



UNIVERSITY OF
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School of Art + Design

Thesis Report

Kara Clarke

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Committee:

Jovencio De La Paz

Hiba Ali

STATEMENT

Kara Clarke is a multidisciplinary artist and writer. She often examines art historical and political subjectivities by creating flexible research structures; output formats range from writing to installations, images and sculpture. Inspiration stems from graduate research grounded in feminist philosophies of science as well as previous experience working with open source technologies. She has worked with various non-profit and cultural institutions including High Concept Laboratories, the MCA Chicago, and the Tribune in Chicago as well as Open Signal in Portland.

INTRODUCTION

Over the course of the past three years my practice has shifted immensely as I have worked to unearth meaningful research methodologies suited to connecting a latticework of varying media and schools of thought. My development has been guided by the influence of a great host of artists, directors, critics and thinkers, including; Sarah Ahmed, Hannah Black, Jean Baudrillard, Octavia Butler, Barbara Christian, David Cronenberg, Charles Gaines, Lauren Fournier, Donna Haraway, Nora N. Kahn, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Friedrich Kittler, Chris Kraus, Audre Lorde, Jill Magid, Marshall McLuhan, Bahar Noorizadeh, Legacy Russell, Cauleen Smith, Hito Steyrel, Diana Thater, and Gene Youngblood, among many numerous others. Realistically there are simply too many to list here.

My time at the University of Oregon has granted me access to the diverse databases and advanced coursework in the humanities needed to ground an interdisciplinary approach to investigation. It has afforded me an introduction to postcolonial literary frameworks and has enabled me to deepen my subject knowledge of varied branches of academic feminist theory with external elective coursework. I am confident that these foundations will continue to inform my research well beyond my tenure at UO.

The thesis report that follows represents a collection of projects, many ongoing which have been my focus over the course of my M.F.A. program along with references and epigraphs which stick together my cross-disciplinary interests in contemporary art, literature and technological criticism.

CRISIS LOVERS

So, what have we provoked? Writing in the midst of California's historic multiyear drought and the explosive fire season of 2015, I need the photograph of a fire set deliberately in June 2009 by Sustainable Resource Alberta near the Saskatchewan River Crossing on the Icefields Parkway in order to stem the spread of mountain pine beetles, to create a fire barrier to future fires, and to enhance biodiversity. The hope is that this fire acts as an ally for resurgence. The devastating spread of the pine beetle across the North American West is a major chapter of climate change in the Anthropocene. So too are the predicted megadroughts and the extreme and extended fire seasons. Fire in the North American West has a complicated multispecies history; fire is an essential element for ongoing, as well as an agent of double death, the killing of ongoingness. The material semiotics of fire in our times are at stake.¹

Donna Haraway

In 2011 early footage of the initial p-waves from Japan's Tohoku earthquake were distorted by internal video stabilization in the camcorder capturing the event. The movement of shaking walls inside an office complex was disguised within the footage. Similarly, during the summer of 2020 when the devastating wildfires that are now endemic to the West Coast cast the

¹ Haraway, "Staying with the Trouble," 44.

ash-laden sky in dreamsicle orange, bystanders noticed that the color correction in their smartphones had altered the eerie hue of the atmosphere. Technology often fails to function amid breakdown or to register crises accurately offering a sanitized account of disaster.

Clock time is perhaps one of the most profound and commonplace semiotic guarantors of modern progress. Like fire in the passage above, it is an “agent of double death” and in many ways “the killing of ongoingness”. *"Crisis Lovers"* draws inspiration from Félix González-Torres's *"Perfect Lovers"* as well as experiences of temporary evacuation during the triple wildfires of 2020 in central Oregon. The ready made clocks combine iconic images of the picturesque Coastline with apocalyptic highways forcing an unseemly connection between disaster and growth.



