

Open and Wide: Figuring Digestion as Research-Creation
Randy Lee Cutler

"Artists often begin something without knowing how it will turn out. In practice, this translates as thinking through doing."¹

This paper reflects upon a literary-artistic work that considers digestion as a figure for experience. It includes a theoretical component on figurations and a description of a fluid creative process weaving together theoretical, technical and creative aspects that are pursued in tandem. As a writer, artist and teacher my work is entangled with research, poetics and experimentation, always making space for discovery. The challenge with this project has been to articulate a broad research method that reflects an experimental process, while gravitating toward speculation and emergent modes of knowing and not knowing. Like many artists, my work seldom begins with an explicitly defined and articulated program of research; the research question isn't always apparent at the start of the art making process. It is only through the process of making and reflection that the research question becomes clear or solidifies.

Often my process begins with a permeable curiosity as an emergent mode of being and knowing. Most recently my art and writing practices have involved discursive and formal explorations into the aesthetic, philosophical and scientific potential of crystals, salt and digestion. While it is not surprising, at least to me, that these themes are interrelated, I focus here on a project that considers digestion as a metaphor: *Open Wide: An Abecedarium for the Great Digestive System*, an inquiry that has evolved into a full colour enhanced e-book². Obsessively following the looping trajectory of metabolism and expanding its potential beyond conventional assumptions and expectations, *Open Wide* assembles a range of elements including research, curating and art making. The e-book proffers an unusual collection of writing, music and images; an ABC primer that is a guide to bodily rhythms, chemical reactions and aesthetic transformations. Each entry presents a portrait of digestion from a different perspective with text, images and audio that enigmatically enhance the subject's unfolding.

¹ Elizabeth Fisher and Rebecca Fortnum, "On Not Knowing," *How Artists Think* (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2013), 7.

² *Open Wide: An Abecedarium for the Great Digestive System* was published on itunes as an ebook in March 2014

For more than 25 years I have been teaching at art schools, colleges, institutes and universities in subject disciplines as diverse as Art History, Humanities, Cultural Studies, Social Science, Film Theory and Visual Culture as well as studio courses in Media Art, Performance and Visual Art. Course titles have ranged from *Representing the Body*, *TechNobodies*, *Metaphorical Bodies*, *The Artist's Body*, *Art as Phenomenology* to *MashUp*, *Audience and Affect*, *Adventures in Sigh Fi*, *Vibrating Matter* and *Supersensible Substrate (The Sublime)*. Operating primarily within the art school context, I bring a cross disciplinary research-oriented approach to investigations of art practice as a means of demonstrating the role of praxis in cultural production. With praxis I am signaling my interest not only in how ideas, research and theory inform practice but also in the ways in which art might make a difference in the world through its potential for speculative visual propositions. As a critical approach to art making, praxis engages with observation, reflection, methods, methodologies, theories, material research, cultural awareness and process. While this range of approaches highlight that there is no singular type of praxis I often find myself exploring the potential role of figurations in the creative process. These are usually understood as framing metaphors that develop new kinds of representations. Importantly, figurations often challenge conventional modes of being and knowing. As a method of research and art making, the mode of thinking has deeply informed how I think, write, make art, teach and interact with the world. I first came across this strategy in Donna Haraway's essay "The Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century" published in *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature (1991)*. I went on to explore other feminist writers who consider the role of figuring, troping and envisioning new forms of embodiment and performative image making from a broad range of disciplines including science and technology studies, science fiction, feminist theory and intersectional studies among others. As a strategy, an approach and a methodology, thinking with figurations has liberated my own training as an art historian into the much more unpredictable realms of artistic practice and hybrid research. What follows is an attempt to theorize and describe the potential workings of figurations and to formalize this for my own practice. Because figurations are by default elusive and slippery, it has been difficult to explain this strategy without fixing meaning or being too prescriptive. What I offer here is a consideration of figurations as they might relate to and inform research-creation.

Figuration as Research-Creation

A framing metaphor that locates a concept in a representation of (or alongside) the body, a figuration envisions how we might represent the world we want to live in. This kind of metaphor shapes new forms of embodiment or what it means to live in a body in a material world. Within the work of Haraway and Rosi Braidotti, among others, a figuration is a proposition, whether a concept or image, that critiques the literal realism and rationalism so often engaged in scientific thinking. In her essay "Ecce Homo, Ain'y (Ar'n't) I a Woman, and Inappropriate/d Others" Haraway applies this concept in her feminist critique of humanity offering us a simultaneously visual and hopeful method of analysis.

