

Sensing the Image: Embodied Art Criticism

by

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## ABSTRACT

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This thesis examines the sensorial dimension of moving image artworks and its relation to art criticism. Artists and curators continually expand moving images through evocations of multimodal sensory affect, yet criticism has not adequately responded to this impulse. Drawing upon pre-existing scholarship within feminist theory, anti-ocularcentric discourse, film, media and affect studies, this thesis develops a method of embodied criticism in response to a sensory turn in Canadian artistic and curatorial practice. I present case studies of artists Aleesa Cohene and Soft Turns to interrogate the affective relations between artworks and beholders, and how artists, curators, and critics may be triangulated in the sensory network of moving image arts. As much as embodied art experiences destabilize dominant aesthetic and cultural norms, embodied criticism may enhance their social and political potential by giving credence to the senses, building intimate relationships between artists and readers, and calling attention to variable subjectivities in public and private realms.

**Key Words:** art criticism, moving image arts, Canadian art, curatorial practice, embodied subjectivity, feminism, sensory studies, affect studies, Aleesa Cohene, Soft Turns.

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## Introduction and Context

I have witnessed a series of exhibitions that cumulatively altered my course for experiencing all others since. Each demanded a unique present-ness in my subject-body, an overt awareness of my capacity to perceive, across all senses, and created a reciprocity of both perceiver and perceived. These notable instances presented an opportunity to become aware of physiological sensations conveyed by the artworks. Prior to this, I had only come across such full, resonant and embodied artistic encounters imaginatively, through the act of reading fiction – the registering of sensation in my mind's eye, nose, and ear, the weighted sensation of the book in my hand, the trace of the page across sensors in my fingertips. Yet suddenly, in these gallery encounters something different clicked. I became implicated in the unique aesthetic constructs of these exhibition spaces; I became active in the authorship of meaning through my own sensory experience.

Amongst the most resonant of these exhibitions was an interactive video installation *Terrors of the Breakfast Table* (2014) by emerging artist and filmmaker Tyler Tekatch. Tekatch's work demonstrated the formal capabilities of an experimental narrative film, one devoid of dialogue but rich in emotive content. Beholders augmented each scene through participation in the work; by expelling breath into a sculptural object at the centre of the gallery, participants increased the pace of the film, changed the visual effects,



and caused a swelling in its concurrent soundscape. The artist's construction of this immersive space involved meticulous preparation – an enormous, 14-foot screen and a precise 8-channel audio mix, all surrounding a central place for contemplation of the work. Perhaps most impactful was the opportunity for participatory co-authorship. By imbuing the work with the capacity to sense and be sensed, the artist achieved a confluent sensorial exchange between the art object and its participants. I wrote a review of this show, which highlighted the work's foregrounding of embodiment. In the act of writing I was driven to articulate and transmit these sensations, and to further implicate the reader in the affective dimensions of this complex exchange (Traficante 2014).

The act of engaging with moving image artworks and installations demands a certain level of attention to one's body – an awareness of the artwork's tangible proposition of time and space, and the media's facilitation of a participatory exchange through activating sight, sound, scent, movement and touch. The reference to these senses are both literal and implied; the senses may be engaged directly through the material properties of the art object, or subtly through the relational constructs that exist between artist(s), media and beholder(s). Relational constructs may be understood as the sense of connectivity between the art object and its subjects, and the unique sensory positionality of each element in the gallery space. Through the comingling of the senses, embodied art experiences destabilize

boundaries between subject and object, self and other, artwork and audiences. Although artists and curators demonstrate a deft handling of sensory and affective strategies in both art and exhibition making, it can be argued that art criticism has not yet responded to this thriving sensibility. A recognizable practice of sensory criticism is not yet fully defined. How can the critic express the embodiment of sensation through the written word? How can art writing transmit experience while also resisting the reductive tendencies of more evaluative discourse?

My research has endeavoured to respond to the power of first-person experiences in writing that replicates the artwork's attention to the affective and sensory realms. In this thesis I have addressed a series of questions: how do artists, curators and exhibitions expand the capacity of moving images to evoke affect through multimodal sensory activation? How can art criticism engage with the senses to participate and respond to embodied aesthetic experiences? How can embodied sensation and art experience destabilize dominant aesthetic, social and cultural constructs? Ultimately, I seek a method of critical writing that highlights and grants significance to perceptual experience, and I develop this method in two case studies as a means of extrapolating the necessity of a new critical practice. In this respect, I propose that the frameworks of artist, curator and critic be triangulated to demonstrate a more fulsome sensory and affective turn in the arts.

In her 2015 exhibition, *are you experienced*, curator Melissa Bennett

staged a performative iteration of the manner in which experience creates meaning in contemporary art (Bennett 2015a: 6-7). This curatorial act took the form of a group exhibition, featuring six artists (Nadia Belerique, Jessica Eaton, Olafur Eliasson, Dorian Fitzgerald, Hadley+Maxwell, and Do Ho Suh) working across video, installation, photography, sculpture, and painting practices. The project articulated the artists' common pursuit to harness the inherently subjective nature of participant response, with attention to the immediacy of perceptual processes as they occur in the gallery's white cube. Beholders enacted the role of performing bodies through the gallery as a site of perceptual experimentation – a stage for meaningful embodied artwork encounters. Bennett's gesture was expressly guided by personal encounters with artworks that appealed to the senses and provoked transcendence through embodied experience (Bennett 2015b). In her curatorial writing, Bennett identified exhibitionary precedents that have foregrounded installation art as a means of constructing immersive and experiential encounters (Bennett 2015a: 6-7). *are you experienced?* resisted the staging of an overt spectacle-based sensorium. Instead, Bennett focused on artists whose works demanded a mindfulness of one's own self as subject. Calling upon viewers to bear witness to their act of beholding, the exhibition demonstrated an awareness of the sensate body, as well as the broad affective turn in both art and cultural theory (Bennett 2015b).<sup>1</sup>

It is significant to note that while *are you experienced?* confirmed the

contemporaneity of issues such as perception, subjectivity, and embodied experience in curatorial and artistic practice, it was conceived in response to previous exhibitions mounted both locally and internationally. One such example, *Sublime Embrace*, curated by Shirley Madill (Art Gallery of Hamilton, 2006), was grounded in an exploration of embodied processes, through international artists whose works “engender[ed] a visceral sensation of conscious experience” (Madill 2006: 6). Amongst other media, moving image artworks such as Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller’s *Night Canoeing* (2004), and David Hoffos’ *Scenes from the House of Dream* (2004), transformed the gallery into a site of sensory exploration.<sup>2</sup> Madill’s curatorial writing harkened to an aesthetic discourse concerning visceral sensations of the sublime, colour theory, visual processing, and cultural consciousness. In addition to *Sublime Embrace*, Bennett cited the four-part exhibition *Unmonumental: The Object in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century* (curated by Richard Flood, Masimiliano Gioni, and Laura Hoptman, The New Museum, 2007), as formative to her curatorial concept (Bennett 2015: 6-7). *Unmonumental* highlighted the presence of the body in the subject-object paradigm by interrogating the fragmentation of objects across diverse art forms, including the readymade, images, sound and Internet-based works.<sup>3</sup> Read as a continuous thread, and in the greater historical lineage of sensory artworks and exhibitions, these examples bring attention to a sustained interest in perception, subjectivity, and explorations of consciousness in both artistic

and curatorial practice.

Despite the proliferation of sensory artworks and exhibitions, it is apparent that related art criticism and reviews have not responded with a similar affective sensibility. While emerging critics wrote about *are you experienced?* with attention to its theoretical approach to consciousness and perception, in execution their reviews revealed a void in the dominant practice of art writing. Critic Adam Barbu (2015), for instance, responded to the exhibition by noting its engagement with the high-level discourse of affect theory, but did not address the immediacy of perception and the materiality of participant experience. While Aryen Hoekstra (2015) more effectively considered the exhibition's performative activation of perception, his overall analysis was somewhat limited by a desire to ascribe interpretive meaning to each work based on literal directives from Bennett's curatorial essay. For example, he discredited the inclusion of Jessica Eaton's rich, geometric colour field photographs on the grounds that they "ensnar[e] both eye and mind as they work to reconcile what we see with what we think we know," and added that this invocation of the mind/body dialectic was counterintuitive to the core premise of the exhibition (Hoekstra 2015: n.p). While Bennett's essay foregrounded the *immediacy* of perception in processes of artwork experience, she also noted the role of the senses as a pathway to complex processes of the mind/body:

*are you experienced?* proposes that the space between the viewer's body and the work shall extend further to conspire with the viewer's mind, memory and automatic sensual responses. It explores the threshold of experience, suggesting the myriad ways to know an artwork pass into the viewer's body via the senses of sight or spatial perception. For the artists in this exhibition, it is their intention to activate this particular way of knowing an artwork. (Bennett 2015a: 8)

Critics such as Barbu and Hoekstra make meaningful attributions to the conceptual framework from which the exhibition emerged. However, they also signal a tendency towards ignoring its immediate effects, or theorizing the artistic and curatorial gesture without thorough grounding in the nuanced experiences of the subject-body. Although there are certainly interventions in art writing that gesture toward embodied sensibility (I will return to examples from third-wave feminism and contemporary instances in Canadian art publishing), art criticism in general continues to purport distance and objectivity by not accounting for the embodied affects of artworks and exhibitions.

The above listed exhibitions make clear that attention to the sensory and affective realms are present across a diverse spectrum of artistic practices. Their affective sensibility is demonstrated in a range of art forms including, but not limited to, installation, performance, film, video, sculpture, and interactive digital media. The historical catalyst for sensory art has been attributed to the innovative live-ness of performance practices that emerged in the 1960s, which foregrounded the experiential value of artworks in a

manner that was unprecedented by traditional, object-based art forms. However, the turn toward multisensory modes of thinking in art and cultural theory surfaced later, in the 1990s. As art historiographer and visual culture scholar Jenni Lauwrens (2012) notes, this turn is perhaps best understood by contextualizing the philosophical and epistemological roots to which the discourse *returns*. She explains that “[t]he sensory turn stems from the empiricist tradition in philosophy and epistemology which held that mental functions like conceptualizing, analysis, judgment, memory and imagination all proceed from sensory processes” (Lauwrens 2012: 4). Reinvoking the basic tenets of empiricism, scholars across the new sensory wave returned to the body as a catalyst of knowledge, foregrounding the senses as pathways for meaningful experience between interior and exterior worlds.

