

Master of Fine Arts Thesis
Approaching Bodies: Mutual Emissions and the Insistence of Reflex
Isabella Uliasz

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirement for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts, Electronic Integrated Arts
Division of Expanded Media
School of Art & Design
New York State College of Ceramics at Alfred University
Alfred, New York
2021

Introduction

Peripheries

First, I have to explain what I mean by *bodies*. My understanding and usage of this term spans almost all things. According to existing definitions of the word, it can refer to the physical structure of a living organism, a central aspect of something, a collection, and a distinct material. Bodies are ideas, relationships, objects, words, spaces, and systems. Anything can be bodied. Body is a verb. It *does*. Bodies operate, connect, create, interact, and transform. Bodies are context, forming the structures of attachment that allow us to understand and make associations. Bodies appear many times in the coming pages. I would like you, my reader, to understand that I purposefully do not distinguish between intended meanings of the word *body* in many cases because to do so would reduce the body's multiplicity. Know that the shifting meaning of this word is a deliberate and critical refusal of the reification of bodies. In this text, I will navigate my way toward the body in all its diversity of meaning, and in turn provide space to observe how bodies approach their own interpretations.

‡

Light shrouds the idea of materiality in uncertainty. It is the backdrop for our conceptions of speed and time, but itself exists outside of any notion of speed because nothing has ever exceeded it, making our systems of measurement relative and speculative. Light is an event that is only visible to the perceiving organism in its mediated form. What we see and recognize as light is actually light's interaction with other matter — space/time, the atmosphere of Earth, substances. All photic activity is propagated by time, another material which cannot be strictly defined, so our understanding of light is reliant on our ability to familiarize ourselves through abstraction. Abstraction makes concepts into material by producing traceable material outputs. Ideas, theories, and relationships become intimate and textured substances when we observe the outcomes or evidence of an abstract encounter.

Light emits in every direction, visibly manifesting as it interacts with other materials, producing mechanics of reflectivity, diffraction, refraction, and mutation. Within these mechanical events are a host of complex materialities which prompt me to question the physical properties of a phenomenon. A reflection is a multidirectional flow of light simultaneously toward and away from a material. Reflections reveal the direction that light is traveling in, and provide information about the perspective of the beholder. The experience of seeing a reflection is hinged on a viewer's position within an apparatus composed of lightwaves and surfaces. This is not to say that reflections do not exist without a viewer to see them, but the presence of the viewer materializes the locality of a reflection by providing an optical instrument (the eye) to process the light. A reflection is a location. It can only be seen in a specific way from a geometrically corresponding vantage point (fig.1) It causes additional space to exist adjacent to the space holding the reflective material. But what is a reflection materially? Do reflections take

on the physical properties of the materials that produce them, or are they a hybrid materiality of their own? Specular reflections depict spatial relationships as we see our immediate surroundings, but it is tricky to assign a dimensional quality to this space. Reflections are curious because they prompt me to question the depth of a surface. The objects within the reflected space, and even the space itself, *become* surface when they are reflected, making reflections a substance of simultaneous surface and depth. Reflections entangle these two things so that they become synonymous.

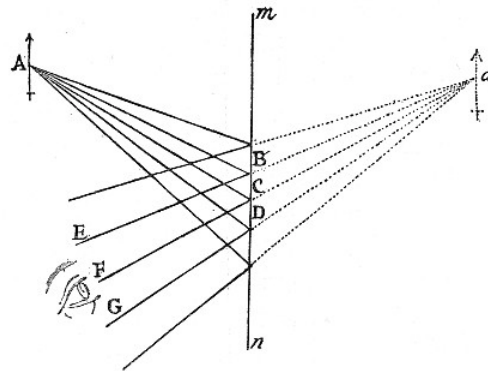


Fig. 9.

fig.1 Diagram of incident ray behavior when reflected by a mirror (mn) taken from Newton's *Opticks*¹. A represents the reflected object's "true" location while a represents its apparent location as indicated by the specular reflection.

I am heavily influenced by a personal desire to connect things of a material nature to things of conceptual nature. Since humans understand things primarily through our material connections to the world, it makes sense to frame theories and ideas as beginning in the material realm and then observe how the conceptual might reflect materiality. Reflections can be measured by philosophical, social, and cultural interpretations. Some philosophers acknowledge the reflected world as an inversion, recasting the "subject" of a reflection as an object. On the other hand, critical gender theorists might point to social signifiers within our perceptions of reflectivity, and describe mirror images as subjective and codified by the distorting effects of the patriarchal world. I point out these differing subjective interpretations because to understand material, we have to zoom out to understand our understanding of material. Holding all these intersecting perspectives at once, I am building this thesis around a focus on the filters (material and conceptual) we look through to see the universe, and an intentional study of their contributions to our perception.

Our understanding of physical matter is closely adhered to the idea of characteristic substance, but material and substance have no definitive meanings because they cannot be compared to anything but their own absence. We are accustomed to observing the physical under the assumption that material is immanently perceivable, making it difficult to process a substance that forces us to perceive abstractly. Our (mis)understandings of dark matter and antimatter are

¹ Newton, *Opticks*.

ostensive of the flaws in our ways of observing material. We cannot materially observe these things, but they are proven to exist by our abstract systems of measurement. These material thresholds allow us to contrast our hypotheses of material against something, but since we cannot observe them directly, our only effective tool for tracing the manifestation of material is abstraction. A significant focus in this thesis is on recontextualizing — and rematerializing — material outside of the immediacy and immanence of the physical, and to frame material as the self-reflexive embodiment of theory and the conceptual residue of this process. The subtitle of this paper, “mutual emissions and the insistence of reflex,” refers to the material and conceptual “emissions” which are the outputs of bodies and their interactions, and then calling on the generative capacity of critical reflection in forming a hypothesis or theory around what is observed (fig.2). Reflex here is an immediate reaction, as well as a deliberate turning back on itself in the process of subject interrogation and observation. I use reflexivity to account for subjectivities that enrich the analyzing process, and to refuse the binaries of “objective” analytical practices that undermine intimate exchanges between art, science, study, and the human body.

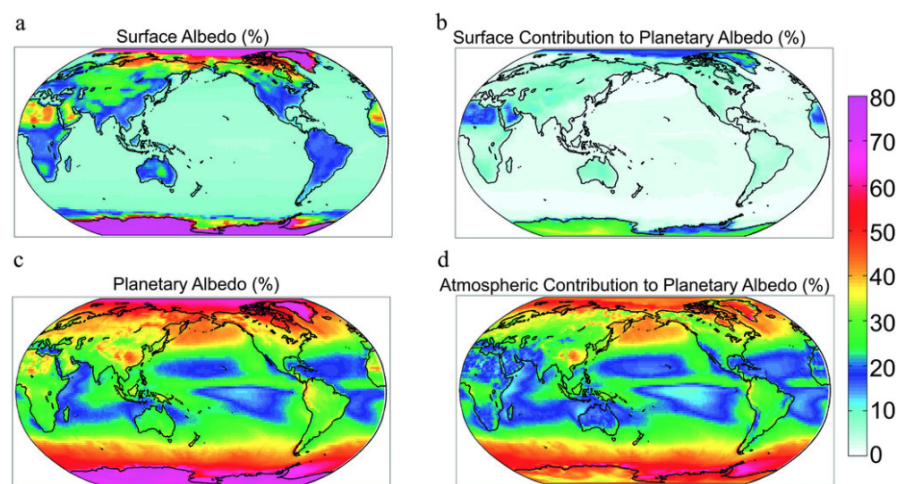


fig.2 Diagram of Earth’s surface and atmospheric albedo (reflectivity) taken from the American Meteorological Society.² This can be thought of as a mutual emission between the Sun and Earth where each celestial body mediates the emissions of the other.