Figuration is about resetting the stage for possible pasts and futures. Figuration is the mode of theory when the more "normal" rhetorics of systematic critical analysis seem to repeat and sustain our entrapment in the stories of the established disorders... Feminist humanity must, somehow, both resist representation, resist literal figuration, and still erupt powerful new tropes, new figures of speech, new turns of historical possibility.³

The possibility for different modes of thinking is echoed in Braidotti who also evokes the potential of imagery to emergent models for being in the world. "A figuration is a politically informed image of thought that evokes or expresses an alternative vision of subjectivity. There is a real urgency to learn to think differently about the notion and practice of subjectivity. This entails the creation of new frameworks, images and modes of thought beyond the dualistic conceptual constraints and perversely monological mental habits of phallogocentric thought."⁴ This mode of theory and its emergent frameworks offer a lot of dynamic energy for making and unmaking images, disrupting and resisting, and for proposing imagery that reflects and refracts lived experience.

There are multiple aspects involved in defining the word. Fig·u·ra·tion is simultaneously an action (the process of forming into figure or a certain form) and the resulting form or shape (usually a contour or outline). In *When Species Meet*, Haraway writes, "Figures are not representations or didactic illustrations,

³ Donna Haraway, "Ecce Homo, Ain'y (Ar'n't) I a Woman, and Inappropriate/d Others," *The Haraway Reader* (London: Routledge, 2003), 47.

⁴ Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects: Emodiments and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 22.

but rather material-semiotic nodes or knots in which diverse bodies and meanings co-shape one another.”⁵ The action of representing figuratively entails an appreciation for allegory and visual play. As symbolic representation, figurations point away from normative values and categories. Indeed, I would assert that many modern and contemporary artworks can be understood as figurations: by this I mean they are propositions, experimental forms that in the first instance challenge our acquaintance with both representation and looking. In this way, art helps us to think differently by troubling image making through the knotting of imagined and everyday reality.

A key aspect of these formations is that they are processual, that is always in process. Because they do not adhere to fixed representations, they can be savored for their protean potential, readily assuming different forms or characters. Figurations are versatile, fluid and responsive, composing and recomposing in response to a given need or application. In this way they actively critique literal realism making way for expanded concepts and metaphors challenging distinctions and ways of knowing. Indeed, figurations are often about becoming, emergence and not knowing.

Figurations are visualizations that refer to representations of the world and how they often limit but also potentially liberate the imagination. They are effective because they can simultaneously create new formations even as they move toward deconstructing outmoded ways of thinking and being. Offering an alternative consciousness that accepts a fluid corporeality, figurations are something like conceptions or schemas – mental images that embody potential for new understanding. I particularly appreciate how figurations may “...somehow collect up and give back the sense of the possibility of fulfillment, the possibility of damnation, or the possibility of a collective inclusion in figures larger than that to which they explicitly refer.”⁶ It is at this point that I introduce the project and demonstrate an expanded potential of figurations for a research-creation practice that is motivated by an active desire to blur boundaries and challenge conventional thinking.

In 2008 I began a sabbatical year with a project that proposed to engage in research, writing and art practice that would explore the relationship between ecological and social sustainability and contemporary art. My

⁵ Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet* (Univ Of Minnesota Press, 2007), 4.

⁶ Donna Haraway, *Birth of the Kennel*, accessed February 10, 2014, <<http://www.egs.edu/faculty/donna-haraway/articles/birth-of-the-kennel/>>

plan was to examine the socio-cultural aspects of food in contemporary art alongside my own creative practice by illuminating the ways in which embodied knowledge and visual art deepen the connection between the individual, sustenance and the social sphere. I soon realized that conventional scholarly research could not provide the right framework for my interests. Frustrated by the process, I put aside an art historical paper I was working on and began to write short, playful essays on topics that were of immediate interest to me. Initially this involved writing on artworks that I found inspiring for their explorations of food, cyclical processes and the rhythms of the natural world. This included Marina Roy's *Apartment*, a surrealist animated video that constructs an allegorical conception of reality populated by all manner of flora and fauna, and Germaine Koh's *Fallow*, a site-responsive installation composed of 2000 square feet of soil and plants transplanted from local vacant land in Vancouver,

IMAGE Marina Roy *Apartment* 2009 (digital video still)

IMAGE Germaine Koh *Fallow* 2005 (site-responsive installation of soil and plants)

as well as Geoffrey Farmer's *Every surface in some way decorated, altered, or changed forever (except the float)*, a durational installation that, over the course of its exhibition, seems to consume itself from within.