Crisis Lovers: Thor's Well
8" Readymade Clock
2020



Crisis Lovers: Vida
8" Readymade Clock
2020

THIS IS QUITE A HEAVENLY SOUND

Printing was the mechanization of writing. It promoted nationalism and national languages because international Latin did not have enough scope to provide markets for the printers. Print also fostered a sense of private identity (by making copies available to individual readers in such large numbers) and

imposed a level of standardization in language that had not prevailed until then, thus making “correct” spelling and grammar a measure of literacy.²

Marshall McLuhan

Insofar as her appearance entirely exhausts her essence, as her representation does her reality, the Young-Girl is that which is entirely expressible, perfectly predictable, and absolutely neutralized.³

Tiqqun

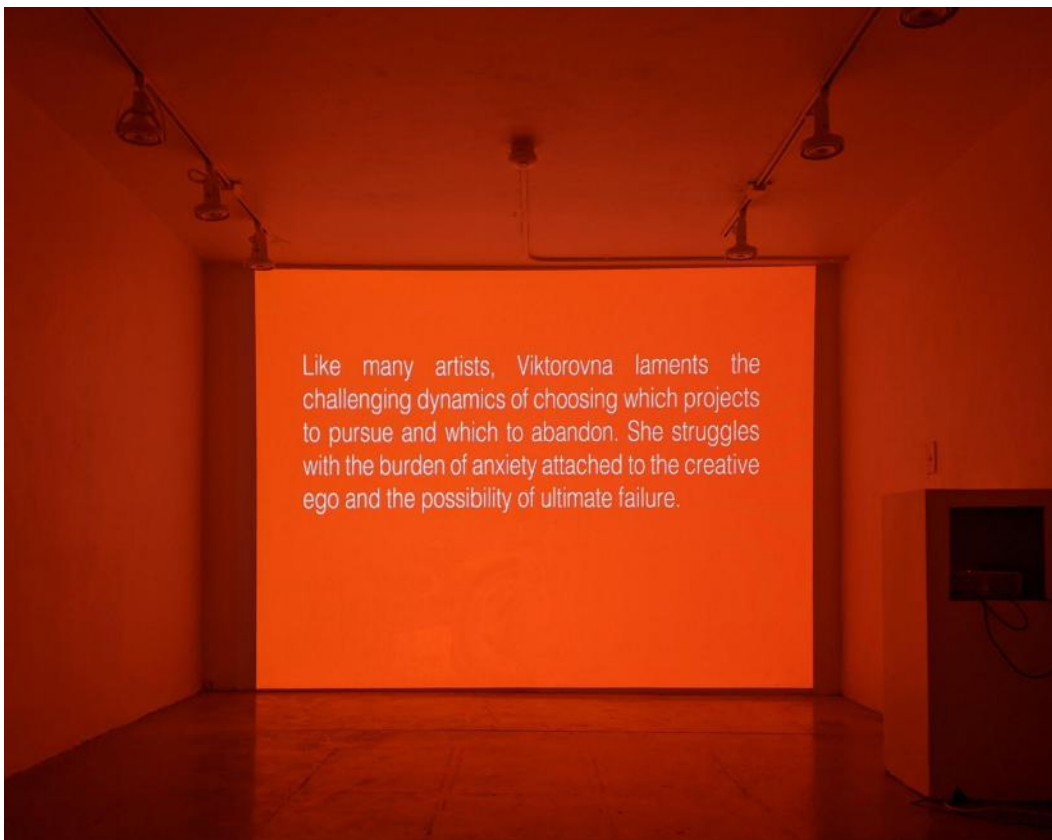
“This is Quite a Heavenly Sound” is an excerpt from a longer video essay utilizing remixed sound from YouTube ASMR artist Maria Viktorovna’s post *“Whisper ? Nailpolish Application ? Chit Chat ? ASMR ? LoFi.”*⁴ The video essay features red and white color contrast as well as mimicked typographic stylings and quotes from Tiqqun’s 2001 manifesto *“Preliminary Materials for a Theory of the Young-Girl”* in order to consider automated caregiving as a performative semiocapitalist assemblage. *“Preliminary Materials”* provoked a heated reaction among its readership at the time it was published, since its passages enact commodified and often misogynist renderings of perfectly executed vacant femininity. Oddly enough, these specific qualities make it an interesting vantage point from which to consider changing perceptions of gender performativity within fluid economies of digital media, characterized by the spectacular evolution of the cam girl, the vlogger, the ASMR artist, etc. When viewed as a contemporary foil character to Marshall McLuhan’s *“The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man”*, *“Preliminary Materials”* exposes itself as a performative critique of feminized subjectivity as an ever expansive marketplace of alienated sentiment.

² McLuhan, *“The Gutenberg Galaxy,”* 234.

³ Tiqqun, *“Preliminary Materials for a Theory of the Young-Girl,”* 33.

