

# *Evental Aesthetics*

## *...Hijacking...*

*Volume 3 Number 2 (2014)*



# Evental Aesthetics

www.eventalaesthetics.net

ISSN: 2167-1931

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Vol. 3, No.2 (2014)  
Hijacking

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# Hijacking

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# Introduction

Mandy–Suzanne Wong

Bermuda's native bluebird, also known as the Eastern bluebird, lives in constant fear of hijackers. Were this timid beauty to attempt to nest in trees, it would find its youngsters kidnapped and devoured by Great Kiskadees, vocal and aggressive but equally gorgeous predators.<sup>1</sup> Kiskadees and brown house sparrows were introduced to Bermuda in the twentieth century to control the small Jamaican lizards which were themselves introduced to kill the blight that all but eliminated Bermuda's endemic cedar trees, the favored nesting sites of Eastern bluebirds. Brought in to defend our native species, the kiskadee has instead driven the bluebird to the brink of extinction (and this is hardly due to a shortage of lizards). Called to action by the local ornithologist and activist David Wingate, human Bermudians began to erect bluebird boxes in public and private gardens. The round entranceways of these sturdy wooden structures are just big enough to accommodate adult bluebirds but too small for the stouter kiskadees. For a time, it seemed, these manmade boxes at last provided bluebirds with safe nesting sites, and the number of bluebirds on the island seemed to stabilize. However, with the continuing expansion of the human population, the sparrow also thrives. Unlike the

wary bluebirds, sparrows are perfectly willing to nest under eaves and atop telephone poles. Nevertheless, the sparrows' overwhelming success has resulted in a serious housing shortage. In response, sparrows have begun to hijack bluebird boxes.



Photo by Mandy-Suzanne Wong

The sparrow is marginally smaller than the average bluebird, hence the boxes' narrow entryways do not present a problem; and what the sparrow lacks in stature it makes up for in spleen. A sparrow may slaughter an entire bluebird family, including the adults, in order to co-opt the nest. In 2011, Bermuda's *Royal Gazette* mourned an adult female bluebird who was beheaded by sparrows inside her bluebird box. Her mate became "Father of the Year" when he successfully raised their chicks on his own, a behavior atypical of male bluebirds.<sup>2</sup>

A hijacking is a violent takeover, a misappropriation of something for a purpose other than its intended one, by parties other than those for

whom the thing was meant. A passenger jet becomes a bomb. A family car becomes a getaway car. A bluebird box becomes a sparrows' nest.

The last example illustrates that hijacking is not just a human proclivity. Moreover, hijackers may be motivated by interests other than "terror," destruction, and fundamentalism. The sparrows' desire is in the end the same as the bluebirds'. Both species just want a safe place to rear their chicks. The sparrows have no specific interest in eliminating the bluebird species. But in the sparrows' overcrowded environment, life cannot flourish without violence, negation, and theft.

Can the same be said of other affirmative practices, even aesthetic ones? The authors of the current issue confront this question head-on. Alexander Joy describes a painting that invades and co-opts its viewers' personal space, demonstrating that hijacking may (perhaps always-already) be an aesthetic concept and technique. Kathryn McFadden examines how the unexpected and violent invasion of public aesthetic spaces by exhibitionist performance artists appropriates patriarchal ideologies only to overturn them. Heather Kettenis shows how recent trends in weight management forcibly cause the very definition of human physical beauty to be reconceived in quantifiable terms. And Prudence Gibson proposes an experimental mode of writing about art that accounts for extra-sensory or telepathic aesthetic experience. Such experience forcibly undermines subjective certainty and thus the generally presupposed centrality of human sensory experience in aesthetics, thereby hijacking or "repurposing" art in search of new and unexpected experiences that may elude conceptualization and knowledge.<sup>3</sup>

Unauthorized repurposing is the backbone of several aesthetic practices which are not explored here, such as musical sampling, circuit bending, and collage. Public art often requires the reconceptualization of public spaces in initially unintended ways. For example, the sound artist Max Neuhaus repurposed Times Square, a noisy, aggressive, and scurrying locale, as a space for concentrated listening and meditation. SKLO, the Sticker Bomber of Singapore, illegally hijacked official street signs and refitted them with subversive messages to articulate an "aesthetic of resistance."<sup>4</sup>

There is a sense, however, in which hijacking is neither unusual nor contrary to intention, although it is subversive. As Graham Harman shows, hijacking is a habitual aspect of relational being. Whenever entities interact with one another, they relate to each other *as* things in particular.

A human traveller, for example, encounters a bridge *as* a place of transit; a seagull alights upon the same bridge *as* a place of rest. Neither “place of transit” nor “place of rest” comprehensively sums up the existence of the bridge. The bridge is also an artwork for its architect, an impediment for the winds above and the boats below, perhaps a home for barnacles. To relate to the bridge *as* one thing *or* another is therefore to hijack it, to misleadingly reduce its complex ontological reality to a much simpler reality which enables one to appropriate the bridge for one’s own practical use or epistemological comprehension.



Photo by Mandy-Suzanne Wong

In the same way, Harman writes, “the bridge is not simply an innocent entity that is later hijacked by the *as*-structure so as to manifest itself in such and such a way.” In addition, “the bridge has already committed a hijacking in its own right, appropriating bolt, cable, trestle, and asphalt, devouring them into its own being.”<sup>5</sup> The bridge *relates* to its asphalt surface as I relate to my skin, for example. I stand apart from my skin in the sense that I can care for it or damage it, even cut it or tear it off. Similarly, the Golden Gate Bridge would remain the Golden Gate Bridge even without its asphalt coating. However, at the same time, I most certainly *am* my skin, just as the bridge *is* its asphalt surface. By demonstrating that relation is always a matter of appropriation – or hijacking – Harman embarks on his thrilling theory of relations as entities and vice versa.

Hijacking is thus a productive aesthetic and theoretical concept as well as an apparently “natural,” even necessary aspect of being-in-the-world. Hijacking is not, as the American media would have it, simply a terroristic outlet for aggression or an excuse for xenophobia. In making such a claim, however, must I necessarily endorse Karlheinz Stockhausen’s view that Al Qaeda’s attacks on the United States by means of hijacked airplanes were “works of art”?<sup>6</sup>

My decision to agree or disagree with Stockhausen is a subjective one, the foundations of which will most likely lie in my ethical convictions, aesthetic preferences, religious ideologies, personal experiences during the attacks (I was in Boston and advised to cover my windows with black garbage bags, a recommendation with which I neglected to comply), or the extent to which I swallow the rhetoric of the “war on terror” propagated by the American media. As I hope to have suggested in these paragraphs, my decision to correlate hijacking with art *cannot* ride on the assumption that art, beauty, aesthetic experience, or even “life” are always, through-and-through, and by definition *affirmative*. Artistic practice and appreciation, naming and definition (including the definition of beauty), and indeed relation in general always entail some negation, some violence to the entities involved therein. Aesthetic practice therefore should not be expected to promote ethical or moral behavior, or to necessarily correlate with it. In no sense must any idea of pleasure or comfort – moral or otherwise – necessarily go hand in hand with “great” or “profound” aesthetic experience (as Stockhausen’s doubtlessly innovative but not always enjoyable music demonstrates). The work in the ensuing pages explores some of the traumatic appropriations on which art and aesthetic thought rely.

It may interest our readers to know that in 2014, the Bermuda Audubon Society developed a new way of deterring sparrows from hijacking bluebird boxes by arranging fishing line in a star-shaped pattern around the entryways. Sparrows, who almost invariably flutter their wings upon landing, find their feathers entangled in the line and must fly away or risk injury to their wings. Bluebirds, in contrast, fly straight through the entryways without fluttering. Owners of bluebird boxes are urged to erect this fishing-line fencing.<sup>7</sup> In this sense, does the Audubon Society in turn hijack these small, brown, flying hijackers?



## • Notes •

- 1 The Kiskadee appears in the [cover art](#) for J. Marie Griggs' Collision, "Failed Aesthetics: Life as a Rupturing Narrative," *Evental Aesthetics* 2, no. 2 (2013): 64-77. Accessed November 19, 2014, <http://eventalaesthetics.net/back-issues/animals-and-aesthetics-vol-2-no-2-2013/>.
- 2 Nadia Arandjelovic, "Father of the Year Award Goes to a Bluebird," *The Royal Gazette*, June 24, 2011.
- 3 Prudence Gibson, "Hijacking Telepathic Art Experience as a Speculative Aesthetic," *Evental Aesthetics* 3, no. 2 (2014): 41.
- 4 Louis Ho and Mayee Wong, "The Sticker Bomber and the Nanny State: Notes from Singapore," *Evental Aesthetics* 1, no. 3 (2012): 14.
- 5 Graham Harman, *Tool-Being* (Chicago: Open Court, 2002), 261.
- 6 Karlheinz Stockhausen, quoted in Terry Castle, "Stockhausen, Karlheinz: The Unsettling Question of the Sublime," *New York Magazine's 9/11 Encyclopedia*, August 27, 2011.
- 7 Bermuda Audobon Society, Accessed October 31, 2014, <http://www.audubon.bm>.

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Gibson, Prudence. "Hijacking Telepathic Art Experience as a Speculative Aesthetic." *Evental Aesthetics* 3, no. 2 (2014): 40-60.

Griggs, J. Marie. "Failed Aesthetics: Life as a Rupturing Narrative," *Evental Aesthetics* 2, no. 2 (2013): 64-77. Accessed November 19, 2014, <http://eventalaesthetics.net/back-issues/animals-and-aesthetics-vol-2-no-2-2013/>.

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Ho, Louis and Mayee Wong. "The Sticker Bomber and the Nanny State: Notes from Singapore." *Evental Aesthetics* 1, no. 3 (2012): 10-22.

A new genre of speculative writing created by the Editors of *Evental Aesthetics*, the Collision is a concise but pointed essay that introduces philosophical questions raised by a specific aesthetic experience. A Collision is not an entire, expository journey; not a full-fledged argument but the potential of an argument. A Collision is an encounter that is also a point of departure: the impact of a striking confrontation between experience, thought, and writing may propel later inquiries into being.



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Alexander Joy, "Toward an Aesthetic of Hijacking: Cathy Choi's B1206,"  
*Evental Aesthetics* 3, no. 2 (2014): 11-21.

