

Slime Aesthetics
By Alexander Iadarola

Slime—often in vibrant neon—is a common trope in the work of EVOL. It shows up in release titles like *Rave Slime*, *Melting Pinkness*, and *Purple Melters*; in the viscous feel of their tracks, brought on by acid house-styled sonic bending; and in the monochrome kandi of their artwork. Although Roc Jiménez de Cisneros and Stephen Sharp’s affinity for it no doubt has to do with psychedelic rave aesthetics—exploration of rave’s media history and sonic template is a recurring theme—slime in their zone takes on a life of its own. There, a big part of its fun as a figure is its ability to function doubly as a conduit for academic styles of inquiry as well as more everyday, tangible, and straightforwardly visceral kinds of engagement.

An important place to start with slime is the fact that it’s very hard to pin down. It’s slippery and evasive not only if you’re a protagonist in *Ghostbusters II* (1984) but also if you’re attempting to ascertain unequivocal knowledge about its form. Indeed, one of its common features in popular media is its ability to dramatically shift its shape. Recalling a familiar plot within the horror genre, *The Thing* (1982) tells the story of a contagion that infiltrates and takes the form of living hosts, while *The Blob* (1958) never stops growing, eating up everything in its path.

Definitive slime taxonomy is not really possible because slime is constantly morphing. You can’t draw a line around it or take concise measurements because it’s constantly growing or redefining itself, much like an EVOL track as it lurches, stretches, and bunches up unpredictably throughout the sonic register.

Slime is thus defined by a constitutive internal difference with itself: it could be one thing, but it might just as well be another; what it “is” is by definition variable, never not in a liminal state. Whatever you think defines slime one moment could prove totally inapplicable in the next. In that way, it could be said to be *Hardly Itself*, a phrase that’s also the title of a text in the form of a dialogue between Jiménez de Cisneros and Guy Birkin, researcher of aesthetic complexity. There, the duo talk about the impossibility of translation, particularly as it relates to EVOL’s numerous versions of German artist and composer Hanne Darboven’s composition *Opus 17a*, the seventh “Slime Variation” of which accompanies this text.

In *Hardly Itself*, their starting point for a very wide-ranging conversation is a line from Bergson, brought to bear specifically on the theme of translation: “To analyze is to express a thing as a function of something other than itself.”¹ Early on, Birkin points out the different locations the *Opus 17a* exists, emphasizing, “It is difficult to separate its content from its form because, as a piece of generative music, the process by which the piece is created is a central concern.” He elaborates:

Where is *Opus 17a* as a piece of *art* amongst all these layers of *work*: the concept of the piece in Darboven’s mind and ours; the visual artwork (*Wunschkonzert*, 1984) made of framed grids and numbers that provided the basis for *Opus 17a*,

17b, 18a and 18b; the mapping system used to translate numbers into notes; the physical/digital musical scores; each live performance of the piece; recordings of those performances; the act of listening to a recording; the act of transcribing it...”ⁱⁱ

Along with this slime-like unlocatability, Darboven’s work is also interesting in its relation to the EVOL project because of how they both deal with time. That theme has recurred regularly for the latter, and was also a central concern of their last long-term translation project, which involved multiple versions of Ligeti’s *Continuum*—a piece which Jiménez de Cisneros described to me via email as dealing with “the perception of time in the illusion of continuum.”

Reviewing Darboven’s mammoth late work, *Kulturgeschichte (Cultural history) 1880–1983*—an unscalable accumulation of quotidian media, ephemera, and collectibles—Lauren Sedofsky praises her art’s ability to “rupture chronology as we know it.” Against the mainstream narrative of predictable linearity and historical progress - which is of course designed to preserve the interests of those in power into the future - she claims that Darboven’s critical edge resides in her “ruination of various historical models, in the nonlocalizability of events within ‘the long accumulation unnoticed.’”

In her introduction to that show, Lynne Cook describes the “libidinal exuberance” of *Kulturgeschichte*, concluding that Darboven seems to acknowledge that excess is in fact constitutive of time as opposed to being something that arises only in abnormal instances of contingency. Elsewhere, Ina Blom considers Darboven’s musical works, arguing that *Opus 17a, 17b, 18a and 18b* are haunted by the “fundamentally political alignment of life-time and musical time.” A similar kind of unscalable complexity courses through those compositions in their endless variations on minimal, mathematical figures, much like *Kulturgeschichte*: she writes that “the range of possible variations is so finely calibrated that any attempt at a structuring overview is impossible.”

