TABLE OF CONTENTS

3
PREFACE

4
ENTER THE RUCKUS

11
THE LIGHT OF OTHER SUNS

12
INVISIBILTY

13
ECSTATIC BEING AND VOICING FROM THE BORDERLANDS

20
OPEN MOUTH KISSING

21
BECAUSE DEATH IS ONLY AN ECHO (WE MUST BURY YOU)

24
BIBLIOGRAPHY

25/26  SIGNATURES / NOTES
Ecstatic is a suite of three video pieces titled *Echo of Self-loss, In-Finite Fountain,* and *The Light of Other Suns.* The work presented has been aesthetically and conceptually influenced by various contemporary artworks, specifically: Andy Warhol’s *Kiss* (1963) and *Blow Job* (1964,) Vitto Acconci’s *Open Book* (1974,) Geneviève Cadieux’s *La Voie Lactée - The Milky Way* (1992,) Atsuko Tanaka’s *Electric Dress* (1956,) Bill Viola’s *Bodies of Light* (2006,) Ralph Ellison’s novel *The Invisible Man* (1952) and Keri Hulme’s *The Bone People: A Novel* (1984.)

*Ecstatic* embodies meditations on the concepts of time, Being, alterity, and consequently abjection. I have explored these concepts through the philosophical writings of Heidegger (*Being and Time,* ) Butler (*Undoing Gender,* ) Merleau-Ponty (*Phenomenology of Perception,* ) Bataille’s (*Visions of Excess*) and Kristeva’s (*Powers of Horror.* )
I fell into the concepts of time, Being, alterity and abjection, through the questioning of agency, the exploration of self-reflection, and the investigation into the possibilities of collaboration. Throughout the past two years, my studio research has taken me on a prolific journey. What has resulted is a poetic expression of the overarching themes found within the motivations and outcomes of my studio play.  

---


3 My studio practice and process is documented online via my MFA research blog. This website functions as a digital library were I can easily access and share readings and web content I am interested in, as well as a presentation space for my studio meanderings and various expressive outcomes of my research. To access my studio research blog please follow this link: http://www.proximityanddistance.wordpress.com
Through the process of making I have come to acknowledge the repetitive surfacing of ethics, a negotiation of the concepts and principles that “guide us in determining what behavior helps or harms sentient creatures,”\(^4\) as an unrelenting influence on my expressive explorations. It has been impossible to ignore ethical behavior’s dependence on the ability to empathize, or at least recognize the livability of others. Compassion requires empathy, and empathy requires one to step outside of oneself, or step metaphorically into the shoes of others. By reflecting on my relationship to the surrounding theories connected to ethics, I have been moved to research ontology, the study of the understanding of Being, which in turn has revealed the philosophical concept of ecstasy.

> “Get your hands out of you pants, Jonathan…leave it alone.”
> – Mother/Father \(^5\)

Ecstatic is a philosophical term that refers to the affect of being outside of oneself, or being beside oneself. It is both temporal and corporeal. It is a concept that is integral to the understanding of Being and occupies a space of desire. Accordingly, the word ecstasy is commonly used to refer to the moment of sexual release/climax, or divine possession. These experiences generally note a moment of corporeal and psychic excess, an escape from the self – through pleasure or pain, or both. We lose ourselves in ecstasy through a movement from the insular and isolated to the open and inclusive.

> “Fuck do I care about Birthdays? Fuck the fuck do I care about birthdays? Fuck. But hey I had one now, didn’t I? And just like anyone else’s too --- because we’re all born of another’s blood and pain.”
> – John Mackenzie \(^6\)


\(^5\)Quoted from my own memory – estimated to have been said by my mother or father to my brother in 1989

For Bataille, “ecstasy is anguish because behind the object that provokes ecstasy lies catastrophe,” or a loss of self. Ecstasy is in a sense a death and a renewal. As mechanism of desire, it is a process of incorporating an other and transforming the self, or an undoing of the self that opens the possibility of becoming.

