing with authorship by way of letting go of some of the apparent control one thinks to have when creating work and, in the case of the wormhole project, giving compositional agency to chance and the improvised trajectories of worms.

So I repeat: A human does not know what it is to be a human does not know what it is to be a worm does not know what it is to be a (...)

But by starting precisely from this point of unknowing I argue that researchers can keep themselves busy with concrete issues and avoid the existential despair burrowing down on all of us who eventually shall be decomposed by bacteria and eaten by worms.

“Whether silent or verbal, declarative or procedural, implicit or explicit, artistic knowledge is, in each and every case, sensual and physical, “embodied knowledge.” The knowledge for which artistic research strives is a felt knowledge.” (Klein, 2010)

Through diving into the wormhole of research I have arrived at a complex set of references, content and forms whose unfolding I aim to keep pursuing in the course of my investigation. This experiential and felt knowledge is being translated into a multimedia approach to performance making. As an artist I did not find anything new, I did not invent nor discover. I merely allowed the worms to take me on a ride. There is no such thing as a low or simple organism, wherever we may focus our attention on reveals itself as a host to a vast body of connections, articulations, pasts and possible futures: a kaleidoscopic web of tissues for human beings to keep themselves busy with.

Other than experimenting new drugs on worms, I suggest that a performance based artistic research can push back this utilitarian approach and propose an embodied tribute and kinship to the organisms who tickle assholes, plough the lands, fertilize fields and become techno-bodies for scientific research.

## **Bibliography**

Bennett, J. (2010) *Vibrant Matter*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Braidotti, R. (2006) 'Posthuman, All Too Human: Towards a New Process Ontology', *Theory, Culture & Society*, 23(8), pp. 197–208.

Cuboniks, L. (2015) 'Xenofeminism: A Politics for Alienation', pp. 1–10.

Foreman, R. (1975) 'Ontological-Hysteric Theatre: Third Manifesto', *The Drama Review: TDR*, 9(4), pp. 71–81.

Giannini, A. M. (2012) *Animal Drag: Sex, Race and the Theatrical Animal*. University of Wisconsin-Madison.

Haraway, D. (2015) 'Anthropocene, Capitalocene, Plantationocene, Chthulucene: Making Kin', *Environmental Humanities*, 6(1), pp. 159–165.

Klein, J. (2010) 'What is artistic research?', *Journal for Artistic Research*. Available at: <http://www.jar-online.net/what-is-artistic-research/>.

Latour, B. (1999) 'Pandora's Hope'. London: Harvard University Press.

Latour, B. (2010) 'An Attempt at a "Compositionist Manifesto"', *New Literary History*, Vol. 41.

## **Hyperlinks**

Definition of Wormhole - <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wormhole>

Installation Video documentation - <https://youtu.be/pysKRCBcJGQ>

Article - <http://hplusmagazine.com/2012/01/26/four-legs-good-animals-and-the-posthuman/>

Worm Video Example - <https://youtu.be/oruNvqrGFkk>

Worm Text Example - [https://docs.google.com/document/d/1EwwHEuCjrXMwd2WBIVfbGDypRCHslxxy\\_qx5foxGsro/edit?usp=sharing](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1EwwHEuCjrXMwd2WBIVfbGDypRCHslxxy_qx5foxGsro/edit?usp=sharing)

Worms at Pinpoint TV - <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IIIYBaWEZN8>

Definition of Pinworms . [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pinworm\\_\(parasite\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Pinworm_(parasite))

Article - <https://www.ucl.ac.uk/news/news-articles/0417/200417-How-gut-bacteria-change-cancer-drug-activity>

Worm at the Lab: <https://vimeo.com/264605492> password: labworm