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## SPIT IN MY MOUTH: Queer Intimacies, Material Intra-actions, and Sensuous Becoming

**GM** Keaton

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## SPIT IN MY MOUTH:

## Queer Intimacies, Material Intra-actions, and Sensuous Becoming

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

#### by GM Keaton

Master of Fine Arts, Virginia Commonwealth University, 2020 Bachelor of Fine Arts, Minneapolis College of Art and Design, 2013

Director: Hope Ginsburg Associate Professor, Department of Painting and Printmaking

> Virginia Commonwealth University Richmond, Virginia May 2020

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And finally to Laszlo, Wellbutrin, and H20. Without you, none of this would be possible.

## SPIT IN MY MOUTH:

## Queer Intimacies, Material Intra-actions, and Sensuous Becoming

By GM Keaton, Master of Fine Arts

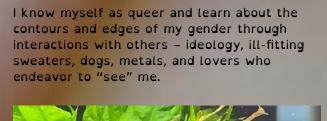
### ABSTRACT

This document describes my multidisciplinary art practice as it intersects with New Materialism, queer and affect theory, ecology, and my embodied and experiential knowledge as a queer subject. The writing is divided into two categories. One is more theoretical, thinking through these different discourses. The other realizes them through relationships and intra-actions between my material kin and me. With these two modes of writing, I propose that embodied and felt knowing is as valid and illuminating as more traditional forms of knowledge. These sections are interdependent and resist linear logic, offering relational meanings to each reader as they find their way through a terrain of text and image offering a multiplicity of readings. Renaming difficulties with articulation as a legitimate tension within my own way of thinking and experiencing, this document pushes against such exactitude of ideas. Ultimately the artworks in my thesis exhibition and this outlining document work to reveal queerness, or queering, as a basic tenet for existence.

This text uses Open Dyslexic, an open-source font designed for readers with dyslexia, a learning difference whose wide range of effects alters the way a person takes in, processes, and utilizes language and graphic symbols.

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## QUEER ENTANGLEMENT





state of constant becoming, multiplicity, and problematizing the concept of self. The word "queer" is linguistically mutable and is widely used interchangeably as a noun, adjective, and verb. This process of orientation speaks to the impossibility of being" self" without "others" because we form each other in a constant network of interactions. These others are not just people but also animals, objects, plants, and other forces. Within my practice, I interact with these others animate and inanimate.

I define "queer" within my art practice similarly to how I experience my

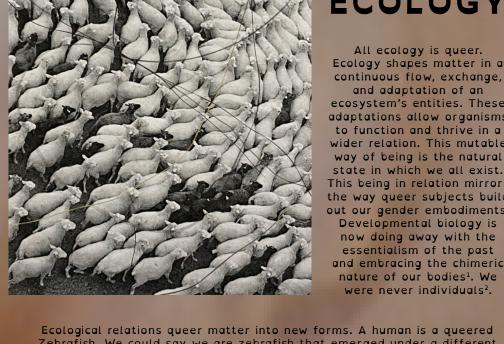
queerness: as an ongoing, relational process of orientation. It describes a

n Gordon Hall's 2016 text, "Reading Things" they advocate for new queer aesthetics, for objects that re-teach us how to see and how to suspend the categorization that leads to othering, which flattens and denies the agency of marginalized identities. Hall positions these objects as our teachers. With my practice, I aim for objects, experiences, and others to teach us to better feel one another (and thus ourselves) through a neightened sense of our mutuality. By creating objects and installations that activate the viewer in a dual understanding of themselves as both subject and object, I aim to queer the notion of an individual. In my installation titled CO (2020), large scale fiber works cover the majority of the floor, acting as a medium, or ground from which different forms of intimacy may take root. These tactile, felt works invite us back into the recognition of our animal bodies. By breathing in the wool's scent and touching its fibers, participants gain a felt sense of the object as both vital and affecting, acting as a conduit into a physical and emotional

chiasmic loop of touching and being touched. I assert this loop is an

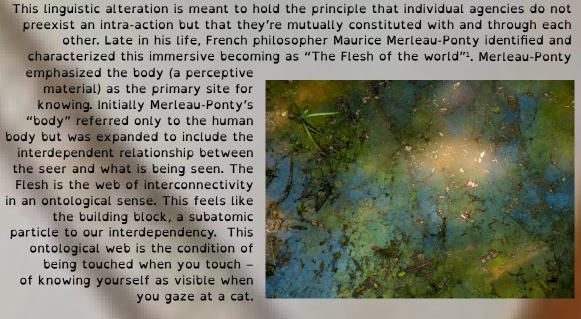
connection with the world.

accessible and life-saving form of queer feeling that forges a sense of



Zebrafish. We could say we are zebrafish that emerged under a different set of conditions. This does not mean one is superior in relation to another, or more evolved. This is another notion of essentialism that has become outdated. We are not more highly evolved, just differently evolved because our ancestors instead of developing gills got toes. We all are essential matter that is just differentiated through chance. This line of thinking challenges Darwin's notion of evolution as "survival of the fittest" because it recognizes fitness as very subjective and inclusive of all of the interrelated organisms that bolster its survival. Our likeness with Zebrafish can be explained by the fact that we are distant relatives. The distance between our two species is not vertical; it

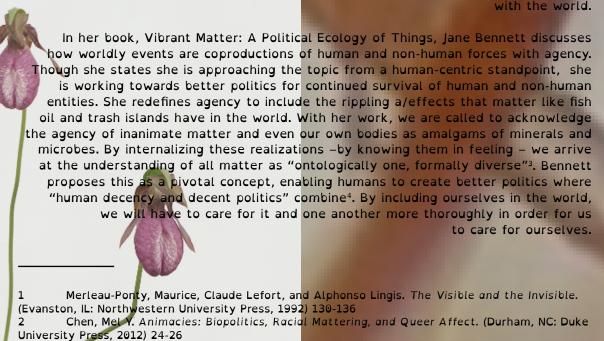
2012 87:4, 325-341 Durham: Duke University Press, 2004. 40-64



the narration.