The senses have materialized in curatorial practice with exhibitions that foregrounded subjectivity and embodied experience as a means of knowledge production. In the 1990s and 2000s, many such instances focused on the complexities of a highly techno-mediated sensorium, examining the body at its interface with emergent technologies. Realized in explorations of heightened sensory engagement, artists and curators have utilized systems of virtual reality, prosthesis, telecommunication, and interactive media to translate the affective dimensions of a rapidly changing social worldview. Both artist and curators have also demonstrated a sustained interest in performance, grounding first-person art experiences in the body through the

evocation of empathic response. In the gallery context, empathy is embodied through the witness of live performance, or may be further mediated through documentation via visual and/or audio transmission. Meanwhile, the practice of relational aesthetics functions to insert the subject body in the act of performance, and allows direct access to senses other than the visual (for example gustation and olfaction) by way of social engagement. More generally, sensory exhibitions also include objects that may be touched, smelled, heard and felt in a manner that disrupts normative gallery viewing practices.

Moving image artworks, by way of their audio, visual, haptic, temporal, and spatial address also contribute to this wave of multisensory intervention. While sensory affects are made present through screen-based media, artists and curators also draw from the strategies of expanded cinema practices to extend moving images' affective reach towards gallery contexts (Casetti 2012). Sensations activated by expanded media register at points of intersection with the body, and are transmitted by various media applications such as multi-channel and immersive projection, monitors, various audiovisual and computational technologies, sculptural objects or surfaces, and olfactory installations. Thus, the media may extend into three or four-dimensional space, engaging beholders in a participatory exchange of sight, sound, smell, movement, and touch. The subtlety of this address is one that demands a unique present-ness of the subject, an awareness of self, of



one's mind/body, and of the environ.

My thesis has emerged in response to these developments and looks to moving image artworks and installations as fertile ground to develop a practice of sensory criticism. Specifically, I interrogate instances in which moving image works extend beyond screen-based media to create affective relational constructs between objects, media, beholders and environs. These instances evoke affect by way of the senses and foreground the subject body as co-contributor to processes of embodied knowledge production. Similarly, by triangulating the artist, curator and critic as participants in contemporary art's sensory and affective networks, I present art writing as method of extending the resonance of sense affect beyond the confines of gallery walls. The first chapter, "Precedents for Sensorial Criticism," reviews coherent threads in criticism and feminist theory that stimulate this embodied method. Precedents are drawn from theorists and practitioners working across literary, film, art and cultural criticism, who interrogate the efficacy of embodied subjectivity as a mode of critical analysis.

In two case study-oriented chapters, I develop my own framework for embodied art criticism. The artworks and exhibitions of Canadian artists Aleesa Cohene and Soft Turns (Sarah Jane Gorlitz and Wojciech Olejnik) have been selected for their use of affect through cinematic and object-relational practices. In the two chapters, I assume the position of embodied critic to interrogate these artworks in the context of gallery exhibitions. In both

instances, the artists move beyond the flatness of the moving image to engage the dimensional space of the gallery as a site of sensory aesthetic inquiry.

The chapter on Soft Turns studies the artists' overall practice and draws from a series of studio and gallery visits I conducted between 2014-15. Focusing on three key works, I propose that Soft Turns utilizes the body as a site of sensory research and exchange. Through stop-motion animation, sculpture and installation, the artists stage complex interactions among the moving image-based art object's "petrified unrest" (which Esther Leslie [2013] describes as animation's oscillation between movement and stillness), the stationary positioning of the installation screens, and the movement of the ambulatory subject. The media thus act as the material conduit between artists and beholders, yielding sites of reciprocity in the co-authorship of embodied meaning.

My analysis of Aleesa Cohene takes the form of an exhibition case study and examines Oakville Galleries' presentation of the artist's solo exhibition, *I Know You Know* (2014-15). Cohene begins within the bounds of a fixed cinematic archive. Through compiled footage, she creates composite characters that interchange with one another to perform collective consciousness. With *I Know You Know*, the artist distributes the affect and sensations transmitted by the screen into objects, scents, and movements that exist materially within the gallery space. This synaesthetic interplay between media and the senses results in a simultaneous intro- and

extrospection of mind/body and environment. As such, Cohene utilizes the moving image as a catalyst to enact the processes of affective embodied experience.

The final chapter concludes my thesis with a proposition of embodied criticism as a method of writing through attention to sensory experience. In developing an embodied critical practice, I argue for an opening up of art writing to consider a range of multisensory perceptions, and to align criticism with the affective capacity of contemporary art experience.

## Literature Review

This literature review maps the critical discourse around the senses across three areas of research: ocularcentrism and its critique, embodied film and media theory, and affect studies. In each of these areas, my review considers a range of scholarship foregrounding the role of perception and subjectivity in understanding processes of embodied knowledge production.

### Critique of Ocularcentrism

Ocularcentrism is a long-standing tradition in aesthetic discourse that has elevated vision to a privileged position in a culturally constructed hierarchy of the senses. Ocularcentric tendencies, which exalt the power of vision, have been central to critical practices throughout the history of modernity, from the Enlightenment era (in its celebration of perspectival vision as the catalyst for the emergence of objectivism and the Age of Reason) into the twentieth century.<sup>4</sup> Vision is often valorized for its detachment from objects; it maintains supremacy as an intellectual sense by highlighting the distance between stimuli and the body in processes of visual perception (Owens 1983: 70). Ocularcentric patterns are further established by claims laid through modern aesthetics ranking optics, perspective, and scientific method amongst the highest intellectual pursuits (Jay 1988: 3). In what may be framed as an anti-ocularcentric move, scholars such as Martin Jay (1988) and Caroline Korsmeyer (1999) have written historical accounts of this tradition,

contributing to ongoing efforts that destabilize its imposed hierarchies and revive claims of the outranked senses to aesthetic valence.

Anti-ocularcentric discourse is an interdisciplinary pursuit occurring across anthropology, sociology, art theory, philosophy, cultural studies and the natural sciences. Phenomenology's attention to embodied sense experience emerged most prominently with Maurice Merleau-Ponty's *Phenomenology of Perception* (1945). His close reading of sensory and cognitive psychological processes underscores the immediacy of the body in the formation of subject positions and foregrounds the presence of the subject in a confluent ontological framework of perception and experience. The legitimacy of the subject, and of embodied experience, is reliant on both interior and exterior planes through which consciousness becomes "ensnared in the sensible" (1945: 221). Merleau-Ponty discusses the relationship between "the sensing being [*le sentant*]" and the sensible," as "not opposite each other like two external terms," but as reciprocal components entangled in a complex interior/exterior consciousness exchange (1945: 221-2). Merleau-Ponty addresses the full sensory body as paramount in processes of being and consciousness. This gesture acts as a watershed or point of entry for a range of disciplines to interrogate sense perception and subjectivity as it is fully embodied.

In subsequent decades, scholars have taken up this work to systematically destabilize dominant patterns in cultural and aesthetic theory.

Carolyn Korsmeyer, scholar of feminist philosophy and aesthetics, works to disrupt the historical continuity of ocularcentrism by confronting the subordinate position of taste within the hierarchy of senses. Noting that taste has been persistently relegated to the “bodily” sphere, Korsmeyer problematizes the notion that senses perceived through direct contact with the body should exist on a separate plane from vision, a sense that is purportedly perceived through the mind. Furthermore, Evelyn Fox Keller, scholar of physics, gender and scientific discourse, flattens these two planes through her examination of “the biological gaze,” a meditation on the evolution of microscopic technology and the manner in which “[the gaze] has been increasingly and seemingly inevitably enmeshed in actual touching” (1995: 108). Keller speaks to progressions in microbiology that have enabled scientists to physically handle, manipulate and probe tactilely while also looking into the interiority of the microscopic sample. She posits that despite its best attempts, philosophy cannot grasp the complexity with which scientific technologies have converged sensory processes, and have problematized notions of both the mind/body split and interior/exterior divide (1995: 112). These and other diverse anti-ocularcentric efforts should be raised alongside Merleau-Ponty’s early discussions of embodiment to build a robust and inclusive consideration of subject/object relations, particularly concerning the ways in which embodied experience is predicated on *multisensory* perception.<sup>5</sup>

However, it is arguable that patterns of ocularcentrism are most efficiently contested through the radical deconstruction of sensory divides. Jacques Rancière's (2004) concept of the "distribution of the sensible" contributes a cutting, critical awareness of the manner in which philosophical discourse has ordered modes of participation within sensory realms according to dominant ideologies and politics of exclusion. Rancière argues that there is evidence of a common belief in sensory division based on dominant social hierarchies, stating that "the power of the elite is here the power of the educated senses over that of unrefined senses, of activity over passivity, of intelligence over sensation" (2009: 31). He posits that through a strategic "*redistribution*" of the sensible, artists and artworks have the innate ability to enact political radicality and engage a new sensorium in spaces of aesthetic "free play" (2009: 32, emphasis added). As a result, the conditions of a dominant hierarchy (whether social, ideological or aesthetic) can be suspended to allow for spaces of full sensory engagement, thus accounting for the formation of multiple unique subject positions.

The interchange between the theories that valorize vision and those that seek to level the sensory hierarchy is a point of interest for artists, historians and critics alike. Within the discourse that this interest generates, it is necessary to tease out the critical capacity of multisensory art and writing practice to provide diverse points of access (both physically and intellectually) to embodied art experience.

### Embodied Film and Media Theory

Efforts to develop sensorially engaged art critical methodologies have perhaps been most prominently explored across film and media theory. Scholars such as Vivian Sobchack (2004) and Thomas Elsaesser and Malte Hagener (2010) are informed by phenomenology, the lived experience of film and its implications on the multisensory body. Elsaesser and Hagener present an ambitious reintroduction of film theory through senses other than the visual, evaluating relational film spectatorship as a multi-modal construct and intentionally repositioning the discourse through an anti-ocularcentric lens. This is achieved in a method that considers embodied spectatorship as a phenomenon resulting from the “spatio-temporal relations between bodies and objects depicted on film, and between film and spectator” (2010: 5). Bringing these elements closer to one another, Sobchack examines film experience as a comingling between the media and senses of the viewing body, resulting in a hybridized “*cinesthetic* subject” (2004: 67, emphasis in original). Both positions offer novel propositions of embodied spectatorship and successfully interrogate the relational capacity of film/media to elicit response through multisensory activation.

