

RESEARCH



VOLUME 2 - THEME 3
FEBRUARY 2015

LONGING 2/3



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KAPSULA Magazine is a serial publication of:
KAPSULA Press, a non-for-profit company.

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Toronto, Ontario
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Canada

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ON THE COVER

BENJAMIN EDELBERG

I keep those dreams of yours
(2011)
silkscreen on paper
20 x 15"

Benjamin Edelberg is a Chicago born, Toronto based interdisciplinary artist. Most recently, his work was featured in the WADE IN screening series presented by Eastern Edge Gallery.

Find him at



PROLOGUE

AN INCONCLUSIVE CARTOGRAPHY

I came to explore the wreck.

The words are purposes.

The words are maps.

*I came to see the damage that was done
and the treasures that prevail.*

Adrienne Rich from *Diving into the Wreck* (1973)

We don't really know where we're going with this. There must be a place for longing—across oceans, housed in history or maybe just in a lover's bedroom—but its coordinates are slippery. The instability of longing makes mapping the feeling an impossible task. When a site shifts unexpectedly and all it takes is an instant, cartographic materials are rendered a useless index of something from the past. And if longing is the thing, it was never really there to begin with. Experience might tell us that, when the feeling passes, the place will stay a gentle reminder of what was. Our maps retain their function, pointing backwards but in a clear direction. Longing, though... Longing persists, and the places it makes home are transient in comparison.

Sometimes its residences will have lasting potential, with room to grow the family and maybe even build a guest house in the back. But you've heard the figure of speech: nothing ever lasts, and the guest house will likely end up a storage area for swingsets and expired nostalgia. Besides, longing can't be satiated with material things (we came to terms last month). With equal investments in geographies, public archives and the imprint she left on the pillow, the places we long and the places we long for vary in scale. Needless to say, it doesn't always take a village—sometimes, the site for longing can only accommodate one. Disparities in scale compound our cartographical dilemma: the map for longing is not only threatened by constant changes in address, its measurements are inconsistent, disparate.

Perhaps, when we talk about how it feels to long *for, through, in a place*, we're actually talking about a desire to *belong*. Presence and absence are a false dichotomy like any other; even if they always feel different, they are often simultaneous and identical in appearance. Being *in a place* won't solve for being *out of place*, and the only way to negate longing here is to relocate. The

catch is that the missing feeling can pervert itself, mutate and re-emerge as a perpetual need to change places. This is a historically-bounded longing, tied to its genealogy by a thousand threads. So the delicate, naked map might just be an and our impulse to chart movement is neither here nor there. We're becoming lost now... But how do you "go back to the drawing board" when the drawing board is where you began?

In the poem Adrienne Rich describes exploring a submerged place, a place beneath the surface—and isn't longing always? She writes: *...it is easy to forget what I came for/among so many who have always/lived here*. Maybe this is where we find ourselves, this is the place we've landed; the underbelly of longing is densely populated, thick with a time-honoured fog and no wonder it's been so difficult to figure out where we are. Because it's near to the end, the answer remains a mystery and longing is left unmapped, we defer. Listen to our chorus of cartographers, who unabashedly dive into the wreck, all to find the words to place *longing*.

THE SADNESS OF DOORS AND MIRRORS

Longing in the work of Abdi Osman and Joshua Vettivelu

Perhaps it is enough to say that longing, at its restless and burning center, appears to suggest distance, a staging of distance and more aptly a staging of distanciation. This semblance of a distance between the subject and the object of her/his desire appears, almost simultaneously, in terms that are both spatial and temporal. Spatially, one might consider it with regards to a sort of imagined space that sets apart the object of one's desire from oneself. Temporally, this distance might be taken account of as the time it takes to reach (arrive at, to reach over, to touch, to grasp, to hold, to return to) the object of one's most intimate longing, like the ten long years it took for Odysseus to return to his beloved Penelope and his beloved home Ithaca.

In either sense of the term, longing appears to rely so perspicaciously on this distance for its own sake—longing becomes this distance for the very sake of longing itself. Longing begins and ends—assuming a linearity to its own narrative wherein beginnings and endings are thought to be possible or viable—with this distance. Longing would appear to not *be* if such a distance was not fervently preserved, if longing could not entomb the object

of its desire within the confines and parameters of that distance. So no matter what iteration it might exist as, whether as vociferous affect or as a creatively fecund feeling, as desperate obsession or as recalcitrant pathology, as paralyzing need or as wanting love, as psychical investment or as insatiable and unappeasable melancholia, as nostalgic craving or as an unconquerable hunger, the very life of longing relies on the distance it stages, without which it cannot imagine itself to be potent as affect, or simply be.

Amidst this heavily insistent reliance on the staging of distances—both spatial and temporal in register—what might become of the object of one's desire? Is the object—perceived or otherwise—even necessary to take note of, attend to, account for and take care of? It seems that when distance becomes paramount to the affective and capacious capacity for longing to manifest in the subject, the subject of longing becomes, as Susan Stewart has suggestively noted, one “without an object” (Stewart 2007, 14). This longing, a sadness in relation to an object of desire, does not need the object of that desire for itself to become manifest.

It appears, invoking Stewart again, to stage a “desire for desire” and consequently “lack... fixity and closure” (Stewart 2007, 23). In a way, it suggests a melancholic relationship to the object, precisely in the style and manner that Freud himself described it in his now-famous and canonical essay “Mourning and Melancholia”:

[Melancholia] . . . a reaction to the loss of a beloved object . . . [It] may be possible to recognize that the loss is more notional in nature. The object may not really have died, for example, but may instead have been lost as a love-object . . . [It] is difficult to see what has been lost, so we may rather assume that the patient cannot consciously grasp what he has lost. Indeed, this might also be the case when the loss that is the cause of the melancholia is known to the subject, when he knows *who* it is, but not *what* it is about that person that he has lost. So the obvious thing is for us somehow to relate melancholia to the loss of an object that is withdrawn from consciousness, unlike mourning, in which no aspect of the loss is unconscious. (Freud 1917, 312)

Despite, or precisely because, it appears to be notional in nature, the absence of the object acts upon the subject and insists that longing percolate fervently within her/him.

