

A MECHANICAL REGARD

Adwait Singh

At first glance Amba Sayal-Bennett's assemblages and drawings strike one as a queer collection of ephemera, models, and plans salvaged from an undisclosed sci-fi set. What suggests their gleanings from a set as opposed to a laboratory or a control room, is the manifestly constructed aspect of these assemblages; indeed, they appear hollowed out of any utility. In the discernible lightness of their being, they float in the exhibition space as diagrams, prototypes, or maquettes, never thudding to the ground with the tell-tale gravity of functional objects. As one settles in their surreal company, forms begin to stir, evanescent bubbles of familiarity that fail to breach the surface of cognition. Is it a lectern? Is it a radar? One is left to wonder. Other works seem to recede behind the ubiquitous anonymity of hardware altogether. Upon closer inspection, however, these unyielding bones reveal a rich marrow animated by complex processes, theories and politics.

In 2019, Amba conducted research at the European Organization for Nuclear Research (CERN) where she was struck by the theatricality of the elaborate set-up that comprises the Large Hadron Collider (LHC). From its subterranean setting to the cryptic communion, rituals, and perambulations performed inside its inner sanctum, the LHC had all the outward bearings of a *telesterion*¹, complete with its prophecies of apocalypse. A revelation of the circumstances surrounding the discovery of the Higgs boson - a particle whose hypothetical existence required the construction of the purpose-built LHC for its verification - led the artist to delve into the performativity and artifactuality of "science in the making."² Highlighting this drama, performance scholar and philosopher

Maaik Bleeker writes:

Proving Higgs' theory meant literally to make matter perform in the way that Higgs had predicted the particle named after him would. This was not a matter of detecting the existence of the particle 'out there' but to first produce the particle and then detect the traces of it having existed. The proof of Higgs' theory thus demonstrates the inseparability of scientific apparatus and the phenomenon observed, as theorised by Karen Barad (2007) after Niels Bohr.³

What theorists like Bleeker and Barad are trying to challenge are empiricist frameworks that hold nature and culture apart, submitting the former to the cold scalpel of the latter for its anatomies to be neatly arrayed as 'discoveries'. They believe these separations to be artificial and misguided. In their view, facts don't exist out there, independently and pre-formed, for science to discover and report objectively. Science performs what Barad calls "agential cuts" in the continuum of reality, arbitrarily framing aspects of its totality.⁴ What gets to make the cut, what is excluded, and with which motivations are questions that then come into sight.

Borrowing insights from quantum physics where entities under observation (such as electrons and light) are known to behave in unexpected, uncertain, or even paradoxical ways, Barad's theory of agential realism upends humanist framings of reality. Her critique is calculated to expose the cultivated blind spots of masculinist science. The agency of the object of knowledge, the contingencies produced by the measuring apparatus, and the positionality of the observing body, are the sacrifices that science demands so that its constructs might ascend as timeless truths. It is this aura of objectivity affected by science that feminists like Barad seek to challenge.

In her seminal essay, 'Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective' (1988), Donna J. Haraway describes scientific objectivity as performing what she calls "the God trick" or "a conquering gaze from nowhere."⁵ This technologically enhanced gaze that discredits mythical modes of apprehending the world, arrogates to itself a mythical power to "represent while itself remaining unrepresented."⁶ The transcendental vision of technoscience, in fact, hides a select view: Western, White, heterosexual, human, male. Conversely, Haraway's notion of "situated knowledges" advances a feminist objectivity that is self-critical and accountable in its avowals of partiality, positionality and embeddedness. Situated knowledges not only uphold the semiotic, material and technical conditions of observation but also the agency of the objects under study. For "the world is not raw material for humanisation" and the divisions performed by scientific epistemologies call for annotation and a careful attending to the power relationships at play.⁷ Insights such as these have led to an explosion of new feminist materialisms, their radical reformulations of agency infecting numerous disciplines.

