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Thinking Bodies and Sensational Minds: Affect and Embodiment  
in Contemporary Art

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of  
Philosophy, at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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## Abstract

### THINKING BODIES AND SENSATIONAL MINDS: AFFECT AND EMBODIMENT IN CONTEMPORARY ART

By Sandra Burke, Ph.D.

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy, at Virginia Commonwealth University.

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2014.

Major Director: Archana A. Pathak, Ph.D  
Assistant Professor, Gender, Sexuality, and Women's Studies

The human subject is profoundly interdependent, in relation to other people and to the surrounding environment, both “natural” and technological. Western dualistic thinking creates bounded and oppositional categories and generates a conception of human subjects as autonomous, self-sufficient beings that are transparent to themselves and in control of self, other, and world. This contributes to the ongoing inequalities in society and supports normative hegemony. This dissertation argues that it is imperative to insist on the intersubjective, permeable, and contingent qualities of existence. While this project is preceded by a great deal of theoretical criticism of Western metaphysical dualism, we must still continually work to break down the binaries of mind and body, self and other, rational and emotional, culture and nature. We need not just to critique the binaries but to generate new ways of thinking. I propose that art can act as a catalyst for thinking the new. Art can queer the boundaries. It is impossible to

separate out the mind from the sensual body in the production or reception of art. Art demonstrates how the sensual and affected/affecting body is integral to the thinking subject, not an impurity or distraction that needs to be controlled.



## Introduction

In the philosophical tradition that begins with Plato and continues through Descartes, Husserl, and Sartre, the ontological distinction between soul (consciousness, mind) and body invariably supports relations of political and psychic subordination and hierarchy. The mind not only subjugates the body, but occasionally entertains the fantasy of fleeing its embodiment altogether. The cultural associations of mind with masculinity and body with femininity are well documented within the field of philosophy and feminism. As a result, any uncritical reproduction of the mind/body distinction ought to be rethought for the implicit gender hierarchy that the distinction has conventionally produced, maintained, and rationalized.

Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble*

At its most basic, this project is aimed at exploring tactics for the incitement of nondualistic thinking-acting in the world. It is a project driven by the sense that the present is unacceptable and that one of the things that perpetuates this unacceptable present is a perverse insistence on oppositional dualism: self/other, mind/body, rational/emotional, culture/nature, man/woman, heterosexual/homosexual, and more. Habits of thinking are hard to break perhaps, and they provide the comfort of the familiar, but for some, the results of these bad habits are anything but comfortable. Dualistic thinking does not just separate the world into arbitrary categories but it ranks those categories. When some people in the world are perpetually associated with the lesser half of a dualism their lives become less livable. The question then becomes how best to break the habits of thought and think the new. It is not my intention to provide a singular and unique answer. I posit that a part of imagining a future that is different than, better than, the present requires giving up notions of a single individual working alone creating something completely unique. This project will extol notions of connectivity and

interdependence. My hope is to contribute to a multiplicitous and ongoing dialog. This dissertation works from a history within feminist and queer theory of critiquing Western dualism and the primacy of the rational, individualist subject. Feminists have worked to establish the links between different forms of oppression that hinge on the restrictive understanding of the body and its subordinate relation to the mind. They pointed to the way that some bodies are marked as irrational, natural, sensational, and emotional in order to draw an exclusionary boundary around the all important objective, rational subject. Through a consideration of embodiment and affect I will argue for a new conception, a new image of thought, one that stresses the interconnected and dependent nature of the subject.

In this introduction I first lay out, in brief, the specific provocations that lead me to the assertion that the present is unacceptable. Then I articulate the elements of theory and action I wish to explore for their potential effect. I am informed throughout by feminist theory, queer theory, affect theory, with perhaps a perverse interest in scientific inquiry. Perversion is of course not necessarily bad. Perversion can stand with the non-normative and anti-hegemonic. Understanding the risks of positivist scientificity, I will still pepper my project with questions, if not conclusions, from contemporary scientific study. We must think differently to make a different world. We must open ourselves up to being affected and acknowledge and cultivate our affect on others. We must give up control and see our dependence not as weakness but as potential.

This dissertation will use art as a theoretical object to explore theories of embodiment and affect and work toward a different future. Along the way it will engage with feminist and queer theory and Deleuzian aesthetics. Deleuze and Guattari's concept that art, science, and philosophy are all propelled by a similar impulse has great appeal. They imagine that each deals with chaos,

intercepting it to a degree to keep it from overwhelming. They also conceive of the world as multiplicitous and interconnected. One way of thinking the interconnectedness of the world is through the image of the rhizome. The research for this dissertation will form a network of connections, or rhizomes, between disciplines, addressing cultural criticism, feminism, queer theory, all at the intersection of contemporary time-based and installation art. I will look to the artwork of several contemporary artists, and I will end with a consideration of my own artistic practice. In conjunction with this dissertation, I have created a body of work that, while it does not attempt to be strictly exemplary of the theories addressed in the text-based research, will be inspired by the theory and hopefully productive of new thought.

Art practice will work in concert with theoretical research. The written component of the dissertation project will be broken into five sections: Embodied Orientation, Sensational Bodies, Queer Emotions, Affected Minds, and Art in Practice. The last section will reflect on the installation produced as the creative component of the project, titled *Suitable for Wet Locations*. This project will appeal to art to imagine how to manifest concepts as affects, to imagine an approach in which the mind and body are extended into the world and all are integral components of a process of becoming. I appeal to art because it already contains so many confusions of borders, because it works best when it is an embodied cognition, and because it is a doing and a thinking. Art is in no way free from the problematic structures of dominant society, but it still holds promise of being an entry point into a new way to be in the world. Art can be connective, between body and mind, but art is also connective with the political. As theorist Mieke Bal observes, “Neither art nor the political are defined by subject matter. They are domains of agency, where acting becomes possible and can have effects.”<sup>1</sup> All of the artists

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<sup>1</sup> Bal, *Doris Salcedo's Political Art*, 2.

selected for this project deal with the political in a way that is not simply didactic but is complex and compels the viewer to think *and* also to feel. They all work with a diversity of media but consistently occupy the space of the viewer and implicate the body as the locus of a thinking, moving, feeling, embodied subject.

I turn to affect and embodiment not as a turning away from other theoretical work but more in the senses of a rhizome extending out, hopefully to reconnect and branch out again, or as a new coupling within an assemblage. As mentioned, part of this project takes inspiration from the work of Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari. And of course at the same time I am reading Bergson, bits of Nietzsche, flashes of Foucault, and my own work here is heavily indebted to these authors and more. Some of the key texts that influence this project are: Halberstam's, *Queer Art of Failure* and *In a Queer Time and Place*, Sara Ahmed's *Queer Phenomenology* and *The Promise of Happiness*, Massumi's *Parables for the Virtual*, Goodman's *Sonic Warfare*, Muñoz's *Cruising Utopia* and *Disidentifications*, Jean Gebser's *The Ever-present Origin*, and Elizabeth Grosz's *Chaos, Territory, Art: Deleuze And The Framing Of The Earth*. I connect to these works and extended them further.

The project is informed throughout, in some sections more explicitly than others, by queer theory. I look to queer theory for its capacity to deviate from the normative, the dominant, the common sense opinion. Art, at its best, questions these things as well. "Queer" resists an easy definition and promotes a comfort with a certain level of ambiguity, remaining open to renegotiation. That said, I will provide some sense of how I will be using the concept in this dissertation. Queer theory reclaims the once wholly derogatory term and makes claims for a human subject that is complex and fluid. Sara Ahmed in *Queer Phenomenology* uses queer to refer to "what is 'oblique' or offline," while she also uses the word to refer to "specific sexual

practices.”<sup>2</sup> I do not view queer theory as something narrowly applying to the realm of those who identify as queer or as lesbian, gay, bisexual, trans, intersex, or asexual; however, I do not want this connotation of the word to be erased. In this project I am more concerned with how queer theory might be used to further the dismantling of structures that generate and oppress a minoritarian community. I use the word minoritarian, following Jose’ Esteban Muñoz, as a term to “index citizen-subjects who, due to antagonisms within the social such as race, class, and sex, are debased within the majoritarian public sphere.”<sup>3</sup> It is not strictly speaking about numbers or ratios within populations. Queer theory questions the legitimacy of dominant social structures and the ‘objective’ knowledge used to maintain dominance. While queer theory offers resistance it is not simply oppositional. It does not set itself up as the binary extension of the dominant. It may follow lines that deviate or pervert or expose the assumptions of majoritarian culture and understanding, but instead of strict opposition it offers instead “a commitment not to presume that lives have to follow certain lines in order to count as lives.”<sup>4</sup> I will also use the term queering; to queer something is to challenge the normative assumptions embedded within. Lisa Duggan, referring to queer theory, claims that it is more than a new terminology; it brings with it “the promise of new meanings, new ways of thinking and acting politically.”<sup>5</sup> I aim to queer Western dualism, to confuse the boundary distinction of fixed notions of identify, and to enact a new image of thinking and a new future.

### **Provocation to Embodiment**

The separation and superiority of mind over body is a significant problem in that the

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<sup>2</sup> Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 161.

<sup>3</sup> Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 56.

<sup>4</sup> Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*. 187.

<sup>5</sup> Duggan, “Making it Perfectly Queer,” 51.

underlying assumptions of Cartesian dualism have been used to justify the subjugation of a large percentage of the population, not to mention the degradation of the environment.<sup>6</sup> This dualism is emblematic of a conception of the humanist subject that has fueled a will to control: body, nature, other. Scholars have critiqued the dualistic humanist subject of Western thought, yet the model persists. N. Kathryn Hayles, among others, even argues that there are forces that are strengthening the practice. She theorizes that our current age is a pivotal moment. Having survived the classical humanist subject, we are still faced with an imminent threat that the disembodied subject will be reinstalled in the move to embrace a utopian vision of escape into a technologically driven, virtual world. She sees too many fantasies of a world in which consciousness can be coded as information and downloaded into all powerful and immortal machines.<sup>7</sup> In this moment, when those assigned the position of other are still subjugated by the effects of dualistic thinking, this schema is being rejuvenated.

Poststructuralist theorists examine the assumptions of rationality and universality embedded in the liberal, individualist conception of humanity as well as the coincident dualistic structures. The primacy placed on rationality serves to eliminate the voices of those deemed less rational, and the assumption of universality is made possible through the exclusion of difference. The “man of reason” is elevated at the expense of a host of “others.” The removal of thought from the body, and its restriction to the rational mind, creates a disembodied subject that assumes greater authority because it is believed to be unaffected by concerns for individual bodies or

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<sup>6</sup> See Karen Barad, *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning* (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 2007). Susan Bordo, *The Flight to Objectivity: Essays on Cartesianism and Culture* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1987). Elizabeth Grosz, *Time Travels: Feminism, Nature, Power* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005). Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs, and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge, 1991). Val Plumwood, *Feminism and the Mastery of Nature* (London: Routledge, 1993).

<sup>7</sup> Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman*,. 4-5.

different bodies. Despite facing various radical critiques, vestiges of the classic humanist subject remain ingrained in the thought patterns of many present-day theorists, including oddly enough, some working within the area termed post-humanism. To the extent that people still try to image a rational subject with a dualistic division between body and mind, there is the danger of reinforcing a disembodiment that does not need to take note of the specificities of skin color, sex, or any other marker of difference. Braidotti warns, “In spite of the sustained efforts of many radical critics, the mental habits of linearity and objectivity persist in their hegemonic hold over our thinking.”<sup>8</sup> In response to this persistent power of the concept of the rational objective subject, I will look to theories that allow us to reconceive the mind and body as one, and understand the way this mind-body interacts with and is sustained by the world.

I begin the first chapter by demonstrating the problem of the mind/body duality and explore the benefits of an embodied and embedded conception of the subject. I argue that art has the potential to enact this embodiment and challenge destructive oppositional constructs that still dominate conventional thinking. I will take the work of Janine Antoni as a case study to explore the implications of theories of embodiment. Antoni’s work involves the body without representing the body and employs a process-focused practice that highlights the fluid and interconnected becoming subject. Turning to the work of Mona Hatoum, I will extend the notion of the embedded subject into a consideration of phenomenology; however, inspired by Sara Ahmed’s *Queer Phenomenology*, this will be a queer approach. Here I will consider how subjects come to be oriented in the world and how certain orientations are favored over others. Hatoum’s work helps us to queer the object world and denaturalize normative hegemony.

In the second chapter, I argue that sensation is integral in art and equally integral to

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<sup>8</sup> Braidotti, *Metamorphoses*, 1.

confusing the boundaries of binary oppositions. In a way this chapter is an extension of the work on embodiment; a key component of the embodied experience is bodily sensation. The body's experience of sensation implicates the profundity of embodiment to the experience of the subject but also the degree to which the body is not independent from the sensation-engendering world. In short, I will argue for the power and force of sensation and the sensational essence of art. Dualism is still a present concern in that sensation is associated with the body and separated from the rational mind. An added complication to this critique of dualism, ocularcentrism, creates ranked differences between the senses. Sight is preferred to the other senses for its imagined capacity to distance the subject from the objective world. Here I will again insist on the interconnected nature of the subject and also stress the interconnected nature of sensory perception. Within this chapter I will consider sound art as my primary source material, but I also look at sound in relation to works that are multimodal, creating a synesthetic experience. I will turn to sound and polysensorial work and to Deleuze's notion of art as intensity and affect for a non-hierarchical understanding of sensation. I will address the work of Christina Kubisch, Laetitia Sonami, and Pipilotti Rist. Sound plays a prominent role in the work of all three artists, though they do not employ sound in isolation. These multi-sensory works that cross the boundaries of the separate faculties can disrupt fixed categories and articulate the relational.

The third chapter turns to a consideration of emotion. Emotion is devalued and suspect; it is the irrational to the rational mind. It is also another powerful tool to analyze and debunk dualistic thinking. Affect permeates the thinking subject and defies Western rationalism. Emotion is also thought of as private and interior and relegated to spheres apart from the public and politic. I will argue for a new consideration of affect. I will first establish the parameters of the many theories regarding affect and then narrow in on the emotional state of happiness. Here I



will again turn to the work of Sara Ahmed, drawing inspiration from her book, *The Promise of Happiness*. I will consider this work in relation to Judith Halberstam's *The Queer Art of Failure*. Happiness can move us, direct our path through life, and drive us to achieve success. But the normative understanding of the good life may direct us down too narrow a path that leaves no room for deviation. I will contemplate emotion as a political force and do so primarily in association with the artwork of Félix González-Torres but also look to the work of Wafaa Bilal and Shirin Neshat. They each create work that is highly affecting.

Chapter Four again addresses theories of affect, but now in a Deleuzian sense: affect in the sense of a body capable of acting on and being acted upon. This affect will implicate the sensitivity of the human subject to interior and exterior forces. Things in the world, in nature, in our own bodies, affect us. I will show the conception of the mind as logical is illusionary and destructive. Affect is a force that can help reveal the illusion. I will also insist the 'natural' world is a dynamic force, far from the passive ground for an active culture, that can thwart the will to control and dismantle misconceptions of human self-sufficiency and self transparency. Through affect I will queer the image of thinking. New ways of thinking are required for new ways of being in the world. And thinking is not the isolated work of the mind, but is in the coupling of the mind and body, the body and world. Thought, and affect may be linked in all operations of the mind, but perhaps they are easier to recognize in art

The final chapter will address my own artistic production: what drives it, what form it takes, my hopes for it. But much like the previous chapters I will also be addressing an assemblage of concepts. In conjunction with this dissertation I have created and installation titled *Suitable for Wet Locations*. My own art is directed at the divide between culture and nature and by extension many other binary constructions. I bring living plants into the work to introduce the

real time dynamism of the living world. I place the plants in a built environment that sustains them. The specific type of plant I am using is grass. Grass has many uses and associations; I will play off these to suggest a problematic in the instrumentalized approach to nature. But the work is not ideally experienced from an intellectual position alone. I think of it in terms of blocs of sensation. While I anticipate and welcome attempts to interpret or read the content, for me the cognitive is not separate from the sensational and is enhanced when the connections to sensation are strengthened.

## Chapter One: Embodied Orientation

The body is the vehicle of being in the world.

Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*

Embodiment is a prominent theme in phenomenology. Embodiment concerns the body not as objective physiological object, but as a phenomenal, experiential body of lived subjectivity. In this sense the body is the location of the subjective and intersubjective experience of being-in-the world. My interest in embodiment is for its potential to complicate the boundaries of mind and body, subject and object, and self and world. The subject comes into being with the world, and the body extends into the world. Cognition, associated with the mind, is embodied and situated and according to theorists Price and Shildrick takes “account not simply of sexual difference but of racial difference, class difference and differences due to disability; in short the specific contextual materiality of the body.”<sup>1</sup> In this chapter I will articulate the problem of the continued practice of thinking dualistically and placing the mind apart from, and opposed to, the body. I will argue for the necessity of an embodied and embedded conception of the subject and argue that art has the potential to enact an embodied and situated approach to experience and knowledge. As part of this consideration of embodiment, I will incorporate the insights of Sarah Ahmed’s *Queer Phenomenology* and examine the importance of how subjects are oriented in the world. After establishing an art historical context for the work of embodiment, I will then think through the implications of these ideas by describing specific works of art by

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<sup>1</sup> Price and Shildrick, *Feminist Theory and The Body*, 5.

Janine Antoni and Mona Hatoum.

The body is a site of crucial negotiations, in part, because of the long history of separating the mind from the body and placing the mind in the privileged position, a position not coincidentally associated with man—the Western, white, man of means. The splitting character of the classical humanist subject places mind as spirit above body as earthbound. This hierarchy is often associated with Descartes, but we can also see traces of it leading back to Plato. For Plato the body was a threat to the higher order of reason, an unfortunate and limiting receptacle for the soul.<sup>2</sup> Descartes further separates the soul, or consciousness, from nature and the bodies contained therein. Descartes famous pronouncement, “I think therefore I am” negates the bodily influences derived from the senses. For Descartes, “the soul, by which I am what I am, is entirely distinct from the body.”<sup>3</sup> While more contemporary instantiations of the binary equate the mind with the processes of the brain, Descartes elevated the mind to equate with the soul and left the body as lowly animal, a mere vessel that can serve only to befoul the mind it contains.

Shifting the orientation toward the body is part of the larger project of moving away from a system that installs boundaries: boundaries between mind and body, man and woman, culture and nature, human and technology, human and animal, organism and world, and even self and other. The mind is celebrated as rational, cultural, and a key component of the universal, objective subject. The humanist subject possesses these qualities but by the nature of the dualistic operation, or what Dianne Currier calls the “logic of identity,” these qualities are denied to the “other.” According to this logic, “difference is conceptualized only in terms of degree of difference from the privileged term.”<sup>4</sup> Thus, woman is defined as not-man, and is consequently

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<sup>2</sup> Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, 5.

<sup>3</sup> Jones, *Critical Terms*, 251.

<sup>4</sup> Currier, “Assembling Bodies,” 520.

not afforded an independent identity of her own. The body is denied any influence, other than a negative one. The body is of nature, of animal, and is uncontrollable. This reveals the mistaken belief that we possess a unified stable subjectivity that is *in control* of the mind. Rather than try to gain equal access to the privileges of mind, I want to join with those who argue that we instead reject the duality all together. In breaking down the dynamic of the mind/body and the identity/other dualisms, no term is privileged and no one is privileged. The body is not placed above the mind but the interconnectedness between them is galvanized. In turning to the body we must guard against the danger of elevating the body to an essentialist destiny without consideration of context. Bodies exist in relation; they are historically and culturally situated.

Our understanding of the body is always mediated by culture, even constituted by culture. Grosz expresses the issue succinctly: “There is no natural body to return to, no pure sexual difference one could gain access to if only the distortions and deformations of patriarchy could be removed or transformed.”<sup>5</sup> How women are defined by culture, how bodies are depicted is central to the very construction of what bodies are. Here again Grosz effectively describes the problem. Bodies “are not only inscribed, marked, engraved, by social pressures external to them but are the products; the direct effects, of the very social constitution of nature itself. It is not simply that the body is represented in a variety of ways according to historical, social, and cultural exigencies while it remains basically the same; these factors actively produce the body as a body of a determinate type.”<sup>6</sup>

The problem of privileging the mind and denying positive significance to difference has led many to challenge the negation of the body. Many women artists have tried to represent their bodies differently and their bodily difference. Women artists have focused on the body as a way

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<sup>5</sup> Grosz, *Volatile Bodies*, 58.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, x.

to insist on their existence, their positive presence, and to redefine the significance of their own bodies. However, much of this early feminist art worked primarily within the realm of representational issues, and was readily co-opted by conceptions of woman as image or object of contemplation, rather than asserting an embodied existence that did not constitute the object to man's subject.

### **Embodiment in Art**

Art has never strayed very far from the body. The body has arguably always enjoyed a dominant role in art, at least with regard to representations of the body. Art has been *about* bodies for thousands of years. Not exclusively so, perhaps, but images of people and their bodies in art are ubiquitous throughout the history of art. But art can be more than representation. Art can involve the body. In fact, "the work of art is the work of embodiment, of bringing us to our senses and cognition."<sup>7</sup> Ultimately I will argue that theories of embodiment are a way around many of the limitations of a representationalist emphasis in art.

Art's strength is not only in how it functions like a language transmitting ideas but also how it functions directly on embodied, situated, subjects. Creating new images of women was only so effective in achieving the desired changes in women's social standing and perhaps even less effective in generating a genuine positive shift in the female subject. One avenue for exploring alternative approaches is to look at art that creates direct bodily sensation and downplays the importance of representation. One artist of interest then is Janine Antoni. Later, I consider her work and the manner in which she approaches the process of art making, the way that she treats the body, not as subject to be looked at, but as a process of discovery and revelation about her embodied experience of the world.

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<sup>7</sup> Meskimmon, *Women Making Art*, 5.

I now take a closer look at possible strategies for performing the work of dismantling the dualistic opposition between mind and body in the realm of art production and reception. To this end I will consider the relationship between art and embodiment. I will clarify that I make a distinction between work that is about the body and works of embodiment. In an effort to critique and contest normalizing cultural constructs, many feminist theorists and artists have worked with images of women and women's bodies, and there has been a proliferation of feminist work on 'the body,' but while almost exclusively focusing on "discourses about the body."<sup>8</sup> While these strategies have been very productive, I want to question the viability of alternative strategies, ones that might also address the danger of an over reliance on the body as sign. It may now be more productive to move away from images of women and discourses about women's bodies, toward processes that generate from an embodied and embedded position. It is in this spirit that I intend to examine the work of material and corporeal feminists and theories of embodiment for ways to think about art practice beyond images and language.

Embodiment involves a positioned thinking subject inseparable from sensory perception. Art is particularly compelling in this project because it is not of the mind or the body but is produced and understood through the intertwined body-mind-world. Art can work in the spaces in-between. Art is of both mind and body. To the extent that it even makes sense to speak of the mind and body as two separate categories, art production and reception involves both. It necessitates the interaction of mind and body, bodies and other bodies, bodies and worlds. Arguably all activities necessitate these complex relations, but perhaps art can make this complexity inescapable and palpable. There has been a growing interest across many fields in embodiment. The body is not just a physiological object but is a locus of lived experience.

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<sup>8</sup> Alaimo and Hekman, eds. *Material Feminisms*, 3.

Embodiment also implicates the influences of the body on mind and subjectivity. In a sense, embodiment is a way of dealing with the body not as the other side to the mind but including aspects of conscious experience associated with the mind. With the rejection of the separation of mind and body, we effectively let the body back into the conversation as more than the mere housing of the mind, more than the unfortunate vessel, the obstacle to reason.

Women's relationship to the body and to art makes a consideration of embodiment imperative. Marsha Meskimmon, in *Women Making Art: History, Subjectivity, Aesthetics*, argues for an embodied knowledge to counter the long history of associating knowledge "with pure rationality, freed from the deceit of the senses, corporeality and by extension, 'woman.'"<sup>9</sup> Meskimmon claims not only that art has a prime position to compel an understanding of embodied knowledge, but that women artists specifically are in the unique position given that "women have been placed on the negative side of the mind-body duality as 'all body.'"<sup>10</sup> Strategically she maintains yet complicates, the duality, or at least difference, between man and woman. Her critical outlook relies on the notion of sexual difference. Arguably in keeping these distinct categories she is also maintaining the dualist structure of gender/sex differentiation. A potential weakness of her work is that she does not stress enough the constructed nature of these categories or acknowledge the ways that many people do not fit neatly into this either or conception. However, in that she is looking critically at the ranked binary nature of difference, she is complicating the oppositional dualism, and she tactically maintains the categories to perform the critical analysis of how difference has relegated women to the negated half of the dualism. A key impetus in Meskimmon's project is to actualize a female subjectivity, a subjectivity that is not the 'other' to the masculine. Rather than trying to assert women's

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<sup>9</sup> Meskimmon, 6.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 76.



equivalent access to the mind, she, as so many others,<sup>11</sup> argues that we reject the duality altogether. An insistence on embodiment and situated corporeality can help to renegotiate a positive subjectivity for women. Certainly this move to embodiment is not the project of women alone, but this is one notable position from which to queer the unified subject, privileged at the “expense of its ‘other.’” Meskimmon points to how “the authoritative ‘I’ who authored texts, the intellectual subject capable of rational thought and the genius who created high art, was not a neutral subject, but masculine, heterosexual, white, euro-ethnic, middle-class and able-bodied—the normative subject of Western epistemology and ontology.”<sup>12</sup> The normative subject excluded women, among others, and excluded the feminized body. And thus a move to reincorporate the none-normative is potentially productive in an effort to dethrone the hegemonic unified, rational man.

Embodiment allows us to think about the significance of the body without relying on an essentialist notion of the body. Embodiment moves us away from a consideration of the body as image or sign. Scholars like Stacy Alaimo and Elizabeth Grosz claim that poststructuralism fostered a “linguistic turn” in feminist theory. They claim that, while very productive on a number of fronts, the turn has gone too far, such that it leaves out the possibility of theorizing an embodied material existence. Alaimo takes particular aim at social constructionist arguments that leave no room for material influences because they assert that even the material body is formed in discourse. The most salient aspect of this argument that I take is the idea that even if we have no access to the body outside of the discourse about the body, this does not negate the necessity of consideration for the body. Following Foucault, we cannot step outside discourse to critique it.

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<sup>11</sup> See Elizabeth Grosz, *Time Travels: Feminism, Nature, Power (Next Wave)* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005). Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Re-invention of Nature* (London: Free Association, 1991). Rosi Braidotti, *Nomadic Subjects: Embodiment and Sexual Difference in Contemporary Feminist Theory* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994).

<sup>12</sup> Meskimmon, 71.

Yet certainly this did not stop Foucault from taking discourse as an object of criticism. We cannot know the body any more than we can know anything at all. Alaimo concludes from this that this turning too far effectively creates another dualism, the dualism of “language/reality.”<sup>13</sup> She explains that social constructionist models have taken pains to avoid any taint of essentialism. Any explanation that is contingent on a material body is accused of being an essentialist reduction creating yet another dichotomy, discursive/material, setting up what seems too close to the modernist dualism of culture/nature. This may be too narrow a reading of the linguistic turn presumably associated with much of poststructuralism, and elsewhere Alaimo herself calls for theorist to “build on rather than abandon the lessons learned in the linguistic turn.”<sup>14</sup>

Within feminist art practice there was also a conflict around the charge of essentialism. Some artists promoted the idea that one could discover an authentic and true woman, a natural woman. Once all the layers of cultural constructions were scraped away this ‘real’ woman would be revealed. Artist like Judy Chicago, putting an aesthetized version of female genitalia on display, attempted to reclaim the woman’s body as positive and beautiful. In her famous work, *The Dinner Party*, first exhibited in 1979, she worked with a number of other artists to create an elaborate table setting in which all the plates were rendered as vaginal and flowering. Each place setting dedicated, with an embroidered tablecloth, to a prominent woman from history, such as Virginia Woolf and Susan B. Anthony, and others draw from ancient goddesses, such as Ishtar and Kali. Many saw these works as drawing from, and celebrating, some sense of an essential nature that all women possessed. They were seen as reinscribing a natural, ahistorical and universal woman and still ultimately reinforcing hierarchies of sexual difference. This may be an

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<sup>13</sup> Alaimo and Hekman, eds., *Material Feminisms*, 6.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid.

overly simplified reading of the work. There were also aspects of the work that dealt with the history of how women's creative work was relegated to craft, and Chicago's work designated ceramic plates and embroidered cloth as viable media for works of 'high art.' Still, the extent to which the work seems to rely on a simple equation between women's biological, material bodies and the essence of woman was problematic.

