

Faculty of Design

2016

## Kapsula

Pearl, Zach, LeBlanc, Lindsay, England, Sara, Terziyska, Yoli, Morgan-Feir, Caoimhe, Granados, Francisco-Fernando, Dennis, Katherine, Smith, Deirdre, Fiedrich, Kristina and Cooley, Alison

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### Suggested citation:

Pearl, Zach, LeBlanc, Lindsay, England, Sara, Terziyska, Yoli, Morgan-Feir, Caoimhe, Granados, Francisco-Fernando, Dennis, Katherine, Smith, Deirdre, Fiedrich, Kristina and Cooley, Alison (2016) Kapsula. Good measure, 2 of 3, 3 . KAPSULA PRESS, Toronto, Canada. Available at <https://openresearch.ocadu.ca/id/eprint/962/>

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WELCOME

GOOD  
MEASURE

2/3

FEBRUARY 2016





## PRODUCTION

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20 September 2014, 11:56:31

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ISSN 2292-7204  
KAPSULA PRESS

44 Hedges Boulevard | Toronto, ON M9B 3C4

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# BODY BY NUMBERS

## PROLOGUE

Data has a subjective dimension—or, perhaps more accurately, many subjective dimensions that feed into the way it's generated, circulated, and interpreted. In this issue of GOOD MEASURE, we observe the production of the subject by data, which codifies the body to become a legible sign within the system. This coding of the body exceeds any particular politic, but often manifests as race, gender, and other inherently discriminatory categorizations of individuals. Undoubtedly, the tendency to process bodily information in an effort to draw certain overarching conclusions about a population, society, or culture-at-large has material consequences for the individuals that fall within the purview of those conclusions. No matter the function of the unmarked, one can argue that there may be no alternative.

Although global, systemic infrastructure works to reinforce the authority of biodata, which then reinforces the distinctions that make data legible (from an anthropological perspective), the use of data to control bodies comes with blind spots. The irony of the intensely personal resonances of supposedly objective or impartial information has not been lost on the contributors in this issue, who look at three examples of artists disrupting the program: In one instance, the body becomes institutionalized in the form of an art object, not only determining what specific types of bodies are accepted by specific institutions, but also looking differently at processes of accumulation, collection, and preservation. The marginalized body gets reduced to trace, both refus-

ing its marked-ness while maintaining a specificity—namely, the specificity of the individual. From an alternate but not necessarily opposing perspective, the presumed singularity of the subjective body (rather than the body that feeds the anthropological corpus) falls under close scrutiny. Really—you'll need a closer look. Part of data's authoritative guise comes from the assumption that, in the scientific sphere, fact reigns over fiction. But what happens when this dynamic is reversed? Or when fact and fiction become indistinguishable? Yet again, the supposed objectivity of biodata and its applications softens like the tissue it touts.

The implementations of data, and biodata especially, are not always pointing to a top-down operation. We engage in acts of self-policing, or policing others, demanding a certain compliance with the hegemonic (and yes, top-down) influence. In the final article of this issue, part of KAPSULA's recently launched column *Alongside Interpretation*, the politics of biodata begets a discussion about when the interpretive act collides with the act of surveillance. Manipulation does not always come packaged and labelled as itself, as a sell; sometimes, we don't know what hit us until we're outside the looking glass. If we're to learn any particular lesson from these perspectives on GOOD MEASURE, it is this: the state of something unseen is not the same as something invisible—and this delicate suppression depends on the *integrity of face*, the everchanging surface onto which information maps itself.

# *Death as Catalysis*

## Adrian Piper's *What Will Become of Me*

DEIRDRE SMITH

Adrian Piper's *What Will Become of Me* consists of twelve honey jars filled with hair, arranged in a row on a wooden shelf. Moving left to right, the hair in the first three or four jars is black, while the rest contain increasing quantities of grey hair. Adjacent are two smaller jars, one holding yellowed slivers of fingernails and the other flecks of dried skin. Two framed, typewritten documents give context to the presentation of these bodily artifacts. On the left, a signed statement from Piper describes a series of hardships she experienced in 1985—the year she initiated the work. Her marriage started falling apart in January. Her father passed away from cancer in April. In December, Piper was denied tenure at the University of Michigan, where she had been appointed an assistant professor of philosophy. Concluding the statement, Piper writes, "I felt sure that if I could just hold myself together long enough to escape from Ann Arbor, I'd be all right."

The second document, titled "Statement of Intent," is dated and signed September 20, 1989, four years after the start of the work. Brief and declarative, it reads: "The final form of this piece will comprise the statement, 'What Will Become of Me,' together with honey jars storing my hair, nails, and skin collected from 1 December 1985 to my death, plus my cremated ashes. I intend to donate this work to the Museum of Modern Art." The bottom left of the document bears the seal of a Maryland notary, making the work a potentially legally binding agreement between Adrian Piper and its now owner, the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA).

The incomplete nature of the artwork begs a question: Will Piper really go through with this? The fact that she has continued to add items for the past thirty years indicates that she might. Photographs taken between 1993 and present day register the passage of time through



the accumulation of jars, and the change in hair color noted above. If the artist does send her ashes to MoMA, the institution will face new questions that have previously been the purview of archeologists and others more accustomed to navigating the ethical sensitivities of storing and displaying human remains. The museum will have to negotiate two responsibilities: one to show respect to Piper's memory in its curatorial, educational and art handling practices, and the other to care for her remains as an object, applying to them the same administrative procedures used to manage the rest of its collection. Chillingly, Piper's remains may be assigned an alphanumeric accession number, and a description of them will be added to the medium line on wall labels and object reports. If accepted as part of the artwork, Piper's ashes may at some point be stored on a shelf or in a vault.

Rather than dwelling on these hypothetical and museological questions, the present study concerns the interpretive issues raised by *What Will Become of Me*. In its completed form, how would such a work function in the galleries of MoMA: as a memorial, an oddity, or a singular work of art by a respected figure? Would someone critiquing its status or quality as art be immediately accused of disrespect? *What Will Become of Me* is an example of a "difficult" artwork as described by Jennifer Doyle in her book *Hold it Against Me* (Doyle 2013). Doyle defines difficult works as those that create dense fields of affect for the viewer (experiences of ambivalent, emotional intensity), as well as what she calls "contradictory effects" that make interpretation challenging—often as a result of the work's engagement with identity and controversy (Doyle 2013, x). Doyle does not aim to resolve or overcome the difficulty of her subjects, but rather to recognize the significance of their perplexity.

