2013

Kapsula, Politics of Aesthetics 2/3

LeBlanc, Lindsay, Powers, Zeesy and Browne, Penny Leong

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NOVEMBER 2013

POLITICS OF AESTHETICS 2/3

KAPSULA

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NOVEMBER 2013, VOLUME 1, THEME 2
POLITICS OF AESTHETICS, PART 2 OF 3

Production

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On the Cover

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PROLOGUE

ZACH PEARL

> *Through the image the world asserts its discontinuity, its fragmentation, its artificial instantaneousness.*

—Jean Baudrillard
from "For Illusion Isn't The Opposite of Reality", Photographies 1985-1998, 2000.

A paramount politic involved in making art is the making of meaning. To accomplish this, art must problematically divorce itself from context; effacing the traces of its environment and even its visuality. In order to construct an image or a text of the world we must essentially remove ourselves from the world. The photographer stands outside the frame. The painter exists *upon* the canvas. The cinema crafts 'another world,' a non-place for logic and sensory deprivation. In this way, the activity of creating aesthetic experiences, while virtuous, is complicated in a politics of what is represented and what is not. Artists select a particular vantage point from a multitude and then attempt to render a perpetually moving reality through a finite unreality. As a result, images and texts become autonomous because they propose to document the world. They are no longer a part of it. The continuous production of images and texts yields a "contiguity of fragmentation" and a plurality of representations. [1] Like the thaw of some epic frozen lake, this plurality splits the image/text into fractals, forever dividing into smaller yet infinite possibilities of themselves.

Artists are not the only ones adding to this immense contiguity, however. As illuminated by many French poststructural theorists such as Roland Barthes, Jean Baudrillard and Jacques Derrida, the use of language is an intrinsically fragmentary behaviour. Grammar and syntax are only conventions that we agree upon. Letters on a page are utterly meaningless until we decide that they must mean something. And still, despite these longstanding conventions, language can easily break. It can fail to create a connection. Words can mimic and betray other words, and identities suddenly transform through accent and dialect. It poses a kind of metaphysical quandary: How best to envision a force that expresses only as much as it negates? And so, just as the image divorces its own environment, language divorces its own employment. Images and texts are the interstitial spaces that precariously join the fragments of a kaleidoscopic existence.

In this monthly, our contributors are concerned with the role that aesthetics play in the formation of these interstitial spaces. How does a particular regime of taste or style influence how plural or fractal an artistic expression becomes? Each article also seeks to be reflexive

about its inevitable fragmentation of meaning and representation through its format as well as the style and voice of the writing.

In Lindsay LeBlanc's "From [text] to [Work]" she re-presents Roland Barthes' hallmark 1971 essay, "From Work to Text." In it, Barthes argues for a sea change in the way that processes of 'reading' and 'writing' can be understood, wherein images and even three-dimensional objects are forms of texts to be read. He denounces classifications by time period, style, form, etc., explaining that they fail to account for the fact that their very concepts (signified) rely on a semblance of signifiers (sign). LeBlanc critiques Barthes' ideas and utterances through a considered series of blackouts, strikethroughs, highlights and insertions. By specifically introducing the words "Art," "artwork" and "aesthetics" she also reframes Barthes' propositions as instructions for reading the text of artistic practice.

"Thy Lovely Stain" by Penny Leong Browne continues this strain of considering the object as a text and conversely the text as an object. Inspired both by her own art practice of meticulous stain-making and the anti-aesthetic artwork of Marcel Duchamp, she addresses the idea of the abject and how it comes into representation. Writing sometimes as herself, sometimes from the perspective of the artwork and yet other times somewhere nebulous between, Leong Browne accentuates how aesthetic experiences can be jarring amalgamations of impressions, memories and bodily stimuli. To reflect the psychological and cybernetic concepts that she deploys, her writing also resembles an *assemblage* or a kind of textual Frankenstein. Thoughts are stitched together through poetic syntax and sentence fragments. Paragraphs densely packed with ideas about confronting the image of the Other are intentionally only hinged together so that any one might swing the anxious reader outward, elsewhere.

In my conversation with Canadian visual and performance artist Zeesy Powers, pieces of our dialogue are shuffled, interrupted and expanded (through interaction with the document) to better portray the fragmentary, multi-modal experience of participating in an interview. Speaking at length about her practice, which largely examines issues of language, intimacy and aesthetics of the body, Powers' responses are reorganized into a non-linear 'portrait' of the event, including notations and illustrations about the weather, the bartender and even the background music. Elements of what is implicitly seen, heard and felt in this instance take on an equal importance as the explicit gestures of question and answer.

In many ways, to straddle the line between implicit and explicit is the charge of the savvy artist and author. The discontinuity of image and text is a duplicitous doctrine—as wondrously realistic in its fiction as it is obfuscating to our sense of reality as a whole. When we are finally forced to reconcile the idea that reality is not a whole, our vision of self, of other, of one and many is fundamentally challenged. As the title of this prologue implies, some assemblage is required on the reader's part within this monthly to make these purposely discombobulated texts 'work.' But do not work too hard to make things fit. In the (shockingly) salient words of Deleuze and Guattari: "These combinations are neither genetic or structural; they are interkingdoms, unnatural participations. That is the only way Nature operates—against itself." [2]

From [text] to [Work]

Remarks

Source text: "From Work to Text" by Roland Barthes (1971) translation by Stephen Heath (1977)
Disclaimer: The source text has been manipulated here with some omissions and additions

Where you see *italics* you see the interventionist
This is a text not written by Barthes nor someone else
To the Modern, dead and alive

See the Legend

It is a fact that a certain change ~~will~~ ~~should~~ could take place (~~or is taking place~~) in our conception of art (improper) ~~language~~ and, consequently, of the (art) work, which owes at least its phenomenal existence to the former. The ~~should~~ change is clearly connected with a lack of development in (amongst other disciplines) ~~linguistics~~ **proper nouns** (the term connection is used here in a deliberately neutral way: one does not decide a determination, ~~be it multiple and dialectical~~ only suggests it). What is new and which affects the idea of the (art) work comes [redacted] from the re[definition] of art **Art** ~~but rather~~ or also from Art's encounter in relation to an object which traditionally is the province of art improper. *Art improper is a term I use in referring to all art before Art. Art (proper noun) is only a surreality, a space between: can we call it a product of a naïve idealism?* It is indeed as though the interdisciplinarity which is today held up as a prime value cannot accomplish [redacted] **aesthetic** knowledge. Interdisciplinarity is ~~not~~ the calm of an easy security; it [began] effectively when the solidarity of the [canon] [broke] down in the interests of a new object and a new language, neither which has a place in the field of ~~the sciences~~ Art (now). It is precisely this uneasiness with classification which permits the diagnosis of ~~a certain mutation perversion~~ improper. The 'improper' which has seized the idea of the (art) work must not, however, be ~~ove~~under-restimated: it is [redacted] of a **re_break.** ~~The break is seen to have taken place~~ since then there has been no new breaks, so that in a way it can be said that for _____ we have been living in ~~repetition~~ _____. What History, our History, allows us today is ~~merely to slide, to vary~~, to **exceed**, ~~to repudiate~~. Just as Einsteinian science demands that 'the relativity of the frames of reference' be included in the objects studied, so the combined action of [redacted] History demands, in art (Art), the relativization of the relations of _____. Over against the traditional notion of the (art) work (improper), there is now the requirement of a new ~~object~~ (Art) Work (proper noun), obtained by the sliding or overturning of former categories. That ~~object~~ former categories is the text. I know the word is fashionable *(I am myself often led to use it)*, and therefore regarded by some with [redacted]; but that is exactly why I should like to remind myself of the principal propositions at the intersection of which I see the ~~text~~ (Art) ~~Object~~ Work standing. *In order, perhaps, to find the space between.* The word "proposition" is to be understood here more in a grammatical than in a logical sense: **the following are not argumentations, but enunciations, "touches" as it were,**