⁴ Viktorovna, *“Whisper ? Nailpolish Application ? Chit Chat ? ASMR ? LoFi.”*

This video essay questions the expanse of platform capitalism and its implications at the junction of digitally mediated emotional labor. Maria wafts in and out of conversations about her postpartum struggles to her musings on the draining impact of creative content production. Here, the digital traces of the woman as involved in biological reproduction become virally imbued with processes of self-destruction and monetized output even as she narrates the parameters of her own predicament.



This is Quite A Heavenly Sound
Installation Projection 5'x7'
Ongoing; 2021



This is Quite A Heavenly Sound
Installation Projection 5'x7'
Ongoing; 2021

On a personal note, this project is important to me because it's one of the first video essays that came together and created something larger than the sum of its parts. I reworked stylistic cues from Tiqqun's typographic montage as well as David Cronenberg's 1983 science fiction classic

“*Videodrome*”.⁵ However, given the trajectory of my research and concerns - I would be interested in approaching the original YouTuber (Maria Viktorovna) if I returned to the project (instead of appropriating sound clips). Since I showed it to a small audience of peers non commercially, it represented a moment of reflection as well as a turning point in considerations around my methodology granting insights into how I might adjust my approach as I develop the work in the future.

STRANGE COMMUNICATION



Series: *Strange Communication*
Ongoing; 2021
Digital rendering dimensions variable

⁵ Cronenberg, “*Videodrome*.”



Series: *Strange Communication*
Ongoing; 2021
Digital rendering dimensions variable

Of course, labor in the art field has always been different from labor in other areas. One of the current reasons, however, might be that the contemporary economy of art relies more on presence than on more traditional ideas of labor power tied to the production of objects. Presence as in physical presence, as in attendance or being-there in person. Why would presence be so desirable? The idea of presence invokes the promise of unmediated communication, the glow of uninhibited existence, a seemingly unalienated experience and authentic encounter between humans. It implies that not only the artist but everyone else is present too, whatever that means and whatever it is good for. Presence stands for allegedly real discussion, exchange, communication, the happening, the event, liveness, the real thing—you get the idea.⁶

Hito Steyerl

⁶ Steyerl, “Duty Free Art - Art in the Age of Planetary Civil War,” 29.

"Strange Communication" is a series of digital renderings based on the semi-hemispheric shapes of corner store security mirrors. Inspired by assembled ongoing research in surveillance studies. While additional elements of the project aspire to be output as tangible chromatic sculptures, 3D modeling provided me a method to realize my idea while working through the logistical and financial hurdles of fabrication. What you are viewing here are 3D renderings created in Solidworks CAD software and imported into a jewelry rendering environment.

The title *"Strange Communication"* references the Bateson Project. The ten year study, which began in Menlo Park VA hospital in Northern California in the 1950s, had a profound impact on communications theory. Led by the anthropologist Gregory Bateson, the study became foundational to the fields of cybernetics as well as family therapy. It relied on the use of early ethnographic methods to observe the livelihoods of institutionalized inhabitants by scrutinizing the "strange communication" observed in schizophrenic patients. Although the issues of consent and power surrounding this kind of study are problematic, ultimately the work established Bateson's "double bind" theory that describes a communication breakdown wherein it is impossible to distinguish between conflicting messages, creating a negative feedback loop.

The double bind has become a foundational metaphor in feminist sociology used to describe the conflict between embodied experience and social power dynamics which often create a no-win scenario. Here empty chromatic globes are captured in cinematic fictions as a visual representation of a "double bind".

Often standing in as the very definition for potentials of containment, conceivability and measurement, the sphere invokes iconic symbols of optical worlding, referencing planets, droids and even the aperture of the human iris. They float through digital terrain confusing the distinction between the interior and exterior of the body, the placeness of source and

the relationship between image surface, observance and surveillance. Rendered in black and white to reference the modernist evidentiary language of film and early ethnography, as well as the architecture of the hyperreal, they can only communicate with each other via reflection. They are stuck between mutual reflections symbolizing the vast international and psychological reach of Silicon Valley as a model for the articulation of analysis and self. At the heart of this project is the pull between embeddedness, embodiment and technological history.

