

**PHARMACEUTICAL TESTS ON AXOLOTLHUMANS:  
ON MICHAEL JONES MCKEAN'S OBJECTS, 2014  
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*This text was written on occasion of the exhibition 'we float above to spit and sing' at Emerson Dorsch Gallery in Miami, Florida, 2014.*

In phenomenal reality, Michael Jones McKean's *Gliese 667C c, Kepler-22 b, Kepler -69 c, Kepler 62 e, Tau Ceti e, Gliese 180 c, Gliese 667C f, Gliese 180 b, HD 40307 g, Kepler-61 b, Kepler-62 f, Kepler-186 f, Gliese 180 b, Gliese 682 b, Kepler-296 f* was authored in 2014. We have to believe this in order to maintain the safety-net of shared points of reference and reasonable assertions. But what year is it in the Interzone, the immanent domain, that the work generates for itself in order to lawlessly expand its manifold lines? The numbers and letters in its title designate all the habitable planets that we've found in the universe thus far. The images on it are of pottery shards that belong to vanished civilizations. The florescent pigment that rings the images is rescue dye, the sort one spills when shipwrecked. It underscores the point that these are things that have been recovered, pulled up from the dark waters of various prehistories. So, we have the material residue of dead civilizations which lived on planets that we have yet to visit. This is the deep past of an even deeper future. In the work's time-twisted Interzone, all this is taking place at least a gigaannum or two down the road from us. Civilizations will have risen and fallen, after we've landed on these planets, having frightfully fled our own retaliating rock with its Chthonic black ops in the form of ever larger storms and unpredictable volcanos and rising water levels. We'll be—or are—the neanderthals of the civilizations who made the pots that have been dug up. By then, by the time these shards on the planets named in the title can exist, indexing entire histories still to come, we, these negligible biological artifacts that we are now—the beta version of what will exist then—enjoying this work, in 2014, will be, if we get it right, terrestrial exiles, in communion with alien chemical economies.

If we're pickpocketing Burroughs for terms here and playing loose with their meaning, it's because no one grew as giddy as he did at the prospect of off-planet exile and deep mutation. He should be called up, even if slight distortion is necessary. "The human organism is in a state of neoteny," he wrote. "This is a biological term used to describe an organism fixated at what would normally be a larval or transitional stage. Ordinarily a salamander starts its life cycle in the water with gills; later the gills atrophy, and the animal develops lungs. However, certain salamanders never lose their gills or leave the water... The Xolotl [I'm sure Burroughs means the axolotl; Xolotl is the Aztec God of sunset, who should of course be lording over what is being said here anyway, since fade-outs concern us] salamander in Mexico is an example. Scientists, moved by the plight of this beautiful creature, gave him an injection of hormones, whereupon he shed his gills and left the water after ages of neoteny. It is perhaps too much to hope that one simple injection could jar the human species from its arrested development." Now, while MJM hasn't—unfortunately—found the ingredients that would go into such a shot, he may be enticing us to imagine, through his objects, what may lie at the other side of the prick.

The disparate things gathered in MJM's carefully crafted display structures share a strange quality, more a vibe than a visible trace: they seem to be gazing back at us from the future. Not *our* future, of course, but theirs—a future which may partially unfold at the other side of the unfathomable edge of our phase-out, after we flower out of our neoteny. I'm not sure what it is exactly that gives them this quality—or what is licensing the bit of sad anthropomorphism that I'm relying on, so out-of-place in these paragraphs: objects with gazes, humanized salamanders, and the like. But I'll hazard proposing that in the case of MJM's objects it's a complex exchange between three elements that is at work.