approaches that consent to remain ~~metaphorical~~ *surreal.* Here then are these propositions: they concern method, genres, signs, plurality, filiation, reading, and pleasure.

(1)

The ~~text~~ Work proper is not to be thought of as an object that can be computed. It would be futile to try to separate materially Works from texts. In particular, one must avoid the tendency to say: the Work is classic, the text avant-garde; the Work is ~~not a question of drawing up a crude honors list~~ in the name of [a new] modernity ~~and declaring certain literary productions "in" and others "out" by virtue of their chronological situation~~: [redacted] products of contemporary art improper are in no way Works. The difference is the following: the Work is a fragment of ~~substance~~, *the sublime, perhaps – I'm inclined to integrate notations on Kant, but the mention of his name seems adequate* ~~occupying a portion of the space of books (in a library, for example, and where I currently write this);~~ the text on the other hand is a ~~methodological field~~ noun improper. *And so, the text parallels art improper.* The opposition may recall (without at all reproducing term for term) Lacan's distinction between "reality" and "the real": the one is displayed, the other demonstrated *the Art Work is the space between* ['La realite se montre, le reel se de-montre']; the Work can [not always] be seen, ~~the Text is a~~ may be a process of demonstration, speaks according to certain rules (or against certain rules); the Work can be held in the hand, ~~the text is held~~ or in language, ~~only~~ may exist in the movement of discourse (or rather, it is Work for the reason that it knows itself as Work); Art is not the decomposition of art, it is art improper that is the imaginary tail of Art proper. Or again: The Work is experienced only in an activity of production. It follows that the Work cannot stop; its constitutive movement is that of cutting across *(the space between).*

(2)

In the same way, the Work does not stop at (good)[redacted]; it cannot be contained in a hierarchy, ~~even in a simple division of genres~~. What constitutes the Work is, on the contrary (or precisely), its subversive force in respect of the old [lack of] classifications (proper nouns). [redacted].
If the Work poses problems of classification *where is the space between?* (which ~~is furthermore one of its~~ should limit its "social" functions) this is because it always involves a certain experience of ~~limits~~ the sublime (to take up an expression from ~~Philippe Sollers~~ Kant). Thibaudet used to speak – but in a very restricted sense – of limit-works: **the Work is that which goes ~~to the limit of~~ beyond the rules of enunciation (rationality, readability, etc.)** [redacted] is this a rhetorical idea, [redacted] some "heroic" effect?: the Work tries to place itself very exactly be~~hind~~yond the limit of the doxa (is not general opinion—constitutive of our democratic societies and powerfully aided by mass communications—defined by its limits, its energy of exclusion, its censorship?)

(3)

The Work can be approached, experienced, in reaction to the Sign. The Work closes ~~on a signified~~ the gap between signifier and signified *(it is both).* There are two modes of signification which can be attributed to this ~~signified~~: either it is claimed to be evident and the work is then the object of ~~a literal science, of philology~~ tau-

tology; or else it is considered to be secret, ultimate, something to be sought out, and the work then falls under the scope of ~~a hermeneutics, of~~ [redacted] entities ***Stein***; in short, the Work itself functions as a Sign proper and it should not represent an institutional category of the civilization of the sign improper. The text, on the contrary, practices the infinite deferment of the signified, is dilatory; its field is that of the signifier and the signifier must not be conceived of as "the first stage of meaning," its material vestibule, but, in complete opposition to this, as its deferred action [apres-coup]. Similarly, the infinity of the signifier refers not to some idea of the ineffable (the unnameable signified) but to that of a ~~playing meaninglessness~~ identity not entity; the generation of the perpetual signifier in the field of the text (or better, of which the text is the field) is realized not according to an organic progress of maturation or a hermeneutic course of deepening investigation, but, rather, according to **a serial movement of disconnections, overlappings, variations**. The logic regulating the improper may be comprehensive (to define "what the work means"), or metonymic; the activity of associations, contiguities, cross-references coincides with a liberation of symbolic energy (*with only symbol* man would die): The Work (in the best of cases) is anti symbolic (~~its symbolic runs out~~, comes to a halt *its aim is to evade symbolism, the little dog - Stein*); the text is radically symbolic: a work conceived, perceived, and received in its integrally symbolic nature is a text (improper). Thus is the text restored to language; like language, it is structured but decentered, **without closure** (note [redacted] a system with neither end nor center) *(The proper: end and center)*

(4)

The Work is singular. Which is not simply to say that it has one meaning, but that it accomplishes ~~the very plural of meaning~~ ∞: an irreducible (and not merely an acceptable) singular. The Work is ~~not a coexistence~~ of meanings [redacted]; thus it answers not to an interpretation, even a liberal one, but to ~~an explosion, a dissemination itself.~~ The singular of the Work depends, that is, not on the ambiguity of its contents, but on what might be called [redacted] a lost dog. The reader of the Work may be compared to someone at ~~loose~~ wits ends (someone slackened off from the "~~imaginary~~" reality); this pass~~ably~~ively empty subject strolls (*it is what happened to the author of these lines, then it was that [s]he had a vivid idea of the Work*) on the side of a valley, an oued flowing down below (oued is there to attest to **a certain feeling of unfamiliarity** *Derrida*); what [s]he perceives is *text*: multiple, irreducible, coming from a disconnected, heterogeneous variety of substances and perspectives. All these incidents are identifiable; they come from codes which are known ~~but their combination is unique~~, founding the stroll in an ~~indifference~~ repeatable only as indifference. So the Work: it can be itself only in its difference (*the unidentifiable between*), its reading is semelfactive (this rendering illusory any inductive-deductive science ~~of texts~~ – no "grammar" of the Work) and never [redacted] woven ~~entirely~~ with citations, references, echoes: cultural languages (what language is not?), antecedent or contemporary, ~~which~~ the Work **traversenscends**: ~~it through and through in a vast~~ The interspace in which every Work is held, it itself being the in-between ~~of another text~~, is not to be confused with some origin: to try to find the "sources", the "influences" of a Work, is to fall in with the myth of filiation; the citations which go to make up a Work are ~~anonymous, untraceable~~ ∞ and its inverse, ~~and yet already read [deja-lues].~~ they are not quotations only quotation marks. The Work has nothing disturbing for any monistic philosophy; *for a Work is a sort of monistic philosophy: a singular knowing, but perhaps quiet in it*