GOD DIES

What combines both the ability to infer and the ability to approach truth (i.e., truth in the sense of making sense of taking-as-true and making-true, separately and in conjunction with one another) is the capacity to engage in discursive practices as described by pragmatism: the ability to (1) deploy a vocabulary, (2) use a vocabulary to specify a set of abilities or practices, (3) elaborate one set of abilities or-practices in terms of another set of abilities-or-practices, and (4) use one vocabulary to characterize another. ... It should be recalled that 'we' is a mode of being, and a mode of being is not an ontological given or a domain exclusive to a set of fundamental categories or fixed descriptions. It is a conduct, a special performance that takes shape as it is made visible to others... By undergirding 'we', discursive practices organize commitments as ramifying trajectories between communal saying and doing, and they enact a space where the self-construction or extensive practical elaboration of humanity is a collaborative project.⁷

Reza Negarestani

"*God Dies*" is a text animation which activates the relationship between content, form and subjectivity through the media of site-specific installation and the format of film. The title is taken from a high school essay penned by

⁷ Negarestani, "The Labor of the Inhuman," 434.

1930's silver screen star, Francis Farmer. The essay, which is a deeply personal reflection about Farmer's gentle divestment from her prescribed relationship to prayer, brought her unwelcome celebrity, eventually earning her the nickname the "Bad Girl of West Seattle High". I discovered the essay years before moving to Oregon and planned on including it in a syllabus at some point. I created the background footage as well as the rhythm for the text animation by recording video conference sessions with friends who recited her essay.



God Dies: Animation and Site Specific Installation
Ongoing; 2021
12' x 7' Cinema Screen



God Dies: Animation and Site Specific Installation
Ongoing; 2021
12' x 7' Cinema Screen

Through its repositioning, the essay questions how our various relationships to technology can become modes of spirituality in communion with the self. Farmer's diaristic essay takes on heightened significance as it is parlayed through a series of smartphones, laptop screens and ultimately recast into a movie screen in the Pacific Northwest where Farmer was originally from. A future development of the work aims to install the animation in an historic theater.

Farmer's words are projected in human body sized scale, with the lines and sentences arranged to remix their poetic function. Readership produces a set of subjectivities and here the construct of readership is evidenced by an intimate, close up view of an anonymous speaker's face as they recite her

essay out loud. The depicted face performs the monstrous sublime via its enlarged; overheated pink fleshtones and blown out blues, invoking a kind of intimacy negotiated by interface.

ELEMENTS FOR A FICTIONAL LIFE



Elements for a Fictional Life
Installation / Assemblage
2023



Elements for a Fictional Life
Installation / Assemblage
2023

The personal essay, in which the world is reflected through the eyes of a first-person narrator, made its debut in the 16th century, introduced by the philosopher Michel de Montaigne, and since then has never really gone away. Even then this approach was hardly new, as more than a thousand years earlier Augustine of Hippo had shown with his confessions that his profound self-scrutiny meant he had to throw himself into the fray. His autobiographical approach was essential for his theological and philosophical development. The first person is elastic, and appears to be able to adapt itself continuously to contemporary forms of literary and journalistic writing, films, or audio stories, whether fictional or documentary. Often the first - person narrator in a

*documentary is rightly or wrongly regarded as, or held to be, identical to the author of the work.*⁸

Katharina Smets

Elements for a Fictional Life, borrows from deconstructed dioramas, molecular models and loosely film strips. I was interested in finding ways of blocking out the path the viewer would need to move through within the space of the installation while viewing the different components of the work. Inflatables (beach balls) bring the simplified shapes of atoms from diagrams into a hypothetical model and bear the discounted logos of companies, charities, holidays and instructional materials, in a hand-me-down economy of commercially produced aspiration. Alternatively, large acrylic prints of photographs depict an array of inconsequential images. Some are shot quickly with a smartphone and others are pulled from source material online for ongoing projects. Together these represent moments, pages ripped from a journal, imprinted footprints that allude to a larger invisible cycle. The wooden box structures encasing the photographs dictate the position that viewers must occupy in order to come “face to face” with the images. Through the combination of affective, saccharine photographs and the cold dilapidated plastic logos, the installation questions the difference between signal and noise, structure and substance within structures of recording and planning. Compression and decompression become important throughout the installation, expressed at different times by physical distancing of the components (for example the atomic models) and also through the reflections that accumulate both inside the photographs themselves and also on their surfaces within the installation.

⁸ Smets, “*The Power and Vulnerability of Your Own Voice in Podcasts*,” 78.



Elements for a Fictional Life
Installation / Assemblage
2023

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