

I CARRY YOU WITH ME:  
ON REPRESENTATION AND THE BODILY EVENT

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Chelsea Couch

TERMINAL PROJECT REPORT

COMMITTEE

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MARY CAITLIN COUCH<sup>for</sup>

1

"I've exhausted the alphabet. But I'm not writing this for you."<sup>2</sup>

1 "The 1939 film *The Women* was shot entirely in black and white, with the exception of one Technicolor sequence—a fashion show—which was literally detachable from the rest of the film. The colored reel had no bearing on the plot whatsoever, so the projectionist could choose to insert it as part of the movie or ignore it altogether. Could one imagine a book that functioned similarly, albeit in reverse—a kind of optional, black and white appendage to a larger body of blue." (Nelson, *Bluets*, pg. 66)

2 (Kapil, *Humanimal*, pg. 63)

## PART I

One of the earliest known forms of artistic representation—painting on cave walls—included the literal hand of the artist. Eponymously, *Cueva de las Manos* in the province of Santa Cruz, Argentina, is the most saturated with these marks. Read as left hands, it is posited that the painters held a spraying pipe with their right hand to compose a stenciled mark on the cave walls.<sup>3</sup> Rather than representation (or a mark of presence), left behind is instead an abstraction (one of absence). The iron oxide, kaolin, natrojarosite, and manganese oxide marks have been carbon dated to approximately 7300 BC, determined by testing the remains of the carved bone spraying pipes found on site.

There is also debate concerning the creation of the Upper Paleolithic Venus Figurines as to whether they were created to represent women or carved by women as self-portraits.<sup>4</sup> The objects remain the same regardless, but their place in history is drastically different depending upon the outcome of these two interpretations. A seemingly subtle shift makes a world of difference.<sup>5</sup> Given the immense role images and representation play in the formation of identities, and as a facet of the origin-story of representation, the difference between an identity founded on self-representation and one founded on representation as other is immense. What if we took this stance? An artistic leap towards an alternate history of woman's subjecthood, handheld and carved in stone or bone? While LeRoy McDermott has been accused of 'cherry-picking' for his *Self-Representation in Upper Paleolithic Female Figurines*, it is important to recognize that *two thirds of what we see is behind our eyes*—rather, that we cannot see what we cannot or do not want to imagine.

3 Although the lack of detail within the negative space could as readily suggest that the back side of the right hand was placed on the cave walls with the spraying pipe held in the left.

4 (McDermott)

5 The Pavlovian-Koestenkian-Gravettian (PKG) style (c. 27,000-21,000 B.C.E.) analyzed by LeRoy McDermott relies upon the theme of a lozenge composition, accompanied by recurring perceived fragmentation of the body or departures from anatomical accuracy, as it relates to the way a woman's body looks through her own eyes within her own fragmented and limited ability to view her body without the aid of a mirror.



*Cueva de las Manos*, Santa Cruz, Argentina (7300 BCE)



*Venus of Willendorf* (28,000–25,000 BCE)

If we trace the history of self-representation in western art history from sculpture & painting to photography & video, a shift occurs with the introduction of new media. The latter holds an interesting position in the ability to capture the image before its formation alters the subject/object. In a moment, the subject is becoming object and it is neither exclusively subject nor object (or both) that is represented, but the transformation. The role of self-representation is not just to reflect back the appearance of the body, but to experience the larger complexities of being. In freezing a moment, the self briefly becomes part object—seemingly tangible.<sup>6</sup>

6 "In the early twentieth century psychoanalysis often employed the myth of Narcissus to illustrate so-called narcissistic object relations. The French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan introduced one of the more influential theories in this field in 1933/36, namely the concept of the 'mirror stage' ('stage du miroir') with which he characterized the phase in an infant's development from six to eighteen months. Still almost entirely dependent, the child discovers his own body as an integral unit and gestalt with which he identifies himself. It's the beginning of the imaginary constituting the ego (the differentiation between the 'moi/me' and the 'je/I.'). Biologists today see this process as one of the pivotal criterion for the confirmation of intelligence in living beings. For children, this process not only determined by delight and happiness but is also simultaneously accompanied by the fear that this 'I' can also be fragmented again (often characterized as 'fear of fragmentation'). According to Lacan, this phase still represents an ongoing problem for adults, which, however, is blocked by most people by means of 'narcissistic self-delusion.' But Lacan also implied with his theory that the process of finding one's identity is one that is in fact never really completed." (Gygax, pp. 155-156)

Turning to haptic visuality, or tactile rather than passive viewing, we see that it is not just a transition that is captured through self-imaging, but a transitory space or continuum.<sup>7</sup> In the seeming transition from subject to object that occurs through self-representation, it perhaps becomes apparent that subject can become object, or object subject—simultaneously, if one may become the other, perhaps the two are not inherently separate. The exchange (that becomes enterable) is a mere facet of becoming. Lynda Benglis explores this exchange televisually in 1972 by presenting a single image that reveals itself as a layering and condensing of time and of self in *On Screen*. The camera captures a video of a video of a video, perhaps of a video, with Benglis herself wedged between the outermost layers confronting the viewers' gaze directly at the conclusion of the piece. All representation (all looking) is inevitably linked to desire. The gaze is perhaps intensified by the presence of a body as the stakes rise.<sup>8</sup>