One important thing to understand about light is that you cannot control it, you can only mediate its path. My practice involves using light as both a material and a subject, and pairing it with other materials/subjects that interact with light in a way that is demonstrative of and curious about its abstraction. I place myself in my work as a performer and an operator of the systems I construct, which pull photic activity out of the imperceivable frequencies of light, and invite these phenomena to form and reform my own understanding of corporeal existence and perception. What often results is a self-induced mediation, or a psychological transformation

² Battisti and Donohoe, *Journal of Climate*.

brought on by combinations of material and interpretation. References to the psychedelic surface in my work as a conceptual reflection of the body. Similar to a state of consciousness induced by a psychotropic compound, my work reflects the materiality of the body (fig.3) in ways that challenge reductionist dichotomies of mind and body, calling attention to somatic perceptive modes that are typically dormant in the brain. I am largely motivated by the desire to undo my own understanding of materiality and reality, two concepts that have as many inferable meanings as there are sentient humans. I create feedback loops of corporeal exchanges until an unfamiliar or interesting encounter emerges.

As I have gotten deeper into my investigations of material interactions I have started paying closer attention to thresholds of change. These thresholds are points where material and concept become adhered so that they are no longer separable. I am concerned with points of convergence because these spaces are imbued with potential to explore hybrid modalities. What I ultimately seek is a perceivable transition. This could be a transition from one mode of materiality to another, or a shifting of context which alters materiality indirectly. It is important to note that all of the following explorations are my building of a framework for my own reflection, and not to be taken as rigid definitions or proof of anything. I think strictly defining what is real and what is not real is a mistake which fails to account for the naturalist biases that enable such opinions to form. Anytime I put these concepts into definitive terms, their meanings change. Engaging with these ideas at all is a process of continual expansion, calibration, and reflection. The purpose is to see the world from a perspective that is not so exhausted by grammars of the symbolic and the real. I want to draw focus to the peripheries of awareness and perception. When edges are at the center of our focus, we can then use our peripheral perception from that vantage point to observe what is just beyond the surface of the seeable world.

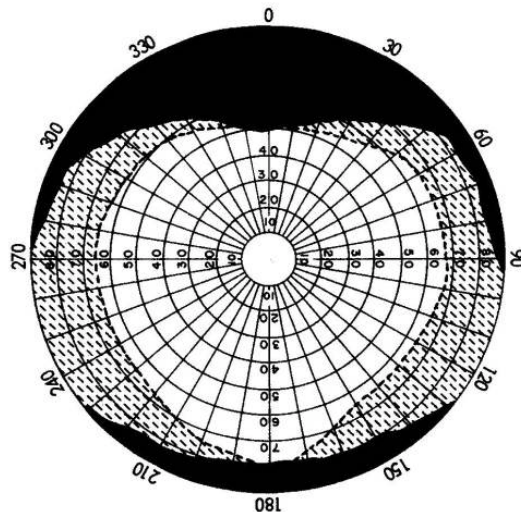


fig.3 Diagram of binocular visual field with head and eyes fixed taken from a [1964 NASA report](#)³ detailing aspects of human vision. Solid white is where the two eyes overlap. This image suggests the material dimensions of human vision and assigns it a status of objecthood.

³ Scientific and Technical Information Division at NASA

Print

My interest in material interactions began with reflections. More specifically, it began with using reflective materials as surfaces to print on. I have spent a lot of time working with aluminized *biaxially-oriented polyethylene terephthalate* (BoPET), which is the elongated name for reflective polyester film. This material has the characteristics of a typical plastic film, but with a semi-translucent mirrorized finish. It is generally available to the consumer as a thin and flexible film commonly used for horticultural purposes. I have found this material to be accepting of many different applications. I have screenprinted, painted, heat-pressed, image-transferred, laser-etched, photographed, and projected video on this material. Over the past two years, I have been particularly interested in a process called *dye sublimation*. This process is typically used for commercial purposes such as fabric and wallpaper printing. The process involves digitally printing images composed of dye, and transferring them to other materials using heat and pressure. In order for a material to accept the dye properly, it must contain a level of polyester. Since reflective BoPET is a polyester-based material, I was able to sublimate onto it directly, though the resulting imagery was slightly fuzzy. The images I printed onto it were photographs that I took *of* reflections produced by the film, so when I transferred the images onto the film, it took on a sort of pseudo capture-device function. Most of the imagery from this experiment contained my face and body, turning the reflective film into a photographic mirror.

To sublimate onto a cotton-based paper or any material lacking a polyester content, I have to apply a liquid plastic medium to the paper. What I appreciate about this process is the potential for crossover between electronic and liquid media. I have the freedom to apply liquid poly the same way I might apply paint to a canvas, using gestural brushstrokes to compose spaces where imagery will appear later on. The liquid poly is clear, making it hard to determine what the composition will look like once it holds color and form. The element of control in this process is only in my ability to choose how to apply the liquid media, and what imagery to transfer onto it. I created a series of prints utilizing imagery sampled from my video work which were sublimated onto large cotton papers painted with liquid poly (fig.4). The result is a painting/print/video hybrid. The imagery retains a level of photographic representation, but only for brief moments of coherence before the abstraction of the liquid media softens it again. These prints are time-based. They share the characteristics of the video footage that the imagery came from, and they rely on a relationship to time to take their final form. The liquid poly is applied, then has to dry and cure for a period of 24 hours before being printed on. During the printing process, the print paper and transfer paper face each other inside a heat press at around 380 degrees fahrenheit for about 45 seconds per transfer. During this process, the dye from the transfer paper is fused to the liquid poly. The dye leaves faint traces on areas where the poly was not applied, and these traces fade over time as the print is exposed to light. The imagery from the video continues to transform even after it is captured and printed as a still image. Time in these

pieces is doubled. They are a fixed representation of infinity with visual demarcations of a relative timescape.



fig.4

Seeing & Being Seen

Representational media are extractions from reality that exhaust the reality they are extracted from. In other words, visibility exhausts its subjects. Things that are extremely visible are easy to dismiss. Their meanings are picked over and hardened by exposure. In this regard, visibility is a vulnerability, with the impacts of this vulnerability differing according to the affected subject. The entities doing the “seeing” of a visible subject will also affect the level of vulnerability the subject endures. For example, when people make themselves visible on the Internet through a social networking platform, they are making themselves visible both to other users of the platform as well as the owners of that platform and the companies they sell user data to. Big tech companies are an efficient example for demonstrating the precarity of visibility because they generally operate with total opaqueness about their technologies, what data they gather about their consumers, and how that data is shared with other unregulated companies.

At the beginning of the pandemic, I lost access to my studio and was attempting to continue my work from home. I was socially and materially isolated, with little to keep myself preoccupied other than trying to make. I decided to make a piece that would capture my experience of that time. I made a single-channel video piece using the omnipresent *Zoom* to superimpose my own zoom room over itself until the video space became an abstract amalgamation of colors, faces, and wood-panelled walls (fig.5). The piece took shape as a long-form iterative performance spanning multiple weeks between March and April 2020. I recorded each session of the performance in Zoom, layered the recording from the previous session over my virtual background, and explored the resulting space in real time with my body, some candles, and mirrors. The piece is an interrogation of the digital platform as both a production tool and product itself, and reduces its function to a tool for the creation of aesthetic objects. The interface is visible and reconstituted as a part of both the “inner” space of the video, and the “outer” space of the room where it takes place. Interface is integrated into the binaries that it typically serves to divide — the human and the machine.

