

Auto-Affection

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Abstract

In sculpture, painting, and video, *Auto-Affection* playfully examines the possibility of self-relation through lenses of philosophy, art, and popular culture. Setting principles of Derridean Deconstruction against the contemporary landscape and aesthetics of self-affection, masturbation, and self-care, this exhibition (and this supplemental document) utilize auto-theory as a research-creation methodology, seeking to define an art of auto-affection.

Keywords

auto-affection, auto-theory, masturbation, deconstruction

A close-up photograph of a person's right hand holding a small, rectangular, yellow object, possibly a piece of paper or a card. The hand is positioned in the upper right quadrant of the frame. The background is a soft, light pink color. The person is wearing a white long-sleeved shirt with a purple stain on the cuff. The word "INTRODUCTION" is overlaid in white, bold, sans-serif capital letters at the bottom left of the image.

INTRODUCTION



For about three years, I worked for a specialty sex toy company to supplement my nearly-nonexistent income as an artist. By hand, we designed and manufactured erotic aids for sale in boutiques such as San Francisco's pioneering sex shop Good Vibrations, an early player in what remains an ongoing movement for safe, educational, and sex-positive retail models focusing on female and queer pleasure. With a sense of righteous excitement and service, we made and distributed what are sometimes legally referred to as "obscene devices" (mainly dildos, and some vibrators), navigating

around laws in states such as Alabama, Mississippi, and Virginia, which, as of this writing, still prohibit their sale.

Our mission was part of a larger trend, what felt like a more or less effective proof of Michel Foucault's Repressive Hypothesis, as detailed in *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1*. Here Foucault essentially argues that sex has never truly been repressed in western society, but that we create various ways to claim that it has been, in order to give it even more attention and imagine



Fig. 1. Paul McCarthy, *Tree*, 2014, Place Vendôme, Paris, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign>.

ever-greatersexual utopias.¹ For about three years I witnessed this dynamic and its promises effectively fuel the dream of my employers: to profit handsomely, with a social cause.

I learned a great deal there. Elbow-deep daily in colorful rubber phalluses, I quickly shed any feelings of awkwardness or embarrassment about sexual objects. Saying I made dildos for a living was a fun party trick, but the intrigue usually stopped there. As Jennifer Doyle writes in *Sex Objects, Art and the Dialectics of Desire*, “to assert that a book, or a painting, or a film, is about sex—or to assert something is pornographic—is to say surprisingly little.”² Moving past this initial step with its associated humor and hang-ups, I began to consider the objects and the work itself with a spirit of social and theoretical curiosity. This thinking, in turn, worked its way into my ideation as an artist.

My curiosity found its ideal object in autoeroticism. While there is a universe of existing interest in manifold forms of interpersonal sex, historian Thomas Lacquer points to masturbation’s “core elements: imagination, excess, solitude, and privacy”³—and I will add supplementarity—as those which make it historically problematic and uniquely fascinating. In my own rumination on this subject, I considered where and how erotic aids fit into the operation of autoerotic pleasure. If masturbation was in essence a truly solitary and closed experience, why had it been so simple to sell objects into the equation, along with the promise of greater wellness, wholeness, an enhanced relationship to oneself?

1 Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality Volume 1: An Introduction*, trans. Robert Hurley (New York: Vintage Books, 1980).

2 Jennifer Doyle, *Sex Objects: Art and the Dialectics of Desire* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2006), xix–xx.

3 Thomas Walter Laqueur, *Solitary Sex: A Cultural History of Masturbation* (New York: Zone Books, 2003), 21.

In the course of my research, I would find the most satisfying responses to these questions through Jacques Derrida's deconstructions of auto-affection: a category of experience that includes but is not limited to sexual self-touch. In *Of Grammatology*, Derrida defines auto-affection as "giving oneself a presence or a pleasure,"⁴ and attempts to demonstrate that within its general structure, there is always already an alterity between one and oneself. For example if I touch my left hand with my right, I am both touching and touched, self and other. This most slight alterity reveals a gap. This gap, I believe, is the very site where the ever-expanding marketing of self-care and personal wellness commodities is directed. These things could, therefore, be understood as tools meant to supplement our experiences of self.

Referring to Jean-Jacques Rousseau's book titled *Confessions*, Derrida explains the concept of the "dangerous supplement" using two primary examples: writing as a supplement to speech, and masturbation as a supplement to sexual intercourse. The supplement is that which both augments and threatens something apparently natural and complete. Derrida writes that "the supplement adds itself, it is a surplus, a plenitude enriching another plenitude...But the supplement supplements. It adds only to replace. It intervenes or insinuates in-the-place-of; if it fills, it is as if one fills a void...It compensates for what ought to lack nothing at all in itself."⁵ The supplement is not just a theme in my work but a research-creation method, consistent throughout the entirety of my MFA thesis. This written portion is itself a supplement to a body of visual artwork titled *Auto-Affection*: an investigation of self-intimacy through sculpture, painting, and video.

4 Jacques Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, trans. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976), 165.

5 Derrida, 145.

Controversial, extra, and derided as secondary, that which is supplemental is, I will argue, a most interesting category: of objects, experiences, and works. Reflexive, unproductive, and fundamentally intimate, the activity of self-supplementing is a particular interest of this thesis, which ultimately asks how artmaking itself relates to auto-affection.



CONTEXTUAL SECTION

Definitions

#Self-Care

This project has been guided by a constellation of compound words. Among these are auto-affection, self-love, self-pleasure, self-intimacy, self-care. I would like to begin with definitions of the first and last of this list, with the knowledge that the others are present to varying degrees in their meanings. Before zeroing in



on auto-affection, I will touch on the term “self-care.” Addressing this term first, particularly in some of its present-day usages, I will then position it as relating to auto-affection. In linking the two—or rather in showing that this link already exists—I hope to demonstrate that the ubiquity of self-care in popular culture reflects the same question at the very core of philosophy: the question of the possibility of self-relation.

In his 1982 lecture *Technologies of the Self*, Michel Foucault

explores the traceable written history of “care of the self” in western thought, beginning with Plato’s *Alcibiades*. Foucault writes that in this text, “concern for the self always refers to an active political and erotic state...You have to worry about your soul - that is the principle activity of caring for yourself.”⁶ From Plato’s time to today, the concept of “self” within “self-care” has likely shifted, as Foucault states, with attitudes. In brief, this Hellenistic care-of-self, one of “social morality,” may no longer be the rule. In *Solitary Sex: A Cultural History of Masturbation*, Thomas Laqueur argues that the “modern desiring self” emerged from the enlightenment. Laqueur writes, “this is the age that invented the notion of morality as self-governance...In these years, a profoundly individualist culture came into being.”⁷ This tension generated from setting the social against the individualistic roots and motives of self-care carries through to the present day.

No survey of self-care is complete without Audre Lorde, who complicates this distinction between its individual and social implications. In her 1988 book *A Burst of Light*, Lorde writes: “caring for myself is not self-indulgence. It is self-preservation, and that is an act of political warfare.”⁸ Ten years earlier, in her essay *The Uses of the Erotic: the Erotic as Power*, Lorde also specifically connects the eroticism of self-experience to the political. She writes, “that self-connection shared is a measure of the joy which I know myself to be capable of feeling...for not only do we touch our most profoundly creative source, but we do that which is female and self-affirming in the face of a racist, patriarchal, and anti-erotic society.”⁹

6 Michel Foucault, “Technologies of the Self” (The University of Vermont, October 1982), <https://foucault.info/documents/foucault.technologiesOfSelf.en/>.

7 Laqueur, *Solitary Sex*, 18–19.

8 Audre Lorde, *A Burst of Light: And Other Essays*, Ixia Press edition (Mineola, New York: Ixia Press, 2017), 131.

9 Audre Lorde, “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power,” in *Sister Outsider: Essays and*

Lorde's words were amplified anew in the wave of anxiety that crashed over American feminisms after the 2016 Presidential election. Online searches of the term "self-care" peaked that same week. Excerpts of her writing were appropriated and regularly deployed via social media to support a narrative driven by individualism and product-mediated personal care. As Jordan Kisner writes in a 2017 essay for *The New Yorker*, "the irony of the grand online #selfcare-as-politics movement of 2016 is that it was powered by straight, affluent white women."¹⁰ True to Lorde's legacy is author and activist adrienne maree brown, who's 2019 book *Pleasure Activism* proposes pleasure, including masturbation, as a catalyst for healing and joy for marginalized people and groups: a means of fueling the work of social change.¹¹ Self-care is a concept that is undeniably linked to subjective experiences of privilege, race, and gender. Often, a fissure is presented between self-care as a political act in the face of oppression, and self-care as useless indulgence, a capitalist trap typified by Goop.com's \$66 jade yoni eggs.¹²

In the last few years, there has been significant discussion grappling with the questions of whom and what self-care is for, and why its performance has become so visible recently, primarily on social media. (As of this writing, the hashtag #SelfCare has 27 million posts on Instagram.) Instead of addressing that question, I would like to step back here and identify, if possible, any shared or common themes. In her 2019 article for *The New York Times* titled "When Did Self-Help Become Self-Care?" Kate Carraway

Speeches (Potter/Ten Speed/Harmony/Rodale, 2012), 59.

