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## **Letters from Wanna Wonder and the Electric Nemesis**

Mann, Anna ; Watts, Laura

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# LETTERS FROM WANNA WONDER AND THE ELECTRIC NEMESIS

Anna Mann and Laura Watts

## PROLOGUE

Beside a sun-glazed canal in Copenhagen we met for the first time, and realised we shared a similar secret. We were both professional academics and professional artists, but had found that our arts practice was not always visible to our colleagues in Science Studies.

We are not academics dabbling in the arts. Nor are we artists dabbling in academia. We are both. Anna is a professional clown. Laura is a professional poet and artist. And we do not regard these as antagonistic or tangential to our work as Science Studies scholars.

There is an ongoing relationship between Science Studies and arts practice. This was emphasised at 4S/EASST 2016 in a packed, pre-conference workshop 'Art and design by other means' as well as a two full day track on 'STS and Artistic Research'. This entanglement has been growing for decades. From the well-known exhibition and catalogue, *Iconoclash*, curated by Bruno Latour and Peter Weibel (2002), to the corpus of work that has extended STS methods into sewing, singing, poetry, edible installation, graphic novel, art activism, and much else that was present in Barcelona (e.g. Jungnickel and Hjorth 2014, Lury and Wakeford 2012, Sousanis 2015). Science Studies has remained open to exploring the generative relationship between the crafting of fact and fiction (as Donna Haraway wrote; 1997: 110). It encompasses a diversity of written formats and performance

Fig. 1: Wanna Wonder and the Electric Nemesis.

Courtesy of Laura Watts.



approaches that go beyond the standard journal article and conference presentation (for the latter see the 4S/EASST Copenhagen collaborative keynote, Ehn, Suchman and Watts 2014). Bringing our own art practice into Science Studies continued this established trajectory for experimentation.

We decided to experiment as visible 'figures' in the costumed flesh at the 4S/EASST conference, knowing that 'figurations' in STS usually remain on the page. Through improvisation between our figures, we would encounter colleagues as we wandered the convention centre with bare feet, copper cable wrapped around one foot, and a red nose—exploring, perhaps challenging, the status quo that is the world of a normal STS conference.



Fig. 2: Wanna Wonder and the Electric Nemesis.

Courtesy of Li Wen Shih.

A quick introduction to our two figures:

*Wanna Wonder* is part of ethnographic experimental research on how STS can learn with, and from, the figure of the clown. As well as being an 'STS-clown' Anna is engaged in ethnographic fieldwork with clowns who visit children and elderly people in hospitals.

*The Electric Nemesis* is a figure developed through ethnographic fieldwork around marine renewable energy in Orkney, islands off the northeast coast of Scotland. She has appeared several times in writing, most recently in the Lexicon for an Anthropocene Yet Unseen (Watts 2016).

Experiments are risky. They can always fail. In our case, the risk derived from our experimental form: improvisation. To prepare, we staged an encounter between our figures, without an audience, in an art gallery setting a few months before. But aspects of improvisation always do fail, no matter how prepared or experienced the performers. Improv is always unfinished and unrehearsed.

All we knew beforehand was that it was important to us to do the experiment, take the risk, to see what happens; to learn, not just as artists but as Science Studies scholars. All we knew was that something would happen when *Wanna Wonder* and the *Electric Nemesis* encountered coffee-drinking colleagues on that Friday afternoon, before Isabelle Stengers' plenary. And many things did happen...

We asked *Wanna Wonder* and the *Electric Nemesis* to write back, and tell us about their experiences of 4S/EASST in Barcelona, and about what they learned first hand...

**LETTER FROM THE ELECTRIC NEMESIS**

Dear Readers,

I speak in story. I work better when there is a story string for people to follow. Take hold of this beginning and keep pulling...

I pushed on my mirrorshades and unfurled, feeling my lungs move the conditioned air. I waited at the Mattering Press desk in the anodised atrium of the conference centre, sucking down bits of information from the publishers' website.