~~plural is Evil~~. Against the Work, therefore, the text could well take as its motto the words of the man possessed by demons (Mark 5: 9): "My name is Legion: for we are many." **The demonic or plural texture which opposes text to Work** can bring with it fundamental changes in reading, *proper nouns possess, don't borrow* and precisely in areas where monologism appears to be the Law: certain of the "texts" of the Holy Scriptures traditionally recuperated by theological monism (historical or anagogical) will perhaps offer themselves to a diffraction of meanings (finally, that is to say, to a materialist reading), while the Marxist interpretation of works, so far resolutely monistic, will be able to materialize itself more by pluralizing itself (if, however, the Marxist "institutions" allow it).

(5)

The Work is caught up in a process of [redacted] self reflexivity: ~~Postulated here are: a determination of the work by the world (by race, then by History) a consecution of works amongst themselves~~, and the *onto- "being, to be*, I am" of the work by the Author. The Author is reputed the Father and the owner of his Work: literary science therefore teaches respect for the manuscript and the Author's [redacted], while society asserts the legality of the relation of author to work (the "droit d'auteur" or "copyright" is in fact fairly recent; it was only really legalized at the time of the French Revolution). As for the text *art improper*, it reads without the inscription of the Father. Here again, the metaphor of the improper separates from the metaphor of the proper: the latter refers to the image of an ~~**organism**~~ **(entity)** which grows by vital expansion, by "development" (a word which is ~~significantly ambiguous~~, at once biological and rhetorical, *a becoming*; the metaphor of the improper (text) is that of the network; if the (text) extends itself, it is a result of a **combinatory** systematic *a composite identity, of many* (~~an image, moreover, close to current biological conceptions of the living being~~). Hence, no vital "respect" is due to the text: it can be broken (which is just what the Middle Ages did with two nevertheless authoritative texts, the Holy Scriptures and Aristotle); it can be read without the guarantee of its Father, if only because it is a product of many, the restitution of the inter-text paradoxically abolishing any legacy .
It is not that the Author may not "come back" in the text, in his text, but he then does so only as a "guest" so to speak: [redacted] ludic. He becomes, as it were, a "paper-author": his life is no longer ~~the origin of his work~~ transcended by his Work (proper), but a ~~fiction~~ source contributing to his work; ~~there is a reversion of the work on to the life (and no longer the contrary)~~; it is the work of Proust, of Genet which allows their lives to be read as a text. The "bio-graphy" reacquires a strong, etymological sense, and at the same time, the sincerity of the enunciation – the veritable "cross" borne by ~~literary~~ morality – **becomes a false problem: the I which writes the (improper), it too, is never more than a paper I.**

(6)

The (art) work (improper) is normally the (digestible) object of consumption; I intend no demagogy here in referring to the so-called consumer culture, but it has to be recognized that today it is the quality of the work (which supposes finally an appreciation of "taste") and not the operation of reading itself which can differentiate between books: structurally, there is no difference between "cultured" reading and casual reading in trains. The Work (if only by its frequent "~~unreadability~~∞") decants the work (the work permitting) from its consumption ~~and gathers it up as play, activity, production, practice~~. This means that the Work requires that one try to ~~abolish~~

~~(or at the very least to diminish)~~ increase the distance between improper and proper *the everyday and Art* in no way by intensifying the projection of the Author onto the work but by joining them in a single signifying practice. [redacted] speeches, not texts). Significantly, ~~the coming of democracy improper~~ reversed the word of command: what was the ~~(secondary) School~~ critical prides itself on is teaching to ~~read~~ engage (well) and no longer to ~~write produce Author~~ define (consciousness of the deficiency is becoming fashionable again today: the teacher is called upon to teach pupils to "express themselves" which is a little like replacing a form of repression by a misconception). In fact, reading, in the sense of consuming, is far from ~~playing~~ (re) defining ~~with~~ the ~~text~~ Art (Work) (proper). ~~Playing~~ Definition must be understood here in all its [redacted] shades: the Work itself ~~plays~~ defines ~~(like a door, like a machine with "play")~~ *effects definition (a knowing) and defines itself* and the reader ~~defines~~ locates [redacted] the ~~definition~~outline of a between-space (sublimity) in the Work ~~as one plays a game~~, *looking for a knowing and un-knowing, difference and indifference (distinterestedness)* ~~but, in order that~~ the practice not be reduced to a passive, inner mimesis (the Work is precisely that which resists such a reduction), also: ~~playing~~ defining the Work in a musical sense of the term. [redacted] "listening" [redacted] to whom [redacted] who listens [redacted] today [redacted] radically altered [redacted] the score, [redacted] "expression." The Work is very much a score of this new kind: it asks of the reader a ~~practical collaboration listener? vital respect~~ experience. Which is an important change, ~~for who executes the work?~~ Nowadays only the ~~critic~~ institution executes the work (I admit the play on words). The reduction of ~~reading~~art to a ~~consumption~~institution is clearly responsible for the boredom experiences by many in the face of the ~~modern~~ contemporary (~~un~~readable) *digestible* text, the (post) avant-garde ~~film or painting~~: to be bored means that one can [redacted] produce the text, play it, open it out, set it going *meet it as an equal, a product of culture industry (Adorno)*

(7)

This leads us to pose (to propose) a final approach to the Work (proper noun): that of pleasure. I do not know whether there has ever been a hedonistic aesthetics (eudaemonist philosophies are themselves rare). Certainly there ~~exists a~~ pleasure of the improper (~~of certain works~~); I can delight in ~~reading and rereading Proust, Flaubert, Balzac, and even~~ *that which came before* – why not? – ~~Alexander Dumas~~. But this pleasure, no matter how keen and even when free from all prejudice, remains in part (unless by some exceptional critical effort) a pleasure from ~~consumption~~ before; for if I can ~~read these authors, I also know that I cannot~~ re-write them (that it is ~~im~~possible today to write "like that") and this knowledge, depressing enough, suffices to cut me off from the production of these works, in the very moment their ~~remoteness~~ plurality establishes my ~~boredom~~ ~~*interest in the Work*~~ (is not to be modern to know clearly what cannot be started over again?). The Work, ~~on the other hand~~, is not bound ~~to jouissance~~, that is, [redacted] a pleasure with~~out~~ separation *space between*. Order of the proper noun, the Work

participates in its own way in a [redacted] utopia; before History (supposing the latter does not opt for barbarism), the Work achieves, if not the transparency of ~~social relations~~ beyond-place and between-place, that at least of language relations: the Work is that **space** ~~where no language~~ [that] has a hold over any ~~other, where languages circulate (keeping the circular sense of the term)~~ ∞.