¹⁰ Jordan Kisner, "The Politics of Conspicuous Displays of Self-Care," March 14, 2017, <https://www.newyorker.com/culture/culture-desk/the-politics-of-selfcare>.

¹¹ Adrienne M. Brown, *Pleasure Activism: The Politics of Feeling Good* (Chico, CA: AK Press, 2019).

¹² "Jade Egg | Goop Wellness - Goop Shop," accessed April 26, 2020, <https://shop.goop.com/shop/products/jade-egg?country=USA>.

argues that in general, self-care today carries with it a theme of opting-out, replacing self-help's goal of optimization with a shift to personal nourishment, enoughness, and pleasure. Carraway summarizes the phenomenon as such: "If self-help is about fixing something, self-care thinks you're already great... if self-help is about how to do, self-care is about how to not do."¹³

Self-care is subjectively defined, a constellation of often disparate things we do with, for, and to ourselves. Yet if there exist a few shared qualities across its rifts in discourse, I would argue they are these: whether it takes the form of rest and pleasure as a rejection of capitalist imperatives for production, or a superfluous crystal vaginal insert, self-care today is generally 1) feminized, 2) typically treated as good or favorable, and 3) in practice, it declines productivity.

Auto-Affection

While self-care is a shifty and diffuse yet popular concept, auto-affection is something like its counterpart in theory, sharing each of these qualities but the last. The term comes from philosophy and is a theoretical state of pure self-experience; one example is Aristotle's definition of God as "thought thinking itself."¹⁴ In practice, auto-affection is what one does to oneself, such as self-talk and self-touch. Because these are contained, personal, and typically private, we might consider them closed loops of experience, completely self-present. Jacques Derrida's deconstructions of auto-affection examine these circuits to reveal gaps which would prove an implicit alterity. Leonard Lawlor explains, "auto-affection occurs when I affect myself, when the

13 Kate Carraway, "When Did Self-Help Become Self-Care?," *The New York Times*, August 10, 2019, sec. Style, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/10/style/self-care/when-did-self-help-become-self-care.html>.

14 Thomas De Koninck, "Aristotle on God as Thought Thinking Itself," *The Review of Metaphysics* 47, no. 3 (1994): 471–515.

affecting is the same as the affected...Derrida tries to show that auto-affection is hetero-affection; the experience of the same (I am thinking about myself) is the experience of the other (insofar as I think about myself I am thinking of someone or something else at the same time).¹⁵ The resulting suggestion is that at our core, in the place we might expect to find an essential self, what we find instead is difference.

Considering Derrida's argument as problematizing the pure privacy and subjectivity of so-called auto-affection, the gaps revealed by these deconstructions create a unique space: an avenue for the most intimate exchanges between the private self and the outside world. In *Of Grammatology*, using the examples of writing and masturbation, Derrida writes:

In both cases, the possibility of auto-affection manifests itself as such: it leaves a trace of itself in the world. The worldly residence of a signifier becomes impregnable. That which is written remains, and the experience of touching-touched admits the world as a third party. The exteriority of space is irreducible there. Within the general structure of auto-affection, within the giving-oneself-a-presence or a pleasure, the operation of touching-touched receives the other within the narrow gulf that separates doing from suffering.¹⁶

Again, Derrida is referring to Jean-Jacques Rousseau's 1782 book *The Confessions*, wherein Rousseau unpacks his moral conflict about the implicitly imaginative practice of sexual fantasy during masturbation. Derrida's "narrow gulf" becomes a site for the

15 Leonard Lawlor, "Jacques Derrida," in *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. Edward N. Zalta, Summer 2018 (Metaphysics Research Lab, Stanford University, 2018), <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/sum2018/entries/derrida/>.

16 Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 165.

secret ingestion of outside material for use in fantasy, and the theoretical point of exit for the expulsion of traces. If practices of auto-affection were entirely self-contained and impermeable, it might be easier to let them remain unspeakable. By revealing the implicit, if little seen, exchanges and residues of auto-affection, deconstruction opens these concepts for consideration in relation to other practices that are also functions of self, imagination, symbolizing, and trace. Via Rousseau, Derrida has already emphasized the link between masturbation and writing. I would like to consider another link: to art.

Part of my attraction to Derrida's deconstruction of auto-affection is that it unsettles the boundary between public and private modes. By suggesting that the outside world always enters into private experience, the distinction of individual and social implications--in everything we do--is undermined. As Ellie Anderson writes in her 2016 article *Alter Ego: Toward a Response Ethics of Self-Relation*, "this relation is one of contamination, such that selfhood and otherness are never pure or absolutely separate from one another."¹⁷ That which is self-centered is also always social, and that which is social is also always a function of self.

If we can imagine the gap at the core of self-relation as a site--whether we call it a "narrow gulf" or "difference"--then it is a space that is navigated variously in theory, culture, and in art. To recap briefly: as we have seen, Lorde and brown have pointed to this very space and assert--as Foucault does with *Alcibiades*--that self-experience is both political and erotic. The commodity-based wellness industry treats the gap as a market. And artists, too, have been situating artwork here for some time.

¹⁷ Ellie Anderson, "Alter Ego: Toward a Response Ethics of Self-Relation," 2016.



Fig. 2. Richard Serra and Nancy Holt, *Boomerang* (video still) 1974, *The Museum of Modern Art*. <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/143808>.

Part II: Art and Auto-Affection

In *Speech and Phenomena*, Derrida's discussion of auto-affection is presented entirely in relation to speech and writing.¹⁸ While most of the artists I introduce in this section will demonstrate a clear link to sexual auto-affection, I would like to arrive there--as Derrida does--by way of language. One modern origin point linking art and auto-affection is Richard Serra and Nancy Holt's 1974 video titled *Boomerang* (fig. 2). In the piece, Holt is filmed while hearing her own speech through headphones at a 283 millisecond delay. Her monologue is simply a description of the experience:

The words are spilling out of my head and then returning into my ear. It puts a distance between the words and their apprehension, or their comprehension...I have a double-

18 Jacques Derrida, *Speech and Phenomena: And Other Essays on Husserl's Theory of Signs*, trans. David B Allison (Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1996).

take on myself, I am once-removed from myself. I am thinking and hearing and filling up a vocal void...I want to hear my own words pouring back in on top of me...I am hearing other things...coming in on me. There is something else besides my own that I am hearing.¹⁹

In exaggerating the experience of alterity implicit within self talk, *Boomerang* portrays auto-affection as an exercise of self-othering, external interference, and disjuncture. Holt even narrates the sensation of the outside world interceding in the space between speaking and hearing. To view this work is also to witness Holt's self-conscious effort of "filling up a vocal void," the same activity Derrida ascribes to the so-called dangerous supplement. Beyond its technological innovation for its time, *Boomerang* is interesting because it proves, with very simple gestures, that the act of auto-affection can itself comprise an artwork.

Can art embody auto-affection when no living thing is present? In *Menzel's Realism : Art and Embodiment in Nineteenth-Century Berlin*, Michael Fried writes a heavily phenomenological analysis of Adolph Menzel's studies and drawings which, while many of them do not depict the body, "are adjusted to the body" or "bear the body's traces."²⁰ One particular drawing of Menzel's, titled *Unmade Bed* (fig.3), Fried writes "exemplifies the thematic of exchange or transfer, as of animation itself, between persons and things that plays a fundamental role in Menzel's art." He concludes that the piece "is essentially a scene of auto-affection, self-pleasuring, in every part."²¹

19 Richard Serra, *Boomerang*, accessed January 30, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8z32JTnRrHc>.

20 Michael Fried, *Menzel's Realism : Art and Embodiment in Nineteenth-Century Berlin* (Yale University Press, 2002), 41.

21 Fried, 41.



Fig. 3. Adolph Menzel, *Unmade Bed*, 1845, chalk drawing on paper, Kupferstich-kabinett, Berlin. <https://biblioklept.org/2015/02/21/the-unmade-bed-adolph-von-menzel/>.