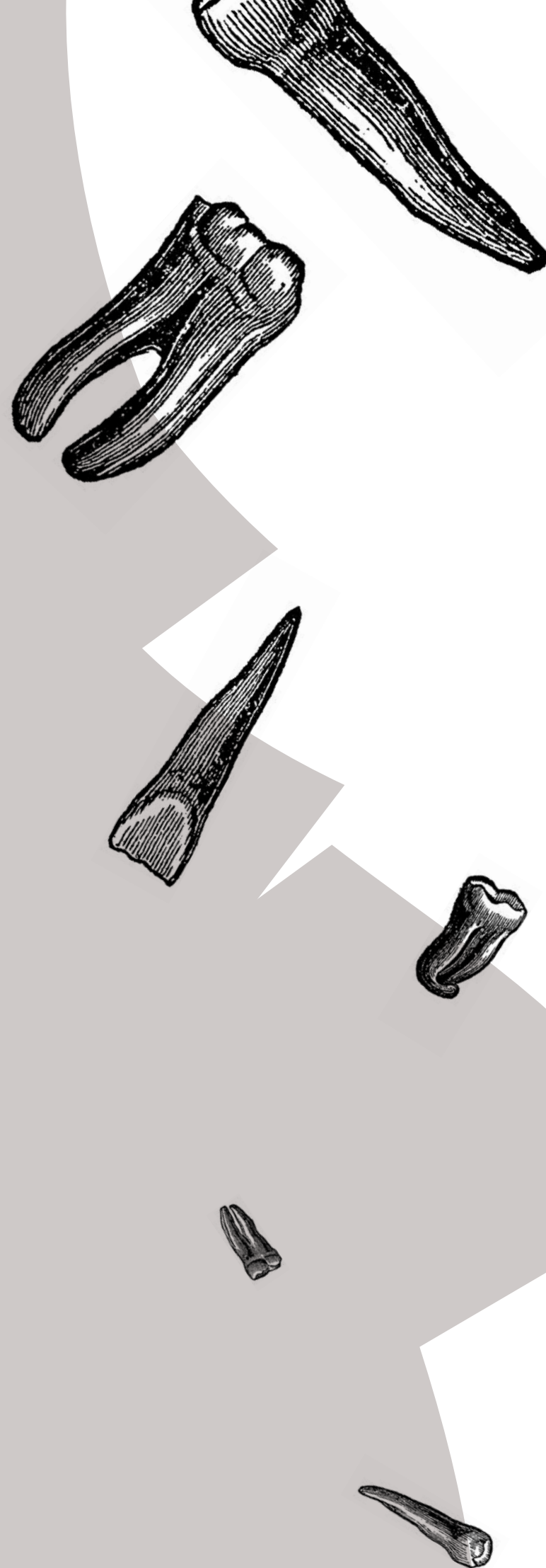
The contradictory effects and difficulties of *What Will Become of Me* are many. The legalistic language of the notarized form deflects the intense sadness of the information in the first statement. The restrained, minimal display of the work contrasts the biological artifacts presented.





Experiences of *What Will Become of Me* could easily be overpowered by the strangeness of an artist donating her bodily remains to a museum, or repulsion at the sight of hair and fingernails in jars. Moreover, the work does not fit neatly within narratives about Piper, best known for her performance actions from the 1970s that powerfully examine experiences of embodied alterity in public space with the aim of challenging and overcoming xenophobia. Perhaps for these reasons, *What Will Become of Me* has not received significant scholarly treatment to date.

This study offers a context for, and analysis of, *What Will Become of Me* in terms of Piper's broader career and her concept of "art as catalysis" (works that act as inducements for social change and reaction by presenting the artist's body as an art object) (Piper 1996, 32), as well as the history of conceptualism to which Piper's artwork belongs. One may fairly argue that the term "conceptualism" has been stretched to the point of now being ineffectual and that arguing about whether or not an artwork or artist are conceptual is moot. Borrowing from Rogers Brubaker and Frederick Cooper's arguments about the word "identity," conceptualism has been strained simultaneously by its "strong" uses (those evoking a specific form of philosophically-engaged practice involving text, numbers and grids) and "weak" ones (those that attempt to expand "conceptualism" using this or that qualifier, while ultimately remaining beholden to its "strong" definition). Insofar as the term remains useful, it unites a variety of intellectual, experimental impulses in art making that can be firmly associated with a particular moment (the late 1960s and 1970s). It is in that sense, and for the reason that Piper herself has identified with the term, that it will be referred to in this paper. While early critics discussed conceptualism's restrictive pursuit of objectivity and anti-humanist deskilling, scholars have subsequently understood conceptualism as also containing expansive and emotional aims. Here I argue that projects like *What Will Become of Me* show how concep-



tualist methods may have been used to manage emotionally fraught matters of life and death. In addition to Doyle, I will reference other theorists of affect in proposing a new understanding of Piper's work, including Ann Cvetkovich and her notion of an *archive of feelings* (Cvetkovich 2003).

Before proceeding, I would like to briefly acknowledge the ways that Piper herself can be a difficult subject, and why *What Will Become of Me* provides an important case study today. Recognized as one of the most significant artists of her generation, Piper has also at times been marginalized—a topic she has written about at length and attributes directly to racism and sexism . In 2008, while a tenured professor of philosophy at Wellesley College, Piper was placed on a suspicious traveler list. She refused to return to the United States from Berlin as long as she was on the list, and her position at the college was terminated as a result. Piper does not grant interviews or public talks about her artwork (although she continues to publish and speak as an academic) . Her papers at the Archives of American Art are currently closed.

In 2013, Piper requested that materials from her *Mythic Being* performance series be removed from an NYU Grey Art Gallery exhibition titled *Radical Presence: Black Performance in Contemporary Art*. Piper wrote a letter to curator Valerie Cassel Oliver explaining that, while she appreciated Oliver's intentions, a better way to celebrate her art would have been to place it in a multi-ethnic exhibition alongside a diversity of her peers (Cembalest 2013). Because of these previous incidents and restrictions, writing on Piper can be intimidating. Standing in the presence of *What Will Become of Me* provides an odd feeling of closeness to the enigmatic Piper that the artist herself withholds.

...

Piper began practicing as a conceptualist in the late

1960s while studying at the School of Visual Arts in New York. Her writings from that period convey a palpable sense of excitement regarding this development. Piper cites Sol LeWitt as influencing her belief in the primary importance of developing an art idea over the physical execution of an object . Her early conceptual projects involved explorations of time, space, and systems of representation—often exposing the contingency of human experience and knowledge. Piper describes her approach in a wordy letter to Terry Atkinson from 1969: "My present work is involved with using the boundaries of specific elements of time and/or space as limitations on the infinite number of possible permutations of these elements, implied by the structure of the language used to identify them" (Piper 1996, 15).