The subject is enamored by the affect of loss rather than by the object lost—Freudian melancholia suggests that such a literal object is not particularly or immediately, if ever, necessary for the subject’s desire. Longing becomes invested in its own sense of a loss and thus divested from the object, but not from the experience of objectification that longing itself promises—a “desire for desire” (as Stewart suggested) that cannot and refuses to be satiated. Longing then mutates into a scene wherein we find what Rebecca Comay has posited as a fixation on the “loss of loss,” (Comay 2005, 92) which is performatively experienced. Using Freud as her guide, Comay insists on the fetishistic persistence of the melancholic, not on the object of longing but on the affective mechanism of loss itself. Thus in the one who longs, loss *becomes* for the sake of loss itself. Comay suggests this correlation between loss and longing in her description of how the melancholic relates to the memorial, as a site and stand-in object for loss:

[Then] the fetishized memorial ambiguously commemorates not the lost object *per se* but the *loss of loss*: in staging the coincidence of memory with its own evacuation the memorial performs an impossible mourning rite for mourning itself and thereby demonstrates our irreducible eviction from our own experience. It is mourning as such

which is now, ‘impossibly,’ being mourned.
(Comay 2005, 92)

Here I will examine two artworks in which this “desire for desire” and “loss of loss” meet to stage the experience of longing—specifically longing as signifying always already a relationship to a loss of fixity or closure. This, in turn, allows for longing to take center stage regarding the tenuous relationship between subject and object, between subject formation and objectification, vis-à-vis the enactment of distances—both spatial and temporal, as I have suggested earlier—such that longing becomes part and parcel of a scene of identity formation. In the first instance, I look at Abdi Osman’s *Untitled* series of collaged photographs of black queer subjects set in Istanbul. In the second, I examine Joshua Vettivelu’s video installation *Fort/Da!* In both cases, identities appear to be formed, unformed and formed again, founded on the experience of what seems to be an almost impenetrable sense of longing for some “thing” that appears to be at a distance, faraway, at some elsewhere place. These identities are envisioned as simultaneously unified and spliced within the context of these distances—distances that both enable and delimit the relationship between the subject and the object, the vessel of desire that allows her/him to feel empty and whole at once through this inescapable longing.

An Opening:

Doors and Desire in Abdi Osman's Collages

On a trip to Istanbul in 2006, Somali-Canadian artist Abdi Osman took to photographing ornate doors he found on his journey across the city. These doors would act as the necessary backdrop and background, the inspiration as such, for his *Untitled* collage project. In the images of these doors—entrances to houses and buildings in and around Istanbul—he would position and superimpose the photographed images of black queer models.

While the work might be placed within the long history of the genre of portraiture, it appears to complicate, shift and unsettle the relationship between figure and ground. Both of these (figure and ground) here belong to two separate photographic works melded into one work. The disjuncture showcased by the superimposition that forms the collage-like nature of the work is intentional. It allows us to witness, as audience, both the displacement and dissolution of the subject thrown out of historical context and time. Further, we see the dissonance between the subject of the photograph and the object of the door and its geopolitical location in the predominantly Islamic city of Istanbul. The figure in front of the door is also indicative of the locus Istanbul acts as—a city working to bridge Europe with Asia, presumptions of

modernity with the assumedly old world and forming the complicated nexus at which east and west meet, only to be separated by the languorous flow of the Bosphorus. In his own words, Osman describes the conceptual framework that he attempts to mobilize within these works:

These images draw on my meditation on religion (Islam), “queer-ness,” space and the body. After a trip to Istanbul, where I was fascinated by the doors of many places I visited and encountered. I began to ask myself: but who gets to enter? In these works I juxtapose the ornate doors with portraits of subjects who trouble and could be trouble for these doors. The idea behind these images is not about closed doors but rather about the possibilities of not being seen behind those doors. I ask myself were these figures to exist behind these doors what might be going on? I ask myself what do these doors keep in rather than keep out? And I wonder out aloud with these images, what happens if figures like these walk out from behind these doors. Doors for me are an opening, never a closure. (Osman 2014)

It appears that for Osman, the intentionality of these exercises in collage aggravate the very ways in which these bodies, his models, are expected to respond to and negotiate the complexities of historical strictures related to mobility, the experience of geographical borders and parameters, queer, gendered, and racialized subjectivities, and architectural spaces. The artist’s work insists that the audience questions the continuities and discontinuities that link these doors to the black queer subjects whose images have, in a literal and metonymic sense, been superimposed on to them.

When revisiting Osman's description: "doors for me are an opening, never a closure," the viewer might be wont to ask, an opening to what? Perhaps it is not essential to answer this question in the immediate sense—rather, it is not what the doors hold closed or might be opened up to that is important to address, but the structure of desire they both demonstrate and account for. The collage, here, acts as a gesture of displacement and emplacement simultaneously, of both loss and recuperation. Osman displaces the figures from their photographs of origin, photographs that we as viewers are not privy to, and then they are placed in a radically different and distinct spatial and temporal context. This is a context both strange and foreign, but in the scene of a necessary gesture that seeks to relocate the figures in a place elsewhere—a place that simultaneously does not belong to them because of their foreignness and queerness, and also belongs to them because of their enacted placement within the photographs of these doors. Osman attempts to override and overturn presumptions of certitude attached to geographical locations and cultural belonging. Bodies that do not immediately belong are otherwise imagined to belong, are otherwise made to belong in communion with these doors that themselves stand as strange objects.

Longing, while it might be about what is behind closed doors, might also be found in the ways bodies become displaced and replaced to experience geography and space differently—not merely the geography of the city, foreign, distant and conceived as other, but also the space in front of the door to which the subjects are closed off. Here, the figures themselves are experienced as foreign, distant and other. The work stages proximity between the subject and the door while also announcing the disjuncture of the two images superimposed to showcase the distance between the subject and the door.

One might notice in Osman's work a desire to display the complexity with which the longing to belong and the distance one might travel to feel belonging are both met with difficulty. The door acts as a partition, relentlessly acting to prevent entry, while also holding a promise of entry at some future time. The door also acts to defer desire, in an indefinite sense, as the subjects in the photograph wait quietly to enter—perhaps they are wondering what lies beyond, what might be longed for on the other side and what can only be fantasized as (and through) the possibility of entry.

Dionne Brand, in her *A Map to the Door of No Return*, is instructive here when she considers how the black subject locates her/himself within a geography of movement, migration and displacement, and experiences time as implied by the history of colonial violence and domination:

The Black body is a domesticated space as much as it is a wild space. It is domesticated in the sense that there are set characteristics ascribed to the body which have the effect of familiarizing people with it—making it a kind of irrefutable common sense of knowledge. It is a wild space in the sense that it is a sign of transgression, opposition, resistance, and desire. The Black body is culturally encoded as physical prowess, sexual fantasy, moral transgression, violence, magical musical artists. These ascriptions are easily at hand for everyday use, much as one would use a tool or instrument to execute some need or want. (Brand 2002, 35-6)

The act of sitting or standing await outside of the doors closed to the subject is not a suggestion of passivity.

