

# KATE WERBLE GALLERY

83 VANDAM STREET NEW YORK, NY 10013

## MOUSSE

### “Alongsideness: Intimacy in Art”

A conversation between Johanna Burton and Lauren Cornell

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LAUREN CORNELL

Recently you and I took a break from our workdays to get the inside of our mouths swabbed for a new piece by Anicka Yi. As I understand it, Anicka will collaborate with a biologist to create a collective female bacteria: a unique form of contagion alchemized in response to an equally viral, if more durable, fear of women. It was a very intimate interaction—we were essentially providing our most private material (DNA)—yet nothing about it seemed particularly invasive. It made me think about how significantly our sense of personal boundaries has been redrawn, partly since it is not improbable that some Big Data company is already in possession of our DNA records, but also because rote self-exposure is so constant. The strategic surrender of self is a condition that has been examined previously in the pages of Mousse: Ed Halter and I discussed how mandatory participation in pop culture changes art; Andrew Durbin has meditated on the poetics of selfies; and the artists' critique of the absorption of marketing tactics into so-called personal brands has also been reviewed. For our purposes, as friends and collaborators with a shared interest in feminist art, I thought it might be productive to explore how a more confessional, increasingly self-centered culture might reshape the intimate gesture in art.

JOHANNA BURTON

The way you've formulated this makes me realize how complicated my own feelings are about it. On the one hand, I do find myself increasingly invested in the critical potential of art within what you nicely lay out as a “confessional, increasingly self-centered culture,” while on the other I find it hard to articulate what marks the distinction between practices that utilize intimacy critically, and those that simply play into a cultural turn that rewards gut-spilling. At a certain point in my own formation—which can be defined by the (not always synergistic) poles of institutional and feminist critique—I became dissatisfied with the way “difference” was accounted for. While of course questions of class, race, sexuality, and gender have been granted a certain amount of (grudging) attention, the ways in which we interact with one another, to say nothing of our own messy internal workings, have been left largely unaccounted for. Now we see the unspoken taboos around such emotional terrain fully overturned. There are various ways that overturning gets explained: via affect theory, animal studies, and head-on rebuttals of desires born of capitalism and its discontents, even a tenuous cultural acceptance of “therapy” and “spiritualism.”

Your example of how Anicka's work plays into all of this is key. Here is an artist whose work has no patience for a long history of conceptual art that privileges the ocular and the rational and yet uses science—ostensibly the most “rational” approach of all—to overturn assumptions about how we make meaning. Her swabbing of our DNA (a very public and personal action, though ultimately the results end up being rather anonymous—a needle in a haystack) utilizes incredibly precise technology, only to appeal to a sense that is considered almost impossible to map: smell. There's something vaguely dangerous, or at least metaphorically scary, about taking the DNA of a large batch of women, combining it, and rendering it invisible, except for the smell it can produce and the bacteria it grows. But there's something palpably sexy there too, in a weird way.

L C

A work that I think takes a particularly thoughtful approach to the line you mention between utilizing intimacy critically and gut-spilling is Ann Hirsch's Playground (2013), a

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performative reenactment of her teen cyber-romance with an older man. The piece operates like a play, with the archive of AOL chats between “xoannieox” (young Ann Hirsch) and “lieshadow” (her cyber-lover) as the script. Hirsch also published the stream of AOL chats as an e-book, which was quickly banned from iTunes for promoting pedophilia (at the time, legally, she was a minor, he an adult).

Critic Rob Horning has written that amidst the aspirational life-scripting of social media, “danger is the new sincerity,” which I think resonates here. Like Frances Stark’s *My Best Thing* (2011), the piece examines how adolescent desire gets tested, through the remove of such a platform, where moral codes can be sidestepped, and fantasy can blur with action, text handles (like “lieshadow”) with bodies. Also, like a collection of letters, here the chats animate the past as an exchange: a reenactment of what was already a staging of intimacy.