Fried's "thematic of exchange or transfer" calls to mind Maurice Merleau-Ponty's theory of the chiasm, which Amelia Jones summarizes, in relation to art specifically, as "reciprocal interrelation between the viewing subject and the object she views, and between the viewer and the subject who is identified with the object as its maker."²² In this relational perceptual model, what is invisible, absent, or reserved plays heavily into how we experience a work of art. It is fitting then that as viewers, we often look for a more intimate point of entry into an artist's practice through their supplemental works. Here, we are primed to expect insight and intimacy over primacy and impact.

Derrida reminds us that "sexual auto-affection, that is auto-affection in general, neither begins nor ends with what one believes

²² Amelia Jones, "Meaning, Identity, Embodiment: The Uses of Merleau-Ponty's Phenomenology in Art History," in *Art and Thought*, ed. Dana Arnold and Margaret Iversen, *New Interventions in Art History 1* (Malden, MA: Blackwell Pub, 2003), 71.



Fig. 4. Marcel Duchamp, *Paysage Fautif*, 1946, semen on satin. <https://www.sartle.com/artwork>.

can be circumscribed by the name of masturbation.”²³ Moving now toward works with more implicit and explicit sexuality, it is worthwhile to first look into, and then look beyond, the purportedly derogatory joke of “masturbatory” art as we endeavor to define an art of auto-affectation.²⁴

There is no shortage of existing artwork and scholarship linking onanism to artmaking. A familiar example is what Sarah Hayden calls the “rhetoric of artistic creation as ejaculation” which “accords with a major trope within modernist theories of creativity.”²⁵ Hayden cites Marcel Duchamp’s 1946 *Paysage Fautif* (fig. 4), a composition created with Duchamp’s own semen on a square of black satin which he purportedly mailed to a

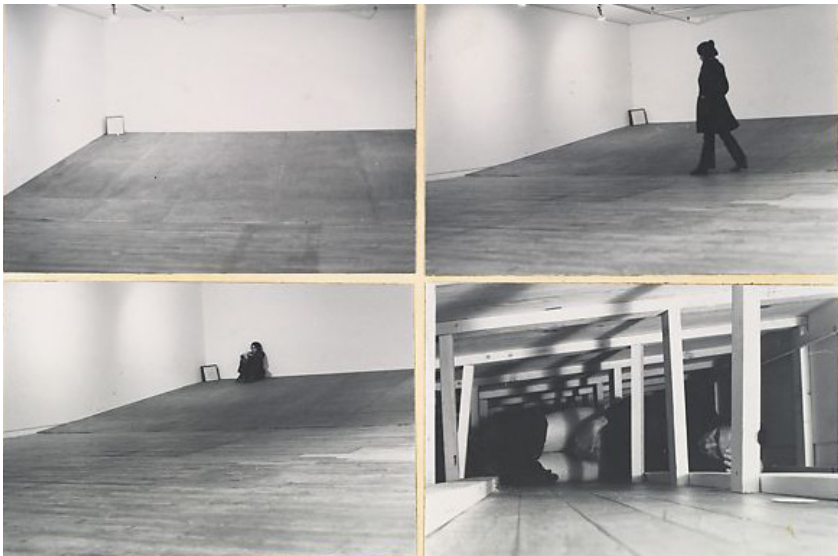


Fig. 5. Vito Acconci, *Seedbed*, 1972, Sonnabend Gallery, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/266876>.

23 Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 154–55.

24 “Definition of ‘Masturbatory,’” accessed December 13, 2018, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/masturbatory>.

25 Sarah Hayden, *Curious Disciplines: Mina Loy and Avant-Garde Artisthood* (University of New Mexico Press, 2018), 100.

lover, and Ezra Pound's claim that "the brain itself is, in origin and development, only a sort of great clot of genital fluid held in suspense and reserved."²⁶ One might also cite Vito Acconci's notorious 1972 performance work *Seedbed*, wherein the artist lay beneath a constructed floor and masturbated as he narrated fantasies involving his unseen viewers, his voice amplified through speakers (fig. 5).

While the modernist trope Hayden points to is deserving of existing critiques, to shape these works into an essentializing argument about male art is to negate the pathos implicit in representing masturbation. Laqueur reminds us that masturbation "is the first truly democratic sexuality," that it can be "an instrument of freedom, or, in the minds of some, a sign of abjection and despair."²⁷ In its very reflexivity, its tendency to turn back on itself and then back onto the artist, what I am calling art of auto-

26 Pound quoted in Hayden, 100.

27 Laqueur, *Solitary Sex*, 22.



Fig. 6. Annie Sprinkle, *Masturbation Ritual*, <http://anniesprinkle.org/masturbating-onstage/>.

affection has the ability to subvert deeply rooted cultural and art historical tropes around art, sex, and power. *Seedbed* not only creates an unparalleled intimacy between the artist and viewer, Acconci debases himself in the process. *Paysage Fautif* is lightly abject, strange, and romantic. And even Jackson Pollock, an archetype of the so-called masturbatory artist, seems awkward and servile when he is captured in the act of artmaking, dancing around his supine canvases on the floor.

In contrast, Annie Sprinkle is godlike in her masturbation ritual, a performance which the artist gave hundreds of times over four years, wherein she brings herself to orgasm on a stage using a Hitachi Magic Wand vibrator (fig. 6). Sprinkle is among a canon of women artists, beginning with feminists of the late 1960s and early 1970s, who have used sexual auto-affection in their work. Others include Valie Export, with her closeup vulva footage in the 1970-73 film *Mann & Frau & Animal / Man & Woman & Animal*, Lynda Benglis' auto-erotic self-talk and self-kissing in her 1973 video *Now*, and Elke Krystufek's 1994 performance *Satisfaction*, in which the artist masturbates on a floor of a bathroom-like enclosure visible to a public audience, then casually takes a bath.

Masturbation in feminist art intersects with the consciousness-raising work of particular second wave feminists who positioned autoeroticism, as Ellie Anderson writes, "as a liberatory site for women to reclaim their own sexual desire... to achieve an agential subjectivity previously denied to them."²⁸ Famous among these are The Boston Women's Collective and their 1970 book *Women and Their Bodies: A Course* (later re-titled *Our Bodies Ourselves*), and Betty Dodson and her 1987 book *Sex for One: the Joy of Selfloving*. In each case, the authors integrated a teaching component into the work. If early masturbation for Rousseau and many other men

28 Ellie Anderson, "Autoeroticism: Rethinking Self-Love with Derrida and Irigaray," *PhaenEx* 12, no. 1 (May 23, 2017): 67, <https://doi.org/10.22329/p.v12i1.4767>.

could be summarized generally as a process of mastering, and working to control, an initially involuntary bodily experience, for many women, it is rather a process of learning the mechanics of how to do it.

It might be appealing here to claim that sovereignty is a unifying goal or impact of female masaturbation in art. But this would be incongruous with the theory that auto-affection is an experience of alterity rather than one of wholeness. Citing Luce Irigaray, Anderson reminds us that “love of self is fluid, mobile, and self-othering in such a manner that the proliferation of differences prevents any stable calculability of the two.”²⁹ Without question, self-experience is deeply linked to self-empowerment. But it need not be linked to a false and problematic promise of wholeness. By choosing to consider self-experience as a practice, rather than a singularly goal-oriented pursuit, this totalizing pressure is alleviated, and a variety of other insights can come to the fore.

One such insight is that witnessing female pleasure is somewhat atypical. As viewers, we are more familiar (and perhaps even more comfortable) with seeing women in various states of erotic victimization. In her essay *The Aesthetics of Power in Modern Erotic Art*, Carol Duncan argues that “the equation of female sexual experience with surrender and victimization is so familiar in what our culture designates as erotic art and so sanctioned by both popular and high cultural traditions, that one hardly stops to think it odd.”³⁰ Women artists who deploy pleasure, humor, profanity, banality, and joy can be misaligned with this cultural tradition, and at times become the subjects of vitriol and copyright as a result. One such artist is Xandra Ibarra, whose

²⁹ Anderson, 66.

³⁰ Carol Duncan, “The Aesthetics of Power in Modern Erotic Art,” in *Feminist Art Criticism*, ed. Arlene Raven, ed. Arlene Raven, Cassandra L. Langer, and Joanna Frueh, 1st ed. (Routledge, 2018), 60, <https://doi.org/10.4324/9780429500497-3>.



Fig. 7. Xandra Ibarra, *La Tortillera* (still), 2015, [Xandraibarra.com](http://www.xandraibarra.com).