Several of Piper's early works followed a format of verbally outlining the scope and intention of a project, then providing various forms of documentation and analysis of the execution of that project as the finished piece. In *Untitled (Elements: Wristwatch A, Wristwatch B)* from 1968, Piper drafts a plan for a work involving two wristwatches, each a different brand, to be synchronized at an arbitrary time and then rewound at twelve hour intervals. The work would proceed until the watches had fallen out of sync by twelve hours. The project conforms to early New York conceptualist aesthetics in form and content. The proposal for the work is expressed in plain language on a typewritten sheet. On one level an elementary experiment, *Untitled* also has wider philosophical aspirations in demonstrating the organic imprecision of mechanical timekeeping.

I argue that one way to understand *What Will Become of Me* is to say that through it Piper came to terms with an emotionally trying period by processing the intensity of her feelings using the ostensibly rational matrix of a conceptual prompt. The results were awkward and incomplete. In the same manner that she discussed wristwatches in 1968, Piper enumerates the details of her experiences in 1985, and articulates a course of action to



follow. She contrives a plan, with a specific form and duration: to collect her hair, skin and fingernails until her death. Each time Piper fills a jar of hair and sends it to join the rest of the work, a measurement of her distance from the events of 1985 can be registered.

The words “plus my cremated ashes” are tagged onto Piper’s statement of intent in nonchalant fashion. The fact of death is thus reduced to another event in a sequence, while also understood as a certainty. The title of the work possibly references an eighteenth-century Methodist hymn by Charles Wesley, later transcribed as a popular shape note song titled “Idumea” by Ananias Davisson. The lyrics begin plaintively, questioningly, “And am I born to die? To lay this body down?” Several lines on, the phrase “What will become of me?” appears, usually written with a question mark: “Soon as from earth I go *What will become of me? Eternal happiness or woe must then my fortune be.*” Piper noticeably drops the question mark, turning the words into an affirmative statement; but as certain as the document looks and feels it does not seek to answer the unknowable questions that accompany matters of life and death.

In contrast to *Untitled*, there is no immediately graspable philosophical point or premise to the work. While the artist refers to the project as a “self-collection,” I would like to suggest that *What Will Become of Me* can also be considered an *archive of feelings*. In her eponymous book, Ann Cvetkovich uses this phrase to discuss a variety of cultural texts that act as “repositories of feelings and emotions,” where feelings are not only visible or accessible in the content of the text, but also in the practices of its creation (Cvetkovich 2003, 7). Focusing largely on queer public culture, Cvetkovich wants to view affect, and the affect associated with trauma, as the basis of public culture, thereby blurring the distinction between personal and public, emotional and political. She defines trauma broadly, intentionally working against both its medicalization and the tendency to privilege large-scale public tragedy as the only kind of

national trauma (diminishing the significance of individual experiences).

*What Will Become of Me* archives Piper’s life since 1985 in ways that are visible and invisible, spoken and unspoken. From the time she started the work, although her body continued to change and age, its material traces were not only collected and archived in a single location, but also cared for as an artwork. *What Will Become of Me*’s power derives in part from the fact that the items in the jars are witnesses to the events and changes that have shaped Piper’s personal life over the last thirty years, although the viewer’s relationship to these events and objects is inarticulate.

Although the look and scope of *What Will Become of Me* (if not the feelings it engenders) fit within a trajectory of Piper’s early conceptualist prompts, it cannot be as easily incorporated within the practices that dominated Piper’s art in the intervening years between 1968 and 1985. This period can be characterized by Piper’s idea of “art as catalysis” (Piper 1996, 32). According to Piper, when her increasing awareness of the war in Vietnam and civil rights struggles at home caused her to question her early work’s tendency toward abstraction, she started doing performances on the street that aimed to serve as catalytic experiences for passersby. At the same time, she acknowledged with disappointment and frustration that many of the artists and curators who had seen and respected her earlier artworks exploring time, space and language had assumed from her name and practice that she was a white man. Piper found herself alienated and rejected by these individuals when they met her and saw that she was in fact a woman of colour.

In chemistry, a catalyst is a material agent that effects a reaction without being consumed or changed itself in the process. In Piper’s essay “Art as Catalysis,” she writes that in this form of artmaking, “The stronger the work, the stronger its impact and the more total (physiological, psychological, intellectual, etc.) the reaction of the

viewer” (Piper 1996, 32). Piper posited that the greatest impact came from direct contact between people and initiated a series of performances in public. Summarizing Piper’s shift to body-oriented art practices in a book about performance art and the politics of identity, Cherise Smith writes, “If aspects of her visual appearance, physical embodiment, and lived experience as an artist, woman, and black determined how she was treated, then she would make those identifications and the viewer’s perception of them her aesthetic and political focus” (Smith 2011, 40).

Piper initiated a series of performances with the name *Catalysis* in 1970 through 1971 in which she altered her appearance, making herself strange or even repugnant before engaging in everyday activities in New York that would allow her to be seen by and interact with large groups of people. In *Catalysis III*, for example, Piper coated her clothing in white house paint, wore a sign that read “Wet Paint” and then went shopping at Macy’s for gloves and sunglasses. Existing simultaneously as another person on the street and an unannounced art object, Piper recorded the often hostile reactions of the people she encountered in text and image. In one photograph of the work, Piper’s expression appears resolutely blank, as she moves through a small group of women in front of a shoe store. All seven of the women in the photograph adjust their bodies to stare at Piper and appear to distance themselves from her.

In the 1970s and into the 1980s, Piper explicitly focused on challenging racial stereotypes as the change she wanted to effect. In her *Mythic Being* performance series, Piper assumed the identity of a black, male alter ego on the street and in a series of correspondent photo and text works. In an Afro wig, a moustache, jeans and a t-shirt, Piper performed activities such as going to openings, the movies, and the opera. She also photographed herself “cruising white women” and in a staged altercation with a white man. As with the *Catalysis* series, *Mythic Being* sought to test the reactions of a public in relation

to Piper’s self-presentation—in this case as a figure that was feared and hated, while simultaneously associated with sexual prowess and cultural capital.

The *Mythic Being* series also had an impact and purpose for Piper as a subject. As a result of the work, she experienced the freedoms associated with masculinity. She writes about enjoying spreading her legs and creating space for her body in public. She also encountered objectification as a visible minority male. Into the 1980s, Piper worked on multidisciplinary art projects highlighting her personal experiences of racism using illustration, text, and photographs. Piper is light-skinned, and members of her father’s family have chosen to live as white (though her father refused). Growing up in Harlem, Piper recalls that black children assumed she was white and ridiculed her, and white adults either mocked and humiliated her as a racial other, or accused her of lying about her identity.

