

Spring 2017

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Recommended Citation

Shvarts, Aliza. 2017. "Nonconsensual Collaborations, 2012-present: Notes on a Shared Condition." *Journal of Feminist Scholarship* 12 (Spring): 54-65. <https://digitalcommons.uri.edu/jfs/vol12/iss12/5>

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Nonconsensual Collaborations, 2012-present: Notes on a Shared Condition

Aliza Shvarts, New York University

Abstract: “*Nonconsensual Collaborations, 2012-present: Notes on a Shared Condition*” is an extended performance text. It investigates the unmarked gendered dynamics of artistic collaboration, documenting a series of “nonconsensual collaborations”—that is, performances with other artists who did not agree to their participation. Presented here as written narratives, these nonconsensual collaborations frame everyday occurrences of violation, erasure, and misrecognition, exploring how discourses of consent arise from the raced and gendered histories of property relations. They call into question the politics of representation, the status of the document, the formation of evidentiary truth, and the interpenetration of sexual and aesthetic economies. These nonconsensual collaborations go against traditional ideas of intention that structure art practice, dwelling instead on the entanglements of relation. By aesthetically reframing difficult social encounters as performance work, they attempt to recalibrate a feminist capacity to act. This work is part of Shvarts’s larger investigation into how we document or capture everyday ephemeral experiences loosely understood as performance (though not necessarily experienced “live”), as well as how writing can be not only a critical resource for theorizing such capture but also a mechanism for enacting it.

Keywords: consent, collaboration, feminism, performance art, queer theory, feminism, performative writing

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Since 2012, I have been working on a series of nonconsensual collaborations—performances with other artists who did not agree to their participation. So far there have been five, but the project is ongoing. A “nonconsensual collaboration” goes against the axioms of intention and volition that structure art practice; it troubles the idea of art as an authoritative act, highlighting instead those entangled processes through which we make things—processes that sometimes belie our own sense of agency. For this reason, the nonconsensual collaborations are not worked out beforehand. They do not have a set duration, venue, or directive. They cannot be witnessed live. Yet, like all performance, they are actions undertaken by a body and sustained over time. And like many of the works in my particular performance practice, they concern not only performed actions or events but also the performative power of language to shape, recalibrate, and make such action tangible.

The nonconsensual collaborations grapple with the fact that we make things in relation, and yet relation is difficult to formalize. “Collaboration” and “consent” give us narratives through which to outline the contours of our imbrication; they authorize habits of interaction and help us understand what we can expect from each other. Often, “collaboration” and “consent” imply a contractual agreement, stipulating the conditions under which bodies come together and orienting those bodies around a shared future goal. Yet the contract—with its juridical and ideological understanding of the subject—is perhaps an inadequate framework through which

to fully explore the forms relation might take. With the nonconsensual collaborations, I examine what else we might make from our entanglement. These *nonconsensual* collaborations question how authorization intersects with authorship—that is, how the contingencies of power structure production and its legibility. As *collaborations*, they propose one way such difficult relationality can be rendered as productive, rather than merely resolved. As *performance*, they apply artistic criteria to the complexity of lived interactions, asking how we might make something more from entanglement—and, in so doing, recalibrate a feminist capacity to act.¹

It is, for a feminist, a dangerous move to critique consent as a mechanism of agency, especially when the elaboration of consent as a legal measure has been a necessary tool in enabling women to make both visible and prosecutable some of the more violent interpersonal expressions of misogyny before the law. Within the legal sphere, where power, agency, and the ability to voice grievance are premised on an ingrained history of property relations, the question of consent and the illegality of nonconsensual sexual violence remains—of course—necessary. However, within lived social relations and performance practice, the issue of consent can be explored with greater nuance—that is, in a venue broader than that rarefied court-bound sphere of legal action. Consent bears a relation (so often left out of contemporary liberal feminism) to the histories of capitalist expropriation, gender and racial difference, and the ideological disciplines of subjecthood and objecthood that undergird property. The subject able to give consent, to exercise will, and to demonstrate injury before the law is neither timeless nor universal, but materially and historically produced. As Saidiya Hartman powerfully describes in *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*, this subject is configured through the convolutions of personhood and property that animated the nineteenth-century legal logic of US chattel slavery: “the law’s selective recognition of slave humanity [which] nullified the captive’s ability to give consent or act as agent and, at the same time, acknowledged the intentionality and agency of the slave but only as it assumed the form of criminality” (80). Through an analysis of those instances of sexual violence that fall outside the legal definitions of rape—namely, “the sexual exploitation of slave women cloaked as the legitimate use of property and the castration and assault of slave men”—she points to the racist and heteronormative framing of rape within legal discourse, and the presumed relationships between will, consent, subjectivity, and injury that such discourse entails (80–1).

