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Feelings

feelingFeelings: On (re)Framing Affect

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So much of literature, visual art, film and performance is based on trying to articulate, come to terms with or even change the way we feel. Yet in terms of the discourse around art, feeling has been backgrounded in favor of meaning, the process of signification, and deconstruction. If the archetype of the artist used to have a special, even sacred, relationship to feeling through aesthetic production, much of contemporary art practice has sought to reframe the artist in a critical role. While this is an important part of creative production, the force of feeling as a cultural phenomenon is surely still a crucial part of the artistic inquiry. Over the course of many conversations about our work and the work of our colleagues, Ali Prosch and I decided that creating a show to foreground feeling would be one way to make space for this discussion.

The works in the show each navigate the murky territory of feeling in one way or another, some by activating the body itself as a site of feeling, some by investigating modes of cultural production that rely on the manipulation of feeling. Monuments, Hollywood, the pharmaceutical industry, yoga practice, and pop music all employ and reflect modes of feeling, promising escape from feeling itself, or at the very least to make us feel better. All of these modes of cultural production engage in creating meaning too – and certainly the works in the show elucidate those processes as well – but creating a space that emphasized the fact that meaning also makes us feel represented an exciting prospect for us and for the artists to discuss this all but forgotten cultural force.

Emotion, the body, touching and feeling are loosely theorized under the term “affect” in various fields from psychology, to sociology to cultural theory. The term is new enough on the stage of theory that there isn’t clear agreement on what it actually means yet. Silvan Tomkins is credited with establishing “affect theory” and argues that affect is fundamentally a motivational system. He writes that “Reason without affect is impotent, affect without reason is blind”. Without a system of affects – a combination of emotion and action – we would do nothing, be nothing. A purely analytical understanding of our environment isn’t enough to cause us to act – we must desire in order to act. We don’t do things because we think things – no one starts a revolution because of an idea

alone. Passion drives us to build things, buy things, vote for people, and make art. I believe there is a lot of work to be done in creating a discursive space that allows affect to take a place alongside theories of signification.

Let me offer an example that I think illustrates the potentiality of emphasizing affect. Architecture comes up again and again for me, as a historical legacy and as a manifestation of both ideas and feelings. There is an aesthetic vocabulary that comes with any architectural feature or design. Arches, plate glass windows, marble columns, poured concrete or brick and mortar – each carries with it a host of association and differing ideas of value and utility. Utopian idealism is often associated with spectacular architecture – from the Crystal Palace in London in 1851 to Buckminster Fuller’s geodesic dome at EPCOT center in Florida, these buildings are ostentatiously inefficient if they are evaluated in utilitarian terms. Those terms might be something like cost vs. useable square footage, or how flexible the space is in terms of adapting to new uses (in both cases, they are failures). However, they are extraordinarily functional if the function is to maximize affect. Many times the discussion around affect is backgrounded as lacking rigor, relating to the decorative (and potentially the feminine?), and relegated to the periphery of analysis. When one tries to explain architecture’s relationship to ideology however, it is extremely useful to reframe affect as a primary function of built space. It isn’t so much about replacing one kind of analysis with another as much as it is a reconsideration of emphasis that I believe opens up new possibilities of understanding cultural production.

Hollywood cinema over the last hundred years has developed a highly stylized vocabulary to produce both meaning and affect. Dialogue, editing, and character each have a history that influences both the production of new cinema and informs our reading of what we see. Julie Orser’s work looks at these tropes of cinematic production by breaking away from a traditional narrative form to explore the construction of the archetypal female protagonist through lighting, makeup and editing. She foregrounds the artifice of this construction and calls attention to what is usually supposed to remain transparent. Her video piece “In this Place (Anna Moore)” features a gaudily made up Hollywood starlet performing various expressive moments, alternately sobbing, screaming and laughing. A voiceover calmly intones lines like “Was I here? Or was I there?” and “The shape of her face her lips your eyes, her body, my voice...” The construction is so self-conscious that we are barred from “entering” the piece, and instead become aware of the distance between ourselves as viewers and the drama playing out on screen. By jump cutting from one dramatic sob



Julie Orser, *In this Place* (Anna Moore)

to another, sometimes with sync sound and sometimes without, she reveals the stylized production of the hysterical female protagonist by shattering it. It's difficult not to have some sort of bodily response to her emotive spectacle – a slight flush of the skin, or an automatic grin, or widening of the eyes – and the discomfort of our manipulation is laid bare. In this sense, she employs an affective strategy to point to the production of affect itself through a particular aesthetic vocabulary.

