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Between Distance and Proximity

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by

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Report

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Dedication

This report is dedicated to my unconditionally loving and powerfully inspiring parents Fleetwood and Deborah Starbuck who have given me absolutely everything.

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Abstract

Between Distance and Proximity

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2017

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My practice is a means of dealing with distance and desire— desire for intimacy and understanding, for clarity in communication, longing to get closer, to see further, to be near the ocean, to touch the horizon, desire for something certain, longing to let it go. The objects and videos I make are metaphors for a relationship between landscape and longing— gestures of reaching, stretching and trying to span a distance, trying to embody the intangible. Longing is often still present even at close proximity. I want the objects and videos I make to instill an urge to touch, to transgress or press against the boundary between beings. Through these gestures I'm thinking of ways to communicate touch across distance— how to feel presence through absence.

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All of these things are about the space between us.

THE HORIZON LINE

Landscape defines the boundaries of your furthest vision and the word *landscape* itself is defined by what is visible,¹ a reciprocal relation across distance. Our view of the landscape is defined by the horizon. A theoretically stable line establishing our sense of orientation and helping us situate ourselves between the parallel enormity of the sea and sky, the horizon is “an infinite dividing line between infinite entities, a place towards which the mind journeys and yet a place that appears as a continuous, productive deferral of place.”² For human beings the horizon line has always played the role as a grounding and bounding force. It is our most immutable tool of orientation and much of our “early navigation consisted of gestures and bodily poses related to the horizon.”³ We held our hands against the sky to attempt to locate our body’s place on the earth.

But even the horizon, our most consistent defining or dividing line, is unstable and dependent, wavering with your height and how level the ground. When relying on our bodies alone, the distance to the visible horizon represents the maximum reach of vision or communication. There is a formula to calculate the distance to the horizon based on height, but it is only an approximation and

¹ Landscape; n. All the visible features of an area of countryside or land, often considered in terms of their aesthetic appeal. Oxford English Dictionary.

² Susan Stewart, “What Thought is Like: The Sea and The Sky,” *The Open Studio* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005), 103.

³ Hito Steyerl, “In Free Fall: A Thought Experiment on Vertical Perspective,” *e-flux journal* 24, (April, 2011): <http://www.e-flux.com/journal/24/67860/in-free-fall-a-thought-experiment-on-vertical-perspective/>.

varies depending on the temperature of the air or imperfections in the surface of the earth, grasping for certainty. Not a straight line at all — the true horizon curves with the earth and I can make my horizon extend or recede simply by standing on tiptoes or crouching close to the ground.

We understand everything in relation, and although a relationship is defined by connection it also implies distance and difference. A single being cannot relate, the relation lives in the space between.

WEIGHT / WAITING

I often think about the experience of floating in water while working in the studio; I spend a good portion of my time in the studio wishing I could make objects levitate. While floating, I use my breath and body to easily defy the gravity I spend so much time fighting. Floating in the ocean is a moment of placing your body between the twin blue expanses of the sea and sky, the breath in your chest allowing you to balance for a moment on the horizon. The water draws a wavering line dividing my body in two — tracing around the sides of my face, over my shoulders, under my breasts and belly, it circles my knees and the tips of my toes — the surface of the water is a skin, an infinitely malleable membrane stretching to accommodate my weight. I'm not buoyant enough to float for long without paddling my feet or breathing deeply enough to fill my lungs. Is this an active or passive activity? Is the water holding you, or are you choosing to breathe or be consumed? This balancing, a moment of simultaneously relinquishing and asserting control. Holding your breath, releasing your weight, waiting for the next wave. Waiting is an act of dealing with something beyond your control.

Water. Hopelessly conformist to any vessel, wavers with the slightest breath.⁴

THE POOL

Tension and temptation in a body of water.

I set up an inflatable pool in the sculpture yard in order to make a cast of the weight of the water, to try to preserve the pressure of the fluid body pressing against the thin rubber skin. It is the type of backyard pool with an inflatable ring at the top and a smooth bulging belly, its shape formed directly by the mass of water contained inside, a heavy, solid, pressing bulge that feels as if it could only come from a great weight of water. This variety of inflatable pool is a seductive object, the mass and materiality and tension composing the pool's body all so directly evident, its form giving in to its content in a way that feels almost dangerously accommodating. Pressing your hand against the exterior of the pool you easily feel both the pressure and the give of the water through the thin rubber wall, a surprisingly thin skin for such a heavy weight. The taught stretch of this thin membrane makes the potential for flood or release feel teasingly palpable.

