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Tensions of Access: Empathy Fatigue // Andrew Rafacz

by Maggie Wong

Dominique,
Knowles,
vadhisthana
VAM, 2019.
Oil on
canvas. 84
x 180 in.

Feeling the formal boundaries of structure—be it incarceration, mediation, or art viewing—is at the heart of the various works in *Empathy Fatigue*, an exhibition of seven artists that took place from January–February 2020 at Andrew Rafacz Gallery in Chicago. Rallying to model care under the frameworks of confinement, each of the artists on view conveyed strategies that engaged with what academic Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick coined reparative reading: a method of historiography and critical theory that indulges in simultaneity, fragments, and the marginal both in form and in

socio-political accounts of “non-normative” experiences.¹ In this way, Empathy Fatigue showcases instances of a contemporary moment that embraces corporeality and dreamy escape routes—from the work itself, to the site and spatiality of the exhibition.

The first “reparative read” exists on a spatial scale. As you approach the gallery’s entrance, you are faced with a large pane of glass. This street view of the window to the interior of the space is the first viewing position of Empathy Fatigue. From the street, a passerby can fully see Dominique Knowles’ vadhithana VAM (2019), a painting nearly the size of the window, comprised of a warm palette of loosely rendered horses on unstretched canvas. With the glare of the window and Knowles’ work compounded together, the exhibition establishes a particular self-awareness that situates viewers around barriers, whereby tensions of access are an active part of this experience. Concomitantly, the placement of vadhithana VAM draws a further connection to the common history of exhibition sites that aim to construct high moral or ritualistic ground out of exhibiting artworks—the intent of which is to absorb viewers into a realm of idealized knowledge.² As a whole, the installation appears to comment on the long-standing modernist argument that an artwork is conditioned by its frame, or viewing space, and that together the image and its boundaries become a portal into an ethereal world.³

In the face of such ascension, *Empathy Fatigue* offers up a less ideal figure through the work of Siebren Versteeg. A stagnant reader is the subject matter of the artist's work *Today's Paper (with flies)* (2019). Shown as a time specific installation, a large monitor leans within a corner and presents a digital daily dose of front-page news held by a static figure clothed in sandals and jeans, seated in a ubiquitous folding chair by the side of a dumpster. Within the basic layout of the piece, the figure's face is obscured by the paper—body and setting unchanged—suggesting an ambivalent attitude to being held in the oversaturated perpetual 24-hour news cycle. Throughout the exhibition's run, vivid colors and seemingly animated articles articulated the latest soaring numbers of corona-virus victims or caucus chaos. In this context, the news not only frames the figure, but becomes the figure's daily persona—one that is not individualized, but instead a conglomerate of tumultuous information that articulates a shared messy world.

Artist Jeremy Weber delivers a confining body politic through the premise of collaging knowledge in literary and judicial form. His work, *The Strangers* (2020), consists of an archived collection of twelve annotated copies of *The Stranger* by Albert Camus purchased online. Each book is partitioned into its own slot within a custom bookshelf that lays on top of a flat shelf, installed at eye-height. To the side of the work rests a stack of

Weber's own adaptation of Camus' novel, in which the infamous trial scene is made new via composed pieces of marginalia found in the purchased copies of *The Stranger*. The original owners of the book are acknowledged in Weber's text by becoming a twelve-person jury that is deciding the fate of an unknown defendant. Through this content, Weber presents a speculative argument for a play that states following the "letter of the law" is an act of interpretation and editing—hailing the reader as author.⁴ *The Strangers* pivots between a state of collectivity within confinement and subjective reading—transforming the viewer into either the subject of the work, or a subject of the state.

Mev
Luna, *Far*
from the
distance
we see,
2019. HD
video, 3D
rendering.
Duration:
8:18.
Edition 1
of 5.
Action
Office
was
meant to
be about
movement
II, 2019.
Metal
frame,
privacy
film,
glass,
sterling
silver

silver,
luna moth
wings. 80
x 70 x 44
in.

New York-based artist Mev Luna's work puts a spin onto the confinement angle: how can an artist articulate incarceration and alienation when it affects their personal narrative? The strategy employed is both corporeal and pensive. In *Far from the distance we see* (2019), a looping video flows through a non-narrative oral history edited as a dialogue between two family members: Luna's father, who was incarcerated, and his brother, who worked at a hat factory. In the exhibition, a monitor hangs just behind the artist's sculptural work, *Action Office was meant to be about movement II* (2019), made from metal and one-way privacy Plexiglas, under which species of Luna Moth wings dangle from a web of delicate chain. For the video, a pair of wireless headphones hang on one side of the partition. Depending on the viewer's position, *Action Office* either partially obscures Luna's video work or Versteeg's screen. The configuration perpetuates a need for constant motion in order to view the installation in totality, yet both the video and physical work originally contain planned obfuscation. For Luna, the viewer is always looping in their footsteps—moving around barricades to navigate stories of being withheld from family or society, be it through criminal or working-class status.

Tucked in the far back area of the gallery was Jason

Lazarus' *2019–Present (26 Sound Screens)* (2020), a pervasive work that uses corporeality as a reparative strategy for living with confinement. The installation consists of white noise machines often used in therapeutic settings; the cumulative sound hinders hearing in the gallery. There is something nefarious about the machines. Blown up to this level, privacy becomes a sensation of soft overbearing security—a visitor's murmurs cannot be heard under the din. The result is that one can be both silenced and confidently hidden in the gallery. Just as Knowles' painting by the window became a part of the architecture, Lazarus' sound engulfs the body into the space. Within the continuous sound of the work, the body finds other, more psychological means for escaping.

Rachel Schmidhofer, *hi and bye*, 2018. Oil on panel. 40 x 30 in.

The inclusion of Knowles and Rachel Schmidhofer's work to exemplify symbolic methods of dealing with cultural constraints. Their separate paintings forage lucid realms that elude to escapes into the psyche. Due to the grandeur of Knowles' scale, loose brushwork, and use of positive and negative forms informing each other, the horses appear untethered to clear references. We are led to believe that these animals only exist in Knowles' mind. Schmidhofer alternately showcases a symbolic language, but through the use of ubiquitous visual signs. In her works *sunflowers in the upside down* (2018) and *hi and bye* (2018), metonymic happy faces, frames within frames, and

chaotic still lives to poke fun at a visual vernacular. Each symbol points to meaning that exists in a social world. For Schmidhofer, an internal ability to make meaning is contained by a culture of limited signs.

Illuminating new narratives of inundation, alienation, silencing, and language—both visual and textual—each of these works paired with the spatiality of the exhibition offer reparative readings on culture. Returning to Sedgwick, who describes this quality as “additive and accretive,” the generative nature of the model asks viewers to mull on what has happened without projecting forward. The formal strategies held within *Empathy Fatigue* do not present the resolution of confinement as a goal. Instead, they work against “moralizing as a form of false resolution,” a notion attributed to the late writer Douglas Crimp. The works resist a “do-gooder” ethos of conducting emotional labor, empathy, or even self-care. Rather, the exhibition slips into specific modes of internal processing to present particular alternatives to “feeling better” amidst confinement.

Empathy Fatigue ran at Andrew Rafacz Gallery from January 10–February 22, 2020.

1. Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky., and Adam Frank. *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*. Durham: Duke University Press, 2003. p. 150. ↩
2. Duncan, Carol. *Civilizing Rituals: Inside Public Art Museums*. London; New York: Routledge, 1995. p.13. ↩
3. O’Doherty, Brian. *Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space*. Santa Monica: Lapis Press, 1986. p. 14. ↩

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