The strategic use of the senses in film and media art making has also been linked with the broader power of cinematic experience to evoke collective consciousness. Ágnes Pethő's (2015) anthology, *The Cinema of Sensations*, traces a current international interest in sensation across film and



post-cinematic media (new media, installation, etc.) with attention to the socio-cultural implications – including representations of cultural issues, gender, time, and death – of said media’s capacity to elicit sensory affect, alongside aesthetic and reception-based concerns. This follows Laura U. Marks’ (2000) influential works on haptic cinema and the connection of “tactile visibility” to representations of cultural difference. Also interrogating touch, Luis Rocha Antunes (2015b) proposes that the senses may be used strategically to “rematerialize the cinematic experience.” He refers simultaneously to the way that perceptual constructions of diegetic space can establish material connections in filmic narratives, and invite the spectator to engage with the narrative and characters experientially, through sensation. Antunes also differentiates between observational (narrative or verbal) and sensory descriptions as cinematic strategies (2015b). Through sensory description (showing the observable effects of direct perceptual experiences across the five senses as well as additional ones, such as “proprioception, the vestibular sense, nociception, and thermoception”), filmmakers may utilize the senses to make space and matter of the film’s world feel present and immediate (2015a: 4). In this way, a conscious engagement with sensory processing on film allows makers to give the diegetic space and materiality of their media a presence in the extracinematic and sensible world, while also projecting their effects onto the bodies of the spectator.

Embodied film and media theory considers the presence of the subject as paramount in the affective relational constructs that exist between filmmaking, narrative construction, the establishment of audiovisual aesthetics, and spectatorship. However, distance and the passivity of the stationary spectator-as-subject certainly limit levels of full sensory engagement. As such, further exploration into the attributes of an ambulatory subject may point towards a broader potential for film/media outside the traditional theatrical setting to elicit affective embodied response.

### Affect Theory

The term “affect” invokes a sprawling field of inquiry occurring across various scholarly disciplines, including but not limited to psychology, cultural studies, communications, art theory and practice. The resurgence of interest in affect and emotions is often attributed to seminal works by Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (1987), Brian Massumi (1995), and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Adam Frank (1995). While recent scholarship in affect theory has paid considerable attention to the formation of marginal subject positions,<sup>6</sup> for the purpose of this thesis, my review is limited to discourse concerning the transmission and embodiment of affective experience. Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth underscore both the ubiquity of affect and the slippery nature of the term, defining it as the visceral forces of encounter, intensities that are “at once intimate and impersonal,” that occur in embodied

awareness and states “*other than* conscious knowing” (2010: 1-2, emphasis in original). Gregg and Seigworth also consider the ways in which affect and its resultant “force relations” may be passed between bodies and within worldly encounters (2010: 2). Feminist scholar Teresa Brennan (2004) posits that “the transmission of affect” is based on a state of constant communication between individuals and their environment, the discernment of which is realized through the senses. This capacity to *affect* and be *affected* unveils the potential of the sensate body to act upon the world. While a breadth of interests compels the myriad iterations of affect theory (political, social, aesthetic), this query of transmission or body-to-body passage is central to most discourse concerning the inherent power of corporeal affectivity.

While certainly reminiscent of phenomenology and other existential pursuits, the fundamental interest in affect as transcorporeal forces of encounter foregrounds relational communication between bodies over the singular subject as perceiver. Brian Massumi (1995) situates affect as a primary or autonomic reaction of the body – an involuntary or unconscious process – related directly to the human nervous system. Further, Massumi makes a key distinction between emotion and affect, defining emotion as a “qualified intensity” (which can be “narrativized,” has function and meaning) whereas affect is “not ownable or recognizable, and thus resistant to critique” (1995: 88). While Brennan (2004) takes up methods of psychology,

psychoanalysis, and philosophy to posit that there is no clear division between the mind/body, the individual, and the environment, she also looks to the senses as a pathway through which individuals may discern their own subjectivity within a flattened ontological sphere. Brennan discusses that knowledge of transmission is not entirely unconscious, but rather, that it has been repressed as a result of the “deadening, passifying affects of modern times” (2004: 117). From the contemporary position, affect is understood as an ineffable force that compels and modifies behaviours between individuals, groups and the physical, physic and geographical space they occupy in the world. However, this force (or purely autonomic reactions) becomes qualified and cognitive once passed from body to body and registered through the senses, as Massumi states, “at the surface of the body, at its interface with things” (1995: 85). As such, embodied knowledge imparted through the senses is paramount to apprehending the transfer of affects between individuals and their environs.

Conversely, affect is also used to articulate nuanced embodiments of aesthetic experience. Jennifer Fisher (2002, 2007) approaches affect with a feminist sensibility, examining touch with attention to the critical capacity of artworks perceived through both direct contact and the relational haptic sense (that is, an implied sense of touch that occurs through the body in relation to objects and things). To further articulate sensations of relational experience, Fisher speaks also to the role of movement and proprioception in

the construction of complex, meaningful, and immersive aesthetic encounters (2002: 20). These affective sensorial engagements resist disembodiment to assert a sense of one's own self in space (2007: 176). Affect is thus utilized as a means of articulating the visceral embodiment of art encounters and aesthetic experiences.

More recently, neuroaesthetic scholarship (a field of study chiefly concerned with the brain and its aesthetic engagements from a materialist standpoint) has also cited affect theory as a means of illuminating the nuanced relationship between sensation, mind/body and environment. Sally McKay (2014) builds on the notion of affectivity in order to further neuroaesthetic discourse, and proposes that mind, body and culture are in fact "co-constitutive" elements in matters of aesthetic experience. She describes art experience as "multi-dimensional, situated, partial, temporal, un-repeatable and material," and states that the affects of such experiences register through "a collective assemblage of communication" (2014: 78, 87). Thus, the manner in which artwork beholders receive affect occurs through processes of physiological sensation (conveyed by artworks and their environments), as well as the social, cultural, political and temporal contexts that sensory encounters are situated in. These experiences are both singular and variable.

Affect theory may thus be used to support the inseparability of nature and culture, and as a mode of resistance to reductive, empirical claims

concerning sensory experience and embodied perception. It also provides an insightful entry point to articulate the potency of embodied art experiences on both a corporeal and cerebral level, and functions to eradicate the detachment between these two realms. This is a departure from early assertions of affect that underscored the inherent limits of linguistic expression in translating the relative forces of sensation (Massumi 1995). If affect registers through modes of the sensory body, then perhaps language must be used in a similar way to pass affect, instead of simply translating it or attempting to pin it down – implicating the surface of the body through its interface with the written word (1995: 85). As such, my thesis moves out from this literature to take up the question of how media, embodiment and the senses may be constellated and applied to successfully convey affect in the written word.

## Methodology

My primary research methods have included direct first-person observation by way of gallery and studio visits, and interviews with curators and artists. I conducted two studio visit/interviews with the artists Sarah Jane Gorlitz and Wojciech Olejnik, as well as interviews with curators Melissa Bennett (Art Gallery of Hamilton) and Matthew Hyland (Oakville Galleries). Gallery visits included numerous locations throughout Toronto (A Space, Jessica Bradley Gallery, Diaz Contemporary, Koffler Gallery, O'Born Contemporary, Prefix Institute of Contemporary Art, Trinity Square Video, VTape, YYZ); as well as Hamilton (Art Gallery of Hamilton, Centre3 Print and Media Arts, Factory Media Centre, Hamilton Artists Inc., McMaster Museum of Art); and in surrounding cities (Oakville Galleries, Kitchener-Waterloo Art Gallery, University of Waterloo Art Gallery). Each gallery visit was guided by observation of the senses in situ. This practice demanded a mindful presence in the subject-body and was informed by tenets of third wave feminist epistemology that interrogate the materiality of experience in the formation of situated knowledge.

My primary research methods were supplemented with secondary, textual research that is interdisciplinary in scope, as there is no one field of study that succinctly addresses my thesis topic. Three foci have directed my research trajectory – affect theory, sensory embodiment, and criticism. I extended this research with attention to the broad spectrum of scholarship

occurring across anti-ocularcentric discourse while concurrently, a core interest in feminism led me to sources concerning the sense of touch, and its implied and overt address in performance and media artworks. I have also referred to embodied film and media theory as influential frameworks, but with intent to explore the unique and affective positionality of percipients of expanded media in gallery space.

A persistent interest in affect theory and the study of relative affect transmission cuts across the different strands of my research methods. Through a varied, interdisciplinary approach, affect serves to legitimate a diverse spectrum of possible lived experiences and subjectivities. Scholars such as Teresa Brennan have contributed unique provocations concerning the role of the senses in affective domains, positing that one's self-possession is predicated on the ability to discern and detach from the ubiquity of affect transmission. The process of discernment is achieved through an awareness of feeling, which Brennan describes as "work[ing] by sensing (touching, hearing, smelling, listening, seeing) and the expression of the senses, particularly in words" (2004: 120). Brennan hypothesizes that in the affective field, the individual is in no way self-contained; however, the senses provide a pathway to discern one's own embodied experience. Awareness of embodied experience leads to an impression of self-possession or understanding of one's self as subject. Thus, discernment is predicated on the access and identification of force relations that compel autonomous affective



response – processes that consist of cognitive detachment from the elusiveness and ubiquity of affect, by registering a distinct awareness of specific, identifiable corporeal sensation. In these processes, the senses are used to extend affect into language as sensation acts as a bodily framework to situate one's subject position within social, cultural, psychic and geographic space.

It is significant to note that while Brennan's proposition is both provocative and decidedly experimental, it is not unprecedented. Susan Buck-Morss' theory of a "synaesthetic system" also posits the sensory body as a conduit of interior/exterior exchange (1992: 12). By stating that "the nervous system is not contained within the body's limits," Buck-Morss indicates that sense perception extends beyond the physical boundaries of one's self (1992: 12). She connects motor reaction with the development of sense memory: a cumulative process through which embodied perception is internalized, translated into meaningful experience, and then returned to the exterior world. Brennan herself endeavours to highlight this cyclical pattern in similar terms, suggesting that sensation of affect across mind/body, individual, and environment is fluid, and works apart from preconceived boundaries that delineate self and other. Within my thesis project, I adopt these propositions of affect transmission to qualify and extend embodied art experience to the written word.

There are guiding precedents across a range of interdisciplinary scholarship, yet the pursuit of embodied art criticism, particularly as it could help export the experiences of sense affectivity beyond the gallery, is still relatively untrodden ground. Taking the form of an affective anti-ocularcentric pursuit, my research has been guided by the principles of third wave feminist theories that seek to legitimate embodied knowledge. However, in order to make room for a new strand of scholarship, I have constellated this research to address a lack in the dominant practice of art criticism. As a result, I endeavour to perform both informed critical evaluation while remaining empowered to articulate my own first person subjectivity. I develop this process through two case studies that draw upon textual and primary research. For the chapter on Aleesa Cohene, I apply embodied criticism to an exhibition case study, closely examining the artists' first solo museum exhibition, *I Know You Know* (Oakville Galleries 2014-15). My observations have been acquired from two in-person gallery visits conducted during the exhibition, supported by a curator interview and an extensive review of pre-existing criticism on the artist. In the chapter on Soft Turns, this study approaches the artists' oeuvre more broadly; I refer to background research on the artists' general practice as well first person artwork experiences recorded in both studio and gallery contexts (Trinity Square Video and University of Waterloo Art Gallery). With both studies, I endeavour to generate a critical response within the context of my

theoretical and art-writing based research. Therefore, my interpretation and commentary expressly address the three topic areas of affect, sensory embodiment and criticism.