J B

The range of possible relationships—and non-relationships—is definitely made much more visible as people can literally assume forms in the shape of their own and others’ fantasies (even if that means just being themselves). I’m also really interested in how, alongside these technology-driven platforms, grassroots or, perhaps more precisely, materially-based communities are also shape-shifting. I’m thinking of the ways in which communities of care are attaining a new visibility. Artists like Park McArthur and Constantina Zavitsanos work from a materialist-feminist perspective to think through the foundations of daily existence—from sustenance to sex—as necessarily interdependent. Park tackles such pragmatics from the vantage point of access: what does it mean to enter a building, let alone a society, that doesn’t account for bodies that can’t be abstractly homogenized? Bodies in wheelchairs, bodies with different social arrangements, bodies that depend on other bodies? Those bodies raise a whole set of needs that challenge holistic or unilateral notions of a “general public.” What Park and Tina (and others) point to is the ways in which intimacy in some cases accounts for support networks. Emotional, physical; emergency, everyday. Bodies can’t be thought of as singular or independent. It’s an interesting addendum to older ideas of intimacy that either took sexuality or traditional family structure as models.

L C

“Disintegrating into a continuous and fluid being ... my self oozes continuously beyond this body, no beginning or end, no difference.” This is an excerpt from a text by Xavier Cha that she wrote to accompany a recent performance, in which an actor walked through the galleries of the Lyon Biennial in a drugged-up state, obsessively taking and posting photographs of himself. The performance dramatized the desire for validation inherent in the act of sharing—an increasingly required mode—and the vulnerability felt in front of a constant audience, and it existed both live and as a trail of increasingly naked self-portraits. I’m drawn to Cha’s work because it breaks down the commercialized version of such support models, bringing the more unprocessed, psychologically fraught parts to the surface.

J B

Sharing. It’s a seductive and important word—and one I think we necessarily should spend time defining in today’s context. So many contemporary artists, from Tino Sehgal to Trisha Donnelly, Seth Price to Emily Roysdon, would seem, in distinctly differing ways, to offer modes of sharing—via communally produced knowledge, abstract ritual, or finely tuned yet broadly understood language. But just what is shared, after all? Something I think we both value is long-standing allegiance, communities that are built and sustained over time. But we also know how such groups can calcify and inadvertently assume the profile of gatekeeper. Where’s the balance between long-standing commitment and fluid, responsive social space? An artist I’m especially interested in in this regard is Brooke O’Harra, who works in the arena of “theater” and yet takes to task the deeply ingrained, often conservative infrastructure that drives it. What does it mean to “use” a shared cultural text like Shakespeare today? Daytime soaps? Her recent work trades upon the immediate recognition of “intimate” exchanges, yet shores up how these are always already scripts that we

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simply play into and play on.

L C

That reminds me of Adam Curtis' essay "The Curse of Tina, Part Two" on the history of the televised hug, and the work of John Miller who has often dramatized this kind of scripting. (I'm thinking now of "Holiday in Other People's Misery," in particular, paintings of reality TV contestants sobbing or holding each other or screaming.) Yet today, amidst a pop culture where these tropes are dispersed, a new spectrum has emerged: from artists' staging projects that embrace a 360-degree audience, for instance Amalia Ulman or Juliana Huxtable, whose personae could be considered part of their material, to a simultaneous move away from open collectivity, towards more clandestine situations, where the experience of art becomes private or limited. I'm thinking of the exclusive viewings of Jordan Wolfson's animatronic she-robot or the individual viewership inside Ian Cheng's Oculus Rift. All seem to negotiate a consumerist culture that is doubling down on self-actualization, self-improvement, self-isolation.