These few propositions, inevitably, do not constitute the articulations of a Theory of the Work. This is not simply the result of the failings of the person here presenting them (who in many respects has anyway done no more than pick up what is being developed round about *her*). Rather, it stems from the fact that a theory of the Work cannot be satisfied by a metalinguistic exposition: ~~the destruction of~~ it is its own ~~meta~~*language* *of aesthetics*~~, or at least (since it may be necessary provisionally to resort to metalanguage) its calling into doubt inaccuracy~~, is part of the theory itself: the discourse on the Work should itself be nothing other than Work, research, ~~textual activity~~ an informed discourse, since the Work is that ~~social space which leaves no language safe,~~ outside, ~~nor~~ any subject: ~~of the enunciation~~ [redacted] The theory of the Work can coincide only with a practice of ~~writing~~ autonomy.

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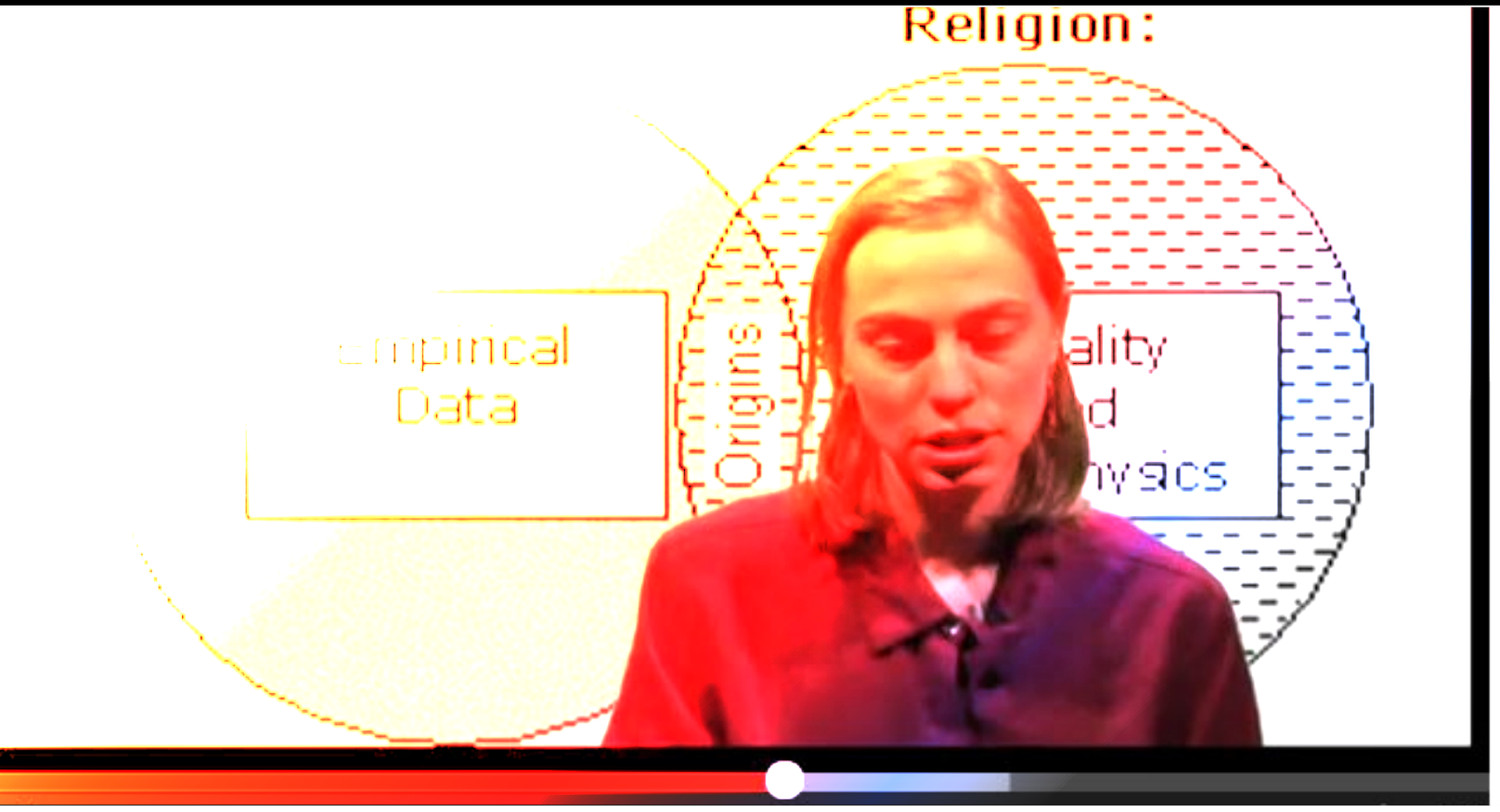
studies at Ontario College of Art & Design University (OCAD U) in Toronto. She finds romance in structured abstraction and (consequently) her research interests include semiotics and language, notions of autonomy in philosophy and theory, and locating 'space between'.

The Optics of Me



[Show tunes pumped through tiny speakers]
[Light wood and chrome]
[Distant din of a pinball machine]

Zeesy: We talked about this earlier... ...the problem of precision in anything...it's a bit of joke.

Zach: Empiricism was a really damaging thing that happened to Western history and culture, because it demands an absolute truth. Where does the line between coincidence and fact get drawn? It's almost absurd to hear you recount these really obvious examples [of environmental disasters], and still people deny them and respond with: "Well, we need empirical evidence that this is *actually* the case" Don't you just see it at that point? What happened to common sense? To logic or rational thinking?

But, what's the difference between empiricism and rational thinking?

Well, empiricism demands physical evidence. Rational thinking can still be a sort of abstraction in the way that logic has no particular shape or substance—it's theoretical. For example: The idea that if one sees light that there must be *something* emitting it. It's theoretical, but it's still logical. Empiricism, on the other hand, would say, "*Show me* exactly what is emitting the light and then I'll believe you. Prove it to me that this relationship is true."

Hmm... very interesting...

[Annoyingly high-pitched vocals rush in from the background]
[~Veruca Salt]

Maybe empiricism is just used as a crutch to allow shitty things to keep happening? Right? An empiricist would be like, "Oh. You know it's gonna be really expensive to do an empirical study of this thing." But that's really just a façade. It's an excuse to keep the machinery running.

...

Yeah. For sure. Science has to justify its own existence nowadays in the same way that Art does.