During our correspondence, Jiménez de Cisneros observed that Darboven’s work “functions as a sort of door to a weird perception of time,” a statement which resonates interestingly with a description he gave relating to his own work. “We’re really good at digesting 4 minute tracks with a very clear narrative,” he explained, “but 50 minute tracks with almost no changes become a very different experience, and at some point you either lose interest or shift your attention to something else. Hopefully your perception of time bends a little bit and you don’t know how long it’s been since that thing first hit you in the face.”

The opening to altered perception that occurs in Darboven’s work arises in part because of its huge scale, in his opinion. Illustrating this point, Jiménez de Cisneros quoted Achille Varzi’s article for the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy* on mereology, the theory of parthood relations, or the relations of part to whole as well as those of part to part within a whole:

Think of objects such as clouds, forests, heaps of sand. What exactly are their constitutive parts? What are the mereological boundaries of a desert, a river, a mountain? **Some stuff is positively part of Mount Everest and some stuff is positively not part of it, but there is borderline stuff whose mereological relationship to Everest seems indeterminate.** Even living organisms may, on closer look, give rise to indeterminacy issues. Surely Tibble's body comprises his tail and surely it does not comprise Pluto's. But what about the whisker that is coming loose? It used to be a firm part of Tibble and soon it will drop off for good, yet meanwhile its mereological relation to the cat is dubious. And what goes for material bodies goes for everything. What are the mereological boundaries of a neighborhood, a college, a social organization? What about the boundaries of events such as promenades, concerts, wars?

Upon closer inspection, parthood relations thought to be crystal clear lose their persuasiveness when seen through the lens of mereology, just like historical models of quantified, linear time become fragmented within the work of Darboven, and epistemological or ontological certainty about the nature of slime loses traction when faced with its constantly morphing nature. At each of these junctures, the situation becomes geared toward the study of vagueness, which is something Jiménez de Cisneros is “admittedly obsessed with.” Indeed, here we are with *Slime Variation #7*.

Although vagueness is by no means a quality that everyone celebrates—it isn't expedient, its essential point is that it's not easily assimilable to popular existing models, and you can't really fact-check it—along with its analogs of slipperiness and fluidity, it can be wonderful. It is in fact the vague, slimy nature of EVOL's work that produces what is unmistakably its enthralling kind of sublime. Theirs isn't the sort that one feels when they feel they've encountered one of life's transcendent, immutable truths—cue slide of a Hudson River school painting—but rather something much more unhinged and zany. Their sublime is ugly. It represents a gross sublime, or, better, a *wrong* sublime. Perhaps a queer sublime.

In the introduction to his book *Delusive Spaces*, media theorist Eric Kluitenberg summarizes the sublime's figuration in centuries of aesthetic theory as an “ambiguous, almost dialectical mixture of anguish and delight.”ⁱⁱⁱ Maybe a little unexpectedly, this is actually a perfect description for the way EVOL flippantly takes what would usually be a fleeting affective peak in a dance track—the certain way a 303 is twisted, for example, or the lashing pleasure of a particularly robust element—and stretch it into a ten-minute experiment in unmitigated excess. Or in the case of *Opus 17a Slime Variation #7*, how they redeploy Darboven's blunt thud of a composition in the cheesiest of Euro popclub tones.

In Darboven's original, she denies the pleasure of satisfying variation in a musical theme by running it through an OCD-like straightjacket of repetition, forcing it to touch and acknowledge every object in a set before moving to the next. The result is psychologically very uncomfortable: like encountering relentless blockage in a space you had perceived to be smooth, yet being unable to abandon the driving intuition that it

should be smooth. By running the score through sounds some might associate with taking too much meth-cut ecstasy, EVOL creates a kind of cognitive dissonance, dislodging from each ingredient's original context the possibility for a previously unconsidered kind of pleasure. Furthermore, on a level less concerned with cultural signification and more with the visceral effects of sound, the unpleasant-but-rewarding nature of Darboven's composition gets an even more intense delivery than its original designation for double bass with these garish, saccharine, and psychoactive rave arrangements.

If, for Lee Edelman, anxiety signals "our too-near approach to what we're driven to enjoy,"^{iv} and the undoing of the subject that such enjoyment promises: desiring, then, takes on a certain privileged position in relation to actually attaining the object of desire. EVOL presents the direct inverse of this value system for maximum effect: no desiring at all, in favor of immediate delivery of the desired object. EVOL tracks, though they use dance music as the host to their contagion, never have that host's dramatic build-up; their sounds only come in floods. Their work delivers pleasure in a form you simply didn't ask for—too much at once, too much for your own good. Famously, Lyotard argues that for Kant the sublime "presents the unrepresentable"; but where Thomas Cole hints at the light of god, EVOL's is a pleasure so titillating that it ultimately takes on a shade of repulsion or *disgusting-ness*.