Insofar as the context of sexual assault delimits the conversation on consent, its broader ideological context remains obscured. At the heart of most theorizations of democracy is the idea of *consensus*: the capacity for people to come to an agreement, to achieve a group mentality and feeling. This idea rests on the philosophical imagination of a citizen-subject: that autonomous individual who possesses a capacity to *consent*—to give permission, to willfully negotiate power difference in a manner that preserves the supposition of agency.² Yet the discourse of consent—particularly as it has also been taken up in relation to scientific research and medical procedures, recording and surveillance technologies, and the liability in the workplace—illuminates how power, agency, and the ability to voice grievance are premised on an ingrained material history. We require consent from some bodies disproportionately: from working class bodies that are overwhelmingly the objects of labor abuses; from feminine and queer bodies that are too often objects of physical and sexual aggression; from black and brown bodies that have unduly been objects of scientific and medical exploitation—and continue to be objects of increased state surveillance and violence. Such bodies seem misaligned with that philosophical imagination of the citizen-subject, as they have not historically been the inheritors of property; in context of the *enduring history* of transatlantic trade and global capitalism, they are the bodies inherited as property.

By aestheticizing the question of consent, this project takes aim at the logic of legal precedent and the larger tautology of power: the fact that both injury and value are recognized only in the terms by which they have already been recognized. In the context of these histories of bondage and ownership, we might critique consent as a market relation, a negotiation about property, and/or a waiving of liability. Consent as a horizon of relation obscures a defining characteristic of the social: the fact that lived relation occurs as a process, the idea that things might change over time. To consent is to reify the body in an economy of exchange. Yet what possibilities of agency and encounter would open up if we were to proceed from the premise that the body is incommensurate with property relations? If we were to act as if our interactions—social, sexual, and otherwise—could not be reified as such, could not be measured by the familiar metrics of value, particularly when these metrics measure only the conditions of their making? Or to phrase it another way: Can we, as feminists, do more with the concept of consent than give or demand it? And is it possible to mine its performative dimensions as a resource for artistic production?

This is a project that asks what could be gained or broken open if we thought about relations not through social scripts, but aesthetic ones. Specifically, it investigates what possibilities emerge when we consider the historically and politically charged notion of consent through the lens of art. There is a long tradition in art practice of troubling the distinction between art and everyday life. As Peter Bürger has argued in *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, the work of many twentieth-century avant-garde movements has been to interrogate this distinction between high art and mere life—or, as he writes, “to return art to the praxis of life” (86). This ethic continued to animate the politicized practices of the 1970s, 80s, and 90s: in the notion (taken up by so many feminist practitioners) that the personal is political; in the notion (taken up by so many queer practitioners, especially those working during the height of the AIDS epidemic) that the distinction between what is merely personal and what is properly political can be the difference between life and death; and in the notion (taken up by so many black artists and artists of color) that the categories of the personal and political are shaped by the history of violence that attends the distinction between personhood and property. These traditions of art practice illustrate how the social world can be mined through aesthetic form; and, conversely, aesthetic forms structure the ways social interactions have meaning. Aesthetic experience is, in its simplest terms, sensory experience, though how that sensory experience relates to questions of beauty, morality, or value remains a deeply contested discourse. In Western traditions of aesthetic theory, art has been described as pleasurable “imitation”;³ vilified as actively deceptive, an obstacle to ethical life;⁴ and lauded as a social or metaphysical good, an experience of beauty that hones moral feeling.⁵ Thus, my question with this project, and in my practice and scholarship more generally, is not *whether* social relations can be made aesthetic, but rather *whose* social relations, historically and in the present, comprise the aesthetic as we uphold and reproduce it, and *to what end*. Whose social relations are dismissed as “mere aesthetic,” decorative or inconsequential, which is to say outside the rubric of value production? And whose social relations bear a higher “transcendental” interest? In short, this work engages the fraught criteria by which some labors are recognized as fine art, while others are not. It highlights the gendered dimensions of that distinction, the different capacities of different bodies to name art as such. Or, as Mierle Laderman Ukeles puts it in her “Manifesto for Maintenance Art” (1969), the historical difficulty of claiming, from a feminine position, “that what I say is art is art.”