J B

And that push is equally a push toward self-loathing and passivity, suspicion toward others, and a buy-in to competition as a new mode of survival of the fittest. I've been going back to Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, and by extension Silvan Tomkins, as a way to extend psychoanalysis's assessment of the subject. I like a great deal the general distinction affect theorists make between, for instance, guilt and shame. Guilt is connected to what one does; whereas shame pertains specifically to whom one is. The existential aspect of shame allows for the interpersonal to be central to how we view subjectivity, rather than supplementary. Such powerful endemic overlap between ostensibly "individual" entities defines the project of artists like Gerard & Kelly (Brennan Gerard and Ryan Kelly), who in works like *Timelining* and, currently at the New Museum, *P.O.L.E. (People, Objects, Language, Exchange)*, take up forms of intimacy as they manifest across time and space. They are particularly interested in debunking Oedipal narratives that privilege bloodlines and generations. Instead, they look horizontally, queerly, at friendships, unconventional affiliations, unrecognized unions, and—in the vein of Juliet Mitchell—siblings. In arguing for these modes of connection, they also point to the precarity and in some cases dysfunction of what we take to be fundamental union-types between human beings.

L C

One of the most discomfiting and also intriguing experiences I've had recently was a studio visit with performance artist Geo Wyeth, in which he situated me inside a union, so to speak, with his deceased godmother, Harriet, a Jewish New York native and activist. My casual conversation with Geo was interrupted by an outfit change, on his part, which doubled as a quick conjuring of Harriet who carried on the visit. A lot was asked of me in our conversation—I had to sing YouTube karaoke for her, share details on my childhood while she rolled her eyes at me as if I thought I was way too precious, and sit in the cold on a rain-soaked stoop while she smoked cigarettes and regaled me with stories of her commitments to the civil rights movement in the 1960s and dalliances with lesbianism—and yet, I was transfixed by the generosity of creating a work just for one person (and by Wyeth's total transubstantiation of character).

J B

That sounds more like a hazing than a studio visit! But it points to a crucial element of the work and terrain we are discussing. There's a kind of social contract in place when we agree—mutually—to engage one another in work that goes beyond laying bare for the sake of laying bare. As the least-likely-spectator-in-the-room-to-engage, I find myself incredibly uncomfortable when placed in the kind of situation you describe above. Yet the ways such experiences set within the context of "art" can function, disrupting convention and providing tools for thinking differently, can be incredibly powerful.

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L C

Thinking about “intimate exchanges” in art, I often return to *Software* (1970), organized by curator turned mystic Jack Burnham,<sup>1</sup> which included art and technology projects by MIT students, alongside John Giorno’s *Dial-A-Poem* and Vito Acconci’s *Follow Piece*, among other conceptual works. The show advocated for systems-based art and interactivity, though Burnham admitted in the catalogue essay that, often, “interaction falls short of the richness of human conversation.” I find this line to be such a simple yet cogent comment on why art attempting to approximate or simulate intimacy falls flat. Whether it’s interactive, technology-based art of then or now, or relational aesthetics projects, it’s rare that an artwork can absorb its viewer in a truly participatory exchange that doesn’t fall short of the richness of human conversation, which is also perhaps why projects like Hirsch’s, among many others, that walk a line through that conversation, are so resonant. Or why today some of the truest expressions of intimacy can be seen in a resurgence of club nightlife: *Ghetto Gothik*, formerly in New York, or *New Theater* in Berlin, or more covert arenas online, where people can be alongside each other, without insisting on sharing.

J B

This situation of alongsideness you describe, whereby the social is made visible, yet not via re-enactment, allows for intimate interaction in art to succeed and fail in important ways. It gives me hope that in our precarious world there are and always will be emerging models.



Gerard & Kelly, *Timelining* at The Kitchen, New York, 2014.

Courtesy: the artists; The Kitchen, New York; Kate Werble Gallery, New York.

Photo: Jason Mandella

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Gerard & Kelly, *Open Pole* in "P.O.L.E. (People, Objects, Language, Exchange)" at New Museum, New York, 2014-2015.

Courtesy: the artists and Kate Werble Gallery, New York.

Photo: Sammy Bethea

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