Rather, in the act of waiting, the body becomes a tool that has to contend with the terrains of traumatized histories that open up as the two images are superimposed on one another. Longing for entry, or the longing that arises from being outside of the closed door, does not require an object beyond it for its fixation. Instead, the subjects engage the door as the very medium through which the affect of longing is mediated—a mediation that becomes possible because of the unknown that can only be longed for in the context of its incommensurable unknowability. Here the subjects, placed in waiting, seem to perform desire for the sake of desire and desiring itself, as they long for the unknown—the loss of loss—that remains closed to them.

Child's Play:

Mirrors in Joshua Vettivelu's Fort/Da!

In Anne Michaels' novel *Fugitive Pieces*, the geologist Athos says to his young ward Jakob Beers, "What is a man [who] has no landscape? Nothing but mirrors and tides." (Michaels 1996, 86) It is almost as though Michaels' lyric provocation anticipates, in an uncanny sense, Joshua Vettivelu's performance and video installation *Fort/Da!* *Fort/Da!* takes its name from the famous game that Freud is claimed to have played with his grandson, and that then would become foundationally significant to the former's theorizing of the psychological experiences of desire, loss, repetition, and pleasure. Vettivelu, a Canadian artist of Sri Lankan Tamil origin, performs a gesture, visually lyrical in appearance, which shows him playing the same game with a large body of water.

Vettivelu has performed the action three times thus far. First off the coast of Ferryland in Newfoundland, then on Brighton Beach, and more recently off the coast of Toronto Island. The gesture is simple and layered precisely because of how deceptively simple it appears. Vettivelu is recorded on video standing on the shoreline making a gesture of throwing something—rocks, according to the artist—at the body of water, far into the horizon. The Freudian allusions are immediately clear for the viewer as Vettivelu attempts to physically perform longing in the guise of child's play enacted by the artist's gesture. The viewer, much like the artist himself, is unsure of who the recipient of the gesture is; who is it that Vettivelu is playing with? Who is it that resides on the furthest reaches of the horizon, the tenuous line where sea and sky meet, that metaphorically appears to return the object being thrown out into the distance?

It is easy get lost amidst the various ways this performance might be explored. One might try to locate the gesture and its subsequent recording amidst the expansive history of the genres of landscape painting and photography that we

are wont to find within the varied discursive spaces that art history claims to occupy. One might invoke Kant and Burke to discuss the presumably terrifying sublime and the question of beauty in the face of such terror, in an attempt to understand how the racialized body might be and becomes placed in relation to nature, while negotiating these very same conceptual devices such as the sublime and the beautiful that in their turn make consequent interpellative demands upon such a body. Here, however, I will think through the physicality of the gesture itself—the manual labor involved in producing the gesture that is still, or can still be reduced to, a form of play—to see what it might offer us in the manner of considerations towards longing.

The gesture straddles the line between emptiness and fullness, leaving the subject of the piece, the artist himself, to traverse the line between mourning and melancholia. The artist throws the rock out into the body of water in the hope that it will be returned. While the gesture of the throw is an instance of performance, the kernel (its beating

heart, so to speak) of the performance lies in the gesture of attempting to catch what is returned. The viewer knows that, unlike in the case of Freud's grandson who played Fort/Da! with a ball tied to a string that would be returned to him in the act of gently pulling the string, the return of the object that Vettivelu throws resides only in the gesture of catching. The object or objects themselves, in the form of the many rocks, never return—the viewer, much like Vettivelu himself, knows that the body of water cannot return them, cannot play with the artist's gestural assertions on equal footing. The play is staged between the human and the non-human, the physically animate and the physical environment, as such. The melancholy repetitive gesture by Vettivelu serves to play out a longing “without an object” as suggested by Stewart. Perhaps this is what Milan Kundera describes as “the unbearable lightness of being.” The physical intensity of the repetition—throwing and play, acting at receiving the rocks over and over again—alludes to the notional nature of melancholia, where the object of longing is either absent or unknown. Loss is experienced surreptitiously as “loss of loss” and desire (for return, for play) is enacted for its own impossibly Sisyphean sake, where the game sees no resolution or end in sight.

To return to the line from Michaels' novel that inaugurated this segment of the essay, situating it up alongside Vettivelu's installation, we might be able to garner a better understanding of what Michaels might have meant through Athos's pronouncement: “What is a man [who] has no landscape? Nothing but mirrors and tides.” Speculatively speaking, the body of water might act, for instance, as a site of projection and reflection. Therein, perhaps one sees oneself in the furthest reaches of the ocean, all the way to the other shore, which is, in the final analysis, a shore one will never reach, an impossible shore. That being said, neither the projection nor the reflection is clear; they are disturbed, ruffled, and unfurled by the unruliness of ripples, tides, and waves upon the body of water. Metaphorically speaking, this body of water stands as a partition, revealing the duality of diasporic longing. Displaced and replaced between and across shores, between two or more terms of reference for that thing called “home,” the body of water signifies the desire to reach the other side, a landscape unknown, long forgotten, or left behind. But as with the very structure of the performative game that Vettivelu plays on the shoreline with the body of water, a return seems to be impossible and no where in sight.

It is also important to take note of how Vettivelu's video comes to its conclusion. The one-minute, thirty-five second video ends with several tracks of the performance layered over one another to create what appears to be a delayed loop. The opacity of the video is adjusted, while added footage of the body of water is also layered on top of the act. Vettivelu's body and its actions are multiplied across the space of the shoreline while the layering creates a

faded effect, such that his body appears to perform the gesture in a series of ghost-like apparitions. The viewer is forced to strain to see the body as it disappears from sight. In straining to catch a glimpse of the disappearing body the viewer participates in the very experience of longing that the work stages, wherein longing, once again, becomes an experience without an object.

Coda

How to contend with the seemingly impossible nature of longing? Whether in the case of Osman's collages—where we find black queer subjects standing, waiting, lingering in front of doors foreign to them, their own bodies taken out of one context and emplaced upon another—or in the case of Vettivelu's rigorous and penitent back-and-forth action in the form of a laborious, tedious, and seemingly endless game, it appears that longing suspends being in a state of incommensurate and unbearable lightness. I alluded to Kundera in the segment regarding Vettivelu's performance. At this juncture, the introductory passage from Kundera's novel *The Unbearable Lightness of Being* calls for repetition—if for nothing else, to describe

an unbearable circumstance inherent to the subject that longs, either to belong or to return:

The idea of eternal return is a mysterious one, and Nietzsche has often perplexed other philosophers with it: to think that everything recurs as we once experienced it, and that the recurrence itself recurs ad infinitum! What does this mad myth signify?