“…I cannot do the same tasks as ordinary people do such as; feed myself, taken to the bathroom, take me for a walk, having fun with people. Yes, I feel like my caregivers are extensions of my body because I, as ordinary people can, I cannot do the same tasks. Most people can feed themselves or go for a walk or go the bathroom by themselves and I thank God for my caregivers because they do all the stuff most people would take for granted.”

-Michael Brown

According to Heidegger, the essence of Being (Dasein) is authentically temporal. For him, Being is comprised of three ecstases, or incoherent phenomena of being outside of oneself: the past – “Throwness,” the present- “Fallness/Discourse” and the future – “Existence/Projection.” For Heidegger, the intelligible, or recognizable event of the moment “must be unpacked using all three temporal ecstases. Each such event is constituted by thrownness, projection, and falling/discourse. In a sense, then, each such event transcends (goes beyond) itself as a momentary episode of Being by, in the relevant sense, co-realizing a past and a future along with a present.”

---

8 Michael Brown's Answer to Question 2 from Question Set 2: “Are your caregivers extensions of your body?” From Intimacy, unpublished/un-exhibited collaboration between Becka Viau and Michael Brown. 2013. For more information about this project please visit: http://proximityanddistance.wordpress.com/intimacy/
To Be is “a movement through a world as a space of possibilities.”\textsuperscript{11} “As authentically temporal, Dasein as potentiality-for-being comes towards itself in its possibilities of being by going back to what has been; it always comes towards itself from out of a possibility of itself.”\textsuperscript{12} As living beings our present, or presence, is a temporal relationship with the past and the future. Or, in other words, Being could be considered a rhizomatic assemblage of becomings,\textsuperscript{13} networked by the dimensions of time. Therefore Being, according to Heidegger, is understood as fundamentally ecstatic and non-hierarchical. It depends on concepts of being that have come before it, and it is only through an imagining of the possibilities of Being, brought forth from outside the symbolic realm, that any transformation of its understanding can be manifested.

“You have to put this light directly into the allotted space. You can’t touch the edges. You can’t change the speed. You have to do it, Becka. You have to follow the rules, or your family will die…the lights are out. The computer graphics are orange, I am in outer space…. But, your Ted will die first. He always dies first… I can’t breathe, and we will all die. We are all…”

– Myself\textsuperscript{14}

I will admit that reading Heidegger’s Being and Time melted my brain, and challenged my notion of understanding. However it was inspiring, and what I took from Heidegger’s writing influenced the development of my studio production. I was inspired by the notion that the openness of Being is not of our own making, but imagining, or the expression of fantasy, can generate the potential of transforming that which is defined as being-possible.

\textsuperscript{11} Korab-Karpowicz, W. J. “Heidegger, Martin [Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy].”
\textsuperscript{12} Korab-Karpowicz, W. J. “Heidegger, Martin [Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy].”
\textsuperscript{14} Quoted from my own memory of a reoccurring nightmare I had almost every night for two years, from 1992-1993
I understood that “being-in-the-world”\textsuperscript{15} is a critical, temporal relationship between the future, the past, and the present and it is from within the throws of the past that we anticipate the possibility of the future.

“We do not learn, and that what we call learning is only a process of recollection.”
— Plato \textsuperscript{16}

Our existence is fueled by expectations that are structured and maintained ontologically long before we were born. However, we also have the ability to open up the potential of transforming these structures by pushing at the boundaries of reality. I see this as being a strong point of the surrealists, and also the work of contemporary indigenous, queer, and third space artists. I also took from Heidegger that Being has a relationship to the corporeal limitations of our body and the bodies of others. Our desires are driven both from the material reality of our flesh and the psychic acknowledgement of our finitude.