### **The Emergent Body in Action**

If we look to the history of feminist treatment of the body in art, perhaps a better model for an embodied approach to art might be the "body art" of the 1960s and 1970s. Rather than a celebration of qualities of the female sex, this work presents us with a living body acting in the world. The performance and body artists returned to the body, not through images and depictions of the body, but through enacted bodies. The body took on new significance in the postmodern era and this shift still influences current contemporary art. Much postmodern art in general returned to representation that had been evacuated, with a few exceptions, from the non-objective works of abstract expressionism. But the body artists, rather than depicting images of bodies, explored their own bodies through action and performance. Amelia Jones points out that at the same time that post-structuralism was critiquing the "coherent Cartesian subject of artistic Modernism," the coherence of the body was being tested in body art.<sup>15</sup> Jones elaborates on the disembodiment of the artist, and the art connoisseur, during Modernism. Influenced by the 'disinterested' stance of Kantian aesthetics and the Modernist insistence on the autonomous and transcendent work of art; the body of the artist was hidden. "The repression of the body marks a refusal of Modernism to acknowledge that all cultural practices and objects are embedded in

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<sup>15</sup> Jones, *Body Art/performing the Subject*, 20.

society, since, it is the body that inexorably links the subject to her or his social environment.”<sup>16</sup>

Body art took steps toward demonstrating a body enacted in context but often maintain the body as a sign for essentialist notions of woman.

Jones goes on to explain this shift toward art engaged with the body as stemming from a number of possible influences, in addition to the emerging interest in phenomenology. The political and counter-cultural spirit of the times led artists, like Ana Mendieta among others, to create works that dealt with the fragility of the body and its embeddedness in the world. But the body still often reads as symbol rather than implicating an embodied subject. Writing about the history of feminist art Miwon Kwon, while recognizing the great variety of artists and theories, reticently still identifies two major ‘camps.’ The distinction between the two comes down to “the status of the body *in* representation and *as* representation. That is, the body as a transparent signifier of identity and self versus the body as a nexus of arbitrary conventions of meaning, the body as signature or sign.”<sup>17</sup> Kwon questions if a reading of Ana Mendieta’s work might “complicate the terms of the current feminist debate.”<sup>18</sup> Ana Mendieta is often included under the heading of body art. Her work is complicated in its various approaches; all however implicate the body. Mendieta’s own words sometime seem to place her in the essentialist and goddess art camp: “My art...is a return to the maternal source. Through my earth/body sculptures I become one with the earth...I become an extension of nature and nature becomes an extension of my body. This obsessive act of reasserting my ties with the earth is really the reactivation of primeval beliefs [in] an omnipresent female force, the after-image of being encompassed within the womb, in a manifestation of my thirst for being.” And still more so in the words of some of

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<sup>16</sup> Jones, *Body Art/performing the Subject*, 20.

<sup>17</sup> Kwon, “Bloody Valentines,” 166.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 167.

her admirers, Nancy Spero writes: “If one of her sculptures were sent to a distant planet, or were kept sealed for thousands of years on earth, it would still convey the imagery, strength, mystery, and sexuality of the female human form—woman’s body and spirit inscribed.”<sup>19</sup> But her work is complicated by a number of factors. The works in her *Siluetas* series were made over a seven-year period and performed in Iowa and Mexico. Born in Cuba and living in exile, her crossing over this border of nationality was a meaningful aspect of the work that cannot be simplified to a reading of any essentialist understanding of woman. She also performed other border crossings that did not seem to exalt an essential feminine. In the performance piece from 1972, *Untitled (Facial Hair Transplants)*, Mendieta collaborated with Morty Sklar. Over the span of the performance his beard is transferred to her face. As Sklar cut off his beard, Mendieta glued the hair to her jaw line fashioning a beard for herself. This piece plays with gender rather than accepting the delineated oppositions. Gender reads as transmutable not essential. It asks us to contemplate what is passing between the two artists alone with the bits of hair. Does Sklar become feminized as Mendieta become masculinized? Can gender be affixed with glue and a little patience? The process involved in this work help to maintain a sense of contingency and fluidity of the subject. In what follows, I will approach the work of Janine Antoni by examining how it might articulate an embodied subject through accentuating process.

### **Janine Antoni: Embodied Processes**

Body art works of the 1960s and 1970s have had a great influence on many contemporary artists, Janine Antoni among them. In the documentary film, *!Women Art Revolution*, Antoni describes the experience of her professor showing her the work of Hannah Wilke, Carolee Schneeman, and Ana Mendieta. “I looked at this work, and I thought, ‘I’m making the work of

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<sup>19</sup> Kwon, “Bloody Valentines,” 168.

the seventies.”<sup>20</sup> In the performance, *Loving Care*, Antoni enacted a performance piece in which she mopped the floor of the gallery space with her hair. Instead of mopping it clean, however, she dipped her hair in black hair dye and systematically covered the floor with black brush strokes. Hair dye is, of course, associated with beauty rituals of feminine gender norms, as moping the floor is associated with gendered labor. And like so many of Antoni’s works the process is labor intensive, challenging the physicality of the body. In *Loving Care*, Antoni’s efforts are present in the work, as is her body. The viewer witnesses her labor. This work is process driven but still has to deal with the issues of how Antoni herself becomes representation. I am particularly intrigued by the works in which her actions are evident, but her body is absent. I want to look more closely at this work for its potential to resist the function of the body in representation or as representation.

While Antoni’s work speaks to a highly gendered culture both within and outside the art world, almost all of her work approaches an understanding of this culture with a practice oriented around performative process. Many scholars are looking at the body in process as a way to acknowledge the body without essentialism. From Julia Martin’s ‘body practices,’ to Rosi Braidotti’s ‘monster in process,’ scholars present us with theories of the emergent body in process.<sup>21</sup> Marsha Meskimmon calls for a process based paradigm as well. She promotes a focus on process for how it emphasizes “becoming, as opposed to meaning, stresses mobility and change as fundamental to subjectivity and this fact necessitates finding ways to think and demonstrate process. Art provides unique opportunities in this respect since its materiality bears the trace of its production and can be mobilized as part of its meaning.”<sup>22</sup> The work of Antoni

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<sup>20</sup> Hershman-Leeson, *W.A.R. !Women Art Revolution*.

<sup>21</sup> Meskimmon, 24.

<sup>22</sup> *Ibid.*, 73.

involves the body in a way that definitely leaves a trace of the production. Antoni negotiates a practice that manages to imply her direct bodily involvement even when she is nowhere to be seen, and when seen, manages to avoid the position of the to-be-look-at. *Gnaw* is a work that exemplifies this. A multifaceted work created in stages, it occupies space but in some sense also take place in time because the process is implicit. Janine Antoni's work decidedly "bears the trace of its production."

In *Gnaw*, Antoni cast a large cube from 600 pounds of chocolate measuring two-foot square and weighing six hundred pounds. She then proceeded to gnaw away at the block. We do not see her perform this act; we see the trace left over. The cube is what is exhibited, with its irregular corners bearing the gouge marks from her teeth. The quantity of marks on the cube conveys the enormity of the activity. She gnawed at the chocolate over a period of a month and a half, repeating the action over and over. She then went through the whole process again, this time with 600 pounds of lard or fat, cast into a cubic form. The blocks are exhibited as a pair. Antoni is keenly aware that just as the viewer imagines biting the chocolate they will also feel disgust at the thought of biting into a block of lard. This work was clearly enacted by an embodied mind, and it speaks to Meskimon's hopeful appeal to the process of art to negotiate a new kind of subjectivity.

The pairing of the material blocks makes immediate associations to bodies even without the trace of her carving. They are reminiscent of minimalist cubes and occupy the space of the viewer in that "theatrical" way as noted by Michael Fried.<sup>23</sup> They create a roughly figural presence in the room. However, the material of the work parts from minimalist sculpture, as does the process. One cannot help but recognize the chocolate immediately. The color, the patina, and

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<sup>23</sup> See Michael Fried, *Art and Objecthood: Essays and Reviews* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1998).

the smell, all trigger the viewer's awareness of the nature of the material. The body knows before the mind makes sense of material it confronts. The viewer experiences the work in an embodied way. The senses desire the chocolate even as the mind tries to make sense of the form. The block of fat may be less immediately recognized, but once the viewer discovers the truth of the second block, they are repelled by the fat even more powerfully than drawn to the chocolate. The oscillation between the experiences only serves to intensify the participant's fully embodied awareness.

As the experience of the materiality of the piece unfolds, thought processes are engaged with sense making. What is the relationship between the pair? Chocolate and fat have some obvious relations. The body desires chocolate, consumes it and produces fat, but the work does not stop there. What are the marks on the surface? A cognizance of the action of biting into blocks brings the viewer into their bodies in yet another way. One cannot help but think/feel the process of obsessively gnawing away at both chocolate and lard. The viewer senses the material, feels the process of the artist in the micro repetitions of the gnawing action and the larger scale of the time involved in the full production, from casting raw block to casting cultural signifiers.

In the process of gnawing, Antoni did not actually ingest the chocolate or the fat but saved up the material she removed from the cubes to cast another pairing of a sort. From the chocolate, she cast the heart shaped container one would typically find containing chocolates, a staple of a romantic Valentine's Day gesture. The lard she combined with pigment and cast it into the form of lipsticks; red of course. This pairing also has powerful connotations of desire and consumption and production; the desire for the compulsory heteronormative romantic love and the consumption of the culturally produced ideals of feminine beauty and sexuality.

*Lick and Lather* similarly sets up a pairing of different substances, but here there are no



minimalist references. This work, in fact, references a much older tradition in art, the portrait bust. Antoni was thinking of neoclassical portrait bust of the nineteenth century.<sup>24</sup> These are not cast in raw blocks but cast in the likeness of the artist. Antoni took a mold of her own head and face and then cast the busts in chocolate and soap. Not just a pairing of two, this time, the work has seven of each. The busts face each other in two rows. The repetition of the forms allows Antoni to show the process in another way. Each of the busts has been eroded, the chocolate by licking and the soap by lathering. The likeness becomes more and more obscure as one walks down the aisle between the two rows. Here again the work is process driven, and the work of the body is performed prior to its exhibition, outside the purview of the gallery audience. Nevertheless, the viewer becomes engaged bodily as they are aware of the artist's bodily manipulations of each form. One is aware not just of the body but also of the time. Erosion is not a speedy process. Erosion is associated with geological time. Chocolate is not stone, but somehow the link between the portrait bust form and the typical sculptural materials of stone are present in the mind. Typically inert matter is displayed in the process of change through sequential repletion of the forms. The work speaks to how the human form is acted on by its surroundings and human action is capable of transforming what it comes in contact with. Something of this affect is active in this work.

What is eroded in *Lick and Lather* is the face, the locus of how we identify other individuals. The busts are placed on pedestals bringing them up to the height of the artist and bringing them into the scale of the spectator. The viewer stands face to face with the artist's surrogate. The artist did not just gnaw away at a crude block but licked and washed away markers of her own identity. Here, Antoni, a conventionally attractive woman, is not

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<sup>24</sup> Lavigne, "Janine Antoni's Lick and Lather," 284-285.

manipulating her likeness to look more beautiful but to disappear. She displays her image to be looked at but, at the same time, denies the expectations of looking. A depiction of an individual subject is shown as both multiple and malleable.

Antoni initially creates the forms in conventional sculptural process but manipulates them in decidedly unconventional processes. She shapes, or reshapes, the work with her mouth and her body. She licked the chocolate. She bathed with the busts of soap, usually a very private activity. In fact, in an artist lecture, Antoni describes this as an intimate, almost loving, process.<sup>25</sup> Both activities required a direct and prolonged encounter with the artist's body. In an interview in *Bomb* magazine, Antoni states, "When you are with my objects you are with something I have, literally, been intimate with. The work doesn't necessarily reveal anything personal. You come to understand the work through your own body."<sup>26</sup> This focus on the experiential body might be productively examined in relation to feminist and queer interpretations of phenomenology. In the next section I will consider a queered version of phenomenology and apply the concepts gleaned from this approach to the work of Mona Hatoum.

### **Phenomenological Orientations**

The outline of my body is a frontier which ordinary spatial relations do not cross. This is because parts are inter-related in a peculiar way: they are not spread out side by side, but enveloped in each other.

Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*

Many scholars interested in embodiment reach out to phenomenology for what it has to offer in the way of understanding how bodies are embedded in the world and how subjects come to be in relationship to this world and to others. However, authors like Susan Kozal, Elizabeth

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<sup>25</sup> Antoni, "Visiting Artist Lecture."

<sup>26</sup> Antoni, "Mona Hatoum."

Grosz, and Sara Ahmed do not turn to phenomenology in a manner that is categorically faithful to, or uncritical of, the tradition. Whether through Kozal's "creative disrespect"<sup>27</sup> or Ahmed's queering of phenomenology, they read the classic texts through an oblique frame for what they have to offer their project. I follow this path toward phenomenology to see what it has to offer in thinking through embodiment and art practices for, "beginning to view our bodies and the spaces between bodies differently is the condition for reworking...our understanding of thought, the communication of ideas between people and the relation between physicality and ideas, between self and world."<sup>28</sup>

Phenomenology is concerned with the lived body. This insistence on the lived body has compelled the interest of a number of feminist theorists. One can even trace Judith Butler's early work back to phenomenology by way of Simone de Beauvoir. Beauvoir translated this interest in the lived body to the experiences of living as a woman.<sup>29</sup> And one can see a certain phenomenological influence on Butler's "stylized repetition of acts" in gender performativity.<sup>30</sup> The body is not an autonomous, natural object but has a history and is manifested in contexts. Amelia Jones points to an emerging interest in phenomenology as another explanation or precursor to the turn toward the body and the accompanying concern for the social and the inevitably *interested* position of the artist and viewer alike. Body art insists on the importance of "intersubjectivity" and the "embodied subject," and many found phenomenology to resonate with these concerns.

Sara Ahmed, in *Queer Phenomenology*, takes up some of the concepts of

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<sup>27</sup> Kozel, *Closer*, 6.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

<sup>29</sup> Lloyd, *Judith Butler*, 37.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 40.

phenomenology. Phenomenology engages with the full body-mind as it is enacted in and with the world. Ahmed also speaks to the importance of establishing positions and the feminist history of “calling for a politics of location as a form of situated dwelling.”<sup>31</sup> Ahmed uses phenomenology largely to investigate the notion of orientation, in the sense of sexual orientation, but also how we are directed in the world in a myriad of ways. “Phenomenology can offer a resource for queer studies insofar as it emphasizes the importance of lived experience, the intentionality of consciousness, the significance of nearness or what is ready-to-hand, and the role of repeated and habitual actions in shaping bodies and worlds.”<sup>32</sup> Ahmed is both interested in how phenomenology might engage productively with queer theory and also how her project might queer phenomenology along the way. Ahmed does not take an unproblematic stance toward phenomenology. She recognizes the limitations of the enterprise and does not attempt to read phenomenology in a faithful or “proper” way. Instead, Ahmed attempts to exploit that which is queer within phenomenology and, in fact, “enjoy the failure to be proper.”<sup>33</sup>

Ahmed’s failure to be proper allows her to make use of aspects of phenomenology but remain critical of some its assumptions. Phenomenology is often critiqued as being too reliant on naïve subjectivism, or “for failing to specify the kinds of bodies and sexualities behind the lived experience in question, or for an inability to deal with power relations embedded in perception.”<sup>34</sup> As if the “zero point” of orientation, as Husserl describes “the point from which the world unfolds,” is the position of a privileged subject somehow not sullied by cultural mediations, as if this point of view could stand outside of discourse and look from a distance.

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<sup>31</sup> Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 5.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>34</sup> Kozal, *Closer*, 13.

Ahmed acknowledges the danger of Husserl and others universalizing from a specific bodily location. Still, the body is what establishes this zero point and thus the lived, sensuous body cannot be dismissed.

The body establishes a point of view on the world, but it is also the point of contact with the world and is affected by and has affect on the world. Some instances of phenomenology actually stress the body as constituted through its actions in the world, not so much as a pre-established agency but as an object in a world of objects. “Bodies may become orientated in this responsiveness to the world around them, given this capacity to be affected. In turn, given the history of such responses, which accumulate as impressions on the skin, bodies do not dwell in spaces that are exterior but rather are shaped by their dwelling and take shape by dwelling.”<sup>35</sup> This is an emergent process and it takes account of the actions of bodies in conjunction with spaces and other bodies, including culturally mediated spaces and bodies. “The social also has its skin, as a border that feels and that is shaped by the ‘impressions’ left by others.”<sup>36</sup> This zero point does not need to imply the “subject as originary.” It does not “make all space relative to ‘my position.’”<sup>37</sup> The body is within space but is also part of an assemblage of other bodies and spaces. It is not the center but an intersection within a multiplicity.

One of the classic tenants of phenomenology is that consciousness is directed toward objects, or it is directed toward things in the world. This gives consciousness the quality of being embodied and embedded in the world, and it also provides the opportunity to take a critical look at how subjects attend to some things and not others. What forces are at play in directing the orientation of the subject? How do subjects come to be in certain locations and not others?

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<sup>35</sup> Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 9.

<sup>36</sup> Ibid.

<sup>37</sup> Ibid., 13.

Ahmed relates an aspect of her own position, “I think fondly of Virginia Woolf’s *A Room of One’s Own*. How important it is, especially for women, to claim that space, to take up that space through what one does with one’s body. And so when I am at my table, I am also claiming that space, I am becoming a writer by taking up that space.”<sup>38</sup> Claiming a space of action, a space of becoming, has to do with how we are oriented in the world. The orientation toward writing is perhaps a more significant direction for some whose bodies do not line up with the expected form of what it means to be a writer. In *Queer Phenomenology* Ahmed directs us to Husserl’s writing table. This table is in a room that is understood to be the place for the work of philosophy to take place. It is also understood that this room is the solitary domain of the philosopher. Husserl takes the writing table as the object of his attention, to test his perception, in a mode that oversteps the familiarity of ordinary perception. Ahmed points out what Husserl must “bracket” out in order to direct this special kind of attention at this object. In describing the background, and what gets set aside, one of the things he brings up are children, his children presumably. What is not present in the room with him is all the domestic labor that has taken place to clear this room for him to work. It is understood that this is the room for his labor. It is given that he is not occupied with caring for children. Ahmed contrasts Husserl’s experience with that of Adrienne Rich’s attempts at taking up the space at the writing table. For Rich the children will not be bracketed out.<sup>39</sup> They tug at her attention and become an obstacle to the object of writing. One of the points of Husserl attending to his writing table was to experiment with perception. He wanted to step outside ordinary, natural perception and look at the object as if it were unfamiliar. In describing his experience of the table, Husserl walks around the table and views it from many points of view, observing how his perceptions shift with his shifting relationship to the table. He

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<sup>38</sup> Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 11.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid.*, 32.

claims that the table remains the same but only through a “synthetic consciousness, which connects the new experience with the recollection.”<sup>40</sup> Husserl recollects what the behind of the table looks like even as he sits in front of it. But what is behind the table that Husserl does not see? The children, yes, but the table also has a history. What objects come to be before us depends on the history, the behind, of the object, as well as the history of our own actions that led us to be in this space. Husserl’s table could not stand still for him to walk around it if the floor not supporting it, if he was not supported by the floor. What else supports the experience of this table—the labor that went into making the table, the labor that built the room, the labor that went on to provide Husserl with the time and space to perform this exercise in perception. What is “given” disappears from view. It is taken for granted. Ahmed meticulously and eloquently elucidates what is “given,” and asks if a queer phenomenology might bring what is in the background forward. The space of the writing table extends the body of the philosopher and makes it possible for him to do his work. There is a history to this space, to the objects in it, to the body that occupies it. Ahmed takes up the idea of orientation as a complex indicator of special location but also an indicator of directions taken. The familial is in place to support this work. The table is in place to support this work. But the work of producing this family structure, this material object, this constructed space is taken as given.

Being oriented is to know where you are, which also implies a comfort in one’s surroundings. To lack this comfort is to be *disoriented*. Orientations require that we think of bodies in space as well as the objects that share that space. Orientation is the direction we face but also the understanding of where we are in space. The comfort of belonging in one’s surroundings can extend to the idea that one is surrounded by certain behaviors. A location is

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<sup>40</sup> Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 35.

never just about space; locations are intertwined with the things in the space as well as the things that go on in those spaces. Our surroundings are intelligible because we know what to expect. Some people come to belong in certain spaces while others are excluded. If we are correctly oriented in these spaces we are read as belonging; we are intelligible.

Normalization also has the capacity to obscure how we came to be oriented in certain space. The ways spaces are designated are not neutral. Space and direction are systematized and hierarchized. Some points of view are taken as given. The gift of this point of view is concealed in the moment of being received as given. As Ahmed makes clear, “What comes into view is not just what “happens to be ‘in front’ of us.”<sup>41</sup> Following a given path takes us in a particular direction that takes us out of reach of other paths, makes some objects unattainable and even unthinkable. Following a given path makes the decision, the action, the investment disappear. They do not call for our attention, and we “arrive, as if by magic.”<sup>42</sup> And in following the given path we make the path that is reproduced become even more definite, like each performance of a normative gender reconfirms its naturalness. Similarly, sexual orientation is a designation used to point to the homosexual while heterosexuality disappears as an orientation one comes to acquire. What winds up in the background when we face a certain direction? One strategy of queering phenomenology, then, is to bring the background forward. It is a strategy in keeping with phenomenology in that phenomenology often attends to the familiar but with an attitude of the unfamiliar. In some sense the unconsidered background might be unfamiliar, even uncanny.

We might compare Ahmed’s well-worn paths to Judith Butler’s conception of performativity. Butler theorizes identity formation and subjectification as a kind of performativity. She suggests that something like gender is produced through a “stylized

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<sup>41</sup> Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 14.

<sup>42</sup> *Ibid.*, 16.



repetition of acts.” Gender does not precede its performance but is constituted by each successive iteration of these performative acts. Discourses around regulatory, normalizing understandings of gender produce the effect that they name. Performativity does not, however, imply conscious choice; it does not mean that each day we may choose the path that suits us and perform whatever gender expression we wish. Writing about her relationship to the identity as a lesbian, Butler clarifies that the performative is how the identity is “established, instituted, circulated, and confirmed. This is not a performance from which I can take radical distance, for this is deep-seated play, psychically entrenched play, and this ‘I’ does not play its lesbianism as a role”<sup>43</sup> Like Ahmed’s point that some paths are in reach and some paths become so omnipresent as to disappear, gender performance is restricted to what is intelligible. Regulatory ideals form intelligible bodies, but they also produce a domain of the unthinkable and unlivable bodies. Normalizing constraints also work through erasure and violent exclusion.

Another line that Ahmed explores is that of disorientation. She again relates this to a queer phenomenology and a queering of phenomenology. “Moments of disorientation are vital. They are bodily experiences that throw the world up, or throw the body from its ground.”<sup>44</sup> Ahmed turns to disorientation to explore the possibility of new paths and new orientations that might support the lives of more people. She is careful to clarify that she is not calling for disorientation as an obligation for queer bodies, not as a goal meaning that all actions in the world must strive to be disorienting. Nor does she suggest that disorientation is always a good thing. Certainly this can be a painful experience, and it is an experience that some are more likely to encounter than others. Queer bodies and bodies of color are prone to experiences of disorientation. But even if moments of disorientation can be experienced as pain or loss or

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<sup>43</sup> Butler, “Imitation and Gender Insubordination,” 358.

<sup>44</sup> Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 157.

deprivation, “then such a deprivation would not be livable simply as loss but as the potential for new lines, or for new lines to gather as expressions that we do not yet know how to read.”<sup>45</sup> It would seem Ahmed is asking us to attend to moments of disorientation for the potential shifting of ground;

The point is not whether we experience disorientation (for we will, and we do), but how such experiences can impact on the orientation of bodies and spaces, which is after all about how the things are “directed” and how they are shaped by the lines they follow.

The point is what we do with such moments of disorientation, as well as what such moments can do—whether they can offer us the hope of new directions, and whether new directions are reason enough for hope.<sup>46</sup>

Life is full of queer moments, but it is also full of “straightening devices.” Ahmed relates an experience in which her neighbor asks her a question about the woman she lives with: “Is that you sister or your husband?”<sup>47</sup> Her neighbor was compelled to understand the relationship from one or another straight perspective. The neighbor’s orientation in the world tries to put a straight frame around this queer relationship; the queer relationship is unintelligible from this frame. Two adult women living together in a home suggests a family, and the neighbor can only conceive of two ways that this familial relation can exist. Ahmed’s partner is either her husband and thus fits, albeit obliquely, into the frame as husband to wife. Her partner steps into one side of the binary couple form. If not husband then sister, not housemate, not close friend. Again if the relationship is to be read as familial the other woman must be a sanctioned element of a family bond. Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner writing in “Sex in Public” envision “the radical aspirations of queer

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<sup>45</sup> Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 171.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 158.

<sup>47</sup> *Ibid.*, 95.

culture building: not just a safe zone for queer sex but the changed possibilities of identity, intelligibility, publics, culture, and sex that appear when the heterosexual couple is not longer the referent or the privileged example of sexual culture.”<sup>48</sup> To Ahmed’s neighbor, two women living together is unintelligible because she privileges heterosexual hegemony; but a part of this heteronormativity is also to structure any private intimate relationship as familial, so if not husband then sister. Berlant and Warner link structures of heteronormativity with public mediations of private intimacies. They write of the “mirage” of the private as the “home base of the prepolitical humanity from which citizens are thought to come into political discourse and to which they are expected to return.”<sup>49</sup> Heteronormativity constructs this notion of sisters as normal. Heterosexuality reproduces itself generationally, and the family structure ensures the continuation of the line, the straight line. For two women of roughly the same age to exist in the heteronormative constructions of family, one must be sister. If they cannot be mother and daughter, then they occupy horizontal position in the family line, but the family form stays intact and the home base a place of proper intimacies, a sanctuary from politically challenging ideas. Perhaps Ahmed’s neighbor found this queer presence disorienting. Disorientation can become a familiar feeling for some. As Ahmed so eloquently phrases it:

By implication, we learn that disorientation is unevenly distributed: some bodies more than others have their involvement in the world called into crisis. This shows us how the world itself is more “involved” in some bodies than in others, as it takes such bodies as the contours of ordinary experience. It is not just that bodies are directed in specific ways, but that the world is shaped by the directions taken by some bodies more than others. It is thus possible to talk about the white

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<sup>48</sup> Berlant and Warner. "Sex in Public," 548.

<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 553.

world, the straight world, as a world that takes the shape of the motility of certain skins.<sup>50</sup>

### **Oriented Toward Art**

I propose that art can help us to attend to the unseen, the unfamiliar, the disorienting. It can bring the background forward, and “to move the ‘behind’ to the ‘front’ can have a queer effect.”<sup>51</sup> Disorientation can lead one off the given path. Art itself often exists on the periphery or even behind the everyday and the familiar. It maintains a closer contact with the unseen forces and the unattended. What does it mean to be oriented toward making art? What objects in the world are in reach because of this orientation? When we do not follow, or cannot follow, the path given we can become disoriented. Ahmed questions the possible productivity of disorientation. Perhaps art can be productively disorienting.

Returning to the work of Janine Antoni, what does this work point to? What objects come into reach in her process? Antoni does not use traditional tools of art making. Instead she uses her body. Sometimes her body serves as model; sometimes it serves as tool. Antoni does not reach for a hammer and chisel to carve away at the block of chocolate or a rasp to shape the soap. What is in reach is her body as tool, in its capacity to act in the world on objects. She brings forward the process of making. She brings the background of bodily interaction, the way bodies affect but also the way bodies are affected. When she uses her teeth to carve she affects her orientation toward the object. She must be close, even intimate, with the material. Our understanding that these gouge marks are, in fact, teeth marks, affects our orientation toward the object. It can make the form abject and repel the viewer. It can, perhaps, disorient the viewer, making a space for them to experience the world from a different point of view.

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<sup>50</sup> Ahmed, 159-160.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 166.

Antoni's teeth are the tools she finds ready at hand. She does not reach outside the body but find the forces within and makes these capacities evident. One can imagine the power and muscularity it takes to wield the hammer and control a chisel. What body do we imagine possessing this power? It takes strength and stamina of another sort to obsessively gnaw away at an immense block of chocolate. In *Gnaw*, Antoni is dealing with food as her material and her body as the tool. The body is the site for the exercise of control for many people who feel otherwise powerless. Many exercise power by controlling what they eat, or do not eat. This exertion of control can often lead to dissolution of the body. Antoni shapes the block of chocolate with her mouth but she spits it back out. Through repeating this simple act of gnawing she shapes the block. She controls the consumption of the desired object and the repulsive object. She is oriented toward, and calls our attention to, objects that manage the body: food, chocolate, fat, lipstick, decorative packaging. She created the heart shape container for the chocolate treats and lipsticks to decorate the packaging of the body. One can also imagine that this repetition must have shaped Antoni's body through the strain of this repeated action. Does viewing this work change our orientation toward the control we may wish to exert over our bodies?