“Instead of situating bodies as inadequate, we might look at ways in which embodiment can be conceived of as open and dynamic, operating and traversing these gaps; not a property that ‘I’ have but something I produce, that is produced, in relation to other bodies and machines.”⁴

⁴ Munster, “Interfaciality”, 148-149.



fig.5

After this exploration of hyper visibility, I became interested in its inverse, the state of invisibility. I am interested in the way that the unseen impacts our knowledge and awareness indirectly, without our being aware of it. There are moments in visual media where direct representation falls apart, stops making sense, and becomes something else. These moments illustrate a failure in the symbolic, and offer a chance to excavate the deeper implications of the way things are presented. I am interested in things that cannot be easily apprehended through symbolism or language, forming gaps in our knowledge that begin to disrupt our fragile subjectivity.⁵ The shortcomings of representation are valuable as focal points because they demonstrate the need to closely interrogate our impulses around the associations and dissociations we make between ourselves and our surroundings.

During the late summer and fall of 2020, I spent a lot of time working outdoors instead of in my studio. I found this setting engaging and challenging. The illusions of control that are granted to me by an indoor space vanish outside. Working with the landscape felt like a collaborative exchange where I was asked to calibrate my expectations, and to work with what was presented to me. During this time I collected a huge archive of video footage, mainly consisting of studies involving the dynamics between daylight and its permeation of the environment. Using sheets of glass and old windows from my house, I set up compositions of spatial abstraction by layering reflections of my surroundings together. These compositions evolved into a performance process where I used my body as the apparatus of support for my reflective surfaces, and blocked parts of the image with my body and shadow. During this process, I encountered a glitch in my recording setup. There was a conflict between the camera I

⁵ Vrhovnik, "Approaching weird", 4.

used and an external monitor/recording device that I used to view the work as I was making it since I would often be positioned in front of or next to the camera. The glitch occurred when I toggled to a specific display setting on my camera, which for reasons unknown to me caused the external monitor to freeze, occasionally producing interlacing patterns of lines and saturated colors (fig.6). I began to explore this glitch as an intentionally triggered phenomenon, and fed the footage through a framebuffer in real time so the glitched frames could accumulate in layers that linger for a longer moment. The result was a hyperchromatic landscape which pulsed with the tempo of the framebuffer, and twitched with the frenetic energy of the glitch. Movement in this footage is distorted, new frames emerging from behind the old ones only to be obscured the next moment by a frame where the camera has been shifted.



fig.6

This process presented me with the juxtaposition of looking through something. The things we look through participate in our perception of the overall composition as much as the subjects we see on the other side. This footage contains multiple layers of material mediation; the framebuffer, the glitch, the layers of sheet glass which bounce light through the lens of my camera. In the moments where the glitch is absent, the imagery retains a sense of distortion which almost appears digitally fabricated, but is actually caused by layers of glass refracting the space outside of the camera. In each still from this footage, there is an abundance of visual information to consume, but there is also an implication that behind the mediated aspects of the image is more information that has been obscured. Glitch artist and theorist Rosa Menkman talks about the self-obfuscation that technology performs when a glitch occurs, and calls on artists to embrace this obfuscation as an integral aspect of our understanding of technology in that glitches give us the opportunity to be self-reflexive and critical in our thinking around obscure systems, and come to a deeper understanding of these systems through critical reflection.⁶ When people

⁶ Menkman, *Glitch Studies Manifesto*, 9.

are passive about their practices of viewership, or fail to acknowledge the imperceivable agents affecting their perception, they become entrenched in collective biases toward a particular way of seeing. Glitches make me think about truth. They make me realize that truth only exists in fractal units, and never as a whole. “Seeing clearly” became impossible for me once I realized this, and since then I have fixated on studying the dynamics between truth and mediation. I do not think that things have to be “pure” or unmediated to contain or represent truth. On the contrary, I think that mediation is the only truth there is.

Shapeshifting

Bodies are information, and they transmute and translate information. Information flows through human bodies in forms such as electrons, hormones, viruses, neurosignals, emotions, and somatizations. This information is transforming our bodies on a molecular level continuously. Macroscopically, the body appears to remain the same with slight alterations over time, but our encounters with material and theories change our physiology and psychology more than our personal systems of perception are granted with the power to process. I’ve found through conversations about my work that people often express a resistance to ideas that expand our subjectivity outside of ourselves. This hesitancy can be attributed to social conditioning towards individualism, or a lack of freedom around the expression of vulnerability, but subjectivity is not solely of the individual mind. Subjectivity reaches (invisibly, sometimes) far beyond the physical boundaries of one body, functioning as an additional layer of perceiving organs which we must choose whether to nurture and utilize, or allow them to get cut away.⁷ Writer and queer theorist Tomasz Sikora explores the body in his book, *Bodies Out of Rule*, where he offers a rematerialization of bodies in response to a problematized liberal humanist approach that cannot account for their materialities and non/subjectivities.

“Subjected to organicist rules whose aim is to make them functional and well-regulated (or healthy) wholes, corporealities prove unruly and precarious, stubbornly resistant to the rule of the Rule. Bodies remain deeply unreliable: susceptible to diseases, deformations, drives, desires, and ultimately death; on a more positive side, they are also almost infinitely capable of registering ever new sensations and pleasures, and of interacting with the world (and other bodies) in unexpected, unprecedented ways. Bodies fail us and/because they exceed us; much as they attempt to immunize and protect (or fortify) themselves, they are always oriented towards other bodies, other experiences, other states of being. This unreliability or instability, which is at the heart of all embodied existence, must breed numerous fears and anxieties, which are then played out and

⁷ Sikora, “Fleshed Out”, 46. “What kinds of extensions and prostheses do our bodies and our identities have? What physical or mental organs get amputated, with or without our consent, with or without our knowledge?”

cathartically alleviated in/through a variety of socio-cultural practices: ritualistic, discursive, aesthetic (or representational), political, etc.”⁸

Sikora acknowledges cultural practices of symbolic management of bodies as a means of maintaining a sense of control over our uncontrollable corporealities. Rituals and aesthetics provide illusions of security for our identities and subjectivities. In order to move away from a dependence on symbolic order, I want to study technology as an informative mirror for human consciousness and account for the projections that keep us tethered to specific forms of interpretation and meaning-making. This is not a practice of overcoming physical limitations with technology but using it as a framework to consider my level of tolerance for liminal spaces within the consciousness. It is a practice of engaging with theory and concept through self-reference.

I got this idea from a spread of thinkers, writers, artists, and activists responsible for the development of *autotheory*, which “describes a self-conscious way of engaging with theory—as a discourse, frame, or mode of thinking and practice—alongside lived experience and subjective embodiment... especially in feminist, queer, and BIPOC spaces that live on the edges of art and academia.”⁹ Examples of this practice can be traced through decades of feminist¹⁰ scholarship, art, and literature. Paul B. Preciado describes his book *Testo Junkie* — often cited as an example of autotheory — as a practice of “somato-political fiction, a theory of the self, or self-theory.”¹¹ In this book, Preciado utilizes a personal narrative to account for intimate experiences with hormone replacement therapy which blur together with heavily theoretical and academic discussions of sexual and bio politics, gender theory, pharmaceutical control, and pornographic economies. He examines the body as techno-somato-political construct arranged by the biopolitical disciplines of medical surveillance and control instated by *pharmacopornographic biocapitalism*, and postulates that marginal bodies can wield disruptive measures against oppressive power structures through their individual “orgasmic force.”¹² Reading this book was a revelation for me to the experimental methodologies of practitioners who are socially subjugated and forced to participate in practice structures which are set up to invalidate their perspective. Since Western academia presumes that objective analysis is critically valuable and subjective experience is not, people who experience oppression in their fields of work must remix the structures of “research” and “analysis” to situate their subjectivity as critical. Applying the framework of autotheory to my practice has brought the function of reflexivity into sharp focus. Concept and self-reference come together to challenge the notion that theory is not personal.