In one sense, Anna Moore enacts Silvan Tomkins' categories of affect – rage, distress, pleasure – emphasizing the performativity of each and the gap between the internal experience of emotion and its socially-defined expression. Clearly there is a lot at stake here in terms of the construction of the female subject in particular, and she underscores the lack of agency on the part of Anna Moore's character by reducing her to cliché coded emotional outcries, while the narrator's calm intoning, "I feel your presence and I assure you, I know you are close by...I sense you watching me from behind the screen..." underscores the dislocation and fragmentation of the proposed character. This disjunction also points to the frame itself, the screen that the viewer looks at and through. The piece is kaleidoscopic. There is no center here, no whole image to return to. Instead, we are held in a looping moment built from familiar but fragmented pieces that refuse to become a full picture. This combination produces a kind of horror as we are confronted with both the drama of her expressiveness and the gaudy artifice of it. Our own empathic relationship to these moments is exposed through the exploitation of our naïve attachment to authenticity.

Several pieces in the show implicate the body itself as both object and subject. Megan Cotts' performance "Pratyahara: The withdrawal of the senses of cognition and action from both the external world and the images or impressions in the mind field" literally engages the body of the artist through the performance of the style of yoga known as Pratyahara. The installation in the storefront window includes the expected pillows and blankets as well as a set

Megan Cotts, *Pratyahara: The withdrawal of the senses of cognition and action from both the external world and the images or impressions in the mind field*

of rings and hanging ropes associated with this particular practice. Using these props, she performed a set of poses ranging from a recognizable "Downward Dog" to more elaborate inverted suspensions, sometimes hanging freely from the wall. Given the practice's aim to rid oneself of the sensorial bodily experience it requires a surprising and spectacular array of props and devices to attain an immaterial state.

The context of the display window sets up a disorienting relationship between what is traditionally a spiritual practice and an architectural space whose function is to display commercial goods. The performance of the poses becomes an image and the viewer a consumer. Yoga is reduced to entertainment, while the commercial space is elevated to a sacred space. There is no equilibrium possible here – each aesthetic vocabulary dislocates the other, threatening the very possibility of transcendence given the implication that a female body is always displayed, whether it is engaged in a meditational practice or not. The gap between our experience of the pose as an external seen event, and her (implied) experience of the pose as an embodied felt event is highlighted by the framing of the store window, which literally puts glass between the viewer and the body on display. The experience of the piece flashes between a voyeuristic visual consumption and a discomfiting embodied empathy. There is a sense of alienation, but it's unclear if it is she who is alienated or us standing outside, peering in, grotesquely consuming the image of her mediation.





left: Mariechen Danz, *FIST: Emoting Structures*
right: Brica Wilcox, *I think, I feel, You know*

of the monument is affect itself. Created by the Chinese artist Liu Bolin, the sculpture in Danz piece flips the Communist symbol of solidarity so that it becomes a fist hitting the ground, an anti-authoritarian gesture.

By breaking the traditional boundary between viewer and monument through physical interaction, she upsets the symbolic value of the monument, reminding us of the humble etymology of the sign itself – a human fist, a hand that touches and feels, a hand that is specific, existing in time, through motion. The sculpture is unaffected by these gestures, though we as the audience may be, through a sense of identification with these bodies that gently explore its surface. The object itself, its physical qualities of heaviness, presumed coldness to the touch, are foregrounded and by engaging it on the level of the body itself the performers locate it in the realm of the concrete, the material.