In *Conduit*, Antoni created a female urination device. Its form was inspired by the gargoyle like sculpture on old buildings that function to redirect rainwater. The rainwater runoff flows through the mouth of the creature. Antoni exhibits the object in tandem with a photograph of herself using the object to urinate while standing near the top of the Chrysler Building. She makes an uncanny association between her body and the skyscraper as well as the forces of nature. Instead of rain funneled through the drainage system of the architecture, we are presented with Antoni's bodily waste pouring through the sculpted object. She redirects our attention to an abject bodily process but with a sense of awe and wonder in the grandeur of this setting. But we

are also looking at a female body urinating while standing. What does this say about bodily orientations? While *Gnaw* may direct our attention to how the body controls what is allowed inside, *Conduit* calls us to attend to how we control what it illuminates. It provides us with a queer perspective, one because of the audaciousness of peeing from the Chrysler building, but also by shifting a boundary of the gendered body. We become familiar with a gendered notion of the body's capacities. In *Conduit*, the given path of the gendered body is slightly shifted. In the next section, I address the work of an artist whose work is less overtly about process and more about playing at the boundaries of the ordinary and the extraordinary.

### **Mona Hatoum: Crossing Boundaries**

If we notice only some arrivals (the arrival of those who are out of place), then it is also true that we only notice some forms of proximity, some forms of sexual and social contact that create new lines in the very moment they cross others. What happens when we follow such lines?

Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*

In a way, it might be queer encounter with existential phenomenology that helps us rethink how disorientation might begin with the strangeness of familiar objects.

Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*

Mona Hatoum has a talent for making the familiar strange, for queering the ordinary. Whether it is taking the simple form of a cheese grater and making it into a functional room divider (*Grater Divide*, 2002), or making the form of a hand grenade (*Nature morte aux grenade*, 2006-2007) out of beautiful and delicate colored glass, or tethering two suitcases together with human hair (*Traffic*, 2002), the commonplace becomes decidedly uncommon, even uncanny. Objects, no matter how familiar they seem, do not simply appear before us. With the familiarity of the object we forget the history of their arrival and the significant of their use. "Seeing such objects as if for the first time...involves wonder, it allows the object to breathe not through a

forgetting of its history but by allowing this history to come alive.”<sup>52</sup>

Hatoum can make strange even objects of ordinary domestic use. In works like *Grater Divide* (2002), the strangeness is produced through a translation of scale but also through a shift in the function. What was once used in food preparation now stands in the room. Over six feet tall and made into three panels, the sculpture functions to partition space, to separate bodies. In this new scale our bodies are the equivalent size to a wedge of cheese, and our skin, that point of division of self from world, feels decidedly vulnerable. As a room divider it is still a domestic item, but the impressive sharp steel implicates divisions beyond simple décor. One cannot help but think about how spaces are divided by the gendering of domestic labor; kitchen utensils call up a world designated as the realm of feminine or reproductive labor. Hatoum speaks about growing up with the expectation that she would inhabit this realm, an expectations that she actively resisted.<sup>53</sup> A room divider might function as a privacy screen for dressing, but it also implicates geographical and national divisions, divisions at both a micro and macro scale. A simple room divider can function physically (and can be read metaphorically) to separate space, but the boundary it creates brings to mind how divisions separate people. A room divider is a boundary that moves; it can even be folded up and set aside. No boundary is immutable, and there is power in how they are located.

The histories of objects and the histories of spaces are not neutral, and bodies inhabit space and utilize objects differently. Some bodies are out of place in relation to familiar objects and spaces. Ahmed illustrates how the familiar world extends the reach and capacities of certain bodies giving them privileged orientation in the world. Queer bodies, disabled bodies and bodies of color may actually have their reach limited by the familiar.

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<sup>52</sup> Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 163-164.

<sup>53</sup> Glencross, “Mona Hatoum Interview,” 65.

In a way, Merleau-Ponty describes the body as “successful,” as being “able “ to extend itself (through objects) in order to act on and in the world. Fanon helps us to expose this “success” not as a measure of competence but as the bodily form of privilege” the ability to move through the world without losing one’s way. To be black or not white in “the white world” is to turn back toward oneself, to become an object, which means not only not being extended by the contours of the world, but being diminished as an effect of the bodily extensions of others. For bodies that are not extended by the skin of the social, bodily movement is not so easy. Such bodies are stopped, where the stopping is an action that creates its own impressions.<sup>54</sup>

The way some bodies move easily in the world while others are stopped tends to be one of those things that disappear into the familiar. Perhaps we can recognize the phenomenon in some instances more than others. The able bodied individual moves easily in the world and many tend to assume that the disabled body is stopped or encumbered by the body’s impairment alone. But clearly impairment is not the only thing that orients the disabled body differently. Hatoum created a sculpture that calls attention to our assumptions about how bodies move. *Untitled (Wheelchair) 1998*, is reminiscent of a conventional wheelchair, but this chair has a number of differences that dramatically change the relationship to the object. The material seems very sterile and appears almost more like a medical cart. There is no padding in the seat, just an unforgiving clean metal surface. The object is very familiar and yet strange. If you look further you notice that the handles, that one might hold to push the chair from behind, are shaped like knives. This coupled with the fact that the rear wheels are as small as those in the front, leaving the occupant with no means to propel the chair themselves, presents one with a very disturbing

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<sup>54</sup> Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 139.



sensation. This chair would not function to extend the body in space but would stop the body in its tracks. Who moves freely in the world is no casual matter.

Why did Hatoum make the handles into knives; to call attention to the impulse to control or direct the movements of others, perhaps, or perhaps to call attention to the pain of interdependence in a world so focused on individual autonomy. Perhaps Hatoum intended a disorienting effect, *and* affect. This disorientation might call attention to what has come to seem a casual relationship of the able body to control and the movement of the self but also the ability to compel others to move in the same direction. In the documentary *Examined Life*, Judith Butler goes for a walk with Sunaura Taylor, an artist and disability and animal rights activist. Taylor was born with arthrogryposis, or as she puts it, “what the medical community has labeled arthrogryposis.”<sup>55</sup> This is a condition in which the joints of the body are fused and there is a shortening of some of the muscles. This makes it difficult for her to use her limbs in a normative fashion making tasks like picking a coffee cup challenging. Taylor describes how she can go into a coffee shop and pick up the cup of coffee with her mouth. “But that becomes almost more difficult because of...the normalizing standard of our movements. The discomfort that that causes, when I do things with body parts that aren’t necessarily what we assume they are for, that seem to be even more hard for people to deal with.”<sup>56</sup> It is not ability that stops Taylor from using her mouth to pick up the cup of coffee but how the able-bodied have become oriented toward objects, including mouths. Confronted with the deviation from the typical orientation toward the object, the able-bodied individual becomes disoriented by an ability that does not follow the norm. During their conversation Butler muses that “maybe we have a false idea that

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<sup>55</sup> Taylor, *Examined Life*.

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*

the able-bodied person is somehow radically self-sufficient.”<sup>57</sup> Everyone can see how creating a ramp provides access to those bodies that use wheelchairs, but what falls into the background is how stairs have been built to provide access for the able-bodied. The able-body is supported in the world, and we fail to see the labor that goes into this support. The stairs appear as if by magic and the ramp somehow implies going out of one’s way to make the building accessible. In order to see the work that goes into supporting normative bodies and value the ways that we help one another, perhaps we need to rethink, to queer, what it means to be human; in Butler’s words, we must begin the process of “rethinking the human as a site of interdependency.”<sup>58</sup>

The human is a site of interdependence, interdependent with other humans but also with the non-human, objects, and environments. Certain objects cluster together in certain environments, and, as Ahmed suggests, we come to feel at home in our shared orientations. This homeliness works more readily for some bodies over others. The home itself, the familiar and familial home, is perhaps the site where bodies are supposed to be most at ease. Hatoum manages to create a tension even around this relationship. In *Homebound* (2000), Hatoum assembled a group of domestic objects. The centerpiece was a 1950s style Formica kitchen table with kitchen chairs of the same era placed around it. On the table’s surface are a host of objects most associated with kitchen use: colander, cheese grater, garlic press, sifter, eggbeater, and the like. The colander is turned upside down and a light bulb is placed beneath and other objects in the space are similarly treated. A bare copper wire runs through the space connecting all the objects. The wire is live. Electricity flows through the wire and the current powers the light bulbs. The bulbs turn on and off seemingly at random. The sound of the electrical current is amplified and loudspeakers play an ominous buzz. Visitors to the gallery cannot approach any of

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<sup>57</sup> Taylor, *Examined Life*.

<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

the objects as there are a series of tautly stretched cables creating a barrier between the viewing space and the space of the assembled objects. The other objects in the installation all relate to the home as well; they are domestic objects though they all have a somewhat institutional quality about them. For example, there is a metal bed frame but no mattress. There is nothing *soft* in the installation. This mundane, yet bizarre and threatening, arrangement shifts our orientation toward these objects and the familiar in general. The electrical wire ties the objects together, but these objects are already tied together in their association to the home, especially the kitchen, the realm of domestic labor. These domestic objects, and the ground of the home, become unfamiliar. As Said describes it, “Familiarity and strangeness are locked together in the oddest way, adjacent and irreconcilable at the same time.”<sup>59</sup> Domestic spaces are associated with comfort and security. This space contains the same objects one might find in a typical home, but they do not disappear into the background, forming the forgotten support of a comfortable existence. These objects come forward and we are confronted with the question of what connects them together. The home which is thought to function as the ground for all other social spaces of interaction, becomes unsteady, unfamiliar, powerful and threatening. Does this shift in the ground open up a space for different kinds of interaction? What are the implications of these objects not only becoming unfamiliar but threatening? They are alive with an energy that surrounds us everyday but one which remains hidden. As Ahmed explains, “when the doorknob is felt as something other than what it is supposed to do, then it comes to have a tangible quality as a “cold object,” even one with a “personality.” A cold object is one that gives us a sensation of being cold. When objects come to life, they leave their impressions. These homely objects become cold bare metal but crackle with the heat of electrical current. Hatoum hopes to shift our understanding of the

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<sup>59</sup> Said, “Art of Displacement,” 108.

familiar, as she describes, “I called it *Homeboud* because I see it as a work that shatters notions of wholesomeness. The home, the domain where the feminine resides is supposed to be about nurturing, giving, loving or whatever therefore I often like to introduce a physical or a psychological disturbance to contradict those notions.”<sup>60</sup>

Hatoum does not attempt to reinscribe the object in a way to straighten our orientation. The objects remain unsettled and unsettling. This disorientation might fit well with Ahmed’s call for a queer orientation. “We can consider the ‘affect’ of disorientation. As I have suggested, for bodies that are out of place, in the spaces in which they gather, the experience can be disorientating. You can feel oblique, after all. You can feel odd, even disturbed. Experiences of migration, or of becoming estranged from the contours of life at home, can take this form.”<sup>61</sup> Hatoum perhaps creates a space for a resistance to the “straightening devices” of the straight world or the “white world.” As Edward Said describes Hatoum’s work: “In Mona Hatoum’s relentless catalogue of disaffected, dislocated, oddly deformed objects, there is a similar sense of focusing on what is there without expressing much interest in the ambition to rescue the object from its strangeness or, more importantly, trying to forget or shake off the memory of how nice it once was.”<sup>62</sup> Ahmed asks if there might be something productive in paying attention to movements of disorientation.

Hatoum’s work crosses the boundaries of geographic and national distance, the distance of emotional separation that “haunt the borders of identity.”<sup>63</sup> It exposes the inside of the body and electrical currents running through mundane and domestic artifacts. We cannot separate the

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<sup>60</sup> Hatoum, *Bomb*.

<sup>61</sup> Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology*, 170.

<sup>62</sup> Said, “Art of Displacement,” 109.

<sup>63</sup> Ross, “Redefinitions of Abject,” 224.

mind from the body; alternately we cannot focus on the body as object without producing vestiges of the object-subject relationship. Hatoum's works make these boundaries ambiguous. Perhaps this work answers Grosz's question of how to live the future differently from the present. For Grosz this requires a feminist theory more complex than the "models of language and representation" that have been dominant throughout the twentieth century. We must not discard nature, matter or anything falling outside of structured systems. "Subjectivity, sexuality, intimate social relations are in part structured not only by institutions and social networks but also by impersonal or pre-personal, subhuman, or inhuman forces."<sup>64</sup>

Hatoum said in an interview about her career, "In the early performance work I was in a sense demonstrating or delivering a message to the viewer. With the installation work, I wanted to implicate the viewer in a phenomenological situation where the experience is more physical and direct. I wanted the visual aspect of the work to engage the viewer in a physical, sensual, maybe even emotional way."<sup>65</sup> *Measures of Distance* (1988), is a video work and is arguably the most autobiographical work that she has produced. "There isn't a conscious effort on my part to speak directly about my background and history," Hatoum has been at pains to point out. "But the fact that I grew up in a war-torn country; the fact that my family was displaced, a Palestinian family that ended up living in exile in Lebanon, has obviously shaped the way I perceive the world. It comes into my work as a feeling of unsettledness. The feeling of not being able to take anything for granted, even doubting the solidity of the ground you walk on."<sup>66</sup> The work features the images Hatoum took of her mother's naked body while she was showering. The images are never whole, never include the full body. They are fragments and close ups, and the image is

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<sup>64</sup> Grosz, *Time Travels*, 6.

<sup>65</sup> Antoni, "Mona Hatoum."

<sup>66</sup> Archer, *Mona Hatoum*, 134.

partially obscured with text forming a kind of translucent patterned screen, like a “veil” or “barbed wire.” The words almost appear to be written on the body at first glance. The text is Arabic, and it is taken from letters written to Hatoum by her mother during an extended, and forced separation. Mona Hatoum was stranded in London when war broke out in Lebanon. The video also has layers of sound. We hear the voices of Hatoum and her mother speaking in casual conversation. Layered with those voices we hear Hatoum reading the letters aloud in English. Her voice is slow and measured and contrasts with the voices in conversation. One cannot help but think about the spaces between, the distance and duration, the geographical distance between mother and daughter, but also the generational distance. The letters speak of displacement, exile, war and isolation. But the voices and the tender quality of the images bring a sense of intimacy.

It is remarkable to think about Hatoum’s concern about using the photographs of her mother. She is not concerned about decorum but the status of representation of women within the art world of the time. Are the images problematic from a feminist viewpoint? We are looking at an obscured image of an unremarkable middle-aged woman. Is she presenting her mother for the “male gaze?” The images are more likely to instill a feeling of intimacy than desire, combined as they are with the sounds of the voices and the context of the words. They do not read like a flat image in a magazine. Instead they create an impression that, in Deleuze’s words, “directly impacts the nervous system and intensifies sensation.”<sup>67</sup> In the letters, Hatoum’s mother expresses some concern about the images as well, but she is pondering the reaction of her husband walking in on the two of them naked, with the daughter taking pictures of her mother. She writes, “He still nags me about it, as if I had given you something that only belongs to him,” and later, “Anyway whatever you do with the pictures, for god’s sake don’t tell him about it.”

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<sup>67</sup> Grosz, *Chaos, Territory, Art*, 3.

Each letter begins with a touching salutation, but no one greeting is the same as the other, and they seem to grow more florid as the time of separation grows longer. “Dear Mona, I long to see you my little one. You are so close to my heart yet so far away from me. It is not fair that this bloody war should take all my daughters away from me.”<sup>68</sup> The work inspires empathy, a shared sensation.

Hatoum has another video piece that deals with images of the body but this time they are images taken of her own body from the inside as well as the outside. In *Corps Étranger* (1994), or foreign body, Hatoum created a tall cylindrical chamber with a video projected onto the floor. The projected image is round like the room and takes up much of the floor space leaving just a small amount of space around the image. The viewer entering the space must stand as if on the edge of an opening or walk on the image. The tightness of the space compels attention to the image and the proximity and the close up view of the imagery creates an intimacy if not a bit of claustrophobia. The footage is of Hatoum's body. The camera runs along the surface of her body but so close to the surface as to make the body into a kind of landscape filled with hyper detailed textures of skin. As the camera reaches the orifice of the mouth it goes inside the body. The footage is shot with the aid of medical equipment, both endoscopic and colonoscopic. The camera moves between the surface and the interior of the human body. This work is at once confrontational and inviting. One is drawn into the image and enveloped by the intimate space of the installation.

This work seems far more objectifying than *Measures of Distance*. It is in fact, part of the point of the work, in the senses of the close examination of a scientific instrument. Hatoum intends for the “foreign body” to reference at once the camera intruding into her body, the

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<sup>68</sup> Hatoum, *Measures of Distance*.

foreign body that conjures the idea of illness invading the body, and as the body of someone displaced from their native country. Hatoum presents us with images of her body, but they do not function in conventional terms. They do not produce a representation of Hatoum's identity but play with the boundaries of inside and outside. And this is done not just with images but with space and with sound. As the endoscope or the colonoscope explores the interior channels of her body the viewer hears an ultrasound recording of her heartbeat. When the camera emerges and crosses over the surfaces of her body the viewer hears the sound of Hatoum breathing. What the camera reveals of the exterior of the body is made strange by the close up view of skin and eyes and ears. There is no abrupt distinction between inside and out. In this small chamber the audience is immersed in her visceral body and made keenly aware of their own bodily limits.

Antoni and Hatoum's work resist the separations of mind and body of Western metaphysical dualism. Hatoum views this dualism from an oblique angle, from a queer perspective, and in her work she makes this oblique angle visible to others:

I come from a culture where there isn't that tremendous split between body and mind. When I first went to England it became immediately apparent to me that people were quite divorced from their bodies and very caught up in their heads like disembodied intellects. So I was always insisting on the physical in my work. I did not want my work to be one dimensional in the sense that it just appeals to the intellect. I wanted it to be a complete experience that involves your body, your senses, your mind, your emotions, everything. I think this has very much to do with the culture I grew up in where there is more of an integration between body and mind.<sup>69</sup>

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<sup>69</sup> Sazzad, "Hatoum, Said and Foucault," 14.



Hatoum problematized the bounded character of the body and the mind, not by representing the body but by making the body and the body's orientation toward objects and spaces perceptible for the audience. To be embodied in a way that does not line up with the majoritarian orientation is to be disoriented. Ahmed sees a potential in paying attention to the moments of disorientation. Disorientation can be uncomfortable but it can also be revealing.

Hatoum and Antoni make no essentializing claim for what the body is, but they set up a situation for the body to be felt. Embodied process directs Antoni's work and resists a distant objective contemplation of the work. The thinking mind is engaged by the work, but it is a mind inseparable from the body. The body is no dumb matter or ground on which culture acts. The body is the point of interrelationship. The body is not the border's edge of the mind but the fluid and interconnected force. Antoni is exemplary of an artist working in a mode that highlights embodiment. She deals with political and feminist issues in her work in a way that does not rely on the representation of the body. Yet the body is always implicated. Guided by a queer phenomenology this chapter has revealed how Hatoum's work challenges boundaries and confronts us with a queer orientation. Her work dissects the ordinary and brings what too often disappears in the background into the foreground of our perception. Both Antoni and Hatoum appeal to an embodied subject in a way that fully integrates the body and mind.

## Chapter Two: Sensational Bodies

Whether through words, colors, sounds, or stone, art is the language of sensations.

Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy*

Bodies feel. The feeling body has long been a contentious point in philosophy. For those who would separate the mind and the body, sensation is connected with all that makes the body suspicious. The senses are unreliable, or worse, contaminating, although, often special consideration is given to the sense of sight, allowing sight a privileged relationship to mind. In the previous chapter, I argued that the feelings of the body could not be disconnected from the thinking of the mind. If we reject the mind/body duality, then we must also give up the notion that the mind, and its mythical rationality, has an inherently privileged place in the production of knowledge. Knowledge, I contend, originates in sensation. In what follows, I will examine processes that value the sensual and the nonsensical in the hopes that acknowledging sensation might provide a way to think the human subject as interconnected and relational, rather than as an individualistic, objective subject that is oriented toward the other as object. Specifically, I want to look at artistic processes involving sound but sound integrated with other sensations. In thinking through the implications of theories about sensation, I consider the work of three artists: Christina Kubisch, Laetitia Sonami, and Pipilotti Rist. Each of these artists employs sound in unique ways; Kubisch brings forward sounds that typically disappear into the background; Sonami couples sound with proprioceptive sensation; and Rist uses sound in immersive video installations. I question if art production can provide a way of working from the situated position

of the sensational mind-body. Following Marsha Meskimmon, in *Women Making Art: History, Subjectivity, Aesthetic*, I contend that the move toward embodiment and materiality opens up a space to think about art practice beyond images and symbolic representations and “as a fully sensory mode of cognition.”<sup>1</sup>

Bodies are sensational. The feeling, moving body is directly implicated in artworks and art production. Artworks come to us through the interconnected sensory perception of the body-mind. For Deleuze and Gutaurri art is the stuff of sensation. “We paint, sculpt, compose, and write with sensations.”<sup>2</sup> Art functions “to extract a bloc of sensations, a pure being of sensations.”<sup>3</sup> Art is not about creating things that are recognizable and that confirm opinion but about creating something indeterminate that passes into sensation. The point of separation between the material artwork and the perceptive body is ambiguous. Sensation is not in the material or in the body but dependent on processual relationship between them. Deleuze is influenced by Erwin Straus’ conception of sensation as relational, as something that affects the perceiver and the perceived; it is a sharing and a connecting. Straus writes: “The Now of sensing belongs neither to objectivity nor to subjectivity alone, but necessarily to both together. In sensing, both self and world unfold simultaneously for the sensing subject; the sensing being experiences himself and the world, himself in the world, himself with the world.”<sup>4</sup> There is an indeterminacy of the boundaries between what is typically thought of as a subject object relationship, as there is also an undecidability regarding the separation of the individual sense faculties. The lack of clear distinctions refuses an easy separation or a logic of identity. In

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<sup>1</sup> Meskimmon, 5.

<sup>2</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*, 166.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid., 167.

<sup>4</sup> Grosz, *Chaos, Territory, Art: Deleuze and the Framing of the Earth*, 8.

looking at the relational quality of art and sensory perception, I first consider how senses were isolated from one another and from the mind.

### **Ocularcentrism and the Dualism of Sound and Vision**

To experience artwork through the body implies experiencing the artwork as more than just visual information. Many philosophers have charged Western art, and Western culture in general, of ocularcentrism, of placing vision above the other senses. In, *Downcast Eyes: The Denigration of Vision in Twentieth-Century French Thought*, Martin Jay writes about developments in theories about human sight and how these theories informed much Western philosophy, pointing out sight's relationship to empiricism and objectivity. Sight has not always been trusted as a direct understanding of reality. Jay references Plato's skepticism and his notion that vision may be as much fabrication as revelation. However, during the rise of scientific thought during the Enlightenment, vision became a tool to reveal truth. Vision became the "noblest sense"<sup>5</sup> and functioned as evidence. Technologies developed to expand human capacity like the telescope and the microscope allowing the acquisition of even greater knowledge of the visible world.

Jean Gebser, in *The Ever-Present Origin*, also writes about changes taking place beginning with the Renaissance development of perspective. Perspective gave artists the ability to illuminate space, but it also changed the way humans understood their relationship to the world. Perspective created a distance between subject and object and a solidification of the individual, the "I," and the Ego. Gebser elaborates on how "perspectival man's" "over-emphasis on the 'objectively' external, a consequence of an excessively visual orientation, leads not only to rationalization and haptification but to an unavoidable hypertrophy of the 'I.' which is in

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<sup>5</sup> Jay, *Downcast Eyes*. 85.

confrontation with the external world.<sup>6</sup> The senses were divided and sight elevated and with the elevation and the extension of the human faculty of sight came a focus on the individual.

Individuals are set apart from the world they observed from a clear distance. The focus on visible reality denies the fluidity of change over time as the observable world becomes reduced to fixed categories. Coincidentally, the will of the individual was elevated above the needs of the community.

Jay points out that the privileging of sight was not universally accepted and scholars, like Denis Diderot, Nietzsche, and Bergson among others, questioned if other senses were not just as important in comprehending the world. For instance, Diderot suggested that touch might tell us about the world while also connecting us to the world instead of distancing us from it, as vision was assumed to do. But the link between vision and an objective knowledge of the world remained dominant in much of Western thought. While Bergson stressed the importance of movement and Diderot contrasted vision with the sense of touch, of all the ‘other’ senses the one most often examined seems to be that of audition. Vision and audition are often placed in a binary opposition, and the eyes are associated with the mind and the ears are associated with the body. Descartes, of course, is well known for his binary positioning of the mind and the body, but his binary hierarchies also extended to the senses. First to value the senses at all he distanced them from the body: “it is the mind which senses, not the body.”<sup>7</sup> Then he singled out vision as having a special relationship to the mind, as “Sight is the most comprehensive and the noblest” of the senses.<sup>8</sup> These theories had a large role in disseminating the notion of the disembodied eye

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<sup>6</sup> Gebser, *The Ever-Present Origin*, 22.

<sup>7</sup> Descartes, *Discourse on Method*, 87.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 65.

and contributed to the ocularcentrism of much modern and contemporary thinking.<sup>9</sup>

Under ocularcentrism, auditory perception often takes the place of the ‘other’ to visual perception.<sup>10</sup> Consequently, many wishing to dismantle Western rationalism, including many feminist thinkers, often look to elevate the ear in order to dethrone the eye. But too often these arguments still maintain the dualism between sight and sound.<sup>11</sup> We should not simply accept the characteristics attributed to sound that are arbitrary and based on normative convention. Jazz producer Joachim Berendt, in *The World is Sound*, portrays the eyes as “aggressive, dominating, rational, surface-oriented, analyzing things,” whereas the ears are “female, receptive, careful, intuitive, spiritual, depth oriented, perceiving the whole as one.”<sup>12</sup> Meant as a critique to ocularcentrism this kind of thinking fits too comfortably with all the other dualisms: mind/body, culture/nature, civilized/primitive, and man/woman. It is no accident that vision is described in typically masculine attributes and audition with typically feminine attributes. We must take care to dismantle the opposition of hearing to sight even as we insist on the value of sound as a sensory experience.

While a simplistic elevation of the sense of audition or the reversal of the binary in favor of hearing is not the aim here, I do wish to consider the sense of audition for what it might reveal about the role of sensation in issues of affect and embodiment. Sound may also be useful for the way in which it often behaves in an unexpected manner. The affective qualities of sound that go unnoticed defy our standard conception of sensory perception. With vision we are too certain of the solidity of the world we see, and sound is easier to conceive of as disconnected from an

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<sup>9</sup> Jay, *Downcast Eyes*, 81.

<sup>10</sup> Rice, “Beautiful Murmurs,” 294.

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 295..

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 296.

object. But ultimately I will argue that the separation of the senses into discrete operations is an abstraction that is ultimately misleading. The senses never operate separately.

Yet this does not deny the potency of sound to complicate categories. Frances Dyson in *Sounding New Media: Immersion and Embodiment in the Arts and Culture*, points to the embodied quality of sound without assigning loaded traits like rationality or femininity:

Hearing is not a discrete sense, to hear is also to be touched, both physically and emotionally. We feel low sound vibration in our stomachs and start to panic, sharp sudden sound makes us flinch involuntarily, a high pitched scream is emotionally wrenching: sound has immediate and obvious physical effects. In listening, one is engaged in a synergy with the world and the senses, a hearing/touch that is the essence of what we mean by gut reaction—a response that is simultaneously physiological and psychological, body and mind. These very characteristics rattle the foundations of Western metaphysics and Western culture generally, by questioning the status of the object and of the subject, simultaneously.<sup>13</sup>

Sound seems to have a more direct impact on the materiality of the body. Sound waves contact the inner workings of the ear; the vibrations of sound oscillate the eardrum and the tiny bones of middle ear. Sound touches us. Sometimes this touch can be quite painful or even lead to permanent damage. While light rays can blind us and sound waves can deafen us, the sonic can also act in more subtly affective ways. It can lead to “diminished intellectual capacity, accelerated respiration and heartbeat, hypertension, slowed digestion neurosis, altered diction.”<sup>14</sup> Sound touches and art that deals with sound can reveal something of this touch, this connecting. Art with sound can impact the subject. It can affect both physiology and psychology, both body

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<sup>13</sup> Dyson, *Sounding New Media*, 4.

<sup>14</sup> Goodman, Steve. *Sonic Warfare*, 10.

and mind.

### **Sounding the Unseen**

“Music is...the rendering sonorous of forces, ultimately the forces of chaos itself, that are themselves nonsonorous. Music sounds what has not and cannot be heard otherwise.”

Elizabeth Grosz, *Chaos, Territory, Art*

I take inspiration in part from how Elizabeth Grosz, following Deleuze, describes art as an intensity that “directly impacts the nervous system” and music as that which is capable of “giving voice or sound to what has not been heard before.”<sup>15</sup> I will extend this also to sound artists who give sound to that which has not been perceived at all. To separate one sensory apparatus from another is a symptom of disembodiment. It is not in keeping with the interaction and multimodal characteristics of sense perception. Looking to the work of experimental electronic music and sound art can easily shake the tidy divisions of the five senses, and the common assumption that these are all that provide the input to our information processing brains.

