



# **PNEUS AND GUNK**

## **JENNIFER TEETS**

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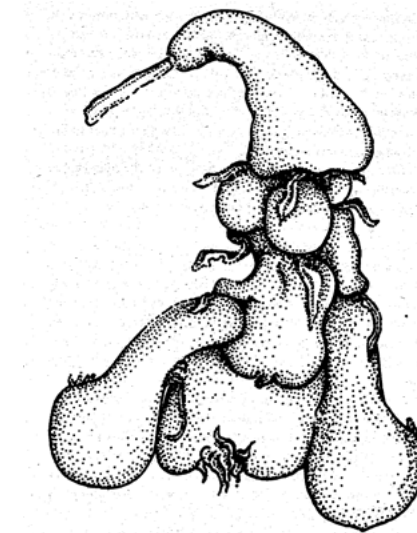
They were living beings, of this I was certain: I had too much experience manipulating life forms to make that mistake. There are some movements no machine can imitate. I calculated the size of the worms: they were approximately one thousand feet long and seventy feet in diameter; they were almost perfect cylinders, with no heads or tails, although their geometric form had to be mentally reconstructed because they were coiling and twisting and changing shape as they moved across the anfractuous mountain terrain. They also looked soft and slimy, but their formidable weight could be deduced by observing them displace enormous rocks along their way, sunder the mountainside, and reduce whole trees to splinters.<sup>1</sup>

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The concept of the “pneu” or a flexible layer that encloses an organism, or inanimate being, in a pressurized filling is particularly compelling when reflecting on the polymer forms subject to the work *Shedding Sheaths* (2015-onwards). These floor-based objects are found fibre optic cable skins that have been repurposed as sculpture. Emptied out, they seem to embody a kind of shedding that is particular to our age of remote retrieval, vessels that will instantaneously swallow, digest, and transmit almost any form of object. Technically, they are subterranean fibre optic sheaths, and as pneus, they are flexible layers that have formerly housed something. Some are flattened or warped, hesitantly unwell, while others are positively out of shape. Conformed by a world of membrane stresses, pneus, in materials science, are “skins” filled with gases, airs, and vapours, stemming from the two-layer membrane that covers the lungs. The archetypal pneu’s behaviour oscillates between stabilization and destabilization: liquid or rubber forms can be rigid in tension or flexible in bending (such as plastic foils and pneumatic halls), while other kinds of pneus can be reinforced by tapes and nets subject to strain. On the flipside, the pneu’s sensitive membrane is also prone to deformation. A rubber hose made of highly elastic polymeric can “bulge” at an early stage of inflation (monetary or intestinal). It is possible at any moment of external force to exhibit stress—a factor that can change the shape of the rubber, defying its uniform thickness and indicate a “weak” point in the material. Fitting, as Canell seems to have a soft spot for weak points. A gutted, shed cable carapace becomes an empty shell—deflated, spat out, expelled. If sculpture can embody a process, such as material exhaustion, the skin, or flexible layer, is proclaimed as one of morphological unwind.

This is an architecture of supporting organs (such as external skeletons) and an economy of materials in our current technological acceleration. Obliquely, sculpture as purely crustacean. Or, perhaps less obliquely, how materials can be a methodology—in aesthetics and sculpture—whereby materials are put forward, granted agency, and asked to perform, renegotiate themselves, react. When given a new task they take on a repurposed skin. I once described this as a metaphysical, ideological, and/or biological process where materials act as epistemological selves or fodders withholding other meanings and functions: precarious traces, absorbents, displaced bodies, or signifying emblems. Within their movement, they come into being, transitioning towards materiality and entity. The sheaths, skins, and gums of Canell's work couldn't be better positioned in this dialectic. It is a concern that stretches further back than the poly-insulated embrace between contemporary subjects. Determined by mathematical parameters, form follows nature in a constant mutation of external forms and structural arrangements. Protective clothing signals traces of development, a net-like grid or coat that can be smooth or have ribs and spines, be divided internally into chambers that we cannot see, or compartments divided by partitions. Canell's sheaths formulate this balance of asymmetrical pressure points where bifold stresses have conditioned the material into collapse. When put under another kind of stress, heated and compressed, the sheaths appear like residue or functionally colourful debris. Enigmatically delivered intestinal forms, oozing, clustering, teetering about. They usually sit around conversing in groups and share a common form of rapport.