7 "Haptic criticism," according to Laura Marks, "is opposed to the notion that criticism bridges a chasm between thing and representation, or subject and object. Rather I see a continuum between the two, with the possibility of one becoming the other." (Marks, pg. 2)

8 "Drawing heavily from the Lacanian theory of the mirror stage, Metz outlines two different registers of filmic identification. Primary cinematic identification is identification with the 'look' of the technical apparatus (camera, projector). The spectator, like the child positioned in front of the mirror constructing and imaginary ideal of a unified body, imagines an illusionary wholeness and mastery. Secondary identification, for Metz, is with a person who might be a star, actor, or character. Feminist film theorist Laura Mulvey posed a substantial challenge to Metz's formation by inquiring into the gender coordinates of the 'barer-of-the-look' and the object of the look. Mulvey described standardized patterns of fascination in classical narrative cinema structure that placed the female spectator in the masochistic position of identifying with the female subject, who is either a scopophilic fetish in the narrative or a brutalized character on the screen. The other remaining option for Mulvey's female spectator is a cross-identification with the male protagonist who is, by the gender coding of the cinematic apparatus, placed in the dominant position of control. Implicit in Mulvey's argument is an understanding of any identification across gender as pathologically masochistic. Mulvey's and Metz's theories, when considered together, offer a convincing model of spectatorship and its working. Their models fall short insofar as they unduly valorize some very limited circuits of identification." (Muñoz, pp. 26-27)

In many ways, self-representation from an embodied space—with an acceptance of the subject/object blurring and the unavoidable gaze exchange in a space of desire—is an act of refusal.<sup>9</sup>

Catherine Opie's series of self-portraits confront the viewer with a multiplicitous approach to a visual identity. She presents herself as seen by her child, as seen by society, as seen in an intimate exchange, and as seen by herself through an array of unapologetic stills. Exploring embodiment allows for an examination of multiple selves—*on our own terms*.<sup>10</sup>

In seeking out alternate figurations there is an expression of the internal struggle of grappling with our multi-faceted selves, as subjects becoming.<sup>11</sup>

9 The act becomes politicized as we “[...press] our wet, pulsating, smelly bodies against the clinically ungiving screen in an orgy of refusal, [...] interactively thrusting our bodies into the picture.” (Jones, pg. 22)

10 “I want to think through the body, not in a flight away from it.” (Braidotti, pg. 5)

11 “Plunging into the depths of the image – feeling the flesh of the other as our own, immanently mortal, corporeal skin (dimpled, expansive, quivering at the potential touch of the gaze) – is to free ourselves (at least momentarily) in a potentially radically politicizing way from both prejudice and fear.” (Jones, pg. 69)



Lynda Benglis, *On Screen* (1972)



Left to Right: Catherine Opie, *Dyke* (1993), *Self-Portrait/Pervert* (1994), *Self-Portrait/Cutting* (1993), *Self-Portrait/Nursing* (2004)

My work in the studio is centered around Ontology—an existence devoted to the senses; one of becoming. Especially when that work is aligned with the history of Feminist Art, the complex, interconnected, and mutable relationship between Subject and Object is one that draws my thoughts constantly. Within this lineage there is a long history of debate regarding the presentation of a body as object seemingly inversely correlated with acknowledging subjectivity: even placing it in the foreground. Although it is not possible to group the concerns of each decade or 'wave' of feminism to specific concerns, there is a pattern.<sup>12</sup>

The emancipatory practice of Feminism and Feminist Art has centered around the reclamation of woman as subject from the objectification of woman as regarded. In pursuit of autonomy—full subjecthood—woman sided with the subject as a means of distancing themselves from patriarchal objectification. The agency of this act appears at the surface to be a logical push, but the contradictions riddled within this distance lend themselves to the power structures at play. Why not subvert the system instead?<sup>13</sup> By recoding the existing authority, working from the inside to reconfigure the autonomy of disempowered identities, a fissure erupts within the majority revealing an alternate future unimaginable to the presently empowered.<sup>13</sup>

12 "Traditionally, emancipatory practice has been tied to a desire to become a subject. Emancipation was conceived as becoming a subject of history, of representation, or of politics. To become a subject carries with it the promise of autonomy, sovereignty, agency. To be a subject is always already subjected. Though the position of the subject suggests a degree of control, its reality is rather one of being subjected to power relations. Nevertheless, generations of feminists—including myself—have strived to get rid of patriarchal objectification in order to become subjects. The feminist movement, until quite recently (and for a number of reasons), worked toward claiming autonomy and full subjecthood." (Steyerl, pp. 50)

13 "Disidentification is about recycling and rethinking encoded meaning. The process of disidentification scrambles and reconstructs the encoded messages of a cultural text in a fashion that both exposes the encoded message's universalizing and exclusionary machinations and recircuits its workings to account for, include, and empower minority identities and identifications. Thus, disidentification is a step further than cracking open the code of the majority; it proceeds to use this code as raw material for representing a disempowered politics or positionality that has been rendered unthinkable by the dominant culture." (Muñoz, pg. 31)

Many artists have grappled over the past five decades with balancing these seemingly disparate concerns.<sup>14</sup> It is here that we begin.