Sound art, as a separate category from music, has been around since the 1960, though it has become more prominent since the late 1990s. Sound artists frequently do not just deal in sound alone, however. They may create installation art or sculpture that uses sound as a dominant element. The sounds used are not typically musical per se. In fact, noise is a prominent concept in sound art. Noise can be a useful concept in that we are surrounded by noise even as it is often pushed into the background. It is also a concept often articulated in relationship to information. Noise is the stuff that does not communicate or even interferes with proper communication. In some sense noise is to logical, useful information what the body is to the mind. Just as Ahmed endeavored to queer phenomenology by bringing the background forward, it is potentially useful to bring noise forward to queer our understanding of our relationship to an

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<sup>15</sup> Grosz, *Chaos, Territory, Art*, 66.



instrumentalized sense of sound.

Common sense tells us that we must quiet the noise to think properly, but noise is never silenced. Edgard Varèse, a composer of experimental music and a prominent influence on many sound artists, declared, “Subjectively *noise* is any sound one doesn’t like.”<sup>16</sup> Noise can fade into the background as it is ever-present and fails to get our attention. Any sensations that persists will tend to become imperceptible. Noise is habitually dismissed because it is considered irrelevant to or incompatible with meaning. Another way to conceive of noise is to think of it as the ongoing and continuous sound from which all sounds emerge, some of which capture our attention. John Cage, another figure that influenced so many sound artists, offers this: “Wherever we are, what we hear is mostly noise. When we ignore it, it disturbs us. When we listen to it, we find it fascinating.”<sup>17</sup>

### **Christina Kubisch: Sounding the Unseen World**

Art is intensely political not in the sense that it is a collective or community activity (which it may be but usually is not) but in the sense that it elaborates the possibilities of new, more different sensations than those we know. Art is where the becoming of the earth couple with the becomings of life to produce intensities and sensations that in themselves summon up a new kind of life.

Elizabeth Grosz, *Chaos, Territory, Art*

Sound artists draw attention to the noise of the background and in doing so also reveal the extent to which we disregard much of the sensations we encounter, as if they have no impact just because we do not give them notice. Christina Kubisch is a sound artist who makes the imperceptible aspects of our environment manifest. She designed headphones that are capable of picking up the electromagnetism of our surrounding environment. Anything that generates

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<sup>16</sup> Cox, and Warner. *Audio Culture*, 20.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*, 23.

electrical current is producing a signal that can be detected and amplified. In her earlier works she created installations of wires that were carrying a musical signal. The wires were arranged in spaces often in curvilinear or flowing patterns. The audience could approach the wires and hear the sounds carried by the current. Initially the audience was aided by small cubes that amplified the sounds traveling through the wires; they put the cubes up next to their ears and, if they moved close enough to the wires, they could hear the sound compositions. Kubisch later had special headphones adapted to perform a similar function as the cubes. She put away the headphones for a number of years as she pursued other work. She came back to them later to discover that the sounds, she once treated as interference, were now much more prevalent, and were generating rhythms and patterns all their own. In the 1990s there was a tremendous proliferation of electrical and digital technologies introduced into the everyday environment. Inspired by the quality and quantity of sounds she heard, she had yet another set of headphones developed to explore these environmental sounds. Now rather than directly composing the sound works herself, she located the sound composition produced by the proliferation of digital technology. This led to a series of works collectively known as *Electrical Walks*.

For *Electrical Walks*, Kubisch provides the audience with a map of an area nearby. The participants walk around the city wearing the headphones provided. In this way, Kubisch offers suggestions about where to hear interesting sounds. There is no particular path mandated, but points of interest are indicated. Sounds emanate from ATM machines, security detection devices, and subways systems--everywhere electricity flows. Kubisch's work reveals the concealed attributes of the environment and calls into question, or reminds us of, the embedded nature of subjectivity. The work also calls attention to the limits of perception. What we know of the world comes from fairly limited sensory apparatuses. We are surrounded by signals that are outside of

our conventional sensory awareness. Being surrounded by so many signals of which we are unaware begs the question, how much of our world do we know? Do these unseen and unheard things have impact regardless of whether we perceive them or not? Much of the electromagnetic waves that Kubisch is dealing with may have little direct impact on people, but some aspects of environmental noise do impact on bodies even when it is outside of conscious awareness. In *Sonic Warfare*, Steve Goodman describes how some of these elements impact our bodies. Part of Goodman's project is to point out how both sounds we can hear and sounds we cannot have been militarized,. Despite the fact that we cannot hear infrasonic (below hearing) or ultrasonic (above hearing) frequencies, experiments have indicated that there is still some level on which we perceive them. This is exploited in movie theaters with subwoofers that produce frequencies below audible levels. Movies often employ this to heighten fear response in the audience. Also, as with other perceptual stimuli, sound does not need to reach the conscious mind in order to affect response. Josephe Ledoux performed experiments on the auditory cortex. Goodman describes Ledoux research showing that "stimuli are routed straight from the thalamus lower down in the brain to the amygdale, which he discovered was sufficient to elicit 'freezing behavior, autonomic responses, suppression of pain, stress hormone release, and reflex potentiation.'"<sup>18</sup> Ledoux concludes that in fact, the higher cognitive functions of the cortex merely serve as filters for decisions already made, subtracting some, complying with others.<sup>19</sup>

Kubisch creates works in which the sonic is experienced in a new way. The headphones reveal what is ordinarily imperceptible. This alters the relationship of the audience to their environment. They do not reveal pure sound or sound in and of itself; they provide an experience of the everyday but made into a new encounter. In an interview with Motte-Haber, Kubisch

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<sup>18</sup> In Goodman, *Sonic Warfare*, 69.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 70.

declares, “I try to create spaces in which the way sound and light are arranged prevents the usual processes of classification and perception from functioning from the outset.”<sup>20</sup> She speaks of how we generally want “things around us to be clear, manageable, secure, and reliably ordered. To maintain this illusion, many troubling elements of what we actually see have to be mentally blocked out.”<sup>21</sup> I contend that this work provides an opportunity to understand the world differently, and to understand one’s relationship to the world differently.

The sounds encountered range a great deal from low rumblings to high-pitched peeps and clicks. Many of the sounds have repetitive elements that become rhythmic and, as multiple sound sources are often heard at once, rhythms can become complex. In listening to these sounds that are otherwise inaudible, we also become more attuned to the general background sounds that make up our environment. Another sound artist, Pauline Oliveros, promotes something she calls “deep listening.” One does not need special headphones to hear the world in a new way. Simply in paying attention to what are customarily background noises these sounds can become an amazing composition. Oliveros describes some of the sounds she hears when she sits down to write:

In the distance a bulldozer is eating away a hillside while its motor is a seccada of harmonics defining the space between it and the Rock ‘n’ Roll radio playing in the next room. Sounds of birds, insects, children’s voices and the rustling of trees fleck this space. As I penetrate the deep drone of the bulldozer with my ear, the mind opens and reveals the high-pitched whine of my nervous system. It reaches out and joins the flight of an airplane drone, floats down the curve of Doppler effect.<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>20</sup> Motte-Haber, “Perception and Aesthetic Experience,” 72.

<sup>21</sup> Ibid.

<sup>22</sup> In Cox, *Audio Culture*, 102.

Kubisch's headphones are perhaps a tool to jumpstart a kind of deep listening, attuning the participant to the strange sounds of the ever-growing electronic environments that surround them. Hearing this complex web of sound might train the ears to listen for what is ordinarily pushed out of perception and pushed out of thought.

*Electrical Walks* take the participants outside of gallery and museum spaces. The space in which the art is experienced is not cordoned off for the appreciation of art. It is a kind of public art but without a monument. There is no permanency. Even the locations indicated on the map are in a state of flux, the sounds differing day-to-day, moment-to-moment, and the participant is not required to follow the guide at all. From this, ideally, I imagine the participants become better attuned to the relationality of moving, feeling bodies immersed in a world of movement and vibration. A possible drawback in this work, the relationality may tend to maintain a primacy of the individual in that each participant is wearing headphones that, while connecting them to this hidden world of sound, do not serve to connect them with other people. Seth Kim-Cohen questions the experience of the participants wearing conspicuous headphones in public spaces.<sup>23</sup> They would also likely be moving in unusual ways, walking up to objects and placing their heads in close proximity to screens and fixtures. Do they feel conspicuous? I think Kim-Cohen is implying that because they are participating in an art experience they may be willing to tolerate their conspicuousness because they are associated with something that has a certain cultural capital. One of the main drawbacks to much of how art functions in society is the tendency for it to be elitist. Who typically goes to art galleries and museums? These spaces often participate in a social stratification. Even if Kubisch's pieces still attract these same elitist audiences, at least it is different in that they are moving about in non art specified locations, locations that are not

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<sup>23</sup> Kim-Cohen, *In the Blink of an Ear*, 111.

marked off as art spaces. As they hear the amazing variety of noises, do they become a kind of spectacle? Do they become “weirdos” with big headphones listing closely to ATM machines? Perhaps this might accentuate the habitual ways people move in spaces as the participants defy the proper orientation toward object and the instrumentalized ways of moving through spaces; perhaps if they feel conspicuous in moving in public in eccentric ways they may also become aware of the normalization of public interactions and bodily movements. Perhaps also those bystanders observing the spectacle may also have their sense of normalcy disrupted for a moment.

Kubisch speaks of an interest in letting the audience have freedom and a role in the composition of the sound experience. She establishes guides but does not direct the specifics of the experience. Each participant will have a different experience of the sound scape provided by the headphones. When sounds shift with just a centimeter’s move of the head, no two people could experience the same composition if they tried. So this is not art as musical composition unless we think of that composition as self directed. The sound composition is not authorized by the artist.

What is generating all this noise? In revealing the ubiquity of electric technology these works also have the potential to compel the viewer to think about the structures of society that bring this technology into being, to the kinds of power relationships embedded in how technology is distributed and deployed. The work calls attention to the rapid proliferation of technology in urban areas, and it is up to the individual participant to draw connections if they are so inclined. How do we understand the environment full of electromagnetic waves from all manner of technology? How often do people notice the security systems they walk by on a regular basis? These security systems are often there to protect the capitalist from loss due to

shoplifting. They are part of an elaborate surveillance system in a growing control society. With these headphones these subtle passageways that are so pervasive and familiar as to disappear, become loud and impressive soundscapes, sometime becoming too loud to walk through.

### **Sensation in Motion**

Orientation was a compelling frame for looking at embodiment in the preceding chapter not only for how it stressed the relation of bodies to objects but also for how it revealed how bodies do not come magically into position. Orientation is processual. Orientation, as Ahmed points out, also implies being directed and moving along paths. Bodies can be oriented in space but this never becomes a static fixed location. This never ceasing process complicates notions of what it means to be embodied. Brian Massumi offers a related but different frame for thinking this processual moving body. Massumi begins *Parables of the Virtual* by declaring that bodies move and bodies feel and that there is a link between these two facets of embodiment. Massumi asks, “Can we think a body without this: an intrinsic connection between movement and sensation whereby each immediately summons the other?”<sup>24</sup> The body has a material existence but is not reducible to inanimate matter. Bodies are intertwined with the forces of movement, sensation and affect. Working against a neo-Cartesian understanding of space in which the body is profoundly separate from the spaces they occupy, here bodies cannot be thought outside of their movements and sensations in space. The body is immersed in a vibratory sensorial plane.

The concept, following after Henri Bergson and also influenced by Deleuze, that movement is a “dynamic unity” is one of the key elements of Massumi’s project. Bodies are fundamentally things that move. They are not static objects that can be simply positioned in space, categorized and measured. Any analysis of the body must factor in the “continuity” of

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<sup>24</sup> Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*, 1.

movement. An arrow shot into the air cannot be reconstituted by thinking of the sequence of positions that it occupied along its path. The path cannot be known at all till the arrow strikes its target. To try to break down and measure the arrow's movement can only be done in retrospect. Zeno's famous paradox tried to imagine the points along the line that the arrow occupied but ran up against the problem that between any two points on a line the space between the points is infinitely divisible. If the arrow occupied one point it could never reach the next and thus movement is impossible. For Bergson this is trying to understand movement through a perhaps equally misguided understanding of space. But movement cannot be decomposed into space. "Measurement stops the movement in thought."<sup>25</sup> When we try to understand perception in terms of discrete units we are distorting the sensation of that perception. The creation of knowledge of the world following this manner of empiricism creates a kind of fiction, a 'fabulation' of a world made up of pieces with definitive boundaries.

Massumi tells us that bodies move. Steve Goodman in *Sonic Warfare* tells us that everything moves. "If we subtract human perception, everything moves. Anything static is so only at the level of perceptibility. At the molecular or quantum level, everything is in motion, is vibrating. Equally, objecthood, that which gives an entity duration in time, makes it endure, is an event irrespective of human perception. All that is required then is an entity be felt as an object by another entity."<sup>26</sup> Here again it is only in thinking about our perceptions that we understand things to stand still. It is only in perception that the body is thinkable as separate from what engages its senses. Goodman, following William James and Alfred North Whitehead, promotes a kind of "radical empiricism," in which the relation between things assumes as much significance

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<sup>25</sup> Ibid., 10.

<sup>26</sup> Goodman, *Sonic Warfare*. 83.



as the things themselves.”<sup>27</sup>

Still, the body is thinkable as separate from what engages its senses. This is aided, I believe, by the common conception that we have but five senses. The five common senses all register at the surface, at the boundary between outside and inside; but what about the sensation of the body itself? We often fail to consider this as sense perception, but without this perception we could not feel the location of an arm in relation to a doorknob or feel the strain on the muscles as they lift a bowling ball as any different than lifting a beach ball. The sense of our own body and the sense of the smell of a flower are not such distinctly different perceptions.

Beyond vision, and even beyond the five customarily named senses, there is proprioception. It is probably closest in relation to the sense of touch, but as touch remains on the surface of the body, proprioception is felt deeper within the body. Massumi names it a middle level sensation describing it as being “at a medium depth where the body is only body, having nothing of the putative profundity of the self nor the superficiality of external encounter. This asubjective and nonobjective medium depth is one of the strata proper to the corporeal; it is a dimension of the *flesh*.”<sup>28</sup> With the skin, and in some ways with the five senses as well, it is possible to imagine that sensory perception is at the outer edge, the boundary of the body, and that it allows information from the exterior world to pass inside. The skin very easily reads as boundary. But not all sensation is about the outside world or exteroceptive. There are also interoceptive senses that allow one to perceive things inside the body like pain and hunger, which complicate the division of outside and inside.

Proprioception is sensation at the level of muscle and tendons. It is the sense that allows you to touch your finger to your nose in a sobriety test. It is a sensation of movement and

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<sup>27</sup> Goodman, *Sonic Warfare*, 91.

<sup>28</sup> Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*, 59.

position. Without the sense of proprioception one could not walk without looking at where they put their feet, could not dance, could not modulate their voice. This is a sense that does not get a lot of attention. But it is particularly interesting in thinking about the relationality of the body, in relation to itself and the world. Proprioception is not usually considered perhaps because it does not reveal the world around us but within us, perhaps because it does not fit comfortably with separations of body and mind and subject and object. Or it could be considered all body and of no consequence to mind, or anything else important. If hearing is charged with being of the body then what about sensations that are more directly about the body? Proprioception is vital to how bodies move through space and interact with objects. Proprioception is critical in playing a musical instrument, but when we listen to a recording of music we often forget about the musicians movement. Even when watching a performance, the movements of the musician are predictable enough that they still may not register. In the next section I will consider the work of a composer and musician who brings attention to embodied sensation and proprioception.

### **Laetitia Sonami: Performing Proprioception**

Laetitia Sonami is a composer and sound installation artist. She performs her own compositions utilizing a device she calls the “Lady’s Glove.” The glove contains numerous sensors which respond to the movements of Sonami’s hand in relation to her body and its position in space. The glove itself contains micro switches, transducers, accelerometers, ultrasonic receivers, resistive strips and more. With it Sonami can control up to sixteen different musical parameters. She also has sensors located on her opposing hand and on top of her foot that function to locate her gloved hand in relation to the rest of her body.<sup>29</sup> Her performances utilize the sense of proprioception and draws the audience’s attention to the moving body in an

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<sup>29</sup> Sonami, “The Lady’s Glove, a Brief History.”

unique way. Her bodily movements seem to generate the sounds of the performance, but the sounds themselves, digitally programmed and emanated from loudspeakers, have no natural relationship to her movements and bear no relationship to a biological entity. A loud oscillating noise may be initiated by the turn of her wrist, for instance. The sounds are more typical of machines, as they are recorded from the mechanisms of “discarded tools” or “raw digital data from documents and old software.”<sup>30</sup> She finds the discarded and hidden in technology and performs a manipulation of the failure of the digital world. Sonami could easily generate these same sounds with a different interface. She chooses an interface that engages the body in motion, calling attention to the pleasures of the moving body. It creates a different relationship to sensation, a relationship that is less dependent on subject/object relationships and more on a sense of the body immersed in the world of forces. She potential confuses the boundaries of inside and outside.

John Cage once wrote, “The most important thing to do with electronic music now is to somehow make it theatrical . . . by introducing live performance elements. That is to say, people actually doing things . . . [and] the actual, visual manipulation of the machine.”<sup>31</sup> Sonami gives us the person “actually doing things” and she gives us the “visual manipulation of the machine.” She combines many typical dualisms. She uses sound that is immersive and visceral but emanates from a body that is capable and in possession of knowledge at home in both mind and body. Sonami acknowledges that in some sense what she’s doing is still akin to the performance of a traditional instrumentalist, and she prefers this sense of physicality in the relationship of body to a material instrument. However, her instrument is not so obviously material. The sounds that she uses are still ephemeral, digital information housed in a computer. Her relationship to

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<sup>30</sup> Sonami, from an interview on *Roulette TV*.

<sup>31</sup> In Chagas, “The Blindness Paradigm,” 12.

the instrument is more a matter of a relationship to her own body. She does not feel the pressure of fingers against strings or strike them to produce the desired vibration. She must instead focus on the bend of a finger or the acceleration of her hand as she rotates her wrist. Julie Wilson-Bokowiec and Mark Alexander Bokowiec write about their experiences using a similar system, the “Bodycoder.” The Bodycoder system utilizes a glove embedded with switches and proportional bend sensors located at various points on the body. The interface sends data collected about the movement of the body and sends it via radio to a Max/MSP environment.<sup>32</sup> Unlike a traditional instrument, the body does not touch an external object but instead becomes hyperaware of the movements of the body itself. They relate how this leads to the sensation that the sound is actually emanating from the arm itself even as they know that the arm movements are simply acting as a trigger for sounds coming from an external location. They also are interested in the role of embodiment in relationship to technology, but they point to the role that bodily sensation has had on the development of technology throughout its history:

Critical theory and science fiction seem to present us with only two possible scenarios: either we become slaves and caretakers to technology or the human body will be forced to evolve through technological augmentation and genetic manipulation. Both these scenarios imply a situation of violent confrontation in which the body either wins or loses to technology. Theories that touch on the sensual—the ecstasy of communication—still theorize the ‘disappearance’ of the body in the technological haze of an information-dominated economy of exchange. What is missing from these projective scenarios is the role that bodily experience has historically played in the development of both utilitarian and expressive technologies: a desire for physical experiences, for sensation underscores

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<sup>32</sup> Bokowiec, “Kinaesonics,” 49-50.

initiation and reception of creative gestures. As such, sensation is the bedrock upon which the identifiable products of our culture are built.<sup>33</sup>

We are not then the passive receivers of technological innovation. Both Sonami and Bokowiec express more complex relationships with the mind and body and the tools we use to extend them.

Sonami has spoken about her Lady's Glove as a response to a common type of computer interface of the late 1980s that was overly masculine, robotic, and militaristic. She first created the Lady's Glove for a performance in 1991, which, at the time, was made from rubber kitchen gloves, "the perfect housewife's tool." She writes on her website about how "this first glove was also somewhat of a joke, a response to the heavy masculine apparel used in virtual reality systems."<sup>34</sup> Later gloves were made in the style of a long feminine lady's glove. This too can be seen as a response to the heavily masculine-type of controller, but it was also a desire for the controller to be more sensual. Her concern for sensuality is connected to her belief in the importance of bodily and physical interaction and bypassing the brain. The sensual emphasizes the libidinal and the bodily presence. It softens the technology. It models an involvement with technology that does not disembody but insists on pleasure in movement and proprioception.

The vision of Sonami's hand enveloped in wires and sensors cannot help but call to mind associations to the figure of the cyborg championed by Donna Haraway. In "A Cyborg Manifesto" Haraway writes, "Cyborg imagery can suggest a way out of the maze of dualisms in which we have explained our bodies and our tools to ourselves."<sup>35</sup> And like Haraway's cyborg, Sonami presents a figure to reflect on, if not escape, a number of troubling dualisms. Sonami sets out to complicate the mind/body duality, and along the way she also complicates the division of

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<sup>33</sup> Bokowiec, "Kinaesonics," 49-50.

<sup>34</sup> Sonami, "The Lady's Glove, a Brief History."

<sup>35</sup> Haraway, "A Cyborg Manifesto," 152.

sound and vision; human and machine; man and woman; and instrument and body. She is concerned with the tendency to use digital technology in a way that promotes a sense of disembodiment. It is also not insignificant that she is a woman working with technology that she developed herself. She is not simply modeling the latest gadget but is involved in its creation. She also programs the sound parameters and processes with which the glove interfaces.<sup>36</sup>

To separate one sensory apparatus from another is also a symptom of disembodiment, and we can look at Sonami's work as a kind of celebration or embracing of the multimodal quality of sensation. Her performance engages the senses through the sight of her body in motion, physically articulating the sound. Additionally, she frequently uses projections of moving images adding representational movement to the enacted movements of her performance. She sometimes uses the glove to interact with objects like light bulbs with sound-controlled filaments. Sonami has designed and constructed an intricate interrelation of unique components. Her multimodal form is an effective approach to combine that which traditional Western rationalism has tried to separate, while not reestablishing a new unity, simply a new version of the universal unified subject.

### **Multisensoral Confusion of Boundaries**

In *Sonic Warfare*, Goodman writes about the recent rise in interest in the "sonic." The sonic is not dealing with the perceptual sense of sound in isolation but the combined sensory experience of the "vibratory."<sup>37</sup> These theories still oppose ocularcentrism but focus on a synesthetic experience that does not rely on the assumption of a preformed subject or a separation of vision and audition. In contemporary perceptual studies, it is more common to find the notion that "every sensation is synesthetic or multimodal." Pedro Rebelo suggests that

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<sup>36</sup> Sonami, "The Lady's Glove, a Brief History."

<sup>37</sup> Goodman, *Sonic Warfare*, 9.

isolating the senses is only useful in the analysis of sensation, which is another way in which we divide the world into categories and classifications to produce a seemingly objective knowledge.

(28) Goodman again:

Interestingly, many ascribe to the sonic a strange intermediary sensory role. Deleuze and Gutaurri assert that perhaps sound plays a piloting role in synesthesia. Stephen Connor has argued that this derives from sound's interstitial qualities, that it has the tendency to drift in between the other senses. French film theorist of audiovisual perception Michel Chion argues that the sonic, within film, possesses a strange power to render a block of sensations that includes both the tactile and the visual... For him 'the ear's temporal resolving power is incomparably finer than that of the eye' and this allows cinema to go beyond a mere correspondence between the senses toward what he called an 'intersensory reciprocity,' transposing a 'sonic velocity into the order of the visible.'<sup>38</sup>

There is no separation between the senses, be they senses directed to the outside world like sight or audition or the sensations of the body itself. All collaborate "trans-sensorially" in a confusion that implicates the confusion between bodies and the things sensed. Massumi asks: "What does the bee see and smell in the flower? Enough to extract pollen from it. A creature's perception is exactly proportioned to its action upon the thing. The properties of the perceived thing are properties of the action, more than of the thing itself. This does not mean, on the other hand, that the properties are subjective or in the perceiver. On the contrary, they are tokens of the perceiver's and the perceived's concrete inclusion in each other's world. The perception lies between the perceiver and the perceived."<sup>39</sup> Perception delimits a body's possible actions and movement. What bodies can do is dependent on what they sense.

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<sup>38</sup> Goodman, *Sonic Warfare*, 47.

<sup>39</sup> Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*, 90.

Body-minds are extended by sensory perception. The feeling, sensing body does not move in isolation. What is in between bodies and objects but sensation? Senses are experienced in relation and they develop in relation. Massumi draws this conclusion by pointing to an experiment in which animals were immobilized.<sup>40</sup> The result of this immobilization was the inability to see. They did not develop the capacity for sight because sight develops in a body that can move in the world. It develops in relation. What are the implications of this for human bodies and other bodies? Sight is argued to create an objective distance and make possible the subject–object dichotomy. If sight, compounded simultaneously with all the other sensory perceptions, is a relation, a being in relation, how does the other become object? If sight extends bodies and is in between, inseparable from the body seeing and from the body seen this challenges the notion of objective distance.<sup>41</sup>

In the next section I consider an artist that uses sight and sound and even proprioception all at once. Pipilotti Rist creates video and sound installations that manipulate what the audience sees and hears and how they move through space. She creates atmospheres. “Like the aural, the atmospheric suggest a relationship not only with the body in its immediate space but with a permeable body integrated within, and subject to, a global system: one that combines the air we breathe, the weather we feel, the pulses and waves of the electromagnetic spectrum the subtends and enable technologies, old, and new, and circulates,...in the excitable tissues of the heart.”<sup>42</sup> I suggest that Rist’s work reveals the interplay of sensations and the sensing body with the world. Her practice can ultimately highlight the permeability of the body and the subject/bodies emergent in relation.

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<sup>40</sup> Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*, 149.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 71.

<sup>42</sup> Dyson, *Sounding New Media*, 16-17.



## **Pipilotti Rist: Immersed in Sensation**

Pipilotti Rist is an artist who works with video and sound installations. The work is intermedia and appeals to a multitude of senses. In experiencing her work one cannot easily separate the function of the eyes from that of the ears, nor can one ignore the proprioceptive experience. My most recent experience with Pipilotti Rist's work was at the exhibition at the Anderson Gallery entitled *The Nameless Hour: Places of Reverie, Paths of Reflection*, 2010. Rist's piece in the show was entitled *Gravity Be My Friend* (2007). There was a partition at the entrance separating the space of her installation from the rest of the gallery. At the entrance to the room there was a gallery attendant who asked all visitors to take off their shoes. Entering the space my first sense was that of the smell of new carpet. Rist had piled carpet pieces on top of each other. They were cut into curvilinear shapes with each shape getting slightly smaller as they move up the pile, creating the effect of a topographical map of sorts. There were rises and valleys like a miniature landscape. The carpet mounds seem to invite the viewer to lay back and experience the video projected on the ceiling. The sound of music, very characteristic of Rist's work, seems to come from all around. One is enveloped in sights and sounds and smell and touch, and one can feel one's body relaxing on the soft floor. The video itself is framed by another biomorphic, curvilinear shape reminiscent of the shapes in the carpet and also repeated on the walls with colorful paint. The video felt immersive, probably more so because of the space it was in, but the quality of the images had something to do with it as well, the slow movement of the imagery combined with an intimate proximity to the objects and the inviting and lyrical sounds. The sound was pleasant, but almost sickly sweet. It too had an odd quality to it, something of a fairy tale with a slightly dark promise.

Watching the video from this vantage is an odd experience. It takes one out of one's customary relationship to works in a gallery. Videos are commonly projected onto walls and are experienced in a very similar vein to a painting or drawing—a very typical experience of a gallery space. Even the curvilinear forms estrange us from the equal and opposing forces of the “white cube” gallery. Lying on the floor immediately places the viewer in an uncommon relationship to the work and to the space. There was something that felt a bit vulnerable about this experience, feeling odd in a space that is designated as high culture. Shoes off, laying on the floor, I was also keenly aware of the other people experiencing the work with me, trying to negotiate the space with the conventional standard of allowing appropriate personal space, conscious of a need, or desire, to share the space with others. They were the same people that I was surrounded by in the other parts of the gallery, but in this closed off space, in this shared experience of the odd, it felt strangely more like a people in relation to one another, not just in relation to the work.