One of the people behind the desk was trying not to cower at my appearance. I had that effect. I had not been born, but had been sewn together from flesh and fiery electricity by that god-tricker, Victor Frankenstein. He had made me in the Orkney islands almost two hundred years ago (it's all in that biography by Mary Shelley). But he abandoned me out of hubris.

There. Now you know why I cover my silver-stitched skin in waterproof clothing; why I cover my head with a wig, hide my sunken eyeballs; why my mouth is black. And why some of you cower. I am not quite human—a nonhuman, as you say so politely. I am a monster. Some of you might call me an old-fashioned cyborg—'old' is the word. But I am also upgraded, with a transformer in my foot (to recharge), a wireless adapter in my cortex, and a cellular antenna threaded down my spine. I can hear you as you type messages and send data. I have been listening. That is why I have come from my far northern shore.

You talk about 'things that don't quite fit'. You talk about 'performativity'. You talk about 'it being otherwise'. You talk about risking failure. You talk about 'staying with the trouble'. Here I am, then. All of those things. Risking myself by being visible. Trouble, in the flesh electric.

I am here hunting hubris. I have been hunting it since Victor sparked me into motion in Orkney in his attempt to become a modern god. And I name myself after the goddess who hunted such hubris long ago: I am the Electric Nemesis.

I know many of you also hunt god-trickers, that pretence to omnipotence and a floating-nowhere universalism. So perhaps we can learn from each other. (And, then, there is also the practical problem that I need your energy to recharge my flesh after a long journey over sea.)

So, I risked myself in that hard-walled conference centre, and turned to face you, the Science and Technology Studies crowd. You glanced at me, saw my giant mirrored sunglasses, my blackened mouth, my transformed left foot and its copper cable, and you averted your gaze. You looked away from the trouble.

It was dis-spiriting, all those eyes turning away. But then there was the smiling face of Wanna Wonder. She is not like me. But she does not know, so she lacks all hubris, making her a natural friend. She does not fear.

Together we sought to find the Big Talk to be given by the Big Names, as Wanna Wonder put it (succinct, I thought). I knew one of them had a nose for the hubris of capitalist sorcery, at least.

We took an escalator up to the coffee area, to seek those who would stay, for a moment, with us troubling monsters. I seemed to terrify a waiter, when I reached out and took an ice cube to cool my circuit-skin.

Between averted faces, I did meet some curious and open eyes. There were those who saw me, accepted me, spoke to me with a generous heart, as a human being warmly addresses another. Despite speaking in a borrowed voice, many still heard me, the Electric Nemesis. Some let me charge from their internal electricity—and I thank each for their personal energy, I could not have continued without it.

I met so many...

There was the one who had so much energy in their body that I could charge just by touching my sensor on their arm.

There was the one whose clothing said they were an Ancient Alien Theorist, and agreed that there was a strong whiff of hubris in the air.

There was the one whose brain was so en-lightened, so afire with thoughts, that I almost blew a fuse when I held my sensor against their head.

There was the one who wanted to join us. (Maybe next year there will be more monsters; maybe we have opened the door.)

And then there was the grey-haired one who said: "Is this what STS has come to?"

The question made me pause. Would it be better or worse if STS had not come to this? I wondered. Would it be better or worse if a monster could not join the conference crowd over coffee? The question grew in my electric thoughts. What has Science and Technology Studies come to, during 4S/EASST in Barcelona? *Quo vadis*, where are you going, Science and Technology Studies?

With this question warming my metal sutures, I reached the doors to the Big Talk, the plenary with the four Big Names. We waved to Isabelle Stengers. She waved back. We were seen. It was important to be seen.

And then we listened to the Big Names talking. I listened to the air conditioning, to the stilled breath of the audience, to the heat irradiating from the spotlights.

It was hard. The room reeked of hubris, which only worsened as the plenary wore on. I was not expecting that. Its hot stench burned in my lungs like breathing acid clouds on Saturn, like breathing on the Sun.