Firstly, there is the strange tension that is generated between the artifacts that he presents remaining themselves, recognizable, unwilling to sacrifice their familiar forms even as they are compressed and foreshortened, and their growing ever more distant and stony at some other level. Molecularly perhaps. Or in their tool-usefulness. Things we know are aluminum and functional mineralize or petrify. Laptops and Blackberries turn into pieces of polished rock. Meteorites become clay. Hair becomes plastic or plastic-

seeming, which is to say that it binds itself, through oil or weird artifact-desire, to extinct species. It's difficult to pinpoint what has catalyzed the rearrangement of molecules in these things, even if only at a narrative level of the work's Interzone, but this rearrangement impinges on their affective power. They now seem to march independently of our calls to them, adjusting the margin of discomfort at their autonomy into a more central place in our engagement with them. They are somewhere else, at the service of other creatures. Perhaps these artifacts are prefiguring unpredictable molecular rearrangements that will come from our entwining with alien chemistries, rearrangements our own organisms will have to undergo as well. Or perhaps, if we look at them from this side of the Interzone, from the unimaginative hard fact that we are standing in 2014, they may be gazing back at us from a closer point in the historical timeline, marking the point at which the profit-cost analyses of capitalist production, shot through with automated computation, hit some threshold at which the forces of the absurd are unleashed beyond the timid tidings delivered by any theater that has taken their name. Decorative retro-MacPros all of a sudden become algorithmically fated and therefore the new products of common sense.

The second significant element in generating the vibe I'm claiming for these objects: the micro-atmospherics that they are embedded in. A hint of the psychedelic always envelopes them. This trippy inflection is grounded in the lure of Oliski-esque color spray-fades and in the slowly modulating lights that spread through the display cases. It is there in the floating geometric objects and in a recurrent figure-ground chromatic collapse which reminds us that "figures" are just differentiated patterns extricated from the continuum of matter. It may even be there in the rounded edges and color gradients of the cabinetry, which quote a design aesthetic—let's say the things that sprouted around Ettore Sottsass, for instance—that sought to capture the glide of the good trip in morphological alterations to common domestic objects.

The psychedelia that cross-cuts MJM's arrangements, however, is a booby-trapped psychedelia. It enlaces itself, as in a Möbius strip, with its very opposite: if on one side there is the universal chemical continuum into which hallucinogens and mind-expanding exercises ostensibly decant us, on the other there is the unstoppable data torrent that generates the world that all of a sudden we find ourselves sentenced to. It's like a penal colony of endless algorithms. If the suggestion of an incessant swirl between one side and the other—between the psychosomatic plug-in to chemical plenitudes and the "tripped out" realization that we are strapped to the cliff-faces of reality by tendrils of code and calculation—collects around these objects in the mode of a vibe, it also finds material presence in slight moments of instability and indeterminacy—moments that find shape in a barrage of questions: Are these objects carved and cast, adhering to traditional sculptural processes, or are they produced on 3D printers? Are they representations of concrete artifacts or are they referent-less mathematically-produced digital specimens? What happens to representation in a world of clones and numbers? Is the search engine an archeological dig site? etc.

The last element conspiring in the generation of the vibe is the encoding of time registrations that are distant from one another in the artifacts. The moments to which some of the objects reproduced or resined-over belong are easily pinned. A floppy disk, a Motorola Razr, even an ancient pottery shard—we can place these historically with some precision. Other objects, however, are more elusive in claiming their moment. Or more reticent in surrendering to any uni-temporality. The white plants in *The Garden* (2014)—Are they from the obsolete future of dated sci-fi? Are they elements of the nouveaux decor of loft spaces that exist for the most part only as architectural renditions? Are they the still-lives of algorithmic capitalism? And, once we find out that each is stuffed with a meteorite fragment, some of which are dated to before the emergence of life on the planet—how do we plot them temporally? Are they from "before us" somehow, in part?

