

Soft, Black, and Liquid

By Mark Horvath

Abstract

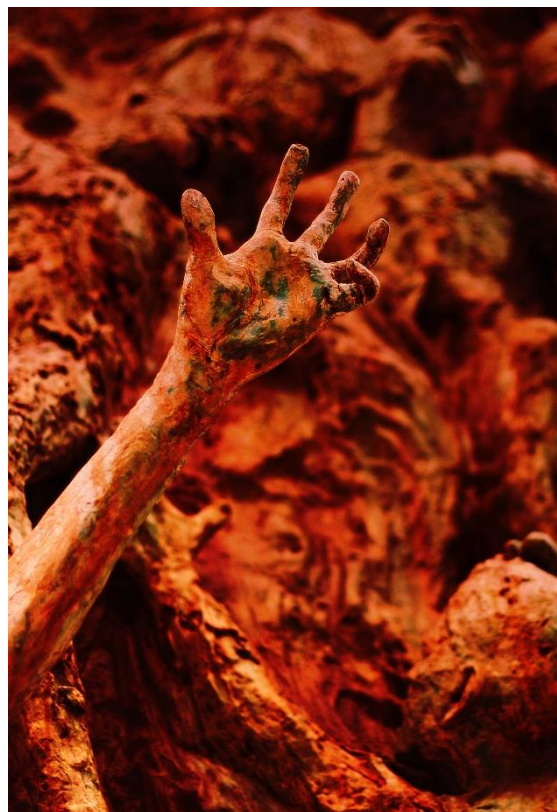
Building upon Jean-Paul Sartre's investigation of softness and sliminess in *Being and Nothingness*, I seek to reconceptualize the "mummy-fluid" craze that swept the internet in the summer of 2018. In this article, I construct a concept of posthuman fluidity that transcends the bounds of ordinary, everyday embodiment. Darkened, ancient blood can teach us about the permeability of corporeal boundaries. Ecology, as Timothy Morton highlights, is always dark and weird, full of causal and temporal loops.

Biography

Mark Horvath is a philosopher and researcher who lives in Budapest. He is the co-founder and co-editor of *Absentology*. His areas of interest include speculative realism, digitality, posthumanism. He has presented at many Hungarian and international conferences, and published in some journals. He published six books including *The Isle of Lazaretto* (co-authored with Adam Lovasz) and *Darkening Places*.

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Blackness or, more precisely, the blackness of paint is more than a mere color, a feature of artistic representation. But also, it is more than materiality or a structure of matter. That which is, is more than material. Thick black paint is at once surface and infinite depth, a depth full of further depths and recesses, yet soft to the touch, a softness that has attained its limit within a chaotic chiasm of world-slices and levels, wherein touch melts into immanence. Every surface is, potentially, an affordance. As Jean-Paul Sartre notes, “my hand reveals to me the resistance of objects, their hardness or softness” (Sartre 303). This revelation depends, however, on the prior presence of resistant objects that display their presence through this very resistance to our will. But what of slime? Honey, or the effluence of rotten, abject bodies, all such instances of sliminess are indicative of “a softness pushed to its ultimate limit” (Sartre 608). Softness is situated, according to Sartre, at the limit of presence and absence. It is a presence that has almost disappeared, but lies fatefully suspended at the edge of effacement. Slime makes separation and segregation impossible; these modalities too must disappear, along with the possibility of a structured body. We feel as if a posthuman liquidity were flowing over us, a liquid from some unnamed Beyond, something unpleasant that flows from outside. There is in all stickiness a



“baseness” (Sartre 612), an unspeakable quality that beckons us to transcend downwards, towards the abyss. Liquidity, once it attains to sliminess, is a transgressive state. No longer does it flow out from within us, like our various familiar body fluids. Rather, slime arrives from the Outside, the environment. Slime is ecological. Slime is “weirdly weird,” to borrow Timothy Morton’s expression, for it displays an uncanny resilience that opposes any teleology (Morton 7). Formlessness perseveres, whilst forms manifest ebb and flow.

