

With Acid, Rats, Flora: Patrick Staff  
Alex Bennett

Patrick Staff needles the ways in which discipline—whether economic, biopolitical, industrial, or architectural—becomes manifest, how its models arouse dogma, and, crucially, how its structure contends with dissent, community, debility, and queer identity.

Discipline conjures its slippery other and Staff frequently invokes this duality, referring to “aboveboard” and “belowdecks” readings of their work. An acute perceiver of intersections between an intensely personal bodily discourse and unyielding bureaucracy, Staff locates friction through particular kinds of hegemony. Controlled by social, medical, and legal structures, agency is frequently seen to bleed into counterproductive activity: daydreaming, volatility, inebriation, exhaustion.

In an examination of queer legacy and intergenerational exchange—which results in an oblique portrait of the artist—Staff’s thirty-minute film *The Foundation* (2015) surveys the politics of preservation at the Tom of Finland Foundation, established in 1984 in Los Angeles and dedicated to protecting erotic art and erotic arts education. The renderings are clear. Picture: leather-clad asses, campfires, and steroidal sass. Picture: elephantine cocks hugged by chaps, mustachioed cowboys with gazes dripping with projective come-ons. *The Foundation* glances only obliquely at this loaded content, to focus instead on the Foundation as an agitated crucible of queer social dynamics.

I am reminded of Staff’s text *Piss* (2014), in which the fetish act becomes an account of a desire for projective force, perhaps kinship in legacy, that soon reaches its limit:

“I imagine all the men I know like him pissing on me. I imagine fathers, and forefathers... I think it unsettles him that I might refuse manliness... as if I’m refusing all the men that are like him... refusing all the men he used to know.”<sup>1</sup>

“You’ll grow into it, being a man” asserts an older man adorned with a leather harness—Staff’s dance partner in *The Foundation*. They dance independently, the older figure at times arranging Staff into particular poses as though courting representational validation. As a younger trans person, Staff situates their self into the foundation’s nexus to consider how inheritance and exchange are complicated by gender identity and presentation. To speak of Tom of Finland is to dip into its sensorial corpus, and here Staff shows how collective identities and cultural artifacts cut against a body geared toward deconstruction. In this delicate tension, Staff negotiates of the lodestone of perception itself: that different external models of perception—social, cultural, medical, legal—contribute to the evaluation and constitution of the self. The jolt of perception is also dislocating, as Jacques Derrida—fresh out the shower—locked eyes with his cat: “Seeing oneself seen naked under a gaze that is vacant to the extent of being bottomless.”<sup>2</sup> The animal is summoned as a specter. Similarly, Derrida referenced animal life to disentangle Marxian commodity fetishism (or the “spectrality effect”) as a historically particular effect of capitalist production. For Derrida, Karl Marx’s table “has become a kind of headstrong, pigheaded, obstinate animal

that, standing, faces other commodities.”<sup>3</sup> The spectral ontology of the commodity, *animalized*.

The animal specter may function as a fetish within deconstruction, draining animals of their historical specificity and life, but Staff’s 2019 installation *On Venus* at Serpentine Galleries, London, reinstates the industrial, mechanical, chemical, genetic, and hormonal violence they have been subject to. The titular video work initially presents warped footage of industrial farming for hormonal, carnal, and reproductive commodities such as urine, semen, and skin. More than brutal malpractice, Staff frames the complex of species, labor, race, and gender in the conditions of capitalism. A pig is kicked repeatedly in the stomach then spanked on its backside. A snake is skinned alive, coiling and bleeding. A raccoon, grabbed from its tail, is flung to the ground headfirst. Carcasses are stripped of skin in one automated stroke.

*On Venus*’s second section comprises a poem describing a queer state of capricious metamorphosis, demolishing anthropocentrism. A space of near-death, the poem is a kind of hemorrhaging of time where searing atmospheric pressure and noxious winds dematerialize forms and rematerialize others. An excerpt reads:

“we are neighbours  
in nerves /  
with chemicals  
/ with acid  
in our insides  
with muscles  
like rats\_ and flora  
like spiders – like sex something that looks like sex  
but isn’t  
/ fucking  
like lava //”<sup>4</sup>

The site specificity of *On Venus* is also somewhat unbearable. Networks of ceiling pipes drip synthetic liquid into steel barrels, their corrosion tender as the institution’s framework weeps under neon vivarium light. A series of acid-based intaglio etchings quote tabloid news stories of 2017-2018, falsely claiming that convicted murderer Ian Huntley sought gender transition while serving his life sentence. On steel, these etchings concretize the media’s perverse weaponizing of cultural prejudices and summoning of panic regarding incarceration and transgender identity. Resilient, relational, and resuscitative, Staff’s position may echo Susan Stryker’s theory that the enactment or the lived experience of different types of bodies makes a demand for a different type of society. In pain, volatility, and extravagant collapse, *On Venus* may be that place.

- 1 Patrick Staff, “Piss,” *EROS*, no. 4 (2014): 93–94.
- 2 Jacques Derrida, “The Animal That Therefore I Am (More to Follow),” trans. David Wills, *Critical Inquiry* 28, no. 2 (2002): 381.
- 3 Jacques Derrida, *Specters of Marx: The State of the Debt, the Work of Mourning, and the New International*, trans. Peggy Kamuf (New York and London: Routledge, 1994), 152.
- 4 Patrick Staff, “On Venus,” Serpentine Galleries exhibition booklet, 2019.

51 Patrick Staff, *On Venus* installation view at Serpentine Galleries, London, 2019-2020. Courtesy: the artist and Commonwealth and Council, Los Angeles. Photo: Hugo Glendinning

52 53 Patrick Staff, *The Foundation* (still), 2015. Courtesy: the artist and Commonwealth and Council, Los Angeles