“When the person Myth meets the person Reality
The spirit of the impossible-strange appears
In dark disguise
It is always there where nothing inverts itself
And becomes something…”
— Sun Ra \textsuperscript{17}

The fact of bodily death limits the concept of existence, and produces a gap in our understanding, a lacking, a void or a desire. I would consider this concept of the void as being the sphere of ultimate potentiality, the sphere of the abject, the realm rejected by the symbolic.\textsuperscript{18} As such, I was pulled toward desire as a launching point for my final leg of

academic and studio research – What is desire? Is it anticipation, or is anticipation an affect of desire? Is it the void manifested? How does it play into the way we create, manipulate, experience and associate to reality and other beings? How does desire play into the ways in which we deny livability for those whose possibilities are considered less than human.\textsuperscript{19}

“You will have nothing in your room. You will be alone, with nothing. You won’t even have a door. If you can’t behave you will have nothing.” – Father\textsuperscript{20}

“You will be a criminal! You are going to end up in jail, you will be a rapist at the rate you are going. I hate you.”
– Myself\textsuperscript{21}

It was through the writing of Judith Butler that I found Hegel’s assertion of desire. Filtered through Butler’s queer/feminist theory, Hegel’s approach exemplified for me a particular combination of social ethics, notions of experience, the understanding of Being, and importance of desire and the corporeal in our everyday lives. According to him, desire “is always a desire for recognition,”\textsuperscript{22} and it is only “through the experience of recognition that any of us becomes constituted as socially viable beings.”\textsuperscript{23}

“I am just so lonely. Alone, and I don’t know how to make it go away.” – Jonathan\textsuperscript{24}

\textsuperscript{19} Here I am thinking of lives that live on the border of acceptable being, or those whose lives are considered less human than those privileged with fully acknowledged lifestyles/bodies, (these examples are only a few and the scope in which society denies livability is much larger) like the LGBTQ community or inter-sexed bodies, indigenous communities, racialized communities, criminals, victims of sexual violence, people with alternate ways of physical mobility …

\textsuperscript{20} Quoted from my own memory – estimated to have been said by my father to my brother between 1990-1993

\textsuperscript{21} Quoted from my own memory – estimated to have been said by me to my brother between 1990-1993


\textsuperscript{23} Butler, Judith. Undoing Gender. 2.

\textsuperscript{24} Quoted from my own memory said to me by my brother after he climbed into bed with me, alone, on a Saturday morning February 2013.
Ultimately, it is from this point that my thesis work propels itself. The following essays and poems are situated to illuminate that which I have discovered in theory and implemented through artistic expression within my MFA thesis exhibition - *Ecstatic*.

“The most astounding fact is the knowledge that the atoms that comprise life on Earth, the atoms that make up the human body, are traceable to the crucibles that cooked light elements in to heavy elements in their core under extreme temperatures and pressures. These stars, the high mass ones among them went unstable in their later years. They collapsed and then exploded, scattering their enriched guts across the galaxy. Guts made of carbon, nitrogen, oxygen, and all the fundamental ingredients of life itself.

So that when I look up at the night sky, and I know that yes, we are part of this universe, we are in this universe, but perhaps more important than both of those facts is that the universe is in us.

When I reflect on that fact, I look up – many people feel small because they’re small and the universe is big – but I feel big, because my atoms came from those stars.

There’s a level of connectivity. That’s really what you want in life, you want to feel connected, you want to feel relevant. You want to feel like a participant in the things goings on of activities and events around you. That is precisely what we are, just by being alive…”

– Dr. Neil DeGrasse Tyson

I much prefer the light of other suns,
already embedded in our skin,
from which these hands and eyes are made,

the light that moves within our veins
and flashes and sparks through the lobes
and fissures folded into our skulls.

I much prefer the light of other suns
that flared and burned and turned their atoms
into the calcium you coalesce around
in planes and curves and soft sighs
on an afternoon drifting into night;

the heavy light condensed into flesh
and water, the smoky taste that lingers
on the tongue for days after you've gone.

-Written By John Mackenzie

“I am an invisible man. No, I am not a spook like those who haunted Edgar Allan Poe; nor am I one of your Hollywood-movie ectoplasms. I am a man of substance, of flesh and bone, fiber and liquids—and I might even be said to possess a mind. I am invisible, understand, simply because people refuse to see me. Like the bodiless heads you see sometimes in circus sideshows, it is as though I have been surrounded by mirrors of hard, distorting glass. When they approach me they see only my surroundings, themselves, or figments of their imagination—indeed, everything and anything except me.”

Ralph Ellison, The Invisible Man

---

“Today solitary, you who live separated, you will one day be a people. Those who appointed themselves will one-day form an appointed people – and it is from this people that will be born the existence that surpasses man.”