I don't want to make too much of this relationality. As Clair Bishop points out in critiquing relational aesthetics, just having an interaction with a group of people is not inherently political or democratizing, especially as galleries are generally frequented by people with a lot in common and who form identification with one another with relative ease.<sup>43</sup> Nevertheless, the work does move away from the individualizing contemplation of equally autonomous objects. It might create a space to think about our relationships to sensation differently and perhaps our relationship with other people differently. Amelia Jones writes of the way that Rist's work produces a feminist subject, “via a *multiple and relational feminine subjectivity* enacted via a deep conceptual and material intertwining body, space, screen, sound, and object—one that

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<sup>43</sup> Bishop, "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics," 68.

necessarily implicates the spectator-cum-participant through synaesthetic means.”<sup>44</sup> Elaborating on the relational aspect of subject formation implicit in Rist’s work, Jones positions herself as like Rist in age and historical relationship to feminism. Jones finds it easy to feel a relation to Rist. I also wonder about the identifiers she is not mentioning: middle-class, white, thin bodied, and the like. Would the process seem as relational for a differently positioned viewer? Relational sometimes seems to assume and/or overlook the degree of sameness of the audience participants. So while I admit to feeling a of community in viewing Rist’s work, it may be significant that I am already in a community of artists and art consumers. Still, perhaps the viewer leaves this space with a different feeling regarding their interrelatedness in general, extending beyond the limited group of people in the gallery at the point of the experience.

The experience was not typical of most gallery experiences, but it was also different from the immersive quality of watching a movie at a theater. There are no clearly designated seats. One had to negotiate the space and the other participants. One cannot forget about the body the way one ideally does in a movie theater. Certainly I am aware of my body in a theater if there is not enough room for my legs, or if the seat is uncomfortable in some way, or when negotiating the shared armrest between the seats, but for the most part the environment disappears once the movie begins. The seats of the theater are homogenous, strictly ordered, fixed in place, designed to maximize occupancy, to maximize profit. Rist’s work is immersive in that it envelops the viewer and engages every sense perception in an open relationship with others.

It might be productive to think of Rist’s work in relationship to Laura Marks understanding of “haptic visuality.” Marks describes haptic perception “as the combination of tactile, kinesthetic, and proprioceptive functions, the way we experience touch both on the

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<sup>44</sup> Jones, *Self/Image*, 214.

surface of and inside our bodies.”<sup>45</sup> In haptic cinema the viewer is not encouraged to view the depth of the scene as much as to view the surface of the moving images. The screen is not a window on the world but another object with which one shares space. “It enables an embodied perception: the viewer responding to the video as to another body and to the screen as another skin.”<sup>46</sup> Rist’s work engages this haptic visuality. The images are digitally manipulated such the space often flattens as one image is overlaid with another; the spaces become confused and ambiguous. The images often have a great deal of detail, sometimes by means of the camera coming very close to objects, other times by visual manipulation, like a colored liquid moving through water and creating complicated arabesques of movement like a band of smoke swirling through the air. Marks claims that haptic video compels the view to be self-reflexive because they cannot enter into an identificatory relationship with the images, the window is opaque and the viewer remains aware of themselves in relation.

Christine Ross has noted that in Rist’s work “femininity is the starting point for discordant beings who fall, scream, grimace, smash or float, seeking to redefine—from within—norms of femininity. These disruptions occur not only at the level of the represented body but also in the body of the electronic image.”<sup>47</sup> The images are distorted, the narratives are broken if existent at all; this appeals to the irrational and the sensational. One cannot look upon these videos and feel a sense of mastery, or a sense in which the eyes will lead one to some objective truth. This further enforces the sense in which works are haptic: “The ideal relationship between viewer and optical image tends to be one of mastery, in which the viewer isolates and comprehends the objects of vision. The ideal relationship between viewer and haptic image is

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<sup>45</sup> Marks, “Video Haptics and Erotics,” 332.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 333.

<sup>47</sup> Ross, quoted in Jones, *Self/Image*, 217-218.

one of mutuality, in which the viewer is more likely to lose her/himself in the image, to lose her or his sense of proportion.”<sup>48</sup>

To the extent that there are narratives at work in Rist’s videos they are ambiguous. But while the imagery is often not naturalistic, there is still much that is recognizable and suggestive of meaning. And as Ross alludes to above, some of that meaning seems to involve gender normativity. Even as the video is dealing with imagery that is recognizable, the way the camera travels over surfaces, moving at odd angles, alters our relationship to the objects and spaces. Often the camera is low to the ground, aiming up, or moving very close to objects. Everything seems slightly unreal. The situations are not so much confusing as perhaps relating to Deleuze's principle of “indiscernibility: we no longer know what is imaginary or real, physical or mental, in the situation, not because they are confused, but because we do not have to know and there is no longer even a place from which to ask.”<sup>49</sup> This is not realism appealing to sensory-motor action but “rather a dreamlike connection through the intermediary of the liberated sense organs”<sup>50</sup> creating a “purely optical and sound situation.”<sup>51</sup>

In *Gravity Be My Friend*, we see images of women in water bobbing and playing. In much of the video the camera is underwater or moves through the surface of the water above and below. In one section, the vantage of the camera is from below and through the surface of the water. In it we see a line of trees and a bright sky. In the water is an apple moving with the gentle waves among lily pads. A close up view of a hand comes into the image and reaches out to the apple. Again this can be viewed in relation to Deleuze's notion of the haptic in cinema. The hand

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<sup>48</sup> Marks, "Video Haptics and Erotics," 341.

<sup>49</sup> Deleuze, *Cinema 2*, 7.

<sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>51</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

touches the apple but not in an instrumental way. The hand is an object of sensation and not a character in a narrative. The hand does not just possess a “prehensile function” and the eye “doubles its optical function by a specifically ‘grabbing’ [*haptique*] one, if we follow Riegl’s formula for indicating a touching which is specific to the gaze.”<sup>52</sup> Marks also references Riegl’s assessment of the relationship between the haptic and more perspectival images in the history of art. His account is a story of progress from the more decorative and surface oriented works to the more advanced illusionist works. This narrative also serves to reinforce the idea that later instances of decorative art were of lesser stature. Not coincidentally much of this work was associated with the productions of women: weaving, needle point, and embroidery. In a way Rist’s work reads as decorative. It is also highly colorful; another characteristic that has often been relegated to the lesser arts in the art world, and it too tends to be associated with the feminine. But in Deleuze, the tactile is considered in relation to the “pure optical and sound situation.”<sup>53</sup> The image had to free itself from sensory-motor links; it had to stop being action-image in order to become a pure optical, sound (and tactile) image<sup>54</sup> in order to put perception in contact with thought.<sup>55</sup>

I am not interested in synesthetic and haptic visuality for the sensations in and of themselves but for what they might do in the world. If Rist’s work is just a pleasant immersive experience then it is of little interest. As I will address in the next chapter pleasant experiences and happiness are not in themselves inherently good. My interest is in changing the way people think, moving away from binary oppositions, away from a drive toward mastery and control, and

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<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 13.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.

<sup>54</sup> Ibid., 23.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 1.

toward an understanding of the deeply interdependent and dependent qualities of being in the world. Sensation is key in any artwork but the artists described in this chapter all deal more pointedly with foregrounding a perceptual engagement with the world. At the same time they all engage a thinking subject and thus model a way to conceive of feeling and thinking as a continuous unity. Incorporating the positioned viewer, they accentuate rationality and move away from the assumed distance between viewer and object. Avoiding an instrumentalized and objectivist form of seeing, sound art and multisensory work enmesh sensations and bodies and contextualized spaces. Kim-Cohen expresses his hope for the role of sound in art: “An expanded sonic practice would include the spectator, who always carries, as constituent parts of his or her subjectivity, a perspective shaped by social, political, gender, class and racial experience.”<sup>56</sup> Kibsch, Sonami and Rist all pull the audience into the work but not to experience art as an “easy chair.” The work still explores ideas as it explores sensation.

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<sup>56</sup> Kim-Cohen, *In the Blink of an Ear*, 107.

### Chapter Three: Queer Emotion

In the previous chapter I looked at sensation and perceptual faculties. Now I will question the relationship of sensation to thought and emotion. I explore what emotions *do*; how do they impact bodies and subjects and worlds. Theories regarding affect will inform the next two chapters but looking at affect from two different vantage points. Affect at its most molecular can be thought of in terms of physiological responses of the body prior to consciousness. Affect at a more macroscopic, or perhaps Deleuze's molar, level constitutes emotions. Emotions are the sedimentation of affect into something nominal, recognizable, still affective but closer to the realm of consciousness. Emotion is how we represent our feeling to ourselves. They are definitely placed on the body side of the body mind binary and on the opposing side to the exalted rationality. Emotions may motivate behavior and even ideology. The plastic arts fairly clearly deal in the stuff of sensation. What is their relationship to the affective? Art can trigger emotion and emotions are powerful forces that can direct our course through life. Art can engender emotion, but it can simultaneously stimulate complex thought processes. Here again, art refuses the binary. Emotions are opposed to rationalism, but they are also caught up in another binary, that of the public and private. Emotions are proper only in the private realm. By dealing with emotional content artists can force open our notions of what is proper to the public and the political realms. While emotions generally are phenomena to be controlled and kept out of public space, happiness is practically a requirement in public and private spaces. In what follows I will consider Sara Ahmed's *The Promise of Happiness*, and complicate this promise



with realities of grief and failure, pulling in Judith Butler's *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* and Judith Halberstam's *Queer Art of Failure*. Félix González-Torres will provide the artwork to guide my consideration of arts relationship to these ideas. His work is emotional yet cognitively stimulating, private yet public, successful yet a success that could be read as a failure. As affect is a term that is used in a multitude of ways, I first establish the specificity of what I intend to address.

Affect is associated with feeling whether it is feeling as emotion or as sensitivity to forces. There would appear to be an increasing interest in affect in the areas of cultural criticism and theory. Ann Pellegrini and Jasbir Puar survey the “centrality of theories of affect to conceptualizations of subjecthood, being, corporeality, and politics.”<sup>1</sup> Although Pellegrini and Puar are skeptical about how new or homogeneous these idea are, their assessment of the importance of affect is in line with many recent publications. Brian Massumi tells us, “There seems to be a growing feeling within media, literary, and art theory that affect is central to an understanding of our information-and image-based late capitalist culture.”<sup>2</sup> Some scholars such as Patricia Clough and Michael Hardt, go so far as to refer to this phenomenon as “the affective turn.”<sup>3</sup> Others down play the extent to which this turn is really a new direction. Hardt, like Pellegrini and Puar, acknowledges the precedence for theorizing the affective. Writing in *The Affective Turn*, Hardt establishes a lineage for this current direction, claiming that it has two major antecedents, “the focus on the body, which has been most extensively advanced in feminist theory, and the exploration of emotions, conducted predominantly in queer theory.”<sup>4</sup> As

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<sup>1</sup> Pellegrini and Puar, “Affect,” 36.

<sup>2</sup> Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*, 27.

<sup>3</sup> Clough and Halley, *The Affective Turn*.

<sup>4</sup> Hardt, “What Affects Are Good For,” ix.

these antecedents significantly and directly connect to my work here, I now move to consider affect.

So if affect follows after the concern for the body and the concern for emotions, how is it distinguished as something else, if not something new? How affect differs is in the particular and pointed way that affect also implicates thought and consciousness. “A focus on affects certainly does draw attention to the body and emotions, but it also introduces an important shift. The challenge of the perspective of the affect resides primarily in the syntheses it requires. This is, in the first place, because affect refers equally to the body and the mind; and, in the second, because it involves both reason and the passions.<sup>5</sup> It is closely linked with many concepts of embodiment in that embodiment also acknowledges the inseparable nature of bodies and thought—the role of bodies in experiencing and understanding the world. However, affect looks specifically at a unique aspect of perception, but more accurately termed affection. Affect implicates the body-mind in the interstitial space between perception and action. Through this interstitial space, theories of affect provide a potent arena to examine the interconnected nature of processes of mind and body, and the way processes that go unseen and unconsidered, never-the-less, play a significant role in experience.

Theories of affect are complicated by imprecision in language and the lack of a “vocabulary specific to affect.” Brian Massumi make this point and claims our existing “vocabulary has derived from theories of signification that are still wedded to structure.”<sup>6</sup> Affect is used to designate slightly differing phenomenon depending on the author addressing the concept. Sometimes it refers to the external expression of emotion, sometimes to emotions themselves. Other authors, such as Sedgwick, follow Silvan Tomkins’ work on affect. “Tomkins

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<sup>5</sup> Hardt, “What Affects Are Good For,” ix.

<sup>6</sup> Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*, 27.

understood affect in terms of specific physiological responses that then give rise to various effects, which may or may not translate into emotions. Affect therefore precedes emotions; affect is not conscious, but it has a dynamism, a sociality or social productivity.”<sup>7</sup> Brian Massumi takes pains to distinguish affect from emotion, preferring to link affect to intensity. Emotion is problematic for Massumi because of its assumed relationship to subjectivity. “An emotion is a subjective content...defined as personal. Emotion is qualified intensity, the conventional, consensual progressions, in to narrativizable action-reaction circuits, into function and meaning. It is intensity owned and recognized.”<sup>8</sup> Affect then for Massumi following Deleuze, is pre-personal. This is a distinction that also helps many to avoid renewal of the centrality of the human subject.

Deleuze considers affect in terms of force and intensity, as a receptivity and a capability to act. All things have the capacity to affect and to be affected. This highlights the way that body-minds are embedded in the world, moved by it and moving it in turn. This is my interest in affect. Referring back to Spinoza, Hardt writes, “the mind’s power to think corresponds to its receptivity to external ideas; and the body’s power to act corresponds to its sensitivity to other bodies.”<sup>9</sup> Thinking is not a separate process from feeling and acting. The body, mind, and world are continuous. There are no discrete, bounded bodies acting in a world of wholly separate objects, but all are moving together. Affect thus helps problematize the fixed distinction between subject and object, self and other.

Some authors, Massumi for one, promote an affective turn because of what they see as an impasse in cultural criticism or a sense of the limitations of a poststructuralist emphasis on

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<sup>7</sup> Wissinger, “Always on Display,” 232.

<sup>8</sup> Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*, 28.

<sup>9</sup> Hardt, “What Affects Are Good For,” x.

linguistics. I do not see affect as against poststructuralism or an alternative to ideological criticism but as an addition/coupling with. I am not comfortable with the degree to which Massumi and others suggest affect as a turn away from poststructuralism. The language of “turning” is not helpful in this sense as it creates easy opposition of bad “old” theory and good “new” theory. Perhaps it could be thought as a turning toward, but we do not have to drop the tools we are already using to pick up new ones. Despite this one departure, I align my project with a good deal of Massumi’s work. I believe that affect has a valuable place within cultural criticism, but we must also attend to the ways that affect works to reproduce dominant social structures. Affect may not be controllable, but it does not attach to objects randomly. Within Eve Sedgwick’s reading of Silvin Tomkins she is excited by the notion that “any affect may have any ‘object.’ This is the basic source of complexity of human motivation and behavior.”<sup>10</sup> While it may be true that any affect can couple with any object, it should also be noted that some affects cluster around some object, and subjects, to a greater extent. This is not innocent coincidence but is tied to dominant social structures and norms, in part perhaps because of the variability of what objects are in reach for different individuals. People can only be affected by the objects that come near, as Ahmed might say. And certainly some objects are more likely than others to produce a given affect. An affect might itself be a kind of object if the affective feeling of one individual is thought to influence the affect of another.

Affect is a direct bodily force or intensity and can often act in surprising ways, but it is connected to macro level power structures. Deleuze writes of molecular and molar and while the molecular seems to be the level where positive changes can be instigated, Deleuze does not lose sight of the ongoing relationship to the molar. Affect may, in some sense, operate at the

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<sup>10</sup> Sedgwick, *Shame and Its Sisters*, 7.

molecular but this does not mean that it operates autonomously, independent from cultural construction. To consider a more molar perspective, I will look at how seeking positive affect can maintain dominant social structure. I am inspired here in part by the work of Sara Ahmed and specifically *The Promise of Happiness*. We chase after the good life because it promises positive affect. Culture constructs norms in such a way as to make it seem as common sense that certain things will be happy things.

### **Affect as Emotion**

In ... affective economies, emotions do things, and they align individuals with communities—or bodily space with social space—through the very intensity of their attachments. Rather than seeing emotions as psychological dispositions, we need to consider how they work, in concrete and particular ways, to mediate the relationship between the psychic and the social, and between the individual and the collective.

Sarah Ahmed, "Affective Economies"

The present is not enough. It is impoverished and toxic for queers and other people who do not feel the privilege of majoritarian belonging, normative tastes, and "rational" expectations.

José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*

In the Deleuzian conception of affect, it is a pre-personal event that comes before action and before emotion proper. This would suggest then that when we address emotion we are dealing with the personal. However, I contend that we conceive of emotions as phenomenon that do not reside exclusively in the interior of the subject but circulate between bodies and objects and other bodies. Sara Ahmed proposes that emotions travel in what she terms "affective economies." In other words, emotions work as a form of capital. Affect does not reside positively in the sign or commodity, but is produced only as an effect of its circulation. I am using "the economic" to suggest that emotions circulate and are distributed across a social as well as

psychic field.”<sup>11</sup> Emotions do things in the way they circulate, in the directions of movement and attachment. I want to consider the ramifications of conceding that emotions are personal but also consider emotion as something that is not contained solely within the subject that is simply expressed outwardly. Emotions might designate a force moving between subjects and objects, neither inside nor outside but interconnecting between. “Emotions are not simply ‘within’ or ‘without’ but...they create the very effect of the surfaces or boundaries of bodies and worlds.”<sup>12</sup>

In what follows, I will consider Sara Ahmed’s *The Promise of Happiness* in dialog with Judith Halberstam’s *The Queer Art of Failure*. Happiness promises a good life for those who follow the right path, who have the *option* of following the right path. I will juxtapose this with what it might mean to fail to be happy, as well as fail to achieve success. In Chapter 4, I will then follow with a consideration of affect at the molecular level, as a more physiologically impactful force. Here I will look to Masumi’s and Deleuze’s work on affect. And at every level I will consider the relationship between affect and art practice.

Affects can be productive. They have the capacity to direct our attention, to move us toward some things and away from others. Arguably the most sought after affect would be what is frequently termed happiness. This project is not intent on swinging over to the opposite side of the binary of rational/emotional, but rather to look for ways to break down the separation. In much contemporary US culture emotions are devalued. They are *out of control*; they degrade the illusion of the rational human. Interestingly though, some emotions are exempt; for instance happiness. There is still some gendering here. If a man is too joyful, his masculinity might fall suspect to question. But overall, happiness seems to be an accepted and even actively sought after emotion.

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<sup>11</sup> Ahmed, "Affective Economies," 120.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 117.

## Happy Affect

Happiness is the ultimate affect, or the affect that is elevated as the ultimate goal. Surely, everyone wants to be happy. Even if one does not express happiness as the goal, happiness is enmeshed with things believed to bring happiness. In effect, happiness can encompass so many other goals: obtaining money and success; marriage; children; all the normative signs of the good life. Perhaps a related phenomenon to the affective turn, Sara Ahmed writes of the ‘happiness turn,’ pointing to the number of recent publications with happiness as their subject, the rise in reference to happiness in the media, and scholars investigating the ‘science of happiness.’ So many efforts to promote happiness and most seem to assume that happiness is inherently good and that a life well lived is a life in pursuit of happiness. Ahmed expresses skepticism that happiness is inherently good and asks, “What does happiness do?”<sup>13</sup> How does moving in the direction of happiness shape the world? Emotions are never innocent or isolated from other forces in the world. What role does the promise of happiness play in the maintenance of hegemonic norms?

Some things in the world have become associated with happiness or assumed to bring about happiness. Ahmed refers to these as “happiness-causes.” In many accounts of what promotes happiness, marriage is placed at the top of the list. The science of happiness demonstrates a correlation between happiness and marriage and then reads the correlation as cause.<sup>14</sup> If people believe that marriage is good and it is crucial to living the good life, does this influence their self-reporting about their level of happiness? What if we associate happiness not just with the good life but with good people? Ahmed makes the point that we come to associate happiness as part of the character of certain people; it is a ‘trait’ that some people possess and

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<sup>13</sup> Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 6.

others do not. In that we associate happiness with all that is good, we also tend to favor those people who possess this happy trait. Those who feel good are good; conversely, those who feel bad are bad. To be unhappy is read as failure, or perhaps worse, a refusal. We cannot lose sight of the fact that we live in a world where some people have an easier path to happiness, or they have a path that makes happiness more likely. What is not acknowledged is the privilege of this path. Happiness as a social good makes an easy critique of those who are critical of contemporary culture: “feminist killjoys,” “unhappy queers,” or “melancholic migrants.”<sup>15</sup> Happiness makes for good workers and good consumers in the ever-receding goal of happiness that spurs the momentary high of the newly purchased.

Insistence on happiness also obscures the number of people actually living lives of drudgery and even misery. At the same time that the science of happiness is compelling people to have positive attitudes, pharmaceutical companies are selling record numbers of anti-depressant drugs. If good people are happy then when people face real unhappy situations they are compelled to, at least not speak of it, and ideally not think of it, less they risk being bad people: lonely, antisocial, neurotic. Meanwhile so few seem to be asking why so many people are failing at being happy. Maybe it is not a character flaw in the individual but something systemically wrong with dominant society. Ahmed is struck by how the failure of so many to be happy has not led to a challenge of “social ideals.”<sup>16</sup> Happiness scholars are surprised when what is thought to bring happiness does not deliver its promise. One cited paradox is the fact that greater wealth has not produced greater happiness. Despite this failed association, people still hold to social ideals and read the failure as resulting from not adhering closely enough to these ideals. Even marriage often fails to be a happiness cause, but marriage is still held to be the

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<sup>15</sup> Ibid.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid., 7.



ultimate goal in our heteronormative society.

José Esteban Muñoz, Heather Love, and Judith Halberstam worry that contemporary gay and lesbian politics are adopting an emotional “positivism.” Love’s “compulsory happiness,” Muñoz’s “banal optimism,” or Halberstam’s “toxic positivity,” all express a concern that some may be following too closely to the normative path to happiness. Heather Love cautions against a “compulsory happiness” that seems to be emerging in some recent queer theory: “There are, of course, many reasons for pursuing a politics of gay happiness, not only because gays and lesbians do deserve some happiness for their pains, but also because a great deal of anti-gay propaganda still feeds on the assumption that homosexuality is tragic. So, while it is true that we need accounts of queer joy, in this historical moment of enforced happiness, attention to queer unhappiness remains paramount.”<sup>17</sup> The good and happy life has strong associations with heterosexual couples and the dominant social structures of marriage and family. Marriage as a happiness cause may be caught up in the neoliberal gay and lesbian political focus on marriage rights. If one deviates from this path one is threatened with unhappiness or worse.

If the queer life is imagined at all, it is imagined as unhappy. Some conservative figures take the association between homosexuality and unhappiness so far as to believe that unhappiness, in the form of “loneliness and sadness, profound feelings of inadequacy, mistrust and fear,” actually causes one to become homosexual.<sup>18</sup> Perhaps it is more likely that being queer in a straight world might lead to a certain degree of unhappiness. While the association of unhappiness and queerness is troubling, it should not simply be covered over or erased for the sake of seeming happy, or putting up a cheerful front for others so that they can be happy. “We can see too the importance of embracing the unhappy queer, rather than simply placing our hopes

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<sup>17</sup> Love, “Compulsory Happiness,” 62-63.

<sup>18</sup> *Ibid.*, 62.

in an alterative figure of the happy queer. The unhappy queer is unhappy with the world that reads queers as unhappy. The risk of promoting the happy queer is that the unhappiness of this world could disappear from view. *We must stay unhappy with this world.*<sup>19</sup> Muñoz is also concerned about what he terms a “banal optimism,” and argues this is something to be avoided, but he is also wary of a “political pessimism.” He opposes a “certain romance of negativity” but not to the extent that excludes the political potential of any kind of negative affect.<sup>20</sup> We must avoid a binary opposition here, as in all critical thinking. Negative affects or “sentiments” can function as a kind of “political refusal,” a refusal of the dominant culture that has all too often created a state of hopelessness in the minoritarian subject.<sup>21</sup>

Emotion is thought of as a highly personal and interior phenomenon. But this notion helps solidify the boundaries between interior and exterior and between private and public. The rigid boundary between private and public has long been the object of criticism within feminist theory. It is a way of hiding systemic problems under the ruse of personal responsibility. If something is a personal matter, then it is of no concern to anyone outside of that unique individual. Crossing and confusing the boundaries of the private and the public is a potentially potent strategy. It is also a matter of concern within queer theory. Here I align myself with the queer project as expressed by Berlant:

The queer project we imagine is not just to destigmatize those average intimacies, not just to give access to the sentimentality of the couple for persons of the same sex, and definitely not to certify as properly private the personal lives of gays and lesbians. Rather, it is to support forms of affective, erotic, and personal living that are public in the sense

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<sup>19</sup> Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, 105.

<sup>20</sup> Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 12.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*, 177.

of accessible, available to memory, and sustained through collective activity.<sup>22</sup>

Dominant notions of what constitutes private and personal determine what is appropriate for public discourse and for political action. If queer folks keep their sexuality and intimacies to themselves, this makes the public sphere a more comfortable place for the heteronormative. The aberrant are hidden away within the normative assumptions of properly private matters. It also obscures the way in which the private is structured to perpetuate heteronormativity through the presumptive family form. Works that are affective and are not just revealing of the individual, personal emotions of the artist; but I will argue this work breaks down the boundary between public and private, the binary construction that hides the private in order to create the illusion of sameness and normalcy.

### **Félix González-Torres: Art of Affect**

*Private loss is restructured and becomes public art.*

José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*

Félix González-Torres was an artist whose work put the private out into public spaces. In

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<sup>22</sup> Berlant and Warner, "Sex in Public," 562.

the *Untitled* (1991), the artist created a black-and-white photograph of his unmade bed. This image was enlarged and displayed on twenty-four billboards throughout New York City. It is tightly framed and presents the upper section of the bed drawing the viewer's attention to the two pillows that clearly show the impressions left behind by two heads. The imprints from two bodies create a pronounced sense of absence and the simple composition against the chaotic surrounds of the city creates a sense of quiet stillness. Anyone viewing the work can make a connection with a recently occupied bed. The bed is a place of intimacy, as well as a place of passion and lust, or rest and recuperation. If one knows more about González-Torres, or even the sense of the crisis facing the queer community in the 1980s, the work takes on another layer of meaning/feeling. His partner died of an AIDS-related illness in 1991. González-Torres does not show us his grief, but he shows a space of intimate connections and profound loss. This is a space we can imagine occupying. Writing about González-Torres, bell hooks says that his "work disrupts boundaries, challenges us to see and acknowledge in public space all that we have been encouraged to reveal only in private. Bringing us face to face with our emotional vulnerability, our lack of control over our bodies, our intense longing for nurturance...this art restores the primacy of our bond with flesh."<sup>23</sup>

The work deals with privatizing emotions but does not represent the personal identity of the artist. Affect allows González-Torres to deal with political issues in a impactful manner without having to narrow and restrict his identity into a typical representation, or be read as a predictable identity no matter what is actually present in the representation. Muñoz, along with many others, points out how minoritarians are either absent from cultural representation or restricted to a very limiting representation. Muñoz's term minoritarian refers to "citizen-subjects

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<sup>23</sup> bell hooks. *Art on My Mind*, 49-50.

who, due to antagonisms within the social such as race, class, and sex, are debased within the majoritarian public sphere.”<sup>24</sup> Almost any way minoritarian individuals represents themselves will be read against the expected stereotypical or exoticized dominant expectation. González-Torres gets at private material without having to present himself as specimen. Relaying González-Torres’s rejection of simplistic and restricting notions of identity politics, Muñoz argues that González-Torres manages to achieve “disidentity.”<sup>25</sup> “He does not counter negative representations with positive ones, but instead absents himself and his work from this dead-end street.” When asked in an interview about the “lack of an overt political or Latino content” in his work, he responded, “I’m not a good token. I don’t wear the right colors. ...Some people want to promote multiculturalism as long as they are the promoters, the circus directors.”<sup>26</sup> While not following the expected path of identity politics, his work is far from apolitical. The act of bringing the private into public spaces alone has political significance. Queer artist and activist, David Wojnarowicz proclaimed: “To make the *private* into something *public* is an action that has terrific repercussions in the pre-invented world. The government has the job of maintaining the day to day illusion of the ONE TRIBE NATION. Each public disclosure of a private reality becomes something of a magnet that can attract others with a similar frame of reference; thus each public disclosure of a fragment of private reality serves as a dismantling tool against the illusion of ONE-TRIBE NATION; it lifts the curtains for a brief peek and reveals the probable existence of literally millions of tribes.”<sup>27</sup> González-Torres work is political also in how it confronts the viewer with issues of grief and specifically grief over the loss of a minoritarian

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<sup>24</sup> Muñoz, *Crusing Utopia*, 56.

<sup>25</sup> Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 164.

<sup>26</sup> *Ibid.*, 165.

<sup>27</sup> Wojnarowicz, *Tongues of Flame*, 108.

subject.