[lips smack]

Well, having worked for a research facility I can confirm that is very true. The process of applying for funding—to justify your existence—is very similar to the grant process of the art world, *except* that with Science you can draw on military funding. Whereas with Art...

[Laughing like an old, drunk sailor]

Well, obviously, we need to find ways to integrate Art into War! That's the key! (*sarcasm abounding*)

People *are* trying. There are definitely artists who profit off the Military.

In propaganda? In technology?

Both. There are definitely creative companies that are contracted by the military to develop training modules. And those visuals, those products are used to...well, indirectly, but to kill people...

[Ding!]

[A waft of fried onions unfurls from the kitchen]
[Radio silence]
[Gulp of beer]

So, first, I think it's important to establish how you view the relationship between aesthetics and politics, in general, and then more specifically in your own work. Many art historians, theorists and critics have argued that there is an inherent politic to the act of making art. Would you agree with that?

Sure. But, that politic depends so much on context. Where are you making this art? What are you making it out of? Under what conditions? And, of course, who is it for? Obviously, making art involves some degree of politics. But, it can become crippling to one's practice to have to think about that all the time. I think that the artists I admire most—their work, at it's core, is always about that... ...But the people who are doing it best are living very principled lives to achieve it. [I think] And I can't lay any claim to that. I'm pretty self-interested. I'm pretty 'normal' in that sense.

But that's still a political position. And as you're implying, if artists who are not making explicitly political work are becoming a minority, *that* becomes your subject position. It's what Deleuze was always talking about—this tarrying of the one and the many, and consequently what the idea of representation means when in-between those poles.

The optics of me—being who I am—doing things like telling people what I think of them [as performance art] is very specific. I'm a white lady who speaks really clean English. And I know that... ...So, that's [a position] being offered [in the artworks]. People don't necessarily have to know my personal history to know that I'm able to trade off of the way that I look. *As we all are.* We're all able to do that to a certain extent.

It's a funny time. Visible issues and perceptions of class are, right now, a really big setback for most people. When

in combination with other kinds of cultural barriers, especially language, or even more basic things like the nationality printed on your passport, it can create incredible hurdles. At the same time, they're not insurmountable. I still think there's an immense amount of room for people to play with their identities and gain from that.

If you can speak in a polished way, present yourself in a polished way, speak polished English...and I don't just mean speak 'English'. I mean speaking particular types of English—any language for that matter—it's crucial to gaining access to different areas of a culture.

With this project (***I Will Tell You Exactly What I Think Of You***), I perform it in a lot of different contexts. But, for the most part, I perform it in galleries or other fine art contexts. And, generally, my audience and the people who eventually are drawn into participating in the piece come from the art world or have an affiliation. They have knowledge of particular ways of speaking and presenting themselves. Or, there have been a lot of people from areas like philosophy and psychology. And I am not an expert in any of those...

That depends on if you even believe in 'experts'...

True. But I would also not describe myself as a person who has engaged in these fields with exceptional rigour. Ha, ha, ha!

[Some curmudgeon is yelling]
[Johnny Cash is strumming on the TV beside me.]

So, let's talk more about this body of work then: *I Will Tell You Exactly What I Think Of You* is an ongoing series of performances that involve you expressing what could be deemed a litany of first impressions in the form of a monologue about a (supposedly) total stranger. You began it as a one-on-one 'service' for a nominal fee, and then a live public performance piece and more recently adapted to a series of video performances, several of which you've published to your YouTube channel. In the video facet of the project you turn the camera on yourself and project a montage of what seem like random images behind you. However, in the live performance documentation you point the camera at the participant. Can you talk about how you came to that decision, and what is significant about the difference between these two formats?

I guess with this project—at its core—it doesn't matter what iteration it's gone through...each time, the participant is basically voiceless.

♫ I don't wanna ... ♫
♫ I don't want your love ♫

At every stage of it, when the participant attempts to respond I have to remind them that it's not actually about them. It's not about that. I don't actually care who they are or what they do for a living (unless I know them). But, even then—even in that context—it's still a one-way street. So, when the camera's turned on me, the person I'm talking about is always me. It's not actually the person who's participating.

[Is anyone participating?]

And by having the video on me I'm not really 'outing' anyone but myself. Maybe I am a little bit...if they understand that I'm doing this to make a 'public artwork'. But, even in the live version that I did for the **Power Plant**, when I chose to turn the camera onto the participants, they were still voiceless. But, what I had to say about them wasn't included either. The piece was really about capturing their reactions. Some people went as far as to perform themselves not caring. Some people didn't have that level of self-consciousness—they just let themselves receive. Sometimes with very gentle, good humour. Sometimes shocked and appalled. But all these people have consented to this process. They all have to sign a little piece of paper before they can be on camera.

Do you think they're even listening to you?

Yeah. It's crazy. I'm honestly waiting for the day when nobody is willing to do this piece...

On your website you've posted a few observations or 'reflections' about this series. And you said that once a woman started crying when you said that she looked poor.

Yeah. That was a performance that I did last year in the Bronx. And I was really nervous about this. I thought: New York art, New York audience; very sophisticated; they're going to be very blazé about this...not at all the case... And these uncomfortable moments come with the territory. A lot of my projects involve working with people in vulnerable positions, or I'm intentionally placing people in vulnerable situations. You know: "I Will Tell You Exactly What I Think Of You"—that already sounds like you're putting yourself in a vulnerable state. I occasionally do a project that's a little bit more complex called, ***Subjects***. It's a project that very clearly makes people uncomfortable. And it *should*. I don't want people to participate who don't understand that aspect or aren't prepared for it. And, the first time I shot the project there were a couple of people involved that it would be really easy to just look at them and listen to how they would describe themselves and to jot down a couple of obvious bullet points about who this person was, you would say, "Oh. Obviously. Vulnerable person!"

[Flailing imaginary arms, like a drowning man at sea]

And they saw this as a platform to explain how they had been victimized. Yet, at the same time, they understood what it meant to be victimized by the system. It was a very transparent act.