## ABSTRACT

This Collision uses an encounter with Cathy Choi's B1206 (2012), coupled with theories of aesthetic empathy, to articulate how hijacking as an aesthetic concept might work. The aesthetic faculty of empathy conceives of the aesthetic experience as "feeling into" a given work. This concept furnishes a useful framework for thinking about aesthetic hijacking, as "feeling into" something implies the displacement of the work or its viewer. Hijacking, then, could foreground that displacement by emphasizing spatial uncertainty. Furthermore, hijacking could be an inversion of the process of "feeling into" a given work, indicating a process whereby the work forces its way into the viewer and the space s/he inhabits.

## KEYWORDS

Cathy Choi, hijacking, empathy, space, distance

# Toward an Aesthetic of Hijacking: Cathy Choi's B1206

Alexander Joy



In this Collision, I would like to begin the work of theorizing an aesthetics of hijacking and to examine a work of art – Cathy Choi's *B1206* – that might offer a few starting points for such an inquiry.<sup>1</sup> What could 'hijacking' mean as an aesthetic concept? How should we begin to think about it? What might an aesthetic of hijacking look like – or for that matter *feel*/like?

Considering the way we use the word 'hijacking' in English, I am disinclined to think that an aesthetic of hijacking is necessarily founded upon *looking* – a notion at once connoting both passivity and power. To look is to witness something without having to participate in it. In the vein of voyeurism, it is to act without being acted upon; yet the act must remain covert, must not be intrusive, lest it dispel the voyeur's unseen presence. Hijacking on the other hand is predicated on violent action. Our vernacular



senses of the word, conditioned in part by recent American history, all suggest acts of violence: to steal something while it is in transit; to hold up and commandeer a vehicle; to determine the destination and use of a seized vehicle or item by force. To hijack is to take command of something – or someone – without receiving consent. It may also involve an assertion of one's presence by virtue of the act of hijacking. We could begin to conceive of an aesthetic of hijacking as one where force, coercion, and seizure of control operate in the foreground.

At the same time, the force behind hijacking derives its power from an element of stealth or of the unexpected. A stowaway – or someone posing as a member of the crew – might be the one to hijack a ship or airplane; similarly, a hijacker could disguise himself/herself as a passenger and wait for the opportune moment to seize control of the vehicle. The hijacker relies on subterfuge, pretending to be part of an expected order of affairs – in this instance, the typical roles of and relations between those who inhabit a given space – before moving to shatter it. The concept of hijacking then also connotes disordering: disorder empowers the hijacker and allows him/her to carry out the hijacking action; the force a hijacking exerts is meant to induce further disorder.



I encounter *B1206* in my university's art gallery, stowed in a corner next to yet another Jackson Pollock wannabe. *B1206* strikes me as by far the more interesting work. The piece hangs at approximately eye level. Its undulating blues and pinks, liquid in shape and texture, stand in stark contrast to the crumbling white concrete of the wall behind it. From above, a small track light guides a soft beam to the piece's smooth, shiny surface. An information card beside the mounted work tells me that it is made from acrylic, glue, and resin on canvas. The canvas itself is a neat square, 36 inches by 36 inches – about a meter tall and wide.

Although *B1206* is a work of moderate size when compared to the other pieces in the gallery, it somehow gives me the impression of wanting – and striving – to be *bigger*. A sidelong view of the piece reveals that it is not quite flat as the initial frontal viewing suggests, but that it has depth, rising in slight ripples and bulges off the canvas. The piece's sense of

outward motion remains once I return to a frontal view. Its waves of color seem to batter against its perimeter as if trying to slosh over it and onto the walls, onto the floor. As if the space that *B1206* occupies is not enough for it. As if it seeks more room and will claim it any way it can.



If hijacking is a more active process than looking, then an aesthetic of hijacking should make use of a more active, more dominating faculty. As such, to articulate an aesthetic of hijacking, we might turn to previous aesthetic concepts that stress active involvement or outright possession. In this regard, empathy (as an aesthetic faculty) could prove useful. Contained in the term 'empathy' is the idea that one can know something by (forcibly) occupying its position or subject-position. The word's German origins suggest that one 'feels' one's way into that position, occupying it by emoting or by feeling what he/she/it would feel; experiencing those feelings enables better comprehension of the object. As such, an empathetic approach to aesthetics is a far cry from disinterested Kantian contemplation.

'Empathy' comes to us via translation from the German word *emföhlung*. According to Gustav Jahoda, *emföhlung* literally means "feeling oneself into", observing that one of the word's more daring usages was in the doctoral dissertation of philosopher Robert Vischer in the 1870s, where *emföhlung* was the central problem to be discussed.<sup>2</sup> Jahoda writes, "[*Emföhlung*] was not altogether a new term, having occasionally been used previously in literary topics. But Robert Vischer pioneered its application to psychological aspects of the appreciation of art."<sup>3</sup> Vischer suggested that instead of encountering a work of art as some monolithic other at which viewers can only marvel, we reconceive the work in humanizing psychological terms. Moreover, because we begin to think of the work in terms of human sensations, we begin to register those sensations ourselves and perceive physical feelings as a consequence. Vischer explains how this process works in a later (1873) account of a generalized aesthetic experience:

I project my own life into the lifeless form, just as I quite justifiably do with another living person. Only ostensibly do I keep my own identity although the object remains distinct. I seem merely to adapt and attach myself to it as one hand clasps another, and yet I am mysteriously transplanted and magically transformed into this Other . . . When I observe a stationary object, I can without difficulty place myself within its inner structure, at its center of gravity. I can think my way into it, mediate its size with my own, stretch and expand, bend and confine myself to it.<sup>4</sup>

Vischer's description of an empathy-driven aesthetic encounter presents a seemingly paradoxical state: the individual identities of object and spectator remain in place, but the spectator feels as if s/he has become the thing observed. As a result, the spectator feels the same things as the object while retaining his/her own identity. Through his writings on empathy, Vischer helps to include the observer of the work of art as a vital player in the aesthetic transaction. Not only do his writings take into account the viewer's reaction to the work of art, helping to localize artistic experience in the spectator rather than in the artwork, but they also suggest that the fullest comprehension of the work comes from precisely this act of ego-projection. In order to know something fully, one must imagine oneself as that something. Crucially for Vischer, this rather invasive imagining process that the spectator undertakes is performed on a voluntary basis. One is not moved into thinking like the work of art but rather *moves* to think like it.

While Vischer's conception of *emföhlung* is noteworthy, the word owes most of its fame to the philosopher Theodor Lipps. In his 1903 essay, "Empathy, Inner Imitation, and Sense-Feelings," Lipps articulates a view of aesthetics that is predicated upon empathy, but instead of insisting that it is merely a physical sensation, Lipps attempts to go further. "Empathy means," he writes, "not a sensation in one's body, but feeling something, namely, oneself, into the esthetic object."<sup>5</sup> Thus, Lipps makes a different claim than Vischer: where Vischer suggests that we experience the work of art as a sensation without a sense of transposition, Lipps suggests that we mentally occupy the object's place – if not become one with the object. For Vischer, the work of art is a gateway to new sensations that ultimately manifest themselves in the spectator; the sensations of the artwork are harnessed and channeled toward providing the spectator with new feelings. Meanwhile, the art and its viewer remain

separate entities. For Lipps, the work of art is a destination. We place ourselves in it and merge with it, overtaking it. The goal is less to experience new feelings and more to fathom the being of the work of art – whatever that entails. It is a subtle difference but a crucial one, for Lipps's move lays the groundwork for articulating how one can feel one's way into another person's place whereas Vischer corrals us in our own minds by limiting the scope of our aesthetic experience to personal sensations. In sketching an empathy-driven aesthetic experience, Lipps writes, "Empathy is the fact here established, that the object is myself and by the very same token this self of mine is the object. Empathy is the fact that the antithesis between myself and the object disappears, or rather does not yet exist."<sup>6</sup> Lipps's portrait reveals that once the feeling-into process occurs, something above and beyond Vischer's ego-projection is happening. The spectator does not merely think like the examined object, maintaining all the while the knowledge that spectator and object are distinct. Instead, the spectator appropriates the object and *becomes* it. No 'antithesis' divides them, for they are one and the same.

Lipps's concept of empathy could provide one way to begin thinking about aesthetic hijacking: an aesthetic encounter wherein appropriation is the vehicle of the experience. Even so, the faculty of empathy alone does not address the forceful power dynamics inherent in hijacking as outlined above. Given that hijacking is concerned with disorder and disordering, the question in aesthetic hijacking is this: in which direction does the 'feeling-into' operate? A more conventional aesthetic order, such as that of Vischer or Lipps, places the work of art in a passive or submissive position, where its viewer may inspect or inhabit the work when s/he decides it is appropriate to do so. If this relationship were reversed, however – if the work of art felt its way into the viewer – it would result in quite the upset of the expected aesthetic experience...

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Before long I start seeing myself in *B1206*. This is not to say I find in it a kindred spirit who also rails against limitations and restrictions but rather that I witness my own slightly blurred likeness in it once I stop investigating its color and texture. The piece's polished sheen is highly reflective, amplified all the more by the light fixture overhead. It shows me



slightly wavy versions of myself and the gallery room behind me, now awash in nacreous blues and pinks.

John Cage once wrote about a similar type of encounter with one of Robert Rauschenberg's white paintings, whose resplendent surfaces are capable of reflecting their surroundings, thereby changing what appears to be displayed on the canvas – or as Cage put it, “the reflective surfaces chang[e] what is seen by means of what is happening.”<sup>7</sup> Cage described the paintings as “airports for the lights, shadows, and particles,”<sup>8</sup> places where the viewer and his/her immediate vicinity could land and be seen for as long as they remained near the white canvas. Yet Rauschenberg's paintings – despite the fortuity of the airport analogy for a conversation about hijacking – seem less intrusive than the work I am viewing. One can always leave an airport after all; they are the sites of departures as well as arrivals. Seeing yourself reflected on a white background does little to alter the colors and appearance of your body and your world, leaving you with the sense that you are merely a visitor to the canvas. The outside world remains recognizably yours, and thus you remain recognizably outside the painting's reach.

With *B1206* however, I feel a sense of entrapment. Myself and my surroundings, rendered in warping blue and pink, bear little resemblance to the world I know. What I see then is not mine anymore; it is something that belongs to the work, that I am permitted to see only on its terms. Rather than allowing me to land on it for a while and take off as I please, *B1206* has ensnared me. I seem to belong to it more than it belongs to me. It occurs to me that it may well be impossible to view *B1206* without also glimpsing yourself and thereby letting the work of art take over. When encountering *B1206*, disinterested contemplation of the aesthetic object becomes impossible, for this piece erodes the subject/object distinction that enables such a process. *B1206* pulls you into itself and makes you a part of it. It occupies your space and surrounds you with blue and pink. It has felt its way into you and claimed you for itself.