In “Violence, Mourning, Politics,” Judith Butler asks what “*makes for a grievable life?*” She also states, “Loss has made a tenuous ‘we’ of us all.”<sup>28</sup> I posit González-Torres’s work addresses these same issues. He is, in a way, insisting that a queer man who dies from AIDS is grievable. Those who have died from AIDS are not unfortunate statistics either held at a distance or disappeared from consciousness altogether. Perhaps, as Butler further asserts, “There is less a dehumanizing discourse at work here than a refusal of discourse that produces dehumanization as a result.”<sup>29</sup> Our shared vulnerability to loss is potentially something that might bring us closer to a sense of relationality, interconnectivity, a “tenuous we.” The experience of mourning the queer life in a public space involves a multitude.

“Many people think that grief is privatizing, that it returns us to a solitary situation and is, in that sense, depoliticizing.” Butler continues, “But I think it furnishes a sense of political community of a complex order, and it does this first of all by bringing to the fore the relational ties that have implications for theorizing fundamental dependency and ethical responsibility.”<sup>30</sup> Emotions are also private because they have no place in the public. Publicity is the realm of rational discourse and people are required to be in control of their emotions. Emotions are a sign of weakness and lack of self-discipline. Emotions are an intrusion when they occur in public spaces. And emotions are of course gendered in notable ways such that this weakness is only tolerable in women, but only because a certain weakness is expected of women. However, this tolerance of emotional weakness has its limits. Beyond this limit, the public characterizes women as irrational, hysterical, and even dangerous.

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<sup>28</sup> Butler, “Violence, Mourning, Politics,” 10.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>30</sup> Butler, “Violence, Mourning, Politics,” 12.

It is difficult to imagine that we do not all feel grief. Butler writes of human vulnerability and how we are “undone by each other.” We are undone in grief, and she claims this reveals that we are undone by the desires that lead us to make intimate attachments in the first place. Our interconnectedness is revealed by grief. In losing someone, one’s own sense of self is altered and so is the “notion of ourselves as autonomous and in control.”<sup>31</sup> The bonds of flesh that hooks refers to also entail vulnerability, to lose through grief and bodily harm. This vulnerability can be a motive for some to seek even greater control and “fantasy of mastery,” but it does not have to. A recognition of our mutual vulnerability might heighten our sense of “collective responsibility for the physical lives of one another.”<sup>32</sup> It is important to note that we are not all equally vulnerable to some kinds of loss. Queer bodies are often targeted for violence and live in a world with greater vulnerability. Likewise not all losses are publically acknowledged as loss.

Grief is a private matter but obituaries give public notice of the loss of some individuals. Some people are publically mourned and memorialized. The US does not memorialize those who died in Iraq or Afghanistan beyond the US soldiers. Iraqi artist, Wafaa Bilal, has done a performance piece, *...And Counting*, which memorializes Iraqis who died at the same time as it memorialized the deceased US soldiers. Bilal had a map of Iraq laved out on his back and tattooed in the names of Iraqi cities. He then had 100,000 of dots tattooed in green UVA ink to represent the casualties incurred in the corresponding cities. Yet another layer of dots were tattooed to represent dead Iraqis but these dots were created with a special ink that was only visible under UV light. In normal lighting conditions, all one would see would be the U.S. soldiers and the Iraqi deaths would remain invisible. While he was undergoing the tattoo process,

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<sup>31</sup> Butler, “Violence, Mourning, Politics,” 13.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*, 30.

audience members would read from a list of the names of deceased Iraqi citizens.<sup>33</sup> Do these deaths remain invisible in the U.S. because these lives are ungrievable? What would an emotional response to the loss of these lives mean? Would it be a loss of control, a sign of weakness, or an acknowledgement of the shared vulnerability and interconnectedness? What would it mean to be interconnected with “the enemy”? Bilal felt the pain of this loss, and had this pain marked on his flesh. This was a very personal loss. He lost family members in the war, and the war was a kind of grief that was felt for a loss of place as well. Exiled from his home by war, having his country forever altered by a foreign power, also brought grief, personally felt, but with great political significance. It is also important to recognize “the radically inequitable ways that corporeal vulnerability is distributed globally.”<sup>34</sup>

González-Torres created another kind of public memorial for his partner in the piece, *Untitled (Portrait of Ross)* 1991. This work consists of 175 pounds of hard candy in colorful wrappers piled up in the corner of a gallery. At least it starts out each day as 175 pounds of candy. Viewers are invited to take a piece of candy from the pile, thus the amount of candy dwindles over the course of the day and is then replenished at the start of a new day. One might approach this work with associations of happiness and childlike delight until one realizes the significance of the weight of the candy. *Portrait of Ross* refers to Ross Laycock, González-Torres’s partner. When he was diagnosed as HIV positive the doctor set his ideal weight at 175 pounds. When we consume the happy candy we are metaphorically consuming the body of Ross. We are involved; we are implicated. Are we being asked to grieve the loss or celebrate the life, or, more likely, both? Moreover, as hooks points out, we are pulled in “not simply through empathy with the artist but by way of our own relationship to loss, to absence, to leave-taking, to

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<sup>33</sup> Bilal, “Interview with Amy Goodman.”

<sup>34</sup> Butler, “Violence, Mourning, Politics,” 19.



remembered grief.”<sup>35</sup> But I think it is important to consider this work as not only about loss. It is complicated by the relationality of the work and the community emergent in the experience of the work. Moreover, it is complicated by sensuality. In the moment we are not asked to eat a humble piece of bread that might befit the mourning of a life, but we are instead asked to enjoy a sweet treat. González-Torres said of this aspect of the work, “I’m giving you this sugary thing; you put it in your mouth and you suck on someone else’s body. And in this way, my work becomes part of so many other people’s bodies ... For just a few seconds, I have put something sweet in someone’s mouth and that is very sexy.”<sup>36</sup> Emotions are never singular and autonomous; rather they are a complex of intertwined and resonant multiplicity. They are also not removed from processes of thinking. The work is affective by drawing the audience into the work. It affects their bodies when they ingest the candy. The pleasure of the sweetness of the candy and the disjunction of the grief defies the opposition of thought and emotion in that the emotion is dependent on thinking through the significance of the material. Simply recognizing the bed may spur memory and feeling but to access the further layers of feeling one has to think on some level. I would argue that these are not separate actions but are deeply interconnected.

The erotic nature of affect, implicated in the González-Torres quote above, is more obvious in *Untitled (Go-Go Dancing Platform)*, in which González-Torres places a small platform about two feet high with lights framing the edge in the gallery. Periodically a man dressed in jockey shorts dances on this small stage. Perhaps equally challenging to binaries of public and private, this work places a queer body of color in public space. “This Latino body, recontextualized within the space of the art gallery, disrupts its space.”<sup>37</sup> The go-go dancer

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<sup>35</sup> hooks, *Art on My Mind*, 50-51.

<sup>36</sup> Bishop, *Installation Art*, 115.

<sup>37</sup> Muñoz, *Disidentifications*, 172.

associated with the “semiprivacy of dark clubs” performing in a high art setting challenges the opposition of private/public and high/low culture. The performance of the queer body and the eroticized Latino queer body is suddenly high art. Muñoz writes about how the desire for the queer Latino body is often “compartmentalized” and “privatized” in gay male culture.<sup>38</sup>

Presented with a lone figure dancing with headphones and a Walkman, we the viewer cannot hear the music. The dancing becomes something else without the music. One becomes conscious of silence. A body on display for erotic enjoyment is certainly nothing new for a gallery or museum space. But there is nothing coy about a go-go dancer. Blatant and unashamed, the dancer performs the ‘semiprivate’ the ‘compartmentalized’ in a space that is about a public looking, a publicity.

Muñoz in his recent book, *Cruising Utopia*, expounds the importance of hope. Through a reading of Ernst Bloch, he offers hope as a “critical affect.”<sup>39</sup> “On some level, utopia is about a politics of emotion; it is central to what Ernst Bloch called a ‘principle of hope.’ It is my belief that minoritarian subjects are cast as hopeless in a world without utopia. This is not to say that hope is the only modality of emotional recognition that structures belonging; sometimes shame, disgust, hate, and other “negative” emotions bind people together.”<sup>40</sup> We cannot erase unhappiness in a rush to find the success of happiness, especially when the path to this happiness means conforming to the ‘happiness causes’ established by the heteronormative world. The way things are, the way that is presented as natural and inevitable, is unacceptable. “It [the present] is impoverished and toxic for queers and other people who do not feel the privilege of majoritarian

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid.

<sup>39</sup> Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 4.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 97.

belonging, normative tastes, and “rational” expectations.”<sup>41</sup> When it is rational to just accept things the way they are, then surely the failure to be rational might be a path to hope.

### **Queer Failure**

While Ahmed hopes to “unravel” happiness in part by making explicit what it means to be unhappy, in something of a parallel path, Judith Halberstam, in *The Queer Art of Failure*, champions the reconsideration of failure and the success/failure binary. In a society where success equates with economic gain and winning in a competitive, hierarchal world, why not take a closer look at failure as a way out of this mind set? Failure may “offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world.”<sup>42</sup> Happiness is certainly linked with notions of success. To refuse the call to mandatory happiness and stand out as an unhappy queer negotiates a different relationship to the success/failure opposition. Queer failure is about queers failing to be normal and not having to keep trying. Failing to succeed may sometimes be preferable to success, especially if success means perpetuating a society built on inequality; means living up to a patriarchal ideal, white supremacy, and violent gender norms. Queers have a different relationship to failure, considering that they know that socially/systemically legitimized success is simply not an option. Heteronormativity leaves no room for queer existence except in assimilation. Queer failure may be a good strategy in a time when so much political focus seem directed toward the heteronormative model of success. The feeling within a neoliberal positivist gay and lesbian politics may be that success is nearly in reach. For some few white, middle class gays and lesbians this may be true. Access to the dominant structures of proper families starts to seem feasible to some directed by a desire for the privileges of this life as well as a sense of belonging. This may look like political success. Yet is it? So perhaps we should attend to failure.

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<sup>41</sup> Muñoz, *Crusing Utopia*, 27.

<sup>42</sup> Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 2.

Who decides what is a measure of success? What does striving for success do in the world? Success, like happiness, is also associated with maintaining norms. The paths to success are pathways to a normative life. Halberstam claims “failure allows us to escape the punishing norms that discipline behavior and manage human development with the goal of delivering us from unruly childhoods to orderly and predictable adulthoods.”<sup>43</sup> And just as the prime happiness measure is proclaimed to be marriage, marriage is a sign of a successful relationship and a step toward mature adulthood. Queer failure denies the expectation of repeating the typical family structure, which is also associated with being a successful adult. “‘Advances’ such as gay marriage and the increasing media visibility of well-heeled gays and lesbians threaten to obscure the continuing denigration and dismissal of queer existence. One may enter the mainstream on the condition that one breaks ties with all those who cannot make it—the nonwhite and the nonmonogamous, the poor and the genderdeviant, the fat, the disabled, the unemployed, the infected, and a host of unmentionable others.”<sup>44</sup>

Being a responsible adult means having a secure job. The work ethic associated with success serves to maintain a consumer capitalist society. Diligent workers competing for a good job ensures productivity. It is also aligned with the myth of progress. The promise of working your way up in the company serves as a justification for all of the ‘entry-level’ jobs. All you have to do is work hard and success will be yours. Low-wage jobs are just a step toward success, which belies all the people who are stuck at this level. They are erased in the narrative of progress and success. They are invisible, or they just haven’t worked hard enough. What if success is not in reach for some people? What if this condition is systemic to capitalism? This model of success asks people without the means for success to try, try, try again. Perhaps, “if

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<sup>43</sup> Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 3.

<sup>44</sup> Love, “Compulsory Happiness,” 10.

success requires so much effort, then maybe failure is easier in the long run and offers different rewards.”<sup>45</sup>

In *Queer Art of Failure*, Halberstam gives us numerous examples of reading art with queer failure. One example is a photo series from 2001 by Tracy Moffat titled, *Fourth*. These photographs depict Olympic athletes who have come in fourth place in their competition.<sup>46</sup> Typically the photographs are taken at just that moment of realization that they have lost. Weeks later they can talk about the joy of just being in the Olympics, but in that moment it is difficult to hide their devastation. The feeling is evident in the posture of the body, the expression of faces, even in images where the expression is one of blankness. Failure here is in a world consumed by success. Athletic competition at the international level represents a great deal of commitment to success. The commitment is not only to the individual success of the athlete but also to nation building. Halberstam makes the point that television broadcasts in the US are orchestrated around those athletes most likely to win medals for the country. It is no coincidence that the richest countries experience the greatest success. At this level of competition even the losers are performing amazing feats, yet for someone to win in this context a whole lot of others have to lose. What does it mean for these athletes to feel miserable even though they have really just done something quite amazing, something that even puts them in a rarefied category of an elite few?

Queer failure involves “investing in counterintuitive modes of knowing such as failure and stupidity; we might read failure, for example, as a refusal of mastery, a critique of the assumptive connections within capitalism between success and profit, and as a counter

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<sup>45</sup> Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 3.

<sup>46</sup> *Ibid.*, 92-93.

hegemonic discourse of losing.<sup>47</sup> Returning to González-Torres's work I explore some of Halberstam's claims for a queer art of failure. González-Torres's work can be read in relation to a "refusal of mastery" and as a complication to the relationship of capitalist accumulation and success. His work also relates to Halberstam's claims for the queer resistance of collectivity.<sup>48</sup> Emphasizing the collective over the heroic individualism so closely wedded to success in the US, offers another way to resist dominant cultural logics. To acknowledge the collective is to acknowledge the dependence of the individual and question the illusion of self-sufficiency. González-Torres's artworks and artistic process draw on notions of the collective.

"Without a public these works are nothing, nothing," González-Torres insisted. "I need the public to complete the work."<sup>49</sup> This involvement of the audience also dislocates the typical relationship of viewer to art expected in typical encounters with art. These encounters usually take place in spaces designated for the consumption of high culture. González-Torres disrupts the usual relationship of viewer and work and the common consumer capitalist function of such spaces. The distance separating the work and the viewer is also broken down. The quotidian imperative, "don't touch the art," is overruled and, in fact, directly countermanded. bell hooks speaks to the potential this offers to those of us who experience the work. "Once we embrace his vision of the collapse of public and private, the convergence of the individual and the collective, we open ourselves to the possibility of communion and community."<sup>50</sup> Through a failure to perform the proper role of the author/artist, to take control of the meaning and demonstrate a mastery over the medium of expression, González-Torres promotes an interconnected

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<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 11-12.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 29.

<sup>49</sup> Buskirk, *The Contingent Object*, 154.

<sup>50</sup> hooks, *Art on My Mind*, 53.

relationship within a multiplicity of participants. Individualism gives up some ground to community.

González-Torres's practice not only puts work of a private nature out in the public by way of gallery or museum spaces; he also makes a point to ensure that some of his works at least will make it outside into the larger public realm. Along the way, he disrupts the way art operates as an autonomous commodity; he produces a failure in the capitalist exchange. He produces images intended for artistic display on billboards. For instance, spaces usually dedicated to commercial advertising instead host a photograph of an unmade bed. In contracting with a buyer, he stipulates that anytime the work is to be exhibited in a gallery it must also be displayed on at least one public billboard space.<sup>51</sup> This confounds the operation of an art object that is owned by an individual. The owners cannot simply do with the work as they please. It also ensures that the work reaches a wider audience by extending outside the exhibition space proper. It puts the art collector in a different position. While the collector typically takes responsibility for upkeep of the work, which may produce additional expenses beyond the purchase price, now the collector also must purchase space on a billboard and produce a print to size. And this is not the only work that complicates the relationship of owner and object; the exhibition space must rejuvenate the candy spills every day they are on exhibit. The purchase of the work is a commitment to furnish what functions as a type of gift to the gallery patron. Of course most museums charge an entry fee so the candy is not always without a price. But the process of exchange is problematized and the work is resistant to the idea of the artwork as commodity.

González-Torres does not demonstrate mastery over any particular medium. In engaging with common objects that are ready made he sidesteps the expectation of the artist as master

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<sup>51</sup> Buskirk, *The Contingent Object*, 198.

creator. This is certainly not unique to González-Torres's work alone, but it is yet another element of González-Torres's embracing of what Halberstam would call queer failure. In *Untitled (Last Light)* created in 1993, González-Torres uses common everyday light bulbs strung together in a line of twenty-four bulbs. González-Torres not only refused mastery in the selection of common objects but also in the way that he allowed the work to be hung in any configuration desired. They could be hung from the ceiling, against a wall, or piled on the floor. He gave up control over the configuration and display of the work in favor of collective involvement.

Two ordinary battery-powered clocks hang side by side in *Untitled (Perfect Couple)*. They start out in sync but as the battery's power drains at different rates, the clock hands fall out of sync and no longer match up perfectly. Eventually the batteries fail entirely and are replaced. Embedded in the work is the awareness of the inevitability of failure; failure of the batteries but also the failure to be perfect, to move in perfect alignment. It also relates to the loss of González-Torres's partner, as he and Ross embodied the "perfect couple," and their lives feel out of sync due to Ross's devastating illness. The bulbs too began with a piece that displayed only two bulbs side by side. Produced just after Ross' death, it was dedicated to his birthday. Is a life cut short a failure? Life expectancies keep getting longer and the idea of a successful life is one long lived. And yet, life expectancy is not constant across different populations. Those living in poverty have a notably shorter live expectancy, and the life expectancy of those in the trans\* community is shorter still. While it may be problematic to embrace a life cut short, certainly it is not acceptable that some die young because of systemic inequality, it is nevertheless important to resist a restrictive model of living without risk. Placing value on simply staying alive without consideration of the quality of that life is problematic. Staying alive is not the same as truly living.



Shirin Neshat evidences a different relationship to failure in both her art practice and artwork. In a lecture titled, *From Photography to Cinema*, given at Berkeley in 2013, Neshat took the audience through an overview of her career.<sup>52</sup> She begins by speaking of how she was not a good artist in art school, how she barely got into a graduate program. After grad school she moved to New York and there decided that she was not an artist. The next ten years she did not engage in art production. Neshat started making work again after returning to her country of origin, Iran. There she felt the pain of feeling like an outsider in her own country and in her own family. And she felt the pain of seeing what had become of her country. She felt a need to express this pain and only then realized that her mode of expression was visual, not spoken or written language. She returned to making art, first with a series of photographs of Iranian women, *Women of Allah*. Neshat chose photography, even though she had not studied photography in school, and she had never even owned a camera. She gave up any need for mastery and through collaboration learned a new mode of working. Collaboration is like a giving up on the notion of self-sufficiency. It involves learning laterally and not only from an authorized expert. The photographs were inspired by the idea of religious martyrdom. They revolve around four objects: the veil, the weapon, poetry, and the female body. All of her work is “deeply personal” but also political. Neshat spoke of how working with the political might be a choice for certain Western artist, but for an Iranian artist it was a kind of inevitability. She gained a reputation and a degree of success in the US and Europe with these photographs. As soon as she felt she was being identified by this work she stopped making it and started working with video installations. This choice to stop making the work that was successful was risking failure, even embracing failure over financial security and professional acclaim. Again, once she achieved

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<sup>52</sup> “Shirin Neshat: From Photography to Cinema.”

success with video work, she stopped working with video and made a feature length film. She recently returned to photography after a six-year absence from the art world.

The video installation titled, *Turbulent* (1998), features two videos projected on opposite walls of the gallery space. On one side an Iranian man, wearing a white shirt, sings in front of an audience of men also wearing white shirts. When the man finishes his song and the audience applauds, he then turns toward the woman projected on the opposite wall as if waiting for her response. The woman is filmed in what appears to be the same auditorium, but she faces only empty seats, and her back is turned to the camera and the viewer's point of view. As she sings her voice shifts and become an unnatural sound. She does not turn at the end of her song and she is greeted by silence. Interestingly, the camera, which has remained fixed when filming the man, now moves around the figure. She is a fixed point. In *A Queer Time*, Halberstam writes of this piece as an example of an "aesthetic of turbulence" or in relation to what she terms as a "transgender aesthetic."<sup>53</sup> The space the gallery audience occupies is one of turbulence, being in between the two projections. "But the turbulence that Neshat's video creates is specifically a gender turbulence, and the space between the male singer and the female singer could provisionally be called a transgender space in the sense that it conjures up a site between two distinct genders where social conduct, religious doctrine, performance rituals, and cultural histories clash."<sup>54</sup> I wonder if this work does not also relate to Halberstam's aesthetics of failure. The male singer performs "successfully." He reaches his audience and moves them to applause. The female singer has no access to the means of success. But still she sings. The piece is in part about the difficulties of making art as a woman and the restrictions placed on women regarding public performance. Neshat made the choice to alter the voice of the female singer giving it an

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<sup>53</sup> Halberstam, *In a Queer Time*, 106.

<sup>54</sup> Halberstam, *In a Queer Time*, 106-107.

otherworldly quality but also a harshness, a voice infused with an element of the disruptive character of noise. It is not a clean, naturalistic, communicative song but very emotive, almost tormented. She sings in relative darkness, “failing” to connect to the world.

Both González-Torres and Neshat work in ways that challenge conventional notions of success: González-Torres through embracing connectivity and giving up mastery, Neshat through a practice that does not chase after commercial success and shows us the emotive power of a failure to communicate. In majoritarian culture, failure, though quite common, is unacceptable. We must all be winners. But most of the ways that people win necessitate that someone else, usually a lot of someone elses, must fail. To win a gold medal obviously means others must lose. Extreme wealth depends on systemic inequality. We cannot all be winners in a society that values hyper competition and capital accumulation. But we are all supposed to strive for success nonetheless, and those that are not successful, we are to believe, have simply not tried hard enough. Queer failure “is a story of art without markets, drama without a script, narrative without progress. The queer art of failure turns on the impossible, the improbable, the unlikely, and the unremarkable. It quietly loses, and in losing it imagines other goals for life, for love, for art, and for being.”<sup>55</sup> Success and happiness are the epitome of the good life, but I have shown that they are also tied to the normative life. The pursuit of happiness often follows a narrow path. Hegemonic norms mold a world that is precarious for those who stray from the path. “*We must stay unhappy with this world.*”<sup>56</sup>

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<sup>55</sup> Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure*, 88.

<sup>56</sup> Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*, 105

## Chapter Four: Affected Minds

We don't lack communication, we have too much, we lack creation. We *lack resistance to the present*.

Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy*

Everybody knows very well that in fact men think rarely, and more often under the impulse of a shock than in the excitement of a taste for thinking.

Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy*

In previous chapters I have critiqued the binary opposition of mind and body, in part by insisting on the indivisibility of mind and body, in part by reasserting the body in the equation, and in part by insisting on the productivity of emotion and the queering of failure. In this chapter I want to again look at affect but this time I examine affect as molecular–affecting without being named or recognized and immediately enveloped by common sense opinion. I want to take up affect to help instigate the failure of reason, the limits of knowing, and explore the affectivity of the non-human. The affect in this chapter will be closer to Deleuze and Guattari's conception of the term and will only tangentially address conventional emotions.<sup>1</sup> Here I will consider affect in the sense of a being's sensitivity to being affected, or impacted by, and its capability to affect something else. This correlates with the notion that people are interconnected; they are affected and affecting. The logical mind cannot separate out emotions and sensation, and the human being

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<sup>1</sup> See Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism And Schizophrenia* (University of Minnesota Press, 1987). Or Deleuze and Guattari, *What is philosophy?* (Columbia University Press, 1994).

cannot separate out the surrounding world. Humans are affected and affecting, signaling the untenable nature of the individualistic, autonomous subject. This subject is founded on the duality of mind and body but also on the duality of nature and culture. In being affected we must acknowledge that both nature and culture have a profound impact on us, and hopefully this will also point to the profound impact that we have on our surroundings. For the rational mind to set itself apart there must be an irrational body. For culture to be set apart there must be an opposing nature. In essence, the domain of the rational mind is culture and the domain of the body is nature. Culture is the high achievement of the rational mind, forming the world from the raw materials of passive nature. I challenge both the assumptions of the rational, active mind and the assumptions about the passive, fixed natural world. I present a conception of nature as dynamic and forceful and challenge the idea that there is any meaningful distinction between nature and culture, while also complicating the distinction between subject and object.

I have stressed in preceding chapters the necessity of subverting the mind/body duality. I am troubled by the idea that the mind is something separate, something that if we are dedicated enough, work at it hard enough, can be shielded from the contamination of emotion, contaminations of the body and all its automatic responses and desires. What if thought itself is just another emotion or desire, not a thing that is different in kind? What if the desire to understand is the same stuff as the desire to eat? I argue that we would do well to acknowledge or even embrace emotion, affect, as a part of thought. To the extent that we operate with the idea that we can access a purely logical mind, we are deluding ourselves. But are we doing more harm than just this self-delusion? Certainly we can connect the operation of expelling the emotional aspects of thought with the expulsion of the unwanted “other” in so many dualistic pairs. Emotion is feminized and racialized. Emotion is the “natural” that must be suppressed,

controlled. Our concept of the rational mind is a construction but a thoroughly naturalized construction. It is how we represent the mind; it is how we recognize the mind, and it makes other possibilities unrecognizable, incomprehensible, unthinkable.

Turning toward the mind then, I now look more closely at strategies to take down the constructs of rationalism. Not only does the body profoundly influence thinking, but I argue that the thinking mind does not work the way common assumptions would suggest. I argue, in short, that not only is the rational mind not superior to the body, even if we could manage to tease apart the mind from the body, but that the mind is incapable of the kind of rational thought it is touted to proffer. An objective position is unattainable, and thought processes, emotions, motivations are not transparent to the subject that experiences them. Minds are vulnerable to all kinds of internal and external foreign bodies, and minds are often wrong. When we believe in the innate capacity for objective logical thought these minds often continue being wrong with great confidence. This wrongheadedness is making some people's lives less livable. If one thinks that their conceptions of the world are based in rational thought, it is difficult to dislodge these conceptions. Thinking that people, or at least some people, are logical beings serves to conceal bias and ignore the ways that we are permeable to the world and radically dependent on the world and each other.

Thought and affect may be linked in all operations of the mind, but perhaps they are easier to recognize in art. I am suggesting art as a boundary crossing, art as an in-between, interstitial space. Art is a site where we might find the intermingling body-mind-world to be intelligible. If we can see the interconnected nature of thought, if we can see the illegitimacy of old conceptions of the rational mind, if we can see that a reliance on this kind of mind sets us up for a dangerous fiction of how thought works, then perhaps we can think a new world. Perhaps

we can revalue affect and with it empathy, give up the illusion and desire for control over, and reconceive ourselves as part of nature and as part of each other.

I will begin this foray into the dismantling of rationalism, by means of the forces of affect, with a consideration of the theories of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. Deleuze and Guattari set forth a concept of affect as a pre-personal force. Their theory allows for art as a form of thinking and a way of contributing to the future of a people not yet here. Sensation has a role in thinking in this model, and their concept of affect deemphasizes the ego in art and acknowledges the invisible forces at play everywhere. I am hopeful about an art that can be political, that can move away from instrumentality of markets and cultural capital, and that can go beyond common sense understandings or myopic engagements with self-referential art world preoccupations. Deleuze and Guattari about write art being made for a people to come, art created for the not yet here and calling futurity into existence, and art as a resistance to the present. “Books of philosophy and works of art contain their sum of unimaginable sufferings that forewarn of the advent of a people. They have resistance in common—their resistance to death, to servitude, to the intolerable, to shame, and to the present.”<sup>2</sup>

### **Deleuzian Affect**

Art thinks no less than philosophy, but it thinks through affects and percepts.

Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy*

Artists are presenters of affects, the inventors and creators of affects. They not only create them in their work, they give them to us and make us become with them, they draw us into the compound.

Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy*

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<sup>2</sup> Deleuze and Guattari. *What is Philosophy?*, 110.

Deleuze and Guattari call on us to resist the present and propose that both art and philosophy share this potentiality. The present is full of unimaginable suffering. The present and the history of capitalism prevent the becoming subject and insist on the inevitability of the way things are now, but *creation*, of concepts and affects, can lead us to a new future. “The creation of concepts in itself calls for a future form, for a new earth and people that do not yet exist”<sup>3</sup> Artistic creation too is directed toward calling a people into existence. Deleuze and Guattari envision a people, a becoming, which resist the majority, a becoming minoritarian. The difference, for Deleuze and Guattari, between majority and minority is not one of size or percentages of the population. The majority is the dominant, normative model to which all are compelled to conform. The creative minority, creative in part because they do not or cannot conform to the existing model, this hoped for people “is not one that claims to be pure but rather an oppressed, bastard, lower, anarchical, nomadic, and irremediably minor race.”<sup>4</sup>

One might also think of the people to come as a queer people. In fact, in *Cruising Utopia*, Muñoz writes in a similar vein about a future not yet here, a queer future. Utilizing the ideas of philosophers from Bloch, Agamben, and Badiou to the phenomenology of Husserl, he writes of the “not-quite-conscious” as the “realm of potentiality that must be called on, and insisted on, if we are to look beyond the pragmatic sphere of the here and now, the hollow nature of the present. Thus I wish to argue that queerness is not quite here; it is, in the language of philosopher Giorgio Agamben, a potentiality. Alan Badiou refers to that which follows the event as the thing-that-is-not-yet-imaged, and in my estimation queerness too should be understood to have a similar valence.”<sup>5</sup> Potentiality differs from the possibility in that the possible is linked to the

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<sup>3</sup> Deleuze and Guattari. *What is Philosophy?*, 108.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 109.