As her work changed radically in appearance, Piper continued to call herself a conceptualist. She wrote that, for her, conceptualism was an art form that subordinated the finished work to the initial idea, creating flexible formal parameters that could prevent her from being pigeonholed as an artist and allow her political content to dominate (Piper 1996, 249). Nonetheless, Piper has often been pigeonholed. Since much of her art starting in the 1970s focuses on race, and since she herself is a person of colour, her works are sometimes reductively interpreted as diaristic and only readable in the context of a discussion of herself or her identity. The MoMA’s explanation of *What Will Become of Me* on its website echoes this simplification: “As both an African American and a woman---two groups that have traditionally been marginalized in the history of art---she is literally inserting herself into the Museum’s collection” (MoMA Learning). The museum assumes that Piper’s actions as an artist stem exclusively from her race and sex, and that the work’s value paradoxically relies on the museum’s own historical prejudices. Although there may be



validity to the idea of Piper's inserting herself into the collection, *What Will Become of Me* is far more complex and wide-reaching than MoMA's statement allows for.

*What Will Become of Me* appears to be a return to Piper's earlier, textual conceptualist forms, carrying with it ideas about turning her body into an object from her "art as catalysis" performances. The work's relationship to its viewer is therefore opaque, especially when posed against Piper's catalytic performances, but its status as art can be productively discussed in relationship to other artists similarly employing elements of classic conceptualism: data, grids and written prompts resembling thought experiments, to occupy a space between art and life with sometimes unwieldy results.

• • •

In 1989, Benjamin Buchloh published his essay "From the Aesthetic of Administration to Institutional Critique (Some aspects of Conceptual Art 1962-1969)." The essay framed American conceptualism with the supposition that economic systems determine the scope of all cultural production made within that system. According to Buchloh's case study, when American society began to increasingly emphasize white-collar labor, moving sites of manufacture out of urban centers, artists responded using administrative methodologies. Artists performed research, analyzed data, and created paperwork. Buchloh ultimately dismissed the rhetoric of conceptualism as self-righteous, claiming that its defining features were a confined scope and lack of vision (Buchloh 1989, 53).

Buchloh's assessment begged revision, particularly as the legacy of early conceptual experiments continued to inform art practices into the 1990s and 2000s. More recent efforts to develop art history's treatment of conceptualism include Peter Eleey's 2009 exhibition *The Quick and the Dead*, which included both *What Will Become of Me* and *Untitled (Elements: Wristwatch A, Wristwatch B)*. In his catalogue essay, Eleey poses the question: "What is alive and what is dead within the legacy of certain conceptual forms and strategies?" (Eleey 2009,

33). Rather than unduly restrained, Eleey's conceptualism is wide reaching: a means to enact and interact with life's greatest unknowns, including death. If conceptualism fails, it is because of the impossibility of its self-assigned task.

Another text, Eve Meltzer's 2013 book *Systems We Have Loved: Conceptual Art, Affect, and the Antihumanist Turn* pairs conceptualism with structuralism to consider the ways that artists, critics and theorists came to terms with the human subject in the late twentieth-century. Discussing the dominant compositional form of the grid within conceptualism (one that Piper took on in her early project *Here and Now* (1968)) Meltzer writes, "[W]e have come to love the idea of the grid. Its lawful scientism, abstraction, and cerebralism are themselves affective, even as---in fact, precisely because---they endeavor to keep the imaginary and with it the affective at bay. Structuralism had seduced us, symptomatized through us, and gripped us with its promise of a masterful dis-affectation" [Emphasis in original] (Meltzer 2013, 66). I argue that, regardless of intention, in her gesture, Piper participated in a form of conceptualism that uses the "lawful scientism, abstraction, and cerebralism" of the grid, or the contract, in order to manage life—in the sense of regulating, controlling and testing it. Artists working in a similar tradition include Japanese American artist On Kawara and American conceptualist Lee Lozano. These two artists in particular serve to elucidate what I would like to claim is a shared tradition of Piper's practice, for the fact that both Kawara and Lozano's art engaged in projects of extensive duration that directly involve the content and activity of everyday life such as to become, at times, indistinguishable from it.

On Kawara's career was dominated by a series of decades-long projects that chronicled his days and travels. In the *TODAY* series, Kawara hand-painted small canvases, with each day's date marked in a neat, uniform script, from the mid-1960s until the end of his life in 2013. He destroyed any paintings that were not started and completed on the same day. As with Piper's

reticent archive of bodily remnants, most details of Kawara's life were left out of the paintings, although the date was always recorded in the standard format of his current country of residence and subtitled with important world events that occurred on that day.

In *I Am Still Alive* (1970 – 2000) Kawara sent nearly 900 telegrams to friends, artists and collectors reading simply, "I am still alive." Piper's *What Will Become of Me* similarly declares her continued existence each time she adds materials to the collection, while excluding information about how states of existence or being change. Kawara's projects, which include books containing lists of all the people he met everyday for over a decade, or all the places he visited marked on maps, share a data-driven, informative simplicity with certain of Piper's projects. However, the lengths to which Kawara went to document his life, using tightly moderated means to develop a compendium of hundreds of books, containing largely impersonal information, are undoubtedly peculiar. Their motivation, if not their appearance, is equally inscrutable and messy as Piper's and, I contend, equally an archive of feelings.

In the late 1960s, Lee Lozano's artwork turned to a series of what she called "Life-Art" projects that merged strategies of conceptual art, journaling, and performance. In her *Dialogue Piece* (1969) the artist challenged herself to call, write and speak to people, both acquaintances and strangers, in order to have dialogues with them. The documentation for the work includes the names of the individuals she spoke to (many of them well known artists) and the method of contact, but not the content of the conversations. Lozano's strategy of withholding this content enacts a conceptualist trope, shared with Piper and Kawara, of telling rather than showing. In her *Grass Piece* and *No Grass Piece* from the same year, Lozano smoked pot all day every day for thirty-three days, recording the results, and then tried to abstain from smoking pot for the same number of days (less successfully). Her most puzzling and most *difficult* (referencing Doyle) work is *Dropout Piece*, which involved the art-

ist slowly abandoning the official art world, claiming to no longer produce work or attend art world events, and eventually seeming to give up her artistic identity altogether, leaving New York for her parents' house in Dallas.

