

“Can’t Get Your Love”

‘I didn’t think it would turn out this way’ is the secret epitaph of intimacy. To intimate is to communicate with the sparsest of signs and gestures, and at its root intimacy has the quality of eloquence and brevity. But intimacy also involves an aspiration for a narrative about something shared, a story about both oneself and others that will turn out in a particular way.¹

-Lauren Gail Berlant

We may know what we want from art, and perhaps we know what we want from bodies—those that belong to us and those that do not—but we are reluctant to discuss the latter in art historical discourse without a shroud of distancing intellectualism. Or perhaps we cannot begin to question relationships among bodies because we do not even know what we want from art; we ask too much of it, or we allow it to live separately of us with blithe autonomy—just as we do with lovers who devote either too much or too little affection.² The operation of art/history is, after all, the same as love. In both cases we attribute inconsistent and life-altering importance to entities over which we (should) have no control.³

As soon as we start asking what bodies want, it is hard to approximate the egalitarian nature that we apply to art. This is not to say that to desire a body is inherently violent (a dated Second Wave feminist argument for which I do have some sympathy), but the motives of love are nevertheless tantamount to violence. We think that if we fashion ourselves in a certain way, we might be worthy of love or partnership, but the flipside of “worthy” is “deserving,” and to deserve a body is to violate it. Or we hope that some-body will allow us to displace our own hopes and self-hatred onto another, for if we do not, the weight would surely crush us. Maybe we wonder about the difference between a lover and a friend, and the answer is often a privileged access to their body. This sentiment is beyond jealousy. Others may touch this body, but there is some “truth” to my touch—something sincerer, more substantive, something that *is mine*.

And what if there is *no-body*, that moment we have all experienced in which the body we crave is only abstract, a coalescence of shapes with no cohering lines? With a biomorphic mindset, we could force these non-entities to become something for us, to emerge as a bounded creature that we can possess if only momentarily. We take control of our imagination, and we require it to perform for us, to divine from the ether some shape that is reminiscent of the life we *should* have or the skin that *ought* to offer comfort. Or our own bodies might likewise emerge as a series of chimera, and we will love some but certainly not all of these ghosts. Our selves (our bodies may not always be ourselves) cannot exist separately from what we dream them to be, and we leave some bodies that *might have been* to die of neglect. Some people are invested in reality, and others are not; it depends on how much fighting you are willing to do. As Amy Sillman has written, “The real, like the body, is embarrassing: your hand is too moist, your fly is open, there turns out to be something on your nostril, somebody blurts out something I wasn’t supposed to know, your ex-partner shows up with their new lover (and your work is uncool).”⁴

Loneliness and embarrassment are perfect metaphors for pretty much all discourse, since they are both entirely material and entirely immaterial. Metaphor is not the right word anyway, since it implies a distance between the emotion and the word, image, or object by which it becomes legible. When someone tells you that they do not love you, or that they do not desire your body, this is of course only a constellation of words and socially constructed meanings. Still, even the most enlightened among us would not be immune to the resulting pain. Our feelings and our bodies may be mediated by public discourse, but when we hurt the last thing we think about is anything outside the individual wound.

¹ Lauren Gail Berlant. *Intimacy*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000. 1.

² See, for example, James Elkins. “What Do We Want Pictures to Be? Reply to Mieke Bal.” *Critical Inquiry* 22, no. 3 (1996): 590-602.

³ See, for example, Jill Lepore. “Historians Who Love Too Much: Reflections on Microhistory and Biography.” *The Journal of American History* 88, no. 1 (2001): 129-44.

⁴ Amy Sillman. “Shit Happens: Notes on Awkwardness.” In *Amy Sillman: The All-Over*. Frankfurt and Brooklyn: Portikus and Dancing Foxes Press, 2017. 109-112. 111-2.

Artistic interventions in these questions of the body and feeling and interpersonal connection and connections among objects have largely been tackled by queer and feminist artists. This is in part an empowering truth, but it remains indicative of the fact that the labor of such conversations has been foisted onto non-normative people. Then those non-normative people find themselves caught between the dueling expectations of identity politics and postmodernism, that is, the representation of politics or the politics of representation. Nothing could be more uninteresting than a show of abstract art that posits abstraction or non-narrative forms as one-to-one transpositions of the ever-evolving nature of identity (which have unfortunately become faddish). By the same token, to simply display difference (especially with the resurgence of cisgender gay men and their photo-essays about the beautiful boys they are fucking) is prone to a lack of introspection and rigor.

The artists in *I am no bird* probably think about these things all the time in a way that is both ecstatic and burdensome. The works included are necessarily varied, but this is not in an attempt to fetishize variety as progressiveness. In my mind, the best group show is one you can walk into and feel like conversations you have in your head, those that feel so familiar as to become a second flesh, are at once entirely understood and in need of some justification. It is a place of repetition and new speech. As Julia Kristeva observes, “Finally, to speak of love may be, perhaps, a simple condensation of speech that merely arouses, in the one spoken to, metaphorical capabilities—a whole imaginary, uncontrollable, undecidable flood, of which the loved one alone unknowingly possesses the key...what does he understand me to be saying?”⁵ I would only remove the qualifiers of “simple” and “merely,” for this interplay of amorous meanings, both normative and non-normative, might be the only true pleasure in this world.

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⁵ Julia Kristeva. *Tales of Love*. Translated by Leon S. Roudiez. New York: Columbia University Press, 1987. Ellipses in original.