On one level, these nonconsensual collaborations are the work of a predatory imagination, a monstrously feminine voracity that threatens to introject. On another, they are an absurdist exercise, wherein predation becomes a feminist critique of the unacknowledged historical contingencies of agency—that fact, which we all confront but confront differently, that we must make choices in conditions that are not of our choosing.

This is to say that the scraps I am presenting now are not meant to prove anything. I have no stake in the truth of these collaborations: They are, by design, uncorroborated by contractual relation, nonconsensual. What animates this project is not the desire to insist on the fact of relation but rather to ask, How do we mark our relations to each other when the terms of that marking are themselves not neutral, when the terms of the mark privilege a certain subject position over others? What relations can be forged through an acknowledgement of this difference in historical power relation rather than through a presumption of sameness in the present?

By naming the following encounters nonconsensual collaborations, I am not attempting to make disempowerment visible; I am not asking that anything be rectified. Rather, this project works through invisibility, exploring how disempowerment can be turned into a covert tactic. In short, it resists the political shorthand of making something visible and explores, instead, how performative framing can be a tool of transformation. Nonconsensual collaboration becomes a way of claiming those interactions and entanglements we did not necessarily choose. It turns the inadequacies of agency into a resource, where the impasses of social life become a medium for making.

I.

The first nonconsensual collaboration took place over the summer of 2012, when I began an e-mail exchange with a musician who was a well-known figure in the Norwegian black-metal scene. He had been incarcerated for violent crimes and while in jail had become increasingly neofascistic, nationalistic, and virulently anti-Semitic and Islamophobic. I was interested in his transition from the radically subcultural to radically regressive, in how the bloodletting and extreme aesthetics that characterized his metal career— aesthetics that looked a lot like the queer S/M performance taking place at the same time in the US—transmogrified into the song of the nation state, into a concern over keeping the national body intact. As I have written about elsewhere (Shvarts 2014), the correspondence between the visual imagery of black metal and queer subculture, while not structured by direct artistic influence or citation, could be understood as arising from a shared stake: a marking of that originary colonial trauma that instantiated the systems of heteropatriarchy at the nexus of church and state. Aesthetically, this shared stake takes the form of a shared occult imaginary of dark feminine or effeminized monstrosity—an iconography that hails me from behind the corpse paint, even though, as a queer Jewish woman, I am no black-metal musician's intended audience.

What interested me about this black-metal musician is my own feeling about him: Why I liked him and felt so compelled by that metal scene which could never have been for me—by the aesthetic innovation of a man who, if he ever knew me, would hate me. This corresponds to the question I have about a lot of the philosophical texts I read as well: What does it mean to love the men who would find my love of them, my use of them for my own thought, so horrifying? What does it mean to be called by a thing that has not understood itself as calling you? After finding his e-mail address through his website, I wrote to the metal musician for about a month. I never got a response. The last e-mail simply said, "I am coming to find you," and I went to Oslo.