But what about a copper coil?

often classified as "dead" or "inanimate" - a categorization that delegitimized potentiality as actants. Chen refers to the "animacy hierarchy" orders and a value to entities according to their perceived liveliness or possible agency<sup>2</sup>. here is both the ability to choose and the ability to be an actant. Chen descr interactions as enlivenings of entities typically assumed dead. This reconfiguring, t state, is a form of queering. By recognizing relationships and a/effects from en typically undercut by the animacy hierarchy we reimagine and expand our intin



In my video Moonstruck (2020), this simultaneity is felt through the affective and material confusion of humans and

zebrafish. We share 70% of our genes, the basic structure of many vital organs, and the need for social interaction. This,

in addition to the zebrafish's low cost and high reproducibility, has made it the favored human model for medical research.

particular attention to the pronouns used, I obfuscate the identity of human and animal in favor of the "we." This "we" is in

constant negotiation as viewers reposition themselves in response to moments of kinship, empathy, and disgust throughout

Woven into footage of this animal is a piece of writing that muddles the position of author, object, and subject. Paying

I am drawn to zebrafish because of our likeness. We human animals have discovered so

much about ourselves through them. It's too tangled to separate, the fish have become

an extension of us. After sixty years of lab breeding countless generations of fish, we

material closeness. I feel for these fish through my own human feelings. I am not afraid

of anthropomorphizing - that's all we are capable of. I cannot imagine something I have

are an extension of them. I am fascinated by our difference in forms, despite our

no references for, but I can understand and hold that I do not know. I extend my

Entanglement is the action, the intra-action of forming and being formed by one

an ongoing conversation called knowing one another, never complete.

rless hand to its fin, opening up the possibility for trying to see and understand. It's

another. "Intra-action" is theorist Karen Barad's intervention with the word interaction.

Mel Chen's 2012 book, Animacies examines how entities, like a copper coil are

we will have to care for it and one another more thoroughly in order for us to care for ourselves.

Merleau-Ponty, Maurice, Claude Lefort, and Alphonso Lingis. The Visible and the Invisible. Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect. (Durham, NC: Duke Deleuze, Gilles. Expressionism in Philosophy. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1990. 67 Bennett, Jane. Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things. Durham: Duke University

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Pumpkin Head. I was

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in public, leaning and hiding if anyone looked at me, spoke to me. If I was feeling especially affronted, I would hiss and spit. The conversations ended there. Alert, always. Except for nights, when I would perch on the top bunk in the room my sister and I shared and built a nest out of pillows and blankets. I slept, curled contentedly in a ball.

This behavior and my refusal to speak didn't raise enough flags to warrant any intervention. In the wake of the months before this seemed obvious enough of a response. I was quiet. I behaved. Only my father seemed continually frustrated with my new feline existence. On our visits, I would meow at him, and he would growl: "you are not a cat, you are a little girl." Wrong. My sister would pet my head every morning to wake me, and that year my birthday cake was a cat with coconut fur and green gumdrop eyes, like my own. A story that circulates in my family from around this time is when a stranger asked how many babies I wanted when I was a mommy. I promptly stated that I would have no babies, and no daddy, that I would only have kittens come out of my belly. How could this stranger not see? I was obviously a cat.

I don't know when I became a human child again, but it was around the time my mother's boyfriend, Thomas-Eddy

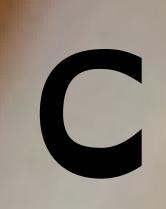
bought my sister and me kittens for Christmas, littermates we named Dutch and Lulu. Because of our ignorance about cat ownership, within a year they became pregnant. Lulu gave birth to a litter of kittens with varying deformities We watched her cardboard box and bathroom after he tried affectionately named recently told that the adopted out, but vet bill, humanely He put them in a bag freezer we ate than he was around.

In 2019 I posted a of a tabby cat who neighborhood as I do. and his body raised his size, warning eyes pulled back in disgust myself and my dog summon the tools calmness. Perhaps felt sense to the tabby peacefully crossing drove between us, and Our potential



I captioned this picture "Hypervigilant", followed by a lightning bolt emoji, a small recognition, an empathy, and an awarness I felt for myself, the cat, and others who might catch the hint. A friend commented on this post with a phrase acknowledging its reference to mental health and trauma healing: "If you stay ready, you don't have to g e t r e a d y." Underneath this, my mother commented, "I like that saying - I might just NEED a tattoo now."