The trouble with choosing to highlight subjectivity over objectivity—or the reverse—is the inextricable nature of these two terms and their actualization through an Ontological lived experience.<sup>15</sup>

14 “[A]s the struggle to become a subject became mired in its own contradictions, a different possibility emerged. How about siding with the object for a change? Why not affirm it? Why not be a thing? An object without a subject? A thing among other things? ‘A thing that feels,’ as Mario Perniola seductively phrased it[.]” (Steyerl, pg. 50)

15 “Knowledge of the object is brought closer by the act of the subject rending the veil it weaves about the object. It can do this only when, passive, without anxiety, it entrusts itself to its own experiences. In the places where subjective reason senses subjective contingency, the primacy of the object shimmers through: that in the object which is not a subjective addition. Subject is the agent, not the constituent, of object[.]” (Adorno, pg. 254)

## PART 2

16

The body is the primal site. Ontologically, everything stems from the body: as container, as contained, as a thinking feeling object occupying timespace. Part of being 'well-adjusted'—of attempting to stray from ferality—is the acceptance of the body as a living and vulnerable object.<sup>17</sup>

Gazing past the viewer, the figure in *Attempts to Obliterate*, I gazes at her own reflection and is lost within it—a listlessness present on her face. The image is fragmented and punctuated by the reflection of an exterior space, obstructed by a spray of white that obliterates the image returning it to white or pure projected light. This acceptance of vulnerability is something that is highlighted in the video through both the obliteration of a self-image and the fruitless labor of cleaning.

My gaze locates this anxiety in simply existing—being alive: the malaise of existence, of existentialism. The malaise of not-human—not-animal; of a lack of foundation or concrete absolutism; of becoming.<sup>18</sup>

16 "Adorno substituted people for animals; I feel cautious and sad reading his words in the middle of the night, studying the body for Ban.

Why?

To reduce the living body.' [E. Grosz].

To reach the point at which: 'life rubs up against matter, its inner core.' And thus to analyze nudity, in a text, as friction, the sacrifice gone wrong: but also: the normalizing contact with membranes of all kinds—plant, brush, nettles, ivy, asphalt, skin. What is the function of a non-genital nudity in a work of narrative? How can the body perform something in a new way—something that belongs neither to the scene nor to history?" (Kapil, *Ban en Banlieu*, pg. 59)

17 "When you wake to the fact that you have a body, you will wake to the fact that not for long." (Lockwood, pp. 65-66)

18 "We are not depressed, we're on strike. [...] Because everywhere the hypothesis of self is beginning to crack." (*The Coming Insurrection*, pg. 34)

There is no avoiding the fact that I too someday will die. That the site of pleasure and happiness is also the site of pain and suffering. That no matter how I identify I have no fixity and never will. That this body needs defending: against governances, against classifications, against other bodies.<sup>19</sup>

19 "‘I AM WHAT I AM.’ My body belongs to me. I am me, you are you, and something’s wrong. Mass personalization. Individualization of all conditions—life, work and misery. Diffuse schizophrenia. Rampant depression. Atomization into fine paranoid particles. Hysterization of contact. The more I want to be me, the more I feel an emptiness. The more I express myself, the more I am drained. The more I run after myself, the more tired I get. We treat our Self like a boring box office. We’ve become our own representatives in a strange commerce, guarantors of a personalization that feels, in the end, a lot more like an amputation." (*The Coming Insurrection*, pg. 29)



Chelsea Couch, *Attempts to Obliterate, I* (2016)



Chelsea Couch, *oh god* (2016)

On the flip-side of this ennui lies desire—*oh god*;<sup>20</sup> an anxious wish; the collective holding of one's breath. As my body jumps, compositionally presented as a torso stripped of most identifying factors, a chain of pop- or beer-tabs beats the chest over and over and over—escalating to a crescendo via delay and endurance—a cumulative and diminishing cycle, feeding itself and building to a deafening roar within an emotional range of anxiety and fear.

20

“When you breathe calm spreads outwards...  
Discipline to learn how to move with  
the body entire.  
To strengthen through the persistence  
of softness.” (Moignard)

My work with video explores the ways in which images can invite a sense of touch. Rather than engaging deep space, my focus on the surface of the image—an emphasis on the thingness of the image—allows a leap of the senses akin to touching with the eyes. A tactile interaction with the image results, allowing for an awareness of the materiality of the media as well as participation with the image.<sup>22</sup>

In *FindViewer*, I rotated the LCD screen of my camera and watched my eyes in the viewfinder with an intense focus while recording; it didn't take long for the lag to affect my responses in turn creating a feedback loop where I empathized with myself. I present simultaneously self and reflection—two distinct sentient beings emerge which are the same yet different. Although I was satisfied with *FindViewer* as a piece existing on its own terms, I decided to examine the action of blinking further by remixing my own work. I wanted to tease a complex idea further out of the visuals while removing (some) of the context of the footage's creation. By running the digital video through a small 4:3 monitor and recording the results as I adjusted the frequency of the image via the dials, I coaxed the image into an overlapping arc to create *FindViewer Redux*. As the two eyes overlapped and became one conflated gesture, the blinking of two eyes inched close to the gesture of a wink—innate action becomes an implicit sign—as well as denying access on behalf of the viewer to any other facial features.

21 “Fragments attract each other; a swarm of iron filings, black with golden flecks but without a soul. I stroke them with my finger so they scatter then relax.

In correspondence.