...[The] idea of eternal return implies a perspective from which things appear other than as we know them: they appear without the mitigating circumstance of their transitory nature. This mitigating circumstance prevents us from coming to a verdict. For how can we condemn something that is ephemeral, in transit? In the sunset of dissolution, everything is illuminated by the aura of nostalgia... (Kundera 1984, 4)

Thus longing is organized around its own impossible yet necessary complicity with itself. Osman's models linger in front of closed doors, staging the longing that resonates in the questions he asks through his work: Who gets to enter? Were these figures to exist behind these doors, what might be going on? What do these doors keep in rather than keep out? What happens if these figures walk out from behind these doors? The viewer will never know the answers to these queries, nor will Osman be able to provide them with any immediate sense of certitude. However, in some way, the answers are impossible and reside always already in the space of fantasy—even in the most material sense, the models have no historical, spatial, or temporal connections to the doors. They have been taken, transposed, and even gently and necessarily re-appropriated into another context not their own.

Belonging will only ever be experienced as a form of longing here. Similarly, Vettivelu's performance craves a return—a return to an unknown and imagined home across the body of water and a return of the object of play. The transitory nature of the subject in Vettivelu's work, which is his self, proclaims a desire for something that cannot be returned or easily accessed, resolved or satiated. The paradoxical stagnancy of the transitory subject is captured in the repetitive gesture that Vettivelu performs, as well as the layered fading exercise he puts his video through until the final instance. Here, he ceases to exist in relation to the body of water which, in the course of his enacting child's play, comes to represent his own longing. In the works of Osman and Vettivelu what is longed for is longing itself, seen in the way in which their subjects attempt to linger on, both resolutely and interminably.

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MUSEUM MISALIGNMENTS

MARY LAUBE

Every day we make countless attempts to memorialize our experiences. We snap photographs, collect objects from our travels, write journals, build shrines, and spend hours re-imagining past events. As a society, we hoard precious objects in museums, build altarpieces, share funerary rituals, and canonize stories in books and theater. Memorialization is a response to our daily confrontation with loss. As our experiences evaporate we seek to compensate through various forms of representation. Any attempt to depict history or illustrate our observations is a romanticized abstraction, disclosing a human longing to preserve.

In this paper I describe how representation is a product of our shared desire to memorialize experience. I will focus on the museum as an institution that uses three-dimensional staging as a primary representational format. In the following accounts of my own experience with particular exhibitions, I draw attention to the viewer's physical relationship to each setting: how scale, size, and movement through space dictate experience and modify the content of the story being illustrated.

Museums have varying degrees of visual and conceptual accuracy, which is rooted in the impossibility to present a complete and accurate version of history (Shafer nich 1993, 45). In some cases this inaccuracy is visual, resulting in a crude or even grotesque appearance. In other examples it is the story being told that seems grossly incorrect. I will describe three American museums that demonstrate the beauty in imprecision and in some cases, the deeply disturbing vulnerabilities of representation: the House on the Rock in rural Wisconsin, the Thorne Miniature Rooms at the Art Institute of Chicago, and Thomas Jefferson's Monticello in Virginia. In each example, I describe instances of unintentional slippage in order to explore how representational errors are reverberations of our ever-present longing to remember.

THE STREETS OF YESTERDAY

Three summers ago I took a road trip through Wisconsin using the Southwest Wisconsin Visitors Bureau multi-museum pass to get discounted entry at a number of tourist traps. The linchpin of southwest Wisconsin tourism is the House on the Rock, a quasi-museum created by the amateur architect Alex Jordan in 1940 (The House on the Rock, History 2015). It is more accurate to describe this site as a portrait of a passionate collector, rather than a museum with a didactic mission. In fact, Alex Jordan made it clear that he did not want the House on the Rock to be classified as a typical museum (Ibid).

The original house consists of 14 rooms, sitting atop a rock foundation in heavily wooded hills. Over time it has expanded with the addition of more buildings and elaborate garden arrangements. In the late 1980's, shortly before his death, Alex Jordan sold the establishment to the collector, Art Donaldson who still owns the complex today (The House on the Rock, History 2015). The original house is saturated in eerie lighting with shag carpets and a lingering smell of mildew. It is filled with eccentric curiosities including: a collection of maritime memorabilia; The Infinity Room, a segment of the architecture that juts out from the house and creates the optical illusion that it continues infinitely; Esmerelda, the robotic fortune-teller; and numerous token-operated music machines peppered throughout the museum. One of its exhibitions, The Streets of Yesterday, is a close-to-human-scale construction of an early 19th century outdoor street block installed inside of the building (The House on the Rock, Streets of Yesterday 2015). Walking through the street, I felt as if I had stumbled upon an abandoned town frozen in time.



The street is lined with storefronts housing objects that are grouped by category—a toy shop, the lamp store, and a clock maker to name a few. The windows are cluttered with objects, without the streamlined logic typical of American museums. One of the facades has a sign that reads “Apothecary.” Behind the window are dusty bottles claiming to cure all types of ailments and rusty objects that seem downright medieval—it seems impossible now to believe these tools were ever employed to aid human health. As if peering into an aquarium, you are faced with marvelous colors and forms pushed up against the glass. However, the space behind the objects is shallow, not at all like an actual shop; even the height of the storefront is oddly small. While the facade is punctured by its spatial limitations, the items within it are actual relics. Questioning the authenticity of the objects is not an immediate impulse, perhaps because we can immediately relate to their scale. Yet the subtle miniaturization of the stage is uncanny. Visiting the Streets of Yesterday feels different than a site museum construction where the museum visitors can make-believe they are walking through a town in some bygone era. The Streets of Yesterday transports the visitor to another place that is based on something real, yet asserts itself as non-history. This exhibit has all of the ingredients for nostalgia and utilizes visual cues that express to the viewer that it is a representation of the past, perhaps even a time and place we yearn for. Yet, the impossibility of the space has an “emerald city effect,” where the desire for an unattainable ideal is mistaken for the here and now.






THE THORNE MINIATURE ROOMS

The Thorne Miniature Rooms are miniature constructions of European and American interiors from as early as the 13th century. Similar to the Streets of Yesterday, they are representations that reflect the architectural and decorative styles of a time past. They were designed by Mrs. James Ward Thorne and are part of the permanent collection of the Art Institute of Chicago. They were meticulously built on a scale of 1 inch to 1 foot (The Art Institute of Chicago 2015). Each room is nestled in a cavity placed low on the walls.