While outside working on the pool, the most frequent conversation I had with passing people involved their desire to release the water and fantasies of how to do that. What if you placed your whole body weight on that inflatable ring? Or slashed the side of the pool with a knife? What if you drove a car directly into it? How far would the water travel, how fast? How deep would it flood? I often stood beside the pool preparing materials for the mold, holding a box cutter or a pair of scissors, thinking about how easy it would be to test at least one of those

⁴ Rosemarie Waldrop, *Driven to Abstraction*, (New York: New Directions, 2010), 24.

theories. How satisfying it would feel to slash the pool, to feel the flood, to allow yourself to be consumed. To give up the pretense of holding it all together.

There's power in that thin membrane: the skin, the fine line between containment and release, pool and flood, form and formlessness. Or is there more power in the water, weighing, waiting, tempting, teasing out our desires to be immersed? Or is the power in our ability to put down the box cutter and feel satisfied, patting the pool gently with our palms, feeling the water gently pressing back?



Figure 1: *Feeling the weight*, paper, resin, fiberglass, latex paint, stainless steel, 2017

METAPHOR

Much of my work revolves around communication or relation and the idea that all communication, even at close proximity, is based in distance and clouded with the inherent mistranslation that builds in the space between bodies. I frequently refer to a quote by Amalia Pica in an *Art in America* interview, “Metaphors reflect our enormous desire to get a point across, to simplify and build up parallels.”⁵ My work is inherently metaphoric, deeply invested in desire and distance and an impulse towards simplification as a gesture towards a greater potential for understanding. Most recently however, my practice has begun to operate more metonymically with a greater focus on proximity, contingency and intimacy. Meaning or experience can be expanded through reduction, but there isn’t always clarity at closer proximity.

Operating under the metaphoric impulse to make the intangible tangible through sensuous concrete experience, I use my relationship with the landscape as a framework to have a conversation about conceptualizing the feeling of things too vast, distant or intangible to be easily understood or communicated. But really I’m interested in how to conceptualize and communicate feelings in general. In my practice, I build parallels between landscape and desire, using landscape as a metaphor for longing; the two experiences are intimately linked, both seemingly immeasurable, potentially boundless and beyond our ability to grasp or control. I determined the best way to address these things was through small palpable gestures. These direct material metaphors had no real hope of being a true representation of their grander counterpoints, but could instead communicate a sense or a reference to the larger things I was trying to build a bridge between.

⁵ Courtney Fiske, “Playing Telephone: An Interview with Amalia Pica,” *Art in America*, April 12, 2013, <http://www.artinamericamagazine.com/news-features/interviews/playing-telephone-an-interview-with-amalia-pica/>.

Metaphor is based in difference and distance and as Kenneth Burke claims, is synonymous with perspective.⁶ There must be space between an object and its metaphor, a valley for the metaphoric bridge to cross.

In many of my videos I translate elements of the landscape into tangible but unconvincing surrogates and place them in direct comparison with their aspiration. In *Transfer of Attention*, a golden beet made of calcium carbonate and paint becomes the sun and is held in place against the sky, easily lit by the actual sun. In *Blue is for when our reach exceeds our grasp*, a sponge dipped in blue dye becomes a body of water with thumb-lined horizons, gently squeezed to expose its insides, first in the absence of ocean, then again held by a new hand in front of the actual ocean. The dye, over-saturated and wanting to be the deep blue sea, makes clear its attempts and failures when viewed beside its aspiration. Of course the ocean isn't actually blue. In these videos, the objects are literally tangible, their concrete tactility evident but the distance between object and viewer remains as the experience of intimate touch is translated through surrogate hands and the inherent distance of recorded video.

⁶ Kenneth Burke, "Four Master Tropes," *The Kenyon Review* 3, no. 4 (Autumn, 1941): 421.