– Nietzsche  

The critique and study of the understanding of Being continues as a long debated and integral part of ethical and philosophical discourses. Ontology, the study of the nature of Being, directs what entities can or cannot exist. It is a powerful system of knowledge that produces, and through restriction, deproduces that which is recognized as human. As a complex mechanism in the structuring of reality, ontology possesses an innate “powerful prerogative within the social world.”  

The ways in which Being is understood regulates how and why humans interact with each other, by designating the possibility of human agency. It creates, maintains and transforms social norms and systems of power that deeply influence and prescribe how we live our lives with and for others.

---


29 Butler, Judith. Undoing Gender. 215.
In the past one hundred years, theories of ontology have been used to sanction the systematic maltreatment of and violence against beings deemed as less human. The pinnacle of ontology’s power, the ability to systematically seize or eliminate the possibility of life, is most notably embodied by the Nazi regime’s use and manipulation of Heidegger’s philosophies to justify their prerogatives and ensure dogmatic control. Even today on a more proximate scale, dominant or normative definitions of Being continue to rationalize ignorance and even endorse violence against different human bodies, via their sexuality, their physiology, political ideology, and their economic class (as limited examples.)

On the other hand, notions of Being have also transformed and expanded the understanding of livable lives to be a space of possibility, most poignantly through critiques driven forth by Feminist, LGBTQ and Post Colonial communities. It must be acknowledged that without reformations in our understanding of Being, alternative sexualities, physiologies, gender and ethnic self-determination would not have begun to emerge from the realms of silence, invisibility and exclusion. Accordingly, ontology continues as an integral voice in the area of ethics, justice and human rights. Because ontology embodies such power it is not a study to be taken lightly, and should not be considered an area of research that could ever generate permanent results. Alternatively, ontology necessitates an approach to Being that emphasizes its transformative and destabilizing qualities.

Through rigorous criticism, the understanding of Being becomes transformative, harboring the power to form possibilities of recognizable life rather than alienating and violently excluding lives from the possibility livable existences. By re-aligning the critique of being toward empathetic and ethical possibility, queer, feminist, and post-colonial studies front the resurgence of inquiry into the understanding of Being. These areas of study and knowledge are voicing the abject, are expressing from the borderlands and are cultivating

---

31 Kristeva, Julia. Powers of horror: an essay on abjection. 3-4
the means to release the focus from the limitations of identity and are exposing a potential for openness and plasticity within the concept of Being.

According to Heidegger, we are inadvertently thrown into our conception of Being. Repetitively performed social structures and perpetuated symbolic realms guide our existence. Yet within this reality, defined by others, we persistently fall into our own being, insular, isolated and individual entities.\(^{32}\) We believe ourselves to be independent agents of our lives. We hold close the notion that our inward experiences are unique and that our tastes, desires and repulsions are for the most part exclusive or particular. Yet, the manifestation of these experiences are essentially guided, ordered and regulated by and for others. The fundamental composition of our individuality is in the thrall of others who came before and who are around us.

Nonetheless, individuals are apt to proceed in ignorance of their dependency on others, allowing the sociality of norms to propagate reality, for good or for bad, without any or very little inner reflection or criticism. We relinquish our inner selves to be moved and negotiated by a “potentiality-for-being”\(^{33}\) that is defined through the sedimentation of social practices, norms and fictions. Our prized individuality is coordinated by established symbolic and physical structures that sustain temporal and spatial fields of reality.

There are structures all around and within us. They order and regulate that which can be and cannot be recognized as possible. Experience and self-persistence,\(^{34}\) generate and maintain their foundations.\(^{35}\) They are stones placed upon stones, situated and maintained over time, established to create the physical and symbolic construction of reality. Our persistence as recognizable, visible, and livable beings depends on these symbolic and

---

\(^{32}\) Heidegger, Martin. Being and time. 1-35.

\(^{33}\) Korab-Karpowicz, W. J.. "Heidegger, Martin [Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy]."


linguistic structures as they institute the “universal conditions under which the sociality, that is, the communicability of all language use is possible.”