A couple months after this post, despite my best efforts to suppress it with medications and hormones, I had my first menstrual cycle in nearly three years. I do not know how to describe the sensation of gender dysphoria other than the body is a pit, and the dysphoric trigger is careening downward as your body tenses in preparation for the crash that will never happen – will never land – its blow ongoing. It felt like I was 11 again. My sense and understanding of my gender regressed years. This backsliding was caused by an experience so ubiquitous and irrelevant to a person's gender. I just had to wait it out and try to remember how one attends to oneself, trying to internalize my knowing menstruation was not exclusive to any gender. I curled back up into a ball in my adult bed and scrolled through the embarrassing results of a feed whose algorithm was trained by my tired grad school brain. I was stopped in my tracks by a portrait of a Persian cat; its head was almost entirely black, so dark the photograph lacked any description of its fur. Set deep into this void was a pair of luminescent orange eyes. Protecting this face, was a troupe of long, twisted white whiskers, moving in every which direction. Going against gravity, they seemed to work independently from the cat, if it was even a cat at all. I felt camaraderie with this creature, enamored by its heightened sensitivity and perceiving body. Everywhere it goes, it interprets the vibrations of these hairs,





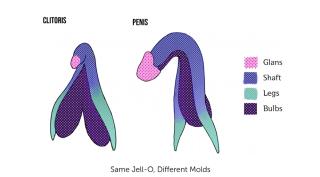
In the early winter of 2016, I had a copper IUD implanted in my uterus. At this time Republicans controlled both the Senate and the House, and new abortion bans were appearing in states all over the country. In rebruary, conservative supreme court judge Antonin Scalid alea in Marta, Texas. The House and Senate blocked President Obama from nominating a new judge, raising the stakes for the upcoming election where a minimum of two Supreme Court seats would need to be filled. I had the privilege of living in Philadelphia – a metropolitan area where one has greater access to affordable and inclusive healthcare – during this time and shortly after Scalia's death I walked into the Mazzoni Center, uninsured, and left with a 10-year protection plan in the form of a small plastic T, dressed with copper cuffs and a

I took the train home, not wanting to ask the person I was sleeping with for a ride. I stood up at York, the stop before my own, and noticed the smear of bright blood on the orange plastic seat. I abandoned it there, in some backward way more ashamed of the fact that I bled than in my leaving it there. Cleaning it meant acknowledging it, so I slipped out of the car early, walking the extra stop.

Movement of material resources felt palpable here. From my window, on the edge of the gentrification I was a part of, I could see and hear people entering boarded-up homes and shitty developments, disemboweling them for their copper pipes and wiring – which fetched around \$2 per pound. Every Monday morning a procession of shopping carts rattled down Emerald Street to unload the weekend's haul.

The copper in my body was spreading out, shedding ions into my uterus, altering my cervical mucus to be uninhabitable for sperm, and inducing vascular changes resulting in extremely heavy menstrual cycles. Exactly why copper causes these changes is still relatively unstudied. It laid me out, bleeding for two weeks straight, every month. I'd dump three or four Diva Cups a day full of metallic-scented blood down the toilet and shower drain. My mood plummeted and all other effects became more visceral. My chest was heavy, breathing shallow, and skin constantly pin-pricked. My body became anemic, and the week before I would start bleeding again my mood would nosedive. I lost my body three weeks out of each month, leaving me with one week a month to regulate myself. During this time I would emerge, gasping for breath. I felt like myself, and desperately sought connection that could keep me grounded. I ate steak twice a week, trying to replace what my body had lost.

I was unable to name my experience with my menstrual cycle gender dysphoria. It felt like an oversized reaction to something so common, and I internalized it as a fault, a lack of reliance and wherewithal. When in fact this experience was a response, a grating against the compulsory cisgender assignment and naming of my body. The friction was caused by existing in normativity, as a queer subject blind to myself. After a few months of this immense rawness I acknowledged the effects were real enough to warrant intervention and I began taking hormones. The hormones acted to suppress this hyperbolic cycle caused by 300mg of copper, in a lifetime of conditioning.

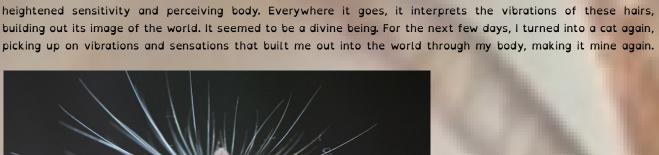


folder where life's papers live, I have four birth certificates, two social security cards, and a litany of promissory notes. These are notes for student loans that l fantasize, someday, I may be able to wiggle out of because perhaps, like myself, the government sees these variations of letters as separate entities. These who was trying to get away by distancing herself and her child through language came more mislabeled documents: CPS and CASA reports, court proceedings, any training in working with Trans and Genderqueer students, or was simply So actually, I have been called whatever all my life. And I wasn't going to let him - fault; when I pressed my or anyone else – have a say in what that whatever would be.

Naming has power; it can grant access, render visible, limit, block, and erase what it represents. A name helps create the edges of differences that allow us to distinguish their particulars. It's been my experience that naming gives me the ability to engage with and better see my gender identity, sexuality, and mental health. Names are frameworks. Once I was in a place where I was processing these mastectomy when performed parts of my identity, I received several diagnoses that gave me an entirely different on ciswomen – it has its own perspective around my experiencing and mental processes. The diagnoses allowed code), or a code for a breast me to extend some much-needed compassion to myself as I began to "babysit" my reduction. I was stuck because thoughts. I anguished privately though, coming out to myself using every possible a system had no name, or word to describe and account for my sexual attractions and experience of gender.

When none of these labels fit, my imposter syndrome flared. I wanted, I needed, a similar frame to see myself through, as I had with the word "depressed." Obviously, I got help from a psychologist who knew the names for things, and how long I But I really wanted it to be, and sometimes I still do. All this to say, names can be useful tools as much as they can be obstructions.