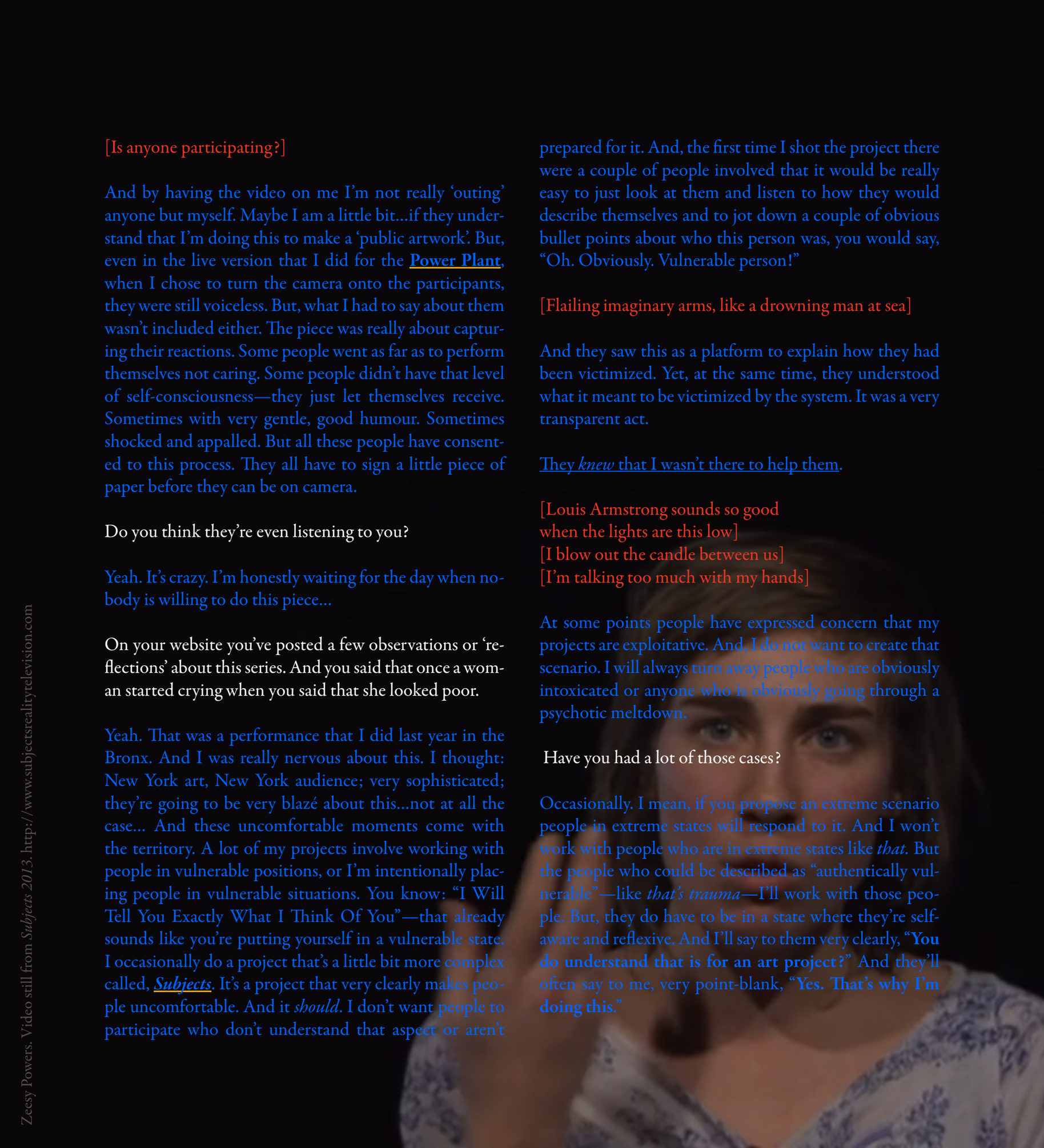
They *knew* that I wasn't there to help them.

[Louis Armstrong sounds so good
when the lights are this low]
[I blow out the candle between us]
[I'm talking too much with my hands]

At some points people have expressed concern that my projects are exploitative. And, I do not want to create that scenario. I will always turn away people who are obviously intoxicated or anyone who is obviously going through a psychotic meltdown.

Have you had a lot of those cases?

Occasionally. I mean, if you propose an extreme scenario people in extreme states will respond to it. And I won't work with people who are in extreme states like *that*. But the people who could be described as "authentically vulnerable"—like *that's trauma*—I'll work with those people. But, they do have to be in a state where they're self-aware and reflexive. And I'll say to them very clearly, "**You do understand that is for an art project?**" And they'll often say to me, very point-blank, "**Yes. That's why I'm doing this.**"



Zeesy Powers. Video still from *Subjects 2013*. http://www.subjectsrealitytelevision.com

The flipside of that is that I've also found there are people who come in and are like, "Oh yeah. Art. I'll do you a favour and *help you* with your 'art project'". Sometimes, those are the people who have no awareness of what they've gotten themselves into...

Once there was this woman who came in with her two friends. She was a social worker—highly trained—and suddenly she admitted something on camera that not even her closest friends had known. I ended up being the first person she had actually *ever* told. I had to stop her and say, "Do you understand that this is on film. I'm going to include this in a publicly accessible art project?" And she also had to stop—actually stop—and consider that reality for the first time, despite all the processes I had set up to make the nature of the work very explicit.

Do you think that she was conscious in that moment, when she confessed that? I'm asking because I'm wondering if it's really that people are compelled to confess secrets in front of strangers or that the camera somehow has a seductive power or urgency behind it that pushes people to expose themselves?

I've heard that about the camera before. I don't necessarily agree with it. But, over the past five years we've seen this increasing ubiquity of cameras in our society. There's so many cameras that it's gotten to the point where even if it is on film there's no guarantee that anyone's going to actually see the footage.

[A mug clinks against the table]
[My scarf is pooling on the lint-ridden floor]

And, in a circumstance like that, I really do think it has more to do with the kind of people who choose to engage. The people who have lived their lives understanding that they fall into a category of 'vulnerable people' understand what it really means to be a victim. Extremely cognizant of what it means to give a statement—on camera, to the police, to a social worker. They understand what this process means. And, now to be in a scenario where they have total agency over that process...

Do they have *complete agency,* though?

Well...