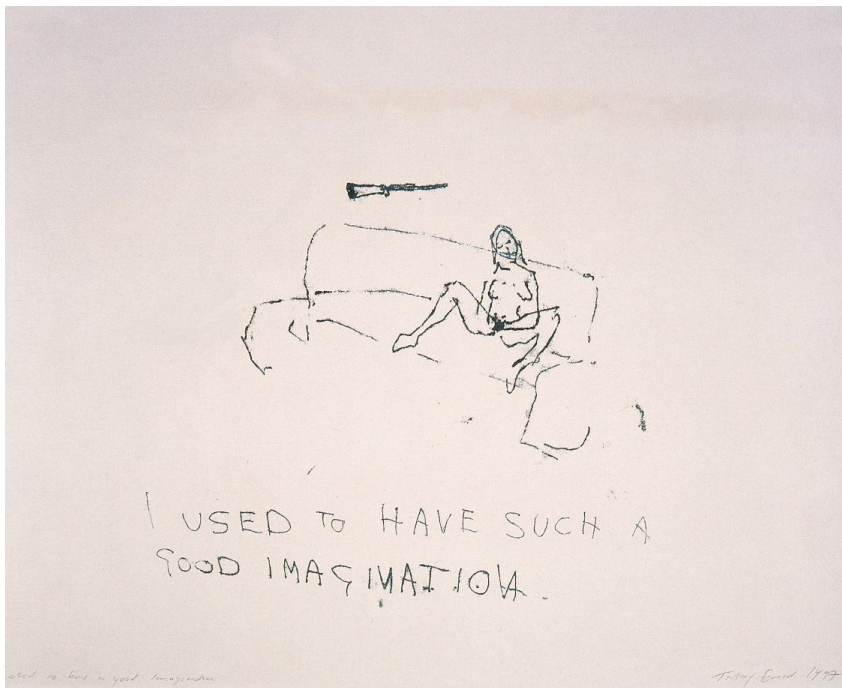


Fig. 8. Tracey Emin, *I Used to Have a Good Imagination*, 1997, monotype, <https://www.pinterest.com/pin/79376012158694342/>.

video *Spictacle II: La Tortillera* (fig. 7) was removed in 2020 from a publicly-funded San-Antonio art space, due to a scene in the piece where Ibarra's alter ego La Chica Boom simulates masturbating onto a taco using a bottle of hot sauce in a strap-on harness. One wonders if what caused offence to San Antonio's Department of Arts & Culture was in part the defiant pleasure that Ibarra appeared to take in this combination of "racial bondage"³¹ and satirical sexual expression.

Tracey Emin is another artist who has at times been naively dismissed due to her treatment of sexuality; her work is rarely discussed for its theoretical richness. Peripheral to her most famous pieces *The Tent and My Bed*, Emin produced several prints depicting self-touch, laying bare the overlap of artmaking and sexual auto-affection. Her 1997 print titled *I Used to Have a Good Imagination* (fig. 8) negates this boundary between creative and erotic ideation by linking the form of the drawing--a casually rendered trace monotype--to its content. The print depicts a seated, relaxed-looking figure masturbating near an indiscernible floating object (perhaps something conjured in her own mind). As a meditation on creative and sexual mastery, the piece becomes a counterpoint to narratives which align creativity with virility, procreation, and production. Instead, Emin offers us a glimpse at an act of symbolizing--an act of auto-affection--that is failing. We do not need to ask whether the text is referring to her artistic or sexual imagination: here they are one and the same.

In 2009, Emin produced a series of similar photogravure prints, all depicting masturbation, titled *Suffer Love*. In an interview the same year for *The Guardian*, she spoke about the drawings:

31 "Tortillera," Xandra Ibarra (blog), accessed April 2, 2020, <http://www.xandraibarra.com/portfolio/tortillera-2/>.

Love doesn't always have to be about loving other people...I enjoyed making this series because I somehow felt removed from it. And even though it is an erotic subject, I even felt distant from the sexuality of the pictures. It was almost like I was trying to get to the bottom of something, understand something - what it means to be a woman, a single entity and feminine. There is no shock or offence intended. They were made for me, trying to deal with something that is going on in my mind.³²

In a 2014 television segment, an interviewer asked Emin "your work has changed history, don't you think?" Emin responded, "I made my bed, and I made my tent. There's two seminal works of art. I never have to make a seminal piece again, I've done it. Now



Fig. 9. Lauren Fournier, *Self Love Limits* (video still), 2013, single-channel video, <http://www.laurenfournier.net/Self-Love-Limits>.

32 Tracey Emin, "Tracey Emin on Her Passion for Drawing and Six of Her Favourite Works," *The Guardian*, May 24, 2009, sec. Art and design, <https://www.theguardian.com/artanddesign/2009/may/25/tracey-emin-drawing-art>.

I can just get on with my life and just make my art.”³³ Here, in an advanced stage of a career built largely on mining and depicting a variety of interpersonal sexual experiences, Emin is pursuing the subject of auto-affection. As with Menzel, these meditations on self-relation are taking place outside the artist’s canon, in the realm of supplemental works.

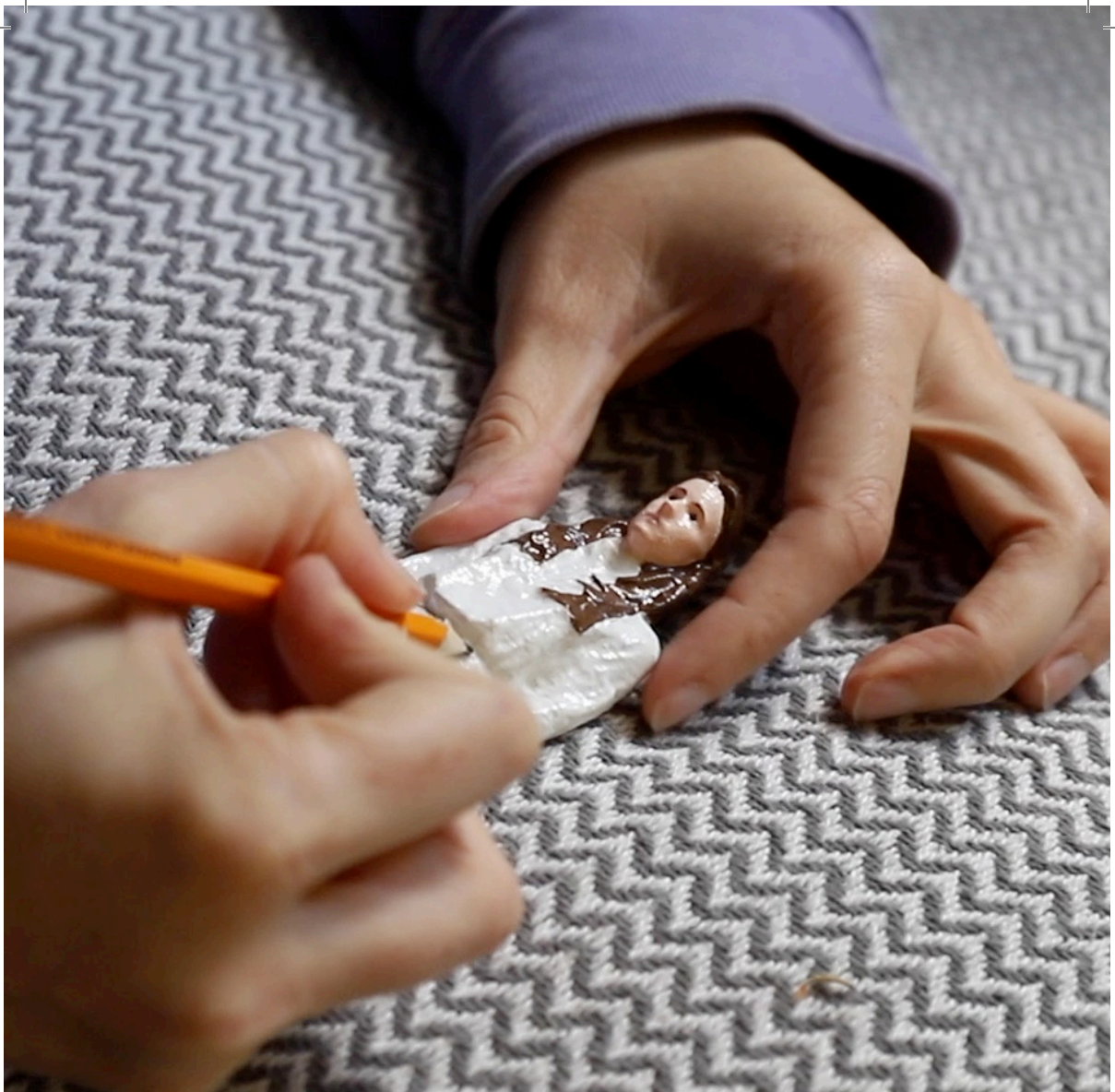
Canadian artist and academic Lauren Fournier takes a more plainly theoretical approach to the subject of auto-affection as art. In her 2013 video titled *Self Love Limits* (fig. 9), Fournier kisses the parts of her body that are within reach, making visible the physical and psychic boundaries of self-affection. For the last decade, Fournier has been making an academic career of questioning what we mean and accomplish by self-love and self-care. In the Methodology section, I will discuss Fournier’s written scholarship in greater detail.