Through mutual understanding, the presumption of a common set of symbolic idealizations allows space for communicative action. This is vital to individual agency, or the ability to act upon and within the world. However, mutual understanding also gives our actions order, and orders it in advance. To be a social agent one’s actions must be recognizable, visible, or perpetuate an already ordered structure of understanding. Without an acknowledgeable presence in the symbolic realm one’s actions, one’s life becomes abject, deniable, or unrecognizable and agency is lost.

Thus, agency is paradoxical in the sense that it is constituted in a world formed outside of individual control. For example, my doing is dependent on how “I am done by norms”, yet the very possibility of my agency or “I” is dependent “upon my being able to do something with what is done with me.” In other words, the very existence of “I” is dependent on the ability to maintain a critical and transformative relation to a world that is sustained by others outside of “I.” Therefore, the concept of “I”, as an independent agent of doing, could be understood as being constantly undone by the world it depends on for its’ existence. In *Undoing Gender*, Judith Butler describes this relationship as being other to oneself or “being for and with others.” The paradox of the dependency of “I” on the world of others does not limit agency to the impossible; on the contrary, it is the ironic constitution of “I” that is the condition for agency’s possibility.

---

36 Butler, Judith. Undoing Gender. 45
39 Butler, Judith. Undoing Gender. P.15
The irony of agency illuminates the transformative potential of articulating from the borderlands, or from the categories of the abject, deniable, invisible and unrecognizable. The borderlands embody that which exists just outside or on the edge of the symbolic realm, just out of reach from social normality and perpetuated reality. Thus, the borderlands could be considered a realm of fantasy and imagination. A place restricted from reality but full of potential. It is a space for voicing the possibility of livable lives that have been denied recognition in the symbolic realm. It is the imagining of possibilities that are yet to be manifested out of the unknown. Fantasy is space of agency designated for the excess of reality, for “what reality forecloses.” As a part of the constitutive outside of the acknowledgeable, fantasy “challenges the contingent limits of what will and will not be called reality.” It conceives the impossible and “expose(s) realities to which we thought were confined as open to transformation.”

Through the consideration of fantasy as constituting part of the outside of the acknowledgeable, a link can be made between fantasy and the experience of one’s identity/body and the identities/bodies of others. For, according to Judith Butler “There is always a dimension of ourselves and our relation to others that we cannot know, and this not-knowing persists with us as a condition of existence and, indeed, of survivability. We are, to an extent, driven by what we do not know, and cannot know, and this “drive” (Trieb) is precisely what is neither exclusively biological nor cultural, but always the site of their dense convergence.” According to Butler, it is through the performance and structuring of desire that we internalize norms. We absorb norms and with them tailor and perform the fantasy of our individual identity. Yet, one cannot forget that norms are structured from outside of ourselves, and we are expected to internalize them in order to perpetuate mutual understanding and ensure our persistence as recognizable as beings.

40 Butler, Judith. Undoing Gender. 28.
41 Butler, Judith. Undoing Gender. 29.
42 Butler, Judith. Undoing Gender. 29.
43 Butler, Judith. Undoing Gender. 216.
44 Butler, Judith. Undoing Gender.15.
Stepping off from Hegel’s conception of desire, as being always a desire for recognition, one could conceive of fantasy as a means of manifesting the possibility of recognition. Fantasy is at play much more often than one would think. Not only is fantasy the realm of the unknown, magic, mutants and science fiction, it is a mechanism of desire, an integral part of the formation and ratification of recognition. Fantasy helps to fill the void created by the unknown dimensions of our selves and of others. Our projections, or anticipations, of what someone else will be before we engage in communication with them is a form of fantasy. These fantasies are created in part by surrounding social structures and our experience of being in the world, as well as the unrecognized or ambiguous qualities we have kept abject from our symbolic understanding of our independent selves.