My favorite room is called the French Provincial Bedroom of the Louis XV Period (Weingartner and Boyer 2004, 76). This bedroom is adorned with yellow floral wallpaper, upholstered chairs, and intricately carved furniture. The quality of light is the most mesmerizing characteristic of this room, which contributes to the construction's elevated realism. The left wall has a large open window letting a stream of daylight pour into the space. The light makes shapes and shadows on the ground that seem so familiar, they would be easy to overlook. On the back wall, beside a yellow and red polka-dotted canopy bed, is a spiraling staircase that appears to lead to a second floor. The lighting on the stairs, although subtle, is warmer than the light coming through the window. A simple shift in color temperature differentiates the representational cues of natural and artificial lighting. While the meticulous carving on the bedroom's armoire is exquisitely crafted, it is the quality of light that stimulates the most powerful sense of authenticity.

While visiting these constructions in person is irreplaceable, photography of the Thorne Rooms is compelling in its own right. In the Art Institute of Chicago's exhibition book, *Miniature Rooms*, the camera is positioned slightly higher than standing height, which gives the viewer a subtle clue that we are peering into a miniature world. However, after flipping through my husband's photographs of our visit in 2010, I noticed that he consistently positioned the camera to create the illusion that the viewer is

A photograph of a miniature room. On the left, a red upholstered chair with dark legs is partially visible. In the background, a doorway leads to another room. The walls are light-colored with subtle patterns.

actually standing in one of the doorways or lying on the floor. The edges of each container are eliminated from the frame. At first glance, some of the images appear to be of human-sized spaces. Then, as time passes, the reality of the room unhinges, and its believability dissolves—so why does this happen? These rooms are known for their intense representational accuracy in proportion and detail. The photographs are positioned and composed to create the feeling of just entering one of these rooms. While the prowess in the construction of these miniatures is beyond question, the evidence of abstraction is inevitable in even the most true-to-life examples. Perhaps, it is the accumulation of many infinitesimal errors that makes the truest of three-dimensional representations unachievable. Yet for me, it is that moment of realization when I become aware that I am looking not at a real-sized room, but a quite small one, that gives me the greatest satisfaction. Recognizing that I have been mistaken in this scenario is rather delightful. Inaccuracy in the miniature world produces the unmistakable quality of charm.

While the Thorne Rooms are magnetic, the utopian appearance of these spaces is unavoidable. The time of day, weather, and arrangement of furniture are far from imperfect. Because everything appears idyllic at first glance, it is the subtle strangeness and the minute implication of abstraction that make these spaces so hypnotizing, yet always out of reach. It is the uninhabitable nature of dollhouses that produces a persistent sense of yearning. Because the Thorne Rooms appear so life-like, we sink deeper into the illusion yet still remain aware of our position as onlookers, therefore heightening our sense of longing for the sweetness of a time that has long passed on.



THOMAS JEFFERSON'S MONTICELLO

While working in Virginia last year, I had the pleasure of visiting Thomas Jefferson's plantation estate, Monticello. Unlike the House on the Rock and the Thorne Rooms, this museum has an overt didactic design of the visitor experience; thirty-minute tours run on a regular basis, where visitors are shuffled from room to room as they listen to the rehearsed stories of a friendly guide.

On the outside of Thomas Jefferson's massive estate is the Monticello Cemetery for the Jefferson family. It is a pristinely manicured section of the grounds. The perimeter is lined with an ornate iron fence clearly marking the difference between the inside and the outside of the space. You can view the tombstones from a distance, but only through the bars of the gate, with gilded embellishments, reminding us of the elevated status of the earth that is just beyond our reach.

Across the estate, south of the Jefferson cemetery, is a demarcated section of land known as the Slave Burial Ground. The edge of the area is lined with a wooden post fence. Unlike the Monticello Cemetery, tombstones and grave markers are not abundant, and there is no clear indication of where to tread, permitting visitors to walk through (and on top of) the sectioned off land.

While this juxtaposition of cemeteries (burial site for slave owners and burial site for slaves) and the organization of visitors seems unintentional, the Monticello burial grounds make a powerful statement. Allowing present day Americans to tread over the soil that covers the bodies of slaves reflects the heartbreaking undercurrent of racism that still exists. Maybe it is in its un-intentionality that it becomes even more problematic. I found the obliviousness of those visiting the museum and the carelessness of the institution itself to be alarming—so alarming that, to this day, my most vivid memory of this location was the awkwardness and shame I felt in participating in the spectacle. In Monticello's attempt to memorialize and commemorate both the Jefferson family and the slaves, they created an interaction between viewer and site that uncovers the problems some assume have long evaporated. Overlooking a detail such as this stresses the institutional desire to write history through a specific lens. This “overlooking” occurs not only in the slave burial ground, but also the museum's official website. The repetitive reminder that Jefferson wanted slaves to be treated well does not change history, and the evidence that proves otherwise. I would argue that the omission of this truth and the evasion of details is an attempt to preserve a fixed version of collective memory. It is a reminder of the deep pang of longing we have to revise the cruelest of memories, and determine how future generations will remember the past.

CONCLUSION

Museums are sites of remembrance where we can meditate on our cultural and technological development. They are memorials for people, ideas, and events of the past. They house our collective desire to stop time and make sense of the world. Museums are incredible platforms for creatively representing the past, but they are also institutions with ideological commitments. The challenge with these institutions is what makes them so interesting: the fact that they are built by people. Like all other storytellers, museums can never present complete accounts of the past; they too have varying degrees of subjectivity (Shaferlich 1993, 45). Therefore, we should interact with museums from up close and from afar, to grasp as fully as possible the histories we desire to understand.

The House on the Rock, The Thorne Miniature Rooms, and Thomas Jefferson's Monticello are vastly different collections of knowledge. They each have a different purpose and distinct stories of development. However, they all have instances of visible slippage, where the inability to capture "reality" or accurately present history forms a different trajectory than what may have been intended in the first place. These misalignments, regardless of how charming or graceless, are reflections of our human desire to create stand-ins for the irretrievable histories we long to preserve.