### Precedents for Sensorial Criticism

The dominant practice of art writing resists the value of subjective experience in favour of the broad contextual evaluation of objects. However, there is also a rising interest in dismantling the tenets of this dominant praxis to account for their embodied address. In a 2015 thought-piece published by Temporary Art Review, artist and writer Steven Cottingham espoused a call to action for art criticism to resist capitalism and come to embody the avant-garde:

How can art criticism be so close to art but fail to reflect any of its spirit? Do the tenuous experiments of art necessitate the stability (and stagnation) of art criticism? Does art criticism need to remain a venue for objective, removed reflection? Or can its attitudes and approaches adapt to mimic the grandiose innovations of its host? (2015: n.p)

In this call, Cottingham gestures to a “revolutionary” break from the formulaic nature of evaluative writing in an effort to embody the radical vanguard spirit of contemporary art. He is particularly concerned by the chasm between critic and artist, and the loss of expressivity characteristic of both market driven and academic writing. While this self-reflexivity is certainly typical of an ongoing discourse within art criticism, Cottingham signals a decided rejection of an all-else-silencing objectivity, requesting a turn toward more performative and poetic forms. How then can criticism become open to spaces of sensory free play, recognize affective transcorporeality and presence of the subject-body across a range of contemporary art practices?

The notion of sensory and embodied criticism has been raised in scholarship, more often than in practice, and across feminist discourse since the 1960s. A call to embodied criticism can be located in Susan Sontag's seminal text, "Against Interpretation," which presents an urgent call for criticism to foreground artwork experience over intellectual interpretation. Sontag attributes such urgency to the violence that content-focused writing demonstrates over embodied subjectivity in the critical reception of art. In opposition to an imposed use-value, Sontag theorizes that the subjective, experienced-based address of the artwork could take precedent in the production of new knowledge – knowledge that is embodied and expressed by the critic in a manner that resists hermeneutics in order to disseminate "a new erotics of art" (1964: 14). Through Sontag, the critic is charged with the task of suspending content-based judgement in favour of sensory experience, to "recover [the] senses, to *feel* more, to *hear* more and to *see more*" (1964: 14, emphases in original). This practice encourages an awareness of embodied art experience and suggests a method for sensation to be effectively extended to realm of the written word.

The notion of resisting interpretive criticism in order to foreground sense experience becomes complicated by processes of subject formation through lived cultural experience. In the 1990s, a return to feminist standpoint theory opposed the impulse toward essentialist experience, opening up feminist discourse to a multiplicity of women's standpoints as

they are personally, culturally and politically informed. Positing the possibility of diverse feminist standpoints as a quintessentially postmodern strategy, scholars such as Susan Hekman (1997), Patricia Hill Collins (1997), and Nancy J. Hirschman (1998) urged for a discursive undoing of a singular women's experience toward pluralist understandings of situated knowledge.<sup>7</sup> In doing so, they hinted at how the embodied contextual frameworks brought forth by each artwork beholder may come to complicate utopic views of a purely sensory criticism, which imagines art experiences to be culture-free and unadulterated by textual knowledge. The sensations transmitted by artworks are in fact embroiled with content, as lived experience becomes the textual framework from which embodied knowledge may emerge.

Feminism's direct contributions to art criticism are often misconstrued as a separation from theory in favour of situated writing, which understands the body as more of a physiological than a cultural vessel. But perhaps feminist criticism simply presents a more nuanced engagement with theory, purporting a confluent exchange between discourse, sensory experience, and embodied subjectivity. Scholars and critics such as Janet Wolff (1995) and Gilane Tawardros (1995) mark a decided separation from this antagonistic relationship by directly engaging feminist art writing with critical theory and cultural scholarship. In her propagation of the idea of the "haptic critic," Laura U. Marks proposes a methodology that is not constricted to theory, but instead negotiates critical discourse with the tactile "smooth

surface” of objects in relation to their environs and one another (2002: xiii). She deems this to be a distinctly “feminist strategy,” and suggests a methodology for writing through haptic sensory engagement “when our optical resources fail to see” (2002: 7). These texts lay the groundwork for a potential methodology of *multisensory* criticism that can emerge from the discursive dismantling of universal objectivity, legitimating unique sensate experience and embodied subjectivity.

In the case of film criticism, some writers express difficulty in effectively voicing one’s unique subject position, as it is sensorially informed. This is evident in Tim Groves’ (2003) intentionally self-conscious reflection on the 1993 film *Fearless* (dir. Peter Weir), in which he seeks to situate emotional response in the context of critical inquiry:

How can I write about sadness, about my cinematic griefs? How can the painful experiences of intense melancholy felt by specific individuals during cinema be analysed as part of a critical discourse? How does one successfully convey such moments while maintaining their authenticity? And given that melancholy is an inherently personal condition or response, what are the implications for the film theorist who undertakes such a project?

Groves attributes his melancholic response to specific formal and narrative qualities of the film – the strategic use of movement, sound and time signature in support of the film’s climactic arc. Although Groves looks to theoretical precedents in order to unearth an affective critical model (including Roland Barthes’ *Camera Lucida* [1981] and its “studium/punctum” framework as well as the theoretical engagements with cinephilia), the

author's concern for his lack of distance from the film and the private nature of his attachments eventually precludes an effective critique. His introspective questioning leaves the author fearful, concluding: "I cannot write *your* cinema/sadness" (2003: emphasis in original). This resonates with Susan Sontag's (1996) declaration that cinephilic writing is inherently doomed based on its penchant for nostalgia. Sontag discusses that cinephilia – the love of cinematic experience – manifests in film criticism and theory through the frame of pleasure tinged with a mournful regret. Yet, a resurgence of interest in cinephilic writing has materialized in the aftermath of Sontag's essay. A subfield of more recent scholarship acknowledges that film criticism is not averse to exploring embodied experience and first-person subjectivity.<sup>8</sup> However, to depart from the cinephilic impulse, I would like to orient my own writing toward embodied and affective moving image experience beyond the confines of the static theatrical setting.

What is central to this project is the question of how specific embodied sensory processes may elicit affect, and how such processes can be articulated in critical language to further transmit affect to the written word. Cultural studies and media theorist Ben Highmore takes up this question and states that the relationship between embodied sensation and culturally constructed meaning need not be discursively undone, but rather embraced through a "critically entangled contact with affective experience" (2010: 119). Highmore crafts a methodology that enables specific sensations to



remain enmeshed with their complex linguistic associations (for example, “taste” as social aesthetic construction, “bitterness” as mood referent) in examples of literary criticism that tease out both embodied sensation, implied meaning, and their resulting affective address (2010: 124-133). Descriptive literature demonstrates an innate ability to conjure the senses through narrative and poetic forms. However, as Steven Cottingham (2015) suggests, literary devices also have relevance in an art critical context, and may be part of the armature that resists stagnation purported by more distanced and objective forms.

In order to uncover critical knowledge in the observable impacts of embodied cinematic experience, it is useful to review the specificities of film/media’s multisensory address and capacity to elicit synaesthetic response. Synaesthesia refers to a comingling of the senses through which stimuli of a particular sensory system may result in the activation of a secondary sense (for example, visual stimuli evoke sensations of touch). Laura U. Marks contributes a novel connection between the tactility of cinematic media (termed “tactile visibility”), the mimetic capacity of sensorial representation, and the evocation of affect. Here, Marks identifies a distinctly haptic quality in the material-specific properties of video image transmission, specifically in case studies of “intercultural” (or diaspora) cinema (2000: 173-175). Further, she presents her categorization of tactile visibility as a material sense in parallel with the mimetic capacity of olfaction. In

film/media there are inherent pathways for scent-based mimesis to emerge through the use of audio and visual cues, manifesting in processes of precognitive embodied communication between artist, media and beholder (2002: 116). Olfaction is implicitly tied to the activation of memory, which may be accessed through implied sense representation, and in cases of experimental and expanded media practices, through the addition of olfactory installation in actual cinematic viewing space. Film/media artists may exploit processes of how the body remembers to elicit meaningful experiences via multi-modal, cross-sensory response.

Sensations of space and proximity differentiate the cinematic viewing experience from that of in-gallery installation. Media theorist and critic Margaret Morse (1990) has identified how feelings of immersion commonly attributed to video installation are predicated on the medium's ability to collapse distance between spectator and screen:

In the proscenium arts the spectator is carefully divided from the field to be contemplated. The machinery that creates the vision of another world is largely hidden, allowing the immobilized spectator to sink into an impression of its reality with horror or delight but without danger from the world on view. The visitor to an installation, on the other hand, is surrounded by a spatial here and now, enclosed within a continuum that is grounded in actual (not illusionistic) space. (1990: 156)

This phenomenon enables the present-ness of sensation and engages beholders in a full embodiment of time and space. Film theorists Thomas Elsaesser and Malte Hagener (2010) discuss that cinema has been likened to

a series of optical metaphors – including mirror, frame, and threshold – automatically differentiating the spatial plane of the spectator from that beyond the screen. The use of visual language is not meant to discredit the multisensory address of film/media, but rather to underscore the distance between representational and actual space. Where cinema may address the viewer in multisensory ways, installation goes further to transpose the body of the beholder within the media's spatial sensorium. This differentiation also speaks to the experience of the critic. Through the traditional cinematic apparatus, film critics receive sensation in a manner that is arguably placid, encouraging detachment and objectivity from the position of an immobilized observer. Installation, on the other hand, promotes ambulatory engagement in an embodied and affective realm.<sup>9</sup>

The embodied critic must respond to the intuitive power of the senses in the formation of meaningful, embodied art experience. Moving image installations offer an apt venue to situate the critic within the physical space of the media's sensorium. While screen-based film and video works also deliver an affective address, the position of the critic within the dimensional space of the installation – where the media moves out from the screen to engage objects and beholders in an affective, *relational* address – further facilitates the process of writing embodied criticism. The critic is aptly positioned to experience and pass on the sensations of media, environment and embodied contexts that serve to form and legitimate variable subject

positions. When taken up vigorously, sensory criticism may serve as a conduit between artists, exhibitions, beholders, and readers in a manner that continues processes of affective exchange.