Is this what it feels like to be a work of art, poked and prodded and felt into? When did I consent to such treatment? This piece has done something to me before I could realize – before I could intervene. I feel violated by it.

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Hijacking as an aesthetic term could perhaps be thought of as a cousin to the empathetic process, differing primarily in where the power of projection lies. Empathy is a faculty that allows you to comprehend or apprehend a work of art. Hijacking is a faculty by which the work of art apprehends you, overpowers you, and uses you however it sees fit.

In this sense, hijacking is malign only in the way that all power disparities are malign.

If a given work of art appropriates you through hijacking, it also alters or dissolves outright distinctions in aesthetic space. We could divide aesthetic space between the world that the art object contains and our world outside it. If the work of art hijacks us and enfolds us in its world, then it brings our entire world with it. The earlier distinction fails; our world and its contents are held captive in a diegesis that has become extradiegetic; or else the artwork escapes its confines and asserts all space outside itself as being within its purview. No boundary remains between that which is art and that which is not.

In this sense, hijacking is malign only in the way that all denials of distinct, protected space are malign.

Perhaps it follows that an aesthetic of hijacking would not permit a comfortable partitioning of space. In such an aesthetic, irruption and interruption would be frequent and unpredictable. No territory could be declared and settled before some new intervention would upend it.

As an aesthetic concept, hijacking could indicate this kind of forcible disruption of diegetic space: one in which the work of art does the disrupting, erasing any pretense of the viewer's power to determine the boundaries of the diegesis.

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*B1206* has requisitioned me. I am part of it. My one defense is to avert my eyes or to inspect the piece from a different angle, where I cannot see my own trapped reflection. In three-dimensional space, at least the balance of power still tips in my favor. I can move freely and evade my appropriated gaze; *B1206* remains anchored to its wall and can look into me only as long as I look into it.

But perhaps I err in thinking that the piece is confined solely to the wall.

Viewed from the side, *B1206* takes on an especially liquid consistency along the bottom of the canvas. The blue and pink seem to well up and pour from the frame but stop an inch or two beneath the canvas's edge – like a waterfall frozen in place. *B1206* melts out of its own frame to startling effect. For in so doing, it resists the finite space allotted to it. It demands space beyond the canvas.

And seizes it.

• Notes •

- 1 Cathy Choi, B1206. Acrylic, glue, and resin on canvas. Margaret Thatcher Projects, New York. [http://www.thatcherprojects.com/artists\\_02.cfm?fid=582](http://www.thatcherprojects.com/artists_02.cfm?fid=582).
- 2 Gustav Jahoda, "Theodor Lipps and the Shift from 'Sympathy' to 'Empathy'," *Journal of the History of Behavioral Sciences* 41.2 (Spring 2005): 153.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Robert Vischer, "On the Optical Sense of Form: A Contribution to Aesthetics," in *Empathy, Form, and Space: Problems in German Aesthetics, 1873-1893*, trans. Harry Francis Mallgrave and Eleftherios Ikononou (Santa Monica, California: Getty Center for the Arts and Humanities, 1994), 104.
- 5 Theodor Lipps, "Empathy, Inner Imitation, and Sense-Feelings," in *A Modern Book of Esthetics*, ed. Melvin Rader (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1978), 381.
- 6 Ibid., 376.
- 7 John Cage, "On Robert Rauschenberg, Artist, and His Work," in *Silence: Lectures and Writings* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan UP, 1979), 102.
- 8 Ibid.



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[http://www.thatcherprojects.com/artists\\_02.cfm?fid=582](http://www.thatcherprojects.com/artists_02.cfm?fid=582).

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A new genre of speculative writing created by the Editors of *Evental Aesthetics*, the Collision is a concise but pointed essay that introduces philosophical questions raised by a specific aesthetic experience. A Collision is not an entire, expository journey; not a full-fledged argument but the potential of an argument. A Collision is an encounter that is also a point of departure: the impact of a striking confrontation between experience, thought, and writing may propel later inquiries into being.



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Kathryn McFadden, “Ambushed: The Unpresentable in VALIE EXPORT's Genital Panic,” *Evental Aesthetics* 3, no. 2 (2014): 22-31.

## ABSTRACT

What is unpresentable in art? This paper considers VALIE EXPORT's feminist exhibitionism in her 1968 performance artwork *Genital Panic*, which took place in a Munich cinema. EXPORT's transgressive display of her genitals, which finds art-historical precedents in medieval sheela na gigs and Courbet's *Origin of the World*, established a paradigm for a kind of feminist art collision that continues today, – for instance in Deborah de Robertis' 2014 unauthorized performance at the Musée d'Orsay. EXPORT's staged presentation and representation of blatant power and sexuality contradicts the lack postulated in Freud's castration complex. At the same time, it raises the question of the unpresentable, a notion taken up by Jean-François Lyotard's *The Inhuman*, which explores concepts of representation and the unpresentable. The latter he defines as an expression of an “Idea of reason,” an absolute. I reflect on how this concept applies to EXPORT's marker for the use of the body in feminist art.

## KEYWORDS

VALIE EXPORT, Jean-François Lyotard, feminist art, Sigmund Freud, Freudian lack, unpresentable

# Ambushed: The Unpresentable in VALIE EXPORT's Genital Panic



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In June 2014, a video circulated on the Internet in which contemporary performance artist Deborah de Robertis walked into the Musée d'Orsay and sat on the floor in front of Gustav Courbet's iconic *Origin of the World* (1866).<sup>1</sup> She lifted her gold dress and spread her knees up and apart to expose her genitalia to the surprised visitors in Room 20. Intending to show even more anatomy than Courbet's painting, she pulled her labia aside to allow for a stark view of her vaginal opening.<sup>2</sup> Many of the onlookers broke into a sustained applause. In the video, De Robertis holds this position until forcibly removed by museum security.

De Robertis' unauthorized performance brings to mind an earlier audacious act that took place in Germany almost fifty years ago. In 1968, Austrian artist VALIE EXPORT went into an art house cinema in Munich

dressed in a sweater and pants with the crotch cut away and carrying a machine gun.<sup>3</sup> The unsuspecting patrons were there to see a pornographic film and were unaware of EXPORT's intention to stage an art performance. She walked among the seated audience in such a manner that enabled them to gaze directly at her exposed genitals while she pointed the gun at the backs of people's heads.

This performance ruptured the expectations of an audience in the midst of the voyeuristic act of watching an erotic film, an act that employs a phallocentric cinematic gaze upon disembodied sexual organs. By offering the cinemagoers a 'real', fully embodied, and contextualized sexual organ, EXPORT not only exposed the fetishization at the heart of the viewers' fantasies but also subverted the structure of patriarchal subjectivity located in pornographic media.

However, EXPORT also told the audience that her actual genitalia were available and that they could do with it as they pleased. In an interview ten years later, she said:

I was afraid and had no idea what the people would do. As I moved from row to row, each row of people silently got up and left the theater. Out of film context, it was a totally different way for them to connect with the particular erotic symbol.<sup>4</sup>

EXPORT employed a guerrilla-style confrontation and transgressive tactic of exhibitionism. She gave permission for anyone to do anything to her pudendum, presumably including (at worst) bodily harm. While she admits to feeling vulnerable, her use of a gun placed the audience in an even more defenseless position since no one could have been certain that the gun was not real and that she would not deploy it. Yet from a critical standpoint, the gun, a loaded phallic symbol, challenges and risks undermining EXPORT's threat rather than augmenting it. Her reflection on what she did merely communicates her *intention* of using her feminist body as an implicit and explicit menace.

A year later in Vienna, EXPORT's friend and photographer Peter Hassman shot the iconic black and white photographs, entitled *Aktionshose: Genitalpanik* (*Action Pants: Genital Panic*). In these photographs, a young EXPORT sits on a bench, striking a defiant glare, wearing a black leather jacket and jeans with a cut-away crotch, holding a rifle. Barefoot with her hair wildly



teased; her legs are spread, exposing pubic hair and labia that are centered in the middle of the photo's composition. These photographs were subsequently screen-printed onto flyers, which were posted in public spaces and in the street.

EXPORT's work was originally presented in the art cinema as performance, re-presented in a photograph, and then *re-re-presented* as a placard for mass viewing. Unlike De Robertis' video, EXPORT's ancillary photographs and posters are not documents of the actual event since they were created a year after the performance. Instead they act as both independent images and mediatory artworks, spotlighting and therefore criticizing the fetishistic gaze of disseminated images. Amelia Jones writes that in the 1960s the photographic/cinematic provocation of female genitalia had the expressive power to dislocate the organization of fetishism.<sup>5</sup> Discussing *Genital Panic*, Jones explains, "EXPORT's project was to turn fetishism violently around, *to enact the female body as a site of agency and potential violence*."<sup>6</sup>

By using a photograph of a staged representation of blatant power and sexuality, EXPORT calls into question the expectation of the fetishizing gaze and forces viewers to realize that newer standards of looking are possible. For example, EXPORT's performance demonstrates that the vagina is not a lack. Freud describes female pudenda as a deficit in his theory of the castration complex wherein young boys learn as a result of punishment to perceive female genitalia as castrated penises. Yet an authentic lack is a privation of something that was possessed at some point, something that has been removed from someone's grasp.<sup>7</sup> EXPORT's work blatantly reveals the truth: that in the female body no such lack exists. As Jones puts it, "Exacerbating its threat to the male psyche, EXPORT's cunt refuses lack and refuses to congeal as a fetish."<sup>8</sup>

Collisions with the labial-vaginal as artistic subject matter or subtext are common. Western art history textbooks typically commence with images of female statuettes sporting emphatic vulvas from the Upper Paleolithic period. In contemporary art, artists snatch those images from a patriarchal agenda. Lyotard's philosophy of presentation, representation, and the unrepresentable may help to elucidate these artists' feminist tactics.<sup>9</sup> He writes:

When the point is to try to present that there is something that is not presentable, you have to make presentation suffer. This means among other things that painters and public do not have at their disposal established symbols, figures or plastic forms which would allow them to signify and understand that the point of the work is Ideas of reason or imagination, as was the case in Romanesque Christian painting. In the techno-scientific industrial world, there can be no stable symbols of the good, the just, the true, the infinite, etc.<sup>10</sup>

Here Lyotard's concern is mid-twentieth-century avant-garde painting, a generally male-dominated art-historical era, yet his theory applies equally well to the innovative strategies of Second Wave feminist artists such as Marina Abramovic, Ana Mendieta, Carolee Schneemann, Annie Sprinkle, and EXPORT. To overcome patriarchal notions of transcendence like the Freudian lack, these artists "embrace immanence"<sup>11</sup> by doggedly negating the long-standing image of the *Venus pudica*,<sup>12</sup> – the nude female who modestly covers her pudenda – an image created and sustained by patriarchal epistemes.<sup>13</sup>

Artists like EXPORT thereby raise the question of what Judith Butler calls the "unrepresentable absence."<sup>14</sup> In Lyotard's work:

The unrepresentable is what is the object of an Idea, and for which one cannot show (present) an example, a case, even a symbol. The universe is unrepresentable, so is humanity, the end of history, the instant, space, the good, etc. The absolute in general, says Kant.<sup>15</sup>

By this definition, EXPORT's performance is not unrepresentable since her Idea was the opposite of an absolute – an unchanging, unconditional, universal concept.