The goal of this article is to articulate a specifically posthuman theory of slime,

predicated upon a posthuman and postsubjective conception of sensuality. How should we imagine such a liquidity, separated from any and all corporeality? In other words, what happens when there are no more hands left to dip into slimy substantiality? First of all, we must introduce a scission between the body and sense. Sensuality is ecological, an aspect of the environment. Sensation cannot be localized. Search as much as one would like: it is nowhere to be found. Nowhere specific at least... There are feeling bodies that act as locii of sense, but sense in general has no homeland, no final resting place, no locale it may call its own. Anthropocentrism must be left behind if we are to understand the full complexity of sense, including the peculiar sensuality represented by sticky, gooey substances. Slime as posthuman, thickened liquidity, undoes the supposed primacy of the body, whilst also making possible more open, heterogeneous and ambiguous connections. Swampy being contains an innate possibility potentially capable of swamping everything. But does this do justice to the excess that is posthuman liquidity. Slime degenerates all linearity. The “arche-lithic,” the ancient temporality of evolution, is ever-present (Morton 83). In its refusal to disappear entirely, slime poses an unsolvable conundrum for linear concepts of history and temporality. Stickiness is a dynamism that loops back into itself. Body fluids too are perfectly capable of becoming transcorporeal remnants, arche-lithic traces.

Sweat, blood, spit all serve to bring nuance to views that portray the body as a type of closed system. When blood flows out of our nose, or slobber leaves our mouth, or piss flows from our penis, then our body opens up to a range of environmental effects, including infection. There is always a chance of making new connections in such cases of openness. It is undeniable that bodily release is ecstatic. Relaxation is an opening up to the general economy of life. Why do such instances nevertheless involve reactions of disgust? What is it that makes bodily ecstasy disgusting? Is it the excessive plasticity of body fluids, or something else entirely?

Our first example of ontological sliminess is the fluids recently discovered within an Ancient Egyptian sarcophagus, as well as the intense social media reaction. There is more at stake here than a merely revelative discovery of the human body's plasticity, for this would not in itself explain the intensity of interest. Certain internet users even signed petitions demanding access to the sarcophagus in question, so as to partake of this revolting fluid (Sung). There is, in a sense, a correlation between attraction and repulsion, one that is far from one-sided or final. The repulsive, once emplaced within a certain communicative environment, is easily capable of becoming attractive, and *vice versa*. Slime is the prelude to our own embodiment. Formlessness contains a secret, a secretion that questions everyday relations to both past and future. As Sartre highlights, “the gluey, the sticky, the hazy, etc.,

holes in the sand and in the earth, caves the light, the night, etc.” all reveal to us “modes of pre-psychic and presexual being” we can never entirely explain with rational categories (Sartre 612). Plasticity transcends our own, restricted corporeal economy. The abject trace shows us a path leading towards an infinitely open ecology, a swampy place wherein life and death, attractiveness and repulsiveness, light and darkness all melt into one ambiguous flow. When confronted with the heterogeneity of death, we feel unnerved, disjointed, separated from the realm of the everyday. The ecstatic experience of death leads to what Gilles Deleuze has called “the zone of indiscernibility” (Deleuze 20–7). Deep blackness is a feature of the dark, burgundy of the mummy fluids, or the darkness of death itself.

Sliminess, as we alluded to it previously, is characterized by an in-betweenness. Posthumanity, as both process and condition, is indicative of a depth beyond conscious perception. Between complete deterritorialization and reterritorialization, the sticky territory of slime contains a myriad of nonhuman becomings. They are reminiscent of what Deleuze writes of Francis Bacon’s figures: “not simply an isolated body”, slimy posthumanity is also “the deformed body that escapes from itself” (Deleuze 18). Perhaps all those intent upon drinking mummy fluids are merely seeking an escape from the tedium of everyday capitalist late modernity? Conventional forms of embodiment give way, after the collapse and death of integrity,

bringing the contingency of all form to the fore. Is the cybernetically accessible mummy a cyborg? This could very well be the case. The mummy’s electronic fluids fill us up to the brim, feeding our hungry mouths, noses and ears with rotten black blood. No mere phenomenological treatment of such sensual transformation can be adequate to the radical nature of this transformation. Discourse reaches its limit, penetrating into impossibility. Connectivity and dissection coincide with one another in the context of infection, viral communication. The internet is a machine for the transmission of viruses and memes. Synthesis entails a connection of various heterogeneous elements. Connection gives meaning to proliferation, multiplication and the production of excess. Production, in turn, demands an initial inconsistency to be defeated and erased. Weirdness is a trick ontology plays on us. Things are characterized by “an irreducible uncertainty, not because things are unreal, but because they are real” (Morton 85). It is weird that multitudes of humans living in supposedly civilized, modern, enlightened societies would demand to be permitted to drink mummy fluids. The past comes to infect the present through bizarre causal loops. Two apparently distant modalities can suddenly come into an intimate connection. Somebody, a fetishist no doubt, could already be drinking several millennia old body fluids. Eagerly lapping up these disgusting traces, such a tongue would arrive at a strange intimacy with the past, one that no legal museum

can give us. Children visiting mummy exhibitions, safely separated from history by layers of protective glass, could hardly ever attain to such an experience.