⁸ Sikora, *Bodies Out of Rule*, 10.

⁹ Fournier, “Autotheory as Feminist Practice”, 7.

¹⁰ When I use the terms “feminist/feminism,” I am referring to a transfeminist approach that actively works against the heterocentric hegemony and state regulated gender/reproduction perpetuated by the project of liberal feminism. Paul Preciado describes the way liberal feminism has been co-opted as a paragovernmental apparatus for surveillance and control. (Preciado, “Pharmacopower”, 231).

¹¹ Preciado, *Testo Junkie*, 11.

¹² Preciado, “The Pharmacopornographic Era”, 41-50. “...the (real or virtual) strength of a body’s (total) excitation.”

SOMATIC: of, relating to, or affecting the body, especially as distinct from the mind
PRAXIS: practice as distinguished from theory

What purpose do these barriers between the body and mind, the practical and the theoretical, actually serve? Abandoning these binaries altogether elicits a shapeshifting of the body/mind/self in its practical/theoretical semantics to the point where a fresh perspective can emerge. To quote Preciado, “we must know whether we want to change the world to experience it with the same sensorial system as the one we already possess, or whether we’d rather modify our body, the somatic filter through which it passes.”¹³ Beyond the physical, the terrain becomes a murky, unstable landscape of tension between concept and material. I want to extend dialogues about corporeality into dimensions beyond the corporeal, and account for what is lost or stolen by the assumption that bodies are insular. Instead, the body can be framed as an open system that is always in flux. The confluence of mind, body, and the reality that we process through our sensory systems is a more accurate picture of human corporeality than the enclosed barrier of our flesh. To reduce the body is to create a body which cannot be trusted to account for the range of experience and subjectivity which occur across the spectrum of human existence.

A corner is a point of convergence, like a threshold. In the beginning of 2020, before the pandemic was publicly acknowledged, I had just begun an investigation into the potential of using two perpendicular planes as performance and installation space (fig. 7). I installed reflective material on one wall, and projected highly concentrated light into the corner so that any reflections or shadows that touched the reflective material would be cast onto the adjoining wall. This was the beginning of my experiments with what I think of as shapeshifting. The corner was a location and a system, manifesting the mechanics of reflectivity in such a way that positive and negative spaces shifted roles. Reflected light could cast shadows, shadows could cast reflections, and it became impossible to ignore the self-reflexive nature of the process I had started.

Over time, through rigorous experimentation with various surfaces, dimensions, light sources and angles, I developed a practice of constructing and navigating refractive spatial systems. Within these spaces, my physical presence is broken up into distinct but connected units. Layers of two-dimensional bodies accumulate, obscuring and revealing one another, while my original body occupies the third dimension (fig. 8). I often bump into my camera rig and ruin my recording in these spaces because I am paying attention to my two-dimensional extensions instead of my three-dimensional surroundings. Navigating this simultaneity of dimension can be disorienting, but ultimately transcends my understanding of the space I create, and the reciprocal effects that a space and an occupying body have on one another. It is impossible to capture the entirety of one of these chambers in a single image, so the image representation I have of them can be understood as one fractal moment in the confluence of a space and a body. The body folds itself into the space that it occupies. Our bodies share material kinship with the space we occupy because we are of the same dimension, the same organization of matter. If we navigated time the

¹³ Preciado, “Testo Mania”, 237.

same way we navigate space, we might find ourselves confronting geometries of another dimensionality which would have reciprocally confrontational effects on our material being. At any moment, space/time and its occupying bodies share a borderless relationship where, despite their individual delineations, they converge as one undulating current. They define each other, and redefine themselves in the process. Bodies and spaces are shapeshifters, molding to fit the context of their time and each other.

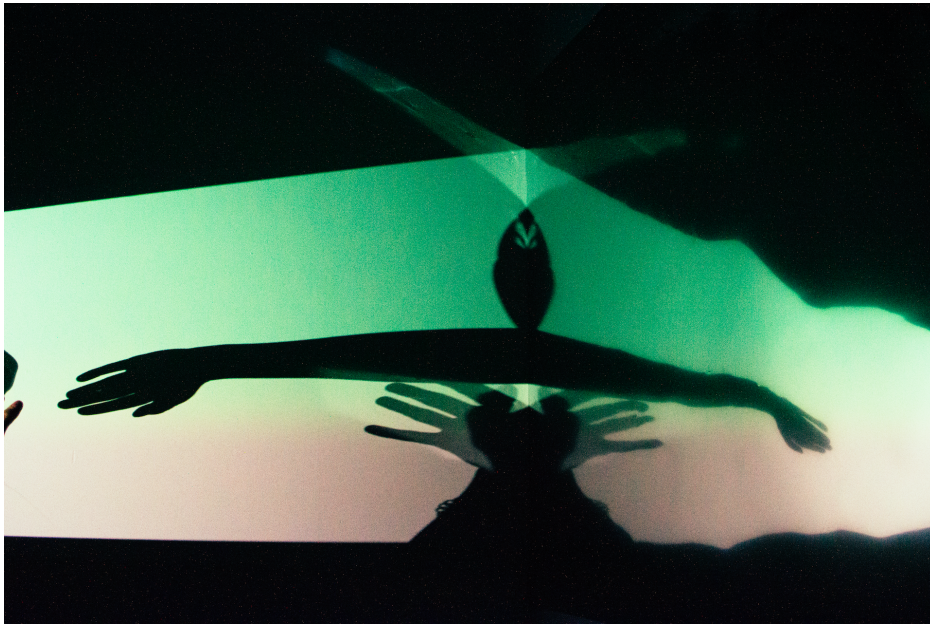


fig.7



fig.8

The phenomena I encounter in my work come and go, and I am interested in the way that their precarious presence becomes an event that changes every time I engage with it. Even within the same performative structure, I regularly find unfamiliar variations of my materials. The work

relies on my capacity to trust the material to continue revealing deeper iterations of the same phenomena so long as I continue my investigations. This practice involves embodying areas of ambiguity, where there is a loss of distinction between concept and material. Obscuring these boundaries makes the process of identification limitless, turning identification itself into its own inverse. Here I am pulling from Julia Kristeva's concept of disidentification in relation to the abject, where there is an incremental loss of subjectivity until the subject crosses a conceptual threshold.¹⁴ I embrace disidentification as a vital nutrient for hybrid modes of subjectivity, where subject and object are not separated by artificial barriers. Performance, bodies, and technologies become entangled with the fluid subjectivities they disclose.