Taking their cues from these revisionary accounts, the assemblages from Amba's exhibition 'A Mechanised Thought' (2020) pry open the Pandora's box of classical objectivity. By probing the performativity, disembodiment and sublimation entailed in the manufacture of this omniscient objectivity, the artist seeks to underline its latent mechanisms of power. The iterations through which hunches get consecrated, sealed and extended as apodictic ready-mades for future experiments to cite freely is evoked in the replication, concatenation and layering through which forms like *Blur* (2020) have been gathered. The blurred, modular and illusory aspects of these assemblages serve to accentuate the artifice and conventions through which the mirage of universality is maintained. Their

neutral palette of blue, white and black evokes the clinical environments of laboratories that conjure a purity of perspective through an oblation of the apparatus and the affective. Throughout 'A Mechanised Thought', parallels are drawn between scientific and liturgical rituals and effects with the view to underline the doxa and puritanism inherent in empiricism. For instance, the mirroring black and white forms of *Oure* (2020) and *Seynt* (2020) evince an ambiguous lineage that points by turns to a laboratory and a church. Similarly, the dripping form of *Reservoir of Many* (2020) fluctuates between a flask holder and a basin, like light shuffling between a particle and a wave.

Amba views her drawings as a practice of boundary-making in the manner outlined by Haraway:

Boundaries are drawn by mapping practices; 'objects' do not pre-exist as such. Objects are boundary projects. But boundaries shift from within; boundaries are very tricky. What boundaries provisionally contain remains generative, productive of meanings and bodies.⁸

The simple act of tracing a line on paper becomes for the artist a philosophical exercise in studying how objects are constituted. An analogy can be drawn between the emergence of forms through marked enclosures of the blankness of paper and how objects are wrested from the continuum of reality by hierarchical and positivist paradigms. Amba's drawing practice not only helps her apprehend these dogmatic classifications, it also allows her to devise and rehearse more 'response-able'⁹ modalities of knowing and worlding. This folding of neo-materialist worldviews within artistic methodologies, offers a much-needed alternative to our skewed relating with materiality and machines.

Barad's lens of diffraction opens up possibilities for the artist to study the work/world from within. Unlike empiricist frameworks that parse reality through binaries/difference, diffractive analysis dwells on the generative aspects of boundaries/difference that come up during our 'intra-actions' in the world.¹⁰ Rejecting distant outlooks on the world, diffractive analysis thus accord centrality to the body and the apparatus in their worldings. A resonance of Barad's ideas of diffraction can be detected in Amba's site-responsive installation projections like *Tholobate* (2024) aggregated through a sequence of media translations propelled by affects and contingencies encountered during the process.

The artist begins by procuring an acetate print of a drawing on paper which is subsequently projected onto a wall. The encounter between media (drawing on paper and projection) generates a diffractive pattern which informs subsequent addition and subtraction of material (tape, paper, other acetate prints and things) to/from the projection field. In this way, affective feedback loops are established between her body, the media and material obstructions, governing the directionality and outcome of the process. This radically materialist working relationship that Amba has nurtured, serves to highlight "processes of materialisation, intensities, forces and potentialities that are not solely human, transforming the divide between mute objects and speaking subjects."¹¹ Interestingly, her graphite, Promarker and ink drawings also embody similar interactions with things familiar from her studio and can be considered transmedia in this sense.

Diffractive methodologies such as these extend the scope of agency beyond the human, reconfiguring it as a distributed phenomenon enacted in the coming together of different materialities both organic and inorganic. In the context of her practice-based research, this has allowed the artist to recognise and respond to agencies besides herself involved in the creation of an artwork. It has

contributed to a growing appreciation of technology, from being a passive tool in the hands of the artist to being an active instigator that sets the tone and teleology of the artistic process. From posing resistance and incompatibilities, causing insightful accidents, producing unexpected results, and opening up new dimensions in the work, there have been numerous instances where the choice of a particular technology has left its imprint on the work.

Amba recounts how 3D modelling programs like Rhino have made the forms more organic and curvilinear in comparison to the angular forms generated by the previously used SketchUp. Similarly, graduation from MDF to mild steel has lent the assemblages a paper-like pliability. Attention to material and technological vibrancies has manifested new possibilities within her artmaking that move beyond human modes of conceptualising, composing and creation. The dizzying form of *Extouch* (2024), made possible by programs that allow for digital manipulation and extrapolation of 2D drawings, portends these posthuman perspectives.