A welcome illustration is *Flubber* (1997), where slime takes on a comparable figure of excess, following its desires with total uninhibitedness. It becomes an object of idealization—Robin Williams seems to want to hop out of heteronormative expectation into its endlessly fluid kind of life—adoration, and perhaps on some level, envy, while simultaneously presenting as gross or even repulsive. It tends to perform something of a carnivalesque figure in the Bakhtinian sense, definitively implementing rupture into business as usual, interrupting society's normal functioning with its presence, opening up the possibility for unpredictable weirdness. Bending your perception just a little bit, echoing Jiménez de Cisneros. We can't imagine ordinary life functioning properly with completely unrepressed slime on the loose.

When I asked Jiménez de Cisneros why he was driven to produce so many translations of Darboven's original work, he open-endedly offered, "It's not so much about doing a perfect rendition of something, but rather using the same template, the original piece, as a way of generating new things, different things." Like some of the horror genre's scariest figures of viral contagion, slime is able to auto-reproduce in EVOL's world. Slime then takes on another shade: the *slime machine*, a generative, productive form; a factory for the gross sublime, a form for producing the form of the wrong sublime.

We can perhaps think of EVOL's slimy approach as a sonic analogue to what Keller Easterling conceives of as "active form" in architecture: "Not a new but an extra art and mode of making in which the action is the form."

Action is not necessarily movement but is rather embodied in relationship, relative position and potential in organizations. Action is immanent in the disposition of an organization.... Active forms design a disposition—a set of

capacities for shaping space over time. Active forms are forms for handling forms.

With an approach analogous to this model, EVOL takes an original composition as a form with which to produce more forms, in ecstatic generative production, creating in the resulting array of variations an organization with relative positions and potentials. Jiménez de Cisneros goes on, “By doing it a bunch of times using different sounds and manipulating the score in different ways, you end up with a short catalogue of possible interpretations.” A catalogue that doesn’t sit still, though—one that’s instead living, breathing, and unpredictable, constantly setting up weird and unpredictable relationships within itself.

Mereology again comes into play because of the prominent interplay between the parts and the whole within the constantly evolving network—for EVOL, the glass is neither half-empty nor full but shattered against the wall, where’s the broom? As they’re producing their own archive, they’re also undoing it and rendering it a palimpsest without any unified sense of direction. Each of the seven versions writes and re-writes the project; like slime, you can’t pin down their work onto any single piece or version. Or, it’s like Darboven—here’s Sedofsky again: “Indeed, the distinction between ‘excerpt’ and ‘work’ constitutes one of the most troubling and provocative features of Darboven’s practice. Given its postulates of quantity and continuation, her shows, catalogues, and artist’s books necessarily amount only to samplings. Darboven is an artist who—like history—can be known only in excerpt.”

EVOL’s *Proper Headshrinker* series is another recent scenario where getting lost in the space between excerpt and work has a dizzying, intoxicating effect—of course doubled up by the music’s curdled synaptic undulations. It started with an LP of that name; was followed up by *Harder Posher Pinker*—which included a text by OOO philosopher Timothy Morton; next landed at *Rephrased Hiker Porn*, a poster (and Easter egg album embedded somewhere on the duo’s website) containing their 16 favorite anagrams of the words “proper headshrinker”; and then coursed through the *Purple Melters 12*. Not only is the music interesting in itself, but it also takes on further dynamic articulation in its “relative position and potential in organization.” There’s no official word on whether the series is done, and indeed it’s more exciting to think of it as persisting without closure, liable to rejuvenate unexpectedly.

Considering that music a time-based art form, it’s interesting that the timelines of more musicians’ discographies don’t feel this alive, aren’t as concerned with their disposition for shaping form over time. One of the most popular discography browsing websites is Discogs.com, and they set up what Darboven, Ligeti, and company might think of as an illusory continuum of artistic history. EVOL offers instead an alternative method for purposeful detouring with their ecstatic slime machine.

ⁱ Jiménez De Cisneros, Birkin 2

ⁱⁱ Ibid. 5-6

ⁱⁱⁱ Kluitenberg 32

^{iv} Berlant, Edelman 8

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