The term "creep," which is also relevant here, and assumingly in a pneu's envelope, is awkwardly processing in my brain as I pen this. Creep can occur as a result of long-term exposure to high levels of stress, which are still below the yield strength of the material: it is the likelihood of a solid material to move slowly or distort permanently under the strain of mechanical arm-twisting. Creep is more severe in materials that are subjected to heat for long periods, and generally increases as they near their melting point. Chatting with a materialist friend, he mentioned that creep can also mean the return of the deformed material back to its original shape—in fact, once deformed, the idea is to create the necessary forces to keep creep at bay. The notion



of “creep” and anti-creep further reminds me of gunk and crud, guck, glop, the hows of getting down in the mire to sculpt the muck of that which tends to fall. I once used mud as a methodology in a happening—a time-based sludge revelry of collective transformation. Canell’s works bring me back to this conjecture, which supposes or purports physiological speculation as a path to collective imagination based on transmission. This is a materialist stance in which the medium at hand is indeed a method for a purported gain. It is as if there is a kind of hidden or arrested broadcasting going on here amongst the objects, in their silent array. Or what Canell has deemed as an “imperceptible and palpable, extra-linguistic, or non-verbal modulation of content.”<sup>2</sup>

Parallel to creep is the concept of viscosity and flow. Resisting sheer flow and strain, materials return to their original state or entity, once the stress is removed. The idea of time-dependent strain recalls how sludge or grime can be energy sources for re-conceiving possible futures. Continually contorting along an axis of free time, flesh-coloured mastic gum droops on elevated steel metal rods anchored to the floor, a sticky disclosure. Typically used to remedy the gut or used as a sealant, mastic is treated as a viscous affair in a series of gum totems entitled *Gum Drags* (2017-onwards). The shape of the work is slippery, contingent on its environmental conditions and in a constant state of humorously sluggish flux that is capable of provoking illogical feelings of empathy. Sculpture as no longer purely crustacean. Gum alludes to mastication and chewing, the first step in digestion, a semi-automated act where materials break down mediated by a higher conscious input. Stimulated by background processes, the *Gum Drags* enact a prolonged material wait, a kind of passing of time that is only ever accessed in its entirety by the walls of the room they perform for, unless others decide to share a total and constant presence with them. Form comes and goes in a consistently indecisive distortion of flow determined by temperature, mass, and odd sentient sag. Other mastic works are literally made for walls, like the *Gum Shelves* (2017-onwards), and exhibit a similarly viscous potential towards a transformative material process. Philosopher and art historian Georges Didi Huberman has written on the philosophical questions around ductile materials—the relationship between form and matter, an interconnection of spirit and matter, a kind of very palpable warmth. He discussed how these materials attest to a ques-

tion of plasticity, for a form to take, so that in general an individuation can occur.<sup>3</sup> It is the storage and transfer of energy at work in this gunk that makes it appealing. Oozy, it appears static in time, succumbed to or locked into gravity’s pull, reacting in a slow, screwed down manner. Slow dive.

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*Reflexologies* (2018), at a contrary rate, disfigures an inflated sphere. A sphere, which could be described as the alchemical gateway, is the result of equal distribution of stresses in the envelope. Put together in collaboration with Robin Watkins, *Reflexologies* is a pneumatic fatigue machine, where a specimen, in this case a synthetic blue bubble-like polymer, is tested. Using software the body language of the work is generated by sine wave frequencies, and following the curved amplitude precisely, signals are converted into physical loads. The suck and stomp of its mechanical limb, panting rhythmic loads into action, causes a sequence of morphing spheroids to occur. This is a process of object-based reflexology: by way of pneumatic pressure the air trapped inside the synthetic rubber sphere changes its appearance, rearticulating the way an enclosed atmosphere is held and re-held. It allows us to study, or perhaps rather to get lost in and interpret behaviour in terms of simple and more complex reflexes. Inflation and deflation. A single-stroke organism with an amphibian vocal sac.

Let’s consider this sculptural set-up where pressure is tested and stress is estimated as a haptic measurement of deviant form. The sculpture is placed in a strained condition for some finite, opening-hour based amount of time and hence causes plastic anomalies. The stress relaxation is the observed decrease in stress in response to the same amount of strain generated, a kind of bliss that relieves the sculpture from vertical influence. The sensitive membrane of the plastic resembles a hyperskin, seeming to hear and react to its own movement. It zestfully flexes, allowing energy to move through the object, be the object, as the object. It is here that the fantasy of the skin that talks, walks the walk, wobbles, and hobbles confirms one of the strangest allotropes of all the skins together. While musing on the nature of bouncing, Steven Connor writes that “the ball that bounces extends out into the world the principle of muscular extension itself.”<sup>4</sup> For him, a ball absorbs force only to “give it back,” and so as an ideal and inexhaustible form



of resilience it actualises the principle of absolute reversibility. While definitely engaged with reversible-like materials and processes—polyethylene, plastic, raw gum, synthetic rubber—Canell isn't exclusively after the reversible body per se. Preoccupied with the transfiguration of reversible matter, she allows it to spill in any direction, following material ahead of her. Placing and displacing way-worn materials, she travels sideways in order to meet the trajectories of her sculptural efforts. One second half-objects, the next second objects half-remembered. Pneus and gunk. Such is the grammar of the incomplete.

<sup>1</sup> César Aira, *The Literary Conference*, (New York, New Directions Books, 2006), 72.

<sup>2</sup> Email correspondence with artist, 2017.

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.cairn.info/revue-lignes1-2000-1-page-206.htm>

<sup>4</sup> Steven Connor, *A Philosophy of Sport*, (London, Reaktion Books, 2011), 140.