The piece isn't decidedly cynical however, but underscores the tension between the body as both something to be escaped and as something to be consumed, a discursively determined and marketed territory. Yoga is certainly not the first case of an aggressively marketed spirituality (marketing is crucial to the success of any institution religious or otherwise) but it may be the most directly engaged with the conflict between physicality and transcendence. In a way, Pratyahana yoga assumes an antagonistic relationship to affect, by attempting to erase it altogether. As a performer and a practitioner, Cotts is presumably attempting to "get outside" the limits of her senses while we are painfully aware of her body as a material object in space. We can only wonder if she is succeeding, there being no way to evaluate the quality of her experience, limited as we are by our alienated consumption of the image.

If Cotts' performance is about attempting to escape the materiality of the body, Mariechen Danz uses physical gesture to make the move in the other direction, from the symbolic to the material. Her performance took place in and around a public sculpture of a fist in Beijing, accompanied by two young Chinese boys, the three of them adorned by small sculptures of fists wrapped around their lower arms. They alternately caress, climb on and lead each other around the sculpture.

Monuments are meant to be "read" but they are also certainly meant to be "felt". Monuments are active – in the sense that they are built to engage the audience in a state of contemplation, celebration or commemoration. Monuments are architecture without utilitarian function, or rather, the function

The frailty of the gesture compared to the heavy, static nature of the monument itself certainly doesn't propose a heroic alternative to the dominant gesture of the monument, but instead perhaps asks us to think about the relationship between (social) control and (emotive) expression. While the monument asserts its meaning with utmost clarity and visual strength, Danz' performance operates in the spaces between, proposing an "also" more than an "instead".

The performative gesture on the part of the artist on some level implicates the viewer's body more or less indirectly. Brica Wilcox asks the viewer to be the body implicated in her piece, "I think, I feel, You know". A claustrophobic sound booth lined with white satin, plays a three-channel audio piece through six speakers installed behind the fabric. The audio is constructed from clips taken from artist talks, repeating the phrases, "I think" "I feel" and "You know". On one hand, it exposes these common phrases as empty connectors, utterances meant to take up time while the speaker composes the next sentence. It also calls attention to the difference between beginning an assertion with "I think" or "I feel", the one perhaps carrying a stronger weight, while the latter emphasizes the speaker's subjective experience. Each carries an affective quality that in turn alters the listener's interpretation of the assertion that follows. While a lecture may be (perhaps falsely) under-



Andrea Merkk, *Rio in MIDI*



Barb Choit, Patrick Nagel, *Rio, UV Exposure Time Two Weeks, Printed and Bleached #1*

stood as a purely informational medium, the audio piece underscores the ways in which that information is subtly qualified through the paradigms of “thinking” or “feeling”.

The experience of the booth is disorienting, and after a minute or so starts to feel like a conversation in one’s own head, an internal stutter that won’t resolve into meaning, stuck on the phrases that set up a thought without ever becoming one. The tension that builds through the repetition of different voices takes on a whole new layer of meaning when we learn the clips are from lectures by icons of contemporary art practice, from John Baldessari to Mel Bochner to Andrea Fraser.

If the archetype of the artist has a special relationship to feeling, and in response contemporary art practice has sought to reframe the artist in a critical role, perhaps the piece draws out the ambiguity of this position, underscoring our reliance on the fluidity between these two states. We don’t just think thoughts and feel feelings – we also think feelings and feel thoughts, the two processes coalescing as symbiotic productions crucial to creative practice.

07 If an audio experience can inspire affect through language, Andrea Merkk’s performance “Rio in MIDI” proposes another consideration of audio as a qualified affective experience. In this case, she looks at the development of MIDI as a digital protocol whose structure asserted a new affective experience associated with digital sound. A lecture that takes the shape of a performance, she uses an iTunes playlist projected larger than life on the wall of the gallery to play audio and video clips, some of which are of the artist herself in character as a VJ. At one point in the lecture she calls attention to the saxophone solo in Duran Duran’s *Rio*, and plays the MIDI version of the melody. The juxtaposition calls attention to the specificity of the saxophone’s

timbre and texture. While we may assume that the sax is the “real” expression and MIDI is merely the approximation, Merkk’s performance asks us to think about the inherent affective qualities of both. The dramatic juxtaposition of the two got a big laugh from the audience, perhaps because of both the nostalgic quality of the music video, and the pathetic thinness of the MIDI version in comparison to an actual wind instrument. Music is certainly not just notes on a page, any more than language may be reduced to combinations of letters, and while she is pointing to a technological moment in the development of music, what comes across so clearly is the way that technology shapes our affective relationship to a medium. A typewritten page is “read” differently than a Word document printed on a LaserJet – and perhaps what is at stake here is that they are also “felt” differently. The affective qualities technology leaves behind on media itself become part of that media’s reception.