Recently, a friend named a particularly passionate few weeks of my tending, tracks. I had never named my intense interest and focus on particular topics mania. Having my enthusiasm pathologized, I felt like the ground below me was shifting. These were plants that taught me care and offered connection; they fill my room with curiosity and growth. Mania made them feel unhealthy, obsessive; my room AND DECREED



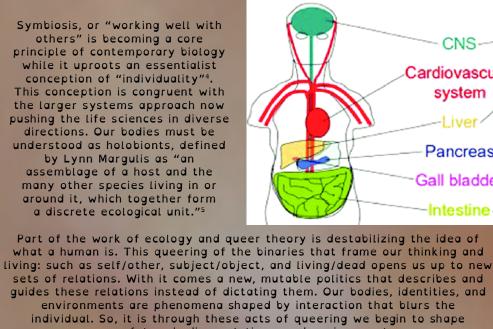
## COLOGY

All ecology is queer. cology shapes matter in a ontinuous flow, exchange, and adaptation of an osystem's entities. These daptations allow organisms function and thrive in a vider relation. This mutable way of being is the natural state in which we all exist. his being in relation mirrors he way queer subjects build it our gender embodiments. evelopmental biology is now doing away with the ssentialism of the past embracing the chimeric ature of our bodies<sup>1</sup>. We were never individuals<sup>2</sup>

is horizontal. Our relation is in the present tense; our differences are a matter of circumstances<sup>3</sup>. This emphasis on the horizontal challenges the anthropocentrism that places us above our fellow animals – as more evolved, more knowing, more feeling. This horizontal relation does not deny our differences, but it works against a hierarchy of being that values human abilities over others. These fish are kin in an embodied,

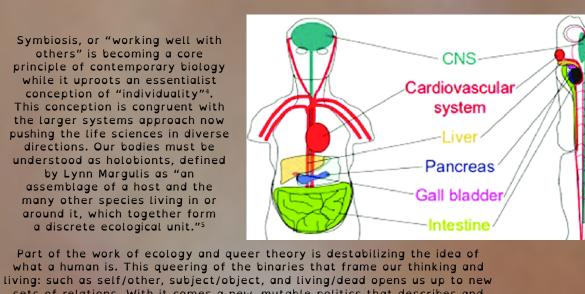
1 Margulis, Lynn. Symbiosis in Cell Evolution: Microbial Communities in the Archean and Proterozoic Eons. New York: Freeman, 1993. 2 Gilbert, Scott F. Sapp, Jan and Tauber, Alfred I. A Symbiotic View of Life: We Have Never Been Individuals. The Quarterly Review of Biology, University of Chicago. 3 Grosz, Elizabeth. The Nick of Time: Politics, Evolution, and the Untimely.

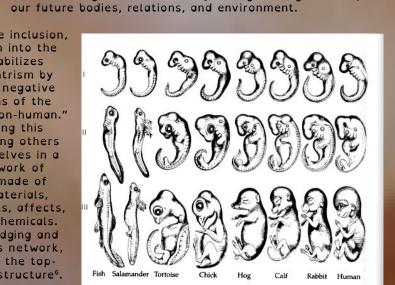
material sense.



The self-aware inclusion or immersion into the web, destabilizes anthropocentrism b denying the negative connotations of the position of "non-huma By accepting this position among others we find ourselves in a buzzy network of comrades made of humans, materials animals, plants, affe waste, and chemical By acknowledging an accepting this netwo we undercut the top down power structure<sup>6</sup>

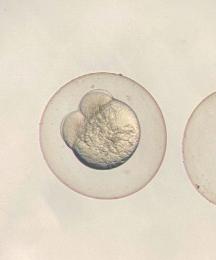
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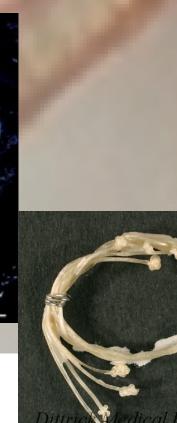


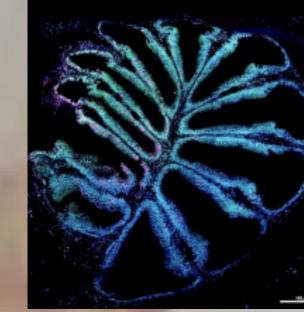
4 Gilbert, Scott F. Sapp, Jan and Tauber, Alfred I. A Symbiotic View of Life: We Have Never Been Individuals. The Quarterly Review of Biology, University of Chicago. 5 Margulis, Lynn, and Fester René. Symbiosis as a Source of Evolutionary Innovation: Speciation and Morphogenesis. MIT Press, 1991. 6 Bennett, Jane. Vibrant Matter: A Political Ecology of Things. XI



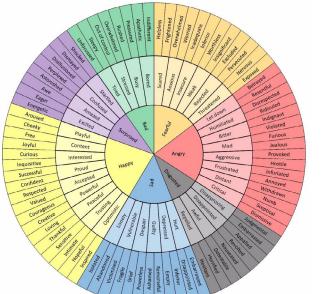


While this study will help develop therapies for those struggling with addiction, it also holds the power to build empathy and understanding. There is harmful and familiar rhetoric around addiction that frames the disease as a choice, weakness, or lack of will In "making the choice" to return to substances, the person is choosing to do harm to themselves and others. This is seen as an intentional opting-out of society, disqualifying those living with addiction from receiving substantial community care, often leaving









no warning, I got a letter in the mail saying my appeal was approved. All of a sudden, with this paper, I was trans-enough for medical intervention.