The environment, as a permanent state of catastrophe, resists attempts to idealize nature. Misguided ecological attempts to separate an artificially purified, homely “nature” to be protected from the deprivations of supposedly human-centered “culture” are bound to fail. Nature never was natural to begin with. The thickness of cybernetically connected materiality testifies to this. Sliminess, Sartre asserts, “is a soft, yielding action, a moist and feminine sucking” that draws us closer and closer to the abyss of unfree inexistence (Sartre 609). Fluidity holds us within an existence with no foundation. We ourselves can be conceived of as bacterial sinks. Even urban civilization is, in a way, a conduit for bacterial infection. It is the dreadful docility of slime that allows it to stick to us. Softness is a preliminary to complete disappearance. Submergence within a sickeningly plastic ecology means that every bodily orifice must be filled up, until plenitude is the rule. No surface is entirely safe from the infectiousness of black slime. Freedom too becomes another surface to be filled up, another hole waiting for a distant, unknown plenitude that nevertheless draws ever closer. Blackened liquidity is an Eternal Return of abjection. No possibility of exit is truly safe from the soft resistance of sliminess: the latter cannot be ejected from our being. Our every motion only

makes our predicament ever more drastic. The more you move, the deeper you sink. Slime is a malignant life that has freed itself of subjection. As a matter of fact, it subjects our hands, indeed, the entirety of our life, to its stickiness: “the slime is like a liquid seen in a nightmare, where all its properties are animated by a sort of life and turn back against me” (Sartre 609). The substrate is elastic, and forever determined by an infinity of becomings, none of which are reducible to a single level of agency. Human and self-centeredness are displaced, and replaced by polycentricity. Our submerged skin too shall join the monstrous night of benighted, dehumanized being. Soft layers of oil paint, skin and slime coalesce within a feminine sucking mechanism that refuses to release us from its grip. This is what Morton is getting at when we claims that “our toilet waste phenomenologically sticks to us, even when we have flushed it” (Morton 125). Ecological embeddedness means that any exit from the hold of sliminess, strictly speaking, impossible.

The dark materiality of sticky, gooey slime is an invitation to submergence, yet it is also paradoxically elastic. One can play with softness, feeling its touch upon our hands, even sliding down our throats. It is all too easy for the active to become passive. The slimy contains “something like a tactile fascination” that gives afforance to a limitless eroticism of the real (Sartre 609). Sticky matter is an ocean that consumes experience, making restricted,

embodied sense all but impossible. Mud is a soft matter waiting to absorb and coagulate liquidity. Sticky substantiality darkens the realm of the outer world, making penetration by the light impossible: pure light and yellowish rays are replaced by rotten decay, decomposition and blackened fluidity. As opposed to the tyrannic “heliopolitics” of vision, dark materiality is suggestive of a dark baseness beyond rational comprehension (Levin 7). Base matter replaces the primacy of the ocular. Darkness and materiality cannot be grasped, for they slip from our hands the minute we believe they have been captured. Extension with no center replaces all solidity with black flows. It is this opposition to both teleology and explanation that Sartre connects so brilliantly with slime towards the end of his magnum opus, *Being and Nothingness*. Sartre’s thoughts on stickiness can be of some help in conceptualizing the meaning of cybernetic mummies mediated through infectious social media. More to the point, can this residual matter be conceived of as an opening to dehumanized, even devitalized modes of perception?

