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“Spit & Spin: a response to Paul Vanouse’s *The America Project*”

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Asking a rhetorician to respond to an artwork is asking for trouble. They’re likely to throw ancient Greek words at you as if they’re the ultimate tool for deconstructing anything: language, culture, media, bodies. So I’ll confine myself to one simple terminological and methodological term: *ekphrasis*, the rich translation into language of a visual object. Ekphrastic writing and speech are a way of getting at the essence of an object or an artwork through exhaustive description. And given its emphasis on translation, transmutation, maybe even transubstantiation, it seems appropriate to treat Paul Vanouse’s *The America Project* as an ideal object for an exercise in ekphrastic speech.

So, here we go. What I’m looking at is a weird object. On first pass, it resembles a little robot from the 50s. Or maybe one of those things you spat into at a dentist if you went to the dentist in the 70s. There’s definitely spit involved somewhere. It’s human scale, made for operation and processing with human hands and eyes. Red tubes pass from an upper Perspex bowl, stoppered and switched in blue, draining into collection vessels situated inside an old, worn centrifuge bowl. The tubes are strangely organic, like living blood passing through an external system of vessels. They also remind me of the first nuclear bomb produced by the Manhattan Project: lines exposed outside when they should be inside. Any technologist knows this: the magic is in the ability to tuck away, not reveal, essential infrastructures.

The centrifuge itself is a magnificent piece of antique high tech. The lower centrifuge bowl is ceramic-coated steel, browned and flaking at the edges. Large collecting tubes nestle securely in a metal contraption built to be spun. Big analog buttons and dials beg to be pressed and twisted. They look like they might make extremely satisfying clunks if manipulated. My rural upbringing finds a strange similarity between this contraption and milking machines, with their tubes and metal components built to convey fluids from animal body to mixing vat. Instead of

milk, though, the upper concave bowl is for collecting spit. It's a spittoon – so American! A nostalgic remnant of the old west, staple receptacle for saloon tobacco and the unfortunate emetic effects of hard drinking. But this spittoon is actually for spit. For us: a creepy collector asking for waste ejected from our bodies, voluntarily. A milking machine for our stuffness. In short, a spit & spin.

Projected on the wall, two electrophoresis gel images slowly become what they were born to be. They're instantly recognizable in a kind of pop-culture way as the public face of "a picture of genes," although the usual portrayal is two maps side by side that look identical, and somebody is about to solve a crime or identify a lost twin because science. *These* images, though, are radically different from one another. The stripes resemble side-on stacks of computer keys. One appears to be conducting a slow, slow version of space invaders, although it's actually morphing into another kind of visual assemblage: in this case, a crown. Another has already arranged itself into a flag. The images are films – scratchy, rich, golden, toffee-colored, contrasting with the clean, cold digital display to one side that documents a simplified description of the process of gel electrophoresis. This trinity – old extractive technology, luminous image, digital panel, live uneasily but in communion, side by side, each translating the other. This is America.

Vanouse characterizes *The America Project* as an act of exploring "radical sameness" through the "anonymous, promiscuous" collection of fluids. If the usual role of genetic imaging is meant to reveal the pinpoint, precise differences between each of us, *The America Project* instead insists on mixing it all up, producing anonymous composites. In this way, it is a radically *undisciplined* disciplinary object, taking spit and turning it into electrophorescent images via a series of precise maneuvers that intentionally promote the slippage between one person's stuffness and another's. Each step in the procedure is documented on the digital display as a specific technical injunction: collect, extract, amplify, image, compose. Sub-injunctions double down on the embodied movements involved in each process: insert, heat, spin, separate. A joyful image of two people facing one another, spouts of water bursting from their mouths. The

dynamic at play is between division and conjunction: separating one fluid from another, mixing them back together. Centrifuge and collection tube isolate and combine. It's like cooking, but with people. This is America.

There is an eeriness to this object, of course, that is in part technological and in part political. Computers, we know, were built for counting people, and waging war. Digital technology promises the accuracy of a one-zero world; no messy fluid, just strings of guanine, adenine, cytosine, thymine, in a perfectly crisp and crispr-able four-letter alphabet soup. My genes are not your genes, even though there is so little difference between us. And the surveilled, disciplined, monetized and medicalized world makes its living on those tiny, identifiable differences. One only need witness the wrangling over the immortal cell lines of Henrietta Lacks and John Moore, or the attempted privatization of BRCA genes, to know that specific recombinations of the alphabet soup are meaningful, profitable, and potentially deadly. Along another axis, *The America Project* is particularly significant in this moment, with the closing of borders and concomitant Brexiting of our responsibility toward one other. DNA extraction and deployment as a machine for processing people resonates to me with the experience of moving through immigration lines at the border. Collectively, we make our way through snaking airport queues or automobile gateways. We are an anonymous mass of people, strangers standing together, but soon enough the processing machine kicks into gear. Piece by piece we are separated. Interrogated. Imaged. And found wanting or not. This is also America.

Running counter to the specter of the border line, and the oncologist's diagnostic lab, there is a strange pleasure in the performance of DNA extraction, live in an art museum. To take materials from human volunteers who do so without the fear of identification, policing, or a potentially devastating medical diagnosis. It turns out that genetics are fun when we all do it together, sipping, swirling and spitting into a weird and beautiful hybrid object. Through *The America Project*, the purpose of DNA extraction is suborned both by the intentional act of promiscuous fluid mixing and the recontextualization of machine and scientific process into artistic expression. Performing such a technically sophisticated activity live, for an audience,

extracts the secret and magical process from the medical or forensic lab (forensic – another lovely rhetorical term) and injects it into a human-scaled space of understanding. Along the way, we see another kind of technological assemblage forming: artist, object, display, documentation, viewer, participant all come together in the same space and mix together. This is the potential promiscuity of knowledge production, and transformation, and visualization. It's not quite *that* radical, of course: the artist retains their specialist knowledge and the audience leaves the building, sans spit; the gels settle into the comfortable forms they've been allotted. We all know that galleries are contested and contestable social spaces, too, defined by stratifications of wealth, access to transportation, and leisure time. But if not the America we live in, it's at least a *potential* America, simultaneously resistant and fluid. It's a project worth pursuing.