Yet Lyotard offers a Kantian loophole: an artist can "present that there is *some* absolute."<sup>16</sup> Artists do this by addressing the idea of the sublime, which does not concern the appreciation of beauty but the "pleasure of pain."<sup>17</sup> Kant's sublime is a subjective aesthetic judgment in regards to nature; the experience of the sublime *moves* the onlooker (as in the awe of watching a violent storm over the sea) in such a way that the subject is markedly affected in their perception of formless and limitless power. As pure idea, the sublime *is* unrepresentable. However, by this reasoning the sight of EXPORT's body in her performance is not a site of the sublime either. Might she *suggest* the sublime

in the display of her genitals? In distinguishing between the beautiful and the sublime, Kant defines beauty as a consciousness of pleasure, related to the imagination and understanding. The glimpse of a bare body, especially in work like EXPORT's, may provoke conflicted feelings of pleasure as well as fear in addition to erotic desire. Hence might we consider that the feelings aroused by the sight of a nude body – in art as well as life – fall somewhere in between the sense of the beautiful and the experience of the sublime?

Lyotard argues that the contemporary artist should: (1) not worry about satisfying viewers and (2) take on the "immanent sublime", the *allusion* to the unrepresentable, which carries no enlightening qualities.<sup>18</sup> EXPORT's performance *was* intended to be an edifying experience, or at least a critical one, that communicated potent messages about reality and fantasy as objects of the gaze. Her straightforward exhibitionism paradoxically negates the kind of gratification that is generally found by viewers in an X-rated cinema. Instead, EXPORT's viewers experienced fear or confusion, even anger, when confronted with her actual cunt; it is significant that no one took her up on her offer to engage with it (although the presence of a gun cannot be overlooked). So although it would seem that EXPORT fulfills only the first of Lyotard's charges to contemporary art and eludes the second in the interests of critique, her barefaced exhibitionism incites the failure of engagement and may thereby indeed allude to the unrepresentable.

EXPORT presented viewers with an aesthetic moment in which everything was simply there. Lyotard argues that the present, the now, cannot be understood; there can be no epiphany about the present in the present because consciousness requires recollection.<sup>19</sup> He states, "One cannot consume an occurrence, but merely its meaning. The feeling of the instant is instantaneous."<sup>20</sup> An example he holds up Barnett Newman's non-objective color field paintings, but EXPORT's *Genital Panic* performance seems to draw close parallels. There is no allusion, no narrative. While Newman used the medium of painting to re-present the here and now, EXPORT and De Robertis deployed the body in a literal face-to-face relationship that invited viewers to *Look at me, Listen to me*, rather than *Look at this*. Lyotard asserts "the force of an obligation within a face-to-face relationship," the same responsibility that fuels the ethos of Emmanuel Levinas – bringing us face to face with the other for whom we are ethically responsible.<sup>21</sup>

In other words, Lyotard and EXPORT encourage collision. "Shock is, par excellence, the evidence of (something) happening, rather than nothing,

suspended privation.”<sup>22</sup> He urges an extreme dramatization of art, advising artists to find new models of vision and experiment with disquieting consequences.<sup>23</sup> Certainly EXPORT adopts this tactic – as does De Robertis. These artists are latter-day sheela na gigs<sup>24</sup> in which “the body is not only historical idea, but a set of *possibilities* to be continually realized.”<sup>25</sup> These prospects include employing the fearless and startling as allusions to the unpresentable.

## • Notes •

- 1 “Artist Enacts the Painting *Origin of the World* at Musée d’Orsay – And, Yes, That Means What You Think” Accessed June 18, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=KMm8GjoDNZ4>.
- 2 According to Benjamin Sutton in his article about de Robertis’ performance, titled *Mirror of Origin*, the artist states (in part), “I am not showing my vagina, but I am revealing what we do not see in the painting, the eye of the vagina, the black hole, this concealed eye, this chasm, which, beyond the flesh, refers to infinity, to the origin of the origin.”
- 3 While EXPORT is quoted in a 1979 interview with Ruth Askey as claiming to have a gun, Amelia Jones notes in a later interview she denied ever saying that. Whether or not there was a gun (or a simulated one) is a key question because its absence would certainly recast the effect of the performance on the witnesses – as well as EXPORT’s own intentions. A gun is a straightforward symbol of unmitigated violence. Its presence certainly would affect how the viewers would react to her demands, which would be perceived as a threat with the sight of the weapon. The absence of a gun changes the scenario rather drastically. Her “weapon” then becomes her verbal challenge along with her exposed crotch. She poses no real threat of bodily harm, only psychological violence upon male fantasies. Since the subsequent photographs reflect the use of a gun in her composition, I pursue the notion that a gun was implemented in the Munich cinema performance.
- 4 VALIE EXPORT, “VALIE EXPORT [interview with Ruth Askey]” in *Elles@centrepompidou*, ed. not noted. (Paris: Centre Pompidou, 2010), 63.
- 5 Amelia Jones, “Genital Panic: The Threat of Feminist Bodies and Parafeminism” in *Elles@centrepompidou*, ed. not noted. (Paris: Centre Pompidou, 2010), 292.
- 6 *Ibid.*, 294. Emphasis original.
- 7 For example, female circumcision (female genital mutilation) comes to mind.
- 8 Jones, “Genital Panic,” 292.
- 9 It is interesting to note that *The Inhuman* was written twenty years after *Genital Panic*.
- 10 Lyotard, *The Inhuman*, 125.
- 11 Jones, “Genital Panic,” 292.
- 12 *Venus pudica* (“modest Venus”) is a conventional representation of the nude female form with her hand demurely covering her pubic region. *Pudendus* (from the Latin) refers to mutual ideas of shame and external genitalia.
- 13 In her essay on *Genital Panic*, Jones discusses Simone de Beauvoir’s famous anti-essentialist quote, “One is not born, but rather becomes a woman.” Jones, “Genital Panic,” 291.
- 14 Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble* (New York: Routledge, 1990), 38.
- 15 Lyotard, *The Inhuman*, 126.
- 16 *Ibid.*, 126. Emphasis added.
- 17 *Ibid.*, 126.

- 18 Ibid., 128.
- 19 Ibid., 59.
- 20 Ibid., 80.
- 21 Ibid., 81.
- 22 Ibid., 100. Emphasis original.
- 23 Ibid., 100.
- 24 Sheela na gigs are architectural medieval carvings of female figures melodramatically exposing their outsized vulvas. They are typically found on churches and castles and believed to serve an apotropaic function.
- 25 Judith Butler, “Performative Acts and Gender Constitution,” in *The Feminism and Visual Cultural Reader*, ed. Amelia Jones. (New York: Routledge, 1991), 393. Butler is referring to an idea by Merleau-Ponty.



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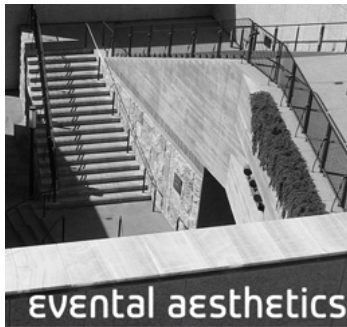
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# Reading

Reading is an affective and reflective relationship with a text, whether it is a new, groundbreaking monograph or one of those books that keeps getting pulled off the shelf year after year. Unlike traditional reviews, the pieces in this section may veer off in new directions as critical reading becomes an extended occurrence of thinking, being, and creation.

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Heather Kettenis, "Quantifying Beauty: Chad Lavin's Eating Anxiety."  
*Evental Aesthetics* 3, no. 2 (2014): 32-41.

## THE BOOK

*Eating Anxiety: The Perils of Food Politics.*  
by Chad Lavin.  
Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013.

# Quantifying Beauty: Chad Lavin's *Eating Anxiety*



Heather Kettenis

**Chad Lavin.**

*Eating Anxiety: The Perils of Food Politics.*  
Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013.

**B**ody-environment relations are central to Chad Lavin's *Eating Anxiety: The Perils of Food Politics*. By taking an interdisciplinary look at how food functions in various human contexts, Lavin uses food as a sort of vessel in and through which he attempts to critically "navigate contemporary political crises" issuing from "globalization, neoliberalism, and democracy."<sup>1</sup> Drawing on philosophical perspectives from medieval philosophy to actor-network theory, he attempts to

demonstrate how trends in food politics blur the traditional boundaries of the self. Lavin's perspective is political; however, he does allude to several ways in which food politics are also aesthetic concerns. I hope to explore his perspective on aesthetics and expand his aesthetic thoughts.

Lavin focuses on aesthetics in his discussions of body image, highlighting the contemporary tendency to react to the obese body with disgust. Inflammatory documentaries such as *Super Size Me* expose the hazards of the current, average American diet to those who consume it. Images meant to incite the audience to disgust include lingering close-ups of body parts – large stomachs, obese legs. The threat of ugliness alone, the film implies, could frighten people into changing their eating habits.<sup>2</sup> Lavin notes that "obese bodies are ... often characterized in the language of filth and disgust" today, but this is a change from the views of prior centuries.<sup>3</sup> The change began during the Middle Ages when the aesthetics of manners and social eating became regulated and bodily functions stigmatized.<sup>4</sup>

Eventually, the ideal standard of beauty was linked to economic status. The obese body was glamorized as long as it was associated with rich people; but when poor people started getting fat, and "surplus calories became democratically affordable," the ideal body image moved in the opposite direction.<sup>5</sup> When wealthy people flaunted their monetary success by reveling in the luxury of excess, additional body weight was desirable. In contrast, the modern-day definition of wealth is the ability to buy healthy food and the luxury of time in which to work out and create a thin, toned body. The body that possesses willpower and control is considered a "fit" body, "fit" to be maintained and to inoffensively participate in public life. Thus the judgment of bodies really is determined by the association of aesthetic standards with social, economic, or political classifications. Beauty in this context is perhaps most accurately understood as an indicator of wealth.