As distinct from the heliopolitical privileging of sight, the queer negativity of unusual body fluids must be thought of as a liquid extension, potentially unlimited in its scope. Once it starts to spread, the ooze of arche-lithic time cannot be halted. The trace that would not cease its proliferation truly does display a life beyond our lived embodiment. The whiteness of bones contrasts markedly with the blackness of ancient,

rotten flesh. Rot is always unbearable, a reminder of our finitude, an unavoidable product of our vulnerable corporeality. Rationality, when confronted with its own extinction, must of necessity fail. Escape from the false light of heliopolitics means entry, even reentry, into the black light of death. Once the body becomes jelly, writing to, in the presence of such ancient corpses, must become transmuted into a sovereign formlessness. A self-referential cycle of rottenness, a feedback-loop of decay becomes the norm, while form degenerates ever further into a gelatinous night. Similarly to a body lying by the side of the road, the sarcophagus contains an infinity of secrets, as well as nauseating details relating to a range of circumstances (how did this person die? how did the accident of this discovery occur?) Digital media serve as channels through which the spirits of the underworld can traverse the various levels of the world. Nearly instantly, news of the discovery spread around the world. Putridness attracts, because the heterogeneous ejects us from our everyday mode. The internet is particularly conducive to spreading such detached details, remnants and disgusting traces. In the manner of a perverse Sun, it illuminates that which formerly could never have been accessed at such speed, leading to cognitive overload and the differentiation of taste into ever more perverse subcultures. Mummy-juice contains a potential rechanneling, a redirection towards a new intimacy with an ecology we were never separated from to begin with. One can,

with no difficulty at all, imagine online communities of obscene vampires feasting upon the body fluids of long-dead Egyptian aristocrats.

As Robyn Longhurst's research has shown, there is a connection between fluidity and femininity. Patriarchal societies tend to exclude liquidity, in favor of a concept of corporeality that emphasizes solid, stable boundaries. The masculine body is one that maintains its borders against all external enemies, whilst the feminine traditionally represents irrationality, evil and vulnerability (Longhurst 9–32). In Gillian Rose's view, rationality, of necessity, demands the presence of irrational Others that are constructed for the explicit goal of serving as convenient excluded residues; subjectivities with uncertain boundaries are liable to being separated from conformist, everyday bodies (Rose 9). The overflowing sarcophagus and the perverse social media reaction to this opens up a new line-of-flight, through which female plasticity can attain an activity beyond any dualistic system of signification, bringing all it touches into connection with a general economy of queerness. Such virality contains the germs of any and all queer performativities, what Jane/Jack/Judith Halberstam associates with ontological queerness: strange temporalities, playful life strategies and an openness to failure, even to the point of death (Halberstam 35). Deterritorialization may be observed through various discontinuous, disjoined continuities. As Morton reminds us, the English word "weird"

originates from the Old Norse word *urth*, which actually means "in a loop" (Morton 5). The loop is a turn of events that refuses to stop turning. Hence, it is an eminently causal and ontological category. The mode of knowledge adequate to loopy time would be equivalent to a type of thinking that swallows its own tail, like the mythical Ouroboros. Like a queer person swallowing their own penis (we are all enjoying it, every single one of our larval selves...) The circulatory radiation of mummy-juice leaves no digital ecology unaffected. Thousands actually seek out the dark, revolting effluence, for the sake of fun, or even seriously. Discovery, like all human and nonhuman actions, creates strange loops in turn. Thought itself comes in loopy form (Morton 24). Another petition demands that the juice be synthesized and mass-produced as an energy drink: "We need to drink the red liquid from the cursed dark sarcophagus in the form of some sort of carbonated energy drink so we can assume its powers and finally die"—reads the petition (Hall).

The will to annihilation, the magical circle of dissolution flows out of the accursed tomb, filling up imploded cyberspace with infernal data. Rotten, abject posthuman liquidity commands our attention in a way that transcends social codes. In most Western societies, the cult of meritocracy entails the perpetual demand for success. Failure must be excluded from one's life. What the above incident highlights is that, below the surface of rational modernity, there exists a

concomitant demand for failure and self-destruction. Rather than viewing failure in an exclusively negative light, Halberstam, suggests that we reconsider the role of failure in performativity. What else could the demand for mummy juice entail, if not a paradoxical rejection of contemporary social norms and expectations? The three mummies contained within the tomb form part of an interconnected web of actants, spanning from the recording technologies, archeological methods, social institutions and practices that made possible their excavation, to the communications technologies that allow for the spread of information pertaining to the sensational discovery. Posthuman slime is the conduit for new modes of cybernetically mediated community. Queerness meshes together with feminine fluidity, rejecting dominant social codes. In Halberstam's view, queer theory must turn towards the improbable and the strange. A danger of subcultural identification is the frequent charge on the part of culture critics of "subcultural burnout" (Halberstam 156). Many subcultures may be dismissed as merely indications of boredom or large-scale social vapidness. As distinct from this position, Halberstam suggests that one must take strangeness seriously, even while questioning the criteria of "seriousness" in general. Another important takeaway is that the dividing line between subcultural theorists and participants needs to be reconsidered (Halberstam 161). We need not keep ourselves clean: it is perfectly