Secretions

Bodies are mostly liquid. If you cut into flesh, it bleeds. If you exert enough physical energy, you will sweat. Bodily secretions contain masses of information about the being that secreted them, even as specific as the individual's DNA. Our biological codes extend far beyond the capsules of flesh that we reside within. With this in mind, it seems trivial to conceive of the human body as a fixed interiority with prescriptive boundaries. Laura Hyunjee Kim describes the work of unlearning the notion of boundaries as such: "Readily venturing into abstraction by reshaping our own realities to see the un-see-able, our nostalgic eyes slow down to un-see the technical limitations of the see-able world."¹⁵ To understand the body as borderless requires a recognition of the un-understandability of its limitations (physical and otherwise) when any attempt is made to measure or quantify them.

I think discussions about the borders and limitations of the human body make many people anxious. The body is a shared human experience, along with the desire to move beyond it. The earliest forms of science had elements of spiritualism and mysticism embedded into them which often expressed a desire to emulate the lifestyles of ancient deities. Humans in early civilizations partook in medical analysis of human and animal bodies for the advancement of both "rational" and "magical" knowledge. Today, we can observe the same curiosities from a technologically advanced perspective, one that often claims to be secular but is still greatly influenced by a human tendency toward spiritualism.¹⁶ With the rise of automation there has also risen a widespread anxiety over the eradication or obsolescence of the human body. I would argue that to erase the human is an impossible feat for humans themselves. Any action performed by a human leaves a trace of human excess, and any human-made attempt at erasing this excess would inevitably leave another trace. Human excess here refers to the traceable manifestations of human activity which permeate all things mediated by humans. More conceptually, it can also refer to the too-muchness of humanity, or the areas of humanity that cross a threshold into something beyond human or inhuman. I am fascinated by the role of the human body as a

¹⁴ Kristeva, "Approaching Abjection", 4.

¹⁵ Kim, "A Musing on Blobs", 66.

¹⁶ Bebergal, *Strange Frequencies*, 22. "The spiritual exertion of will over the material world."

housing unit for the most insular of human anxieties and fears. Humans are afraid of humans erasing humans using human-made technologies. This auto-parasitic anxiety dampens the urgency of our collective responsibility to reflect on the ways our technologies impact human (and nonhuman) lives (and non-lives) and futures. Rather than shying away from the existential questions that arise as humans develop in ways that have not occurred in the past, we ought to use those same questions as frameworks for new philosophies of multi-species collaboration and survival.

The human body as a boundless concept cannot be confused with a claim of possession or ownership. Humanity must be understood as hybridity, bearing significance only through its reciprocal relationships to the nonhuman. Attempts to contain and control the human and the body emerge from fears of contamination of the body and its “normality.” These fears tend to originate from deeply rooted biases toward bodies that stray from dominant notions of normalcy, from the historically pervasive mystification of the female form to past and contemporary manifestations of ableism and racism. These othered bodies are characterized by what they have that those that fall within the bounds of normalcy cannot relate to. In other words, they are identified by their excess. So returning to the idea of human excess requires that the body is understood as an infinite multitude. The body and its secretions, physical and conceptual, liquid and energetic, is an omnipresence, a corporeality, and an abstraction existing through its material traces.

I became interested in microorganisms as I moved through the idea of abstracting the body’s borders. It occurred to me that the human body (or rather, its interiority) is more microorganism than it is human, and to cultivate a community of microorganisms would be like building a small world of human context. There is a hugely diverse range of microbes living within us, but they are local enough to humans to suggest the presence of a human body on their own. They are not technically considered body parts, but we are their habitat, and they are a part of our individual ecosystems, assisting in our digestion and regeneration of skin cells, just to name a few of their beneficial functions. I experimented with growing bacterial cultures in my studio, with samples taken from my body and environmental sources like plants outside my house, a stream, and airborne particles (fig.9). I also combined some of these sources together into mixtures like *skin + moss*¹⁷, *air + saliva + water*, and so on. The combination dishes grew the most successfully, indicating that microbes thrive in materially diverse environments. This whole experiment is ostensive of the body and its microscopic flora as an ongoing system rather than a fixed form. The human body is a colony of smaller bodies, some of which belong to lifeforms older than land-dwelling organisms themselves. Removed from their habitats, these “secretions” of the body continue to transform. In this way, they are both continuations of the origin and new bodies in and of themselves. I allowed my microbes to grow for a period of around four weeks before I decided to destroy them. I had begun to feel anxious about creating

¹⁷ I found moss to be the most generative and diverse source of microbial life. I plan to conduct future experiments of moss/microbial cultivation.

something dangerous for myself given I was keeping these bacterial cultures in my studio, a room with no windows and sub-par ventilation. I doused the bacteria in bleach to kill them, and recorded the degradation process under a microscope. I plan to conduct future projects of microbe cultivation in order to learn more about the physical variants that exist beyond the scope of my unassisted vision. The archive of footage and imagery I collected through this experiment has informed my thesis projects in ways that I will discuss in the following section.

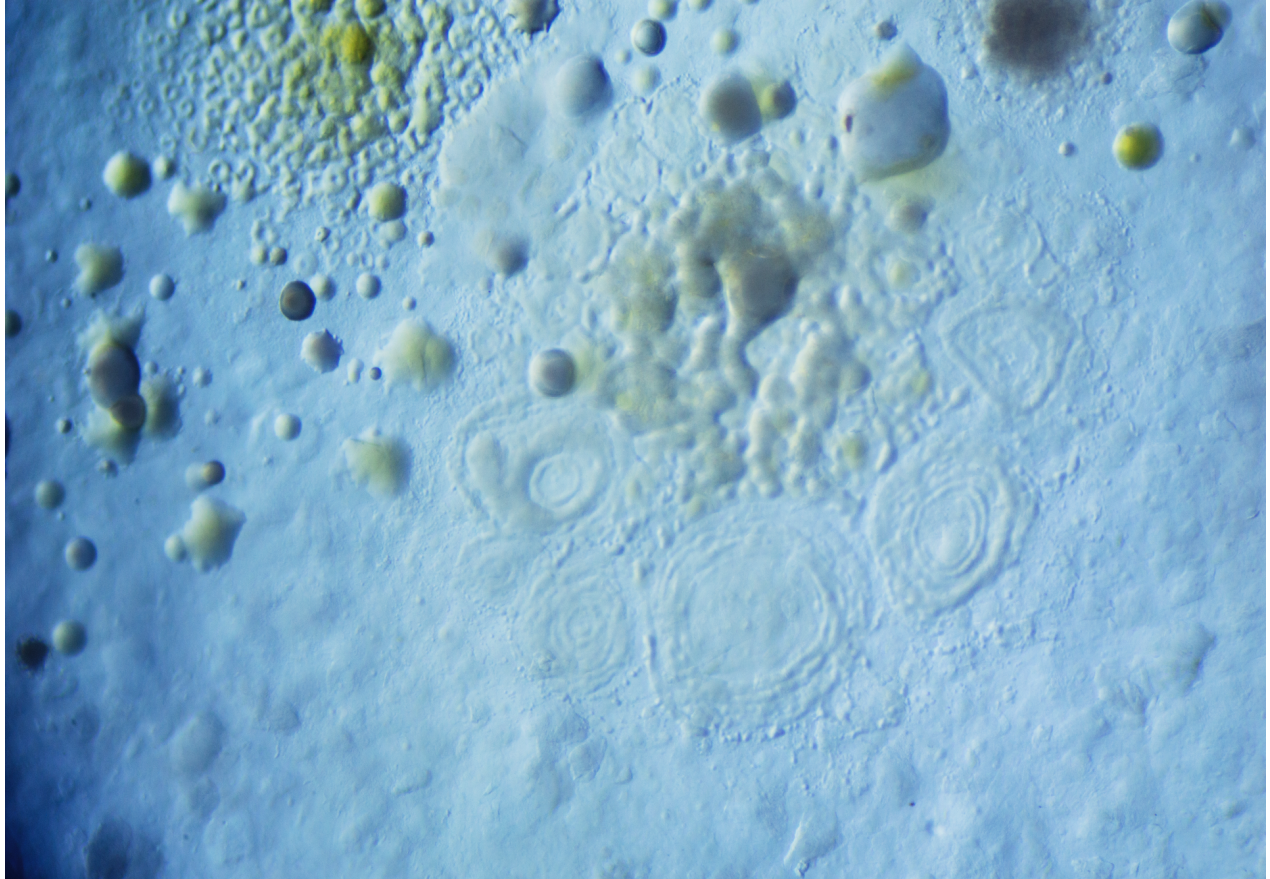


fig.9

Parasomatic

Para: prefix meaning above, next to, near, resembling, beyond, abnormal

Somatic: of, relating to, or affecting the body, ~~especially as distinct from the mind~~