In a series of collected lectures and writings, Adrian Piper describes xenophobia in relation to dynamics of violation. She writes:

Xenophobia is defined as the fear of strangers, but it actually is not just the fear of strangers as such; for example, xenophobia does not apply to people in one's family, relatives whom one happens to have not met, or to neighbors, or to other inhabitants of one's small town. Xenophobia is about the fear of the other

considered as an alien—someone who does not look the way one is used to having people look, someone who does not behave in the way that one takes to be normal. It's about the violation of boundaries, and I think that this perhaps has increasing resonance now in the European context, because of the demographic changes and waves of immigration that you experience from Eastern Europe, Asia, and Africa. (Piper 1996, 255)

The “violation of boundaries,” which Piper identifies as the animating fear of the xenophobic, is at the same time the animating erotic of black metal. Boundaries are repeatedly violated—sonically and bodily—in order to rehearse the trauma of that initial violation which is the subject of the music, the colonial imposition of a Christian order on a Pagan prehistory. As a performer, I also find an erotics in the fear of violated boundaries—in my audience's fear that they might be subsumed in the action, in my own fear that the action will leak out into the everyday and fail to cohere legibly as art. I come from a slightly different perspective, though: one that neither presumes nor seeks to restore an idea of an inviolable self, as this inviolable self rests on a relationship to subjecthood, property, and agency which I fail to inherit or embody. Rather, in relation to the xenophobic charge of black-metal music, mine is a xenophagic impulse. I seek to ingest that which is not meant for me, to derive sustenance for myself where there is none, to turn into a resource something that is not meant for me. Xenophagy describes the state when the herbivore becomes carnivorous, the hunter necrophagous. It is an adaptive change born of necessity, on the insistence that the inhospitable environs in which one might find oneself must offer something for survival. It is a behavior that reflects a greedy yet willful insistence on one's own flourishing.

I went to Oslo hungry for an encounter. I searched and, in the process, became sated with the search itself. How do you tell the story of searching for something and not finding it? How do you frame a search as an ongoing relation rather than its object? What is the difference between a fantasized relation and a real one? An earnest search and a failed one? What confirmations do you then find all around you? On some level, this was a search for origins—for the cradle that fostered a radical and genuinely complicated musical subculture. I was looking for him because I was looking for metal-ness, and the ineffable quality of the quest was met with an atmospheric quality of its object. What we made together, what I made with him, is metal-ness as a way of looking: a question asked and answered through the act of looking for it. Nonconsent in this context names the imagination of one's own capacity to capture—especially when that capacity is imagined in the face of complete inaccessibility, the pretension to agency that marks any fringe subject.

II.

The second nonconsensual collaboration, which took place in the summer of 2013, began when I had an encounter with another performance artist in the men's room of a New York City Chinatown bar. It was the after-party for an art event, and the artist—quite drunk—was complaining about how all the women he was hitting on “couldn't handle” him. I could handle him and was appropriately provoked by the provocation. So I took him into the men's room where he ate my pussy. This was an artist whose work I have written about and am interested in precisely because it negotiates questions of consensual acts and vulnerability. During our encounter he made a lot of the same salacious statements he makes in his performance work. For several days afterward, the artist and I texted. Then, from an unknown number, I got a picture of what was unmistakably his photoshopped hand holding a cell phone. The phone displayed a text-message exchange between the artist and me, but one that had never happened. It contained excerpts from things we'd both said publically about our work, the status of the document and the nature of evidentiary truth. I was excited and decided to send something equally exciting back. So I sent him a clip from a performance I had done

several years earlier with a rape kit, where I swab my vaginal cavity and put the swabs in evidence-collection envelopes. I sent the video clip as a text, along with another text that said “77 hours later,” counting up from the moment of our encounter. And I sent this not to the unknown number, but the one I already had for him.

It turned out that the artist had not sent me the original image of his hand. It was, very coincidentally, part of a work a friend was putting together—one that imagined different artists and celebrities who have all experienced negative media attention at a dinner party together. My friend had chosen to represent my presence nonvisually in an imagined text exchange between this other performance artist and myself, and had texted me the resulting image. For some reason, I had not saved her number in my phone from the last time we talked. Understandably, the performance artist was very upset by my video and its implication of evidentiary capture. The forensic gesture of “discovering” him, of capturing his bodily matter, where neither of us refute he had been, where we both already knew it was. He yelled at me about it for a while and then said something that was the impetus for the way I’ve been thinking about this project: that his art and life are separate.