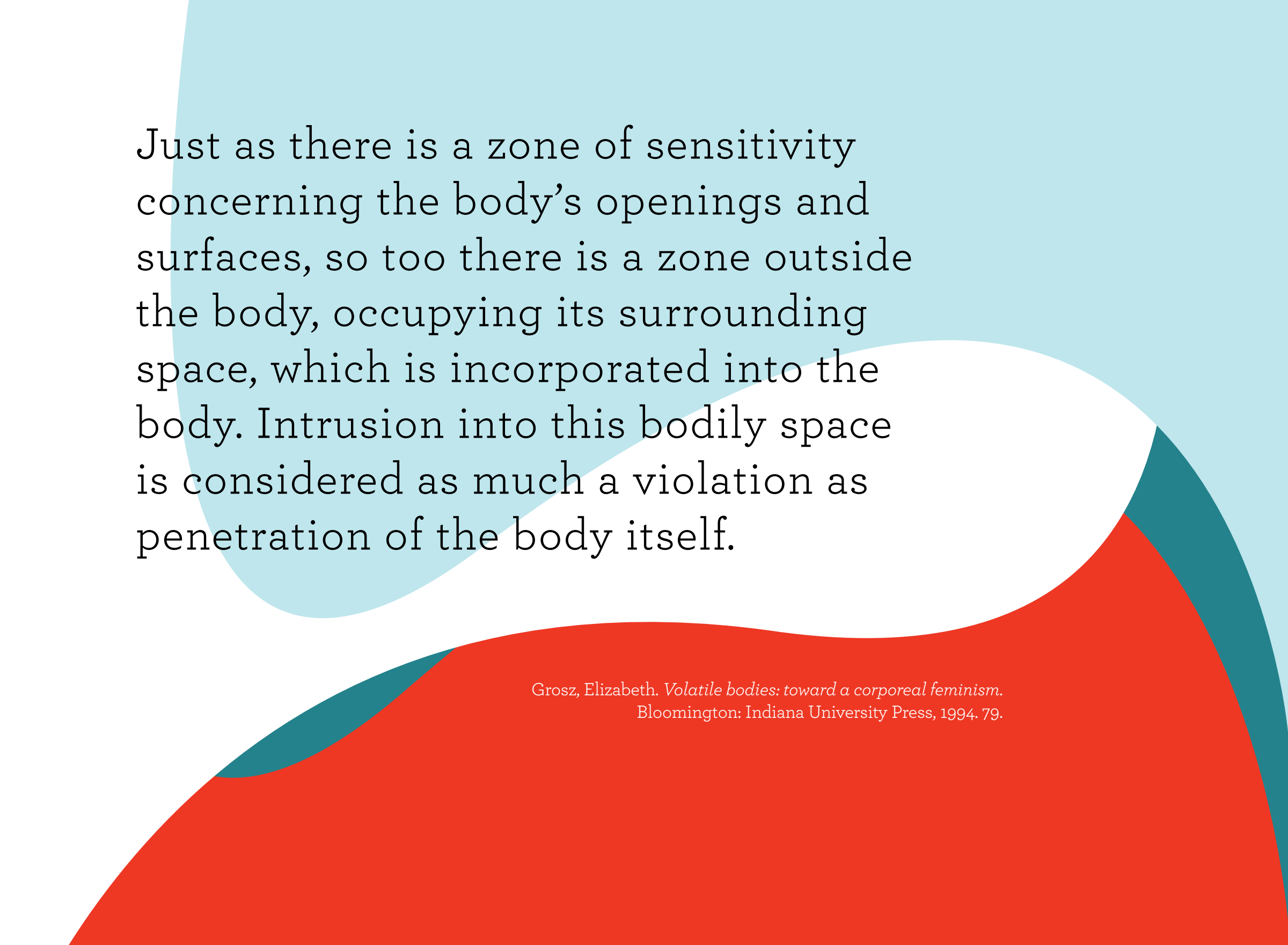
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Just as there is a zone of sensitivity concerning the body's openings and surfaces, so too there is a zone outside the body, occupying its surrounding space, which is incorporated into the body. Intrusion into this bodily space is considered as much a violation as penetration of the body itself.

Grosz, Elizabeth. *Volatile bodies: toward a corporeal feminism*.
Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994. 79.



THE ALLURE OF ABSENCE

The aesthetics of the female body in Western contemporary art and seventeenth century Japan

The exhibition *Sleepless: The bed in history and contemporary art* **has just opened in Vienna**. As is often the case, both the title and the content of the exhibition omit the word ‘Western’; its absence is not considered problematic because the West is an assumed paradigm. It is therefore momentous to discuss one of the representative works in the exhibition in conjunction with another work that is distanced in time and space, but similar in its framing of a conspicuous absentee: the feminine body. The former work is Tracey Emin’s *My Bed* (1998), **an installation replicating the artists’ own bed**. The latter is a seventeenth century Japanese folding screen called *Tagasode byobu* (Whose sleeves?) that depicts feminine clothes hung on a rack.