In summary, artists have done a great deal with the subject of auto-affection in a variety of forms, from self-talk to masturbation. There is still an apparent gap that remains, one where I will situate my own work in the sections that follow. Among the artists I have researched, many have used erotic aids such as dildos and vibrators in their work. Each of these objects was integral, yet always in a supplementary role to the human body. In the spirit of centering the supplement, my own work will place the erotic aid in a more primary position. Further, while philosophy works extensively at considering the possibilities of self and self-relation, and popular culture, as evidenced by the self-care movement, is equally concerned with the same subject, rarely do we see them linked. In the next section, I will describe my own efforts to draw them together through object and image-making.

33 FondationBeyeler, Tracey Emin: Gustave Courbet’s “The Origin of the World,” accessed December 13, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JIRNBWBwyOO>.



METHODOLOGY



“Everything we do in life is rooted in theory”

--bell hooks *Feminism is for Everybody*

Literary arts have always been my side-passion--my dangerous supplement--and I draw inspiration in my studio work constantly from poetry and fiction. In this project, I have been guided by

Walt Whitman's 1855 *Song of Myself*, the poet's opus of self-affection,³⁴ as well as the character Marcelle from George Bataille's 1928 novella *Story of the Eye*. (Marcelle, an epitome of the psychoanalytic death drive, is often masturbating and notably accompanied by the symbol of a soaked white bedsheet, which she hangs from her window on a psych ward. It becomes at once a phantom, an index of her abjection, a flag of surrender).³⁵ Literature is also what led me to finding a name for my methodology: auto-theory.

I first encountered the term auto-theory as an extension of "auto-fiction" in a literary context. What seduced me was Chris Kraus' philosophical, auto-fictional and uncommon portrayal of female desire in her 1997 book *I Love Dick*. When I read the following question, I related to it deeply: "Why is female vulnerability still only acceptable when it's neuroticized and personal; when it feeds back on itself? Why do people still not get it when we handle vulnerability like philosophy, at some remove?"³⁶ Here, Kraus voices the necessity I have in my own work to address vulnerable subjects and subject areas without making work that is primarily about my own experiences. Rather than centering a particular narrative or subject, then supporting and contextualizing it using theory, my intention is to instead center theory and affect, and support and contextualize these using personal anecdotes, form, and material.

In her scholarship on the subject, Fournier works to define auto-theory in greater detail in relation art practice. She writes, "In auto-theory, theorized personal anecdotes or embodied actions constellate with fragments from the history of philosophy to form

34 Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass*, 1st (1855) ed, *The Penguin Poets* (New York: Penguin Books, 1976).

35 Georges Bataille, *Story of the Eye*, 1st City Lights ed (San Francisco: City Lights Books, 1987).

36 Chris Kraus, *I Love Dick*, *Semiotext(e) Native Agents Series* (Los Angeles, Calif: Semiotext(e), 2006), 207–8.

potent analyses of gender, politics, academia, and contemporary art. Embodied experience becomes the primary material for generating theory, foregrounding disclosure and ambivalence as that which enhances critical rigour and relevance.”³⁷ New—though well-precedented—barely defined, feminist, and intrinsically concerned with the self, auto-theory is a promising site in which to situate my inquiry. It is an appropriate container for the personal, theoretical, and material aspects of my practice, allowing for unconventional interchanges between these varied components.

Generally characterized by the creative work that comprises it, auto-theory is not a methodology in the conventional, procedural sense. Therefore, rather than positioning my own research and creation as adhering to an existing set of methods within auto-theory, I offer the methods that I used in my own work, and the sum of their results, as my contribution to this emergent field.

Self and Alter Ego

To visualize the operation of self-othering within auto-affection, I worked with an alter ego. This was not a new development for my practice; for several years I have invited her into my work in order to gain distance from my subject matter. The differences between her and I are few: the equivalent of a fictional character based on a real person without many attributes changed. As a proxy, she draws a faulty boundary between myself and the work. Her name is MP, and she wears a modest white outfit, which is a loose combination of the way I dressed as a nine-year-old, the way I dressed when I painted houses for a living, and the way I once imagined that performance artists probably dressed (gestures at traditions of aesthetic neutrality which here admit their

37 Lauren Fournier, “Auto-Theory as an Emerging Mode of Feminist Practice Across Media,” May 15, 2017, <https://yorkspace.library.yorku.ca/xmlui/handle/10315/33700>.



Fig. 10. MP, 2019, 3D polymer print with enamel paint.

scattershot origins). MP only appears in the work itself, never in life (fig. 10). The interplay between me and myself, visualized through me and my alter ego, is my central method in this work.

Scale and Materiality

If Menzel's drawings "are adjusted to the body" or "bear the body's traces,"³⁸ scale and materiality in my own work are primarily dictated by existing categories of things that either the body goes into--such as a bed--or things designed to go into a body, such as erotic aids. These two primary objects--a bed and a palm-sized

38 Fried, *Menzel's Realism: Art and Embodiment in Nineteenth-Century Berlin*, 41.

vibrator--became the two ends of a scale spectrum; other pieces in this body of work are sized and situated between the two.

In addition, while I believe strongly that eroticism has no aesthetic, I do employ existing materials and visual cues that I consider to be erotic-adjacent. One example is silicone: recognizable as both the primary ingredient used in many sex toys, it is also a pervasive material in contemporary sculpture.³⁹ Another example is the aesthetic of Autonomous Sensory Meridian Response (ASMR) videos (fig. 11), a category of internet content where a performer performs tactile rituals with objects and makes particular sounds into a microphone--brushing, tapping, scratching, whispering--with the intention of evoking a relaxing tingling sensation in the scalp of the viewer, sometimes referred to as a "brain-gasm."⁴⁰

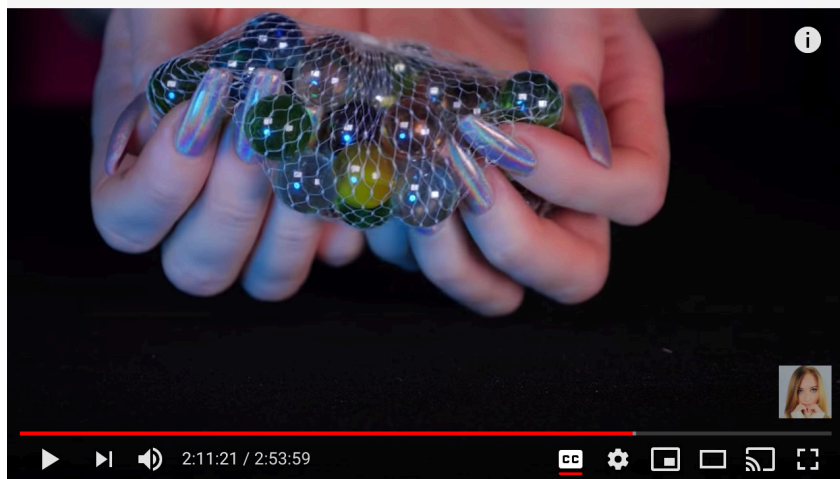


Fig. 11. Stacy Aster, 2019, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=_TeoeXWxvZI.

39 Alina Cohen, "8 Artists Using Silicone to Create Strange, Radical Artworks," *Artsy*, March 25, 2019, <https://www.artsy.net/article/artsy-editorial-8-artists-silicone-create-strange-radical-artworks>.

40 Julie Beck, "How to Have a 'Brain Orgasm,'" *The Atlantic*, December 16, 2013, <https://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2013/12/how-to-have-a-brain-orgasm/282356/>.

ASMR videos often share sonic and visual markers, aesthetics I have drawn from in my own video work. These and other material references--the use of bedding, water, velvet, occasional splashes of bright color--create a semblance of eroticism in my own work which is layered and largely inexplicit.