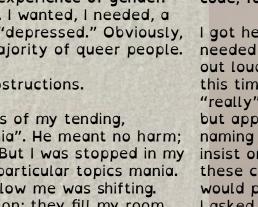
know that I am predisposed to experiencing manic episodes. I'm still internalizing I felt conflicted about legally changing my name, opening up a process where the lesson my given name taught me, that names are often arbitrary, changeable, the state (like the insurance company) completes or validates the speech act l variations exist because of insistent patronymic naming conventions and a woman that there is no finality in the naming. Naming is part of the process of being with. endeavor to utter every day: "My name is actually GM.... yes, just the letters, like good morning'...just that yes... sure, or general manager". The process of stating my doubleness in every voicemail, transfer, pharmacy, and appointment was not as distressing as it was exhausting. Once we were straight that my breasts were a chest, I wanted to slip smoothly through the bureaucracy of the hospital during my surgery as just GM. I didn't want to hear, to be reminded that, I existed in this world firstly as the self others assume me to be. I wanted to put myselves first. Legally changing my name would not keep me from being misgendered or mislabeled, but when it came to life's bureaucracies, soon they wouldn't have anything else to call me. Changing my name felt like setting a boundary with the world, or at least its insistence on a cisgender identification.

so weighted and permanent. There are many names I still don't know, but I know my feeling. Trying to translate thoughts into words and back again is challenging because of the anxious chemical soup that is my body and the way my brain processes information as a person with dyslexia. This learning difference affects the way a person understands and works with language. For me, it's like translating into a second language I don't know as well. I pull whatever words or phrases feel relevant or useful to the table of a conversation, fashioning and pairing them into meaning.

The font you are reading is designed for brains with dyslexia. It works by highlighting the graphic differences in each letter and creating a weighted bottom that helps the eye track its progression across the page. Articulateness is often synonymous with precision and exactness; this is something that I feel tension with both in theory and in the context of my ability. It's not to say that I can't be articulate, but this text is an attempt at seeing how I more naturally can. Instead of forming myself to expectations, I re-form those expectations for myselves. My relationship with words and language has taught me compromise, and when I'm not anxious I let go of the performance of perfectionism. Communication is a meeting, a coming to some commonality through shared understanding. With this, just as with my name, I will put myselves first as a way of meeting the world.



I've had many names, or at least variations of a name. In the broken accordion



became evidence of a disorder. I suddenly felt ashamed that he had seen me as I couldn't. Perhaps this was just mania that wasn't disruptive enough to be visible. This is one of the dangers with diagnoses. Now, I do not think it was mania, but I do

Even the first name was contested – first X, then Y, Z, and W with hyphenated last During an eight-month battle pursuing top-surgery, the real struggle I had with names toggling back and forth between versions. From this wellspring of documents the insurance company was over the power and authority to name. Transness exists within the binary, according to the State of Virginia's Medicaid policies. To amended school report cards, baseball jerseys altered with a sharpie, bank accounts, be trans in their eyes, you had to be FTM or MTF. My insurance first denied the diplomas, licenses, leases, taxes, et cetera. Mislabeled because in 2018, while loudly claim because I am not a transman. When asked to present documentation of prior arguing with a Records and Registration employee (who had obviously not received medical intervention, my use of estrogen did not qualify as hormone therapy, even though it was used to suppress menstruation. To them, I was a woman taking transphobic) two weeks into my MFA program at Virginia Commonwealth University, a "female hormone." How could that be an intervention, when that's what was I realized the issue had never been settled. I laughed at this man when he told me, natural? And if there was tissue remaining on my chest post-surgery, it would "I couldn't just call myself whatever I wanted" because none of my names matched obviously be called breasts: "...and Ms. Keaton, the State of Virginia does not fund up. The last birth certificate and Social Security card had different names on them. cosmetic surgery." When I pressed them on this label, they said it was my surgeon's Articulating myself in nearly every facet of my life has been a struggle; words feel

surgeon, he said it was the insurance company's fault. There were only two codes the surgeon could submit to the insurance company: a full FTM top-surgery (called a code, for others like me.

The copper's talent of amplification made my

experience visible. It made my body scream. The

the perspective to name this gender dysphoria.

alchemy of effects this metal had on me gave me

Having shut off my awareness of my body as a child,

sensation, to listen and feel the call and response of

bells appear. Singing, they have oxidized in my urine.

Trace deposits of medications I take to help regulate

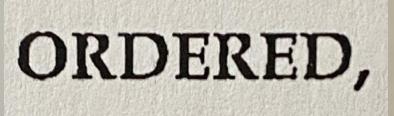
I began to explore - to tip my toe into a world of

my trans body moving with those around me.

In my installation work dozens of small copper

my body's chemistry, crust and collect on this

metallic choir's throat. They sound off: euphoric.



this is not how sexuality or gender identity works for the majority of queer people. needed to have known those names to further my case. He spelled these names out loudly and slowly in a letter to the insurance company – a warning. Until this time, I had resisted using the word Trans to describe myself. I felt I was not "really" trans, according to the popular definition, the one I was fighting against but apparently also held, and needed to let go of. In this instance of language, in propagating, and talking about the begonias I live with, "mania". He meant no harm; naming myself trans, things shifted. The word and I inhabited one another. I began to he said it like it was a good thing, something to be enjoyed. But I was stopped in my insist on the phone with the insurance company – naming myself trans – knowing these calls were being recorded. I demanded the insurance company name what would prove my gender identity, and thus the medical necessity of my procedure. I asked over and over again for a list of which boxes needed checking. It ends up they don't have a list. After eight months of mildly harassing a case manager, with

# ZEBRAFISH

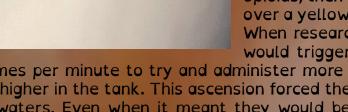
I have recently been taken with an other. Danio rerio, more commonly called Zebrafish, share 70% of their genes with humans. We also have in common the same basic structure of many vital organs and share the pathways necessary to develop them. These include the heart, brain, spinal cord, kidneys, pancreas, and liver, to name a few. In 2013, the entire zebrafish genome was published. Eighty-four percent of human diseases have a counterpart in Zebrafish, opening up the possibility for Zebrafish research focusing on diseases like muscular dystrophy, cancer, and even addiction. We are both innately social animals, needing to live in close proximity to others.