The tendency to quantify physical human beauty results not only from the equation of beauty with financial wealth but also from the pervasive contemporary tendency to quantify all kinds of value – from friendship to aesthetic value – in social networks. In general, Lavin implies that online social networks have a great deal of influence on how we believe our bodies relate to themselves and others. In his analysis of the change in dieting trends over the decades, Lavin discusses the recent focus on low carbohydrate diets like the Atkins diet. He states that when dieters discard their diets, this is not necessarily because they don't work –

limiting one's calorie intake remains an effective way to lose weight – but because of some change in the way people understand their environment. The theory that Atkins has promoted since the 1970s was only publicly embraced in the 1990s and 2000s: the so-called "information age." The Atkins diet works on the principle that carbohydrates stimulate production of insulin, the hormone that causes cells to convert excess carbohydrates into fat. Reducing one's intake of carbohydrates decreases fat production and eventually changes fat production into fat burning. As a regulation of hormones, this type of program "promises dietary success through the successful management of information."<sup>6</sup> For just as computers send messages through internal circuits and global networks with the power to alter the world around us, our bodies send and receive hormonal messages that control the contents of our bodies. The idea that the human body is governed by messages seems most credible to a public that is comfortable with the idea of the Internet. As Latour observes, the prevalence of networks encourages us to understand our entire environment according to networked structures.<sup>7</sup> Hayles describes this type of process as a "coevolutionary spiral in which humans and tools are continuously modifying each other."<sup>8</sup> Haraway takes this view a step further by stating that "communications technologies and biotechnologies are the crucial tools recrafting our bodies."<sup>9</sup> In the Internet age, she writes:

the key operation is determining the rates, directions, and probabilities of flow of a quantity called information. The world is subdivided by boundaries differentially permeable to information. Information is just that kind of quantifiable element (unit, basis of unity) which allows universal translation, and so unhindered instrumental power (called effective communication). ... In modern biologies, the translation of the world into a problem in coding [that is, of transmitting information,] can be illustrated by molecular genetics, ecology, sociobiological evolutionary theory, and immunobiology.<sup>10</sup>

I would add weight management to Haraway's list. This brings me to the latest trend in health and fitness training: wearables. Although such devices lie outside the scope of Lavin's book, his arguments inspire critical perspectives regarding the influence of such technologies on the aesthetic notions that motivate weight management. Placed directly on the body, these devices measure someone's steps, heart rate, burning calories, and so on. In other words, wearables suggest a quantifiable self. People have embraced the practice of tracking these numbers and bringing

them within particular, predetermined ranges that correlate with the thin, strong body currently understood as aesthetically beautiful.

Accepted weight-management practice therefore relies on data collection – data about our bodies and data about food. The latter takes the form of food labels (“Nutrition Facts”) and food journals. These have been revolutionized by Internet sites and software that not only count calories but also allow dieters to track their protein, fat, and carbohydrate intakes in efficient ways. Just as in Rich Andrew’s analysis, people judge others’ personal beauty and desirability according to the number of “Likes” or “followers” they have, physical beauty can now be judged according to the number of miles, hours of workout, or calories that a body can run, endure, or burn, respectively.<sup>11</sup> Like someone’s number of “friends” may be an indicator of their popularity and superiority, food intake and body movement numbers can be publicly displayed on sites like Fitbit as indications of someone’s “fitness.” In fact, in the social media world, it is possible that users might look at the amount of weight a person has lost or the number of calories they have consumed alongside or even instead of the person’s photograph when forming a judgment on their beauty. These modifiable factors and numbers might satisfyingly overshadow opinions of traditional aesthetic beauty for people who believe they have other imperfections they are unable to change. Could a numerical judgment of beauty be considered more objective, realistic, or universal than perceptions of beauty that vary with different people’s perspectives?

These numerical standards of beauty are easily called into question as many of the wearable pedometers and calorie counters available today are often rated by features and style rather than accuracy. Numbers have the appearance and the reputation of objectivity, but they are subject to mismeasurement and misinterpretation. The designation of ideal ranges within which the measurements must fall is similarly questionable. The problem is analogous to that of medical diagnosis, which must create categories to determine the difference between illness and health or obesity and its opposite: the categories do not apply to every patient. Once the ideal ranges or diagnostic categories are agreed upon, the decision is treated as objective and fixed; but in reality it relies on subjective determinations or statistical averages that leave room for friction at the categories’ boundaries. In diagnosis for example, it is not unheard of for someone’s test results to indicate a disease that the patient does not have (a false positive) or for someone to test negatively for a condition that they actually have (a false negative). Lavin discusses another example of misleading categorization according to body mass



index (BMI) tables. A correct reading of a BMI table can lead to the mistaken classification of a fit, muscular person as obese. BMI tables were initially created using actuarial tables generated by insurance companies, linking excess body weight to shorter life spans and increased healthcare costs.<sup>12</sup> It is true that excess weight correlates with shorter life spans and greater costs, but this is not the whole story. The lesson to be taken here is that quantified judgments of human physical beauty or “fitness” are not at all universal – but arbitrary.

One of the goals of weight loss – to achieve an acceptable BMI and minimize health risks – is the premise behind the recent designation of obesity as an epidemic. Discussing the consequences of obesity for public health adds another dimension to the current aesthetic standard that glorifies thin bodies. Lavin points out that in the media and public lectures, news reporters and healthcare professionals often draw on maps, created by the Center of Disease Control, to demonstrate that obesity is a public health hazard. These “Obesity Prevalence Maps” show the United States in various colors that change over time. In 1990, for example, Texas is shown in blue, indicating that 10–14% of its residents were considered obese. By 2010, Texas dons an alarming red color, indicating a population in which more than 30% is obese. The typical presentation animates the maps to show the entire United States gradually changing from healthy blue to obese and diseased red. The maps are virtually identical to the “surveillance maps” used by the CDC to assess the prevalence of actual infectious diseases such as influenza.<sup>13</sup> These striking visual presentations impress upon the public the dire nature of the obesity problem. They scare people into thinking that obesity is spreading just like the influenza virus during flu season. Am I more likely to catch obesity if I live in a certain area? Am I at increased risk of catching obesity within the next 10 years? I’d better make sure that I contain the spread of obesity within myself to make sure I don’t destroy the health of those around me. The aesthetic phenomenon of the “prevalence map” medicalizes obesity by translating numerical data into visual imagery that disseminates the data in a manner digestible to a public that submits to the authority of quantifiable data on a regular basis. In the same manner that the prevalence of networks, messages, and computations shaped our understanding of weight loss as a hormonal mechanism, the CDC’s maps quantify and aestheticize obesity in a format intended to make the general public understand obesity as an epidemic – in other words, to shock people into action. The idea behind the dissemination of these maps is that as much as many people focus on

our personal responsibility for what our bodies ingest and digest, we are still part of a body politic, ruled by biopolitics.

Many people cite their health as their reason for losing weight. They want better endurance, lower risk of heart disease, diabetes, stroke, sleep apnea, arthritis, and other associated medical conditions; they want to improve their fertility and live longer.<sup>14</sup> Physicians do recommend weight loss as a treatment for such conditions. In that sense, obesity is indeed a medical condition. However, it is misleading to consider obesity as a condition on par with influenza and Ebola because obesity is not technically infectious.

Furthermore, many people want to lose weight not because of medical reasons but aesthetic ones. In order to achieve a total metamorphosis into a thin, ideal, and “fit-for-a-bikini” body, these people chain themselves somewhat paradoxically to the quantified body described above. To achieve a reality that is particular, concrete, visible and tangible, fleshy and desirable, the dieters envision themselves as abstract transmissions of messages that imply no flesh at all, and are only representable by numbers. Moreover, the ideal numbers and the desired sensible reality do not necessarily go hand in hand. The loss of a significant amount of weight produces irreversible changes to the body, not all of which are aesthetically desirable. For example, someone who loses over 100 pounds may possess excessive folds of stretched and empty skin that will not fit the thinner body without surgical intervention. This failure to achieve physical perfection in front of the mirror may encourage a focus on numbers as opposed to sensible qualities as bearers, markers, and standards of beauty that may prove to be more satisfying to those who achieve dramatic weight loss.

Could this emphasis on quantifying the body, treating it like a machine, be a step towards the creation of a cybernetic chimeric human? And are we ready for this step? How to make the body more beautiful, to create something new and machinic when the flesh body in and of itself is not enough? Haraway discusses how cyborg politics rejoice in the “illegitimate fusions of animal and machine ... conceived as coded devices.”<sup>15</sup> In contrast, the struggle with food that Lavin describes is very much a struggle against the fusion that is the process of eating, during which the environment literally becomes ourselves and vice versa.<sup>16</sup> Consciousness of this self-diffusing fusion produces the anxiety that human bodies are animal bodies, and this anxiety may encourage us to withdraw our fleshy bodies behind the abstract veils of quantification and

information. In a contradictory identity crisis, we resist interspecies fusion by embracing cybernetic fusion. Either way, we experience the loss of our singularity.

Analyzing the political implications of eating, Lavin observes that we strive for control of our bodies and the numbers implied thereby when everything else in our lives is beyond our control. "Beneath the veneer of the debates about obesity we can find widespread anxieties about the status of the narrative of individual responsibility that anchors liberal politics," he writes.<sup>17</sup> "The saturation of food discourse with fear and anxiety is symptomatic of the broader concerns about economic power, self-determination, and the reliability of government institutions and the scientific establishment."<sup>18</sup> The contradictory idea that a supposedly public-health problem, an epidemic, boils down to a matter of private, individual, personal responsibility for one's own quantified body exemplifies a general, pervasive attempt to take control of our relations to the world by shifting the location of politics from the public to the private realm.<sup>19</sup> I would add that we try to quantify beauty when control of our own aesthetic presentation – how our bodies appear and feel to others – seems to elude us both in the mirror and the abstract realm of the online network.

## • Notes •

- 1 Chad Lavin, *Eating Anxiety: The Perils of Food Politics* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press), ix.
- 2 Ibid., 81.
- 3 Ibid., 80.
- 4 Ibid., 32.
- 5 Ibid., 73.
- 6 Ibid., 15.
- 7 Ibid., 18.
- 8 N. Katherine Hayles, *How We Think: Digital Media and Contemporary Technogenesis* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press), 30-31.
- 9 Donna Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women: The Reinvention of Nature* (New York: Routledge), 164.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 Rich Andrew, "Fakebook," *Evental Aesthetics* 1, no. 2, (2012):53.
- 12 Lavin, *Eating Anxiety*, 74-75.
- 13 Ibid., 84. Some examples of the maps Lavin and I discuss are available at: <http://www.cdc.gov/obesity/data/prevalence-maps.html> or [http://www.cdc.gov/obesity/downloads/obesity\\_trends\\_2010.ppt](http://www.cdc.gov/obesity/downloads/obesity_trends_2010.ppt).
- 14 <http://www.cdc.gov/obesity/adult/causes/index.html>
- 15 Haraway, *Simians, Cyborgs and Women*, 150.
- 16 Lavin, *Eating Anxiety*, 137.
- 17 Ibid., xii-xiii.
- 18 Ibid., xiii.
- 19 Ibid., xiv.