Figure 2: Still from *Transfer of Attention*, 8m 36s, Single channel video, 2014



Figure 3: Still from *Blue is for when our reach exceeds our grasp*, 3m 13s loop, Two channel video, 2016

METONYMY

While continuing to create forms that act as surrogates for an absent body, my most recent work feels like a shift from metaphorical to metonymical operation. The swimsuits in the series entitled *Measuring the distance as if it were the essence of being close* function as metonyms for the absent body. As an object that usually lives pressed up against the skin, the relationship between swimsuit and body is one of intimate proximity. In Kenneth Burke's descriptions, the relationship between metonymy and synecdoche is fluid and overlapping; he describes synecdoche as "container for the contained."⁷ Under this definition, the swimsuits are a synecdoche for the body and in particular the naked body. They are also synecdoches for the act of swimming and an implied body of water, the necessary context for a swimsuit. Taken away from the context of swimming, a swimsuit becomes uncomfortably intimate and out of place. Thinking about how to imply a partial but incomplete context for the suits I cast a section of an inflatable swimming pool in paper mache and resin. Casting and taking impressions are also acts of metonymy, the form of the resulting cast is directly dependent on the physical impression and proximity of the original object. Through metonymy, the fragment of the pool is still able to imply the larger absent body of water.

This shift in my practice from metaphor to metonymy has helped me think about the work in terms of intimacy rather than distance; still, a primary impetus for the work remains investigating the feeling of distance even at close proximity.

⁷ Burke, "Four Master Tropes," 426.



Figure 4: Install shot of *Measuring the distance as if it were the essence of being close*, latex paint, projection and *Casting*, paper, resin, sunlight, both 2017

LONG / LONGING

Embedded in all of the objects and videos is an inherent futility, a persistent sense of trying or reaching. Our first most direct point of contact with the world is through our bodies. The metaphors we use to communicate are based in a comparison between physical experience and the intangible or abstract. The language used to describe our feelings is built around material properties— you feel up or down, you feel blue, your heart melts, you pour it out, you are tender, you are soft. I became interested in the use of metaphor in the language used to describe desire and distance and began to think about how the actual gesture of the objects I was making could operate metaphorically. I was thinking about the

gesture of reaching or stretching as an act of longing and trying to span a distance. For the body of work titled *Longing we say* I made objects based on the outline of my body stretching. Slight forms with references that slip back and forth between plants reaching for the sun or bodies arching their backs, their undersides have channels indexed to the size of my finger tips. Androgynous objects, simultaneously soft and hard, the open, cupped containers form tall skinny protrusions.



Figure 5: *Longing we say*, cardboard, plastic, cloth, resin, water putty, sand, paint, 2015

These objects are also a record of limits, the limits and extension of my body, touch and attention, the limits of ability and the scale and reach of my hands. A record of boundaries of weight, balance and gravity, they reach toward the edges of the room in which they live.

But these were still static objects, representing but not embodying stretching. Wanting to make the objects themselves flexible, I began making forms from poured sheets of blue house paint, thin membranes formed by the process of liquid leveling. Once dry, the paint sheets retain many fluid properties, soft surfaces pulled by gravity toward the flat ground. For the series of objects titled *A movement between immersion and elevation*, the paint skins are paired with telescoping metal stands that bend slightly under the weight of the paint strips, counterbalanced by a set of sandbags. Forced verticals: slowly reaching, sagging, stretching, sloping back toward level, pooling on the floor, trying to make smooth surfaces touch. Together they were forms feeling their weight, simultaneously resisting and succumbing to gravity. There is tension or anticipation in waiting and weight; the weight of each object causing a straight line to curve.



Figure 6: *A movement between immersion and elevation*, paint, stainless steel, sand, resin, nylon, 2016

BLUE

72. It is easier, of course, to find dignity in one's solitude. Loneliness is solitude with a problem. Can blue solve the problem, or can it at least keep me company within it?— No, not exactly. It cannot love me that way; it has no arms. But sometimes I do feel its presence to be a sort of wink— *Here you are again, it says, and so am I.*⁸

Made from paint, these forms are also embodied color, built from blue. The color blue is a necessary metaphor, a multipurpose tool used to communicate many immaterial things, longing, distance, desire, sadness, the ocean and the sky are all embodied in blue. But color itself is already shiftily relational and not concrete. The idea of blue is sticky and slippery, collecting meanings and letting them go again, a fluid metaphor allowing us to communicate across distances.