Because of our likeness, over the past sixty years zebrafish have emerged as the most popular medical model for humans in biomedical research.

There are, of course, other reasons for this coupling. These robust, prolific fish are an apt and cost-effective form of biopower for neoliberalism unrestricted and relentless "progress" in the biomedical field. Zebrafish breed rampantly; and with human intervention to protect the eggs and fry from larger fish, a single female can produce two hundred eggs in a week. These eggs fertilize and develop outside of the mother, unlike other model vertebrae, like mice. The eggs and the developing embryos are completely transparent, allowing us to watch zebrafish development from multiplying cells to hatching, which takes a mere twenty-four hours. Generations of animals cycle every three months. Up to fifteen fish can be housed per liter of water in lab facilities without issue, and because of their size food cost is low.

When I became aware of how and why zebrafish and humans interact, I became obsessed. In my usual fashion, I watched every YouTube video, read published studies that I could barely understand, and generally just went "all in." I began meeting with Dr. Greg Walsh, a VCU researcher who works with transgenic Zebrafish studying neurodevelopment. He describes a situation where a person is born with a rare or new genetic variation of muscular dystrophy. When this happens, he says, researchers will recreate this variation exactly in a clutch of fish and try different drugs and therapies during the fish's development into adults. This transference feels astonishing to me. What must it feel like to know and see these creaturely others, sharing your own genetic experience, knowing their existence and circumstances knot in/to your own? I ask Greg if he knows anyone who has met their fishy avatars. He gently laughs.

A study from the University of Utah has the potential to shift popular perceptions about addiction by stimulating empathy. The study looked at drug-seeking behavior in Zebrafish. Researchers dosed the Zebrafish with opioids, then taught the fish how to self-administer the drug by swimming over a yellow platform that released hydrocodone directly into the water. When researchers lowered the dosage and number of times the sensor would trigger, the fish frantically swam over the platform, returning to the sensor dozens of times per minute to try and administer more of the drug. In addition to lowering the dosage, they raised the platform higher and higher in the tank. This ascension forced the fish into the dangerous and stressful situation of swimming in increasingly shallow waters. Even when it meant they would be partially out of the water, the fish desperately returned to the platform.



Zebrafish and humans have the neurotransmitters dopamine and glutamate in common, as well as a receptor for m-opioids that trigger the reward centers of the brain. Two days after their last dose and the removal of the platform, the fish were visibly distraught, exhibiting stressed behaviors like isolation, fighting, and erratic swimming. The researchers confirmed the likeness between the fish's neural-activity and a human's. These fish were suffering withdrawal from addiction, another confirmation of the biology behind addiction.

## AFFECT AND SOMATICS

With my work I aim to produce a space, object, or experience that opens us to feeling our mutuality, or relational existence through material intimacy. This intimacy resists the subject-object binary, because it acknowledges the object's agency or ability to act as well as its co-constitutive role in being. This blurring problematizes the inanimate entities' seemingly fixed position in the hierarchical organization of matter. I argue that this feeling of material intimacy is queer feeling and embodiment.

This queer affect is one of the main organs sustaining the work through material intra-actions – it is the petting of a dog, the dose of estrogen and Adderall, the lanolin left on the palm of your hand.

Affect Theory emerges from many different fields of inquiry, resulting in simultaneous definitions of the word and its application. This simultaneity complicates description of the phenomena of affect. When I speak about affect, I am speaking about the feelings that emerge for a subject within an intra-action. These feelings are psychological and neurological. They are material happenings that can emerge or pass through their subjects. Emotions are cognitive workings situated in particular cultural contexts. Emotions are what we produce as we self-reflect on our experiences, or try to communicate to another our affective experience: "I am feeling overwhelmed". Affects resist language longer; they are more concerned with the encountering of other bodies then communicating between them<sup>1</sup>.

This encounter with others brings us back to Merleau-Ponty's conception of "The Flesh". When we transmit, receive, or share a/effectually we can recognize ourselves in this flesh as both subject and object. It is in this moment of recognition with others that affect works somatically, into our bodily flesh, our neural networks. Somatics emphasizes the subject's internal physical perception of an experience. Somatic therapies first teach us how to notice and listen to this internal perception. Once we become more aware of how our material bodies are perceiving the world we can set out to alter these perceptions. We can recalibrate how we feel in these moments of intra-action through our bodies.

people suffering from addiction struggling in isolation. But people can feel for these little fish; they may even call this experiment cruel. The metaphorical comparison between the researchers' tests and pharmaceutical companies' predatory tactics of pushing opioids into communities brings to light the way larger, and often unseen, systems have power over individuals. These fish show how a/effective the drug is on their brains. We seek relief from stressed and dysregulated nervous systems through the same neural pathways to pleasure. The Zebrafish teach us empathy for our fellow humans through our material likeness. They animate the opioid from a passive object that is consumed, into an active agent that impresses itself into those who encounter it. This understanding has the power to sway public opinion to the point of affecting policy. These fish humanize humans. They allow us to see one another.