IMAGE Geoffrey Farmer, *Every surface in some way decorated, altered, or changed forever (except the float)*, 2004 (variable dimensions and components)

I also found myself writing on an encounter that I had with chiggers. In case you are unaware, these are incredibly small insects, usually called mites that temporarily become chiggers while in their larval stage. Though this phase is brief, I can attest that chiggers cause torment when they attach a specialized mouth part to a pore or hair follicle, emit an enzyme which renders cells digestible and then feast on the cell soup produced in the process. The infestation comprising more than two hundred bites all over my body informed and made manifest my ongoing cogitations. In this instance I was the thing being digested. Not long after having written about this unpleasant encounter, I saw an exhibition of work by Ryan Peter and was struck by how his images captured my rudimentary, and perhaps felt, sense of these microscopic entities.

IMAGE Ryan Peter. *Untitled (Landscape Portrait)*, 2012 (Pen, Acrylic, spray paint, and Epson pigment-based inks on Plexiglas and plywood panel, 48 x 70 inches)

As a method of inquiry, the writing was predicated on the role of creativity, imagination, and an attention to both form and structure in my creative process. More than gathering data, the research involved trying out new ideas, new modes of discovery and engaging an ever-expanding interdisciplinary approach. Released from the constraints of an academic paper, I made the most of speculative thinking and embraced the partial perspective of my own embodied experience. This translated as thinking through doing.

The works of art I was writing about or responding to seemed to capture something amorphous yet compelling in my own aesthetic sensibility. I was engaged with a constellation of images that provoked new ways of thinking through the expansive concept of digestion as a metaphor for experience. In her description of friendship, Anais Nin draws out what I perceive as the attraction to figurations and new ways of figuring when she writes, "Each friend represents a world in us, a world possibly not born until they arrive, and it is only by this meeting that a new world is born."⁷ Here representations (and the friendships that accompanied them) engender possible worlds that I could not have envisioned on my own. As the venture progressed, my engagement with images and the artists that made them, evolved into one of affection for new worlds of possibility.

Generating situated forms of knowledge – embodied, local and personal - I slowly constructed an archive of experiences, encounters and research that explored a relationship and articulated a dialogue between ecology and contemporary art. As I surrendered to this process, I made two important discoveries. The first was that the writing and research was developing into a work of creative non-fiction within a framing metaphor of digestion. The second was the structure of an abecedarium which gave the project a shape and generated a nonlinear engagement, something akin to the experience of viewing an exhibition. The ABC primer also engendered a playful pedagogical approach that embraced a range of genres and disciplinary subjects within an accessible framework. *Open Wide: An Abecedarium on the Great Digestive System* was born.⁸ Twenty-six letters permitted both scope and limit. In this way, each entry became a portrait of digestion from a different perspective whether through art writing, biological research, nutritional information, food studies, philosophical reflection or personal anecdote. The project folded in on itself like

⁷ Anais Nin, *The Diary of Anais Nin, Volume 2: 1934-1939*, editor Gunther Stuhlmann (NY: Swallow Press, 1967), 193.

⁸ Abecedarium is Latin for a book used to teach the alphabet.

an extended digestive tract with protean endogenous folds determined from within the organism.⁹ Here I began to appreciate how, conceptually, folds can be understood beyond the bodily map. Plugged into a different context they manifest alternate synergies and interactions bringing to mind labyrinths and winding passages, planar surfaces turning into virtual spaces.

Even as I settled on a word for each letter, conducted research and wrote the entry, I was also curating the project. I would either ask permission from artists or galleries to include the images in a yet to be realized book or invite artists to produce an image in response to a piece of writing. The result is a document with 26 chapters, each representing a metaphorical aspect of digestion that became an entangled knot of biological, literary and artistic composition. Digestion is a metabolic process which by extension tells us something about the movement of energies and forces both inside and outside the body; it concerns transformations that operate at multiple scales and durations while pointing to the absorption of nutrients and experiences. Like the biological process, it takes time and space for an encounter to be assimilated into and through a system. And this absorption itself was challenged by the often contradictory trajectories of metaphoric potential. For example, the rich intricacy of the digestive metaphor is also evident in the processes of accumulation, hoarding and indigestion where flows are neither smooth nor productive. I became fascinated by the multiple meanings of this figure, how it points to fundamental natural processes as well as our current system of overproduction, endless waste and unsustainable practices. Further, the durational experience of conceiving, researching, writing and making over a period of years manifested yet another encounter with the operations of digestion. It takes time to digest the ideas and experiences of working with an expanded figuration.