“Parasomatic” is a word I came up with to describe a mode of embodiment which moves the subject beyond the immediacy of the physical, redefining the self as both its living body and its energetic exchanges. Applied to the reflexive self, parasomatism is an abnormalization, reference, expansion, and dissolution of the body as a fixed interiority. It is the body as a locality both inside of and beyond itself. This work does not address fantasies of an altered physical presence in the immediate sense, but reveals physical presence to be tenuous, nervous, and circumstantial. In order to dissolve false dichotomies of mind and body, and theory and practice, I employed the idea of parasomatism in my thesis project as a modality referring to a physical and energetic state which the body occupies in relation to its conditions. Parasomatic describes the body itself, as well as the conditions materializing the body in a given context. I used this word as the title for the body of work featured in my thesis exhibition, which consists of video documentation of iterative performances. In these performances, I use my body to explore the mechanics and phenomena of light, and reflexively account for energetic impact on the body and perception.

Using *control* and *excess*¹⁸ as bodily modalities informed my conception of parasomatism and provided a context for the ideas that this work grew from. I situate control and excess as opposites, a concept which I have previously identified as unstable since opposites can always be made to contradict themselves by becoming their own inverse. Control¹⁹ is the state of the body taking things in and regulating itself, as well as forming a baseline for comparison (self-reflection). The body is its own reference point. The role of the body as its own control paradoxically suggests the absence of control since a reference point that cannot be held constant cannot actually be used as a faithful reference. As the body regulates itself among an incoming stream of information, the body changes.

Enter excess, a state in which the body is overflowing, externalizing, spreading, and leaving traces of itself, producing new bodies and relationships through this process. The two states together form a cycle of internalization, accumulation, transformation, externalization, and degradation, not necessarily in that order. Internal and external are parts of the same cyclical body, each one permeating the other. Even with this knowledge of opposites as one and the same, they serve distinct purposes and can be felt as separate effects across the mediascape presented in this body of work. Opposites are one concept spread across a spectrum of conditions, the concept

¹⁸ Building off Sikora’s idea of control and excess as measures of what is just right and what is too much in relation to the body (the body is either regulated/surveilled or is cast out of human subjectivity altogether). Also plays into his observation that that which makes us human also calls humanity into question. “To put it more simply, the ‘human’ is always a question of the interplay between measure and excess.” Sikora, “Fleshed Out”, 42.

¹⁹ I also employ this term as an effort to reclaim it from the subjugation and regulation of bodies by the state (an example of an excess of control). Here I offer the body the opportunity to control itself.

serving as the *control* (a constant variable), and the conditions serving as the events that produce an *excess* (the residue of an interaction).

In my experiments with microbe cultivation, I found myself becoming interested in geometry and the study of shapes and dimensions more generally. I was working with a stereoscopic dissecting microscope, meaning it has two eyepieces and produces a three-dimensional view. This binocular viewing apparatus echoes the human visual field where the brain superimposes two separate images together to make a “seamless” view. Since the microscope is not a part of the body, it lacks the nuance of focus and movement that human eyes perform, making the objecthood of the microscope itself a noticeable part of the visual field. The eye and the lens form a visual dialogue together that makes apparent the physical and optical properties of the lens. As I peered into the microscope, I found myself more intrigued by the optical phenomena I was noticing as I moved my eyes around than I was by the subject under the lens. I started questioning what shapes my body makes, how my systems of perception inform the shapes that I am able to see, and the degree of mediation that my body has on those shapes.

I developed a performative process which involves an apparatus comprising myself, an overhead projector, and two parallel mirrors. Within this apparatus, I was able to cast a reflected inverted feedback loop onto the wall of my studio. The light from the projector is aimed at a large mirror behind me, which bounces the light onto the wall. As I move a smaller handheld mirror around the projection field, angling it toward the same wall, it reflects additional light on top of what has already been reprojected (fig.10). The two reprojections layered together form an inverted feedback loop, where the receding forms occur inside the original ones instead of outside like in a typical feedback loop. The body’s physical presence becomes fragile and temporal, only affirmed when the apparatus is operational in a specific way.

When I became familiar with the concept of autotheory, I came across a project from Adrian Piper that I had never seen before. In 1971, she conducted a private performance in her home which she documented through photography and titled *Food for the Spirit*. The performance involved her isolating herself in her apartment and immersing herself in Immanuel Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason*. She also fasted and practiced yoga, and over time started to dissociate as a result of the disorienting philosophical text in combination with the drastic lifestyle change. During times where she questioned her material existence and felt afraid, she would turn to the mirror and materialize herself through her own gaze, as well as capture the physical apparition in a photograph. The work is presented as a series of these figurative photographs of Piper in various stages of undress, affirming her material form through the relationship to the camera and mirror as tools for self-looking. Piper performed a literal embodiment of and experimentation on the body through theory.

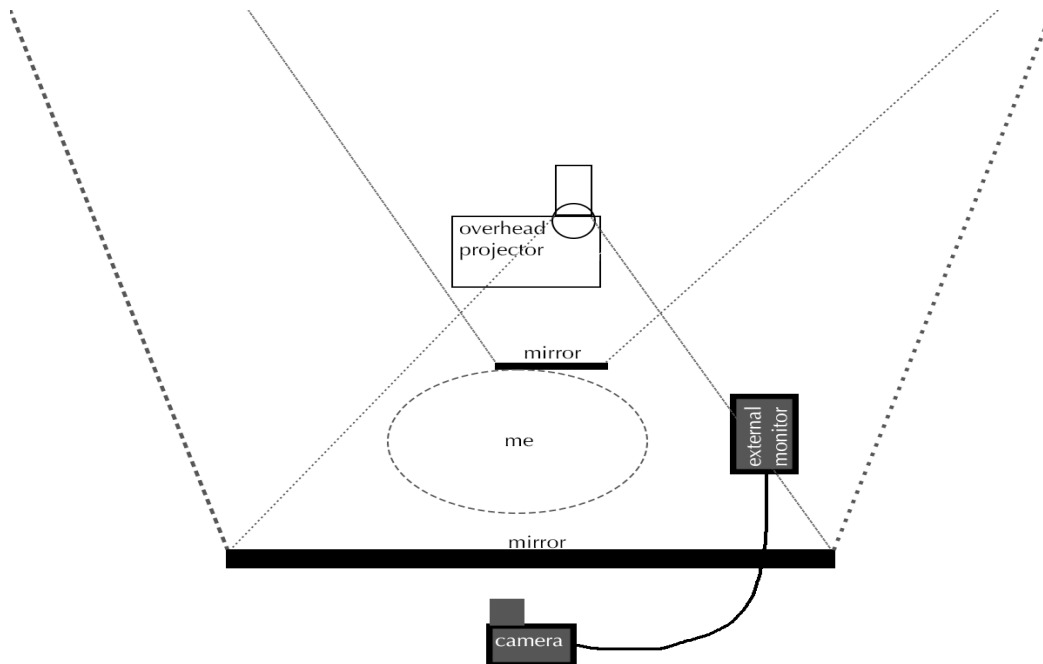


fig.10

Reading about this piece changed the way that I think about performance in my own work, and prompted me to redefine the role of the body and self within a performative structure. I reapproached some performative processes that I had engaged previously, but found that new ideas and relationships emerged from my altered perspective. I developed a performance of “autoportraiture” based on the same material processes that I had studied before, but found that new phenomena emerged when I came to the process with a different awareness. I started paying

more attention to the reflexive impact that my actions were having on myself, and noticed that in interacting with my own form, I was creating a *place* with my body.