Rebecca Solnit's essay "The Blue of Distance" has, for me, forever linked the color blue with the feeling of distance and the sometimes sweet, indulgent futility of something forever far away. She writes, "Blue is the color of longing for the distances you never arrive in, for the blue world... often it is the distance between us and the object of desire that fills the space in between with the blue of longing." While establishing the constant of distance, she also presents the potential for accepting and owning that longing:

I wonder sometimes whether with a slight adjustment of perspective it could be cherished as a sensation on its own terms, since it is as inherent to the human condition as blue is to distance? If you can look across the distance without wanting to close it up, if you can own your longing in the

⁸ Maggie Nelson, *Bluets* (New York: Wave Books, 2009), 28.

same way that you own the beauty of that blue that can never be possessed?⁹

I often refer to these tactics of reorienting perspective in relation to desire and allowing longing to fill the spaces in between. Filling my studio with blue I began to think of the color as both the distance and the desired. The paint I use is color matched to swatches of blue sent to me from friends and family living far away. Each new color and object made from that color then becomes embedded with a reciprocal care from and for faraway loved ones, another means of spanning a distance.



Figure 7: Selection of color swatches sent to me by friends and family

⁹ Rebecca Solnit, "The Blue of Distance," in *A Field Guide to Getting Lost* (United States: Viking Penguin, 2005), 30.

FLUID BODIES

A body implies some sort of container, a boundary surrounding and giving form to contents.

I think of the objects I make as fluid bodies, they embody a fluidity both in materiality and meaning. Often the line between contents and container is very fine. Our skin is porous, soft and thin. Varying between individuals and parts of the body the thickest skin, usually on your palms or the pads of your feet, is still only about 1.5mm, the thinnest only .05mm.¹⁰ A surface no thicker than a few sheets of paper defines the barrier between boundless bodily fluids and an autonomous individual. Our skin provides the primary point of contact with the world outside ourselves.

After thinking of the abstract objects I was making in *Longing we say* and *A movement between immersion and elevation* as reaching and stretching fluid skins and bodies, I began making swimsuits out of the same poured paint as the earlier long blue strips as a means of more directly addressing the simultaneous presence and absence of a body. The swimsuits instill a sense of an absent body as well as a body of water, and nudge you nearer to a feeling of potentially uncomfortable intimacy. They are containers for bodies, thin skins themselves designed to press up against your skin. These swimsuits reference a female body; they are a barely there barrier simultaneously protecting the woman's body from public exposure and the public's eyes from the "horror" of a bare breast.

¹⁰ Bardia Amirlak, "Skin Anatomy," *Medscape*, last modified July 18, 2015, <http://emedicine.medscape.com/article/1294744-overview>.

The swimsuits can be read as gendered objects, however, it is the presence of the top of the swimsuit that labels them as female, the portion of the suit designed to cover breasts. Even in absence, a female is defined by her body, by her breasts. The absent body suggested by these paint swimsuits is a topless one. Because they have been socially sexualized by Western cultures, breasts are body parts with strictly policed bounds. Even in contemporary society and through the distance of the internet, women's nipples are still considered a threat and banned on social media sites like *Facebook* and *Instagram*. Female sexuality is often feared and regarded as capable of transgressing boundaries and societal standards.



Figure 8: *Measuring the distance as if it were the essence of being close*, latex paint, 2017

Physiologically and psychologically, women are wet.¹¹

There is a powerful cultural construction that women are boundless, leaky, fluid bodies in need of containers. This metaphoric understanding of formless female wetness has impacted the way women are able to move through society. Fear of the formless and fluid stems from a desire to maintain distance and boundaries, an aspiration to retain control. “Civilization is a function of boundaries. In such a society, individuals who are regarded as especially lacking in control of their own boundaries, or as possessing special talents and opportunities for confounding the boundaries of others, evoke fear and controlling action from the rest of society.”¹² But most boundaries are in some way permeable and porous.