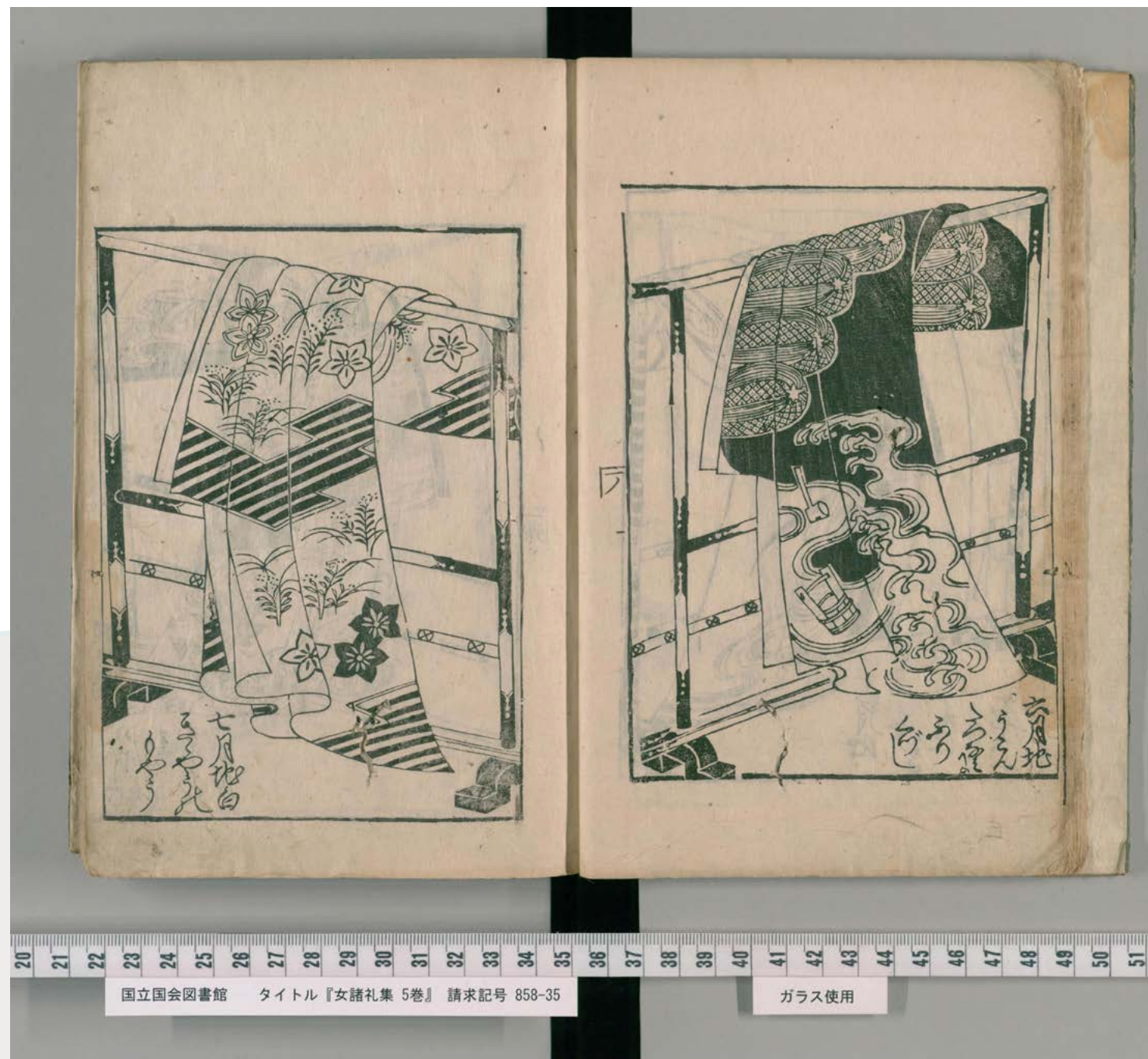
I will explore the significance of the absent body to issues of feminine identity and bodily practices by bringing the two artworks together as facing mirrors. The objective is to uncover new meanings in each one through the other.

Throughout western civilization, the bed has been the site of crucial existential events such as giving birth, children jumping, wedding nights, sleeping, dreaming, and death. It is an intimate and versatile space, both the site of relaxation, passivity, and sexual activity. When compared to technologies of rest in other cultures, the bed is stationary and difficult to move around—in fact, its very importance derives from its perceived immobility. The bed has also been one of the main framing devices for the female nude in Western art (Clark 1956). Although they tend to be taken for granted, all of these features of the Western bed play a part in the artistic agency of *My Bed*. This is why a comparison with a work such as the ‘Whose sleeves’ screens is revealing; in seventeenth century Japanese culture, there was no equivalent of

the Western bed. *Futon* (padded mattresses) were still a novelty at the time, and clothes were commonly used as bedding for naked bodies. Clothes also had an architectural function: hung over racks, they would serve as room dividers, similarly to a folding screen (Murase 2000, 353).

The clothes retained their association with their owners (Screech 1999, 114), and their display had an erotic connotation (Guth 1992, 33; Carpenter 1998, 424). Clothes, therefore, had a multiple framing function: physical, either when worn or when displayed on rack, and ontological, suggesting the taste of a specific wearer. A similar framing function is performed by the bed in *My Bed*—notice how elements of personal dress, such as tights, are integrated into an assembly that likewise offers a domestic scene for aesthetic consideration.

The titles of these two artworks relate through an inverted parallelism. The title of *My Bed* is specific, identifying the work and its contents as belonging to Tracey Emin. At the same time, the content is non-specific—without a title and an identified author, it could be any woman's bed. In the artist's words, "It's just a bed." (TV Spain 2008, 02:03) By contrast, the title of 'Whose Sleeves?' screens is non-specific and interrogatory. Despite this, the contemporary audience would have been able to reconstruct the taste and personality of a specific wearer, an elegant lady, from the details in the dress (Screech 1999, p. 114). In the former



case, the person (Tracey Emin, the author of the work) specifies the frame. In the latter case, the frame specifies the person (elegant lady). This distinction is characteristic of the specific cultural frames within which both artworks are situated, and further reflected in the documentation attached to the two artworks. The identity of the ladies depicted in the screens is no longer known. Besides historical vagaries, this might be due to the fact that the objects themselves were less important than the social contexts in which they were used. We also don't know the identity of their authors, beyond the assumption that they were so-called 'town painters' from studios selling works in the capital Miyako (now known as Kyoto) (Satsuki Milhaupt 2003, 273). The screens are also difficult to date, and there are various theories regarding the genesis of the genre. Meanwhile, we know close to everything about *My Bed*: who, when, and where it was made, down to the street number of Tracey Emin's London apartment.

The documentary abundance of Tracey Emin's work is a telling example of the encroaching role of media in contemporary art. As Deborah Cherry reports: "In London *My Bed* rapidly became an over-night sensation, as a rhetoric of shock, sensation and controversy swirled around the artist and her work." (Cherry 2001) How did an artwork that was "just a bed" cause such a media frenzy? Well, *My Bed* is not just any bed—it is a dirty bed. Cherry writes that: "*My Bed* emits no strong odour. Nevertheless a stink metaphor, already in circulation for Emin's art, drifted around *My Bed*." (Cherry 2001) The newspaper reviewers who employed this "stink metaphor" were translating visual stimuli into olfactory responses. The same synaesthetic mechanism is consciously employed in the screens. The title itself is a poetic allusion to a classical poem which privileges olfactory over visual stimuli:

*The fragrance seems even more alluring than the hue,
Whose sleeves have brushed past?
Or would it be this plum tree blossoming here at home?*

*Iro yori mo ka koso awaredo
omohoyure tagasode fureshi
ado no ume zo mo*

(Heilbrunn 2000)

The suggested texture and scent of the robes and the flickering light under which they would have been viewed contribute toward an encompassing synaesthetic experience. This is compounded with the enfolded-ness of the screens, customarily displayed at various angles that result in a spatial and temporal dynamics. The insistence on sensual triggers runs counter to the Western aesthetic tradition, highly influenced by Kant's privileging of contemplative over sensory pleasure. Contrary to this tradition, Tracey Emin's artwork invites the viewer to participate in a transgressive sensory experience. Although the artist achieves this only through visually suggestive means, the very suggestion of non-visual elements is repulsive, just like Damien Hirst's *A Thousand Years*. From this point of view, *My Bed* challenges the inodorous and aseptic medium in which art is displayed in the Western civilization. In the history of Western thought, the visual has been privileged as detached and objective, while the olfactory has been relegated to the discourse framing the Oriental or the feminine Other. For instance, in a François Boucher painting of one of the mistresses of Louis XV, the flower and incense suggest olfactory pleasure in a manner which parallels that of the screens. Both in the screens and in paintings of female nudes that are intended for private viewing, the gaze is that of a male voyeur, activating the work by imagining the presence of the feminine body. Here is where *My Bed* distances itself: it sets the stage for voyeurism, but offers a doubly disappointing sight: the bed is visually repulsive, and the female body is not present (Terraroli 2010, 55). *My Bed* subverts the traditional idea of contemplative male voyeurism. The strong reactions elicited by the work testify to the effectiveness of this subversion.