I started to conceive of the body as a locality, and in my research found some interesting conceptual connections to philosophical interpretations of body and place. Luce Irigaray discusses the concept of place:

*“Place is not form. By the property it has of surrounding, of being an envelope, form appears to the place: the boundaries of what surrounds and what is surrounded are the same. In actual fact, these are two boundaries but not of the same being. Form is the boundary of the thing; the place, the boundary of the surrounding body.”*²⁰

This analysis is taken out of the context of her broader discussion of the *place* of the woman, specifically within the conditions of heterocentric hegemony, motherhood, and the economy of desire. Irigaray’s analysis shares a continuity with my ideas around locality and boundaries. She illustrates exchange as intrinsic to the corporeal experience, and expands the terrain of the body to its occupied context. In my performances, I was multiplied within and outside of myself. The locality of this space/place surrounded by my presence (itself an envelope wider than my body) became a new layer of the apparatus, the local turning itself inside out, receding into an unknown distance, then replacing itself as the foreground. This became a second iteration of my earlier performance where I introduced a digital feedback loop into the apparatus by feeding my camera into a digital projector which served as my light source (fig.11). This creates additional duplicates of my form in the piece, and has a more typical appearance of feedback where the image is repeated outside of itself. All the silhouettes make the same gestures at the same time, only from differing positions and at variable scales. The body affirms itself as a locality in this work by moving in relation to itself (as a part of the apparatus), but simultaneously becomes nonlocal in that its only reference point is itself.

²⁰ Irigaray, “Place, Interval”, 47-48.



fig.11

In my questioning of shapes, I returned periodically to the circle. Circles began calling my attention in various areas of my work; the petri dishes I housed my microbes in, the shape of the light beam from my overhead projector, the lenses I looked through to see into the microscope. I had developed a process of recording light refractions that appeared on the surface of my eye through a microscopic lens. The resulting footage is abstract, but recognizable as an eye from the way it moves and blinks. I had started the process out of curiosity for a phenomenon I noted when I looked into the microscope and saw light reflected from my eye being bounced off the lens and back into my eye. I was seeing a reprojection of my own gaze, an external phenomenon which was only visible internally, and only visible at the moment it was being observed. This idea of a phenomenon that is only visible as it is being observed prompted me to try to recreate it as something recordable so I could study it at a removal. This unfolded into an experiment with my own vision, and an interrogation of human visual perception more broadly.

In a pseudoscientific analysis of the human eye, I used my own eye as the subject of a photic “vivisection” (fig.12). A camera which is recording through the eyepiece of a microscope captures photic phenomena as light interacts with the refractive cornea. Diffraction patterns slide across the surface of my eye as I blink and look around, redistributing liquid across the eye. In a controlled experiment, I developed a method of adjusting the focus and coloration of the image by moving my eye around the frame, and used a cracked polarized lens for a portion of the video to reveal the way the eye focuses the image.

Circles and ellipses are the shapes we are most likely to encounter as visual materializations of the eye due to its semi-spherical form. Lightwaves are refracted and mutated by various parts of the eyeball before being translated into the images we see. Materially, these images are actually our subjective interpretation of nerve impulses. These impulses are our optic nerves “feeling” the lightwaves. Because of the shape of our eyes, and the way this form causes lightwaves to behave, our neurological conception of vision is really a reflection of our own

physicality mixed with information from our surroundings. Reality as we see it is a mirror for the human corporeal experience. Our eyes objectively facilitate the simultaneous processes of lightwave mediation and the subjective neurological projection we think of as vision, acting as a filter between our brains and the world.

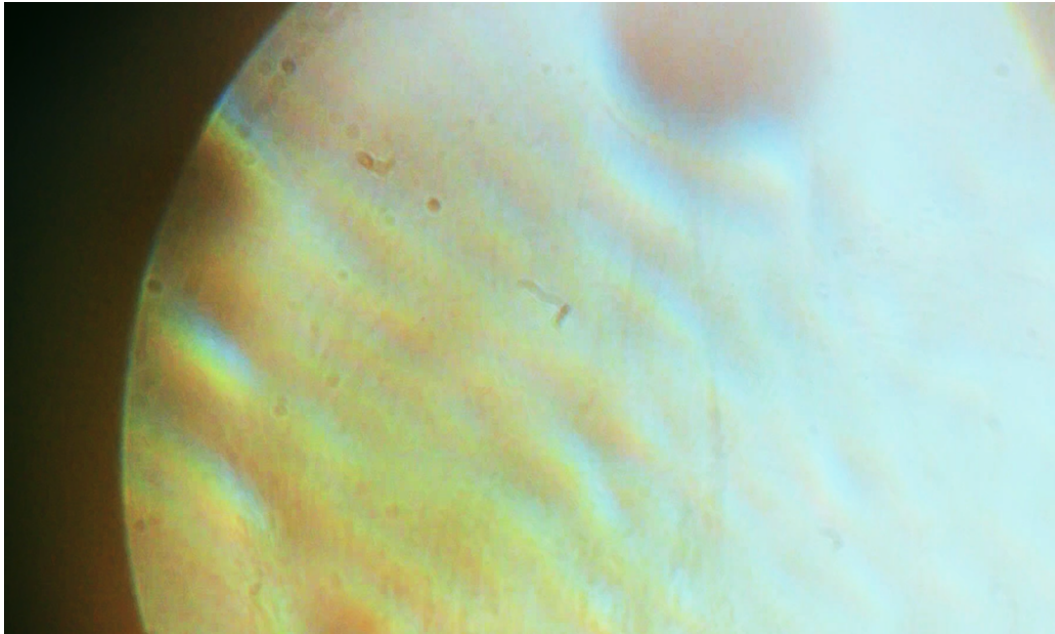


fig.12

Similar to the reprojection I encountered when my eye was reflected by the microscope, I developed a larger reprojection process using projected video and optical lenses. The lenses reflect the projection back into the projector, which casts it back out into the space. The results vary depending on the lenses being used, the bulb and lens of the projector, and the contents of the projection. I found an interesting juxtaposition within this process when I used the footage of my dying microbes for a performance of reprojection. In the video I recorded of this performance, the silhouette of my hands can be seen moving small lenses around the frame, adjusting the focus as I move them closer to and away from the projector (fig.13). What you see in the video is the projection and shadow being cast onto the wall of my studio.