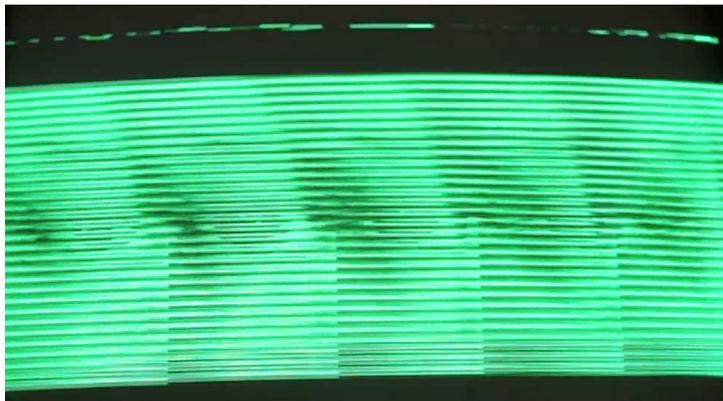
In the involuntary response to being touched.” (Kapil, *Schizophrenie*, pg. 22)

22 “With its careful attention to tactile surfaces and textures, Resnais's [*Hiroshima Mon Amour*] initial sequence of dissolves appeals to what Laura Marks has termed a 'haptic visuality'—images that invite as though it were a sense of touch. Haptic looking, as Jennifer Barker observes, 'lingers on the surface of the image rather than delving into depth and is more concerned with texture than with deep space. Engaging with an image in a haptic way is a form of synaesthetic quality of cinematic perception that explains how we are able to experience Resnais's initial series of dissolves as a tactile visuality.' (Martin, pg. 269)

This participation with the image—an invitation extended to the viewer rather than merely identifying with the image—allows the viewer access to both my subjectivity and my material thingness. The viewer engages the material of the image presented, as well as the desires it accumulates. Rather than attempting to stand in as a representation of reality, the image exists in this way as a fragment of the world.

I've returned time and again to duration as an exploratory point of departure in both the construction of objects and articulation of videos, asking questions such as: How can I crack open time? How can I make your heart beat faster? How can we get lost together? Can three minutes feel far too long in the presence of pain?<sup>23</sup> Can the capacity of the body and the capacity of time occupy space simultaneously?

23 "The rape joke is that time is different, becomes more horrible and more habitable, and accommodates your need to go deeper into it. Just like the body, which more than a concrete form is a capacity. You know the body of time is elastic, can take almost anything you give it, and heals quickly." (Lockwood, pg. 42)



Chelsea Couch, *FindViewer Redux* (2015)



Chelsea Couch, *Breath(e)* (2015)

I came across a large pile of older video monitors piled up and covered in dust around the same time I began to consider the grainy and skin-like quality of older video monitors. This tactile quality of visual texture explores Laura Marks' views on haptic visuality with its potential to oppose optical visuality in pursuit of an interaction with a viewer as well as removing the separation between viewing subject and object.<sup>24</sup> In many ways, the screens were the size of me once they stood in a line on my studio floor. I laid my body before them and allowed the camera to gaze at my reflection. Through this act, *Breath(e)* creates a link between the video and the monitor, a specificity of display, as well as warping the body and allowing for various duplications.

24 "Optical visuality, seeing things from enough distance to perceive them as distinct forms, depends on separation, on the viewing subject being separate from the object. We need [optical visuality]—to drive, to form judgments, to assess ourselves in the mirror; to build complicated theories of representation. But suppose we suspend for a moment the idea that this distance is always the case and always necessary. Our lover's skin seen an inch away becomes its own absorbing world, its gleam and pores and tiny hairs playing a delicate game of bas-relief. What is haptic criticism, then? If criticism is observing something in order to form an opinion of it, haptic criticism observes, well, haptically, in close contact with its object. Haptic criticism is opposed to the notion that criticism bridges a chasm between thing and representation, or [between] subject and object. Rather [it sees] a continuum between the two, with the possibility of one becoming the other. [...] Whether criticism is haptic, in touch with its object, is a matter of the point at which the words lift off. Haptic criticism keeps its surface rich and textured, so it can interact with things in unexpected ways. It has to be humble, willing to alter itself according to what it is in contact with. It has to give up ideas when they stop touching the other's surface. [...] Haptic visuality sees the world as though it were touching it." (Marks, pp. 2-4)

Through multiplicity—a split and duplicated image of a durational body in space, in this case—making is an act of visibility. Within the creation or exploration of *multiple* identities, self-representation allows for an examination of its very construction.

Whether actualizing an opposition or drawing from or against it, the process of transformation is not a shift but a series of iterations.<sup>25</sup> By creating five separate videos, each with varying durations, and allowing them to loop in close proximity, a pleasantly unsettling sense of time emerged in the sense that it seemed to both flatten and elongate simultaneously. How does our perception of time alter when its consistency is disrupted through reflection and duplication? When duration is fragmented alongside form? The lag of the simple movement of breathing disrupts the illusion of a single body in space and the abundance of visual information nearly creates five separate moments, similar to an internal self-perception, instead of a reconciled and complete form.

25 Realizing that subjectivity is a socially mediated process, “[...] the point is not to know who we are, but rather what, at last, we want to become, how to represent mutations, changes and transformations, rather than Being in its classical modes.” (Braidotti, pg. 2)

What of the context—the spatial confines—of the body? Bodies, navigating the structures that house and protect their vulnerability, move in a way prescribed by the built environment. This occupancy is inscribed in stone from blueprint to concrete and wooden beams, tile and mortar, carpet even. The industrious nature of these associated materials extricate forces of movement and emotion while defined architectural voids such as corridors predispose gestures and prompt passage through time and space.<sup>26</sup>

Additionally, its very makeup mimics our own. We conceive of a dwelling as an extension of ourselves, insulate couched in membranes, grounded in the soil, arching upwards in a vertical gesture. We lay thresholds at the brink of inside and out, body and world, marking not only territory but the point at which public becomes private.