Found objects also play a significant role in this project. There exists a history--across the internet, in women's magazines, and in self help books--of suggesting random assortments of objects for use in masturbation. My favorite list comes from *The Sensuous Woman*, a punchy sexual primer published in 1969 by Terry Garrity. In the chapter titled "Masturbation" Garrity writes, "popular objects are candles, hot dogs, bananas, sausages and, of course, those big rubber penises that are offered by a number of mail order houses...Don't use coke bottles, test tubes or splintery wooden things."⁴¹ In the ideation stage of a piece, I will often begin with a list. These found and invented lists serve as source material when I create my own assemblages.



Fig. 12. *Every Thing is a Vibrator* (assemblage of hand made vibrators using found objects), 2020.

41 Terry Garrity, *The Sensuous Woman* (New York: Dell, 1969), 50.

In *Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things*, Jane Bennett draws on Deleuze and Guattari's assemblage theory in a discussion of the unique agency taken on by things in groups. Bennett writes, "assemblages are ad hoc groupings of diverse elements, of vibrant materials of all sorts...each member and proto-member of the assemblage has a certain vital force, but there is also an effectivity proper to the grouping as such: an agency of the assemblage."⁴² I made choices to create my own assemblages incorporating found objects adopted from existing object categories: the domestic or quotidian (such as a lightbulb and coathanger), things sometimes considered tropes in feminist art (such as fruit and shells),⁴³ personal care items (such as a toothpaste tube, medication, or dietary supplements), personal detritus (such as hair from my hairbrush), and art materials (such as paint tubes, tarlatan, and copper shavings). As assemblages, these things form riddles, add and detract meaning from each other, and allude to personal narratives that are never fully delivered.

Supplement and Interdisciplinarity

As detailed in the introduction, the supplement is an addition to something that should already be complete. It reveals a lack in that which is considered essential, undermining the idea of essentialism itself. To refresh with a list from *Of Grammatology*: "speech comes to be added to an intuitive presence...writing comes to be added to living self-present speech; masturbation comes to be added to to so-called normal sexual experience; culture comes

42 Jane Bennett 1957-, *Vibrant Matter : A Political Ecology of Things*, xxii, 176 p. ; (Durham : Duke University Press, 2010), 23–24.

43 Lucy R. Lippard, "Sweeping Exchanges: The Contribution of Feminism to the Art of the 1970s," *Art Journal* 40, no. 1/2 (January 10, 1980): 363, <https://doi.org/10.1080/00043249.1980.10793628>.

to be added to nature, evil to innocence, history to origin, etc."⁴⁴

My enamorment with the supplement in art begins with my background as a printmaker. Printmaking has an historical aspect of self-aware supplementarity, having started as a means of disseminating images of originary art objects. From its invention in China around 105 AD to now, the medium has not shed its direct relationship to the supplement.⁴⁵ This lends printmaking an implicit fluidity and humility, allowing it to operate on multiple levels at once, from the pedestrian--as a fast, cheap communication tool--to the more elite: as fine art (although fine art prints are rarely ever viewed as totalizing or primary works). As Tracey Emin demonstrates with her masturbation prints, it is possible for the medium to play off the subject of auto-affection in a uniquely effective way--we may read them automatically as secondary works.

If working within a singular discipline eventually requires an argument to be made for why that discipline or medium is ideal, this project is more promiscuous. While I might have executed this thesis entirely in printmaking, I chose instead to carry certain attractive and appropriate components of print into other artistic media, treating interdisciplinarity itself--in the sense of relating to multiple branches of knowledge, both within and without what is considered art--as a practice of continuous supplementation. In a practical sense, this meant working in sets of series, states, and stages across media, not building toward closure or completion, but moving instead through an endless additive process. Each subsequent medium or method was chosen based around its potential to serve or refer to the idea of auto-affection. For example, having begun this project in sculpture, I discovered the necessity to add elements of time, sound, and ritual, so I added video.

44 Derrida, *Of Grammatology*, 167.

45 "Printmaking - History of Printmaking," *Encyclopedia Britannica*, accessed April 27, 2020, <https://www.britannica.com/art/printmaking>.

The work within each medium became a series, then a sequence of series. I made paintings of the videos, then videos of the paintings. The paintings required the videos in order to have meaning, and both were intended to help make sense of the sculptures. The sculptures supplemented each other indefinitely. And all of this relied on the supplement of language, beginning simply with conversations, then titles, and ending with this exegesis. With every addition, a new gap appeared and asked to be filled. As Joan Miró once stated, “[When] I’ve finished something I discover it’s just a basis for what I’ve got to do next. It’s never anything more than a point of departure.”⁴⁶ While there may not be anything markedly unique about holding one’s practice this way, I do see this as a good reminder that a project—or an art practice as a whole—can look more like supplementation, iteration, or maintenance rather than progression toward summation or culmination. The entire project *Auto-Affection* is itself a chain of supplements, marking differences between each component, rather than distance or derivation from some past or future essence.

Self-supplementing as a method reflects my preference for exploration, insight, and intimacy in this work over mastery, singularity, and impact. Akin to the principles of contemporary self-care summarized in the contextual section, this practice of supplementation on some level declines to work toward any use value. As Elizabeth Grosz writes in *Chaos, Territory, Art: Deleuze and the Framing of the Earth*, “art and nature...share a common structure: that of excessive and useless production—production for its own sake, production for the sake of profusion and differentiation.”⁴⁷ This territory of useless production is meaningful to me. It is not a site of anomie, but of creative agency

46 Quoted in Raphael Rubinstein, “Provisional Painting,” *Art in America*, May 1, 2009, <https://www.artnews.com/art-in-america/features/provisional-painting-raphael-rubinstein-62792/>.

47 E. A. Grosz, *Chaos, Territory, Art: Deleuze and the Framing of the Earth*, The Wellek Library Lectures in Critical Theory (New York: Columbia University Press, 2008).

and exploration. Akin to the existence of masturbation, it proves an excess of energy in reserve which asks for release through the supplement. In *The Accursed Share Volume I: An Essay On General Economy*, Georges Bataille calls this portion of any economy “the accursed share,” and argues that societies must expend it in monuments, non-procreative sexuality, and the arts.⁴⁸

Humor, Pleasure, and Intimacy

While this project is not about pleasure, pleasure is certainly a core component, and for this reason I have worked to understand its role. Tracking my own sense of pleasure in my practice meant tuning in to what materials and processes were most or least pleasurable. If artmaking does indeed overlap with auto-affection, then pleasure ought to show up somewhere in the studio.

While enjoyment or pleasant feeling is absolutely not the goal of the work, nor the everyday experience of making, the pursuit of pleasure constantly propelled my process forward. The project felt most clear, worthwhile, and exciting when the studio work and materials were pleasurable. As I collected found objects to incorporate in sculptures or to pour as casts, I made visit after visit to the local junk shops, one of my favorite things to do. When I used food in the work, I reflected on the relationship of food to pleasure. To make the lobster tail piece for the *Invaginations* series, I purchased the lobster tail at Busch’s Grocery Store for \$8.99, cooked and ate it in the kitchen at the graduate studios, then filled the shell with silicone in order to turn it into a vibrator (fig. 13). This choice felt as rigorous as it did absurd, luxuriant, pleasurable, and funny.

Cultivating a sense of humor and intimacy is vital to this work. Understanding auto-affection not as a closed circuit, but as an

48 Georges Bataille, *The Accursed Share: An Essay On General Economy* (New York: Zone Books, 1988).

operation that actually lets the world in, means acknowledging the real and imagined viewer and any others who enter into the process of its making and dissemination. I worked to create things that made me laugh, think, or feel uncomfortable, hoping that others would share in this. I tried to surprise and unsettle myself. I tried approaches that were more or less absurd, more or less aesthetically lush or clinical, and shared these with different viewers. I sprinkled in intimacies, provocations, and personal details; others returned these in kind. And the resulting artwork has the hands of other people all over it, those who helped me workshop my ideas and execute the various components of my exhibition. Through the traces their bodies had left and the smell of their laundry detergent, I even developed relationships with the absent strangers whose old bedsheets I painted on. I formed intimacies through time and space with authors, fictional characters, lost or absent loved ones, and myself.



Fig. 13. Process shot, vibrator casting, 2020.



CREATIVE WORK

Eternal Feminine

(Self Portrait as 121 Dildos)

My thesis work begins with *Eternal Feminine (Self Portrait as 121 Dildos)* (fig. 16-18). The piece consists of 121 individual 2"x2"x7" silicone casts of my own body scaled down to 6," each with a functional suction cup base. These figures hang from steel rings



hooked to the wall. All 121 are hung in a series of concentric circles, and the outermost circle is 84" in diameter. 37 of the figures have other material mixed into the silicone, an array of found materials and personal ephemera including seashells, dryer lint, a Venus razor head, dietary supplements, my grandmother's old oil paint tubes (fig. 18), a condom wrapper, ibuprofen, half of a best/friends pendant, copper shavings, hair, and potting soil, forming a fragmented and non-narrative self-portrait.