Piper, Kawara, and Lozano used conceptualist strategies of text-based, experimental practice to order daily, lived experience across decades. Piper's *What Will Become of Me* manages, in the sense of *making manageable*, a close encounter with death and loss by adhering the artist to a practice of self-collection, and subsequently self-preservation. On Kawara performed longstanding rituals, appearing to equate life largely with the passage of events in calendrical time. In contrast to Kawara and Piper, Lozano's works do not share the look of rigid order. Lozano favored hand-drawn lists and declarations. Nonetheless, the artist attempted to mediate the passing of time by creating prompts for artworks that were largely indistinguishable from actions of everyday life, and experimented with personal and social limits. Such comparisons enrich all three artists' practices, which might initially appear obtusely idiosyncratic, but point to a larger strategy for figuring out how to exist in the world as a person and an artist.

...

Returning briefly to the issue of "catalysis," what type of reaction or catalytic potential exists in *What Will Become of Me*? It fosters sympathy for and connection with Piper, though in a way that also keeps the viewer at a distance. The work challenges the viewer to create equivalence between the artist (invoked as "Me" in the title) and her body, though in contrast to the *Catalysis* performances, *Mythic Being* and later projects, it is not immediately apparent to a viewer that Piper is a woman, or a woman of colour.

There is also an element of institutional critique in the work, targeting the staff of the MoMA who will become Piper's eventual caregivers and memorializers, taking



on responsibilities usually reserved for a partner or family member. Artists have long regarded MoMA as the unavoidable, yet perhaps unwanted, arbiter of the official history of modern art. Many protests and happenings have been staged there aimed at offending the museum's sensibilities and creating a space for experimental and political practice inside its walls. Given such a history, Piper's choice of the Museum of Modern Art (an institution that owned no artworks by Piper in 1985) might be read as deliberate agitation. However, as with *Mythic Being*, to see Piper as only acting according to one strategy—an outward and political one—is to ignore the ways that her work continued to serve other purposes.

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In Boris Groys' essay, "On the Curatorship" he writes that only artists have the special ability to decide what is art and what can be displayed in exhibition spaces as such (Groys 2008, 45-52). He claims this represents a paradigm shift from when the curator alone held that privilege. In the past, for example, curators took functional, often religious objects and put them on display in museums, an iconoclastic gesture that profaned the sacred. To take Groys' at his word, now the artist has the ability to elevate the mundane into art, and in Piper's case even to re-inscribe the gesture of the curator by turning her own remains into relics for museum display. In *What Will Become of Me*, Piper assumes the power to dictate that her ashes will be placed in a museum as a work of art.

Churches once engaged in a perverse form of competition, exhuming the bodies of saints in order to display them. Objects of religious veneration, relics and reliquaries were also economic boosts for a church and its town. If artists can be called modern-day saints in the secular religion of art, museums arguably engage in a similar practice surrounding the accumulation of art objects touched by artists, connecting the institution to

the presence of these individuals whose lives are idealized through these objects and canonized through their presence in the museum. Exploiting these co-productive dynamics, Piper has assured herself a permanent place in the museum where she will continue to be considered and cared for as a person and an art object. However, *What Will Become of Me* will also occupy the museum as a difficult work, a powerful, affective archive, and a testament to a conceptualist, but moreover human, desire to manage life and death.

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# About Face:

*investigating the multiple potentialities of  
Cerniello's Danielle*

KRISTINA FIEDRICH

Through slow-morphing animated portrait photographs, Anthony Cerniello's animation *Danielle* makes visible facial transformations, showing a young child becoming an old woman. Created from a series of photographs of an extended family, *Danielle* oscillates between a fictitious and real subject. While the actual subject of *Danielle* exists within the derivatively named work, the trajectory of this subject is manufactured through digital manipulation. The animation engages representations of the transforming female face as well as the effect of this imagery on subjectivity, both for the subject of the video and the viewer. Though the way in which the face transforms can be interpreted as the process of aging —generating an anxious, affective response—this paper attempts to consider the moving-image work primarily through a lens of transformation and becoming.

Through an investigation of surveillance, facial recognition and identification, this essay also explores the cultural phenomenon of biometrics through the lens of contemporary portraiture. I intend to examine the ways in which the face is being coded for surveying, classifying, and categorizing information about the private person, and to highlight new methods of resisting or questioning biometric control. In taking up Cerniello's *Danielle*, this paper not only questions subjectivity and representations





of the face within the animated work, but also the effect of multiple subjects merging/morphing to create the illusion of a singular, transforming entity. In what ways does this work undermine and complicate technologically driven modes of recognition and identification?

## FINDING DANIELLE

*Danielle* (2013) is a five-minute, single channel, digitally enhanced video animation by commercial and film editor Anthony Cerniello. The video was produced in collaboration with artists Keith Sirchio, Nathan Meier, Edmund Earle and George Cuddy. While *Danielle* has been widely circulated across the internet, I first viewed the animation in *Biometric*—an exhibition at the New Media Gallery (New Westminster, BC) that explored the meeting point between portraiture and biometric-centered science and technologies.

I stood close and watched *Danielle*. The animation begins with almost imperceptible transformations, producing an uncanny sensation. The first few viewings, my eyes were fixed on the screen in an effort to witness the moments of distinct change from child to young girl to young woman to matriarch. The illusion of liveness—as opposed to a static photographic representation—is achieved through the subtle movements of the facial features. The mouth quivers as though to speak; the eyes blink, gazing back; cheeks flutter, eyebrows perk, chins tremble and throats swallow. I left with the desire to know how this subject—the animated Danielle—could possibly exist.

In the fall of 2012, Cerniello attended Danielle's family reunion with photographer Keith Sirchio. Using a Hasselblad medium format camera, Sirchio photographed members of Danielle's family, from her youngest cousins to her oldest relatives (Jobson 2013). The photographs were scanned and edited to include only those family members with recognizably similar facial structure and features, then ani-

mated by Meier and Earle using After Effects and 3D Studio Max. In order to bring the still photographs back to life and generate the illusion of a singular subject captured in a time lapse video, Cuddy used the 3D visual effects software Nuke to include details such as blinking eyes to the animation (Jobson 2013). Cerniello described *Danielle* as the product of a desire to “make a person,” to fabricate a narrative using the body's trajectory from young to old. In this way, *Danielle* can be understood as a construct, a person that both does and does not exist within the animation.