<sup>5</sup> Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*, 21.



present and the real while potentiality points toward a future not yet realized. Artistic affects and philosophical concepts can help us to image the future that is not yet thought, is not yet conscious. One of the ways that art can approach this, according to Deleuze and Guattari, is through the creation of affect and the struggle with chaos and against opinion.

Deleuze and Guattari propose that art is a struggle “against the ‘clichés’ of opinion.”<sup>6</sup> Opinion functions as a barrier against chaos. Elizabeth Grosz tells us that chaos is “also known or invoked through the concepts of: the outside, the real, the virtual, the world, materiality, nature, totality, the cosmos, each of which is a narrowing and specification of chaos from a particular point of view.”<sup>7</sup> Opinion covers over chaos and makes regular and predictable forces that are anything but. I take from their concept of opinion a critique of dominant, normative ideas. “The essence of opinion is will to majority and already speaks in the name of a majority.”<sup>8</sup> Those in dominant positions determine what counts as true opinion, and opinion becomes like the recognizable sign of the dominant group and determinant of its membership. Conventions and opinions act as a shield to keep out destabilizing forces, a shielding that the artist perpetually breaks open again. Artists struggle also against chaos but “in order to bring forth a vision that illuminates it for an instant, a Sensation.”<sup>9</sup> From brief glimpses of chaos the artist finds tools to combat opinion. Art at its best does not rest on opinion but explores what might be hidden behind it, and this can have a queering effect by bringing forward what is hidden behind. Out of chaos, art isolates affects and precepts and opens up the ordered world of opinion, and as Elizabeth Grosz tells us, “affects and intensities attest to the body’s immersion and participation

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<sup>6</sup> Deleuze and Guattari. *What is philosophy?*, 204.

<sup>7</sup> Grosz, *Chaos, Territory, Art*, 27.

<sup>8</sup> Deleuze and Guattari. *What is philosophy?*, 146.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 204.

in nature, chaos, [and] materiality.”<sup>10</sup> While opinion allows the subject to ignore difference or singularities of perception in favor of a stable image of itself, affect can jar the subject out of automatic responses of recognition and into a state of thinking the new.

Affect for Deleuze and Guattari is not the equivalent of emotion or feeling per se. Affect is what happens in between perception and action. Typically, the mind-body encounters sensation and acts accordingly, but this causal ordering is not always so simple and direct. For instance, hearing a car horn, the mind-body experiences the sensation of the horn before the mind/consciousness register an awareness of it, even before the body jumps in fright if we are startled by the sound, and long before we decide to step a little further away from the road. Affect is closer to the impulses in the nervous system than to the emotion of fear that we come to label the experience after the fact. Even if the car horn is a distant vibration that does not rise to the attention of the conscious mind the vibration is still felt. Affect avoids the production of a subject/object relation but instead engenders a relation of one vibratory body acting on another. ‘I’ as a conscious subject does not register the sound but the body-mind, nevertheless, feels it. Once we recognize the sensation we can file it comfortably away without giving it any thought. However, what is compelling about affect for Deleuze is the fact that it does not necessarily result in action or recognition but does compel us to think.

There are physiological stimuli that act so fast as to be over before they reach the conscious mind, but there are also affects that slow automatic, unthinking responses. A Deleuzian affect happens when one encounters a force that, instead of leading directly to action, stops or slows the reaction. Similar perhaps to the way that Deleuze writes in *Cinema 2* about going beyond the sensory-motor response and experiencing “pure optical and sound situations.”

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<sup>10</sup> Gorsz, *Chaos, Territory, Art*, 3.

When perceptions and sensations do not immediately extend into action or habitual response, Deleuze tells us, they are allowed to directly contact thought. But Deleuze stresses that we develop a new image of thought. The mind is not the origin of thought but a point of turbulence within a multiplicity. The mind is not the ultimate attribute of the subject. “Deleuze refuses any ‘intellectual’ account of being, any account that in any way subordinates being to thought, that poses thinking as the supreme form of being.”<sup>11</sup> Deleuze want to avoid putting the mind above the body and the material. He challenges us to produce a new “image of thought” that refuses comfortable habits of thought and common sense opinion. In the next section I will address this affective queering of thought.

### **Queering Cognition**

It is not enough to disturb the sensory-motor connections. It is necessary to *combine* the optical-sound image with the enormous forces that are not those of a simply intellectual consciousness, nor of the social one, but of a profound, vital intuition.

Gilles Deleuze, *Cinema 2*

Thought rather than a common occurrence is only engaged in on occasion of a kind of shock. Deleuze opposes a notion of thought as re-presentation of the real or the recognition of a pre-given reality. The conventional image of thought is really a force of habit that simply repeats a common sense understanding that itself is built on assumptions of a common sense ordering of the world. Affect is that event that can bring about the shock to thought. Thought is not an easy and comfortable affair but is difficult and results from a disruption of ordinary processes of moving through the world. Thought occurs outside the boundaries of the existing order and challenges its bounded nature.

We are affected by all manner of things in our surroundings and in our corporeality. We

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<sup>11</sup> Hardt, “What Affects Are Good For,” xiii

are not, and cannot be, consciously aware of all these things at once, if at all. We are not self-transparent. We do not fully know what we are affected by or how we are affected by it.

Nevertheless, things outside our awareness most assuredly affect our thought processes. Many scholars have looked to psychoanalytic theory for this reason. I follow Deleuze and Guattari in rejecting psychoanalytic theory that is based on the Oedipus complex and the “daddy-mommy-me triangle.”<sup>12</sup> However, I do still hold to the general concept of drives and forces of which we remain unconscious. These forces do not have to be elaborate constructs of the psyche, however. They can sometimes entail being affected by simple stimuli or even the microorganisms living inside the body. In what follows I will describe a number of scenarios in which the thinking mind is queered through a little known understanding of perception, by the implication that certain bodily movements can affect judgment, and by the queer notion that bacteria in the intestines speak directly to the brain.

Perception of a stimulus may remain outside of awareness, and it would seem that perception can actually occur retroactively. Brian Massumi describes the research of Benjamin Libet to give an example of the enormous complexity of sensation and perception. Libet’s experiments found that a stimulus had to persist for approximately 500 milliseconds (or half a second) in order for the subject to be consciously aware of it. He was able to apply an electrical pulse to the brains of conscious patients, and he found that individuals very often respond to stimuli in time frames of less than half a second. This leads to the possibility that we are responding to stimuli of which we are not fully conscious. Our effective response is far more rapid than our conscious response. This would seem to require that we experience an odd lag between our actions and our consciousness of the “cause” of our actions. I might begin to swat at

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<sup>12</sup> Deleuze and Guattari. *Anti-Oedipus*, 51.

a fly prior to registering the fly's presence. So why do we feel a synchronicity between stimulus and response? Libet theorized that our subjective experience is backdated. He also suggested that we make decisions before we are actually aware of them. He did further experiments to confirm his hypothesis. The subject's decision to act registers as an electrical change in the brain, and it would appear that decisions can be made before one becomes aware that one has made them. According to Libet our awareness of our decision-making is also backdated. It is difficult to overlook the implication that our experience of actions and decisions are actually fabrications or in Massumi's terms "hallucination." In another section of the *Parables of the Virtual*, Massumi goes so far as to say "It is not possible to sustain a strict distinction between perception and hallucination."<sup>13</sup> Perhaps even more interestingly we are likely effectively influenced by numerous stimuli that never reach our conscious awareness, even as backdated fabrication. This includes influence on what we commonly think of as higher reasoning. As Massumi put it, "It should be noted in particular that during the mysterious half second, what we think of as "free, 'higher' functions, such as volition, are apparently being performed by autonomic, bodily reactions occurring in the brain but outside consciousness."<sup>14</sup> The bodily is part of our thought processes, even our decision making processes, whether we like it or not, whether we know it or not.

To queer the mind further, other scientific studies suggest still more ways that stimuli have unexpected influences on what we commonly think of as the mind. There have been a number of scientific studies regarding the association between smiling and judgment. Tempered with the understanding that science does not possess an unproblematic relationship to knowledge production, these studies show some intriguing correlations. One such study looked at the

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<sup>13</sup> Massumi, *Parables of the Virtual*, 155.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, 29.

correlation between certain body movements and music preference. Some subjects were asked to engage the muscles associated with smiling (by holding a pen in their teeth) while others were compelled to suppress those same muscles (by holding the pen in their lips). In brief, those smiling were statistically more likely to report a preference for the music played.<sup>15</sup> None of this necessarily means that this is biological destiny. Why this correlation exists is not explained by the study. Those executing the study may believe they have demonstrated something immutable and natural about the human animal, but there could of course be other explanation.

This same study also had the participants move their head (up and down or side to side). It is not too difficult to guess which one was associated with positive response versus negative, but the experiments involving the movements of the arm were a bit more unexpected. Contracting the muscles that would bend the arm toward the body versus pushing the arm away from the body produced a similar statistical correlation. Moving the arm toward the body produced greater positive responses. Although neither the head movement nor the arm movement was as impactful as smiling, they still produced a statistically significant result.<sup>16</sup> What I find interesting about this, and other studies like it, is that it implies that the relationship of body and mind is perhaps more reciprocal that we usually think it is. A mind can make a decision about musical preference that is informed in part by an arbitrary movement of the arm. Perhaps decisions about musical preference are not the stuff of rational thought but it is nevertheless a conscious choice made by the 'mind.' But even at the level of emotional response, these studies are telling. Typically we think that if we feel happiness or pleasure or enjoyment then we smile in response. What is the implication if, on occasion, the emotions we feel are a response to our bodily movements? Many self help books tell us that having a positive outlook

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<sup>15</sup> Cacioppo, Priester, and Berntson. "Rudimentary Determinants of Attitudes," 10.

<sup>16</sup> Cacioppo JT, JR Priester, and GG Berntson. 1993. "Rudimentary Determinants of Attitudes," 15.

will make us happier. This is one small item that serves to call into question the role of the body in judgment, in feeling, in thought. It points to a complex integration of body and mind, and embodied cognition.

Another queer influence on the mind comes from the gut. It has long been established within the medical sciences that the bacteria living in the intestines of humans play a major role in the digestion of food, not just in breaking down the food but in proper absorption of nutrients. More recently, studies are looking at the role of these bacteria on the function of the mind. One such study found that bacteria possess both “mammalian neurohormones and their receptors” which “suggests the possibility of interkingdom signaling which could represent a heretofore unrecognized avenue by which both disease and homeostasis are influenced.”<sup>17</sup> Signals are being sent from one species to another, but not only between different species, but different kingdoms. Mark Lyte, a researcher in microbial endocrinology, theorizes that the bacteria are signaling to the brain through the vagus nerve. “The ultimate result is that changes in microbial diversity...influences the function of components of the CNS (i.e. brain) as reflected in altered cognition, such as induction of anxiety-like behavior or changes in memory and learning”<sup>18</sup> Lyte even speculates as to whether the microbes might be signaling the brain as to their preferred diet. How does this fit with common conceptions about the nature of the human mind? The autonomous, rational mind is actually interconnected with billions of microorganisms and disruptions in the balance of bacteria species correlate with a “spectrum of psychiatric symptoms including depression, panic disorder and generalized anxiety.”<sup>19</sup> I believe we must change our image of thought when we come to understand that microscopic organisms living within our

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<sup>17</sup> Lyte, "The Microbial Organ in the Gut," 635.

<sup>18</sup> Lyte, "The Microbial Organ in the Gut," 635-636.

<sup>19</sup> *Ibid.*, 636.

bodies influences our brain chemistry, our emotions, and our thoughts. It is part of our common understanding that certainly things that we ingest can affect brain chemistry, but typically this is conceived of as the ingestion of medications—the product of advance medical science. Still the idea that living things, living within us, can have just as significant impact on brain processes might surprise many.

Where do we draw the boundary between human and microbe? I think the relationship described above challenges the binary between human and nonhuman, a boundary line that has been drawn with great ferocity, due to the human hubris that we are totally unique on the planet. Related to this binary is the opposition between culture and nature. The human is above the nonhuman animal just as human created culture is above nature with the implication that culture holds the promise of controlling nature. Even early feminist theory tended to keep this binary functioning as it argued for the social construction of gender. Of course that was soon complicated. In *Epistemology of the Closet*, Eve Sedgwick muses about the “buoyant enthusiasm with which feminist scholars used to greet the finding that one or other brutal form of oppression was not biological but ‘only’ cultural!”<sup>20</sup> While culture proved to be more intractable than assumed, so too did nature prove to be more dynamic. Nature was, and is, often assumed to be the stable ground on which culture acts. This leaves nature as fixed and unchanging but also as passive relative to the active forces of culture. Again I struggle with where we even draw the line of separation between the two conceptions. Generally, culture is that which is built or manipulated by human society. Are cows a part of nature or culture? Is a tree natural until it is milled into lumber? What about trees planted in regimented spacing along the side of road, absorbing the exhaust from passing cars, and trimmed to fit around the power lines? What about

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<sup>20</sup> Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet*, 41.



“natural” disasters that occur when people build cities in flood plains? Is this the force of nature alone? What seems clear to me is that what we generally think of as nature is anything but fixed, immutable, or passive. As Massumi tells us, there is no decisive boundary between the categories of culture and nature, but both are becoming. “Becoming implies an emergent process which cannot be reduced to a binarism. Just as movement is a dynamic unity with location in space, as an emergent quality of movement, culture emerges from nature but does not separate from it. With this we can reject the separation of culture and nature and instead look to emergent properties of relationality or to a “*nature-culture continuum*.”<sup>21</sup>

### **Nature Is Not Immutable**

Art is of the animal. It comes, not from reason, recognition, intelligence, not from a uniquely human sensibility, or from any of man’s higher accomplishments, but from something excessive, unpredictable, lowly.

Elizabeth Grosz, *Shaos, Territory, Art*

In 1978, the documentary *The Secret Life of Plants* was released. One section of the documentary is dedicated to the scientific exploration into the capacity of plants to respond to their environment, to in some sense feel. Researchers conducted an experiment with cabbage plants. They attached sensitive electrodes to the leaves of the plant to measure changes in electrical activity, using what appears to be an oscilloscope they observed the changes in wave formation to measure the plants reaction to stimuli. At one point in the documentary a voiceover tells us, “Research conducted in the Soviet Union lead scientists to believe that plants may think.”<sup>22</sup> If so this would certainly queer the image of thought. Much of the research presented is a bit suspect, the study referenced by the narrator claims that a cabbage plant not only responds

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<sup>21</sup> Massumi, *Parables for the Virtual*, 11.

<sup>22</sup> Green, *The Secret Life of Plants*.

when a technician destroys a nearby plant, but that the plant can pick that specific technician out of a line up. However, there is agreement in the scientific community that plants are plastic and responsive and communicate with one another through various forms of signaling. “The literature is replete with...studies demonstrating how plants use chemicals, contact, or various light wavelengths to transmit, receive, and evaluate information about their neighbors both above and below ground.” They communicate things like imminent drought or they communicate to prevent competition with other individuals of their species “favoring them over strangers, and hence facilitating kin selection processes such as cooperation and altruism, similar to what is seen in animal social systems.”<sup>23</sup> Plant life communication exposes just one element of the vast interconnected natural world. And human life is a part of this world.

As a part of the culture/nature binary, complicated of course with the need for shelter from inhospitable environment, most people live the vast majority of their lives in built environments that do not attempt to integrate elements of the ‘natural’ world. The habit of people to separate themselves from nature is detrimental. Nature affects humans just as humans affect nature. Plants are responding to their human cohabitants; there is a great deal of research as to the effects of different kind of sound on plants.<sup>24</sup> Likewise, people respond to plants. There is a level of influence on human feeling and thinking that goes unnoticed and unacknowledged. Some recent research investigates the effects of green space on human health. For instance, studies show that children with ADHD who are exposed to green space for a period each day experience a statistically significant reduction in symptoms. “In a survey, parents of children with ADHD reported greater symptom improvement after children participated in activities in “natural” settings versus indoor or artificially built outdoor settings such as cement

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<sup>23</sup> Gagliano, 789-790.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

playgrounds.” And “a recent study found that children with ADHD performed better on a verbal task sensitive to concentration after taking a walk in a park versus a residential or downtown setting.”<sup>25</sup> The human refusal to acknowledge their own dependence and interdependence encourages the strict separation of built environment from natural environments. In the next section I will examine the work of an artist who complicates this separation.

### **Natalie Jeremijenko: Queer Nature**

Natalie Jeremijenko is an artist and engineer with a background that includes studies in biochemistry, physics, and neuroscience. She works in a manner that shares commonalities with science, and some might argue that her work only shares a few commonalities with art. Her work is experimental in nature though not as rigorous in methodology as a typical scientist might prefer. Jeremijenko is concerned with revealing processes of nature and the environment that are not commonly considered. Her work questions our understanding of what is considered natural. Natalie Jeremijenko installed a piece at MASS MoCA in 1999 titled *Tree Logic*. This work incorporates six living trees. They are suspended from trusses and oriented upside-down. The roots are planted in large metal containers sealed and suspended from what resemble telephone poles. The suspension itself is startlingly. Trees are strongly connected to the earth in ubiquitous experience but also in ideas. Trees are firmly planted on the earth, in the earth. They seem solid and ancient. Seeing a tree knocked down by a storm gives one a sense of the awesome power that storm let loose. The suspended trees lose their weightiness, but more disconcerting still, the trees are hanging upside down. Jeremijenko was interested in the dynamic processes of trees, specifically their gravitropic and phototropic responses.<sup>26</sup> Over time the trees have begun to grow

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<sup>25</sup> Searight, 5.

<sup>26</sup> Thompson, *Becoming Animal*.

toward the sun, bending back towards their roots and taking on an unnatural shape. The work makes evident that nature is dynamic and moved by interconnectedness. It also makes evident the instrumental relationship that we have with all aspects of the world. The trees are lined up in two rows, spaced as one might find them in a park or lining a street, functioning to decorate and beautify our orderly world. It also seems reminiscent of the kind of ordering inherent in our systems of knowledge, like cataloged specimens. And of course one cannot escape the sense of scientific experiment. In some strange way it is indeed an experiment based in scientific knowledge, a demonstration of phenomenon. The spacing separates the trees and makes each an individual example of 'treeness.' Their isolation in this arrangement still cannot separate them from their environment. The piece is following the habit of instrumental use and control over nature but is so far outside the ordinary, it creates that shock to thought.

The concept of the piece is not just about the display of the inverted trees but also about revealing a generally unconsidered natural process in order to reconsider what in fact is natural about it. Plant life grows toward the sun and away from the earth, sensing the light (phototropic response) and gravity (gravitropic responses). These responses follow set patterns. Jeremijenko is studying what happens to the patterns of growth in these displaced trees. Turning the trees upside down does a number of things. First, it creates a confrontation with a sense of illogical. It speaks to the sciences as systemization that pay little attention to practical logic. It speaks to control of nature. It displaces what is natural about the shape of a tree. But more importantly Jeremijenko makes evident the dynamic processes of nature. Nature is not passive or fixed.

Currently, Jeremijenko is the director of the xDesign Environmental Health Clinic at NYU. This is a collaboration of artists and designers and it is modeled after a medical clinic. A visitor to the clinic meets with an artist like Jeremijenko and describes their illness or rather an

environmental health concern. The artist works with the individual to devise a prescription. An example of a prescription might be the directive to acquire a *GreenLight*, which is a plant in a self-contained maintenance device designed to bring air purification into the living space. A more complicated prescription, *NoPark*, involved creating a miniature park in the unutilized spaces in front of fire hydrants. The plants do not impede the fire truck on the occasion when they require access, but they do provide a little bit more green space within an urban environment. “Micro engineered” green spaces, these parks actual filter the polluted run off from the roads before it makes its way into the sewage system. Jeremijenko presents us with a new way to think about the culture nature binary and perhaps a way to get closer to a new image of thought itself.

Art has the potential, though often not attained, to make new thought possible. New ways of thinking are required for new ways of being in the world. Thinking is productive, not a passive observation. Thinking beyond recognition and opinion is an active engagement. And thinking is not the isolated work of the mind, but is the coupling of the mind and body, the body and world. Perhaps one of the greatest potentials for art in this project is the necessity that it engages sensation, activating the embodied and embedded subject. It can move us away from a conception of thought as the sole purview of the rational mind. The shock that makes us think might just be a visceral response to the unintelligible, that which does not make sense but is highly sensorial. Breaking with the ordinary is meaningful, or better, it is thought provoking. The world is stuck as we go through the routines of living. So, in line with Deleuze and Guattari, I have argued against opinion and for the desire to touch a bit of chaos and pull away with the new. The new is desirable, perhaps essential, for positive change. Change requires breaking the routine, stepping outside the ordinary, crossing boundaries, and rearranging stander couplings.

The world is in need of change and one possible direction forward—queer thinking for a new future.

## Chapter Five: Art in Practice: *Suitable for Wet Locations*

The preceding chapters have established that art is a productive approach to the challenge of breaking down the oppositional divisions of Western dualism. This chapter will address the art installation, entitled *Suitable for Wet Locations*, created in conjunction with this dissertation. In what follows, I think through my own work as an experimentation in what art can do, approaching art practice as another form of inquiry. I claim that my art is affecting and that art with the force of affect calls for both thinking *and* feeling and complicates an *either/or* construction of mind/body. In this material exploration, the primary dualism I address is that of culture/nature. I examine the *both/and* relationship of nature and culture. I explore how placing nature in opposition to culture also places it under the control of the human, culture-producing, subject. In this chapter, I also describe the processual nature of art and how this becoming rather than being resists fixity and standard subject/object relationships. The work is an event; it takes place through time and movement, as well as space.

I begin with a straightforward description of the artwork to establish some basic sense of the subject under consideration. The installation is comprised largely of prefabricated industrial materials and living plants. Electrical metallic tubing (EMT) is formed into a framework that supports long trays of grass. There are six of these framework stations arranged in two rows of three on either side of a central channel-like space. The six are repetitions of the same basic design. The stations are seventy-eight inches tall and four feet wide. A horizontal plane, or plant tray, runs across the four-foot wide main frame approximately four feet off the ground. The plane itself is forty-two by twelve inches. This tray is covered by tautly stretched black plastic

with evenly spaced circular holes cut into the plastic. From each of these holes grows a dense bunch of grass. Water drips from above, coming out of four small spigots embedded into clear plastic tubing running across the top of the EMT frame. The tubing runs up from a bucket housing an electric submersible pump. The water drips down onto the plant tray platform and the blades of grass. Some of the water seeps into the holes and some collects and eventually runs over the edge of the surface. Beneath this platform is a second planar surface. This plane also has a tightly stretched plastic surface. This plane is tilted at a slant so that the water runs down to one corner and off into the bucket with the water and submersible pump. The water is then pumped back up to the top continually circulating water through the system. The six plant sustaining stations are connected together with metal tubing running from the tops of framework. At the far end of the central channel between the two rows there is a screen with a video projection.

### **Processual Emergence**

The work for this dissertation project is particularly focused on process and event rather than object and essence. In what follows, I address process in relation to how my work comes into being and is received by the viewer. And I also consider how a focus on process relates to a theoretical stance. Processes move through space and time; they are occurrences, events. Process, event, becoming, all stress a dynamic ongoing conception of the subject and the world. This moves us away from the images of fixed subjectivity operating on/against a static object. It offers a new image of the subject/object dynamic. In *Semblance and Event*, Brian Massumi tells us, “The world is not an aggregate of objects. To see it that way is to have participated in an abstraction reductive of the complexity of nature as passage.”<sup>1</sup> The world is not a complex of objects but a multiplicity of occurrences. Objects are the result of processes but the process does

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<sup>1</sup> Massumi, *Semblance and Event*, 6.



not stop with the *completion* of the object. Nor are subjects ever completed. Process implies something ongoing and changing, creating space for a more malleable vision of the world and becoming with the world. *Suitable for Wet Locations* is not merely an art object; it is an event in process.

When I approach a body of work, I do not have a resolute form in mind. The process of making is a play of ideas and experimentation with materials. I am not concerned with representing something in the world; I want to create work that is *felt* as the world. Engendering the final form is a process of reciprocal thinking *and* feeling. I have a thinking-feeling that propels the process. As I consider materials and orchestrations of space, I imagine what they might mean to a viewer and at the same time how they might feel to the viewer. While I have a great deal of appreciate for works that are conceptually driven to the point of dematerialization, in my own work, I am compelled by the notion that the work can impact at the level of sensation. It can generate a visceral response—not a visceral response that shouts at the viewer but a quiet emergent thinking-feeling. In this dissertation, I posit that art is a kind of thinking: an embodied thinking, an affective thinking. As I work on this project, I feel my way through it; it is a feeling similar to Massumi’s “thinking-feeling,” distinct from recognition-action.

But that thinking-feeling slips behind the flow of potential action that the objectness suggests. We let the vitality affect, the “uncanny” apprehension of the qualitative dimension, pass unnoticed. Instead, we orient toward the instrumental aspect of the actions and reactions that the perception affords. The self-reflexivity of the experience is backgrounded. The sense of relational aliveness disappears into the living.”<sup>2</sup>

My work foregrounds the “vitality affect” and brings the relational forward.

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<sup>2</sup> Massumi, *Semblance and Event*, 44.

When the viewer is presented with the work, it continues to function as process. It is an encounter between the viewer and the work. The installation is not an object that the viewer stands apart from and contemplates from a distance. It does not address a unified fixed subject placed in the perspectival position in relation to the work as an autonomous fixed object. The work is an event to be immersed within. The audience/viewer/participant<sup>3</sup> experiences the work through space, time, and movement. In a sense, the process of reception is another stage of development or a continuation of the becoming of the work. Process takes place over time; it takes place through space; it is not singular or individual but rather relational. This shifts the focus from object to process, from individual to collective. The viewer experiences the work relationally and processually. The process makes the experience of sensation explicitly felt-thought. “Art foregrounds the dynamic, ongoing relational pole. Everyday experience foregrounds the object-oriented, action-reaction, instrumental pole.”<sup>4</sup>

### **Interconnecting Assemblage**

In the opening chapter of *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Guattari articulate their concept of rhizomatic multiplicities, which has resonance with the concept of relationality and process. Comparing the rhizome with radicular structures, they hail the rhizome as lacking the hierarchal structure of the root. A typical root structure has a dominant center or trunk with a unidirectional flow of water and nutrients from the small capillary roots back through the branching structure to the central root. The term rhizome literally refers to a plant that propagates by sending out horizontal subterranean shoots to generate a new node or plant. Compared to a radicular structure, the rhizome moves in all directions across a field where no one rhizome is anymore significant than any other, and new rhizomes are continually shooting out in new

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<sup>3</sup> I use the term ‘viewer’ in this chapter for the sake of simplicity and not to give primacy to the visual experience.

<sup>4</sup> Massumi, *Semblance and Event*, 45.

directions creating plant nodes along the way. As a theoretical figure or model the rhizome can express the interconnected nature of the human subject. “Here in the West, the tree has implanted itself in our bodies, rigidifying and stratifying even the sexes.”<sup>5</sup> In a rhizomatic mode the subject is not settled or complete but entangled with other subjects and other forces in a process of becoming. The rhizome queers subjectivity, and in this model Deleuze and Guattari assert that everything is interconnected:

Multiplicities are rhizomatic, and expose arborescent pseudomultiplicities for what they are. There is no unity to serve as a pivot in the object, or to divide in the subject....A multiplicity has neither subject nor object, only determinations, magnitudes, and dimensions that cannot increase in number without the multiplicity changing in nature (the laws of combination therefore increase in number as the multiplicity grows). Puppet strings, as a rhizome or multiplicity, are tied not to the supposed will of an artist or puppeteer but to a multiplicity of nerve fibers, which form another puppet in other dimensions connected to the first.<sup>6</sup>

Rhizomes are also related to Deleuze and Guattari’s concept of the assemblage. Assemblages too are multiplicities—dynamic multiplicities linking together to form a transient or tenuous configuration. “Assemblages have elements (or multiplicities) of several kinds: human, social, and technical machines, organized molar machines; molecular machines with their particles of becoming-inhuman.”<sup>7</sup> The elements of an assemblage are transitory. They begin to solidify to a degree as they become territorialized but always promise to become deterritorialized by new lines of flight. Assemblages represent an ongoing process in which multiplicities connect

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<sup>5</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 18.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 8.