There are two responses to *My Bed* that are especially illustrative of the larger meaning it carries. Firstly, I will discuss the appropriation of the artwork by two Chinese artists, Cai Yuan and Xi Jianjun, who "removed some of their clothes, rushed onto the bed, shouting and

jumping, and had a pillow fight." (Cherry 2001) They conceived this act as a performance, entitled *Two Naked Men Jump on Tracey's Bed*. Their act was staged as a refusal to perform the role of voyeur. However, Yuan and Jianjun violated the feminine space of *My Bed* both physically and symbolically, thus appropriating it as a site of masculine activity despite their claim to have done the opposite. The two artists replaced the bodily absence of *My Bed* with a doubled bodily presence. In this sense, whether intentionally or not, they harkened back to a Western tradition of bed-bound nudes. If we were to genealogically trace this tradition back in time, we might mention Toulouse-Lautrec's paintings of intimate lesbian couples. Lautrec was challenging the function of the bed in Western tradition as a framing device for the female nude exposed to the male gaze. In paintings such as Boucher's, the feminine body's personal space had been fully exposed and available to the male gaze. Toulouse-Lautrec painted the body as defined by its personal space, and not by its erotogenic zones. His choice of feminine intimacy is relevant in this context. The two women enjoying each other's bodies autonomously, hidden and non-erotogenic to the male gaze. It is not only the opacity of the bedcover that restricts the male gaze. It is also the expanded volume of the women's bodies. The artist has configured an expanded bodily space, impenetrable by the viewer.

We find the same use of space in Jeanne Dunning's photographic work. The body is present, defining its personal space within the frame of the bed. At the same time, the body is disappearing from the reach of the male gaze, though not completely; the hand is still visible. The immaculate bed in Dunning's *In Bed* is tame and non-transgressive, perpetuating a tight containment of the body—remarkably different from Emin's *My Bed*, with its stained confusion. In Emin's work the framing of the female body is not complete; the body is half-present through its fluid traces: blood, urine, semen. Adrian Gargett points to this when he writes: "*My Bed* is about incontinence moral and actual." (Gargett 2001) I would replace the 'moral' here with 'ontological', echoing calls for a feminist philosophy of the body (Grosz 1994). By transgressing the boundaries between self

and other, *My Bed* is pointing towards a new configuration of feminine identity through the specificity of the artist's body. However, the aesthetic suggested by *My Bed* and feminist theories is still beyond our current system of representation. Works such as *My Bed* thus inhabit aesthetic limbo: abjection. Emin makes the move from body as object to body as abject. The second significant response to *My Bed* that I will discuss addresses the destabilizing function of abjection: "[T]he homemaker from Wales who intervened in the installation and then told the press, 'I drove straight to London with a 500 ml bottle of Vanish. I had a go, but unfortunately I could not get to wash the sheets, just a pre-wash. I may have done the artist a favour. In her video, she was bleating on about a lack of a love life. She will never get a boyfriend unless she tidies herself up.'" (Loughlin) The woman's response is not just about the physical act of cleaning the bed—it is also about configuring a sanitized feminine identity by erasing the traces of her body. In this regard, the name of the stain-remover brand the woman was using (Vanish) is unwittingly appropriate.

Are there other modes of expression besides abjection, in which a new feminine bodily aesthetic could be couched? The screens embody the same sensually charged failure of containing the feminine body—visible only are the objects which bear her traces. Unlike Boucher's nudes, the male gaze is not fulfilled. The resulting ambiguity of the feminine body is valorised and integrated into an alluring identity. Thus, I propose that the screens can function as a model for future aesthetic developments in contemporary art. My proposal takes into consideration similarities in the context of production: although the tendency is to attribute fixity and atemporality to non-Western works of art, the screens were products of an age just as volatile as the nineties. After a century of civil war, the Japanese archipelago had been centralised under the rule of the Tokugawa family, which moved the capital from Miyako to Edo (present day Tokyo). Rapid economic growth led to wider audiences which required fresh visual formulas of consecrated themes. The screens were produced at the very beginning of this period of intense transformations. They were contemporaneous with the emergence of a new bodily aesthetic, represented by the 'bent' poses of a burgeoning demimonde (Carpenter 2002). The iconography of erotic images



was also changing in this period, from nude bodies against an empty background to cloth-framed bodies in an interior setting (Tanaka 1996, 63).

I interpret the absence of a body in the screens as a crisis in representations of the feminine body. Relatedly, I argue that these screens are a manifestation of a change in the conception of the body in seventeenth-century Japan. Could *My Bed* announce a similar future aesthetic transformation? When the feminine body was featured in early seventeenth-century Japanese paintings, it was depicted with alluring 'bent' poses in which the tightly-draped garments played an important role. The screens thus exhibit a fissure in the iconographical conventions of the feminine figure, fragmented into clothes on the one hand and a highly expressive body on the other hand. At the time, this iconography was highly unusual, daring and experimental. This is more difficult to recognize today because the bodily poses were soon standardized into depictions of feminine beauty in the *ukiyo-e* ('floating world picture') genre, that has since received considerably more attention in the West. For instance, the erotic undertone of poetical allusions in the screens was brought to the fore in later images.

In the pictured example of a 'floating world picture,' clothes hung on a rack configure an erotically-charged scene along with the woman bather's coquettish hand gesture (Mostow 1996, 101-103). Despite their delights, these later images ultimately simplified the ambiguity and radicalism of early seventeenth century screens. The screens, as well as *My Bed*, are characterized by the temporary nature of their display, their snapshot quality. The resulting sense of casualness in both cases encourages the tendency to dismiss these works as insignificant or generic, to moderate their transgressive movement. In this sense, both works are casualties of fame (or the lack of it), historical change, aesthetic canons, and the need for closure.



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