Given the clear confluence of his performance work and our bathroom encounter, this seemed patently untrue. But of more interest to me is the question of who gets to make that assertion: Who gets to insist on the separation between aesthetic and social life? Certainly not me; certainly not most women. The rape kit is itself a poignant embodiment of that. It highlights the way a woman’s body is always at least partially a landscape of the social: a field on which meaning is produced, truth is discovered, value is created. As I have explored elsewhere, rape kits exist because of the evidentiary difference between a woman’s voice and her body (Shvarts 2013). My previous work with the rape kit was about the material expropriation at its heart, the idea that structures of visibility, agency, and power remain materially bound to the feminine position as it is reduced to the vaginal cavity: the hole that speaks—that is made to speak—and overspeaks that other hole, the mouth, the seat of representational agency we usually refer to as “voice.” The rape kit as such a highly choreographed object asks, for me, not what truths can be discovered, but what harms *cannot* be voiced? What complicated entanglements cannot be understood simply in terms of harm? These questions informed the encounter I had with this artist before we ever walked into the men’s room. They have a form and structure, which is not aesthetic for him, but is certainly—given the nature of my practice—aesthetic for me. When I was performing with the rape kit, I tried and failed to write about false rape reporting. The question of the false rape report is one of how someone can use an incomplete tool of capture—a tool that reproduces those terms of erasure which make such capture necessary in the first place—to capture something that escapes, the violence, violations, and historical conditions of subjugation that cannot be voiced. Part of the logic of the kit is that it demands a perpetrator. Though what possibilities open up in the object when perpetration is not thought of as an individual act, but an institutional one? There’s an incommensurability between the performance artist’s and my understanding of perpetration and capture. And our nonconsensual collaborative work centers on the question of what happens when that incommensurability is formalized and shown rather than erased.

III.

The third nonconsensual collaboration is easier to date from its end rather than its beginning. In the fall of 2013, one partner in a couple I had been close to sent me a breakup e-mail. She was upset about what she understood as deceit on the part of the other partner, deceit that became attributed to me. She was angry,

specifically, about a sexual encounter that I had with that partner, which was kept as a long-hidden secret for a significant portion of our friendship—a secret I eventually told. It's not that sexual encounters between us were inherently disallowed. It was that in telling—telling what was, at that point, likely already known, or at least long-suspected—I had violated the tangled structures of power, pedagogy, and dependence that came to define our triangular relations. So the wronged partner, the one I was closer to on many accounts, sent me an e-mail that I understand as a score to go fuck myself:

aliza

three last bits:

MONDAY

recently there was mention that you were aiming to confirm interview for Monday? no, not necessary.

THE REST

who fucking cares? you got fucked by [X] with a handheld dirty disposable plastic prop dick. you got text messages to follow. this new years offer to [X] - as i left for myanmar reflected a very uninterested and bored me. a nuisance. now: you can't hold your end of the annoying long-held bargain to leave it alone. as i pointed out, i am disgusted that you would trash [X] first - before your desperate fingering blurt.

aiming for the low blow is right in line with mediocre cocksucking.

overall, we'd just rather you just didn't.

about final commitments

submit your final design and writing to me for TDR as our last correspondence via dropbox.

due in MONDAY Nov 11th.

the intern will be in touch to get your submission/payment paperwork together. you will receive \$100.

if you decide to withdraw, leave the ALIZApersonal dropbox folder as it is - empty.