When the MacAir and the "timeless" flower, the pizza slice and the Pre-Columbian vase, the meteorite fragment that hit the planet 50,000 years ago and the morphine dose shack up in MJM's display units, they render what we can call the concretization temporal incommensurability a recurring motif. History is set in knots. And in twisting the linear fantasy of anthropomorphic time, these objects insinuate other temporal arrangements. Times before the very idea of time was on the table, since life itself and the thinking that eventually came to accompany it were not even possibilities. Not *times*, then, not in the way we like to think them, at scales we can fathom, but something exo-temporal and yet still unfolding. And, of course, as there

is the “time” before anthropocentric time, there will also be the “time” after it. We are minor and nearly meaningless agitations in relation to the Absolute.

Of course the time after our Big Snuff-Out—or, more likely, our softly modulated phase-out—is the time of the post-axolotlhuman. We’ll sunset our current form, under the auspices of Xololt, of course, who knows all about vanishment. We’ll cross a threshold and reconfigure anew. Blindly perhaps. Burroughs again: “Mutation involves changes that are literally unimaginable from the perspective of the future mutant.” But how then does the axolotlhuman dream itself otherwise? Maybe other things—strangely-charged artifacts and wayward proposals softly coursing through the world—dream it beyond itself, in a subtle delivery of seemingly preposterous but somehow still enticing suggestions concerning the configuration that will replace it.

Burroughs’ axolotlhuman cannot help but call on another axolotlhuman—Julio Cortazar’s. In “Axolotl,” the narrator first runs into the lung-less salamanders at the Jardin des Plantes in Paris and grows soothingly obsessed with them. From the very first moment in front of these creatures, he intimates something that will change him: “I knew we were linked, that something infinitely lost and distant kept pulling us together.” In the absence of resemblance, which often extorts us into communion, it may just have been the empathy that the unfinished have for one another that binds them.

“The anthropomorphic features of a monkey reveal the reverse of what most people believe, the distance that is traveled from them to us. The absolute lack of similarity between axolotls and human beings proved to me that my recognition [of their closeness to us] was valid, that I was not propping myself up with easy analogies. Only the little hands...But an eft, the common newt, has such hands also, and we are not at all alike. I think it was the axolotls’ heads, that triangular pink shape with the tiny eyes of gold. That looked and knew. That laid the claim. They were not *animals*.”

They are too close to us to be just animals; they are our fellow travelers in neoteny.

*“So there was nothing strange in what happened. My face was pressed against the glass of the aquarium, my eyes were attempting once more to penetrate the mystery of those eyes of gold [of the Axolotls] without iris, without pupil. I saw from very close up the face of an axolotl immobile next to the glass. No transition and no surprise, I saw my face against the glass, I saw it on the outside of the tank, I saw it on the other side of the glass. Then my face drew back and I understood.*

*“...Outside, my face came close to the glass again, I saw my mouth, the lips compressed with the effort of understanding the axolotls. I was an axolotl and now I knew instantly that no understanding was possible. He was outside the aquarium, his thinking was a thinking outside the tank. Recognizing him, being him himself, I was an axolotl and in my world. The horror began—I learned in the same moment —of believing myself prisoner in the body of an axolotl, metamorphosed into him with my human mind intact, buried alive in an axolotl, condemned to move lucidly among unconscious creatures. But that stopped when a foot just grazed my face, when I moved just a little to one side and saw an axolotl next to me who was looking at me, and understood that he knew also, no communication possible, but very clearly. Or I was also in him, or all of us were thinking humanlike, incapable of expression, limited to the golden splendor of our eyes looking at the face of the man pressed against the aquarium.”*

This is how it sometimes feels in front of MJM’s displays, which become like the aquarium in the Jardin des Plantes: we are caught in them as our own axolotl selves—the traces of this historical biological configuration are sequenced in obscure ways into these artifacts and this fact vibrates to an intensity that rises a notch below the threshold of full awareness or complete intelligibility. But it’s there anyway. Impinging at the edge of our encounter with these sculptures. This is the Vibe. We are caught in these objects and we look back at ourselves from inside them, but only to find that we have been displaced to some future that for the time being can only find form in the Interzone of the work. These objects dream us after we’ve superseded our neoteny.