This connection between technology and affect is made in another way through Merkk’s sculptural piece “MIDI’s of Rio”. By modifying an mp3 player and hooking it up to an 80’s analog cassette tape deck, we are confronted with the clunkiness of the object compared to the sleekness we now expect from audio devices. The functionality of this defunct device is resurrected and the Frankensteinian combination of mp3, cassette tape, and MIDI versions of *Rio* collected (and instantly downloaded) from the internet evokes nostalgia for the days of mixtapes as much as it points to the fragility of our investment in the magic of particular technologies, inevitably rendered obsolete.

08 Barb Choit works with Patrick Nagel’s hyper-stylized posters so iconic of an era – the shoulderpads, the hairspray, the neon. Ubiquitous and instantly recognizable in that strange way bits of pop culture sometimes become, I can’t name a particular moment I encountered one, but am able recognize



Ian James, *Buns of Steel*

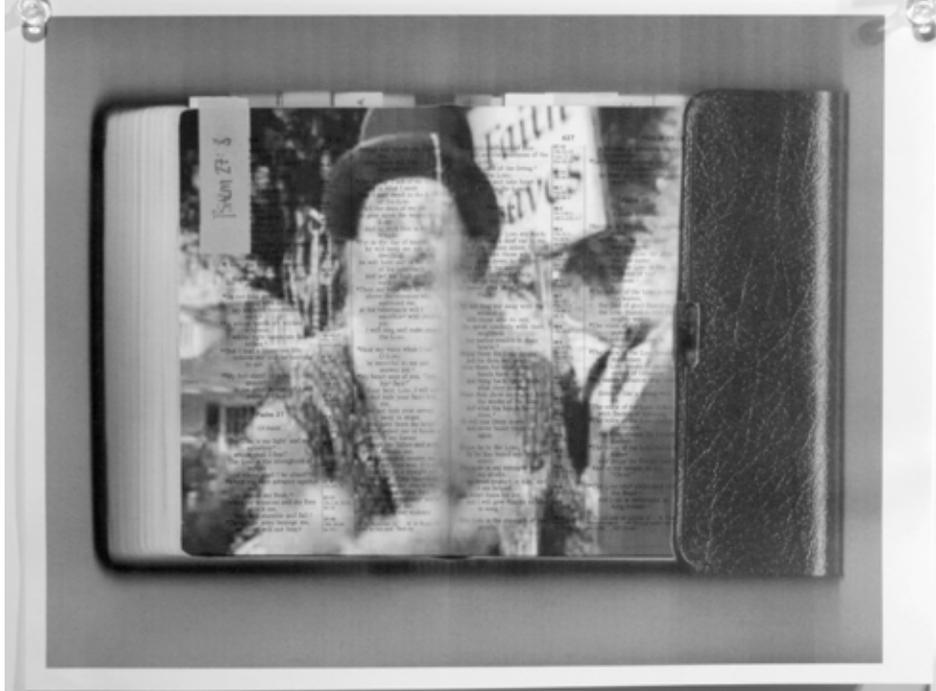
one from across the street. Reductive, cartoonish, flat, they are metonymic of the era's artifice. They are representations of bodies drained of any qualities of the body itself. Humorous in some ways, and perhaps horrifying in others – the "Nagel Woman's" grin seems almost pathological – they employ and are emblematic of a certain aesthetic vocabulary, squarely rooted in a particular cultural moment. Designed to invoke a certain affective experience – presumably one of desire given their original context in the pages of *Playboy* magazine – the "Nagel Woman" is, according to the introduction to his 1985 monograph, "...elegant and sophisticated, exuding an air of mysterious enticement. She is capable, alluring and graceful, but also aloof and distant. You will never know this woman, though she stares out of the Nagel frame straight at you, compelling you to become involved, challenging you to an intense confrontation." What struck me is how opaque they are in terms of our ability to access the original intended affect. It's lost to a cultural moment that I have reconstructed through my own nostalgic relationship to the icons of that time. We can't feel about them the way that perhaps we once could – outdated is an understatement – they are so firmly located that there is an element of alienation. Perhaps nostalgia requires alienation – the fact that we are no longer able to identify with the object of our nostalgia – the gap in identification – is what allows us to feel nostalgic in the first place. And perhaps it is the gap that also lends nostalgia an element of melancholy. Mix that with the horror of the grin and the sword-like earrings, and it is a disorienting affective experience for sure.