*26 "Twelve steps up first, skip seven. Then two little flights after the turn...Skip four; skip three, step wide at the top. You can remember it, it's got a syncopated rhythm. He skipped the fourth step and the first little flight. There was a round window just at the turn before the last little flight. Guy remembered from some essay, As a house is built so the pattern of activity of those will be who live in it... Shall the child pause at the window for the view before he climbs fifteen steps to his playroom?" (Highsmith, pg. 150)*

*Or tongue. Of flame.* complicates this threshold moment and explores these material and formative similarities between flesh and structure. The piece exists in space as two videos running simultaneously. In one, a mouth can be seen licking concrete, spittle running down both chin and wall. The figure is bound tightly both compositionally in the frame and spatially through the dated 4:3 monitor. Atop the monitor is a bent sheet of copper, marred with oily fingerprints and a growing patina from two painfully-slowly-dehydrating fleshy mandarins wrinkled as evidence of their bound state by a bright blue rubber band. The slow change is visible as artifact, yet predates and extends beyond the viewer's interaction with the piece; this elongation of time is paired with the frenetic movement and resonant sound of the videos occupying the same space.<sup>27</sup>

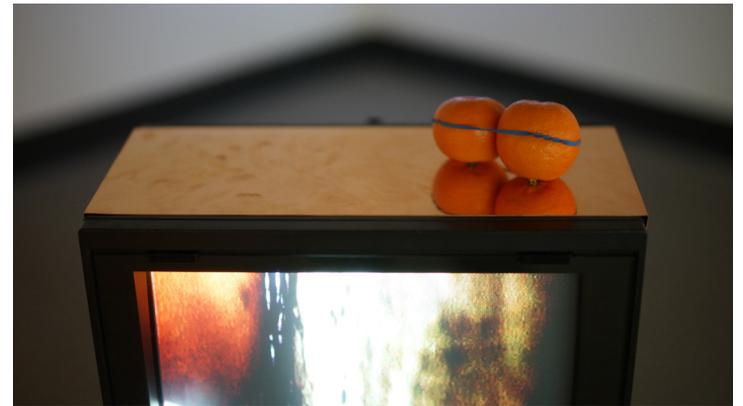
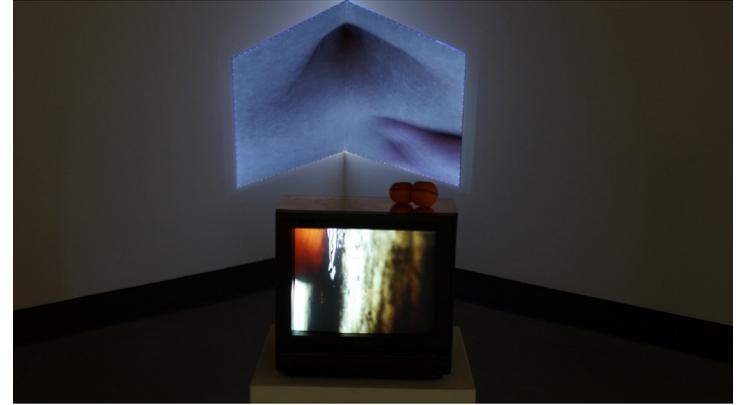
Behind, a projection strikes the corner of the room. The viewing space is delineated by a line of copper nails pinning a sheet of pitted roofing felt onto the walls. In this video, a hand investigates flesh, pinching and twisting, opening pores and revealing dry skin around a knee and a bellybutton; additionally, the footage alternates between flashes of the same hand running over textured dry wall and concrete cracks. There is a maddeningly anxious sense of isolation, of containment, of a feral body seeking resonance or freedom, or both. A submissive body locked in isolation, backed into a corner.

27 "Schizophrenic, what binds design? What makes the city touch itself everywhere at once [...] like the city you live in now? What makes the wall wet, the step wet, the sky wet?" (Kapil, *Schizophrenic*, pg. 15)

In this isolation or entrapment, there is strong presence of desire. Desire to push softness against rigidity, pressing skin onto a hard and unyielding surface. Desire for moving beyond the threshold as an envelope; of resistance, escape, transgression; sensing delineated edges, of freedom.



Chelsea Couch, *Or tongue. Of flame.* (2016)



Chelsea Couch, *Or tongue. Of flame.* (2016)

## PART 3

The emancipatory practice of Feminism and Feminist art is a struggle over representation and the history of elevating the subject. In this split between Subject and Object, it was regarded as imperative to side with the subject in order to work against being regarded as object.<sup>28</sup> If an opportunity is presented to participate in an image, in its material, in its desires, by acknowledging the thingness of both the image and its subject, this either/or relationship is clouded, diminished. The image is a thing, I am a thing, you are a thing—we must subvert the system in pursuit of reconfiguring the autonomy of disempowered identities.