Zil (2021), on the other hand, in its re-membering of the ancient lost wax technique of metal casting can be regarded as an artefact of collusion between technological and biological agencies. By orienting us towards the past, it suggests the tantalising possibility that our perspective has perhaps always been more-than-human. Furthermore, *Zil* can be viewed as a testament to our co-evolution with technics (including language, to the degree that language can be considered a tool). In a context where socio-culturally acquired behavioural adaptations proved far more significant than genetics in determining the course of our physical evolution, technics were "the architects of Australopithecus-Homo transition", not its products.¹² Viewed in this light, our 'humanness' appears to be a result of, if not a gift from, technics.

The significant role played by technics in our ecological ascendance

as human gods with expanded cognitive faculties was reflected in the preminent role reserved for *deus ex machina* or god-machines in the Attic theatre from the fifth century BCE onwards. In his book *A Thousand Machines* (2010), Gerald Raunig revisits this ancient god technology whose presence above the left stage door was synonymous with divine manifestations like thunder and lightning, the opening of the gates of hell, or the mystical appearance of heroes and gods.¹³ The playwright Euripides, for instance, is known to have used the *deus ex machina* in his tragedies not just as a special effects device but also as a narrative trope.¹⁴ These god machines were frequently used to resolve impossible complications and aporias within the plot.¹⁵ Far from being a cover for dramaturgical incompetence, the *deus ex machina* allowed for the creation of convoluted dramatic knots that could suitably reflect the complex socio-political reality engendered by the Peloponnesian War; gordian knots that would take a deity to resolve, or failing that, a *deus ex machina*.¹⁶

The image of a god-machine controlling the plot of a Greek play fits well within the larger puzzle of technics spinning our fates in evolutionary time. In sharp contrast to the status and visibility enjoyed by the *deus ex machina* in Ancient Greece, modern theatre, barring a few exceptions, seem to banish machines and their mechanisms to the wings.¹⁷ This denotes the wider modern tendency to progressively and paradoxically render technology transparent/invisible, all the while extolling its marvels. As with the treacherous idolisation of women and nature by phallogocentric modernities,¹⁸ technology has witnessed a diminishment from being the hand of our fate, to being a glorified tool in our hands. These slightings and the denial of its agency have caused it to turn on us as only affronted gods can. Indeed, the slavish horror wrought by machines rings heavy through Marxist critiques of industrial societies, allegorising how our pretensions of mastery saw us enthralled to machines.

In her book, *X-Ray Architecture* (2019), Beatriz Colomina describes the emergence of a new visual regime inaugurated by X-ray technology. The transparency of the body made manifest by X-rays was quickly simulated by modern architecture of which it became a defining feature. From there, it spread to other material cultures: “Everything, not just the house, all of a sudden needed to be see-through: from Pyrex cookware and Saran Wrap to windows in ovens and washing machines that expose their contents.”¹⁹ Soon, however, the technology that was devised for diagnostics started devising more sinister ends. By the mid-twentieth century, mass X-raying of US citizens became an established practice with the result that the contagious transparency that was supposed to expose its beneficiaries to health ended up exposing them to harm in the form of radiation and surveillance.²⁰ The cautionary tale of X-rays reminds us of the infinite cunning and malevolence that technology can summon when we fail to fully account for its agency.

By expanding the conception of machine from being an inert tool to a concerted operation between biological, technological, and material agencies, Amba’s practice urges us to attend to phenomena that skip our scrutiny but can stop us dead in our tracks. It allows for a fuller comprehension of agencies that a culture of technofixes and terraforming ambitions fails to account for. The works from her exhibition ‘Architectures of Excess’ (2023) comb the built heritage of modernism for signs of these para-human excesses. By holding modernist material cultures under metaphorical X-rays, the artist seeks to expose the biases and hegemonies coded in their technologies, materialities and designs.

‘Architectures of Excess’ was inspired by a brush with fascist architecture during a residency at the British School at Rome. In particular, the artist was interested in tracking fascism’s forward and backward longing over time to arrive at a fusion of architectural

elements from antiquity and Modernism, informing the visual grammar that conveyed its imperial ideology. By blending classical forms and materials like travertine with Modernist deployments of glass and clean lines, fascism sought to imbue its built heritage with a sense of authority, transparency and order. The instrumentalisation of materials like travertine for legitimising fascist folly is obliquely recalled by the stone-like appearance of *Daro* (2022).