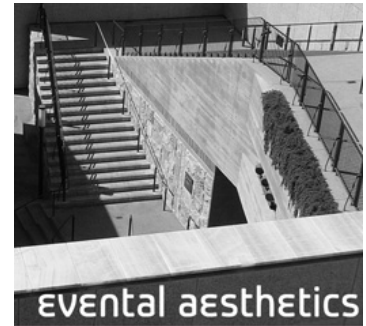
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Prudence Gibson, “Hijacking Telepathic Art Experience as a Speculative Aesthetic,” *Evental Aesthetics* 3, no. 2 (2014): 42-61.

#### ABSTRACT

“Hijack” has etymological connotations of force. It is intended here as a purposeful turn away from expert authority and from singular authorship, towards a more expanded sphere of multiple experience in art aesthetics. If there is a hijacking force in art, it is the dynamic desire to reclaim the impossible and the unexpected. These qualities are evident in telepathy as a system of transmitted aesthetic information. Isabelle Stengers, who has investigated the role of the charlatan, might urge us to follow such a turn away from regulated forms of sensory information and repurpose telepathy as a propagated extra-sensory activity. Like the charlatan or other maligned characters of ill repute, the art writer who responds to the essence of the artwork through participation rather than judgment becomes the outsider and, in this case, the telepath. This paper addresses the work of Australian artist Jacqueline Drinkall as an aggregate of telepathic transmissions, ripe for hijacking. I argue that a telepathic hijack, as an unexpected reclamation and as a method of aesthetic experimentation, can be enacted as a speculative form of art writing. Telepathy in art and of art allows a writing with the artwork. By this I mean that a super-sensory and speculative mode of writing can exist beside the artwork, rather than in judgment of it. This is a divergence from an overt critique of art through established constructs of history, origin or relations alone. In this paper I will explore the concept of telepathy as a quality of speculative aesthetics, which is distinguished by contingent change, variable outcomes and meandering. I will focus on: telepathic art transmissions as a hijack of conventional aesthetics; Jacqueline Drinkall’s telepathic artwork as an interrupted experience; and Isabelle Stengers’ figure of the charlatan.

#### KEYWORDS

telepathy, speculative aesthetic, Jacqueline Drinkall, Isabelle Stenger, hijacking



# Hijacking Telepathic Art Experience as a Speculative Aesthetic

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There is a relationship between telepathy, hijacking and the work of artist Jaqueline Drinkall. She explores psycho-sensual transmissions of data by building UFOs and conducting live performances wherein she encourages audiences to contribute telepathic messages by writing with marker pens on the inside walls of her spaceship. She uses telepathic headdresses to navigate natural environments in performative video works. She sends and receives transmitted data by weaving computer cables into balaclavas and setting off into underwater environments to make contact with other humans, pre-humans, and post-humans, thereby inviting multiple speculative perspectives. Later in this paper, I assume the role of hijacker in my writing about her work, by interrupting and repurposing the *experience* of her artwork, and by writing it as an anecdotal, reflexive tale of an underwater telepathic excursion. The writing constitutes a participatory seizing and a re-signaling. In this

way, my telepathic rejoinder is an aesthetic hijack within the context of Drinkall's telepathic hijack of singular sensory aesthetics; a hijack of the hijack.

Before exploring Drinkall's work further, I need to articulate the role of the hijacking telepath. In an artistic context, telepathy may function as the content or subject matter of artworks as well as an extrasensory mode in which one may analyze or experience the artworks. It is a system of transmitted information that sits alongside conventional sensory experience, without exhausting the discretion of human sensations. Telepathy can be understood as a para-human aesthetic theme. It is a sensory activity of the mind, in contrast to the five physical senses. For this reason, telepathy does not fit easily into traditional disciplines of knowledge, which often rely on sensory input. If finitude is the limit of knowledge, then telepathy punctures that limit and extends along an endless radiating frequency. Likewise, if telepathy is a mode of being hyper-aware of more than one kind of fixed art experience, with multiple possibilities or outcomes, then aesthetics might evolve beyond the subject-object relationship that typically characterizes the starting point of aesthetic experience.

A telepathic mode is hyper-sensitive to all the different elements of aesthetic experience, such as the art space, the artwork's narrative, materiality, temporality, the socio-historical contexts and the multiple reactions and emanations of animate and inanimate things to and from the artwork. Those elements are of discrete and equal importance in speculative aesthetics, as are contingency, uncertainty, improbability and even the possibility of catastrophe. These qualities also characterize the telepathic aspects of art, creating a "sense" that is impossible to measure and lacks recorded evidence. Telepathy's relevance to aesthetics is its receptivity to information that can't be understood via conventional constructs, and the potential of aesthetics to participate in an ecology of speculation. The telepath, as outsider, as adventurer and as arbitrary (open to possibility) or undetermined (likely to change for no reason) function of communication, is a hijacker. To write a narrative hijack is to take over the controls of someone else's ship (of fools), in this case seizing bridge-command of an outmoded art-critical approach, and to repurpose the aesthetic messages, so that new knowledge or heightened experience becomes available. The telepathic art writer, then, sabotages the subject-object dyads of aesthetic criticism by participating, repurposing, interrupting and transmitting the energy of the artwork rather than merely conveying its meaning. To welcome this intensive aggregate of multiple

frequencies instead of filtering them out would be to open ourselves to a telepathic hijack suggestive of knowledge beyond the human. Repurposed sensory experience (in this case writing about Drinkall's artwork using qualities of telepathy) is an endeavor that potentially breaks through simplistic or reductive limits.

Conventionally the telepath is a powerful protagonist in arcane narratives, one who hears something that the rest of a given society cannot hear, who perceives something that the rest cannot perceive, who knows something that they cannot know and is consequently both leader and outcast. In this enquiry, though, the telepath is no leader. The telepath is no outcast. The telepath is one among many, who hijacks various disciplines – art, theory, performance – that exist *in tandem* with the sciences of the occult.

Science philosopher Isabelle Stengers writes about the "charlatan" in medical history as a figure who might be recast or transformed from a suspicious quack to a valuable alternative perspective.<sup>1</sup> The same might be said of the telepathic artist and art writer. The charlatan experiments with new medicine, and exhorts its worth before the testing has been completed, before the argument is proven, before the data is published. When Stengers says "the cure proves nothing," she describes how the experiments conducted by a medical charlatan cannot be reduced to their results, because he is conducting a practice without an interest in the proof.<sup>2</sup> In the same way, art writers who write about telepathic art, using telepathic systems of shared information, suffer the same scornful skepticism, because it is difficult to prove the assessable value of the art experience beyond the anecdote.

Writing speculatively about art can become a telepathic hijack by resisting the authoritative voice of the one and allowing for multiple viewpoints. It accepts the original performance, the video, the witness, the speculative story, the headdress, the water and the writer, all of which are bound together by telepathic connections, as participatory elements in the experience of writing. The hijack resists limits by repurposing conventional modes of art writing.

## • Telepathic Art Transmissions •

Telepathy is a complex information system that can comprise the making, delivering and experiencing of art. It manifests as a network of transmissions. Telepathy is also the movement of electromagnetic waves from unknown sources and towards unknown places. Telepathy is the faint sound of “another” voice and “another” voice and “another”, piping up behind the more obvious ones. Are they the voices of the dead, of our own inner consciousness or from another realm we can never comprehend, or all three and more?

If telepathy is distinguished by its supernatural non-human otherness, can manmade transmission systems of data and information, such as radio, be telepathic? Although the messages themselves are sent and received by humans, the system also produces glitches, crossed lines and static energies that were not intended in the original radio wave transmission. These anomalies don't fall within the conventions of traditional messages. These unexpected elements are the abruptions of the hijack: the sounds of unpredictable experiences. Sending and receiving transmitted information, outside common human sensory abilities, suggests a pre- and post-human aesthetic by moving beyond the finitude of comprehension. The transmissions are thoughts and vice versa.

A defense of the unknown is more difficult than a defense of the unseen. Invisible systems of transmitted information between things are difficult to record, but create curiosity and foster narrative possibilities. “Did you hear that?” This is a question offering multiple narrative strands. “Did you see that?” Again narrative options emerge from an image or an experience of an image with hindsight. If I engage with the artwork of Jacqueline Drinkall in a way that does not conform to conventional aesthetic modes of distant critique, then I have experienced an abruption and my interaction with her work (admittedly in hindsight) is a hijack of both the original artwork and of the continuing discourse between writers and artists. Yet what happens when you tune in to a second, third, fourth, fifth radio frequency? How can those strands of story be re-organized into a palatable aesthetic pattern? The result of tuning into multiple frequencies is that there will be more than one narrative voice, a quality that will be enacted in this paper.

## • The Telepathic Field •

Jacques Derrida's 1979 iteration of telepathy referred to a series of hallucinations and receptions without fear. Theories of science have kept telepathy at bay, Derrida said, "to render unthinkable what earlier science pushed back into the darkness of occultism."<sup>3</sup> It was hard for Derrida to believe there could be a place for the unconscious in accepted psychology and yet still no place for theories of telepathy. Freud was fearful of the potential poor reception of his ideas on telepathy. He was aware of the "link between two psychic acts, the immediate warning one individual can seem to give another, the signal or psychic transfer can be a physical phenomenon."<sup>4</sup> Freud was circumspect regarding his interest in telepathy, like hiding a naughty little hobby: "the conversion to telepathy is my private affair like my Jewishness, my passion for smoking ...."<sup>5</sup> Freud decided not to publish his telepathy lectures during his lifetime,<sup>6</sup> yet his interest in telepathy was based in a psychoanalytical investigation of the unconscious and dreaming, areas of thought which have had a large impact on psychotherapy.<sup>7</sup>

Derrida, too, points out that "non-telepathy" is harder to believe than telepathy.<sup>8</sup> He approached the question of scientific legitimacy by deconstructively abstracting and fictionalizing his major telepathy text.<sup>9</sup> His essay on telepathy comprises a series of letters dated 9–15 July 1979. Derrida begins his essay in the first person, as himself writing to us, then as Freud writing to wife Marthes, then as Wilhelm Fliess (friend of Freud and fellow inventor of psychoanalysis) writing to wife Marie, then as Gustave Flaubert writing to his lover Louise and then as Plato writing to Socrates or vice versa. So Derrida is not just impersonating or channeling Freud, but using a cast of related characters. A hijacking multitude. A smaller cast of characters is enabled across this paper (Drinkall, Julian Assange, Derrida and me). Just as Derrida breathed life into his contemporaries and his Classical idols, my hijacking is an attempt to breathe life into the art writing process, to animate it, to engender its dissemination, to expand its conditions ... as purposeful sabotage, as intentional hijack.