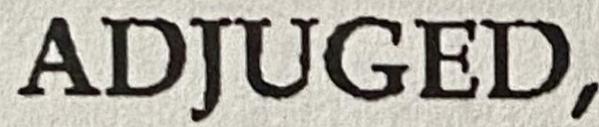
Books, 2015. iii-xxvi

"Being among trees or near water can activate the ventral vagal nervous system and create feelings of connection and safety. Our relationships with plants, animals, ecosystems, and places can be relations where we develop secure attachment. Healing our ability to connect and be in relationships is not a practice exclusive to our relationship with other humans. Nonhuman beings, ecosystems, and places can be profound sources of connections, attachment healing, and nervous systems regulation" - Clementine Morrigan<sup>2</sup>

The book, The Body Keeps the Score, by Bessel van der Kolk does not deprioritize the body, as many dominant notions of psychology do, but addresses the mind and body as one, an entity that is deeply material. The physiological and psychological are equal partners. If a rabbit is chased by a fox and gets away one of the first things it does is find a hidden place to quickly shiver, yawn, or vocalize. This behavior releases tension by combating the stress hormones so that it can move forward in life. Because humans have historically not understood this integration of mind and body, our stress release responses are squashed by social pressures. We grin and bear our trauma, bury it, deny it, or form any number of coping mechanisms. Living with PTSD is living with a nervous system that is dysregulated. It is still in the state of being traumatized – braced – even if there is no present threat. Somatic therapy involves bodily engagements like breathwork, contact dancing, and primal screaming. These therapies teach us, our long neglected bodies, how to release ourselves from trauma's grip that keeps us in survival mode<sup>3</sup>.

Teresa Brennan writes about the transmission of affect, or movement of affect through the world between groups and individuals sharing space. Sometimes these affects are directly transmitted from one

2 Morrigan, Clementine. You Cant Own the Fucking Stars: Collected Writings on Trauma, Addiction, Recovery, and Transformation 2012-2016. Montreal, Québec: Published by Clementine Morrigan, 2018. Van der Kolk Bessel. The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma. New York: Penguin



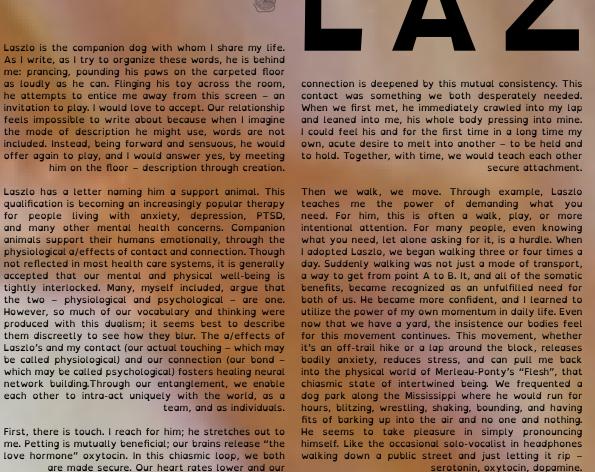
individual to another: an anxious friend at a party leaves you feeling self-conscious. Alternatively, you may enter into an affect, such as a celebratory room that lifts your spirits and brings you to tears. In our current situation with the coronavirus pandemic, fear and uncertainty permeate the air. Waiting in line to get into Home Depot we may feel directly threatened by a fellow queuer whose idea of six feet is lacking as much as his non-existent face mask. We may feel consciously aware of how we are being affected by others and the media, but that does not mean we will place the fear on the correct object, or process it. Imagine all the world shaking in somatic release. The man in line at Home Depot is just a repository, a too-close-tohome reminder that my body is itself permeable and that I have very little control over my environment. We become a vessel for this anxiety, pouring out into those around us. Transmission of affect includes biological changes. Brennan cites in her book that the visual can be a way in which affect is transmitted as well, and that though it is not the primary way, it is an accessible way to speak about transmission between people<sup>4</sup>. Through vision, we can see and feel ourselves apart from others. We may see the face of our venting friend and get worked up ourselves over an injustice they nave experienced. It is our choice to look, to engage. We fantasize that if we choose not to look, we cannot be affected. We think we make ourselves separate, we draw the line between ourselves and others. This, of course, is not true and the fallacy manifests on macro and micro levels from the a/ effects of a pandemic to the death of a loved one we had put off calling.

If affect is transmissible, it can build groups, publics. The recognition of the somatic effects of an affect – a protest or a Saturday at Ikea – is the material manifestation of the affect through biology and behavior. I want to understand more the interplay between affect and somatics, currently this exploration is with my material kin.

4 Brennan, Teresa. The Transmission of Affect. Ithaca, NY Cornell University Press, 2014.



are made secure. Our heart rates lower and our

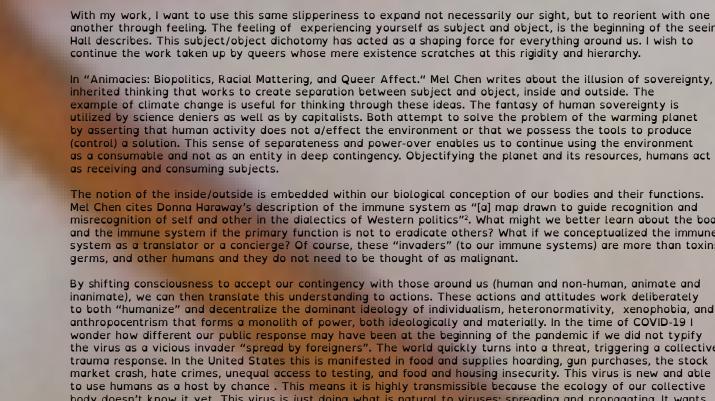












likely always be in and of this world.

