



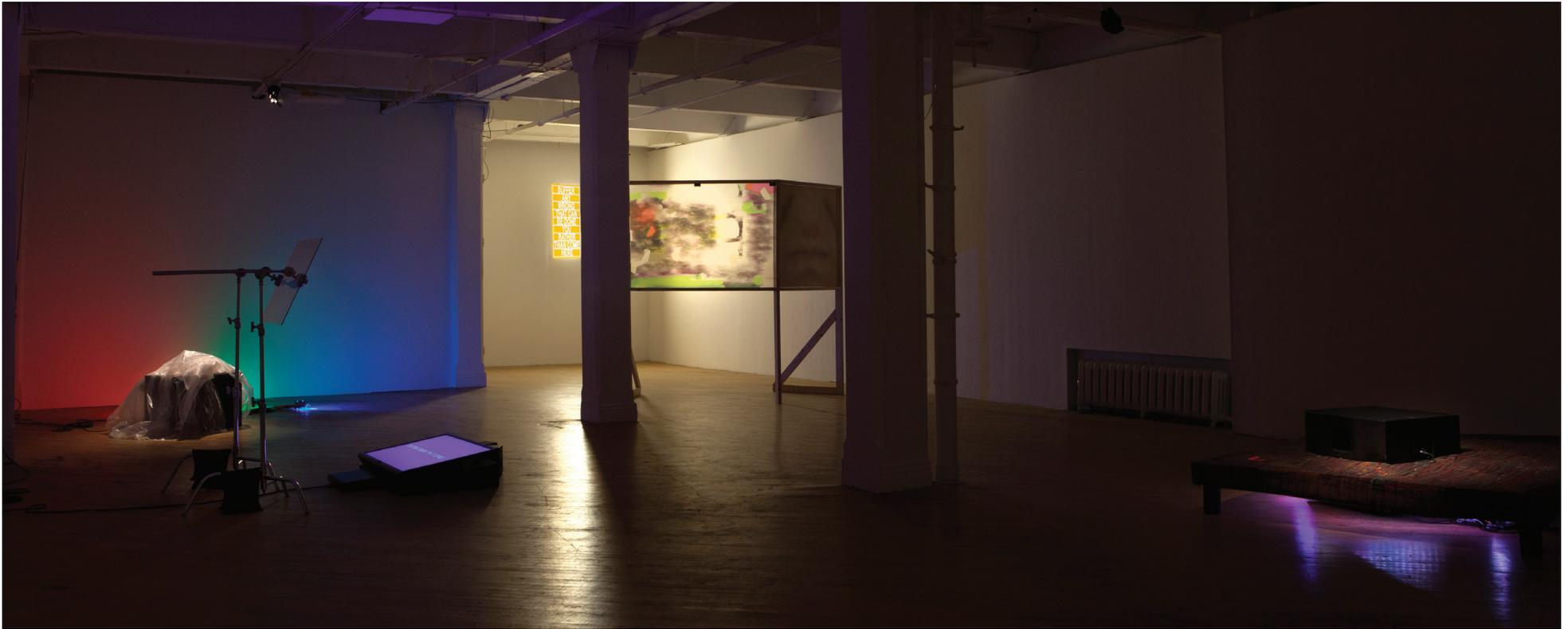
The yolk of menial light

ANDREA ROBERTS

You can _____ your life (3MDR), Subwoofers, carpet, wood, sine waves, trouble lights, plastic.

All photos by Karen Asher.

October 23 - December 1, 2015



On Facing

A response by
Cam Scott

A low thrum crescendos at the peak of the stairwell to the gallery. Inside, one hesitates before (stumbles upon) Andrea Roberts' motley sculpture: so many decommissioned satellites orbiting a cancelled appearance. In a corner a subwoofer sinks below a grotesquely carpeted stage, pulsing at intervals; its counterpart is placed diametrically and draped in plastic. A translucent screen, resembling a heat-map of indiscernible reference, makes a diptych with a half-portrait of a stormy face. Perpendicular to this, comically gnomonic overtures of apology scroll backwards across a television screen in eye-achingly saturated colour, reflected in a glass pane for legibility, if not sense.

In spite of the sparseness of the presentation, one's movement feels inhibited at every turn. Bare wood and exposed clamps suggest both work-in-progress and abandonment. An illuminated sign in the far corner of the room declaims: "SUFFER ANY WRONG THAT CAN BE DONE YOU RATHER THAN COME HERE," a mantra concerning the fictional court case of Jarndyce and Jarndyce, from Charles Dickens' *Bleak House*.¹ To be indecently treated, one gathers, is nonetheless better than to be improperly judged. Facing and effacement are key themes here; the necessary risk of appearing before another, as an other, by oneself.