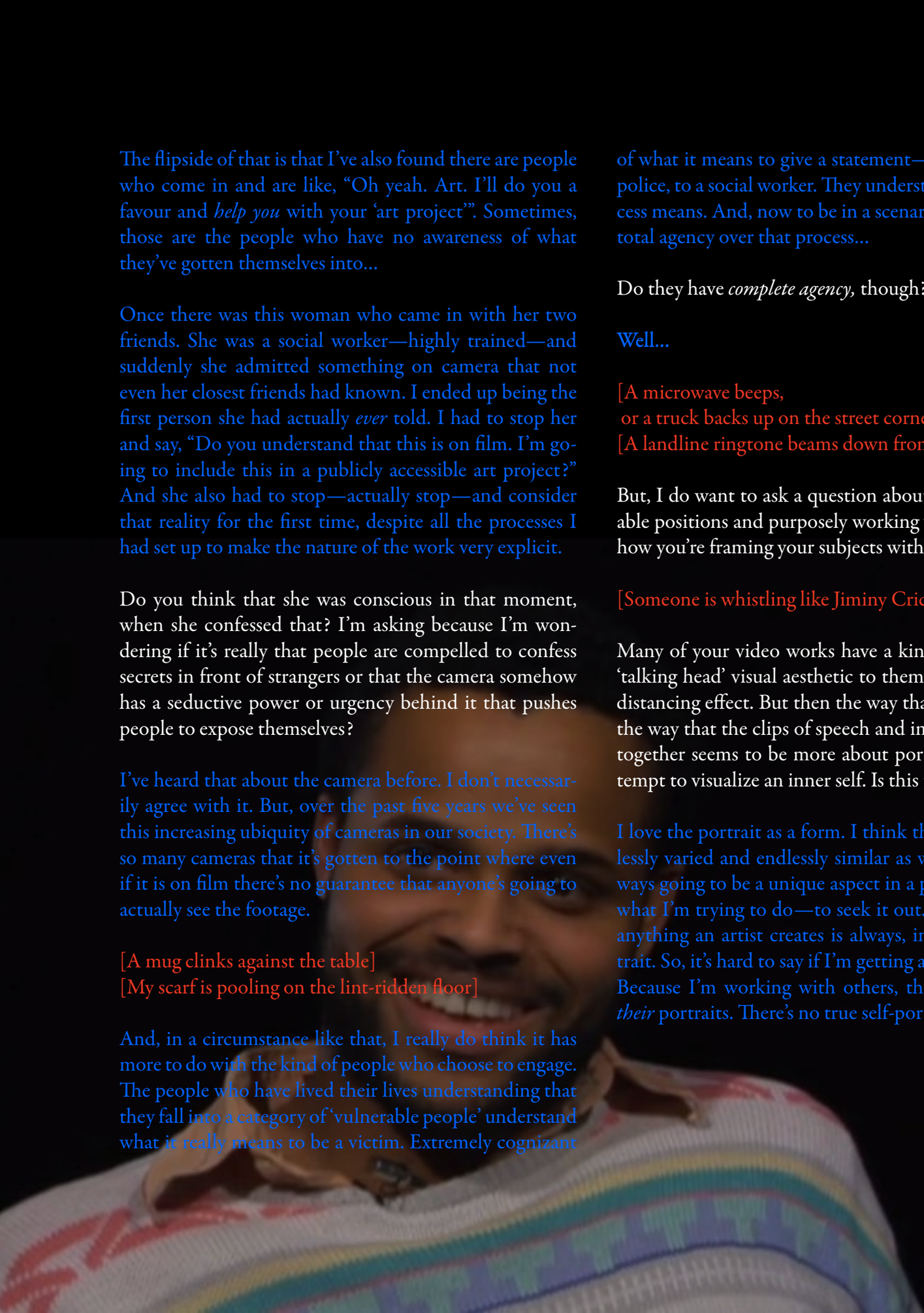
[A microwave beeps,
or a truck backs up on the street corner]
[A landline ringtone beams down from a satellite]

But, I do want to ask a question about people in vulnerable positions and purposely working with that, and also how you're framing your subjects with the camera...

[Someone is whistling like Jiminy Cricket]

Many of your video works have a kind of 'interview' or 'talking head' visual aesthetic to them, which can have a distancing effect. But then the way that you edit them—the way that the clips of speech and image actually come together seems to be more about portraiture and an attempt to visualize an inner self. Is this the goal?

I love the portrait as a form. I think that people are endlessly varied and endlessly similar as well. But there's always going to be a unique aspect in a person. And that is what I'm trying to do—to seek it out. I also believe that anything an artist creates is always, in a way, a self-portrait. So, it's hard to say if I'm getting an accurate picture. Because I'm working with others, the projects are also *their* portraits. There's no true self-portrait.



Zeesy Powers. Video still from *Subjects 2013*. http://www.subjectsrealitytelevision.com

We have our inner life. And then there's the way that others perceive us. But then there's something in between—how we integrate and fit into our surroundings. How we function as social beings. And in some ways, I feel like my practice is an extended learning of becoming self-critical, and in a constructive way—a challenge to see outside of myself but not be detached from it. There's an opportunity there for a group portraiture, or a collective portraiture, or a kind of dual portrait that one can create, if you're open to recognizing it. I feel that's an important dimension to explore.

[Welcome pause]
[Swig of beer]

Sorry... [nervous laughter] I just wanted to check the time... I don't wanna draw this out past its due...

No, no, no. Let's keep going.

[Ding!]

Zeesy Powers

Zeesy Powers is a Toronto-based interdisciplinary artist. She graduated from OCAD without a major and has consistently produced compelling works of art. Her artwork spans various mediums including video, performance and drawing and painting. Her work has been showcased in Toronto, Germany, Japan and the United States. Her talk show *Breakfast with Zeesy* featured interviews with artists, musicians, activists and family members. Since 2007, her project *I Will Tell You Exactly What I Think of You* has been performed in Berlin, Los Angeles, Montreal, New York and Toronto, and will be mounted again this spring in Vancouver. She is currently in development for *Common Fate*, a new projection work for ten dancers.

http://zeesypowers.com

PENNY LEONG BROWNE

Thy Lovely Stain:
The Aesthetics of the Abject and its Faint Representation

The abject is the quality of things or the things themselves that we refuse as refuse— waste to discard, to forget. (As if it was possible.) Rejected from within, from mind and matter, the abject is origin "rejected." From Latin: *abjectus*, past participle of *abicere* 'to reject.' (1) Attempts to discard the matter of mind; the state of things that defy Beauty and Truth—these are futile in the insistence of the abject. As much as it is refused, it refuses to be ignored. Throwaway it is not. The abject stares at us in the face, refusing to be refused. So we are forced to confront the abject, the undesired, uncomfortable, disturbing nature of being and things. (2) Against our instinct for self-preservation of the ego subjective, "I," the abject is the confrontation of the Other, releasing the intersubjectivity of "We" and thus infinite possibilities—the Virtual Self. The Other is within us, inseparable—as the mirror image renders not "I" but inflects many selves, many states of being human. As such, the hegemony of Beauty gives way to the heterogeneity of the unbeautiful. Oh, such beautiful mash ups, intertwinings, random deviations there are.

To acknowledge the abject is to accept our own vulnerability as mortal, human creatures. The Otherness of body: Destructible flesh and organs. Soft and wet. Living matter against the inanimate. Wetware. The cyborgian monsters of Haraway. (3) The matter of life *becoming* through the abject—the deterioration, decay, and death of our human selves, becoming the impossible death of representation.

Possible death, as matter that inflects, does not have a double image. Yet to refuse its representation is to fold the abject upon itself. A transcoding of light that deforms, mutates or interrupts its reflection. Without its double, a re-presentation of death becomes possible again, even if only faintly so...

There is a boy with a rose unfurling on his cheek. A red stain that marks his flesh, unmistakably, undeniably his own. "[A] rose is a rose is a rose is a rose" is not a rose, as it is the bloom of the un-beautiful. (4) This is Beauty neither opposed or negated but *un-made.* The denied "rose" — it is not the thing it says. Denied itself from birth yet persistently present.