### Case Study I: Soft Turns

Soft Turns is the collaborative project of Toronto-based artists Sarah Jane Gorlitz and Wojciech Olejnik, whose stop-motion animation, sculpture and installation practice interrogates the structures of subjective experience. Their approach to the moving image is quiet and subdued. By seeking to decelerate the act of viewing, Soft Turns collapses the apparent binaries of self and other, subject and object, creator and recipient. Gorlitz and Olejnik stage experiences that request involvement in the production of meaning; by offering artworks as provocations, they relinquish sole authorship in favour of an open and conversant exchange. The works appeal to senses of movement, sight, sound and touch in a manner that resists the overt and immediate. This sensory address is unobtrusive, but affectively cues an awareness of one's own embodied experience. Further, Soft Turns utilizes the durational capacity of their media to request time from the viewer. With time comes the opportunity to uncover meaning and attachment through what the artists refer to as "participatory co-authorship" (Gorlitz and Olejnik 2015). These instances mirror not only the careful, laborious production of each work, but also the artists' ongoing quest to seek knowledge from an incomplete archive. Consequently, Soft Turns uses the senses to signal connectivity between subject and object, and reveal their own presence as co-authors of and within this contemplative exchange.

In this chapter, I discuss three of Soft Turns' works that reveal an embodied research-based practice. The tenets of this research are imparted to the viewer through processes of slow, meditative idea-exchange within the gallery context. In the four-part video and sculptural installation *Behind the High Grass* (2012-2014), the subject of the traveller is drawn from the artists' prolonged study of a book found by chance at a Berlin flea market. The book chronicles two post-war Czech travellers in both word and image;<sup>10</sup> however, when the artists opened the volume, the majority of its text pages had been removed. The book presented an incomplete narrative, which the artists set out to investigate through their own embodied explorations. Their methods took the form of travel, research, and reconstruction, so as to animate the gaps in the story through discovered truths and imagined experiences. The artists then produced a series of stop-motion animations and sculptures to form a composite installation. This installation has been presented in four iterations in galleries located in the US, Sweden and Canada.<sup>11</sup>

Each component in the installation assembles the absent narrative by way of sensory clues constructed by the artists. Short animations recreate the banal visual and aural sensations of travel: the passage of shadow and light in a moving boxcar; the framed perspective of a car windshield; the static tone of a nondescript radio broadcast. Each video is shot in stop-motion (an animated sequence of still images pieced together to create continuity and movement), often using artist-constructed miniatures. For the 0:45 looped

animation, *Solitary Man with Nature* (2011), the artists engage directly with an image culled from the travel book. Working from a sepia toned photograph of a man standing amid tall grass, the image focus oscillates between figure and ground and creates a sense of vibratory movement within the pictorial plane. In the context of the installation, these videos are shown on floor and wall-mounted monitors, as well as full wall projections. The absence of narrative content within these short videos coerces the viewer to forge connections between images on screen and objects in dimensional space, such as replicas of travel photos hand-painted on Mylar and framed modular constructions that reference modes of museum display. Through these spatial, aural and visual components, Soft Turns frames the view toward an open and unfinished exploration.

Attention to the sensate subject body is also demonstrated through the artists' current and ongoing project, *Fluorescence* (2015- ). With this work, Soft Turns restages the microscopic gaze as a vehicle to collapse distance between senses of sight, movement and touch. Images in this multi-channel video are sourced from various editions of a plant biology textbook. The artists conduct a careful selection of image plates with consideration to subtle changes in brightness, translucence and colour from one edition to the next. Soft Turns composes animations from these source images using movement and light to yield fluorescent effects. These single-image compositions replicate prototypical microscopic slides and each specimen

resonates as though emitting light from within. The artists achieve this effect by applying external light from a laptop screen and controlling the variability of the light source by moving the screen toward and away from the page. This method is repeated across multiple versions of the same image, assembled together to create vibratory animations. The plant forms thus transmit a movement-based and tactile visuality through mutable surface textures and slow, uncanny image transition.

The manner in which *Fluorescence* is experienced during exhibition further implicates viewers in the process of movement-based authorship. The work was first produced for the group exhibition *Peripheral Fixation* at Trinity Square Video in 2015. In this initial iteration, the multi-channel video was screened on a cluster of four flat screen monitors, staggered at various heights in the centre of a darkened room. By removing the screens from the confines of the wall (a two-dimensional plane), viewers had the liberty to approach and circumnavigate the image-objects, thus mirroring movements inherent to the production of the work. Monitors were placed in various orientations – both parallel and perpendicular to the floor – thereby instigating diverse modes of looking into and upon the surface of the image. The screens became beacons of light in the darkened gallery, their undulating, iridescent images beckoning an inquisitive approach. Through this strategic spatial configuration, viewers came to hunch over the surface of



the screen, peering at the mutable image as though looking through the lens of a microscope.

The act of embodying the scientific gaze is also manifested through the visual and aural cues in the video *St. Helena Olive Tree, Extinct 1884-1977, 2003-* (2010). This work resulted from the artists' extensive research into a tree species presumed extinct in 1884 and then rediscovered in 1977.

Following failed attempts to propagate seedlings from the last remaining wild tree, the species was reclassified as extinct in 2003. To respond to this history, Soft Turns produced a paper replica of the tree based on textual, illustrative and photographic research. This replica served as the subject of a short black-and-white animated video, which presents a close study of light and shadow cast across leaves of the delicate paper tree. Grid-like shadows trace the plant's surface to denote its enclosure within interior space. The accompanying soundscape indicates the presence of wind; however, the tree branches remain still. When exhibited, the video is accompanied by an exhaustive collection of documents pertaining to the history of the tree (Soft Turns 2015). With this tool, viewers may come to understand the work as it responds and contributes to an ongoing mythos of the lost species. Following this project, stills from the video now appear in Google image search results for "St. Helena Olive." In restaging the botanical study, Soft Turns points to an evolving archive wherein the species now only exists in representational and imagined forms. In its exhibitionary context, the video calls attention to

human percipients in relation to non-human objects. The affects of this lost species implicate the beholder through visual and aural sensation, and sense memory, whether living, imagined, hallucinated, or reformed.

In their research-based practice, the artists seek to suspend certainty and stage sites of sensory investigation. These sites are each a confluence of video, objects and sculptural components that evoke embodied knowledge through analyses of time, movement and space. Writer/curator Rachel Anne Farquharson (2014) has noted that topics of distance and proximity, past and present are also central to Soft Turns' practice, through which they seek to "collaps[e] perception into something of a closed circuit." The art objects thus become material conduits through which viewers may access visual, aural and spatial clues left by their makers.

Soft Turns repeatedly resists the sole authorship of these staged experiences in favour of participatory exchange. In an interview with Julie René De Cotret, the artists describe participation as a practice of "conscious openness," while encouraging audiences toward "similar unresolved encounters with the work" (2015: 4). In this respect, the artists construct spaces that foster embodied subjectivity. Audiences come to know the passage of time and space (prompted by video as a time-based medium and installation as a spatial medium) through ambulatory movement as a means of embodied knowledge production. Gorlitz and Olejnik (2012) relate this process to the act of walking as a mindful practice:

When one walks, takes in and reacts to one's environment (consciously or unconsciously), one is already in a conversation, in the midst of the other. Perhaps it is the slowness of the movement that allows this engagement, the possibility to easily pause, spontaneously change directions, or be interrupted. Perhaps it is the one-two rhythm of each pace, or the regular pulse of circulating blood that provides a patient, undertone to thought.

Traversing space with one's body encourages an awareness of self in relation to others, objects and environments. Within such spaces, the artists see to it that subjects are empowered by the absence of set narratives and derive meaning from their own embodied experience (Soft Turns 2015). Thus, Soft Turns enacts spaces of subjectivity to encourage knowledge that is mutable and forever unfixed.<sup>12</sup>

The source of embodied knowledge here originates in points of intersection between artwork and beholder. With their video-centred practice, Soft Turns most immediately engages participants through audio and visual stimuli. However, it should be noted that their stop-motion animations use both sound and image sparingly. Soundscapes are ambient and relatively quiet while image transitions are often slow and subtle. This is a delicate and prolonged address that underscores each work's ability to engage participants in a durational, time-based exchange. The evocation of meaning comes as a result of familiarizing oneself with audio and visual perspectives, and connecting these cues with embodied sense memories.

With

*P-19720* (2013) (an animation from the installation *Behind the High Grass*), this process begins with recognition of the car windshield framing the ocular view. Once vision is situated, aural cues of wind and water signal a peaceful passage of time. The subject may relate to these sensations through personal memories of travel and consider their own stories in the absence of an overt prescribed narrative.

In addition to audio and visual stimuli, the sense of movement is also pivotal in formation of embodied meaning. *Soft Turns* engages the proprioceptive body on two levels: by way of virtual movement represented onscreen, and actual movement of the percipient body in space. With the short animation *behind the high grass* (2011), movement is represented in the passing views of a train both inside and outside the boxcar (*Soft Turns* 2015). Screened on a wall-mounted monitor, the video is reached by navigating components of the greater installation of the same name. Spatial negotiation of the body (passing through sculptural constructions, paintings and adjacent videos) produces a sense of moving within the artists' worldview. This participatory act functions to replicate artists' own process of embodied research.

Touch is perhaps the subtlest activation within *Soft Turns*' sensory world. With *Fluorescence* (2015), their recreation of the microscopic gaze aligns with Evelyn Fox Keller's assertion that sight cannot exist apart from touch. Keller states that "[if] we have learned anything from physics at all, it

is of the impossibility, even in the physical domain, of looking without touching: the very light we shine disturbs the object at which we gaze” (1996: 117). Thus the scientific gaze unsettles sensory hierarchies by feeling through the eye, effectively collapsing the myth of distance. *Fluorescence* demonstrates this point rather astutely. Its haptic address results from visual and kinaesthetic activations of the image plane. Performative movement of the maker’s body functions to augment and reduce light on the surface of the image. This transforms the static, representational image into a tactile object. Jennifer Fisher identifies that proprioception carries a “tactile modality,” and that sensing one’s own body through movement contributes to the formation of “volumetric or ‘charged’ space” (2007: 176). While Fisher attributes this phenomenon to instances of in-person performance, with *Soft Turns*, video operates to stand-in for the artists’ performing body. In the crossing of sensory pathways (looking and touching, moving and feeling) the affects of sensation implicitly narrow the distance between the subjects and objects of viewership.