I had collaborated with this partner on work about our relation before: about the question of generations between queer and feminist art practice, about the difficulty of what remains and what can be passed on. We'd always struggled to formalize our exchanges, being too much inside the shared social world we created, the shared language of our mutual feeling, enacted through years of conversation and through the accumulation of everyday gestures of care. Paradoxically, in her gesture of ending our friendship, the wronged partner put into aesthetic imperatives that which had been the subject of our shared concern. The carefully crafted and typographically considered phrases introduce a language of domination that is made more communicative for its florid detail. The pronoun "we" retroactively places her at the moment of betrayal, and this reinsertion covers over the real violation, which was not sexual transgression but exclusion. In this sense, we might understand the e-mail as itself a performative text, one where she imagines a scene of bad sex in order to bear witness to it. At the same time, the e-mail is clearly a score: a set of directives for performance, a demand for specific movement perhaps best encapsulated by imperative mood of the words "submit" and "leave."

How do you attend to the porousness of influence while you are still in it, under it? How does a feeling of ostracization become a feeling held in common—and, more importantly, a basis for commonality? How do you collectivize bitterness—feelings of having been overlooked, forgotten, discounted? Can you act in ways that allow for both bitterness and love? The score formalizes our common stake through the same gesture that obviates it. As an emissary, a direction to action, the e-mail feels like not only a score but also a gift. Like all gifts, it is premised in violence: in exchange that can never be made even, in a reciprocity that could only ever be felt as debt. In “The Traffic in Women: Notes on the ‘Political Economy’ of Sex” (1975), Gayle Rubin describes how women are the first gift: Given from one man to another, the woman becomes gendered in the exchange, the bearer of kinship relation that will be carried out in her reproductive labors. There seems to be an echo of this dynamic in relations of queer kinship. As a kinship structure, queerness is not exempted from the questions of inheritance, propriety, and belonging that undergird the heteropatriarchal order. In queer relation, one might negotiate those questions differently, with a different politics in mind, but nothing guarantees the realization of such difference. Or perhaps queerness simply offers the possibility of broaching intergenerational relation with a different orientation towards pleasure and prohibition. In the relationship with these two older queer artists, it felt as though I was something they passed from one to the other to concretize their relation—something offered and received. This gifting—my gifting—was something I could take pleasure in as well, as in their negotiations I could experience the charge of my own objectification. But the difficulty of this dynamic, I came to realize, is that once you have ceded agency in this respect, allowed yourself to become a term of relation for others, it is difficult to then opt out. I opted out by telling that which I knew I was not supposed to tell, by announcing the terms of their unspoken deal with each other—an exchange between them but about me. With the score as a type of gift, I become no longer just the object but also a subject of exchange. In this transition from object to subjecthood, I was released. Like most release, it was both painful and gratifying—an agential act but not exactly a choice.

In adultery narratives, there is the corroboration of the couple: They reinforce each other’s story. The damage control seems one of reconfiguring the bounds of the world they share, of shoring up what they both know about it, of coming to agreement on what there is to know. As an oblique third in any relationship, you don’t want to pierce that tenuous bubble—we all only depend on the kindness of others to maintain that surface tension of relation that binds any form of intimacy. (Of course, perhaps part of the pleasure and power of the third is the knowledge that you could.) Intimacy is, in this sense, a depth produced always at the surface, an enclosure that is merely a fold, an inversion, an invagination of the outside. From the other side of intimacy emerges a new set of questions: How do you choreograph pain? What room is there for other feeling when you have been the source of pain for others? How do you understand yourself as the mark against which others come together, against which new intimacies can form of which you are not a part? I think, in a profound way, there is an answer that lies in the experience of getting fucked and then being told to get fucked—in being told to get fucked because you got fucked. It’s a call and response structure out of time, in the wrong order, you could even say a queer order—one retroactively fulfilled. What interests me is how the attempt to cut off relation instead suspends us in one. What is nonconsensual in this relation is what also might be construed as a willful act of misreading: to look at something violent and recognize it as care. And there’s a reciprocal violence in reading this e-mail as a score, and more so in reading it as a good score, a beautiful score: a violence all the more troubling to enact (and I’m sure to experience) because it is presented as an objectively critical capacity to appreciate aesthetic value—that is, because it is shrouded as taste.

IV.