possible, indeed, necessary to soil oneself whilst working in cultural studies. Nothing would be more deliciously perverse than the revelation of a death-cult, a new inverted Christianity, an atheological subculture dedicated to mayhem and the rule of Chaos. Subcultures, once they reach a certain intensity, cannot be situated in any easy relation to dominant cultural codes; even the oppositional matrix proves too restrictive for such practices (Halberstam 160). Queerness means a complete, anarchistic rejection of society, oppositional identities included (Halberstam 13–5). In the case of the virtual mummy-juice drinking community, we cannot speak of opposition or counterculture, at least not in the standard way. Queerness entails a weirding of relations, not their mere replacement, but rather a complete displacement of languages and ontological categories. Existence is not some clean category that may be separated from nonexistence. The ritualized drinking of mummy-fluids shows the inner vacuity of any and all rationalistic heliopolitics. Beyond anthropocentrism, a limitless abundance of limitless perspectives may be unearthed. Mummified fetishism: this is either the end of all human culture or the beginning of something else entirely... Posthuman liquidity, as both object of speculation and actual objectivity, represents the possibility of openness. The stench is subversive of embodied norms, expectations and conventional, boring desires, in favor of a haptic liminality. Fluids know no boundaries apart from

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solidification. Exposed to the tyrannical Sun, they dry up. We seek to burrow below the ground, into an intimate proximity with ancient tombs, buried layers of time, forgotten traditions. Modernity is productive of weirdings, extratemporal loops that cannot be reintegrated into linear time. Temporality itself must be reconsidered, once contact with extratemporality is achieved (Halberstam 9).

The internet as posthuman zone effaces identity, decomposing subjectivity into ever more abstract segments, layers and slices. Mummified effluences refuse to signify anything: they can be understood neither from the perspective of Ancient Egyptian religion, nor that of teleological modernity. Mummification leaves us nowhere, except at the crossroads of a withdrawn, inaccessible time. Failure may be conceived of as a performative game, a lifestyle full of impossibility and magic, access and lack of access, being and inexistence. The remnants of bygone eras rot into a monstrous softness. We feel softness by using our hands, but what if these hands, indeed, all of our organs, have rotted away into insignificance? Or is monstrous deformation productive of meaning? A concept art example can help illuminate the dark, mucous materiality of posthuman fluidity. Jenny Keane's video

installation, *Ingeminated Battology*, shows us a blackness that opens up in the manner of an infernal mouth, not unlike the mouth of Hell in medieval art. The mouth attempts, in vain, to give expression to words, phrases, but all that comes out in the end is an unintelligible stream. A black tongue slips from among the lips of this monstrous, uncategorizable creature, like a frostbitten arm or the limb of a corpse. No longer do these body parts have any connection with any functioning bodily whole (Keane). The blackened tongue is an ambiguous residue, a degenerated recessive organ, a dark entity whose dark fluids give a new, intensive flavor to our experiences. We desire to mix our own spit with its flows, even at the expense of nausea. When we touch something, and let this touch be reduced to softness, we enter into a mode of being that is formless, pure intensity: soft brushing is "to be made pure mucous membrane" (Sartre 396). The pure, black mucous membrane sucks upon our exteriors and limbs, until we cannot escape the deadly softness. Taste melts into smell, and the smell becomes another flavor that extends our life into sticky infernal swampy chaos.

Formerly hot blood lies underground, cold and damp. The sweaty, perverse desire for direct contact meshes with new modes of mediation.