When viewed as a series of screenshots, Danielle's transformations are more apparent as the subject appears to grow, taking up more space on the screen. The screenshots also reveal the original ‘snapshot’ structure of the work and expose greater differences between subjects later over-coded by the animation. The transformation produced by the morphing face(s) echoes long-term portrait projects such as Noah Kalina's *Everyday* (2000-2012), which configured twelve years of self-portraits into an eight-minute video composite—or Diego Goldberg's *The Arrow of Time* (1976-2014) that documents annually each member of his family in an ongoing ritual. These works engage with aging by documenting and recording slight changes that accumulate over the years, requiring the passage of real time for their fulfillment. *Danielle*, by contrast, artificially produces the passage of time, merging multiple individual subjects (the various family members) into an animation that leads the viewer to believe they are witnessing a time-lapse video.

In cinematic terms, the reproduction of movement functions as a selection of equidistant instants to create an impression of continuity. Taking up Henri Bergson's second thesis of movement – the *any-instant-whatever*—Gilles Deleuze frames the lineage of cinema with the snapshot that gets transformed by the sequential organization of a whole (Deleuze 1986, 4). He references Eadweard Muybridge's galloping horse (Deleuze 1986, 5) as an example, which allows the viewer to witness singular points of movement, not dissimilar to the original snapshots of *Danielle* and the screenshots included here. Deleuze notes that the any-instant-whatever holds the potential to generate a new awareness of cinema as “the organ for perfecting the new reality” (Deleuze 1986, 8). In the case of Cerniello's video, the creation of a new reality includes the creation of a new subject—Danielle—who exists only within the animation. In this way, *Danielle* can be interpreted as side-stepping the temporally-based dialogue of aging, engaging instead a discourse of transformation and becoming that supports a decidedly less anx-



ious and more unexpected viewing experience. This affective dimension of *Danielle* can perhaps be attributed to the spectacle of technology—the use of compositing software to create the illusion of a singular subject—or by contrast, the recognition of the various subjects that have been merged together through visual similarities.

In its production, *Danielle* combines scanning, modeling and rendering, compositing and VFX software. Following the advancements of digital media and open-source software, the creation, distribution and modifying of software in the 21st Century engenders social activity. In his seminal 1989 essay “An Aesthetics of Astonishment: Early Cinema and the (In)Credulous Spectator,” cinema and media scholar Tom Gunning describes the first experiences of moving-image media, which terrified audiences by its uncanny realism. According to Gunning, this legendary response demonstrates the illusory power of cinema, setting in motion the theories of spectatorship that would come to dominate film studies (Gunning 2004, 57). Approaching the spectator from a historical perspective, Gunning investigates the attraction of new inventions and the role of illusion in cinematic experience, considering the impact of projected movement and visual transformation from the trompe l’oeil genre to the uncanny qualities of recording the real. Following Gunning, early films express the public’s interest in attractions through the excitement of technological curiosities, the exaggeration of experience, and the highlighting of display (Gunning 2004, 57). Though the illusion of cinema was and continues to be successful, it is nonetheless understood as illusion. In this way the spectator, not duped into believing that what they are seeing is ‘real,’ is nevertheless attracted to the spectacle of the experience. From this perspective, *Danielle* takes up Gunning’s cinema of attractions in its use of new technologies and software to create an illusory narrative of a singular aging subject.

## SEEING FACES

The contemporary spectator continues to be swayed by distracting spectacles. Though aware of the illusions made possible by technology, *Danielle* engages the viewer in the spectacle of seamless, surreal transformation. In observing *Danielle* closely, it becomes apparent that the question posed by the work is not *what* we see but rather *who*. Is it the willing suspension of disbelief that simulates the experience of encountering a single subject, or is there another device to decipher? If there is another device effecting our perception of *Danielle*, it must be an interpretive one.

The face is historically our most identifiable attribute as individuals. Until recently, the human capacity to recognize faces has been unmatched, but this changed with the growing market of surveillance software. Beyond the portrait as art object, images of the face have long been integral to self-identity formation, social documentation, and identification management. Identity can be understood as a series of qualities – physical, psychological or social – that assist in establishing a consistent presentation of personality. Subjectivity, in contrast, refers to the ways in which one’s identity or personality is constantly reflected, examined, tested and understood by one’s self (Hall 2004, 3-4). As Arthur Kleinman and Erin Fitz-Henry describe, subjectivity should not be limited to biological reductionism (physical features), but must also acknowledge “the variability, heterogeneity, and contingency of our subjectivities as they unfold within the realm of experience” (Kleinman and Fitz-Henry 2007, 53). In this way, subjectivity attempts to locate the site from which identity develops – whether through appearance, social standing, historical and cultural contexts, race or gender – and how, if at all, one might exercise control over it. Subjectivity therefore considers the ‘legibility’ of identity, and must be continuously renegotiated to define and locate the self. This is even more the case when images of the face are produced/reproduced, presented/represented through technologies of seeing, especially within biometrics discourse. Ultimately, representations of face, whether sculptural, photographic or algorithmic, signal identity. We analyse facial expressions and facial features and make determinations about identity, character, and intention. But what of the veracity of the face? What can be determined as ‘truth’ in the face? Evolving out of a long history of documenting and analyzing the face as a visible representation of a person’s inner character and personality, biometric techniques draw from scientific methods to claim that the face, isolated from the body, can give away the truth.



By definition, biometrics is the measurement and documentation of various sites of the body, including the face. Implicated in these modes of classification is the use of photography as a scientific tool to record and visualize facial features and their underlying meaning. The allure of photography in the 19th century was in its supposed ability to objectively capture and neatly frame a rapidly changing world (Hamilton 2001, 57). The simultaneous development of photographic technologies in the mid-1820s and early biometrics in the mid-1850s demonstrates the relationship of picture-taking to evidence-gathering within an era “obsessed with taxonomy and social order” (Hamilton 2001, 57). The continuing desire to identify and organize the subject within a social order has culminated in the current, ubiquitous culture of surveillance.

As cultural theorist Btihja Ajana notes, the seductiveness of the ‘new’ and the novelty of contemporary biometric technologies often overshadow its long history. As such, a culture that greatly values newness “conceals the genealogy of new technologies and obscures the historical *continuity* connecting them to older technologies” (Ajana 2013, 25). The measurement of the body for purposes of identification was primarily implemented to document subjects and identities perceived as marginal or criminal. Similarly, measurements of features were thought to provide insight into the character and intelligence of a person and offer ‘truth’ where otherwise it might be concealed. These techniques only reinforce assumptions about visibility, gender, race and class, as well as modes of inclusion or exclusion; both historical and contemporary modes of identification have been “conceived of in terms of dichotomies of self and other, of inside and outside, of belonging and alien and so on” (Ajana 2013, 26). Similarly, biometrics infer that the human body (specifically the face, in this case study) is stable and unchanging.