<sup>7</sup> Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 36.

and then branching off or disconnect entirely to combine with other elements forming new couplings. Lines of flight are ever-present resistances to dominant structures. Change and resistance are built into the system. Affect and rhizomes are related in that they both propel a way of thinking that moves away from a regular, taxonomical understanding of the world.

In *Suitable for Wet Locations*, a multiplicity of elements come together to form a contingent unity, always maintaining the potentiality to take on new elements and new configurations. The materials used are well suited to working in a modular fashion. Modularity has the advantage of functioning much like organic growth. New cells are added on or sloughed off to direct the form and function of the organism. This installation is quite literally made up of an assemblage of elements. I have chosen to work with industrial materials with visible couplings. The electrical metallic tubing (EMT) is used in electrical wiring in all manner of structures in the US. The tubing can be formed to fit any location or circumstance, and the connectors are universal. The pieces can be formed into numinous configurations and dismantled and put together in a completely different way. Electrical conduit is visible in many buildings that have been retrofitted with new or additional electrical wiring. It is seen running along walls and across ceilings. I chose this material for its practical function, to carry electricity to the lighting for the plants, but also because what it makes is never a completed form. In a building, a new outlet can be added at any time by running another line of tubing, branching off an existing line or straight from the circuit box. The pieces are interchangeable and in a sense are in themselves modular.

The potential disadvantage to modularity is that typically each unit must be nearly identical to fit in its place next to the others implying a rigid sameness. However, in organic modularity the cells can actually manifest a tremendous variety. The repetition in this installation

relates both to restrictive mechanical regimentation but also to cellular building which produces a vast array of different forms. There is repetition in the tubing and connectors, but also in the six repeating plant-sustaining stations, and in the repetition of the holes from which the repeating blades of grass emerge. Each repeating element connects to another element. Even the blades of grass have intertwined roots and connect in a very functional way to the dirt. Even the components that are not physically touching are connected. The light from the bulbs *touches* the plants. The pieces are interconnected and interdependent. Each of the six modules that physically support the plant trays also houses a process that forms a life support for the plants. Water circulates through the framework and lights provide a specific wavelength of light conducive to plant growth.

The title of this installation, *Suitable for Wet Locations*, comes from a label imprinted on many of the components used to construct the framework. Namely, it is stamped on the light fixtures and the junction boxes. These elements meet building code requirements for electrical components located outside and exposed to the elements. Basically it is safe if they are rained on. I chose this phrase because it speaks to the divisions of inside and outside. It also calls into question just what might be suitable for a wet location and what kind of locations are wet. Bodies are wet. The term wetware is often used to distinguish living beings or the human brain from hardware and software, distinguishing biology from technology. These divisions are brought forward in this piece but as an assemblage that merges them all together. The boundaries are challenged and the affective quality of the work makes the interconnections palpable.

### **Affect and the Event of Perception**

What is called "perception" is no longer a state of affairs but a state of the body as induced by another body, and "affection" is the passage of this state to another state as increase or decrease of potential-power through the action of other bodies.

Deleuze and Guattari, *What is Philosophy?*

The creative project that accompanies this dissertation is an exploration of the idea that art can be affective. Art with the force of affect calls for both thinking *and* feeling. My process has always been entangled with theory, but the relationship of my own artwork to this dissertation is not one of mere illustration. Art practice is another form of inquiry. In this section, I address my own artwork in connection with the theories of affect articulated in chapters three and four. In this dissertation, art is a kind of thinking, an embodied thinking, an affective thinking.

The work in this installation is meant to be affecting on many levels. Upon entering the space the viewer encounters the moisture in the air, and if they move close enough to the individual stations they can feel the light spray of water on their skin as the water drops bounce off the tautly stretched plastic. Viewing the grass pushing its way up through the holes in the plastic, one might even feel an empathy with the plants in their restricted boundaries or with their persistent movement toward the light. Every manner of movement surrounds the viewer: the slow movement of plant growth; the movement of water dripping from above the grass and from below, the movement of the images in the video projection, and the time lapse movement of the dandelion which *grows* among the grass. And the viewer's body moves through the space to perceive the work. The objects are familiar but strange. It is not enough to imagine what the work looks like from the other side; the viewer must move their body to fully experience the work. Finally they experience the vibratory movement of all of the sounds. And as they move through the space the sounds change as they move closer to one element of sound generation and further from another.

## Sound and Vibratory Affect

“Vibrations, waves, oscillations, resonances affect living bodies, not for any higher purpose but for pleasure alone. Living beings are vibratory beings: vibration is their mode of differentiation, the way they enhance and enjoy the forces of the earth itself.”

Elizabeth Grosz, *Chaos, Territory, Art*

Sound is part of the strategy of making *Suitable for Wet Locations* affective. To perceive we must be open to the world; we must be vulnerable to its impact, its affect. To perceive we must be open to the affect of forces of becoming. To hear a noise I am touched by the very vibrations moving at the origin of the auditory stimulus. The sonic vibrations touch the ears just as the water vapor touches the skin. But these things do not stop at the surface. Skin is a permeable membrane and water penetrates into the body. Sound too penetrates past the surface and resonates throughout the body. Sound can affect our internal organs as well as our mood. Sensation defies the boundary of the body; it extends the body beyond the skin

The water drips slowly from four spigots running across the top of the EMT framework. It makes a kind of drumming noise as it hits the tightly stretched plastic surface. The rate of dripping varies slightly from one spigot to the other, and they do not drip in sync. The sound is rhythmic but irregular and changing. Some of the water collects on the surface and runs off the side of the platform. This movement is more like a pour than a drip, adding a different kind of rhythm. The second tier platform is larger and makes a different audible frequency when struck. The sounds of the water striking the surfaces are varied and changing. Yet if one stands still, or does not focus on an individual element, the sound of all six plant stations dripping and pouring combine into a din not unlike a steady rain. All the dripping starts to merge into one percept. Nevertheless, as one walks closer to any one of the six stations, the volumes shift and the closer sounds start to stand out and individuate. In this way sound locates the viewer in relation to the

objects and articulates their movements through space.

To add an additional component to the multiplicity of the installation, I made audio recordings of the dripping water and created a digital sound composition that plays through loudspeakers. The recorded audio serves to individuate elements of the sound, accentuating attention directed at selections of sounds. This cuts through the din of noise but also has a decentering effect on the viewer. These sonic stimuli do not have an object, a recognizable source. The live sound and the artificial or contrived sound of the recording coincide and entangle. The boundaries between them are unclear.

The boundaries between subject and object are unclear as well. The auditory element intensifies the immersive experience of the work. In *Suitable for Wet Locations*, I chose to work with multisensorial installation. The viewer cannot stand outside the object of contemplation. There is no fixed object to be perceived by a fixed subject. The forms surround the viewer in front and back but also above and below. They are enveloped with tubing running above their heads and plastic sheeting, covering the floor, crinkles under foot as they traverse the space. The immersive experience plays with the illusion that the individual can control their reaction to sensations, control affect. The moisture from the spray will be absorbed into the membranes of the skin no matter what one thinks about the water. The plants will clean the air they breathe no matter whether anyone gives a thought to this process. Maneuvering through the space will make an impression on the body and will engage proprioception. The synaesthetic experience will make any simple reading of the work, like a one to one language, impossible. The body will insist on its presence during the event of perception. The work as event queers the subject object relationship with affective reverberations of the interconnections, couplings, and assemblages calling into question the distinctions of the built and natural world, of culture and nature, and of



human and nonhuman life.

### **Controlling Boundaries**

Emotion is another facet of affect. Affect can blur the boundaries between subject and object, and emotion can blur those between self and other. Emotion and affect can also queer the rational, sovereign subject. In previous chapters, I addressed this subject, engendered by Western dualism, and its illusions of control and self-mastery. Dichotomous thinking leads us to imagine we can and should control our emotions and, by extension, we can and should control nature. Emotions, sensations, and bodies threaten because they are out of the control of the rational mind. The non-normative threatens the control of the hegemonic normative order. I posit we must give up control and reconceive the subject as vulnerable and interdependent. Chapter three covered issues of emotion and focused in part on happiness, critiquing research in happiness studies with a queering of phenomenology. I now investigate happiness in the context of a subjectivity that fails to control: emotions, sensations, nature, and even the suburban lawn of the American dream. *Suitable for Wet Locations* is, in part, an inquiry into the regimentation, instrumentalization, and control that are functions of this promise of happiness.

Daniel Gilbert, a professor of psychology at Harvard University and author of *Stumbling on Happiness*, claims that humans have an innate desire for control, not just for what practical effects this control can bring them but because “people find it gratifying to *exercise* control.” This control is a large part of happiness. His work fits within the trend toward happiness studies addressed in chapter three. Gilbert declares with great confidence that control “is one of the fundamental needs with which human brains seem to be naturally endowed.”<sup>8</sup> But he has a rather loose and shifting definition of “control.” In many instances it would seem like a better word for

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<sup>8</sup> Gilbert, *Stumbling on Happiness*. 22.

what he is addressing might be agency or even affect. I find it disconcerting to conflate the meaning of the words ‘control’ and ‘affect.’ Control implies *control over* with implications of dominance. Gilbert reads the joy of a toddler knocking over a stack of blocks as the child’s desire for control. Clearly the child does not have control over the blocks. The blocks fall in a seemingly random manner. The child affects the blocks, and the child is affected by their movement in return. Rather than understanding this as evidence of the innate need for control we might instead image the child’s joy coming from a being in the world and a coming into being with the world.

“Our desire to control is so powerful, and the feeling of being in control so rewarding, that people often act as though they can control the uncontrollable.”<sup>9</sup> Apparently people do not enjoy watching a recording of a football game, with the winner already decided, as much as watching the game live because there is no possibility to influence the outcome. Gilbert suggests that much of our sense of control is illusory. However, he claims that one group “immune to this illusion are the clinically depressed, who tend to estimate accurately the degree to which they can control events in most situations.”<sup>10</sup> Thus leading some psychologists to believe that the “feeling of control—whether real or illusory—is one of the wellsprings of mental health.”<sup>11</sup> It is interesting that the conclusion is that those who are prone to illusions are the mentally healthy. Believe that you have control and you’ll feel better. Have a positive attitude and you’ll be happy. Perhaps rather than encouraging delusions of control we might work to alter the world so that there are not so many people who lack agency in their lives. Perhaps these researchers might consider that this illusion is easier to maintain for some people who happen to be privileged by living in a

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<sup>9</sup> Gilbert, *Stumbling on Happiness*. 23.

<sup>10</sup> Gilbert, *Stumbling on Happiness*. 24.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

world that essentially tells them they are, or at least should be, in control.

Sara Ahmed offers compelling insights in *The Promise of Happiness*. Some people have greater access to the means of control or, at least, to greater choice and agency. She also points to the danger of claiming that happiness is a character trait. Ruut Veenhoven is another scholar associated with happiness studies, and he is director of the *World Database of Happiness* and founding editor of the *Journal of Happiness Studies*. In “Questions on Happiness,” he describes the “distinctive personality profiles” of the happy person.<sup>12</sup>

Happy persons are more likely to be found in the economically prosperous countries, whose freedom and democracy are held in respect and the political scene is stable. The happy are more likely to be found in majority groups than among minorities and more often at the top of the ladder than at the bottom. They are typically married and get on well with families and friends. In respect of their personal characteristics, the happy appear relatively healthy, both physically and mentally. They are active and openminded. They feel they are in control of their lives. Their aspirations concern social and moral matters rather than money making. In matters of politics, the happy tend to the conservative side of middle.<sup>13</sup>

While this seems to be describing people who might have a greater sense of control, this control comes from privilege not from good character. In an individualistic society, a happy life is assumed to be about making the right choices and having a positive attitude; unhappy people have just made bad choices; their happiness is completely within their control and has nothing to do with systemic conditions. They are failures in a world of positive thinking.

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<sup>12</sup> Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*. 10.

<sup>13</sup> Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness*. 10-11.

## **Immaculate Lawns and the Failure of Weeds**

In the chapter, “Queer Emotion,” I wrote about how happiness directs us toward happy objects. In turn, the promises of, and threats against, happiness direct us toward “happiness causes” which often turn out to be societal norms. Marriage and family are among the chief happiness causes. Ideally this family is middle-class, majoritarian, and on the “conservative side of middle.” The image of the ideal family also entails the happy suburban home. This home is surrounded by an immaculate lawn, even if the white picket fence is less common than it once was. The lawn must be uniform in plant type, color, and height. The weed is a sign of failure; it is out of control. Here again I draw inspiration from *The Queer Art of Failure*. The ideal lawn has its nemesis, the weed. The lawn is only a lawn by keeping anything not proper grass out. A weed is defined in context. The weed is the plant that grows where it does not belong. The belonging is decided by the ideal and by the drive to master nature. The suburban yard is ideally homogeneous, much like the ideal suburban human population.

In *Suitable for Wet Locations*, I created mechanisms that sustain living plants, specifically grass. The grass might make one think of a grassy lawn, or a row of decorative plants, or even rows of crops in a field. These all have in common the evidence of human domestication or a functionalist approach to living forms. The shaping and spacing of the plants in this installation imply associations with control and regimentation. I think of this controlling environment as related to the control necessary to create the immaculate ideal lawn. The grass grows from sixteen evenly spaced holes cut in the plastic. It creates a very restrictive environment for the grass, but at the same time it speaks to the resiliency of plant life and to the futility of efforts to control. Plants will grow up from the cracks in a sidewalk as these blades of grass find their way through these small holes. We do not have control over plants because we

plant them in rows; the life processes continue without our instigation. We affect; we do not control. But this illusion of control and the boundary created between culture and nature also serves to obscure the affect that our surroundings have on us.

Letting plants mingle is a “failure” of lawn maintenance. When a plant grows in the wrong place it is a weed. Even the coveted grass is a weed if it grows in the wrong place. Keeping everything separate is a never-ending endeavor, and it is an illusion. Lawns require a great deal of maintenance: watering, weeding, mowing, trimming, raking (or leaf blowing), and fertilizing. In the installation, one of the holes does not have grass growing up through it. If one moves closer to observe why, one will see a small video display screen with a time lapse image of a dandelion flower blooming. This is a failure in the other wise uniform growth, but it is virtual failure. The weed is not growing in the space but is merely a moving image. The time-lapse video speeds up the movement of the plant and makes the movement of the growing grass more present. Plant life is not static but has a different durationality. The time-lapse image reveals the becoming of the plant life.

The grass blades grow toward the light placed to the side of each plant tray. This too speaks to the dynamism of the plants. These trays are the same ones used by nurseries in cultivating plants to sell to consumers. A single species growing like specimens in trays remind one of the classificatory approach to nature and the cultivation of different categories of plants for different purposes. We have a classificatory division among plants but also between plants and beings in other kingdoms. Placing plants and animals in separate kingdoms implies a fundamental and grand difference, a boundary that is profound and cannot be trespassed. We place an even stronger boundary line between humans and animals despite that fact that we are in the *same* kingdom. Many seem to have difficulty conceiving the human as animal and plants

barely even register as alive.

In this installation the grass does not grow in the ground but is held aloft defying expectations of grass growing up from solid earth. This serves to take the grass another step outside of ordinary perception as a simple recognition. Combining the movement of the video with the implied movement of living plants, and recorded sound with live sound, as well as defying expectations of easy recognition all serve to queer perception and generate affect with the ultimate goal of queering thinking to bring about a different future.

### **Shock to Thought and Thinking the New**

The boundaries between culture/nature and human/animal remain in place in a great deal of common thought. The body is lesser than the mind in part because it threatens to reveal that humans are animals. Humans are thought to be far too clever to be animals, but there are many clever non-human animals. An octopus can open a glass jar containing some tasty treat in under a minute if it has encountered such an object before. Presented with a jar for the first time it might take five minutes. Apparently, it would take a monkey closer to a month to figure out how to open a jar. Presented with a childproof bottle it might take the octopus an hour to complete the task. Yet the octopus brain is nothing like that of the monkey or other primates-like humans. Octopi do not have a cerebral cortex and about two-thirds of their neurons are located in their arms.<sup>14</sup> This does not limit the octopus's capacity for thinking, acting, affecting and being affected. Perhaps if humans had such an arrangement we might find it easier to avoid imagining the brain as a separate entity from the body. The human brain is contained in a centralized location but it does not do its work in isolation. While we may not have neurons throughout our bodies the body has a profound affect on thinking and other processes of the brain. This queer

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<sup>14</sup> Courage, "Octopus Help us Understand."

image of thinking might be enough to shock one out of conventional assumptions.

Normative and dualistic thinking continue to create and oppose categories that, in themselves, have no clear boundary. The mind and body continue to be divided in two. Art practice can be one of those queer things that fall outside the boundaries and pushes against the skin of bounded social forms and concepts permeating the subject and the object, the mind and the body, the cultural and the natural. *Suitable for Wet Locations* is an experimental approach to the potential of art practice to create positive difference. The theorem is that art can queer the image of thought, promote new ways of thinking, and generate new practices of knowledge production. It can provide that shock that compels thought that breaks free of recognition and opinion and steps away from the ease of common sense. Certainty of opinion is the enemy of those that do not fit into the well-worn concepts of the individualistic self and humanist rationalism. Subjectivity is not rational and self-transparent but is in process and never complete. This situation allows greater potential for an encounter to result in change. It allows for the event to impact the decentered and processual subject and generate transformation. We are not closed off entities but are instead open to the world and open to the potentiality of change.

Art has long had a reputation for producing shocking material, whether on moral or aesthetic grounds. Many have charged artists with being deliberately shocking for the purpose of gaining attention. This is not the kind of shock promoted here. The shock I am writing about is not to produce outrage; outrage is just as likely to solidify opinion as to produce new thought. The kind of shock sought in this installation necessitates the difficult work of thinking. The affective nature of the work interrupts recognition and response and creates that pause after the first impression of a sensation. Affect compels a consideration of the work on a different level. There is something very familiar about seeing plants growing in rows, about seeing grass

growing in contained areas, about hearing water dripping, yet something decidedly strange about how they appear in this context. Plants in rows have become normalized to the extent that we no longer notice. Lawns are ubiquitous and we fail to consider how they function or how they came to be. Queering this arrangement brings this backgrounded nature into full view. It immerses the viewer in a thinking-feeling event in the simultaneity of the process of “natural” growth and technological sustenance. *Suitable for Wet Locations* generates the opportunity to think anew. This is not an attempt to put nature on a pedestal as all good. Placing something on a pedestal is still a process of othering. This is not a scenario in which nature is simply good and human/technology is all bad, but speaks to the resiliency and dynamism of nature and the interconnectedness of human, nature, and world.



## Conclusion

A queer aesthetic can potentially function like a great refusal because art manifests itself in such a way that the political imagination can spark new ways of perceiving and acting on a reality that is itself potentially changeable.

José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia*

This dissertation established the central role of affect and embodiment in the ongoing struggle to create a new image of thinking that disrupts Western dualism. Embodiment counters the separation and elevation of the mind and the assumed universal subject implicit in conceptions of the mind. This is a matter of great significance as the binary conception of the mind versus body consistently reinforces subordination of anyone designated as connected to the body. Sensation and affect permeate the embodied subject, which defies the rationalist conception of the autonomous subject and the accompanying will to control and assumptions of self-transparency. I have shown how art is of sensation and affect *and* continually implicates the mind. The body-mind is affected and affecting, proving the interconnectedness of the subject, including a connectedness to the subjects' environment. I challenged the opposition of culture/nature, and determined that the control of nature is implicated in the will to dominate the "other" and in constituting the illusion of the control of self. Through this inquiry, I established that art can affect the viewer and amplify the idea that nature is not an immutable ground to be controlled but is instead an active force constantly in motion and shaping the subject. It is vital to recognize the reciprocity and relationality in the subjects encounter with the world.

### **The Force of Embodiment**

Embodiment insists on a located, thinking-feeling subject. This dissertation has shown the vitality of embodiment for challenging dichotomous thinking. This is not a preferencing of the body or an attempt to bring the body up to equal standing with the mind, but a move to queer the distinction. It is not enough to look at the body as a countermeasure; we must consider the entanglements of phenomenal experience, social condition, physiological capacity, sensoriality, and cognition. Art proves to be a strategic approach to evidencing this entanglement. Art's materiality and processuality foreground linkages to phenomenal experiences of body-mind-world. Through an analysis of artworks by Janine Antoni and Mona Hatoum, I demonstrated that art can reveal bodily processes and produce a bodily awareness at the point of contemplation. Antoni showed us the weight of a bodily engagement with materiality and spatiality. Hatoum showed us a queer orientation toward domestic objects, inspiring wonder rather than recognition. Phenomenal experience orients mind-bodies in the world in ways that often go unnoticed and this dissertation offered the queer notion that we should pay particular attention to what is backgrounded.

### **Interconnected and Interconnecting Sensations**

A located embodiment reveals the interconnectedness of human subjects, as does affect and sensation. External as well as internal forces affect us; consequently, we must acknowledge that we are not completely autonomous individuals. *Thinking Bodies and Sensational Minds*, established how emotion, affect, and sensation interpenetrate utilizing a selection of artists to think through the implications for art practice. Artists Christina Kubisch, Laetitia Sonami, and Pipilotti Rist exposed the vulnerability of the human subject to exterior and interior sensations. Subjects are not bounded by an impervious membrane separating them from the world, rather they are beings of sensation that are touched and permeated by the world.

Sensory perception is often thought to reinforce the boundaries of inside and outside and

of subject and object. But this dissertation has offered a way to think of sensations as relational. We do not sense unless we are exposed to stimuli. The stimulus is just as much a part of the process of perception as the apparatus of sense perception. Sensation does not draw a line between subject and object, but instead sensation proves the relationality of subjectivity. The artists in this chapter revealed the subject as immersed in sensation, and gave us a way to look at perception as the dynamic experience of an event rather than an object.

Sensation is omnipresent yet generally neglected in many post-enlightenment Western conceptions of subjectivity. However, these conceptions grant the sense of sight a special status because of its relationship to empirical knowledge and they extend this sensory perception through scientific instrumentation. We can see the microscopic, the astrological, and we can see inside the workings of the brains itself. Researchers often study other sensory phenomena but rarely consider their influence as factors in the formation of knowledge. We cannot fully separate sight from the other senses any more than we can separate the mind from the body. Sensations intermingle and precede conscious thought and awareness and often remain in the background even as they influence processes of thinking and decision-making. Emotions similarly influence thinking but are relegated to the other of the rational mind.

### **Queering Happiness and Failure**

Emotions are things to be controlled, held in check by the rational mind. I have problematized this notion and shown emotion to be indispensable to the thought processes of an embodied subject. A full range of emotions inform a thriving body-mind. Emotions keep one connected to others. Some emotions have been more valued than others, and happiness has a growing popularity and a field of study named after it. Looking at happiness in isolation from other emotions is the first sign that there may be problems with happiness studies. Emotions, like

nearly everything else, are interconnected. Not surprisingly, considering the value we place on happiness, many are looking for happiness causes. These scholars gathering data on happy people and then make the leap that things associated with these people are causal. When happiness causes start to look like normative majoritarian values then hegemonic norms become the prescription for a happy life. When the oppressed are not happy with their lot in life, it is looked on as a character flaw rather than a critique.

In this project, I examined what we might learn from emotions like grief and failure rather than accepting this prescription for happiness. Grief proved to be revealing regarding the intensity of intersubjectivity. Grief is an extreme form of affect and exposes the degree to which our relations to others affect us. When we feel the devastation of loss, we can also see our interdependence with other beings. Grief can also make the body feel sick, and it can make concentrated thought seem impossible. It is not contained within the boundaries of emotion alone. It seeps through all aspects of experience permeating the human subject. Boundaries do not restrict what grief can access; it is only restricted in our images and thoughts. The artist Felix Gonzales-Torres made grief palpable but also complicated this emotion with sensuality and reciprocity. He defied the boundaries of public and private by sharing his grief in public spaces. He also shared material items such as candy and posters, defying boundaries of individualistic consumer capitalism.

It is customary to see emotion as a failure of reason and to see any kind of dependence as a failure of character. I identified a framework in which failure is mobilized to resist a majoritarian standard of success. Sometimes things are more ambiguous and complicated than an either/or scenario. Furthermore, when success means assimilating into an unequal social structure, then we should challenge this as a goal. This dissertation showed how queer failure can

be a model for a more livable future. We should consider the failure to control bodies, emotion, nature and the other as productive of positive change.

Nature, like emotion, fails to stay within its proper boundaries. Nevertheless, a persistent attitude has it that the natural world must be controlled just as the animal within the human must be subordinated to the cultural intellect. This attitude diminishes nature at the same time that researchers look for ways to establish difference as natural and immutable. A quick Google search of neuroimaging tells us that, “Brain Imaging Studies Show Different Cultures Have Different Brains” and “Male and female brains wired differently, scans reveal.” This is a curious desire to make cultural norms innate, natural, and inevitable, and it leads people to speak of brains as “hard-wired.” However, this is in direct contrast to the understanding of neural plasticity.<sup>1</sup> The brain changes over time and how it changes depends on factors as diverse as what activities we engage in to what microorganisms live in our gut. How we think about thinking matters in how we act in the world.

Ascribing some things as human nature implies that they are unchanging and unchangeable. If some tendency of behavior is “in our nature” then we should give up hope of altering this behavior. But the brain is not hard-wired and there is nothing inevitably fixed about nature. Culture, thought of as what we build ourselves and seemingly under our complete control, is compared to nature, thought of as the ground upon which we build. This project revealed how the line between culture and nature is untenable, and it demonstrated the dynamism and force of nature. Through an analysis of the artwork of Natalie Jeremijenko, I was able to problematize common conceptions of the natural world and established that art can reveal the uncommon and generate new ways of thinking beyond comfortable assumptions about how

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<sup>1</sup> See Huttenlocher, Peter R. *Neural Plasticity: The Effects of Environment on the Development of the Cerebral Cortex*. Cambridge: Harvard University press, 2002.

nature works.

This dissertation has exposed the dangers in fixed opinion and how dualist thinking works in tandem with hegemonic norms. Norms do not need to be explicitly declared. We come to understand dichotomies, such as how the mind is separate and superior to the body, without necessarily even giving the issue any thought. Thinking is hard work and opinions and norms are ready at hand. We cannot go through life thinking through every encounter. Each time I approach a chair I do not evaluate its shape, imagine its function, and calculate how much it can support. I simply sit down if I need a rest from standing. Recognition without thought is practical and necessary, but if we reduce too many experiences to recognition, informed by pre-established opinion, it makes the world inflexible and intolerant of those items that do not fit. Thinking of everything as fixed creates a resistance to change. The force of affect breaks up the fixity of opinion and art can cultivate affective encounters.

### **The Processual Becoming of Art**

This dissertation stressed the importance of a new image of thinking, and it demonstrated that art has a role in creating this new image. So much art fights against boundaries, even the boundaries of what constitutes art, and art wields the tools of thinking, *but also* sensation and affect. These are effective tools against boundary lines drawn between mind and body. Art is experiential, even art that presents itself as a fixed object is experienced through sensation, within space and over time. Artists can choose to accentuate the experiential nature of art and make this process present for the viewer.

This dissertation has travelled through the interstitial spaces of a dualistic conception of subjectivity and sociality. These spaces have been located by examining the binary divisions of Western dualism but must not stay tied to this thinking. The work of this dissertation was to

imagine a new way of thinking, one not restricted to either side of the binary. Ideally, this new image of thought does not remain tied to the two poles established by dualism, rather it dislocates the oppositional poles and puts all into a relation of multiplicity. It has been challenging to write this critical study without using the very words so anchored to dualistic thinking. Our vocabulary is inadequate in addressing interstitial thinking or in thinking of affect, sensation, or nature. We do not think merely with the brain or feel with the heart and one without the other would be useless.

This dissertation asserted the problematic of Western dualistic thinking. Dualistic thinking is a part of the maintenance of a stratified society. Dividing all difference into oppositional pairs also hides from view the vast multiplicity of difference. This thinking reduces everything to fit on one side or the other. Nevertheless, excess always frustrates this system. Nature will not stay in its place; femininity will not stay within its bounds; and emotions bubble up over the edges. Opinion fixes experience to a restrictive model that makes so much of the world disappear into mundane recognition. Layers of sedimentation make things seem solid, but everything is in motion. Lines of flight continually change the shape of tenuous assemblages. I mobilized examples of art that move against sedimentation. My own art production performed as a mode of inquiry into a queer aesthetic. The installation accompanying this dissertation materially explored some of the same issues expressed in the written text. It challenged the dichotomy of nature and culture with an assemblage of parts entangled together in a process of becoming. This entire project with text and art together challenges divisions of discipline and the separation of knowledge production in to discreet field. Through material experimentation and text-based inquiry, this project enacted a process to change our image of thought and opened up as space to think the new.

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