The affective address of *Soft Turns*’ artistic practice may be discovered in spaces of contemplative exchange. The artists stage experiences to enact subjectivity, encouraging both cognitive and embodied participation. In the absence of narrative, the force relations between artworks and beholders function in a manner that is variable across diverse subjects. Affects are thus informed by the mind/body and the environment,

as well as the social and cultural contexts in which sensations are embodied. Such experiences cannot be qualified per se, but must remain open and unfixed. Brian Massumi tethers the definition of affect to its distinction from emotion, while affirming the shared mutability and slippery nature of the term. He tries to locate affect by returning to the body as a site of registered sensation. Through a practice of embodied awareness, subjects may identify their ability to affect and be affected in the world. Similarly, Soft Turns resists the praxis of qualification, the prescription of narrative, and the authorship of set meaning. Instead, they embrace the mutability of experience and the fluidity of knowledge through the research and construction of an affective exchange.

The critical writing on this work to date has focused on the affective import of place in the process and aesthetic concerns of Gorlitz and Olejnik's practice. However, a gap exists in effectively speaking to the idiosyncrasies of Soft Turns' embodied art address. In his redolent (auto)biographical style, critic R.M. Vaughan (2011) has posited that Soft Turns' practice is meditative and inherently informed by the experience of living and working in Malmö, Sweden.<sup>13</sup> Vaughan conducted a visit with the artists and made an astute comparison between the city's identity and the pensive quality of their work:

Following Gorlitz and Olejnik around Malmö, from the art school to the studio to their standard-issue shoebox apartment, I learn that Malmö, grumpy and dingy as it is, might be the perfect place to make compact, portable and very quiet art. The other side of grumpy is

pensive, and Soft Turns' work is nothing if not thoughtful and monkishly still. (2011: 150)

His impression of place informs a reading of the work, which he describes as "time-eating, slow-to-form, delicate and mysterious" (2011: 150). Vaughn concludes that Malmö offers a space of solace, making a connection between the affects of place and the material product of the artists' research and production. *Canadian Art* later published a review by Sophie Lynch (2013) that also notes the influence of place on the artists' work, who writes that "[t]he light that casts a glow over the spaces they construct brings to mind the otherworldly atmosphere of white nights in Sweden." Here Lynch identifies the artists' astute handling of light and subtlety of visual effect as a reflection of geographic context. Lynch also delivers a novel response to the stillness of their media, positing the animations as more akin to extended photographs than videos proper. While these two writers intuit the artists' responsiveness to place and pensive handling of their media, both Vaughan and Lynch focus exclusively on the artworks' visual address. The art objects certainly embody stillness; however, the subject is equally present in this exchange through the act of ambulatory viewing. An opportunity remains, then, to explore the ways in which Soft Turns addresses the body and to consider their works as conduits for affect beyond the maker-artwork dynamic.

In this respect, existing criticism inadvertently implies how Soft Turns' work primarily reflects the artists' embodied experience but does not directly speak to it. The process of evoking sensations of place is indeed indicative of their embodied research-practice. Yet Soft Turns has also made clear that subjective, participatory co-authorship is of equal importance to the formation of their work. This can be likened to Susan Buck-Morss' (1992) theory of the synaesthetic system, by which experience creates meaning through the body as a conduit of interior/exterior exchange. According to Buck-Morss' system, "the circuit from sense-perception begins and ends in the world" (1992: 13), making any experience participatory or transcorporeal; likewise, Soft Turns demonstrates an embodied research-based practice that both begins and ends in the world as a system of contemplative exchange. Thus, critics close down the circuit of participatory authorship by inscribing absolute meaning on the work. With attention to the embodied knowledge of the artwork beholder, the critic may rather point to the myriad ways through which experience is manifested across a range of subjectivities. Evidence provided by the affective, sensory body points to the openness and variability of this confluent system. As such, each body's interpretation is variable, and artists, artworks and beholders must all be constellated as co-authors within the exhibition as a site of aesthetic inquiry. As a result, the critic may write through her own subjectivity, and be responsive to the variability of embodied art experiences. In the case of Soft



Turns, by articulating the mutability of sensation and affect, embodied criticism may come to more accurately replicate the nuanced characteristics of the work to which it responds.



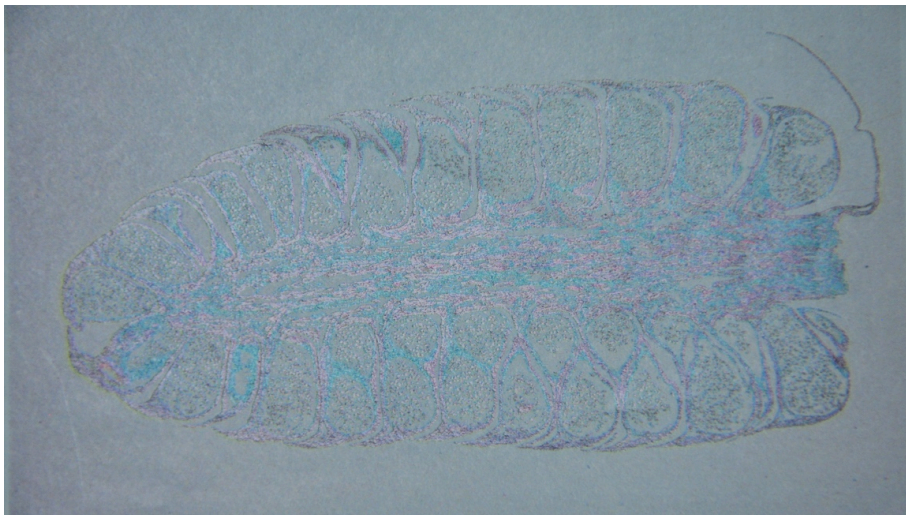
**Figure 1.**

*Soft Turns: Behind the High Grass III* (2014). Installation view at University of Waterloo Art Gallery (January 9 – March 8, 2014). Photograph courtesy of the artists.



**Figure 2.**

Soft Turns, *Flourescence* (2015- ). Installation view: *Peripheral Fixation* at Trinity Square Video (August 19 – September 26, 2015). Photograph courtesy of the artists.



**Figure 3.**

Soft Turns, *Flourescence* (2015- ) Still from video. Photograph courtesy of the artists.



**Figure 4.**

Soft Turns, *St. Helena Olive Tree, Extinct 1884-1977, 2003- (2010)*. Still from video. Photograph courtesy of the artists.

## Case Study II: Aleesa Cohene

Artist Aleesa Cohene explores the interchange between affect, immersion and location. She works intuitively through found film, video footage, and a range of media that together come to build what curator Matthew Hyland (2016) terms an “affective arc,” both on-screen and in dimensional gallery space. While video has been the cornerstone of her artistic practice since 2001, more recently Cohene has demonstrated an impulse towards the construction of full, sensorial environments. In one such exhibition, *I Know You Know* (2014-15) – deftly positioned in Oakville Galleries’ idiosyncratic Gairloch Gardens, a former private estate – Cohene conveyed affect through the formal address of the artworks, the intimacy of subject matter, and the familiarity of the gallery’s domestic space. Engagement with each of Cohene’s works demands attention to one’s self as subject; however, a deeper sense of meaning is achieved by situating the self amongst composite parts of a whole. This notion is integral to the artist’s practice and is achieved in the complex interplay between a variety of elements: the cinematic archive; audio, visual and olfactory sensations; the presence of material objects and the body; and the curious gallery context. As such, Cohene presents an affective milieu that compels the percipient body toward meaning, and fosters a fuller sense of coming to know one’s own self in space.

Cohene is a process driven artist. Each of her video works are composed of innumerable cuts of collected film footage from the 1970s, 80s

and 90s. Her meticulous method is mainly conducted at the post-production level – viewing, selecting, cataloguing and editing frames to create composite characters. As filmmaker and writer Mike Hoolboom (2008) has noted, Cohene’s characters interchange with one another to enact moments that are at once singular and collective. The artist’s selection of footage is bound by a fixed archive. Her collection was first guided by a decision to compile footage from lesser-known VHS material, including B-movies and self-help videos from the period of her childhood and adolescence (Hyland 2016). The archive is consistent in its visual aesthetic – carrying a relative anonymity, yet also appearing uncannily familiar. The collected and catalogued footage is the raw material from which the artist has built numerous single-channel video works (2001-2008). Such early works were screened widely across the experimental film circuit, and began to break into the context of gallery exhibitions in 2005.<sup>14</sup>

Cohene’s exploration of the composite has carried through this early period into her current interdisciplinary practice. At its core, the composite imagery is produced by mixing footage from the cinematic archive to create short video works. While visual imagery is collaged and remixed, the audio tracks maintain continuity, drawing emotive response through the strategic use of music and dialogue. While this technique is more commonly referred to as “mashup,” Cohene uses the word “composite” exclusively to describe her method. As such, I will adopt the artist’s choice of this term for the

remainder of my analysis. As the anchor of her practice, the concept of the composite continues to evolve from a place of critical experimentation.<sup>15</sup> Now moving beyond the confines of the two-dimensional screen, Cohene expands the vocabulary of her practice to implicate viewing bodies in more fully immersive and associative experiences. The exhibition at Oakville Galleries exposed the breadth of Cohene's current interdisciplinary practice. *I Know You Know* was composed of five interconnected works in a range of media, including video, painting, sculpture, dance performance, sound and scent. While two videos situated the exhibition's core thematic, numerous visual, aural and olfactory cues appeared both onscreen, then doubled to repeat as material objects present throughout the gallery's physical space. Together the artworks conveyed an uncanny embodiment of the composite and simultaneously commanded an introspective awareness of one's self as subject. The act of beholding this work is achieved through the entire body – through visual, aural, spatial, olfactory, and associative sensations. Each sensation was not isolated but occurred simultaneously, thus activating a synaesthetic response through recurring layers of sight, sound, scent, movement, and touch.

Both form and content of the exhibition were expressly guided by an expansion of the artist's cinematic archive. The three-channel video *That's Why We End* (2012-14) acts as the conceptual catalyst for the exhibition, composed entirely of footage from each of the 236 colour films discussed in

Gilles Deleuze's seminal texts *Cinema I* (1986) and *Cinema II* (1989). This work and the accompanying single channel video *Hate You* (2014) engage with the subject of psychoanalysis by depicting an encounter between a dream analyst and her client.<sup>16</sup> *That's Why We End* is screened on three monitors, each with their own facing Mart Stam armchair with audio received via headphones, creating a direct one-to-one ratio between characters and viewing participants. Composite footage is derived from the Deleuzian archive and the audio track composed of excerpts from a conversation with the artist's friend and scholar Eric Cazdyn. Cazdyn's lone male voice personifies the position of the client, while numerous silent women perform a visual embodiment of the dreamt analyst. Related objects are present in the gallery – notepads, a stack of shirts, a small, egg-sized meteor embedded in the wall – accompanied by a custom blended scent of ambrette seed, cucumber, grass, neroli, orange flower blossom, and tomato stems (Cohene 2014). Culled from the client's recount of a monotonous yet unsettling dream, the material presence of these objects brings his monologue closer to the viewer. Meanwhile, he is present in voice only, occupying the space between that which is actually audible, and thoughts encountered only in the mind's ear.