What started as an investigation of fascist architecture in Rome grew into a broad inquiry about the legacies of modernist architecture and the migration of its forms, materials, and ideologies to contexts such as Chandigarh, London, and Dubai that hold special significance for the artist. Moving from southern Italy where the artist traces her roots on the paternal side, to Chandigarh in Punjab in India, close to where her maternal grandparents hail from, Amba began exhuming the imprint of modernism on the emergent Indian modernity. In the planned city of Chandigarh designed by the Swiss-French architect Le Corbusier, the tenets and aesthetics of modernism were co-opted to usher a utopian futurity “unfettered by the traditions of the past” in the words of its commissioner Jawaharlal Nehru, the first prime minister of India.²¹ However, the enduring utopia promised by its favoured materiality of concrete was belied by the cracks that soon started appearing in its facade. Chandigarh’s scale, design, and layout inadvertently produced an effect that was cold, alienating and exclusionary.

In the post-oil context of Dubai, a similar modernity is well underway by dissolving the links to its traditional past and investing in what would become glorious ruins marking its past wealth.²² While the artist was developing ‘Architectures of Excess’ for this context, she became aware of a significant deviation in how modernity’s streamlined aesthetic, with its promise of progress and speed, is deployed in Dubai. Ever since the publication of

the polemical essay ‘Ornament and Crime’ (1913) by the Austrian architect Adolf Loos, ornamentation has been all but exiled as undesirable superfluity from modernist lexicon. To then encounter its efflorescence in Dubai, where certain architectures not only cultivate it superficially but embrace it to the point where ornamentation overtakes function, was no short of fascinating. This discovery led to closer inspection of technologies (3D Printing, CNC Milling, 5-Axis Laser Cutting, Robotic Bricklaying, etc.) behind these bio-morphological and ornamental corruptions of the sanitised and rigid geometries of modern architecture.

The motif of technology-driven insurrection is chased by works like *Loose Leaf*, *Strike Root* and *Auxiliary*. *Strike Root*, for instance, extends this scrolloping²³ revolt to the brutalist architecture of the Barbican Centre in London. Its sunken gardens, envisioned from a god’s-eye view, have been transposed with arabesques abstracted from Mughal miniatures housed at the Victoria and Albert Museum. These dissonant emblazonings across found plans and prototypes register a kind of fullness and vitality against the brutality, ubiquitous whiteness and sterile emptiness perpetuated by modernism. In the hands of the artist, these vegetal decorations thus become weaponised, acting as irritants to its symbolic order.

Recognising the potential in this stray insurgency sparked by technology, Amba enlists these techno-material instigators to fan the flames in modernism’s fabric. Her queer collaborations with architectural tropes and technologies are subsequently calculated to free futurity from the totalising grasp of modernism, discernible from its colouring of various modernities and futurist imaginaries at large. In recalibrating modernism’s tools to destroy its house, Amba assays the role of Haraway’s ‘coding trickster.’²⁴ The assemblages born of her generative interactions with machines and materials enact a ‘cyborg politics’²⁵ in their hacking of dominant order that offers a hegemonic vision of the future. Instead, these chimaeras

venture emancipated futurities not cast in dead materialities by subjugated machines; futurities that are veritably cyborgian, vitalist and posthuman.

Adwait Singh (b. 1992, lives and works in New Delhi) is a curator and writer engaging affective historiography, queer epistemologies and ethno-cosmologies with the view to qualify predominant understandings and modes of relating to the world. Theirs is an integrative practice that seeks to promote collective care, commensality and dialogue within the arts ecology. Recent curations include the 5th Mardin Biennial (2022) that sought to revise mainstream perceptions on migration, forwarding an economy of renouncement instead, and the 15th edition of the Queer Arts Festival, Vancouver (2022) inviting a mutational politics as a counter to neocolonial technics of exposure and their monitored replication of the status quo. Other significant projects include 'Mutararium', Mumbai (2019) which questioned the terminology of the Anthropocene by juxtaposing more-than-human evolutionary timelines, and 'Caressing History', New Delhi (2018) exploring the possibility of a para-textual, embodied historiography. Their writings have appeared in various publications and periodicals.