The fourth nonconsensual collaboration took place in the spring of 2014. An older artist left a message on my answering machine with an invitation to attend the VIP night of a museum opening as her guest. I'd worked for the artist—unhappily—when I first moved to New York and had not kept in touch with her over the past several years, so was surprised to get the invitation. But an article had been making the rounds about my work, and I thought perhaps this had reminded her of her interest in me. So I called back and accepted the invitation. I even bought her a corsage. Once the excitement wore off, though, I began to worry that she had meant to call someone else who shares my name. All my friends told me I was being paranoid—that my name was unusual and unlikely to be confused. One told me I had low self-esteem. Yet when I showed up to the event to meet the artist, my paranoia was confirmed: I was the wrong Aliza. And because I had anxiously rehearsed this exact situation in my head for the entire week prior, I did not look appropriately surprised. I think the artist thinks that I tricked her. When I see her out in the world, she seems to still regard me with suspicion and—perhaps symptomatically—can never remember my name.

People talk about the terrible responsibility of the people who are in positions of power, but what is often overlooked is the terrible responsibility of the dependent: the burden of recognizing, while pretending not to see, the fragility of those upon whom you depend, the nakedness of power's violability. Is it significant, does it mean anything, to be the wrong one, the right name and wrong body? To have to bear the shame of your own misrecognition? There lies in this a basic feminist question: Why must we, who are misrecognized, carry the violence of that encounter with us? How does the naive earnestness of response—that *not-knowing-better-than-to-show-up*—become a violence done to someone else? I'm interested in all the work, all the anxiety, all the aspiration that goes into that banal relational form of showing up. In how promises are often posed as calls—calls to power, calls to belonging—yet how belonging or solidarity might actually manifest in the misrecognition of oneself as being called.

Everyone who attended this VIP night of the museum art opening received a party favor: a hideous box shaped like a metallic apple. Different lengths of spikes stick out of the apple at all sides and it feels like it is made of a type of heavy plastic. The lid is ill-fitting and the construction is shoddy. Nonetheless, I kept the apple as a marker of my evening. It reminded me of a Greek myth, recounted by Ovid, that tells of a golden apple. Eris, the goddess of discord, created a golden apple engraved with the dedication “to the fairest one.” Three goddesses claimed the apple: Hera, Athena, and Aphrodite. They asked Zeus to judge who should receive the gift. Unable to decide, Zeus assigned the judging to the mortal Paris. There's an ending to the story—the goddesses try and bribe Paris, Aphrodite has the best bribe, Helen, and wins the apple though also starts the Trojan war. But what I find most compelling in this myth are the dynamics of giving and gifting. The golden apple is mobilized in a world of women—women who are its equivalent, women as a medium of exchange: an apple for a hand in marriage, an apple for other parts. Yet the measure of this medium does not change. As Peggy Phelan writes in her analysis of gender performativity and illusory power of feminine representation, “Zeus to Paris: the golden apple is always given by men to other men” (1993, 23).

The phallogocentrism of aesthetic value works in similar dynamics. In what Mary Kelly has described as “the coincidence of language and patriarchy” (1993, 23), the medium—and those bodies who are historically, and in the present, nothing but mediums for other things to pass through—fails to announce itself, fails to claim its own terms. “Consent” becomes an inadequate term through which to understand our dependence. How do you claim something that has happened to you? Can it ever be independent from a relation to the other? This difficulty bespeaks the structural dependence between a “you” and a “me.” On whose terms is that dependence figured and understood?

V.

The fifth nonconsensual collaboration took place from the fall of 2014 to the spring of 2015. It was with another artist whose work could be described as “sexually aggressive,” though the actual loci of sex and aggression in her practice are more complicated than that term suggests. Like me, this artist had become the subject of public controversy because of her art practice. Over many home-cooked dinners, this artist and I discussed ideas of violation, intimacy, dependence, and agency in our practices—the ways in which our approaches differed and the way they overlapped. We came up with a term that seemed to describe the personal and political disposition we shared and that we came to identify in other artists: the condition.