The reinvigoration of biometrics, when coupled with digital technologies and complex algorithms

of identification, suggests a remediation of early techniques. Each of these historical methods are genealogically linked to the current modes of measuring, categorizing and ‘datafying’ the body. As such, contemporary iterations can be considered to improve upon early modes of measurement and identification. Borrowing from Bolter and Grusin’s concept of remediation, current biometric technologies can be understood “as hybrids of technical, material, social, and economic factors,” (Bolter and Grusin 1998, 77) combining and adapting previous techniques to become better at the task of identifying individuals using bodily markers. Anthropometrics, physiognomy, composite photography and eugenics are just some of the historical examples of discrimination via scientific study of the face. But biometrics also points to the hybridization of the body and technology. In *Governing through Biometrics*, Ajana compares the remediation of biometric techniques to the presentation of a new media or ‘biomedia’ that converts the body into data and codes (Ajana 2013, 21). As such, biometrics escapes the familiar McLuhanesque trope of technology as an extension of man, becoming instead a rendition of the body (Ajana 2013, 21).

The normalizing of surveillance and tracking systems, from tailored advertisements to facial recognition in social media photo-tagging, demonstrates the social acceptance of the digitized face as an accurate representation of identity and subjectivity. Cultural theorist Karyl Ketchum describes how the contemporary cultural understanding of the body, engrossed in the oscillating qualities of seen and unseen, and the ‘terror’ of the unknown, “naturaliz[es] associations between certain bodies and certain discourses, certain ways of looking and certain ways of being seen” (Ketchum 2009, 198). What remains problematic is that these associations – through statistics, algorithms, and templates – are defined within a threshold, mobilizing “a discourse claiming an ability to quantify, calculate, and organize—or master – the surfaces of the body [...]” (Ketchum 2009, 196). This recalls, among other points, the popularity and persistence of physiognomic facial registers as a means of divining truth at a glance.

As a portrait (of a person ‘made’ by Cerniello), *Danielle* engages long-standing questions of subjectivity and representation, taking the viewer to the edge of recognition, identification, and the digitally manufactured subject. From this position, who am I as a subject and who is *Danielle*? *Danielle* complicates the traditional portrait-based representation of an individual existence, highlighting the way in which we adapt, transform, and become throughout



a life. The drive to 'know' faces through biometric qualifications raises questions about whether technology can identify faces with the same accuracy as humans, and addresses ways of seeing shaped by social, cultural, and historical forces. As a result of the rising culture of surveillance, various sites of our bodies have become commoditized, denying multiplicity even where it often exists. In this way, facial biometrics and recognition technology treat the face as a static representation of identity. *Danielle* generates a fluid body that points to the variability of a perceived singular identity, and in doing so questions the potential for positive (ie: correct) biometric identification. With so many faces, then, which one is the 'real' Danielle? Is there *a* Danielle? To work through the multiple facial layers within the work, this paper will take up three potentialities within Deleuzian analyses of the face: the qualities of Peircean firstness and secondness; the whole subject who is elsewhere, forming a ceaseless becoming; and the immanence of a life that exists as multiple virtual subjectivities.

## CLOSE-UP

Watching the animation, it is challenging—if not impossible—to tell where one subject ends and another begins. The subtlety of the transformations and the micro-movements of the eyes, mouth, cheeks and chin create the impression of a living, becoming entity. In the sixth chapter of *Cinema 1: The Movement-Image* Deleuze considers the close-up in cinema, describing the oscillation between the reflective and intensive face. In comparing qualities, Deleuze draws on the dual possibility of the face represented as either a unified surface or expressions the surface (as a collection of independent micro-movements) (Deleuze 1986, 88). With the close-up face, typical capacities to express, socialize, identify, and communicate dissolve. The face becomes immobilized yet animated with potentialities, and can point to new connections or assemblages that might bring to life previously unknown representations of the face and subject (Herzog 2008, 66).

In the case of *Danielle*, the changing face of the single, manufactured subject can be understood as an intensive face, transforming over time with micro facial expressions and movements. This becomes the representation of a subject, brought to life through animation and special effects—the constructed subject that does not exist outside the cinematic space. Alternatively, if the work is considered to comprise multiple subjectivities, the intensive face(s) could be understood as contained within the outline of the reflective face, a placeholder in which the face of Danielle might (at one unknown moment) appear like a phantom.

In describing the face as affection-image, Deleuze takes up semiotician Charles S. Peirce's classification of images and signs into "firstness" and "secondness" (Deleuze 1986, 98). The affection-image is categorized as 'firstness,' relating to possibility prior to actualization, sensation, and feeling: "It gives a proper consistency to the possible, it expresses the possible without actualising it" (Deleuze 1986, 98). Secondness, on the other hand, is the actualized 'real,' a closing down of possibility into one outcome. *Danielle* operates in the scope of 'firstness,' if we take into consideration the variability and changing surface of the face, as well as the space each subject takes up within the perceived whole. According to Peirce, firstness "[...] is that rare faculty [...] of seeing what stares one in the face [...] unreplaced by any interpretation" (Peirce 1998, 147). The impossibility of deciphering where one subject ends and another begins lends *Danielle* the impression of always-becoming that seems to align with the Deleuzian interpretation of firstness.

## ONE OR THE OTHER PERSON

The oscillation between self and other, *Danielle* and viewer, generates an experience of the face as a potential encounter with something unrecognizable. In their essay "Losing Face," English and literary scholar Dr. Gregory Flaxman, with film and literary theorist Dr. Elena Oxman, explore the various recurrent concepts of the face put forward by Deleuze and Guattari. The potential of the indistinguishable face leads to its disappearance, "[becoming] the non-place of an encounter between the subject and an asubjective becoming, between faciality and its effacement, between thinking and an unthought" (Flaxman and Oxman 2008, 40). The most salient aspect of Flaxman and Oxman's essay is the discussion of the "Other Person," which designates only one among multiple positions that can generate a plurality of subjects (Flaxman and Oxman 2008, 41). From this position Deleuze and Guattari question



to what extent an Other Person is actually other. According to Flaxman and Oxman, “this field of indeterminacy already suggests the contours of another problem [...]: what if instead of asking which comes first, self or other person, we inquire into the nature of the *positions* that define self and Other Person, or even subject and object?” (Flaxman and Oxman 2008, 41) Determining in this way that the Other Person has the potential to occupy a plurality of positions, Deleuze and Guattari note that “the Other Person appears [...] as something that is very different: a possible world, the possibility of a frightening world. This possible world is not real, or not yet, but it exists nonetheless.”