2012) 24-26

taxonomize them:

## SUBJECT/OBJECT

In 2016, the North Carolina "bathroom" bill, or HB2 law, was signed into law making it illegal for individuals to use a bathroom not aligned to the sex marker or biological sex on a state issued ID or birth certificate. In this context, the artist Gordon Hall wrote "Reading Things" to advocate for queer objects and a new kind of queer aethetics. Moving away from the use of maximalist aesthetics to announce an artwork's queerness or to signal its taking on of conventional gay issues, these new objects and aesthetics take a stand by being difficult to pin down, name, or categorize. Most importantly, Hall suggests that these objects teach us to decentralize the visual as the central means of the beholder's "understanding" of the other that is in front of them, as well as their need to

What we require is a large-scale rearranging of the ways that bodies are classified and hierarchized along gendered and racial lines. This is largely a question of reworking our vision so that in the moments we encounter one another, we are actually able to see differently than the way we have been taught. This is a form of aesthetic labor—relearning how to see and identify what we are looking at – and it seems to me that some of our best teachers might be things themselves. — Gordon Hall<sup>1</sup>

another through feeling. The feeling of experiencing yourself as subject and object, is the beginning of the seeing Hall describes. This subject/object dichotomy has acted as a shaping force for everything around us. I wish to continue the work taken up by queers whose mere existence scratches at this rigidity and hierarchy. In "Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect." Mel Chen writes about the illusion of sovereignty, the inherited thinking that works to create separation between subject and object, inside and outside. The example of climate change is useful for thinking through these ideas. The fantasy of human sovereignty is utilized by science deniers as well as by capitalists. Both attempt to solve the problem of the warming planet by asserting that human activity does not a/effect the environment or that we possess the tools to produce (control) a solution. This sense of separateness and power-over enables us to continue using the environment as a consumable and not as an entity in deep contingency. Objectifying the planet and its resources, humans act

he notion of the inside/outside is embedded within our biological conception of our bodies and their functions. Mel Chen cites Donna Haraway's description of the immune system as "[a] map drawn to guide recognition and misrecognition of self and other in the dialectics of Western politics"<sup>2</sup>. What might we better learn about the body and the immune system if the primary function is not to eradicate others? What if we conceptualized the immune system as a translator or a concierge? Of course, these "invaders" (to our immune systems) are more than toxins, germs, and other humans and they do not need to be thought of as malignant.

By shifting consciousness to accept our contingency with those around us (human and non-human, animate and inanimate), we can then translate this understanding to actions. These actions and attitudes work deliberately to both "humanize" and decentralize the dominant ideology of individualism, heteronormativity, xenophobia, and anthropocentrism that forms a monolith of power, both ideologically and materially. In the time of COVID-19 I wonder how different our public response may have been at the beginning of the pandemic if we did not typify the virus as a vicious invader "spread by foreigners". The world quickly turns into a threat, triggering a collective trauma response. In the United States this is manifested in food and supplies hoarding, gun purchases, the stock market crash, hate crimes, unequal access to testing, and food and housing insecurity. This virus is new and able to use humans as a host by chance . This means it is highly transmissible because the ecology of our collective body doesn't know it yet. This virus is just doing what is natural to viruses: spreading and propagating. It wants to survive and thrive, not intentionally kill millions of people. If we held this in our minds staying home, then washing our hands, wearing masks, and working to produce therapies would feel like a powerful response, one of care, protecting our collectivity. These tools help us manage our side of this encounter, this new relationship, until our bodies, assisted by a still unknown therapeutic technology, learn to be with this virus. It is and will most

1 Hall, Gordon. "Reading Things." Walker Art Center. Walker Art Center, August 8, 2016. https://walkerart.org/ magazine/gordon-hall-transgender-hb2-bathroom-bill 2 Chen, Mel Y. Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect. (Durham, NC: Duke University Press,



1 Ahmed, Sara and Schmitz, Sigrid. "Affect/Emotion: Orientation Matters." Freiburger Zeitschrift Für GeschlechterStudien 2, no. 20 (December 2014): 97–98. https://www. researchgate.net/publication/316457951\_AffectEmotion\_Orientation\_Matters\_A\_Conversation\_between\_Sigrid\_Schmitz\_and\_Sara\_Ahmed.

> dog companions: Donna Haraway, Mary Oliver, Gertrude ein, Radclyffe Hall, and Eileen Myles, a few of my nurture us when the world and its people do not, or can not. They are not as is often suggested, substitutes for humans. Donna Haraway offers these relationships as of relationship. If we are attentive, they teach us through likeness and difference what it is to be with another -

> > and what it is to be other

Laz and I have been taking sensuous walks. These walks take anywhere from one to five hours. We exchange roles of leading and following according to the pull of our senses' desires. I want to observe the others that call to Lazslo: smells, scents, sounds, the sunny sides of the street. We take a strange route, but more noticeable is the pace. When Laszlo leads his nose is to the ground, and his ears are up: it might take hirty minutes to go down one block of leyway. I let him point my attention; try to hear the names he shows me. I realize how fixated I am on the visual. In our coevolution, dogs recognized the immense communicative potential of the face and eyes. Looking others in the eye nere is a long history of queers and creatives with close ancestors do. The dogs we cohabitate with developed a is not something wolves or other dog muscle we named the levator anguli oculi medialis that expands their range of facial expression as they reach out to make contact. Most notably, this muscle allows them to make their earnest and endearing "puppy dog eyes."

Since our coronavirus quarantine began,

A confident, securely attached dog will look directly into pre-existing examples of what it is to have non-natal or releases the kin-making oxytocin in both participants, their human companions' eyes. This gaze, like touch, genealogical kin. Dogs provide an entirely different kind forging connection. We expand; through our companionship, our worlds get larger. We are more stimulated and alive because of one another.

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