28 “The struggle over representation, however, was based on a sharp split between these levels: here thing—there image. Here I—there it. Here subject—there object. The senses here—dumb matter over there. Slightly paranoid assumptions concerning the authenticity came into the equation as well. Did the public image—of women or other groups, for example—actually correspond to reality? Was it stereotyped? Misrepresented? Thus one got tangled in a whole web of presuppositions, the most problematic of which being, of course, that an authentic image exists in the first place. A campaign was thus unleashed to find a more accurate form of representation, but without questioning its own, quite realist, paradigm. [...]

To participate in an image—rather than merely identify with it—could perhaps abolish this relation. This would mean participating in the material of the image as well as in the desires and forces it accumulates. How about acknowledging that this image is not some ideological misconception, but a thing simultaneously couched in affect and availability, a fetish made of crystals and electricity, animated by our wishes and fears—a perfect embodiment of its own conditions of existence? As such, the image is—to use yet another phrase of Walter Benjamin’s—without expression. It doesn’t represent reality. It is a fragment of the real world. It is a thing just like any other—a thing like you and me.

This shift in perspective has far-reaching consequences. There might still be an internal and inaccessible trauma that constitutes subjectivity. But trauma is also the contemporary opium of the masses—an apparently private property that simultaneously invites and resists foreclosure. And the economy of this trauma constitutes the remnant of the independent subject. But then if we are to acknowledge that subjectivity is no longer a privileged site for emancipation, we might as well just face it and get on with it.” (Steyerl, pp. 51-52)

If we take this artistic leap towards an alternate history of woman's subjecthood, one enveloped in thingness, we must also take with it all of the bruises and catastrophe that come with being an object. Isn't that what we wanted anyway? To be seen as we are, to be made more complete by regarding all that encompasses and engages our sense of self, however tarnished and disjointed it may be?<sup>29</sup> By acknowledging and highlighting our thingness, we begin to see the radicality of the object and its potential to recode existing authority.

What is thingness—when does an object become a thing? When it confronts our habit-relationship with it, when it no longer works for us; when it is misused, when its common function is thwarted; when its socially encoded value is shed. Thingness relies on a relationship between subject and object. It is a thing's material quality, the result of a subject-object bridge. In *Three Passages*, the works collectively focus on the fragments of objects, of image, of experience, in order to recognize their part in the world as not a singular representation of reality, but a mere facet of something larger than individual bodies and individual experiences.<sup>30</sup>

29 "On the other hand, the increased appeal of becoming a thing doesn't necessarily mean that we have reached the age of unlimited positivity [...] No, the negativity of the thing can be discerned by its bruises, which mark the site of history's impact. As Eyal Weizman and Tom Keenan remark in a fascinating conversation on forensics and the fetish, objects increasingly take on the role of witnesses in court cases concerned with human-rights violations. The bruises of things are deciphered, and then subjected to interpretation. Things are made to speak—often by subjecting them to additional violence. The field of forensics can be understood as the torture of objects, which are expected to tell all, just as when humans are interrogated. Things often have to be destroyed, dissolved in acid, cut apart, or dismantled in order to tell their full story. To affirm the thing also means participating in its collision with history.

Because a thing is usually not a shiny new Boeing taking off on its virgin flight. Rather, it might be its wreck, painstakingly pieced together from scrap inside a hangar after its unexpected nosedive into catastrophe. A thing is the ruin of a house in Gaza. A film reel lost or destroyed in civil war. A female body tied up with ropes, fixed in obscene positions. Things condense power and violence. Just as a thing accumulates productive forces and desires, so does it also accumulate destruction and decay." (Steyerl, pp. 52-53)

30 "Often women, but by no means always." (Nelson, *The Argonauts*, pg. 21)

In the video *B(l)ind*, a monitor flashes between black and white. Occasionally, a hand can be seen drawing a blind over a window, fighting a spring over and over—open/closed, public/private. The stark contrast highlights the monitor as both an apparatus and as an interface while the window itself serves as both a pictorial device and a material surface. In this composition, I focus on portraying the body at the threshold of a subject-object interaction. I misuse the body in order to break down cultural prescriptions and constructions—such as expectations of what constitutes an appropriate action or level of openness regarding personal embodied experiences—that come with its objectness.



Chelsea Couch, *B(l)ind* (2017)



Chelsea Couch, *Lay Lady Lay Lady Lay* (2017)

*Lay Lady Lay* opens with a degraded audio track slowly coming into audible focus to reveal a relentless loop of the first five seconds of Bob Dylan's *Lay Lady Lay*. The repetition is persistent and maddeningly reminiscent of the skip of a needle on the surface of vinyl. This song is one of the many celebrated examples in Bob Dylan's oeuvre with misogynistic lyrical undertones.<sup>31</sup>

My own hesitation to even state this openly reflects an internalization of the infrastructure of patriarchy.<sup>32</sup> In the video, the absence of these lyrics reflects both this hesitation towards explicit statement or definitive expression as well as prompting the viewer to provide closure as they conjure cultural content internally while witnessing an extrication and displacement of this violence visually.