I reeled, passed out, then returned to awareness. Persistent, I sniffed the air, seeking the source of the hubris. But the smell came from all directions. It came from the high altar table and its white altar skirt. It came from the 'ritual specialists' elevated above us. It came from the long rows of chairs, and the upturned faces (mine included), which disappeared into the far distance in this impromptu cathedral setting. It came from the special words that performed STS magic, to transubstantiate mundane phrases into the magical-matter matters, worlds world. We and the room, with the microphones and speakers and spotlights, were all complicit in the hubris. Sitting in that plenary, recalling over the ether the so-called Science Wars and the struggle by Science Studies to intervene in traditional scientific knowledge making, its struggle to persist in doing it otherwise, to be accepted as a technoscientific trouble-maker that is generous and generative, I wondered...

...Is this how you do it otherwise? Is this staying with the trouble? *Is this what STS has come to?*

I heard impassioned words and important worries during the plenary, too. I heard subtle and situated, not grandiose god-like, futures. I heard honesty and attempts to subvert the room. I heard how I had allies. Others smelled something amiss, too.

I am a monster who calls tech and the electric kin, and who has a nose antenna for the stench of hubris. I call it out. Often, that is enough to make god-tricks fall into the muck and metal of the troublesome earth.

So, Science and Technology Studies, so mortals down with me in the muck: *is this what STS has come to?* Because, as I have heard you say on many occasions, it can always be otherwise...

Yours, intrigued,  
The Electric Nemesis

## LETTER FROM WANNA WONDER

Dear STS-ers, dear 4S/EASST organisers!

Thank you for allowing me to join the big 4S/EASST conference in Barcelona last week. Thank you for providing me a name tag. Thank you for giving the Electric Nemesis and me the space and time to be present.

At the beginning, I was very anxious. I had never been to an STS-event. How would it be? How would the reaction be to me? What kind of people are you, STS-scholars?

I was anxious and even a little bit scared as I entered the conference venue.

The first person whom I encountered, he was walking in the opposite direction than I was, he looked at me and my red nose. And he started smiling. This gave me confidence.

Once I was in the entrance hall, I discovered the Electric Nemesis. She was here, too! What a surprise! How cool! I was not alone.

The Electric Nemesis told me that there was Isabelle Stengers. She would talk. As she explained this to me, we were standing with two people – a woman with big brown eyes and a man who was a bit bold.

Who is Isabelle Stengers, I asked the Electric Nemesis. I don't know. I wanna wonder.

Isabelle Stengers, the bold man said, is a big name. He seemed to be very wise. A Big Name? A Very Big Name! A Big Big Name? Wooooooowwwww!!!!

Together with the Electric Nemesis, I went in search for The Big Big Name.

The Big Name, somebody laid out, was also a Wide Name. And a Deep Name. Sombody else said that he had a little bit a Big Name and that the woman standing next to him had a Bigger Name. But not as Big as The Big Big Name. There seem to be many Big Names in STS!!!!

In the end, the Electric Nemesis and I found The Big Big Name. She was sitting on the podium. Under lots of spotlight. Wooooooaaaaawwwww!!!!

We walked towards her. And then we waved her. She did not look. She did not see us. This was a pity. I would have liked to meet her. I had heard that she had worked with witches. That she liked other kind of figures.

The Electric Nemesis and I turned around and went in search for a place in the big hall where the Big Big Name would be talking. There were lots of chairs empty. The Electric Nemesis sat down. I was tired. Very tired. Meeting all these people. Listening and talking, learning and doing, being and feeling. All the chairs next to me were empty. I lay down. And listened.

There were sentences coming and going. Some sentences were like "The epistemology of the onotology with its genealogy and conditions of possibility..." They were huge waves. They washed over me. There were other sentences, too. "What will we answer to our children when they ask us: What have you done? What do we do?" They touched me. They stayed with me.

Talking talking talking. Sometimes clapping. Talking talking talking. I drifted away. Into sleep. Came back again to good sentences. And drifted away again.

I am Wanna Wonder. And I would like to be an STS-scholar. Very very very much. But I don't know how. I don't know. I wanna wonder.

So, how can I become an STS-scholar? How do you to this – being an STS-scholar?