Therein also lies the unwritten object— unwittingly, the thing Other to itself that is foreign yet strangely familiar. A Freudian dream of the Uncanny. Marble cubes, thermometer, cuttlebone and a painted metal birdcage –– a display of beautiful refusals. (5) Within the questioning title of Duchamp's still-life assemblage ***Why Not Sneeze, Rose Sélavy?*** could be a statement of bricolage posing as abject becoming.

This uncanny un-beautiful is the abject that cannot be ignored, as it is ever present—latent, or in full bloom within the states of matter or in matter itself. Carbon of dirt, water, plant, animal, insect, silver, trees, ash, meteor, lava, rock, skin, blood, flesh, hair, shell or bone. Alive or inanimate, the possession of the abject is absolute. Forever reformulating, remixing or reconfiguring in the present, the abject owns neither a past nor an origin, and therefore cannot be forgotten. The Frankenstein of matter—the abject is the monster that haunts our earthly dreams.

Life, intermingling with inanimate matter.
Objectness of our human selves.

Monstrous, yet nevertheless a most gracious monstrosity,
the abject embraces vulnerability and imperfection.

The abject is incomplete. It is enthralled in the process of its own becoming. Decay in and unto itself—carbon matter deteriorating into ash and returning to carbon again. Indefinite and indefinable.

The abject reveals itself only in surprise. Its condition of appearing is unpredictability. Never to appear the same, the abject is a hallmark of its own originality. The rose blemish on the boy's face is the original mark of a person. A DNA tattoo programmed cellular and inked in blood vessels. Animate matter.

The stains I apply with oil and ash onto various surfaces of drywall, graph paper or canvas can only be produced by abandoning them. The initial act of placing the oil or ash water on paper begins the process. The stain is set in motion, bleeding slowly or quickly, depending on the viscosities of the oil and water. Interrupted by the grit of ash dust, it can take another course. Reaching the edge of the planar surface it blossoms, *appearing* authentically, a stain of its own becoming. By my very human hand however, I sometimes relent to the temptation of control, placing the angle of a brush or sponge at its wet edge. I attempt to coax the stain towards a particular direction, transparency or configuration. I remain, however, cautious. Even a sleight of hand can arrest its becoming. This strange flower, the rose-denied, never to blossom. A stillborn stain. The phantom of abjectness.

Yet, if this strange flower is left to abandon, to blossom in its own uncanny (un)beauty, it will appear to us inevitably monstrous and alien. In spite of our inculcated desire for beauty we *can* be seduced, to love thy lovely stain.

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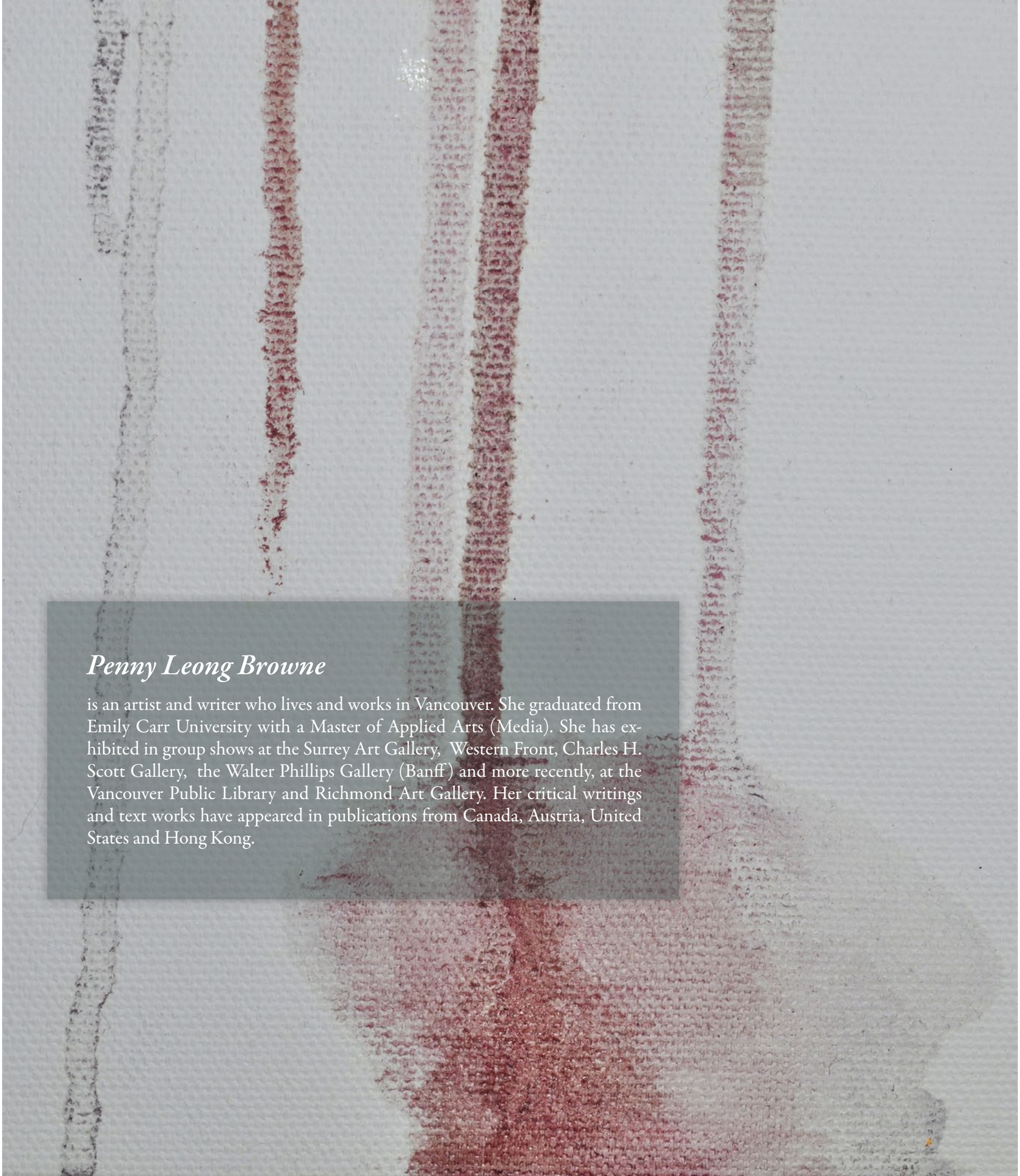

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is an artist and writer who lives and works in Vancouver. She graduated from Emily Carr University with a Master of Applied Arts (Media). She has exhibited in group shows at the Surrey Art Gallery, Western Front, Charles H. Scott Gallery, the Walter Phillips Gallery (Banff) and more recently, at the Vancouver Public Library and Richmond Art Gallery. Her critical writings and text works have appeared in publications from Canada, Austria, United States and Hong Kong.