Derrida's essay is punctuated with pronouncements of passion: it is a love letter. He says, "It is because there would be telepathy that a postcard can always not arrive at its destination."<sup>10</sup> When Derrida talks of

transference and telepoetics, he is talking to me. I've seen Derrida, by the way. He was standing by the curb, across the road from my house recently. He stood in his heavy, grey overcoat, next to the red street mailbox. His white hair was all messy and fly-away, collar turned up against the wind. His back stooped. He held an addressed letter without a stamp. Just as he reached out to push the letter through the post box slot, a gust of ocean wind whipped it out of his hand and sent it up in the air. I saw it spinning in the gust of wind, so I sprinted across the road and jumped up to grasp the letter. I caught it but when I turned back to Derrida, he was gone. As I looked down at the letter, I saw it was addressed to me. Are there many other people across the planet having the same experience, receiving the same postcard? I am only one among many, a point on a spherical map with many pins stuck here and there.

Derrida's telepathy essay is rife with references to premonitions, foreseeing, fateful visions, the seeing of his own double as an omen of death, and projections into the past and the future. Was this missive, this SOS, this postcard meant to reach me in the future, a speculative arche-fossil?<sup>11</sup> What if I received a telepathic message from Derrida, from the past? All forms of "descriptive assault" and non-critical critique should be cast aside in the appreciation of good art.<sup>12</sup> I will always prefer Derrida's "pure pleasure"<sup>13</sup> to Kant's "pure judgment."<sup>14</sup> Having said that, in the field of criticism, the engagement of art deserves more than poetic celebration or unevaluated valuations or unreflective contemplation.<sup>15</sup> Derrida's essay on telepathy is a complex entwining of Freud's curiosity about telepathy and Derrida's fictive discovery of a library book, which launched his appropriation and imagining of a "postcard" between Plato and Socrates.<sup>16</sup> I have read Derrida's telepathy essay a number of times, only to feel more unsure about who is speaking. Is it Derrida or Freud? Plato or Socrates? Michael Naas writes an entire chapter about this in his book on Derrida.<sup>17</sup> Who comes first, who lingers still?

So telepathy in art refers to the silent transmission of energy from multiple living and non-living beings to others. It is a hyper-conscious activity, it is a plea to receive the right message, from among the cavalcade of messages marching around out there. Empathy, sympathy, telepathy: the three perceptions of art.

Telepathy is a useful metaphorical apparatus for art. In the art world, a singular artwork is dematerialized or subordinated to the distributed systems of galleries and the complex elements of the artwork itself.<sup>18</sup> The maker withdraws, as surely as the artwork withdraws into its

elements and as completely as the expert human witness withdraws into her interpretation. What is left, after all this dematerialization and withdrawal? Only the faintly recorded transmission, the quiet voices from the other end of the line, the traces of the artwork and artist and viewer from the outside. All that matters is the system of transmissions between all things, that is, telepathy. This is telepathy, meant as objects' sensing of each other, without obvious forms of communication, without direct contact.

Art and telepathy dovetail well in an aesthetic domain. An art historian who keenly listens for telesthetic messages in his art writing and exhibiting is the sound art historian at University of New South Wales, Sydney, Douglas Kahn. His latest book, *Earth Sound Earth Signal*, charts the development of transmitted sound from eco-writer and transcendentalist Henry Thoreau's anecdotes of hearing the sound of telegraph lines to the sounds of wireless radio.<sup>19</sup> This is a book that affirms the existence of sounds from natural and unnatural sources and global energies. Kahn is no stranger to telesthesia and is as comfortable writing on brain waves as on the history of electromagnetic waves.<sup>20</sup> He and Frances Dyson curated and collectively wrote for an exhibition on telesthesia. They wrote threads of conversation for a catalogue text and created an installation and video work dealing with voices outside life. This was a contemplation of making contact with the dead as a form of distance-sensing. So there are several academic actants in a multi-strand of narratorial telepathic threads where radio transmissions, speculative writing and sensory experiments are undertaken.

In another example, Edward Colless embraces an interdisciplinary approach in his art writing practice. His articles and conference papers suggest his tolerance of occultism and sound a warning, instead, against phantasms of criticality. This is his "in-discipline of academe" where para-academic interests should be encouraged.<sup>21</sup>

The drift of the "transdisciplinary" is fugue-like, amnesiac and lapsing: signaled in the treacherous negation entailed in the prefix "un-" as the sinister persistence of a remainder beyond the deprivation of that thing's essential qualities or properties. A remnant and revenant of a discipline that involves its disappearance like the cat into a grinning unnaturalism, and the dispossession of its own corpus or body of knowledge. In this fugue-like drift could not aesthetics become an occult science, or (in no way symmetrically or commensurately) could science become an occult aesthetics?<sup>22</sup>



I am interested in this rejection of authoritative, authorial voices, and of expert critical opinions in an art aesthetical writing context. The telepathic hijack allows aesthetics to drift towards an occulted but scientific realm, as Colless seems to suggest here. This interdisciplinary drift supports the concept of a speculative art writing form that encourages sci-fi play or fictional interludes. Stengers has also been known to call upon occult traditions by referring to the witch goddess Starhawk in her complex iterations of force and spells of production in a capitalist society, where we consumers are spell-bound by the never-ending bounty of purchasable objects. <sup>23</sup> Stengers quoting Starhawk: "As neo-pagan witch Starhawk writes, to utter the word 'magic' is already an act of magic: the word puts to the test, compromises, exposes to sniggering."<sup>24</sup> Stengers' esoteric references support a multi-narrative voice. They are re-assemblages of experience, hijacked expositions, investigations into (un)natural forces by creating counter-spells. By listening earnestly for alternative voices and secret aesthetic messages, the charlatan, the hijacker and the telepath create fuel for an art writing subversion that moves beyond straight description or interpretive meaning.

### • Jacqueline Drinkall's Telepathic Artwork as Experience •

I met artist Jacqueline Drinkall after a Melbourne artist, Veronica Kent, urged me to make contact with her, believing our interests were in common.<sup>25</sup> When I met Drinkall back in Sydney, she was building a bespoke UFO, which was a large, person-sized (fitting about four humans at once) clear Perspex model of a conventional flying saucer spacecraft, made as part of a body of work called *Weatherman UFOlogy*, constructed during an artist residency. Drinkall says:

UFO as "irregular shelter" of utopian counterculture and emergency DIY activism, such as hex and geodesic domes, UFO as centripetal surveillance aesthetics, UFO as visibility through transparent exo-skeleton, reflective surface and light-diffusion, exploring optics like it is a giant distorted contact-lens and UFO as a "mother wheel," using a term of Louis Farakhan which connects the UFO to the idea of a large breast.<sup>26</sup>

Aside from the political preoccupations that underlie all of Drinkall's work, she has conducted various telepathic experiments within this UFO. She invites art lovers inside it via a tiny hatch that requires yoga skills to enter successfully. There, visitors are encouraged to gather information via EEG headsets, transcribing their brain activity as text on the UFO walls, or by surfing the internet and writing out their discoveries on the UFO. The headsets might also send out telepathic messages to future participants. The confined environment within the UFO helps participants to access incoming telepathic information intended for those within. Drinkall creates these telepathic materials (the headset and the UFO as metaphoric telepathic travel capsule), to make a comment on surveillance-cultures but also to celebrate the pure physical forms (round and spinning like frisbees) of conventional UFOs. For me, the attractions of this work were the unreliability of the accumulated data, the precarious nature of art-space-based, non-clinical research and how much imagination and fictionalizing played into these processes.

To conduct a speculative art writing hijack requires a leap of narrative faith (and voice), that matches the esoteric elements of Drinkall's work. This refers to a point at which boundaries between academic/para-academic writing become blurred, where membranes between non-fiction and fiction are punctured. So a speculative art writing hijack re-purposes the processes of analysis of art and its experience, to accommodate multiple voices, to allow various types of information and to welcome unexpected narrative outcomes, which may or may not be true. For instance, there is more to the artist Drinkall than first meets the eye: she appears materialized but there is an insouciant quality to her physical nature, which is difficult to navigate. There is only a small gap between her unity and plurality. She smiles; she is friendly. She giggles a lot and regularly stares off into space. Don't fall for her fey ways, though, because her razor-sharp eye is assessing, inventing and aggregating. Don't fall for this author's fey ways either; the truth is not to be trusted.

### • The Art Experience, Hijacked •

I stand by her side, this artist, Jacqueline Drinkall. Yes, I am happy to write data on her UFO walls as part of the UFO performance/research project and schlepp her crippling heavy wooden formwork around a car

park art space for the set-up of an exhibition on Speculative Aesthetics which I curated in 2013.<sup>27</sup> I am drawn to her nature and was consequently curious to see what would happen if I inserted my "narrative self" into one of her artwork video performances, *Weather Underwater* 2009–2010, from a retrospective position. And so, it is hardly surprising that one day, I found myself by her side, at the edge of icy water. The rocks were slippery with algae and three tiny turtles paddled past. It was intermittently overcast and the creek water rushed by with hazardous speed.

Drinkall pulled a balaclava out of her high-res bicycle saddle-bag and placed it gently on her head. Her job was to locate other telepathic artists in the bush environment, to make connections and form alliances. Her balaclava was not an ordinary knitted-black one, but a pixie-style headdress of crocheted plastic telecommunication cables. She would have looked like a kindly elf, if she hadn't been wearing a Guantanamo Bay orange jumpsuit, which conjured simultaneous emotions of fear, futility, oppression and pity. "Can you read my mind?" I mouthed. She smiled at my lameness: "You're only asking if I can lip-read, not whether I can receive a telepathic message."