The condition is primarily marked by a certain type of excess, one that bears a relationship to femininity—that well-worn “monstrous” feminine that is too much: that wants too much, loves too much, is too soft, too wet, too excitable, too effusive, too much. The condition describes, in part, a femininity reduced to its sensuousness, its object-ness—an understanding of the ways a reproductive body, a maternal body, is under threat of being consigned to mere matter. Part of the condition is that there is no real name for the condition. The condition is marked by its effects: a scandalized relationship to a public sphere, a pathologized relationship to community, a predatory relationship to interpersonal encounters. The condition often manifests as notoriety: as the public scandal, hate mail, death threats. It often goes by the wrong names—hysteria, narcissism, self-indulgence—pseudonyms by which it circulates in the social. The condition is not a symptom, but a proclivity: a capacity to play the villain in a narrative that precedes you, a willingness to be burned at the stake.

Part of the condition is that we were able to recognize one another. Those who have it wear it on the outmost surfaces of their skin—as the first layer that touches the world. Part of the condition is that we will feel stolen from by each other—and part of the condition is our capacity to perversely recognize such theft as love. Ours is a collectivity that comes from need, from a suspect relation to autonomous individuality. The condition is an acknowledgement and struggle with the dependencies of social life, an experiment with that dependency that should be understood as political. In “Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy” (1844), Karl Marx writes—in a poignant acknowledgement of the affective stakes of material conditions—that “to be sensuous is to suffer.” To exist as an object, as matter, as something more than an abstraction, is to exist for others. As soon as you have an object, that object has you for an object. The condition describes exactly this state of living objecthood; this state of being for and in relation to each other.

The artist and I lost each other eventually. A large portion of what initially brought us together was that we both experience intense social connections. At times they take the form of internet stalkers, obsessive ex-lovers; other times, they manifest through sudden friend breakups, repeated falling-outs. Perhaps it should have been no surprise that we might eventually experience that with each other. While I miss my friend sometimes and worry about my own capacities for friendship, I feel comforted by a deeper commonality that shows itself only as turbulence in the smoothing action of social connection. The artist does not consent to my writing about the condition in these pages, but part of the condition is that we cannot decide what we owe each other: something between everything and nothing. The condition is shorthand for the fact that we make work under conditions not of our choosing—conditions under which the axioms of value and agency arise from the historical conditions of heteropatriarchy and white supremacy.

“The condition,” as a term, plays with the language of feminine pathology. It is an inoculating practice, one that explores how the already-available scripts of hysteria, manipulation, and deception can be turned into a resource: one that explores how an embrace of the pejorative can become reparative, or more importantly, can become politicized critique. The condition as a diagnostic tool describes how the constraint of these

material conditions is both shared and felt. We find each other, lose each other, enable each other through a partial knowing—in ways that confirm both our so-called pathology and our power.

Notes

1. “Performance” can be a broad term that refers to a diverse set of practices within multiple art-historical contexts—from avant-garde theater and experimental dance to “happenings” and durational body art. It is also a term recently invoked in critical theory, both in the context of speech action (Austin 1975) and in reference to gender identity (Butler 2006). Thinking across these contexts, I here engage the term to refer to consequential action undertaken by a body over time.

2. Here I refer to ideologies of citizenship and subjecthood produced in Enlightenment thinking. For a compelling history of this production, see Lloyd 1984.

3. “Imitation comes naturally to human beings [and] ... so does the universal pleasure in imitations.... The reason for this is that understanding is extremely pleasant, not just for philosophers but for others too in the same way, despite their limited capacity for it. This is the reason people take delight in seeing images; what happens is that as they come to view them they come to understand and work out what each thing is (e.g., This is so-and-so)” (Aristotle 1996, 48b).

4. “painting and imitation as a whole are far from the truth when they produce their work; and ... imitation keeps company with the part in us that is far from prudence, and is not comrade and friend for any healthy or true purpose” (Plato 1991, 603b).

5. “Taste enables us, as it were, to make the transition from sensible charm to a habitual moral interest without making too violent a leap; for taste presents the imagination as admitting, even in its freedom, of determination that is purposive for the understanding, and it teaches us to like even objects of sense freely, even apart from sensible charm” (Kant 1987, 230).

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