The two prints in the show are reproductions of Nagel's print "Texas", which is also the image on the cover of Duran Duran's hit album "Rio". Choit defaces the prints using the kinds of cosmetological procedures implied by

that era's fashion advertisements, subjecting them to bleach and UV rays via a tanning bed. On one level it's a humorous gesture, on another, a violent one. Turning the tools of self-enhancement against the image that is meant to inspire our desire for that artifice, Choit's posters confront us with our own constructed nostalgia, rendering it empty, misguided. By doing violence to the surface of the image, does she do violence to idealization of the female body or to our obsession with surface itself or to our nostalgia for the past? Or maybe none of these. It is culture turned on itself, culture eating itself. The decay of the image through time is mimicked by the decay of the image in front of us. The image is anything but timeless – it is something that tarnishes, changing with us, uprooted from a firm interpretation, emblematic of so much and simultaneously inaccessible. The meaning and the affect of these icons is dynamic, fading before our eyes.

The 80's not only gave us the tanning bed, but also the exercise video as another means of self-enhancement. Ian James' recut of *Buns of Steel* from 1987 highlights the affirmative comments that pepper Greg Smithey's landmark contribution to the field. Emphasizing how good we're going to look after we exercise, the causal relationship is clear: if we look good, we'll feel good, and looking bad is the reason we feel bad in the first place. He sits, (or lays, or squats, depending) at the front of a room full of grinning spandexed participants, performing various leg lifts, his students following in unison. James' re-edit makes it clear that the video falls somewhere between exercise and therapy, as Greg Smithey speaks directly to us, always in second person, intoning such encouragements as "You're going to be hot, you're going to look good, for you and your friends and family and for the people you don't even know yet!" This last statement gives us a clue to the fantasy being played out here. If we are disciplined and keep up the good work, we might meet our very own Mr. Right someday, and we'll have the buns to keep him! In the meantime, Smithey seems happy to take advantage of the common client/therapist phenomenon of transference – he becomes the object of our affection, as he convinces us that we are the object of his. For the duration of the workout we might be able to enjoy his gaze and encouragement, knowing that we're "taking control" under his guidance.

From the leg warmers and neon spandex to the palm trees painted on the back wall, the decor locates the video in a certain time and place, one that simultaneously connotes optimism and leisure, as if to say "Exercise is fun!" Smithey sells us a feeling., or the promise of one. On the surface, the video aims to make us feel better through exercise – but James' recut makes it clear



Matthew Siegel, *Nanny's Favorite, Psalm 27, of David, Verse By Verse*

that so much of the success of the video is the affective experience of having a personal coach who assures us we're going to be "looking hot!" There is something weirdly pornographic about the intensity of his gaze and the self-consciousness of his performance, not to mention some of the gestures – spandex doesn't leave much to the imagination. Smithey clearly likes to leave the lights on, if you will, and never averts his gaze. He literally beams positive affect to us, and given the success of the VHS – over a million copies sold – he is a pro, in every sense of the word.

If an image or a video or a monument is constructed to evoke an affective response through cultural association, the ingestion of pharmaceutical drugs skips this step, directly altering the chemistry of our brains to change our affect, presumably for the better. Prescribed to control anxiety, Xanax promises to rebalance what is out of balance, to purge unwanted biological response like tremors, increased heart rate, and the fight-or-flight response to fear.