31 "Lay, lady, lay, lay across my big brass bed  
Stay, lady, stay, stay with your man awhile  
Until the break of day, let me see you make him smile  
His clothes are dirty but his hands are clean  
And you're the best thing that he's ever seen" (Dylan, *Lay Lady Lay*)

32 "She takes just like a woman, yes, she does  
She makes love just like a woman, yes, she does  
And she aches just like a woman  
But she breaks just like a little girl" (Dylan, *Just Like a Woman*)

The image of a pineapple which compositionally evokes a still life is disrupted when a hand enters the frame and strikes the pineapple with the point of a tack hammer. The fruit returns to stillness and then the assault resumes. Over and over in slow motion the pineapple sprays liquid as fruit flesh flies, the pineapple falls to the ground and is eventually split in two. The loop of the video is as relentless as the audio, starting over infinitely with no semblance of conclusion or a break, returning the fruit to a vertical orientation in a microsecond only to begin again, a skip in and of itself.<sup>33</sup>

By focusing on the uses of the body, *Lay Lady Lay Lady Lay* advocates for this thingness, questioning the ways in which a body operates in society; recognizing the materiality of self; the ways in which it is a tool that can be used or abused, by ourselves or others; grappling with what occurs when our bodies no longer work in service of society: all of the above serves as a subversive way of navigating the radicality of the object.

How then can this material body be doubled and presented tangibly in space? How can the haptic be made solid? What happens when gesture becomes form—an imprint of action, solidified as mass and halted in time? I have explored the interface or a surface separation of two bodies in many ways within my work, whether through screens and monitors, panes of glass and walls, or reflective materials presenting this divide—however these methods rely on restriction. When this notion is further divided to surfaces which are malleable and those that are unyielding, an interface can either record a moment or deny—even erase—this interaction.

33 "You gaze out the window get mad and get madder  
Throw your hands in the air; say 'what does it matter?'  
But it don't do no good to get angry  
So help me I know

For a heart stained in anger grows weak and grows bitter  
You become your own prisoner as you watch yourself sit there  
Wrapped up in a trap of your very own  
Chain of sorrow

I been brought down to zero, pulled out and put back there  
I sat on a park bench, kissed the girl with the black hair  
And my head shouted down to my heart  
'you better look out below!  
Hey, it ain't such a long drop don't stammer don't stutter  
From the diamonds in the sidewalk to the dirt in the gutter  
And you carry those bruises to remind you wherever you go" (Prine)

The material body as made evident through works focusing on material capacity is one point of access to the body's thingness made tangible in space. Equally important to the presentation of a present body, an absent body as represented by materials or a sketch of the spaces that would be or were occupied by a body can serve as a means of creating this material body. Further, the ways in which a body occupies space, in which structures serve to reroute space, or gesture, in which the texture and quality, mass and form, weight and variations of the body, become visible.

*Three Passages* explore these variations of absence. In one, a large copper-covered steel structure delineates space at the entryway of a gallery. A large pane of plexiglass acts as interface in many of the ways described above; it is simultaneously screen, window, and surface. It creates an interior and exterior space in and around the sculpture, its transparency grants visual access beyond the surface, yet its reflective qualities allow for its visibility as a material. Suspended in space, it is precarious and vulnerable, supported by a steel frame whose structural pressure point is diverted in space, a disruption of function which presents its thingness in addition to confronting our habit-relationship with an institutional structure. As a form it is navigable, yet its passages reflect absence until the viewer physically maneuvers the space.<sup>34</sup>

34 "A woman comes into the room, that's to say, she's here  
A woman has come into the room  
Here, a woman comes into the room, see?  
You read this, she's come in, these ain't just words, don't pretend  
A woman comes into the room and so she does  
And from your own point of view which you confuse with absolute truth?  
Fuck  
When a woman comes into the room, your view is a foreshortened arm, your  
own and it being hers, foreshortened but  
A woman comes into the room  
On amid small kinds of created reality and continuities flash mirage  
A woman, they are windows and light, an ounce of triteness, a major genre, if  
this were a novel, but it is a woman  
Part hard scrutiny, part a dream, but just about free of page, you ask  
A woman comes into the room  
She's you, and maybe even room is you, but you are not a woman comes  
into the room  
And I'm astonishedly happy because a woman comes into the room  
She comes into the room  
What else and why should I worry?  
A woman comes into the room, she just comes into the room" (Notley)



Chelsea Couch, *Three Passages* (2017)



Chelsea Couch, *Three Passages* (2017)

A fluorescent light runs the length of a horizontal beam, situated high enough to serve as an invitation for the passage of bodies yet blending in well enough with structural expectations to dissipate into the space.<sup>35</sup> It is a useless structure, an institutional failure. There is a notable absence of the body or when considered alongside my past works, an extension of the presence of bodies to the viewers themselves.

In the second, a copper sheet is situated both on the floor and the wall in a slump. The reflective quality of the metal allows fragmented images of the surrounding space, but the concave form distorts and even inverts this space. A patina on the surface of the copper reveals a history of interaction—the mark of hands and feet are visible on the surface as residual oils have oxidized. This interaction is recorded on the metal through long finger lines and smudges that elicit an image of a body clawing at the surface. The result of capacity, an invisible force is made visible. Yet there is no bruise. A fluorescent tube runs horizontally across the sheet, pinning it in place and trapping it against a ballast fixed to the wall.