In *When Species Meet*, Haraway considers interspecies or animal-human encounters and alternative practices of world building. Her contemplation of companion species, beings-in-encounter, has stimulated my own ruminations on digestion, intestinal flora and the human-micro-organism matrix in which plants and animals have co-evolved. In her final chapter, Haraway writes that companion species are “nourished in

⁹ Folds became an important spatial metaphor in the project. The infinite amplitude within folds and their surfaces allow for new ways of thinking not only about space but also events and experiences. According to Gilles Deleuze in *The Fold: Leibniz and the Baroque* (Univ Of Minnesota Press, 1992) “The multiple is not only what has many parts but also folds in many ways.”(3) The movement within the fold reflects an important aspect of digestion where concavities not only capture matter but also help things pullulate and move forward.

the cavities, crevices, and interdigitations of gestation, ingestion, and digestion”.¹⁰ Indeed, “living organisms owe their evolved diversity and complexity to acts of symbiogenesis, through which promiscuous genomes and living consortia are the potent progeny of ingestion and subsequent indigestion among messmates at the table, when everyone is on the menu.”¹¹ The role of bacteria and other organisms in *Open Wide* allowed for their digestive potential to be considered both within a given narrative or essay as well as between each entry. As a result, the proliferating figuration of digestion in the form of microorganisms, fungi, enzymes, etc. is explored throughout the project.

I envision the abecedarium, a living organism with multiple entry and exit points, as an infinite machine that gathers in on itself as it charts various trajectories. Each alphabetical entry unfurls idiosyncratically, possessing its own method and etching its own passage. The open format generates categories that range from the personal to the political. More or less developed and appealing to a variety of sensibilities, the figure of digestion changes as the position and orientation of the viewing perspective shifts. Motifs and images come in and out of view, they appear, disappear and connect to each other in often surprising ways. In one sense each condensed item operates as a sample or fragment of a larger repast.

Reconfiguring microscopic properties like flora and microorganisms which are conventionally fixed to biological and anatomical systems of representation requires the imagination to unfold supposedly functionalist paradigms of the body’s structures and processes in order to move into realms of the recondite and yet all too real. With these examples, I outline some of the varied references to bacteria as they relate to digestion. These entries are designed to illustrate how an expanded appreciation for digestion might undo conventional structures of knowing and unknowing by highlighting the larger ecosystems in which they inhabit, intersect and interact. What follows then are excerpts from a selection of entries in the abecedarium. Each visual and conceptual figure of digestion seeks to explore metaphoric potential, challenge assumptions and connect possible worlds that operate at different scales and registers.

Aa As Above, So Below considers the relationship of enzymes to good metabolism. Momentum is simultaneously corporeal and incorporeal in nature: metabolism is a metaphor for the multiple flows of energy and forces in a world in which everything moves. And spatial passages with their continual

¹⁰ Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet*, 286.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 287.

circulation of nutrients highlight the ways in which the metaphoric and the metabolic are not so easy to disentangle.

IMAGE Ranu Mukherjee *Animist Vabana #4 (ecstatic)* 2013 (Ink on silk, 45 x 96 inches)

Bb Bacteria is a short dialogue between millions of bacteria on a piece of decomposing wood where they discuss the synthesis of enzymes and the digestion of decaying matter.

IMAGE Margit Schmidt *Untitled* 2006 (Pen on paper)

Ff Flora looks at the newly discovered role of the appendix in the storage of healthy gut flora when the GI tract is under threat from dangerous pathogenic bacteria. The appendix, usually assigned the role of vestigial structure or a hangover from an earlier stage of evolution, has recently been proposed as a 'safe house' for beneficial bacteria.¹²

IMAGE John Cussans *Schematic Diagram of Host-Mediated Biofilm (with Blue- Green Algae Blossom)* 2013

Gg GI tract maps out the complex ecological balance of more than five hundred different species of friendly microflora throughout the gastro-intestinal tract. Though distributed, digestive flora is like a system in itself.

IMAGE Holly Schmidt *Moveable Feast (May – October)* 2012

Oo Oligochaetology describes the earthworm as predominantly an intestine inhabited by more than fifty different types of bacteria, which can thrive and reproduce inside the body of a worm until far more bacteria emerge from the end of the worm than entered it in the first place. The basic body arrangement of an earthworm is twofold; an inner digestive system, within a muscular outer body perforated at either end by orifices.