fig.13

The reprojection distorts the dimensionality of the projection field, at times producing what I think of as four-dimensional imagery where the silhouette of a form is emitting bidirectionally, guided by the path of light which is bouncing between various layers of optical distortion. The imagery is dependent on a relationship to the temporal, accumulating a layer of dimension each time the light crosses back over itself. The alignment of the objects is the hinge holding the piece together. The slightest of movements can break the chain of interactions, and this happens several times throughout the performance. Each time I lose the proper alignment, I feel around for it with my tools until I find it. In the installation for this piece in my thesis exhibition, I used projections and the same optical instruments used in the piece to construct a space that would reproduce the effects in the performance (fig.14). I think of this piece as an environment that causes viewers to share subjectivity with the material. They are both activated by and activating the space when they enter. Opposites are refracting each other in the space. Presence/absence, light/dark, positive/negative, organic/constructed, abstract/representational all become false dichotomies, revealing a gray area between two binaries. The piece is a rearrangement of dimension in real time achieved with simple optical mechanics. This makes me wonder how much invisible photic activity is happening around me all the time.



fig.14

Concluding Thoughts

Light brings my attention to the reciprocally displacing effects that physical presence and occupied space have on each other. I mediate the light's path as the light calls my attention to my own locality. Specular reflections in some ways create a binary between a space and its reflection. I am curious about the exchange that opposites and binaries have when they bump up against each other. As a participant in these systems, I try to align myself between two opposing forces like I would between two mirrors so that I might see the refractions of information that are obscured by binary viewership.

My goal with this thesis is not to convince anyone that what I've said is correct or definite. I think the most interesting propositions are the ones that value the capacity to provoke creative thought and response over validity and truthfulness. All of the ideas and media presented in this text share subjectivity. If they stand between things, they do so to point out the way two separated things are linked by the thing separating them. By repeating concepts and actions across the body of work presented here, I insist that this material is generative through its capacity to reflect. What happens between bodies which all emit something is an intermingling of thoughts, materials, actions, words, perceptions, and objects which co-produce an expansion and unification of bodies. The oldest and newest technology is the body — constantly updated, made and remade.

Bibliography

- Battisti, David S. and Donohoe, Aaron. "Atmospheric and Surface Contributions to Planetary Albedo" In *Journal of Climate*, vol. 24, issue: 16 (2011). American Meteorological Society. <https://journals.ametsoc.org/view/journals/clim/24/16/2011jcli3946.1.xml>
- Bebergal, Peter. "In the (Uncanny) Valley of the Dolls" In *Strange Frequencies*, 22. New York, NY: TarcherPerigee, Penguin Random House LLC, 2018.
- Fournier, Lauren. *Autotheory as Feminist Practice in Art, Writing, and Criticism*, 7. Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2021.
- Irigaray, Luce. "Place, Interval" In *An Ethics of Sexual Difference*, 47-48. Translated by Carolyn Burke and Gillian C. Gill. Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993.
- Kim, Laura Hyunjee. "A Musing on Blobs" In *Entering the Blobosphere: A Musing on Blobs*, 66. The Accomplices: A Civil Coping Mechanisms Book, 2019.
- Kristeva, Julia. "Approaching Abjection" In *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*, 4. Translated by Leon Samuel Roudiez. New York: Columbia University Press, 1982. <https://users.clas.ufl.edu/burt/touchyfeelingsmaliciousobjects/Kristevapowersofhorrorabjection.pdf>
- Menkman, Rosa. *Glitch Studies Manifesto*, 9. Amsterdam/Cologne, 2009/2012. https://amodern.net/wp-content/uploads/2016/05/2010_Original_Rosa-Menkman-Glitch-Studies-Manifesto.pdf
- Munster, Anna. "Iterfaciality" In *Materializing New Media: Embodiment in Information Aesthetics*, 143-149. Edited by Mark J. Williams and Adrian W.B. Randolph, New Hampshire: Dartmouth College Press, 2006.
- Newton, Isaac. "Opticks or, a Treatise of the Reflections, Refractions, Inflections, and Colours of Light" In *The Project Gutenberg EBook of Opticks*. Produced by Suzanne Lybarger, Steve Harris, and Josephine Paolucci. 2010. <https://www.gutenberg.org/files/33504/33504-h/33504-h.htm>
- Preciado, Paul B. *Testo Junkie: Sex, Drugs, and Biopolitics in the Pharmacopornographic Era*, 11. Translated by Bruce Benderson. New York, NY: Feminist Press, 2013.

Preciado, Paul B. "The Pharmacopornographic Era" In *Testo Junkie: Sex, Drugs, and Biopolitics in the Pharmacopornographic Era*, 41-50. Translated by Bruce Benderson. New York, NY: Feminist Press, 2013.

Preciado, Paul B. "Pharmacopower" In *Testo Junkie: Sex, Drugs, and Biopolitics in the Pharmacopornographic Era*, 231. Translated by Bruce Benderson. New York, NY: Feminist Press, 2013.

Preciado, Paul B. "Testo Mania" In *Testo Junkie: Sex, Drugs, and Biopolitics in the Pharmacopornographic Era*, 237. Translated by Bruce Benderson. New York, NY: Feminist Press, 2013.

Scientific and Technical Information Division at NASA. "Vision" In *Bioastronautics Data Book SP-3006*. Edited by Paul Webb, M.D. Washington, D.C. 1964.
<https://web.archive.org/web/20170124045754/https://vision.arc.nasa.gov/personnel/al/papers/64vision/17.htm>

Sikora, Tomasz. *Bodies Out of Rule: Transversal Readings In Canadian Literature and Film*, 10. Kraków, Poland: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu Pedagogicznego, 2014.
https://www.academia.edu/6154997/Bodies_Out_of_Rule_Transversal_Readings_in_Canadian_Literature_and_Film

Sikora, Tomasz. "Fleshed Out: On Meat and Excess" In *Bodies Out of Rule: Transversal Readings In Canadian Literature and Film*, 42-46. Kraków, Poland: Wydawnictwo Naukowe Uniwersytetu Pedagogicznego, 2014.
https://www.academia.edu/6154997/Bodies_Out_of_Rule_Transversal_Readings_in_Canadian_Literature_and_Film

Vrhovnik, Dimitrij Mlekuz. "Approaching weird: psychoanalysis and archaeology of caves" In *Academia Letters*, Article 190, 1-4. 2021.
https://www.academia.edu/44995065/Approaching_weird_psychoanalysis_and_archaeology_of_caves?email_work_card=title

Additional Reading Material (not cited)

Bridle, James. *New Dark Age: Technology and the End of the Future*. London; Brooklyn, NY: Verso 2019.

Carson, Anne. *Decreation*. New York, NY: Vintage Books of Random House Inc. 2005.

Chu, Andrea Long. *Females*. London; Brooklyn, NY: Verso, 2019.

Chun, Wendy Hui Kyong. *Updating to Remain the Same: Habitual New Media*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017.

Grice, Elizabeth A. and Segre, Julia A. "The Skin Microbiome" In *Nature Reviews Microbiology* 9, 244-253. 2011.

<https://www.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/pmc/articles/PMC3535073/>

Haraway, Donna. *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2016.

Hershman Leeson, Lynn. "Romancing the Anti-Body: Lust and Longing in (Cyber)space." 1994.
<http://www.lynnhershman.com/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/Romancing-the-Anti-Body.pdf>

Morton, Timothy. *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World*. Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2013.

Russell, Legacy. *Glitch Feminism: A Manifesto*. London; Brooklyn, NY: Verso, 2020.