*That's Why We End* situates a multi-faceted thematic through which the gallery and its contents come to reenact the relationship between analyst and analysand exercised in psychoanalytic practice (Hyland 2016). To this



end, the gallery context also contributes as an extension of the artist's media. The act of locating these complex encounters in a domestic environment similar to interiors pictured in the filmic archive draws the viewer closer to the experiences depicted on-screen. Thus the artist engages with both the theoretical framework and material evidence provided by Deleuze (1986, 1989). By setting the stage for simultaneous projection (externalizing) and embodiment (internalizing) processes of association, Cohene stages a complex interchange between media, context and viewing participants.

The artist also utilizes non-visual aesthetics as a means of affective transference via synaesthetic response. This is achieved in associative relationships between objects and images, and the layering of sensation within the gallery space. While scents permeate the entire exhibition they emanate from specific material objects to create moments of uncanny association. The doubling and redoubling of sensory clues yields an amplified familiarity from otherwise banal objects. Similarly, aural sensation is intensified by the inclusion of a musical score that emits from the gallery's fireplace; this piece also accompanies the 18-minute dance work, *I'm Not Surprised* (2014), performed on four dates throughout the duration of the exhibition.<sup>17</sup> Choreographed by Cohene, a single dancer occupies space within the gallery as a performative embodiment of the analyst.<sup>18</sup> Dance augments the sense of movement, creating an awareness of the proprioceptive body within the gallery's synaesthetic spectrum. Through a

repetitive sequence of modern dance's most difficult gestures, the performer's body comes to represent the durational hardship of the psychoanalytic process (Hyland 2016). Thus, through the use of repetition and co-mingling of the senses, Cohene sets the stage for empathic response through embodied movement, sound and scent.

The locative experience of this exhibition signals the complex exchange of affect that occurs in domestic space. Gairloch Gardens is an eleven-acre, lakeside estate that was bequeathed to the Town of Oakville by James Gairdner in 1971, with the intention that the residence become a contemporary gallery and the surrounding acreage be used as a public park (Oakville Galleries n.d. b). Curator Matthew Hyland notes the artworks' correlation to the domestic character of the site is intentional; both the artist and curator felt the home was aptly positioned to draw out the complexity of human relationships present in the exhibition's core narrative (Hyland 2016).<sup>19</sup> While Gairloch's interior has been somewhat neutralized for the purpose of a gallery, it retains familiar characteristics of the stately home: leaded windows with surrounding garden views, a wood burning fireplace, molded ceilings, hardwood and terracotta floors. These interior views come to mirror scenes depicted in Cohene's composites. In fact, representations of the domestic are fairly consistent across the artist's oeuvre. For Cohene the home is a curious muse, which she describes as the place "where most of our unconscious fears are rooted and where we act through and against them"

(Hoolboom 2008: 246). While the home is a familiar and unguarded space, it is never neutral.

With the exhibition *I Know You Know*, the domestic setting comes to represent the interiority of the prototypical psychoanalytic consulting room. This configuration evokes the problematic interiority ascribed to carceral spaces to of the nuclear family, the asylum, and the psychoanalyst's couch in Deleuze's work. Teresa Brennan describes the clinic as an affectively loaded space, capable of "countertransference" between analyst and analysand (2004: 27). This notion may be understood as a pathway through which affects of the client are transferred and embodied by the analyst. However, Brennan is deeply critical of the psychoanalytic position towards notions of transmission, which is regarded as a deficiency of emotional containment on the part of the analysand (2004: 24). Echoing Deleuze, she discusses the impossibility of containment within a boundless ontological field of mind/body and environment. Within this framework, transmission is inevitable and cannot be controlled. This sentiment is mirrored in Cohene's work. Through strategies of sensorial association, the artist suspends apparent boundaries between analyst and analysand, artworks and beholder. With *I Know You Know*, Cohene demonstrates a critique of the claustrophobic interiority of the psychoanalytic process. In a range of media, the artist makes sensible the unrelenting, repetitious nature of analysis as it seeks to regulate and contain the emotive and affective domains.

This immersive and reflexive praxis simultaneously draws viewers closer to objects and media in their environs, while also finding cause to reflect and retreat further within. Through her strategy of the composite, Cohene resists the presentation of an overt narrative, and instead stages subjective experience in a manner that compels processes of participatory authorship. Participation occurs in interstitial sites of conductivity, in the moments when sensations become embodied, coalesce with sense memory, and then return to the exterior world. Cinema is often construed as a vehicle of escaping one's self. However, Cohene's interdisciplinary practice extends the cinematic archive in both media and subject, implicating the full sensory body in a performative act of embodied knowledge production. Cohene achieves this method by interrogating the potency of sense memory, location, and the transference of affect in processes of interior/exterior exchange.

Embodied art criticism may be applied to this study as a means of articulating the relational constructs that exist between location, affect and immersion. In fact, the critical response to this exhibition gestures quite astutely toward the potential tenets of an embodied critical method. In a feature article on Cohene's practice (prompted by *I Know You Know*), critic Gabrielle Moser (2014) expressly foregrounds the beholder-subject as a conduit for embodied knowledge. Moser identifies the complexity of synesthetic sensation, which she describes as "the feeling of smelling what you are seeing, or hearing a texture you desperately want to reach out and

touch,” voicing her own response to sense stimuli as it is physically and personally embodied. Moser oscillates between persuasive, first person recollections of artwork experience and details of the artists’ method and theoretical intent. She describes her first viewing of the two-channel video, *Like Like* (2009) with attention to her own body in relation to the media, affectively compelled by the artwork’s melancholic narrative thread:

The first time I saw *Like, Like*, I was entranced by it: fixed to the spot between its two central protagonists, I both wanted their love affair to be redeemed and desperately hoped their cycle of love, loss and failed reconciliation would never end. To watch Cohene work with this well-worn Hollywood material is to feel you are learning to watch movies all over again, seeing an entirely new narrative unfold across films you thought you knew. (2014)<sup>20</sup>

Moser responds to both the physiological stimuli and the affectively laden content of Cohene’s expressive act. She hones in on the crux of the artist’s intention in order to differentiate Cohene’s method from other collaged-based media artists. Moser identifies an essential element being the artist’s astute “valuation of the spectator’s affective response to film above all else” (2014). With this statement she ascertains the artists’ consideration of cinematic affects in both the production and reception of her work. Thus, the critic posits an overt awareness of the subject-body by way of the artist’s multi-media address. Moser comes to this realization through an articulation of her own embodied subjectivity.

An embodied art critical method may thus include several tenets: attention to subjectivity, through the critic’s own lens of self; responsiveness

to the artist's intention as manifested through the material conduit of media; and commentary and interpretation as it is physically, socially and culturally informed. Also paramount to this process is an astute attention the sensory body, and the manner in which affect registers at its interface with objects and environs. The exhibition *I Know You Know* presents an apt example to develop a practice of writing in this way. Cohene's exploration of interplay between affect, immersion and location lends to the formation of embodied knowledge. Sense data is transmitted by audio and visual media, and in the gallery's physical space through the presence of objects, olfaction and performance. Cohene intuits the moving image as the foundation for sensorially immersive spaces. She posits the senses as a pathway to encourage a deeper realization of one's own self in space. Thus, these affective constructions become fertile ground for writers to experiment with new art critical methodologies.



**Figure 5.**

Aleesa Cohene, *That's Why We End* (2012-2014). Three channel video (20 minutes), Mart Stam Armchairs, pyrite, dress shirts, bowtie, stack of notebooks, scent. Installation view: *Aleesa Cohene: I Know You Know* at Oakville Galleries in Gairloch Gardens (September 14, 2014 – January 4, 2015). Photograph: Toni Hafkenscheid, courtesy of Oakville Galleries.



**Figure 6.**

Aleesa Cohene, *That's Why We End* (2012-2014). Three channel video (20 minutes), Mart Stam Armchairs, pyrite, dress shirts, bowtie, stack of notebooks, scent. Installation view: *Aleesa Cohene: I Know You Know* at Oakville Galleries in Gairloch Gardens (September 14, 2014 – January 4, 2015). Photograph: Toni Hafkenscheid, courtesy of Oakville Galleries.





**Figure 7.**

Aleesa Cohene, *That's Why We End* (2012-2014). Three channel video (20 minutes), Mart Stam Armchairs, pyrite, dress shirts, bowtie, stack of notebooks, scent.

Installation view: *Aleesa Cohene: I Know You Know* at Oakville Galleries in Gairloch Gardens (September 14, 2014 – January 4, 2015). Photograph: Toni Hafkenscheid, courtesy of Oakville Galleries.



**Figure 8.**

Aleesa Cohene, *That's Why We End* (2012-2014). Three channel video (20 minutes), Mart Stam Armchairs, pyrite, dress shirts, bowtie, stack of notebooks, scent. Installation view: *Aleesa Cohene: I Know You Know* at Oakville Galleries in Gairloch Gardens (September 14, 2014 – January 4, 2015). Photograph: Toni Hafkenscheid, courtesy of Oakville Galleries.





**Figure 9.**

Aleesa Cohene, *Hate You* (2014). Video (10 minutes), note pads. Installation view: *Aleesa Cohene: I Know You Know* at Oakville Galleries in Gairloch Gardens (September 14, 2014 – January 4, 2015). Photograph: Toni Hafkenscheid, courtesy of Oakville Galleries.



**Figure 10.**

Aleesa Cohene, *I'm Not Surprised* (2014). Dance (18 minutes), Kilim Rug, sound. Choreographed by Aleesa Cohene and performed by Mairi Grieg. Sound composition by Isabelle Noël. Performance view: *Aleesa Cohene: I Know You Know* at Oakville Galleries in Gairloch Gardens (September 14, 2014 – January 4, 2015). Photograph: Toni Hafkenscheid, courtesy of Oakville Galleries.

### Conclusion: Embodied Art Criticism

Both Cohene and Soft Turns demonstrate the notions of sensory affect and embodied subjectivity present in contemporary moving image arts practice. Such conceptual frameworks are revealed by the material conduits of the artworks, and elicit close study and prolonged engagement on the part of beholders. The artists present clues discoverable through processes of sensory observation – at times the stimulus is immediate, at other times sensations emerge in a process of slow reveal – each augmented by the nuances of the gallery as context. Perception requires a unique presence in the subject-body and an attuned awareness of self; each beholder brings forth contexts of embodied knowledge that are mutable and unfixed. Thus, the affects of each work are quite variable, as new meaning may be revealed across a multiplicity of subject positions.