IMAGE Gaye Chan *Frass* 2011 (54 Inkjet Digital Prints with dowels, rotating laser level, Installation Size: Variable, 40" x 60")

¹² R. Randal Bollinger et al, "Biofilms in the large bowel suggest an apparent function of the human vermiform appendix," *Journal of Theoretical Biology*, Volume 249, Issue 4, (2007): 826-831.

Ss Stomach recounts a three week relationship with an intestinal bug and speculation as to its origins whether from garden produce, *toxoplasma gondii* the protozoan parasite in cat feces, or the immunological effects of perimenopause. Finally a trip to the naturopath provided the diagnosis of a fungal infection.

IMAGE Randy Lee Cutler Untitled 2012 (Digital Photograph)

And Tt Tract expands on Germaine Koh's aforementioned installation *Fallow* comprised of soil and plants transplanted from local vacant land. That sweet smell that we often notice in the woods was incongruously present in the gallery when I first encountered the artwork. Caused by the bacteria

actinomycetes, it grows in soil when conditions are damp and warm. Koh's piece highlights the importance of both the unfolding and becoming of time and process.

Other entries in the abecedarium move beyond the microscopic into more philosophic potential. Ii Ingesting asks what the ties are between reading and eating, between digesting and understanding. As Daniel Birnbaum and Anders Olsson note, "Reading is eating, an assimilation and incorporation of the external in one's own subjectivity, whose ability to break down the foreign substance makes it look like a genuine digestive apparatus..."¹³ The correspondences between food and text highlight a more abstract appetite or the desire for a different kind of sustenance.

IMAGE Myron Campbell Untitled 2013 (Ink on paper)

Pp Peripatetic looks at how walking stimulates and enlivens thought. It considers how motion influences consciousness by asking: What are the ways in which motility ---slowness or speed--- alter one's experience of space and time? Fundamental here is the embodied affect of movement on the imagination, the peristaltic waves of the mind.

IMAGE Monique Fouquet *Crowd #1* 2013 (Graphite on paper 22 x 30 inches)

As it evolved, the writing took on many surprising and unexpected forms. After watching Sophia Coppola's 2006 film *Marie-Antoinette*, I was intrigued with the scene representing the transformation of the naïve

¹³ Daniel Birnbaum and Anders Olsson, *As a Weasel Sucks Eggs, An Essay on Melancholy and Cannibalism* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2009), 135.

Maria Antonia Josepha Johanna von Habsburg-Lothringen into the dauphine Marie-Antoinette. Through dazzling cinematography, the heir to the French royal throne emerges from an intricate series of tents in the middle of a forest stripped of her nationality and absorbed into the French court of Louis XV. As the project evolved, this film review became the entry for Xx (French Court of Louis) XV. Finding a visual example for Xx and its themes of stylized historical excess proved to be challenging. This missing image shifted from finding or commissioning an existing work to the production of my own collage generated from fashion and food magazines as well as a sample of French wallpaper found at a boutique décor store.

I had in mind an image that would reflect the frothy aesthetic of Coppola's cinematic sensibility while showcasing the operations of incorporation and transformation. As I had already included some of my own photographs in the abecedarium, I decided to make a collage for this letter. Spending time cutting up fashion magazine editorials and advertisements, I enjoyed the process of producing a visual equivalent for both my own writing and the film's cinematography. In this way the activities around the project continued to oscillate between researching, conceptualizing, configuring and figuring, writing, curating and making. This methodology of thinking through doing coupled with making space for not knowing has become an important part of my research creation practice. It is significant that I have learned to inhabit the space and time of artistic production and not just its critical reflection: its explorations and bewilderments fold back into the teaching of critical studies in the art school context. In addition to the immense satisfaction of these aesthetic investigations, making images also acts as a form of research that inspires a deeper appreciation for material practice.

IMAGE Randy Lee Cutler *Marie Antoinette* 2012 (Handcut collage, 16 x 12 inches)

I was fully aware that this had become an unusual project. When I sent the manuscript to a Vancouver publisher, a respected purveyor of alternative and arts related publications, I received back a humorous rejection email stating that "digestion was the least appealing subject in the Food Studies genre". The message also explained that books with work by local artists would not sell internationally. Meanwhile I had been chatting with a colleague who, in addition to being a fine typographer, was developing a research area in e-book production at Emily Carr University of Art and Design. Taken with the enterprise, Celeste Martin suggested that we work together on an enhanced e-book version. I was smitten with the potential of an

innovative interactive design platform coupled with the possibility of exploring digital publishing and alternative forms of dissemination. The opportunity to expand *Open Wide* as an e-book encouraged unanticipated forms of artistic expression to further communicate the larger premise including video excerpts of artwork and a commissioned sound composition. These additions augmented the unfolding process and deepened my understanding of the project.