Although we are distinct in our physical being, as isolated, individual bodies that are being-within-the-world, we form and are formed by psychic and physical relations that are created between ourselves and the bodies and objects around us. Fantasy, the ability to imagine possibilities, is a key component in creating those relations. We desire to be recognized by others in order to validate our own possible existence, and in order to do that we must overcome the psychic reality that others are not I, and find some sort of relationality with each other. Fantasy is employed often to project or anticipate what we will have in common, the possibilities of recognition, with each other. Fantasy exemplifies the psychic risk we all take as social beings, as beings psychically isolated inward yet essentially dependent on the world of others – What if the fantasy of my identity is not recognized as possible? What if I am unable to feel connected to others’ projected fantasies of what I should be? What then happens to my Self?

Because fantasy is situated throughout the realms of the symbolic and abject, the self and the other, it occupies a liminal psychic space. Therefore, it has the potential to rupture the boundary between the known and the unknown and reveal new or alternate subjectivities. Ralph Ellison, in his preface to the novel - *Invisible Man* - speaks to the notion of fantasy as an agent of effective change. He says, “Because imagination is not constrained by the
boundaries of reality that frustrate traditional political action, it is a space that allows subjects to explore possibilities that reveal themselves only within fantasy.”

For me, fantasy is the language of the borderlands. It is a means for manifesting, from the abject and deniable, the possibility of recognition. Fantasy is also risky because it has the potential to perpetuate hegemonic structures that dominate, and violently exclude. Yet, I consider fantasy’s destabilizing or risky quality as the point of its greatest potential. As a strategy for communication, fantasy is a powerful force, capable of disrupting the norm and transforming what is recognized as possible.

---

"The mouth is the beginning, or if one prefers, the prow of animal’s; in the most characteristic cases, it is the most living part, in other words, the most terrifying for neighboring animals."

– Bataille 46

As an interface between the inside and the outside of the body, the mouth provides a boundary between the subject and the object, the subject and the other, the proximate and the distant. It is an erogenous surface of the body, inscribed by objects that generate abjection - food, spit, vomit. Yet, it is a liminal threshold of desire, one that satisfies by means of moving objects through it. It is a place structured to expel or incorporate, to withhold or articulate.

A closed mouth denies existence by rejecting the other, or by eradicating the communicative action of language.47 Considering language as a social structure that forms the possibility of a recognizable future,48 the closed mouth disposes of the future by allowing the subject to fall into its self and revert to its “uncontrollable materiality.”49 It purges all that is other. Which is ultimately the destruction of the fundamental dimensions of Being,50 it is the complete devouring of the void; it is death.

Because of the drought
Because dust smothers everything which has the temerity to sprout
Because even mud becomes sand
(Because even blood dries on the hand)

Because the garden is a scowl
Where the only plants with rumours of health are weeds
And they are sparse, toppling green
Like diseased teeth

Because it gets in everywhere
Crevices and orifices
Because eyes and ears, nostrils and mouth, let it
Into the brain

Because the brain, dust-coated,
Is prone to short-circuits and misfires
Because the fatty sheaths of nerve fibres are infected with grit
Because summer will burn
And because fall will come (and winter) to this pantry
To this root cellar
Because even a desperate hope
Is still a hope, is still….

Because death comes quietly, by increments
Because it builds around hips seeking
The hardwood comfort of rockers
(Because it builds around hips,
Seeking)

Because it lengthens eyelashes like painful mascara
And causes them to flutter, to flirt
With death in all sizes

(Because the sky itself is an eye, glazed
Because the sky is an hourglass, shattered
Spilling all the sands of time
Because the sky is a punctured drum
The great deaf ear of god)

Because this small death was conceived
In the strain
Towards a little death to throw
In the howling face of the wind
(Because death is only an echo of our reverberating hearts)
Because offence is the best defence
Because we think to fight fire with fire
Because there is nothing left to do but find hope

Even in this small flooding wetness
In your small death that tears and grinds at us
In ways that all this wind-driven soil cannot

We must bury you in the garden and believe that you
Will nourish us
As we would nurture you

- Written By John Mackenzie

51 MacKenzie, John. "Because Death Is Only An Echo (We Must Bury You)." In Unpublished Manuscripts (In Progress.) 2013. Used with permission from the author.


Robert Bean – MFA Program Advisor

Jan Peacock – MFA Program Director

David Clark – Chair, Media Arts

Dan O’Neill – Faculty, Fine Arts

Carla Taunton – Faculty, Critical Studies