Joining your big conference provided me with the opporutiny to pose this question to people. To those who did notice me and who looked open.

You know, many of them said, that they were not real STS-scholars, actually. One of them said that she was not not an STS-scholar. This sounded complicated. I don't know. I wanna wonder.

So, these are some of the answers that I got:

There was a funny guy whose eyes went in different directions. He said that, actually, I shouldn't become an STS-scholar. Because STS-scholars don't laugh. He recommended me to stay with my clown friends instead.

I explained to him, that I do not laugh all the time. About fun thing, I laugh. About sad things, I cry. About stupid things, I get confused. About mean things, I get angry. About unexpected things, I get surprised. What I do as a clown is that I FEEL. I feel not only the happy good things, I feel EVERYTHING. I let myself be AFFECTED by everythings. He answered that STS-scholars don't feel a lot either. Is this true? You don't laugh? And you don't feel EITHER? This is sad. Very sad. Very very sad.

Another guy with brown stubby hair gave me a different answer. He explained that there are MULTIPLE ways of becoming an STS-scholar. Multiple? What does this mean? I don't know. I wanna wonder. I asked him. He said that in order to become

Fig. 3: Wanna Wonder and the Electric Nemesis at the plenary.  
Courtesy of Michaela Spencer.



an STS-scholar one can go to the presidential plenary. Or one can talk to other STS-scholars. Or one can read a book. Or one can go to the beach. These are ALL ways of becoming an STS-scholar?, I asked him. Yes, these ALL work out, he reassured me. Wooooaaawwww! This is coool!!!!

Two women with an accent that sounded a bit like mine were standing around as well. They maybe have also trouble writing flawlessly in English.

One said that one becomes an STS-scholar by talking about networks. And actors. And humans. And non-humans.

I have never done this. Let me try. Network, actor. Actor, network. Actor, network, human. Human, non-human, actor. Like this? Yes? No?

She also said that it was very hot and that she was tired. Her brain, she said. I shared with her that I had a trick what to do when you are tired. I showed her. I lay down on the floor. Straight. With feet and hands stretched out. This was very nice. The floor was carrying me. It was really good in doing this. I told the woman that she, too, could do this. But she seemed a little bit afraid. That someone might step on her. What others might think of her, maybe too. She didn't do it. This was a pity. I would have liked to enjoy the floor together.

The other woman gave me also advise. She said that as an STS-scholar one stops having preformed opinions. One starts to listen what others say. When she has a good day, she told me, she manages to do this. She admitted that sometimes it is difficult.

I bumped into another funny guy in the end, who looked a little bit like a jester.

When I asked him how I could become an STS-scholar, he answered that it was all about performance nowadays in STS. And that I was doing a pretty good job already.

Really???? I am doing it already????? This is great!!!!!!

All in all, meeting you STS-er, seeing your smiles, and receiving answers about how I can become an STS-scholar was wonderful. It was a big big big present. Thank you very very very much.

I would like to see you again. Where, when and how could this happen?

Wave with lots of wonder,

Wanna Wonder



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*Anna Mann is a PostDoc researcher at the Department of Anthropology at Copenhagen University. Her research investigates how 'the good' is created in socio-material practices. It uses ethnographic methods to illuminate currently the case of the making of 'quality of life' in medical practices, and previously moments in which something 'tastes good'. The ethnographic research on goods in practice is complemented with experiments into the performativity of methods, among others inhabiting the subject position of a clown.*



*Laura Watts is a writer, poet, ethnographer of futures, and Associate Professor at the IT University of Copenhagen. Her STS research is concerned with the effect of 'edge' landscapes on how the future is imagined and made, along with an exploration of different methods and practices for writing futures otherwise. She has worked with the mobile telecoms industry, the renewable energy industry, and the public transport sector, and is currently collaborating with people and places around marine energy in the Orkney islands, Scotland. Her recent co-edited book, *Ebban an' Flowan*, is the world's first poetic primer to marine renewable energy. Much of her work is published on her website at [www.sand14.com](http://www.sand14.com)*