The two case studies may be situated amongst a current wave of interest in the senses and affect in art, curatorial practice, and greater cultural consciousness. Through a simultaneous study of art criticism, it remains apparent that dominant writing praxis preserves notions of distance in the subject-object dichotomy. Experience of the sensory body is reduced to an exclusively visual realm, thus furthering patterns of ocularcentrism. In criticism the devaluation of subjective experience is sustained by an academic and journalistic tendency towards distance and objectivity. However, artworks and exhibitions of this contemporary moment demand

that criticism pay closer attention to art's implication on the subject-body.

With this strategy, art criticism may begin to participate in the complex dimensions of affect transmission and aesthetic experience.

My research initially set out to address moving image artists as catalyst for embodied criticism; however, the idiosyncrasies of both Cohene's and Soft Turns' interdisciplinary praxes compelled my study toward a more nuanced analysis of media. In both instances, the artists' work exists within and extends beyond the limits of the two-dimensional screen. As a result, objects beyond the image plane are equally important to the affective relational constructs that exist between artworks, media and beholders. This development also enables a closer read on the variance between cinema and gallery subjects – and to that end, the inherent difference between theatrical film and art criticism. Where the traditional cinematic apparatus addresses the subject in multi-sensorial ways, it is also less immersive on account of the stillness of viewing bodies, and the distance between spectators and the objects and encounters on-screen. However, the interdisciplinary practices of Cohene and Soft Turns urge a sense of closeness between the image and beholders. The extension of media into dimensional space, and elements of exploration and participation allow experiences to be more resonant within the body. In turn, embodied criticism utilizes this resonance as an inducement to translate affective sensation into the written word.

Reciprocity between artists and beholders in the development of co-authorship also emerges as a common concept in both case studies. For Soft Turns, this tendency is distinctly identified in the artists' intention; the artists decidedly step away from the position of sole authors, endeavouring to seek meaning from source materials by processes of sensory research. They urge beholders to participate in a similar way and sense discovery is enabled by way of slow, careful observation and processes of ambulatory movement. Cohene also grants agency to the beholder in the formation of knowledge. She removes overt narratives from cinematic material, and suggests sense memory as a guide toward realizing associative meaning. Cohene engages the senses more overtly by layering stimuli in a manner that yields synaesthetic results. In both instances, the artists use sensation to construct points of interplay between their own inscribed meaning and contributions from the embodied knowledge of the beholder.

The manner in which experience manifests in the context of the gallery is informed by the materiality of sensations and the social and cultural contexts in which they are embodied. Processes of subject formation through lived cultural experience amplify notions of resisting the prescribed narrative and fixed meaning. It is significant to note the closeness of this concept to the tenets of feminist standpoint(s) theory discussed above. Feminist discourse suspends the notion of universal experience in favour of variable, situated knowledge; this is the foundation from which embodied

criticism emerges. Similarly, explorations of the senses and affect theory must also consider a spectrum of difference in the formation of embodied subjectivities. Thus, by giving voice and significance to situated, aesthetic experiences, embodied criticism may contribute to a more diverse and inclusive contemporary art discourse.

This proposal of embodied art criticism emerges in direct response to theoretical precedents as well as current developments in artistic and curatorial practice. Conversely, this method is also informed by interventions in the dominant practice of art criticism that consider the sensory implications of artworks. In order to participate in the corporeally affective realms of contemporary art experience, critical writing must seek to articulate the transmission of affect apparent in the context of gallery spaces. Massumi discusses that language has a limited ability to translate the relative intensity of affective sensation (1995: 86); however, he also states that affect registers “at the surface of the body, at its interface with things” (1995: 85). Likewise, Brennan also identifies the senses as a conduit to the discernment of affect – the vocabulary through which force relations of the body may be translated into language. If senses are the pathway to transmit the *feelings* of affect – then by articulating sensation, the critic may lure the reader towards parallel affective domains. Ultimately, the critic must also demonstrate attention to subjectivity realized in analysis, commentary and interpretation as it is physically, culturally and socially informed. In order to destabilize the



dominant aesthetic methods of distance, the objects must be brought closer to the reader, through the critic's own lens of self.

Embodied art criticism acts as a point of intersection between artistic practice, exhibition making, and theoretical discourse concerning the affective and sensory realms. This method seeks to articulate experience in a manner that furthers the translation of affect, by making experience sensible in the written word. As a result, embodied criticism puts sensory discourse into action, bridging the gap between theory and praxis. By experimenting with the nuanced capacities of the subject-body, critical writing becomes more closely aligned with both the material and immaterial powers of embodied art experience.

## Endnotes

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<sup>1</sup> During the course of my thesis research (and in response to my writing on Tyler Tekatch), I was invited to contribute an essay to the accompanying publication, *are you experienced?* (Bennett 2015). As such, I was privy to concepts of the exhibition during Bennett's research and planning phase.

<sup>2</sup> *Night Canoeing* (2004) by Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller is a video and sound installation. The video was filmed while the artists canoed down a river in the Muskoka region of central Ontario late at night, and is screened in

<sup>2</sup> *Night Canoeing* (2004) by Janet Cardiff and George Bures Miller is a video and sound installation. The video was filmed while the artists canoed down a river in the Muskoka region of central Ontario late at night, and is screened in a manner that viewers may be transposed within the canoe to witness an immersive first-person experience of the quiet, darkened waters (Madill 2006: 58). *Scenes from the House of Dream* (2004) by David Hoffos is a multi-media installation that includes film and video in various forms: projected onto objects such as cut-out figures; screened on monitors; and repeated on reflective surfaces in a gesture that blends material and immaterial elements to create an immersive, surrealistic space (Madill 2006: 54).

<sup>3</sup> Both *Sublime Embrace* and *Unmonumental* occurred the same year(s) as Caroline A. Jones' seminal two-part exhibition and publication, *Sensorium: Embodied Experience, Technology and Contemporary Art* (MIT List Visual Arts

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Centre, 2006-2007). While not cited as a direct influence on *are you experienced?*, this exhibition certainly leant to a North American art world consciousness of the mid-00's that influenced a new generation of curators, such as Bennett.

<sup>4</sup> For example, see Isaac Newton (1730), Johann Wolfgang von Goethe (1840), Erwin Panofsky (1939), Michel Foucault (1977), and Guy Debord (1983).

<sup>5</sup> See also Constance Classen (2012), Jim Drobnick (2004, 2006), David Howes, (2005), and Caroline A. Jones (2006).

<sup>6</sup> See Sara Ahmed (2014), Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (2003), and Patricia Ticieneto Clough and Jean Halley (2007).

<sup>7</sup> This movement in feminism follows trailblazing efforts in cultural studies and postcolonial theory that similarly worked to destabilize notions of universal experience and subjectivity.

<sup>8</sup> For example, see Jonathan Rosenbaum (2010).

<sup>9</sup> It is significant to note that the strict differentiation between the static film critic and the ambulatory installation critic becomes less so with conceptualizations of 4D cinema. 4D cinematic method extends the material conditions of diegetic space to theatrical space by synchronizing physical conditions of the theatre, for example the inclusion of rain, wind, tremor, and vibratory effects.

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<sup>10</sup> In the course of research for *Behind the High Grass*, Soft Turns discovered the book title to be *Südamerika: Zwischen Parana und Rio de la Plata*, co-authored by the two Czech travellers Jiří Hanelka and Miroslav Zikmund (a German edition, published in 1956) (Soft Turns 2015).

<sup>11</sup> The following exhibitions represent four iterations of a whole, mounted throughout this project during the course of prolonged research and development: *Behind the High Grass* (2012), Southern Exposure, San Francisco, USA; *Behind the High Grass II* (2013), Skånes konstförening, Malmö, Sweden; *Behind the High Grass III* (2014), University of Waterloo Art Gallery, Waterloo, Canada; *Behind the High Grass IV* (2014), O’Born Contemporary, Toronto, Canada.

<sup>12</sup> For more information on the artists, see Ivan Jurakic (2014) and Weston Teruya (2012).

<sup>13</sup> Soft Turns lived and worked in Malmö, Sweden during Gorlitz’s MFA Study at the Malmö Art Academy (2011). During this time, Gorlitz and Olejnik conducted preliminary research for *Behind the High Grass* and produced videos such as *Solitary Man with Nature* (2011). Both Gorlitz and Olejnik also spent this time working on their solo painting and image-making practices.

<sup>14</sup> In 2005, Aleesa Cohene’s *All Right* (2003) was included in the exhibition and screening series *Brisk Collages & Bricolages: Artistic Audits & Creative Revisions of Mainstream Media in Recent Canadian Shorts*, Mount Saint

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Vincent University Art Gallery. This was a collaborative exhibition between MSVU, guest curator Gerda Johanna Cammaer and her curatorial collective, La Femme 100 Têtes (The Hundred Headless Woman). As a collective, La Femme 100 Têtes sought to present independent media works in the context of contemporary visual arts (Cammaer 2005: 4).

<sup>15</sup> For more information on the artist, see Jon Davies (2009), Amy Fung (2014), and Julia Paoli (2012). To access the exhibition's digital archive, see Oakville Galleries (n.d.a).

<sup>16</sup> With *Hate You* (2014), Cohene extended the project's ambitious archive to include the filmography of actors included in the previous work, *That's Why We End* (2012-2014). This decision was made for pragmatic reasons, that is, to extend beyond the limits of the 296 films included in Deleuze's texts (Hyland 2016). It should also be noted that with both works, the use of the Deleuzian archive resulted in the inclusion of Hollywood actors that would not have been included in Cohene's earlier works. The result was a more familiar visual aesthetic, and women on-screen were more readily identifiable as actors.

<sup>17</sup> Musical score composed by Isabelle Noël. This piece appears elsewhere in *Hate You* (2014) as a song on the analyst's car radio.

<sup>18</sup> Performed onsite at Oakville Galleries by dancer Mairi Greig.

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<sup>19</sup> Exhibition curator Matthew Hyland (2016) attributes this intention to a common interest in affect and association he shares with the artist, specifically exploring Cohene's desire to "atomize" the visceral sensations that drive memory and emotion.

<sup>20</sup> *Like, Like* (2009) is one of two earlier video works that mark the artist's entry point into multi-channel videos, painted environments, and scent. Two-channel video is used to animate one character per monitor, expanding the affective plane across multiple screens and creating dialogue in the spaces in-between. Cohene draws upon surface patterns represented in the video to create a painted viewing environment, which also includes a custom scent, mixed by the artist (Cohene 2009).

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