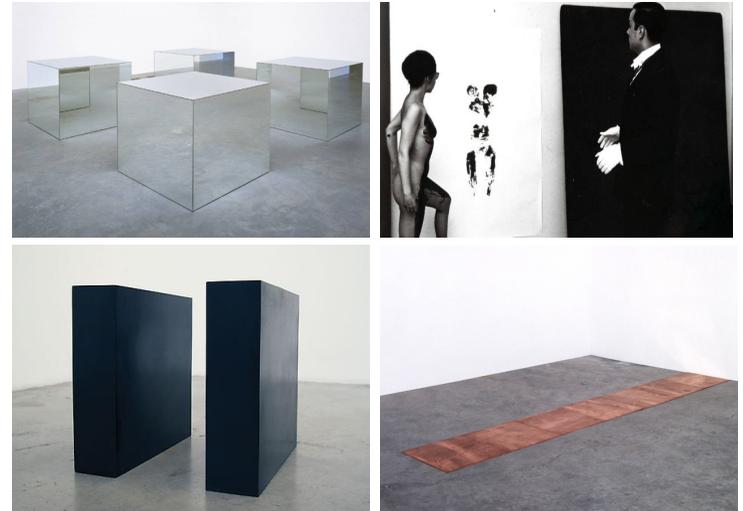
35 "The schizophrenic's work is to make the house schizophrenic: an illuminated yet blackened construction at the center of a field. All of the lights are on and the curtains are not drawn, exposing the occupants in the rituals of their illnesses." (Kapil, *Schizophrene*, pg. 54)

In the third, a large fragmented form stands up from the floor at an angle, an implied recline. Opposed to the first Passage which is oriented vertically in correspondence with the structural space of the gallery, this form appears incomplete, fragmented, and disoriented. What could be a frame for window panes is situated at a haphazard angle. A window grants access to a world beyond—surface meets depth, transparency meets its barrier. Draped across the top corner of the frame is a synthetic metallic silver cloth—tied taught around the center is a synthetic metallic gold cloth. The soft material envelopes the rigid frame, creating opaque spaces within the delineation as if the drapes have been opened making what would be private public.

These works explore a recoding of the Minimalist canon by operating within the context of works such as Robert Morris' reflective sculptures, Yves Klein's use of women's bodies as mark-making tools, Tony Smith's monumentally-scaled sequential steel sculptures, or Carl Andre's situation of industrial materials which served to interrupt physical engagements in space, all of which explore objects in art working against rather than for us, highlighting thingness. By recalling these art historical moments of creation and the subjectivities linked to them, my own subjectivity enters the work through this (dis)identification, categorization, translation, and recontextualization.



Chelsea Couch, *Three Passages* (2017)



Left to Right: Robert Morris, *Untitled* (1965), Yves Klein and Elena Palumbo-Mosca, *Anthropometry* (1960), Tony Smith *The Elevens Are Up* (1963), Carl Andre *Seventh Copper Cardinal* (1973)

Much as with the criticality of a move towards embracing thingness in Feminism and Feminist art, the radicality of the object lies in the very act of working on and against, a resurgence of the context at hand. One of the ways in which dominant ideologies can be utilized as raw material for systemic change is through engaging disidentification.<sup>36</sup>

Objects can be used as a means of actively serving as agents of change by recoding—operating from within the context of—the majoritarian rather than attempting to replace or buckling under its pressures. This alteration or innovation of existing systems, structures, and objects, is a subversive act: one which is a maneuver for furthering minoritarian subjectivity, as well as thingness.<sup>37</sup>

36 “Disidentification [...] neither opts to assimilate within such a structure nor strictly opposes it; rather, disidentification is a strategy that works on and against dominant ideology. Instead of buckling under the pressures of dominant ideology (identification, assimilation) or attempting to break free of its inescapable sphere (counteridentification, utopianism), this ‘working on and against’ is a strategy that tries to transform a cultural logic from within, always laboring to enact permanent structural change while at the same time valuing the importance of local or everyday struggles.” (Muñoz, pg. 12?)

37 “Let me be clear about one thing: disidentification is about cultural, material, and psychic survival. It is a response to state and global power apparatuses that employ systems of racial, sexual, and national subjugation. These routinized protocols of subjugation are brutal and painful. Disidentification is about managing and negotiating historical trauma and systemic violence. I have gone to great lengths to explicate, render, and imagine complicated strategies and tactics that enact minoritarian subjectivity.” (Muñoz, pg. 161)

If, as Harmony Hammond posits,<sup>38</sup> art is a site of resistance—a means of intervening in historical and cultural fields of exclusivity—than utilizing disidentification as a tactic in art carries with it the historical concerns of media specificity. Within my work, it is crucial to maintain a finger on the pulse of historical and contemporary concerns inherent to the discipline(s) in order to understand the context I am embedded in, working on, working against. Within my sculptural and video works, engaging a Minimalist, Conceptual, or even Experimental approach or aesthetic is an act or recoding, queering a, at least *historically*, male cis het canon. And so, this is where we end: a gathering of forces on the border; a gravitational force holding the work within rather than without.

38 As Harmony Hammond so succinctly states, “I see art-making, especially that which comes from the margins of the mainstream, as a site of resistance, a way of interrupting and intervening in those historical and cultural fields that continually exclude me, a sort of gathering of forces on the border: [...] I believe that the answer lies not in accepting or choosing identity, but rather in creating it, and one way we create identity is through art.” (Hammond, pp. 97-98)

39 “Being is a becoming. And this becoming does not achieve stabilization even with death. Long after a given being has ceased to be physically in the world, it remains there, mnemonically ‘housed’ in all of the psyches that have ever affirmed it. In each of those psyches, it is not a coherent and stable entity, but a constellation of diverse and highly particularized sounds and images, caught up in a ceaseless process of flux and transformation. —Kaja Silverman” (Kwon, pg. 281)

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