I was implicated in her telepathy experiment, once I began writing about it. I intended to hijack its operations and so a speculative writing mode was spawned. This speculative mode was one which moved in a parallel motion to the artist's experiment, rather than sitting in opposition to it (writing *with*, rather than writing *from*). By writing about her work, as a participant rather than as a distant art critic, I intended to avoid overt judgment and conventions of historical or biographical context. By writing with hindsight and with a fictionalizing of an "imagined interaction," the telepathy of the project has become an ongoing transmission. By discussing this process, Drinkall and I have become co-conspiratorial hijackers. This became our telepathic connection, as nothing was directly discussed or prescribed in terms of the writing interruption. It also became my hijack, as a re-purposing of her original video artwork. This is what transpired:

I urgently shoved Drinkall in the lower back and into the cool water she dived, because it is and was important to move beyond staid habits and mediocre methods. Deep, deeper into the dark green she swam, but still her orange Guantanamo Bay-style jumpsuit was easy to see.<sup>28</sup> Mossy rocks and river carp. The sound of moving water made me hum a tune. Soon an occasional kick from her feet was all I saw. If a group of jellyfish is called a smack, then the pack of us who allow for the possible capacity

of telepathy might be called a knock-out.<sup>29</sup> Soon enough Drinkall exploded up through the river surface and surged ahead with strong swimming strokes (her balaclava quivering a possible route), divining a course across the waterhole which was fed by the tributaries of the Murray River. Icy water from the higher plains trickled through the muddy basin, later to avalanche over the edge of cliffs, in thundering waterfalls.

About an hour later, she swam back. Her cheeks were flushed red from the exertion and the cold. She wriggled free of her jumpsuit, carefully put away her balaclava and pulled on a warm fleece and leggings, accepting the flask of hot coffee with gratitude.

"I saw him," she said.

"Who?" I asked, handing her a muesli bar.

"Julian Assange. He was upstream, standing under a rocky overhang. He must be camping up there. Had a tent, a fire going, a rifle."

"A rifle?"

"Yep," she continued. "It was definitely him."

"Are you sure it wasn't a trick of the eye? An illusion?"

"Maybe," said Jacque. "He said to watch out for the gaming trolls and to never divulge your guerilla tactics."

This was sound advice, however, having already exposed my hijacking processes, I knew I had already sabotaged the subversion I had hoped to create. I tried not to feel disappointed by the collapse of the hijack, mid-paper, and instead I urged the telepathic artist to drink some more hot coffee and eat some mixed nuts.

The results as proof: What was Drinkall looking for that day in the creek? She was looking for her fellow hacker telepaths. The antenna on her balaclava had twitched, causing her search, which functioned as an aesthetic preamble. Drinkall has written about her performance video. It has the narrative tenor of fiction, rather than artist statement, as can be seen in this excerpt:

Weather Underwater: Once the escapee is reunited with fellow cult members, the cult collaborates in an underwater mission to gather evidence of The Disappeared. The cult was ambiguously associated with Weather Underground during the VHS era, and more recently with the Earth Liberation Front (ELF) during the HD era, resulting in many disappearances from the media. Mainstream media does not report many recent and very real acts of sabotage by ELF upon power stations and other environmental hazards. Underwater cult magic — consisting of mutant telecommunication wiring, alternative power dressing, and fish dancing rituals — raises disappeared skeletons from amongst the dead coral.<sup>30</sup>

This frenzy of conspiracy theory, political activism and media-mania refers to the difficulty of making sense of information in a digital age. Hence her turn towards esoteric forms of communication, such as telepathy. Managing information is the greatest preoccupation of our Western lives, and this artist deals with it via a carefully labored process of making art and connecting with other politically-active artists. Drinkall's telepathic search was a metaphorical act, an exploration of possibility, the unexpected and of sending out transmissions first, in order to receive them.

Drinkall has written about telepathy as an academic, as well as enacting it as an artist. In a paper for Monash University's *Colloquy* journal, Drinkall explained:

The words telepathy and telesthesia were coined simultaneously when Frederic Myers founded the Society for Psychical Research in London in 1882. However, telepathy names an experience of distance (*tele*) feeling (*pathos*) or ideas (*thesia*) found in all cultures.<sup>31</sup>

This distance connects to my mode of hijack, where the writing occurs simultaneously at the time of the work and several years afterwards, but based on a continuity of feeling. For this artist, telepathy has emerged as a guiding principle and as also a property of the work's making, of its progress and of its function. The artist's sensory awareness of transmissions beyond spoken language manifests as both content and process, and this condition informed my repurposing hijack of art writing, as a form of critical play.

## • Telepathic Transmission as Art Writing Form or Aesthetic Hijack •

The problem for the telepath is similar to the problem for the charlatan, the sorcerer and the hijacker. They are disdained within structures of ordered authority for being mercenary, illegitimate and untrustworthy. This investigation reclaims the maligned characters and repurposes their unreliable skills as art writing tools. The hierarchy of expert voices is toppled, creating a level playing field where artist, writer, audience, historian, video screen, gallery space and random hijacking interloper are all equally important. In a telepathic system of aesthetics, any single authority is drowned out by the static of multiple transmissions.

How can we write about art in a coherent way without echoing a singular voice? The telepathic transmissions are more reliable than the author, the narrator or the scholarly researcher. The transmissions comprise all the elements of information revolving around Drinkall and her artwork. They include the possibility for misreading, the likelihood of imaginative divergences, the surprise of discovering that humor is synonymous with politics, the action of making a performance video, which runs alongside the subsequent task of writing about it. Telepathy could be understood as a metaphorical silent mouthpiece, a mode of sharing multiple strands of experience, content and story simultaneously. It avoids singular subject-object delineations due to its multiplicity of interpretations and due to its position outside conventional thought.

The hijack occurs when the art writer attempts to respond to this multiplicity, this evasive arbitration of aesthetic sensory experience. The reliability of any narrator is always in question, and the art writing hijacker is particularly unreliable. By avoiding an expert voice, by rejecting an authoritative position, the hijacker who writes about a telepathic artwork is condemned, before she starts. Fictionalizing an event, as an afterword, only works if it is not part of a commentary. Meta-fictive explanations within an academic paper, risk the ruination of the process. Did I really accompany Drinkall to the Murray River creek tributary or did I hijack her documentary evidence? Did I really push her into the water, feed her nuts? More likely, this fictioning was part of a telepathic hijacking writing process. Why? First, because it shifts the emphasis towards a decentralized egalitarian approach. Secondly because it shifts away from

singular experience and towards a shared and reciprocated system of sensorial information that is not limited in time nor is it limited to the correlation of subject-object critiques. The fictioning of the art experience allows readers and viewers the chance to trust their own imaginative dalliances, to give permission for more than one reading or experiential interpretation, and to be aware of these multiple feelings or voices. This fictioning of the art experience is not an effort to remove the social, the historical, the biographical information but to add another dimension of experience to that conventional criteria. When we visit an art space and are stimulated to respond to an artwork by writing, it's important not to be bound by a demand to locate meaning, but to also acknowledge our human desire to interact and participate.

### • Speculative Art Writing, Hijacked •

This brings me to investigate how the telepath and art-telepathic signal can be elevated from its sub-strata status, in a similar way that fictional art writing responses ought to be. If we disallow various imaginative interpretations and messages, we are left with story rather than narrative, we are left with overbearing singularity rather than the freedom of conjecture or contingency. The act of interrupting telepathic frequencies, in art writing, creates a different forceful allure.

Writing is interceptive work. Writing about artwork can generate multiple entities – the art catalogue, the Facebook quote, Twitter feed, re-quoted in online journals – adding another element to the energy from the artwork, the electricity grid, the viewer, the floor, the opening night recorded on Instagram. If fictionalizing art writing is the telepathic electromagnetic current that contributes to a reciprocal imagination shared by many and feeds back into the multi-channel telepathic transmission, will I change the status of the work? By decentralizing the experience through a fictional mode, have I diluted the original artwork's entelechy or energetic source? Has the value changed? Well, Stengers says, "imagination is not a true variable because the experimenter is not free to control the variations."<sup>32</sup> No matter how hard I work to change the subject-object dyad and to disrupt the conventions of art criticism, I remain trapped by my position as a single human writing about an object of aesthetic pleasure. Stengers is right that I am not free to control the



variations. I may not have provided an alternative, other than to remind readers to be aware of multiple alternatives.

How can I defend the experimenter when I don't know who it is? Is it the liar, the art stager, the performer, the actor, the fiction writer, "a being of scientific allure?"<sup>33</sup> In a speculative aesthetics model, all these characters would be experimenters, alongside the lie, the performance, the play, the novel and the experiment. But it wouldn't end there: the list would go on and on.

## • The Telepathic Ending •

Telepathy is a "dispatch" for Derrida and "a connection between two psychic acts" for Freud. For me telepathy is an art fictioning. Telepathy is a movement beyond finitude (the limits of knowledge), a relationship across space, across time. It links many, rather than only two. Telepathy sits well in the realm of art, where the intuitive, the in-between and the unknown are almost always explored. As Jacqueline Drinkall explains through her video and performance work, the extremes of contemporary communication need to be explored. Simply place her cabled elf balaclava upon your head and you have access to multiple connections and cross-currents of thought. This makes space for memories, the hum of static, the cross-currents of conversations along the telecommunication wires and cables. Listen closely, the message might be for you. Consider what Derrida says, "Life is already threatened by the origin of the memory which constitutes it, and by the breaching which it resists."<sup>34</sup>

Telepathy sits in the black hole of non-knowing. Telepathy is a non-reason. Can I write about telepathy and art using a sensible, academic modality? If the answer is yes, then I will continue with the next step, which is speculative aesthetics: a form of writing where possibilities and contingencies eclipse authority and expertise. Next time, I will do so as a collective, as a bureau, to further alleviate the damage wrought by the single dictatorial voice.

## • Notes •

- 1 Isabelle Stengers, "The doctor and the Charlatan," *Cultural Studies Review* 9, no. 2 (2003): 11-36.
- 2 Ibid., 11-36.
- 3 Ibid., 238.
- 4 Ibid., 241-2.
- 5 Ibid., 256.
- 6 Jan Campbell and Steve Pile, "Telepathy and its vicissitudes: Freud, thought transference and the hidden lives of the (repressed and non-repressed) unconscious," *Subjectivity* 3, no. 4 (2010): 403-425.
- 7 Ibid.
- 8 Jacques Derrida, 'Telepathy' in *Psyche: Inventions of the Other* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2007): 237.9 Ibid., 239.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 An archeofossil is an object that proves an existence anterior and posterior to terrestrial life in Quentin Meillassoux, *After Finitude: An Essay on the Necessity of Contingency* (New York: Continuum, 2008), 16-18.
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- 13 Ibid., 43.
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