Hidden rituals are exposed to the permanent light of pervasive connectivity. Blood as both object and content of sacrifice opens up corporeality to the impossibility of any ownership. Our bodies are not units closed upon themselves. Instead, they are situated in a multitude of flows. Blood as it rushes out reverses the usual relations of self-possession. After a while, the latter becomes all but impossible. The sacrifice results in a magical possession of the world and its causal relations, an increase in power that is concomitant with the decrease of the sacrificial victim's power. As we have seen, softness tends toward precisely such a reversal of relations. That which sticks to our hands lays claim to our attention, indeed, the entirety of our embodied being. What makes this reversal of agency strange is the absence of any discernible stage of finality. In the case of mummy blood, we find a dark, sticky, stinky mess that nevertheless makes possible a new mode of perception, an emotional attachment to the past. Black blood is a symptom often associated in ancient and medieval times with a melancholic humor (Drew 25). The ecstasy of sacrificial reenactment constitutes a return to general economy. Ecstatic submergence returns the human body to a state of primordial nakedness, a vulnerability without limitation, a softened sensuality that lays waste to hardened resistance.

Far from any purity, the sacred is a state of manifest impurity. The experience of scatological holiness corresponds to the unwholesome discovery that “there is no ‘away’—waste goes

somewhere, not ontologically ‘away’” (Morton 78). Dark ecological awareness is the realization of the absence of an exit, a safe space wherein one can isolate one's own pathetic, exposed, soft self. Holiness, far from purified, is dirty, and this dirtiness testifies to its real nature. The scatological sacred retroactively lays claim to the body, but also points beyond our world. In Sartre's view, “the sacred object is an object which is in the world and which points to a transcendence beyond the world” (Sartre 374). Bodily waste is, similarly, within the body, but points toward a flooding of the body's environs. The dead cannot keep their wastes contained within the restricted political economy of the individuated body. As objectified through sacred vessels, the sacred is emplaced midway between appearance and disappearance. The integrity of the body abates when confronted with the sacred scatological. “God” in Sartre's existentialist framework is the “unrealizable,” the impossible “radical absence” one can never reach (Sartre 423). If this is so, the untouchable too may be conceived of as radical absence. Touching, let alone tasting mummified traces is not permitted, hence the transcendent character of such desires. Indeed, not only does Sartre equate absolute impossibility with God, he also extends this to the humanity of observers in general. The human too is impossibility, the realization of the human essence is just as difficult as achieving mystical unity with the divine. Ritual consumption of corpse fluidity would be, in this context, an

impossible desire for sacred flesh, a necrophilic religiosity eerily familiar for all those steeped in Roman Catholicism, with its cult of sublimated cannibalism. Secretly, many desire to partake of the flesh of God Himself (or is it a Her? or an It? or unnameability itself?). In the meantime, blood flows through dense networks of information, in which sensationalism cannot be separated from authentic, real communication. Only that may be informative which has not been received and decoded by perceivers. Redundant information is not information at all, but rather noise. Feminine substantiality covers the contours of formerly patriarchal social space: sickening, fuggy air fills our nostrils to the brim, as thick, oil fluids leak out.

Ingeminated Battology is an experiment in blackening both language and perception. As such, it connects with the blood of sarcophagii through the similitude of its materiality, as well as the affects it produces. Digestion, consumption and growth all play a role in this abyssal process of artistic creation. Black spittle spills out of the mouth, while the black tongue appears intent upon tasting our anxiety-stricken bodies. The night of deathly annihilation is a state of liminality outside of life and meaning. As Keane puts it, “the tongue is a liminal object – inside and

outside, soft and hard. It deals with food, language and sexuality” (Keane). Modes of categorization, as well as everyday technologies of the self, no longer operate. Once the blackened tongue sticks out, we either wretch or extend our own tongues towards the abyss. Convulsively, the mouth opens and closes, whilst the tongue cuts itself upon sharp, carnivorous teeth. It is impossible to decide what has gone wrong: has meaning reached its apogee, or has the body been left behind, or has consciousness finally transcended reality once and for all? Blackness itself is a rotten sun that stains all terrestrial surfaces (Stephanou). Sticky black spittle subverts both the gaze and the exposed body alike, leaving no intentions intact. Softness is a carressing movement, a ceaseless, machinic embrace of surfaces. Blackened corporeality consumes even the most solid of structures, returning all to baseness, impurity, dirtiness. This tongue lacks language of any sort: its communicative potential resides in the lack of communicability. No information is to be obtained here, except the sacrifice of meaning and the erasure of human language. Is such a sacrifice not noble, even pure in its very impurity? Can our hands resist deathly envelopment within softness?

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