The sound portion of the installation, *You can _____ your life (3MDR)* (Subwoofers, carpet, wood, sine waves, trouble lights, plastic. 2015) pulsating symmetrically, is named and conceived in reference to Francine Shapiro's Eye Movement Desensitization Reprocessing (EMDR) therapy, an experimental technique based upon the observation that traumatic memories may be ameliorated by distracting stimuli, such as light or bilateral sound. And as sound eludes any static conception of sculpture, Roberts' installation, like Shapiro's therapeutics, confronts onlookers as an organization of both experiential and physical material. Perhaps, to start, it is this sensitized threshold between past experience and present stimulus, pathology and process, where one may situate the face, refracting gaze.

Roberts' sculptures utilize the radically (dis-)placed gaze, the feeling of being-seen-seeing. This transpires in the staging of a quotidian grotesque—a glimpse



of the cord tailing a speaker, a smear blending floral carpet—encouraging a paranoid feeling that the work is never in front of you, but at once always behind and around you, sounding, glaring, glowing: the glower of a gaze without a face.

Uses of Suffering

"Suffer any wrong that can be done you rather than come here." (*Absorption Costing*; LED Lightbox, vinyl. 2015) This performatively vexing signpost draws one forward only to ward away. But where in this exhibition is 'here'? This is the sort of cautionary advice dispensed by Dantean shades, who say to the interloper, in essence, *change your life*. In Roberts' version, backlit by menial light, the exhortation appears as both a curse and call to consciousness.



Philosopher Catherine Malabou traces the concept of neuroplasticity, the capacity of the brain to alter its structure, after injury or habit, by cortical remapping. Malabou is chiefly concerned with the negative implications of plasticity as it bears not only on repair, but on induced loss of identity. In the case of brain injury, for example, one is faced with “the plasticity of the wound through which the permanent dislocation of one identity forms another identity ... Such patients prove that destruction is a form that forms, that destruction might indeed constitute a form of psychic life.”²

Disasters of subjectivity are also acute in certain visual agnosias. Prosopagnosia, for instance, is the inability to recognize faces, including one’s own. Often the afflicted is able to recognize their photographic likeness



Cutting up Touches, Ink on acetate, coroplast, vinyl, clips, wood.



but not their reflection. For these wounded, everything remains in place, perfectly responsive, except for the sighted centrepiece, themselves. “*All suffering is formative of the identity that endures it,*” Malabou asserts³, a premise foreshadowed by Emmanuel Levinas, for whom suffering is pre-subjective, blotting consciousness, rather than an experience one has for, or as, oneself. Suffering, says Levinas, is useless, but where there is suffering, there is an opening toward the other who promises remediation.⁴

May we say that the face is originally affected? Malabou follows Deleuze, suggesting that the face, “as it coincides with the affect, becomes a pure quality or pure intensity,” amplified with the cinematic technique of the close-up.⁵ Emotional recognition tests exploit and reduce this intensity and Roberts’ work draws extensively upon these profiles, one of which, enlarged and partialized, glares from a wooden frame (*Cutting up Touches*; Ink on acetate,

coroplast, vinyl, clips, wood. 2015). The image is a close-up of a tight-lipped mouth; the eyes are omitted from this panel only to be interpolated everywhere instead. Further, the iconicity of the test-face impels wonder, but it is no one’s face in particular. It is a topological map of a highly contagious emotion.

Image Fixation

‘Facework’ is a key component of presentation, where ‘face’ is a synecdoche of presentation more generally, an apparition to be groomed and guarded. According to sociologist Erving Goffman, presentation denotes all that activity which “occurs during a period marked by his [sic] continuous presence before a particular set of observers.”⁶ Here too one is at the mercy of the other who may redeem or damn an image by simply looking.

This crucially informs the Image Repair Theory of William Benoit, and its emphasis on the genre of *apologia*. “When faced with a threat to our image, we rarely ignore it, because our face, image, or reputation is a valuable commodity. We not only desire a healthy image of ourselves but want others to think favorably of us as well,” Benoit writes, understating the extent to which these are the same thing.⁷ This brings us to the text of Roberts’ teleprompter centrepiece, *Eye Dialect* (LED TV, C-stands, sandbags, glass, speakers. 2015) sourced from public apologies of various public figures (Tiger Woods, Reese Witherspoon, CEOs of Goldman Sachs, and British Petroleum). These scripts of cynical contrition, scrolling backwards and reflected on a pane of glass as though to work some restorative magic, were recited in the artist’s voice, then errorfully recorded by transcription software, rendering a failure of recognition, of shared reference, of climactic moment. Forgiveness is expedient here, qualitatively different from and unrelated to mercy. “Suffer any wrong that can be done you,” the abject apology implicitly declaims. This anguish is nothing like the primary expression of suffering that Levinas denotes by ‘face’: this suffering is far from useless, in fact, it has been monetized.