Fig. 14. Auto-Affection, MFA Thesis installation view, 2020.



Fig. 15. Auto-Affection, MFA Thesis installation view, 2020.

In planning this piece, I compiled a list of instances in literature and theory where a body is likened to a phallus or a penis, or otherwise shrunk down to a small stature. The list includes Jacques Lacan's theory of woman as phallus, Ella Freeman Sharpe's theory of a dancer turning her body into a "magical phallus"⁴⁹ as she moves, and Frans Masereel's wordless 1920 novel *Die Idee*, about a man's idea which takes the form of a miniature naked woman who then escapes into the world. The scale of the figure is a nod to Charles Bukowski's short story *Six Inches*, about a woman who shrinks her husband and uses him as a dildo.

To have a dildo of myself is to have the ability to penetrate myself with my entire body. This is my own contribution to the art historical tradition of *mise en abyme* (to place into abyss), wherein a smaller copy of a thing appears within the thing itself as a means of suggesting recursion, self-similarity, or often, art that is about art.

Invaginations

The series *Invaginations* (fig. 19-20) is a suite of 15 small-scale sculptures. Each piece is an unmanipulated, unpigmented silicone cast of an existing interior space: a light bulb, a poblano pepper, an Atlantic giant cockle shell, a condom, an avocado, a lemon, a tube of toothpaste, a blood orange, a Florida horse conch shell, a banana peel, a Campbell's tomato can, a lobster tail, a cocktail onion jar, a pomegranate, and a nitrile glove. Each cast has a cavity housing a small vibrator with a button which, when pressed, causes the entire object to vibrate. This follows the design of many erotic aids: a washable silicone implement with a removable, battery-powered vibrating insert.

49 Ella Freeman Sharpe, *Collected Papers on Psycho-Analysis* (New York: Brunner/Mazel, 1978).



Fig. 16. *Eternal Feminine (Self Portrait as 121 Dildos)*, 2020, silicone, pigment, inclusions, 84"x84"x7"



Fig. 17. *Eternal Feminine (Self Portrait as 121 Dildos)* (detail), 2020, silicone, pigment, inclusions, 84"x84"x7"



Fig. 18. *Eternal Feminine (Self Portrait as 121 Dildos)* (detail), 2020, silicone, pigment, inclusions, 2"x2"x7"



Fig. 19. Invaginations, 2020, silicone, vibrating element, various sizes.



Fig. 20. Invaginations, 2020, silicone, vibrating element, various sizes.

To actually use the vibrators that comprise this series is in some sense to masturbate with negative space. The title, *Invaginations*, is a term from both biology and philosophy, used by Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and later adopted by Derrida and Rosalind Krauss. It refers broadly to a structure—cellular, narrative, or otherwise—which folds in on itself, transforming outside to inside, and turning what is inside out.

Auto-Affection Video Series

The thesis includes four videos: *The Sunset* (fig. 21), *Polishing Grapes* (fig. 22), *Tangerine Lantern Love Poem Vibrator* (fig. 23), and an untitled work which I will discuss in the next section (fig. 30-31). Each of the three named videos portrays an invented ritual using fruit. In *The Sunset*, a sunset-for-one is created at the bottom of a cup using a glass of warm water, a blackberry, and a candle. As the glass is tipped back, the water becomes an ocean, the berry becomes an island, and the breath becomes the sound of the surf as the candle/sun sets inside the cup. In *Tangerine Lantern Love Poem Vibrator*, inspired by Walt Whitman's "I Sing the Body Electric," a tangerine is gutted, turned into a lantern using a candle, and its hollow rind is then filled with silicone, transforming the fruit into a functional sex toy. In *Polishing Grapes*—filmed in Itoshima Japan—a bunch of large black grapes are polished by hands which become increasingly agitated as the ritual proceeds. Eventually, the hands begin peeling, crushing, and dissecting the fruit.

I refer to the rituals in these videos as surreal self care exercises. They are largely reproducible activities with varying complexity, intended for one person to do alone. I situate them between ASMR, visual poems, and surrealist games. Rather than illustrating acts of auto-affection, these videos ask how auto-affection relates to

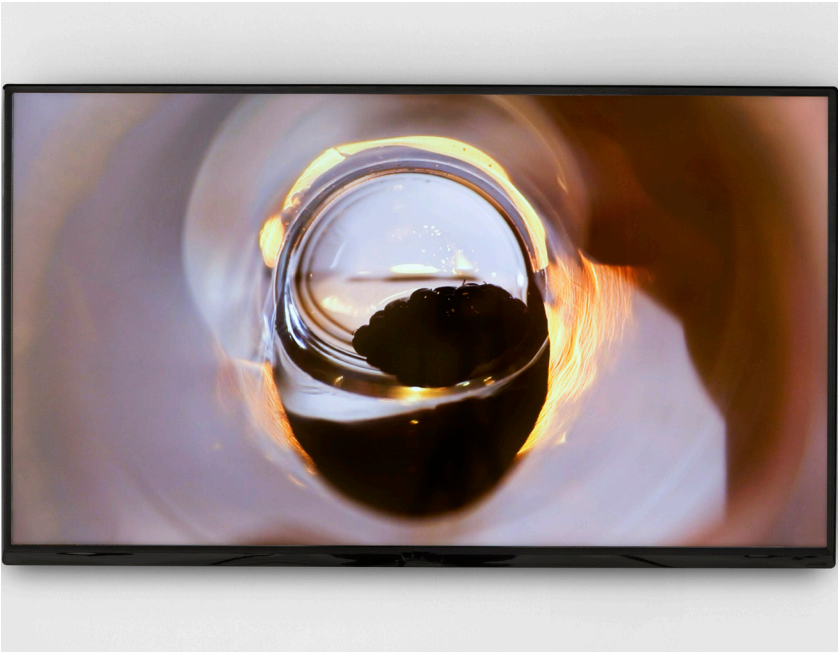


Fig. 21. *The Sunset* (video still), 2020, single channel video.

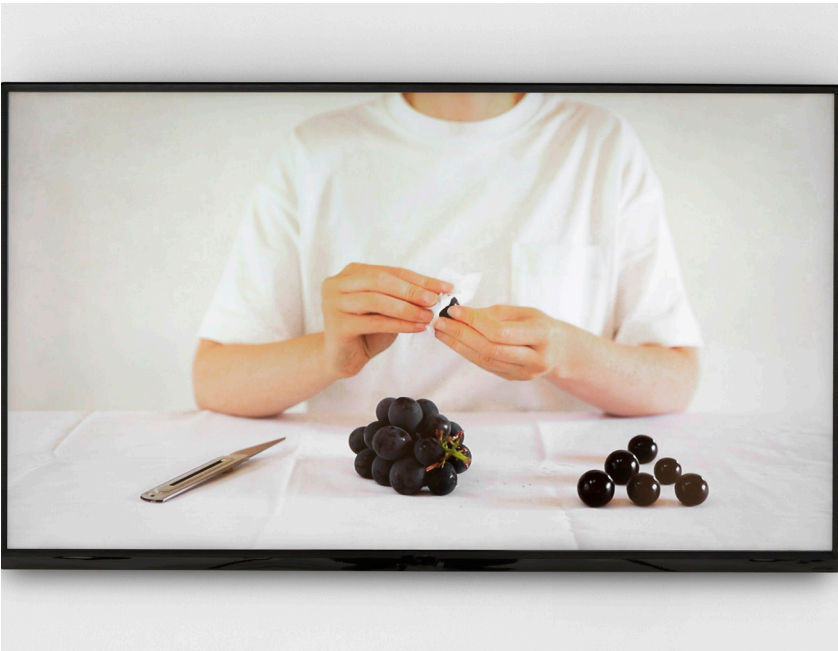


Fig. 22. *Polishing Grapes* (video still), 2020, single channel video.



Fig. 23. *Tangerine Lantern Love Poem Vibrator* (video stills), 2020, single channel video.

new forms and rituals for self-soothing in contemporary culture. Rob Gallagher writes that “ASMR videos reflect the growing importance of networked devices as a means of self-medicating with media, of creating ‘bubbles’ of pleasure, solace, concentration or belonging.”⁵⁰ The *Auto-Affection Video Series* betrays a similar intention.