- 1 A Greek building in which religious mysteries
were conducted.
- 2 This performativity is explored at length in
Bruno Latour, *Science in Action: How to Follow
Scientists and Engineers Through Society* (Harvard
University Press: Cambridge, Massachusetts,
2003; originally published in 1987).
- 3 Maaïke Bleeker and Jean Paul Van Bendegem,
'The Point of the Matter: Performativity
in Scientific Practices,' *Performance and
Posthumanism: Staging Prototypes of Composite
Bodies*, ed. Christel Stalpaert, Kristof van Baarle,
and Laura Karreman (Palgrave Macmillan:
Cham, 2021), 242.
- 4 See Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway:
Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and
Meaning* (Duke University Press: Durham and
London, 2007).
- 5 Donna J. Haraway, 'Situated Knowledges: The
Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege
of Partial Perspective,' *Feminist Studies*, vol. 14, no.
3 (1988): 581.
- 6 Haraway hints at this technoscientific
misappropriation of myths when she writes,
'[v]ision in this technological feast becomes
unregulated gluttony; all seems not just
mythically about the god trick of seeing
everything from nowhere, but to have put the
myth into ordinary practice. And like the god
trick, this eye fucks the world to make techno-
monster.' See Haraway, 'Situated Knowledges:
The Science Question in Feminism and the
Privilege of Partial Perspective,' 581.
- 7 Ibid., 593.
- 8 Ibid., 595.
- 9 This is a feminist steering of the term
'responsibility' beyond human-human
obligation, towards a more radically materialist
accountability. See Donna Haraway, *When Species
Meet*. (Minneapolis: The University of Minnesota
Press, 2008), 88; and Karen Barad, 'On Touching—
The Inhuman That Therefore I Am,' *Differences*,
vol. 23, no. 3, (2012): 208.
- 10 Agential literacies assume a non-essentialist
view of difference/otherness believing it to be
processual rather than preordained. 'Intra-
action' is a Baradian queering of 'interaction'
to underscore the primacy of relationality over
being. While 'interaction' implies exchange
between pre-existing entities, 'intra-action'
suggests that exchange precedes/ produces
things/phenomena that it seeks to define/
measure. See Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway:
Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and
Meaning*.
- 11 See Amba Sayal-Bennett, 'Diffractive Analysis:
Embodied Encounters in Contemporary Artistic
Video Practice,' *Tate Papers*, No.29 (Spring 2018).
- 12 See Timothy Lenoir's foreword in Brian Rotman,
Becoming Besides Ourselves (Duke University Press:
Durham and London, 2008), xx.
- 13 Gerald Raunig, *A Thousand Machines: A Concise
Philosophy of the Machine as Social Movement*, trans.
Aileen Derieg, [Semiotext(e): Los Angeles, 2010],
37.
- 14 Ibid., 38.
- 15 Ibid.
- 16 Ibid., 38-40
- 17 Ibid., 41.
- 18 See Timothy Morton, *Ecology Without Nature:
Rethinking Environmental Aesthetics* (Harvard
University Press: Cambridge, Massachusetts,
2008).
- 19 Beatriz Colomina, *X-Ray Architecture* (Lars Müller
Publishers: Zurich, 2019), 142-3.
- 20 Ibid., 143.
- 21 See Aaran Patel, 'What Le Corbusier got wrong
(and right) in his design of Chandigarh,' *Scroll*
(March 15, 2022).
- 22 For these critiques of Gulf Futurism see Karen
Orton, 'The Desert of the Unreal,' *Dazed Digital*,
November 9, 2012; and Shadya Radhi, 'Sophia
Al-Maria, Gulf Futurism, and Architectural
Temporalities,' *The Routledge Handbook of
CoFuturisms*, ed. Taryne Jade Taylor, Isiah
Lavender III, Grace L. Dillon, and Bodhisattva
Chattopadhyay (Routledge: New York and Oxon,
2024).

- 23 A portmanteau word coined by Virginia Woolf, apparently combining 'scroll' and 'lollop' to describe heavy, florid ornament.
- 24 Haraway, 'Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective,' 596.
- 25 According to Haraway, '[c]yborg politics is the struggle for language and the struggle against perfect communication, against the one code that translates all meaning perfectly, the central dogma of phallogocentrism.' See Donna Haraway, 'Manifesto for Cyborgs: Science, Technology, and Socialist Feminism in the 1980s,' *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Re-invention of Nature* (Free Association Books: London, 1991), 177.