As it relates to animation, the expression of the Other Person exists within the reality created by the moving-image illusion. *Danielle*, having multiple subjects, could be explored through this theoretical position, challenging the singularity of the other in relation to the viewer who observes Danielle. The ‘no one’ that appears in *Danielle* points to an unfamiliar, even frightening world in which transformations take place at a rapid pace, never allowing one possibility to take priority over any other. At the same time, the multiple potentialities presented in the face(s) of *Danielle* signal endless possibilities—the many positions from which we might experience life, self, becoming, other. Each/all can perhaps be understood as virtual subjects engaged in a process of actualization within the animation.

The potentialities, subjectivities and transformations within *Danielle* all contribute to the illusion of liveness and movement that make the animation appear real. Borrowing from Bergson’s third thesis of movement, *Danielle* holds the capacity to express change of duration or the whole (Deleuze 1986, 8). The ‘whole’ according to Deleuze is defined by relations that are external to it and in a state of ceaseless becoming: “Through movement the whole is divided up into objects, and objects are re-united in the whole, and indeed between the two ‘the whole’ changes” (Deleuze 1986, 11).

Danielle forms a ceaseless becoming, a constant transformation of one family member’s photographic image into another, each relating to all the rest, whether sequentially or otherwise. The ‘whole’ that is elsewhere is a fictitious subject that has the potential to become any number of other subjects, and might even point to life itself, which passes over the individual faces while exceeding them (Marks 2015). The complexity of *Danielle* stems from the inability to decide between the hegemony of the singular fabricated Danielle, or the between-moments that contain multiple potential Danielles (Deleuze and Boyman 2001, 30-31).

## CONCLUSION

The many faces of *Danielle* remain full of possibilities—for analysis, exploration, interpretation and identification. Initially captivated by the visualization of aging that overshadows *Danielle*, it has been my goal to allow room for the implicated subjects to come into view, adapt and transform, mimicking the process of becoming that I argue is inherent to understanding the animated work. *Danielle* calls upon the viewer to come face-to-face with the illusion of a rapidly changing subjectivity, an experience not unlike the surging flow of time and the transformation of life itself. A genealogical experiment, *Danielle* has the potential to become any number of subjects, and from this position replaces the anxious discourse of aging with possibilities for personal growth, or metamorphosis.

Aided by the slight movements and shifts in the faces themselves, the uncanny quality of liveness created by the animation eclipses its fiction. This new subject can only exist within the space of the digitally manufactured portrait, questioning representations of the face, the veracity of identification, and the visual deception of animation. From the multiple individuals photographed to the single life of Danielle, the close-up face(s) slip in and out of potentialities. One moment a surface waiting to carry an expression, the next a whole subject with the possibility to change into any other. Who might *Danielle* become next?

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## KRISTINA FIEDRICH

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This research was supported in part by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council and the British Columbia Arts Council.



ALISON COOLEY

## ALONGSIDE INTERPRETATION

## II

I've wrestled with the decision to write about interpreting a 2007 work by Ken Lum, *House of Realization*. I've wrestled with it because it's a work I've felt manipulated by. It's a work whose procession is rote and predetermined—something I generally feel cornered by, as if the work is speaking down to me. But I believe that this manipulation offers a tidy illustration of the way the interpretative impulse can drive an interaction with an artwork. *House of Realization* is indeed tidier and more compelling than any other, subtler work I know.


The work begins with a long strip of text along the wall, an excerpt from a poem also titled *House of Realization* by 13-14th century Sufi mystic poet Yunus Emre. Trying to remember this text, before Googling it furiously upon beginning to write about the work, I thought of it as a platitude—the poem's content seemed completely insignificant to me at the time. It could have been virtually any text with an air of light profoundness to it. Here's where the manipulation begins: Lum presents us a text to read and interpret, and that's what—under the pressure of being funnelled into a serious corridor in an art museum—we do.

The text excerpt, presented in reverse, is set across from a mirror. Reading the vinyl alone is difficult, but reading it in the wall-sized mirror is quite a bit easier—stepping back and forward so as not to get one's reflected body in the way of the text.

Turning the corner at the end of the corridor, spectators enter a second, darker room, where the mirror's glass is revealed to be two-way. I remember laughing nervously at this point, looking at the strangers in the room who had just watched me read the text, smiling a bit abashed, and then standing against the back wall to observe. More than curiosity, I felt compelled to watch the next readers, to—what? Regain my composure? Avenge myself for being caught in the interpretive act by imposing the same surveillance on others?

I would say my reaction to the two-way mirror was typical, although I have only the strangers' outward expressions to judge by. One man entered and angrily faced his surveillors in the small dark room ("You mean you guys have been watching me this whole time? That's fucked up") before storming out. We watched him pass through the other side of the glass and give us all the finger. This man was caught looking at art and trying to understand it in public, and it made him mad. In so many deep ways, this feels indicative of what's at the sopping core of interpretation: it is vulnerable and it risks revealing something of us, without our intending to.

And Lum cannily predicts that we'll be moved to interpret, to find out if we "got it right" by turning the corner into the dark room. Interpretation engineers a kind of participatory churning in *House of Realization*. Because the work begs so obscenely to be interpreted (and uses



interpretation as a mechanic of manipulation) I can't help feeling proud of the spectator that fails to even try to interpret—the one who picks her nose, pops a zit, checks her lipstick, adjusts her belt in the mirror. And may she be unflinching once she gets to the other side of the glass!

Returning to this work, I'm painfully aware of how cynically I've disregarded the text—that it might be meaningful (imagine seeing the poem really resonate with someone from across a two-way mirror) or even beloved (the work was first shown at the Istanbul biennial, where Yunus Emre is recognized as a historical cultural figure).

But if I didn't think the text was so inconsequential, I probably wouldn't think this work was so successful. I still feel it could be any text—that somehow making meaning from the words on the wall is less important than making meaning from surveilling others' meaning-making. *House of Realization* conjures something of what interpretation always does—it sits on our subjectivity, like an anvil on a ribcage. *This anvil has been on my ribcage this whole time? That's fucked up.*

## ALISON COOLEY

is a writer, curator, and educator based in Toronto. Her work deals with the intersection of natural history and visual culture, socially engaged artistic practice, craft histories, and experiential modes of art criticism. She is the 2014 co-recipient of the Middlebrook Prize for Young Curators, and her critical writing has recently appeared in FUSE, Canadian Art, and KAPSULA. She is also the host and producer of What It Looks Like, a podcast about art in Canada.