Water transmits touch between fluid bodies. Fluids and the formless take the form of the container in which they are placed but they also have the potential to be engulfing; they flow seep and infiltrate, they spread contact and contamination. Fluidity is both physically and socially transgressive, a means to breach the boundaries around which society is organized.

FEELING / FEELINGS

Perhaps the most difficult task we face daily is that of touching one another— whether the touch is physical, moral, emotional, or imaginary. Contact is crisis...The difficulty presented by any instance of contact is that

¹¹ Anne Carson, “Putting Her in Her Place: Woman, Dirt, and Desire,” In *Before Sexuality: The Construction of Erotic Experience in the Ancient Greek World*, ed. by David M. Halperin, John J. Winkler, Froma I. Zeitlin (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991), 137.

¹² Carson, “Putting Her in Her Place”, 135.

of violating a fixed boundary, transgressing a closed category where one does not belong.¹³

That moment of touch, of transgressing the space between bodies is often fraught, but the sensuous experience of touch is our most direct point of contact with others and we construct our understanding of the world through our bodies. Feeling is a way of reaching for another both physically and emotionally. Like metaphor, touch requires a distance to be bridged — I touch my shoulders, my cheek, my hair, your leg — defining distinct parts of a body. Touch is an inherently reciprocal activity whatever you're feeling is always feeling you back.

If women are wet, then feelings are also fluid, capable of weeping, seeping and spreading between bodies. You absorb another's fears or anxieties. Empathy is an act of porousness and absorption. This contamination of feeling is a threat to a supposedly solid psyche “the assault of emotion was also thought to be an endangering wetness. Emotion pours into a person and melts, loosens, and dissolves him.”¹⁴ What's wrong with being soft?

In a discussion on the artist Lee Kit's work writer Anthony Yung refers to emotions as the final common denominator in a globalized world,¹⁵ and I agree, we all presume to know the feeling of love or loneliness or desire, but emotions are also the most difficult sensation to communicate, even at closest proximity. How many countless books have been written on love and how to better understand your lover? Constantly shifting, deeply visceral, and based in language rooted in metaphor, our communication of feeling is always mediated. I

¹³ Ibid., 135.

¹⁴ Ibid., 138.

¹⁵ Anthony Yung, “Yes, but no, but yes,” in *Lee Kit: Never* (London: Koenig Books, 2016), 15.

am interested in attempting to communicate touch and feeling between individuals and across distance, in mediated means of contact and communication between beings.

My work operates with a tactile erotics, instigating or tickling a sense of touch while still holding you at a distance. Evidence of past touch is embedded in surfaces folded, stretched or compulsively sanded smooth. Videos depict distant hands repeatedly feeling absent objects.

In the video *Washing* a hand methodically rubs a wetness across a dimpled blue surface, the light from the projector seeps into the texture of the wall and is mirrored on the reflective floor below. We can easily understand this gesture, a hand, a reach, a smooth surface, but the actual experience is mediated and distant, the specific moment of touch and materiality translated into light looping on a gallery wall.



Figure 9: Still from *Washing*, 9m loop, Single channel video, 2017

Laura Marks describes erotics as “the ability to oscillate between near and far... to move between control and relinquishing, between being giver and receiver.”¹⁶ The reciprocal relationship of touch has an inherent intimacy and erotics. In the experience of touch and haptic visuality there is a closeness that involves giving up control:

What is erotic about haptic visuality, then, may be described as respect for otherness, and concomitant loss of self in the presence of the other... A visual erotics that offers its object to the viewer but only on the condition that its unknowability remain intact, and that the viewer, in coming closer, give up his or her own mastery.¹⁷

I want my work to live in this space of in-betweenness, pulling you close and then drifting away. There’s power in the fluidity of that in-between space and the inability to be distinctly defined. Openness comes from a close enough proximity that you can’t comprehend the whole, the outer edges, from the act of negotiating and balancing intimacy and vulnerability. This is the same feeling as floating.

¹⁶ Laura U. Marks, introduction to *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), xvi.

¹⁷ Laura U. Marks, *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 20.

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