The non-face

The *non-face* affixes nothing: it refuses fascination, though its gaze gapes before us like a frame. If Levinas reminds us that being is primarily tied to suffering, he nonetheless allows for assistance in the inter-face. And Malabou, whilst emphasizing creativity and repair, acknowledges the chance that the very category of 'face' may be withheld a subject. Detraction-abstraction informs the colour-blotted vista of *Cutting Up Touches*, which superimposes two (non-) faces in different colour registers, RGB (red-green-blue) and CMYK (cyan-magenta-yellow-black), associated with web- and print-based media respectively. The combination of these different optics, additive and subtractive, aptly, abstractly, represents the uncanny feeling of glimpsing oneself as another, from without. One could describe Roberts' sculpture as an aesthetic frame by which to glimpse this destitution. Philosopher Peter Sloterdijk sketches the tendency, albeit for purposes of lapsarian elegy:

Where modern art does still depict faces, it keeps a figurative record of a constant interfacial catastrophe ... it shows faces that are no longer modeled within correspondences between intimate spheres ... Detraction and abstraction have won out over protraction as facioplasmic morphological forces It is no coincidence that the most distinctive new place in the innovated medial world is the interface, which no longer refers to the sphere of encounter between faces, but rather the contact point between the face and the non-face, or between two non-faces.⁸

What might it mean to suggest that the face today is threatened as a *category*? One may note a technologically vitiated abjection of the face, biometrically secured by techniques of long-distance surveillance and short-range profiling. Glaringly, Sloterdijk writes as though the interface had never malfunctioned before the advent of certain new media, while anybody with a politics, anybody with a history, knows of innumerable cases of prejudice and stigmatization where the face-to-face has failed and where evil has asserted itself in

the guise of illegibility. Without pictorial platitudes, however, Roberts' work approaches the face as one must any sacred object, by allusion: as a multimedia production, subject to dis-closure, or an opening: as both a window and a wound.

Notes

- 1 Charles Dickens. *Bleak House*. (London and New York: Penguin Books, 1996), 15
- 2 Catherine Malabou, trans. Steven Miller. *The New Wounded: From Neurosis to Brain Damage*. (New York: Fordham University Press, 2012), 18
- 3 *Ibid*
- 4 Emmanuel Levinas, trans. Michael B. Smith and Barbara Harshav. *Entre Nous: Thinking-of-the-other*. (London and New York: Continuum, 1998), 78
- 5 Catherine Malabou and Adrian Johnston. *Self and Emotional Life: Philosophy, Psychoanalysis, and Neuroscience*. (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013), 46
- 6 Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life*. (New York: Penguin Books, 1978), 22
- 7 William L. Benoit, *Accounts, Excuses, and Apologies: Image Repair Theory and Research*. (Albany: State University of New York, 2015), ix
- 8 Peter Sloterdijk, trans. Wieland Hoban. *Bubbles: Spheres Volume One: Microspherology*. (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2011), 189



Eye Dialect, LED TV, C-stands, sandbags, glass, speakers.

Critical Distance is a writing program of **aceartinc.** that encourages critical writing and dialogue about contemporary art. The program is an avenue for exploration by emerging and established artists and writers. Written for each exhibition mounted at **aceartinc.** these texts form the basis of our annual journal Paper Wait.

aceartinc. gratefully acknowledges the generous support of associate members and donors, our volunteers, the Manitoba Arts Council, The Canada Council for the Arts, Media Arts and Visual Arts Sections, The City of Winnipeg Arts Council, WH and SE Loewen Foundation, the Winnipeg Foundation, The Family of Wendy Wersch, and the Sign Source.

aceartinc. is an Artist-Run Centre dedicated to the development, exhibition and dissemination of contemporary art by cultural producers. **aceartinc.** maintains a commitment to emerging artists and recognizes its role in placing contemporary artists in a larger cultural context. **aceartinc.** is dedicated to cultural diversity in its programs and to this end encourages applications from contemporary artists and curators identifying as members of GLBT (gay, lesbian, bisexual, transgender), Aboriginal (status, non-status, Inuit, Métis) and all other cultural communities.

Cam Scott is an itinerant poet, essayist, and improvising non-musician from Winnipeg, Canada, Treaty One Territory.

aceartinc.

2nd floor, 290 McDermot Ave.
Winnipeg MB R3B 0T2

204.944.9763

gallery@aceart.org

www.aceart.org

Tuesday-Saturday 12 - 5pm