As an ever-evolving process of development, my method has been to draw on existing expertise (writing, curating, image making and collaboration) to challenge my skills as a writer, visual thinker and even project manager. The methodology draws from my training as an art historian, experience teaching art history, cultural studies, film theory, social science along with my general fascination for science, science fiction and food studies. While I did not begin with a formalized research question or a clearly established problem, *Open Wide* can be configured around a series of questions including:

- How does digestion as a figure for experience inform a wider understanding of absorption and assimilation?
- What does the figure of digestion look like when woven through research, visual art and creative writing?
- How might an expanded exploration of digestion unsettle existing human-animal relations engaging the power of metaphor to transform our relation to the world that we inhabit?

Flagrant in its ambitions, the theoretical contextualization for this project remains open *and* wide traversing a broad field of literary-artistic inquiry. The inspiration of artists who themselves cross disciplinary boundaries is important to this way of working, coupled with an attraction to scientific, theoretical and aesthetic convergence. With their multiple potentialities, digestion and figuration are flashpoints for affective and metaphoric intensities. In this way, my method takes up some of the implications of digestion with its relation to the time and space necessary for the process to unfold. *Open Wide*, an infinitely accommodating concept, reveals how digestion is a figuration for experience where encounters, images and ideas can provide nourishment as well as disrupting their smooth and easy absorption. I envisioned *Open Wide* as having a voracious appetite that could potentially contain and accommodate any number of

events, practices and influences. Over the five years that I worked on the project I took inspiration from the nineteenth century caricaturist J.J. Grandville especially the image of a strange creature whose mouth is a gaping maw. Grandville's images display a keen analysis of character, human foibles and importantly an appreciation for serious play. His works are themselves figurations of human-animal hybrids that critique the growing French bourgeois society in which he lived.

IMAGE J. J. Grandville (1803 – 1847) from *Les Métamorphoses du jour*

As Birnbaum and Olsson articulate in their book *As a Weasel Sucks Eggs, An Essay on Melancholy and Cannibalism*, "To write is not to satisfy basic needs, but to want something more, to move from need to desire, from a kind of automation in response, to obsession."¹⁴ In a sense this project stems from my own desire to read something that would acknowledge and engage an interdisciplinary mix of concepts, references and storytelling. As I worked on *Open Wide*, digesting, weaving and knotting ideas across a range of disciplines, I folded themes into each other as a way of reflecting upon my own emergent interests. I have come to recognize that a text while similar, is never fully comparable to physical nourishment and I am compelled to write in my own effort, "to move from need to desire."

IMAGE Celeste Martin, *Open Wide* ebook cover design, 2014

IMAGE Celeste Martin, *Open Wide* ebook page design for LI Lower Stratum, 2014

In this project, figurations concern the composition and transformation of elements. It is about process, not state or stasis. Here the figure of digestion critiques the literal realism of biology and our relation to other entities, even as it draws on the facts and realities of the metabolic process. It offers an alternative that is protean and performative, where living creatures, things and experiences might be perceived as otherwise. During the process I have felt aligned with microorganisms from chiggers and flora to other entities including fungi, ruminants and worms. These companion species, simultaneously real and metaphoric have been entangled with my own sense of embodiment where questions around host and parasite are perpetually posed. By working through the visual aspect of figurations I hope to have made these propositions both accessible and visceral even as they challenge the distinctions between self and other, identity and alterity. Perhaps in this way, digestion as figuration points to thinking about new kinds

¹⁴ Ibid.

of subjectivities, liberating the imagination and perhaps lived experience.

As stated in the introduction, the challenge for this paper has been to articulate a broad research method that reflects an experimental process, which gravitates toward speculation and emergent modes of knowing, and not knowing. The project reflects an artistic practice of “thinking through doing.” In the process, *Open Wide* investigates and troubles the conventional book form by taking up the innovative potential of digital publishing; it meddles with curating by installing an exhibition with a thematically open and flexible premise in the unconventional and abstract space of the e-book. Ultimately, it renegotiates practice by blurring and converging modalities for an innovative presentation of research that resides both through and between writing, curating, image making, and collaboration, knowing and not knowing.