Perhaps religion offers a similar promise by offering answers to nagging questions like "Why am I here? How should I live?" Silvan Tomkins directly related religion to affect and wrote that "Christianity became a powerful universal religion in part because of its more general solution to the problem of anger, violence, and suffering versus love, enjoyment, and peace." Through ritual, prayer, chanting, or recitation of a spiritual passage, religious practice engages both the mind and body. Matthew Siegel's piece "Xanax Drawing Series" juxtaposes these two modes of affect management, perhaps question-

ing the efficacy of either strategy alone. By taking Xanax and making drawings using printouts of the biblical passage Psalm 27, he attempts to access this meditative state, through chemical inducement, as a way to understand or uncover the power of the text. As a performance during the opening of the show, he (again on Xanax) engaged people one-on-one, sometimes asking if they would like to hear his grandmother's favorite Psalm and if they agreed, reciting it from beginning to end.

Psalms are meant to be spoken, repeated, not just read and understood. Their meaning isn't accessed solely on the level of the words themselves, but in the physical experience of their recitation and repetition. Psalm 27 is about emotive experience, or affects ("Though an army besiege me, / my heart will not fear; / though war break out against me, / even then will I be confident."), and also creates an affective state in its utterance. On the one hand, the work reduces this affective performance to the level of a chemical state in the context of the Xanax. On the other hand, it might be read as an indictment of the possibility of spiritual fulfillment and perhaps a critique of the promise of religion to wrest us from our fears and anxieties. The use of stills from the music video for Soundgarden's Black Hole Sun adds to this interpretation given that it is a song about yearning for the apocalypse to "make the rain go away". If there is pleasure in religious chanting to bring about a peaceful state, there is also pleasure in the fantasy of apocalypse to annihilate the world that causes us so much grief and anxiety. Xanax, religious poetry and the apocalypse – all three are mechanisms to dampen and neutralize, to free us from the friction of our daily struggles. In this work, all three seem to be failures that keep replacing the others, in an attempt to find stasis, balanced affect, release from our material existence. The only possible state here is one of yearning to no longer yearn.

Funny things happen when performance happens outside the socially agreed upon space of performance – people take it seriously. Which might imply that performance is not taken seriously (which of course it is) but performance is much of the time understood as a metaphor, as existing outside of everyday conversation, language and gesture. During the opening night reception, Clarissa Tossin sent a text message that read "I feel disconnected" to about forty people in her address book. Each recipient, of course, assumed that this message was meant for them alone, save for a few who understood it as a performative gesture in the context of the opening. Many people however, called her back immediately, to find out what was wrong. Feeling obligated to answer these anxious phone calls, she found herself talking to



Clarissa Tossin, *I'm feeling disconnected*

many of her friends, some as far away as her hometown in Brazil, explaining that it was a performance, and that she was doing okay, and no, she didn't really feel all that disconnected. The irony being, of course, that she may have at some point felt that way, but the response required her to perform her way out of her own performance, assuring the people in her life that the gesture was disingenuous and that she, now in this moment of comforting the text message recipient, was in fact being genuine.

The expression of affect through language to another person functions as a request, where the person articulating their emotional state is asking for some kind of ameliorative from someone else. In this way, the communication of an affective state becomes a dynamic social situation, an action between people. We are empathic beings. Not all utterances require a response, but emotive utterances many times do. Tossin's performance asks us to consider the social mores around emotional expression in the context of a detached and disembodied medium like text messaging. The technology we use changes our relationship to each other and the way we respond to the content communicated. Whether it's as meaningful or satisfying to express a feeling through the interface of a cell phone as it is face to face is debatable. It may be alienating for some and liberating for others, but it certainly affects the experience of communication itself in one way or another. The ways technology and the ever wider spread of data networks alter our relationship to the body have implications for how we might consider the body's move into cyberspace, though to say one is more immaterial than another seems to miss the point. Affect is of particular relevance when navigating unclear boundaries between the corporeal and incorporeal, material and abstract since it exists in the boundary itself. •



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