Vibrator Paintings

On the wall facing the videos are five 42”x56” paintings, scaled from the dimensions of a queen-sized bed (fig. 24). Each painting takes its title and color scheme from specific aspects of the videos hanging on the facing wall. The titles of the paintings are *Her Shirt*, *the Tablecloth*, *the Wall* (named for the costuming and setting of

⁵⁰ Gallagher, “Eliciting Euphoria Online.”

the videos)(fig. 25); *Tangerine Lantern Love Poem Vibrator* (named for the video of the same name, with colors pulled from particular video frames)(fig. 26); *Polishing Grapes* (to match the magenta stain left by the grapes on the tablecloth)(fig 27); *The Sunset (the Money Shot, the Cuff Stain)* (named for the main shot in the video, as well as the berry stain which appears in the video on the cuff of the shirt) (fig. 28); and *Pinky (With a Hangnail)* (named for the pinky finger which is featured in all of the videos)(fig 29).

All of the paintings were created by vibrators moving through oil paint across the underside of bed sheets, stretched as canvases and laid on the floor. MP's participation in their creation was limited to lubricating the vibrators and occasionally scrubbing the sheet's surface with a rag in areas where a large amount of paint soaked through. The paintings are both a supplement to the videos, and a new form of body/vibrator collaboration that results in artwork rather than orgasm. First recognizable as akin to abstract expressionism, they nod to the elements of pleasure in both parody and mild abjection, along with what Raphael Rubinstein calls "the impossibility of painting and the equally persistent impossibility of not painting" in contemporary art.⁵¹

Across the gallery and to the left of the video monitors is a 1.5-inch velvet-lined hole in the wall, 48" above the floor (fig. 30). Through the hole, a viewer can watch a video of a vibrator creating the painting titled *Pinky (With a Hangnail)* (fig. 31). The hole is unmarked and unlit, but as a viewer approaches, the sound of the vibration coming from inside the wall becomes slightly louder. This video becomes a critical supplement which reveals the paintings' relationship to the other artworks in the space.

51 Rubinstein, "Provisional Painting."



Fig. 24. From left: *Her Shirt, the Tablecloth, the Wall*; *Tangerine Lantern Love Poem Vibrator*; *Polishing Grapes*; *The Sunset (the Money Shot, the Cuff Stain)*; and *Pinky (With a Hangnail)*, 2020, oil on cotton, 42"x56" each.



Fig. 25. *Her Shirt, the Tablecloth, the Wall*, 2020, oil on cotton, 42"x56."

Fig. 26. *Tangerine Lantern Love Poem Vibrator* (detail), 2020, oil on cotton, 42"x56."



Fig. 27. Polishing Grapes, 2020, oil on cotton, 42"x56."



Fig. 28 The Sunset (the Money Shot, the Cuff Stain), 2020, oil on cotton, 42"x56."



Fig. 29. Pinky (With a Hangnail) 2020, oil on cotton, 42"x56."



Fig. 30. Peephole (installation view).



Fig. 31 Peephole (video still).

Betty, Me, Marcelle

Betty, Me, Marcelle (fig. 32) is a large-scale floor sculpture with the dimensions of a queen-sized bed. The mattress portion is covered with white fabric, pulled into the center as if it were being sucked down into itself from a single point. This void is filled with 22 gallons of clear water, and the surface of the fabric beyond the center is also covered with water droplets (fig. 33).

This piece is my monument to female desire. The title is a play on Lacan's theory of registers (Imaginary, Symbolic, and Real, all of them interdependent): myself (real), my late grandmother Betty (symbolic) and the fictional character Marcelle from *Story of the Eye* (imaginary). Each of these three women epitomize self-desire to me in different ways, and each has guided this thesis.

The Sensuous Woman (Machinic

Assemblage for up to Nine Holes)

In the spirit of supplementarity, this last piece (fig. 34-35) was created as a form of visual bibliography. It is an electronic cluster of found and made objects. Among those cited here are my alter ego MP (represented as a 3D print, painted with model paint), Jacques Derrida (in the form of six vibrators sculpted in his likeness), and Jacques Lacan (in the form of 27 cast silicone mobius strip cock rings that read "traverse the fantasy"). The title of the piece refers back to *The Sensuous Woman*, a copy of which is jerry-rigged into the base of a kinetic thrusting machine with a wooden banana, rubber fish, and Barbie arms. This sits below a hanging cluster--motorized by a vibration mechanism salvaged from the guts of a massage chair--which includes four padded coathangers that have been dipped in silicone and transformed



Fig 32. Betty, Me, Marcelle, 2020, wood, fiberglass, fabric, foam, water, 81"x61"x23."



Fig. 33. Betty, Me, Marcelle (detail), 2020, wood, fiberglass, fabric, foam, water, 81"x61"x23."

into functional double-dildos. The electronics are connected to a motion sensor. The piece turns on when a person steps in front of it, positioning the viewer as the final contributor to the work.



Fig. 34. *The Sensuous Woman* (Machinic Assemblage for up to Nine Holes), Silicone, motors, found objects, 56"x27"x10"



Fig. 35. *The Sensuous Woman* (Machinic Assemblage for up to Nine Holes), Silicone, motors, found objects, 56" x27" x10"



CONCLUSION

Theory can do more the closer it gets to the skin.

—Sara Ahmed, *Living a Feminist Life*

I am confident that when Ahmed wrote those words, she wasn't suggesting that we make painstakingly sculpted silicone vibrators of our favorite philosophers' heads. And yet, precisely as there is no singular aesthetic of eroticism, no fixed set of practices that amount to self-care, and no perfect reading of an artwork or a



text, there is also no right way to use and engage with theory. Embedded in all of my work remains the central question I posed at the beginning of it all, a question that I find to be entirely humorous, erotic, philosophical, and intimate in itself: *how does art relate to auto-affection?*

Deconstruction affirmed for me what I already sensed as my personal truth regarding art and self-experience. Namely, that my

work is generated from the imaginative and sensual space of self-relation. This is a conclusion in the sense that it has resolved for me my primary concern with what I believe my artwork *does*, and whether contemporary art is (or must be) self-interested, social, or productive. I no longer believe that this can really be controlled.

In her 2016 book *The Lonely City: Adventures in the Art of Being Alone*, Olivia Laing writes:

There are so many things that art can't do. It can't bring the dead back to life, it can't end arguments between friends, or cure AIDS, or halt the pace of climate change. All the same, it does have some extraordinary functions, some odd negotiating ability between people, including people who have never met and yet who infiltrate and enrich each other's lives. It does have the capacity to create intimacy; it does have a way of healing wounds, and better yet of making it apparent that not all wounds need healing.⁵²

Self-alterity does not need healing. I am duly convinced that it is the experience of internal difference that makes having a self possible at all, and that having a self is perhaps the only real requisite for artmaking. I have wondered at times why so many artists--myself, my peers, my students in particular--are so interested in liminality. I notice that in the face of grave societal and ecological uncertainty, we are turning inward, turning to the self. Perhaps we are then mapping our internal difference onto the outside world, seeing fissures everywhere: gaps where new growth might spring up, light might enter, and new pleasures might be taken. Wary of essentialism and in lieu of solid ground, we stake our claims in these between spaces. And so much art is born from here.

52 Olivia Laing, *The Lonely City: Adventures in the Art of Being Alone* (Picador Paper, 2017), 280.

In his 1993 lectures *The Self Under Siege*, Rick Roderick states that “Philosophy under the heading of Deconstruction is housework... It doesn’t get finished.”⁵³ Self-care, self-pleasure, and artmaking can be like this too: like maintenance. We maintain; no impact or legacy seems certain. But intimacies—first with ourselves, with objects and materials, with viewers and strangers, with fictional characters, with loved ones here and gone, with poets, artists, and philosophers long dead, with ideas, with real and imagined others—these are right at our fingertips.

In 2020, as isolation silos our daily lives, social media echo chambers shape our worldviews, new forms of self-care help us to soothe ourselves, digital content supplements our sensory experiences and our erotic imaginations, and video conferencing facilitates the possibility of watching rather than simply hearing ourselves speak, it is worth revisiting the question of how and why we affect ourselves, and what tools we use to do so. This is a question posed by philosophy and answered by culture in many, many ways, including in art. And as artists, this moment in history offers a unique opportunity for us to meditate on the role of self in all we do. Having taken this on in my graduate work, the result has been defining my practice in new terms, terms which feel at once revealing and sustainable. I hope this thesis will act as an invitation for others to consider, with care and curiosity, their own practices of auto-affection, inner monologues, dangerous supplements, secret rituals, and side passions—especially if they are creative ones.

53 Rick Roderick on Derrida - The Ends of Man [Full Length], accessed April 18, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LvAwoUvXNzU>.

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