Warm Compression – Damp Gestures

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

By

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BFA, University of Florida, 2006
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Director:
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ABSTRACT

*Warm Compression – Damp Gestures*

By Melanie McLain, MFA

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

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2012.

Major Director: Adrian Wong, Visiting Professor, Sculpture + Extended Media

Thoughts on vulnerability, emotions, social interaction, self-awareness, skin, touching, bodily functions, and the combination of all these ideas into a confined space filled with heat and humidity just enough to leave you feeling damp and perhaps a bit sore.
If something changes in the environment, all the organisms that depend on that environment will react somehow to recreate the equilibrium they need to survive.

Rubbing

Jeff Herring is a therapist my mom and stepfather saw for marriage counseling. He also coincidentally had been my dad and stepmother’s marriage therapist a few years prior. I had a couple therapy sessions with him before realizing any of this. I wondered how he was so astute at understanding me even in our very first session. His view of the nature of family dynamics opened my eyes to a different way of looking at relationships of all kinds. He explained this as each member of the family trying to hold each other in place by resisting change in order to maintain the stability of the system even if that system is detrimental.

Many psychologists look at groups and individuals as systems in homeostasis, and view homeostasis as the ultimate function of emotion. Taking this idea into a larger social context, the sanity of an individual is largely determined based on the
A direct form of experiential understanding of others is achieved by modeling their behaviors as intentional experiences on the basis of the equivalence between what others do and feel and what we do and feel.

ability to function socially. When a person starts to disrupt the system, everyone around shifts accordingly to return it to stability. If enough people shift with in a group, the equilibrium shifts as well. This happens on a large scale, such as recent discussions about our shift toward a narcissistic culture. Perhaps it is more noticeable on a smaller scale in subcultures or different contexts in the same social group.

Within these smaller groups, the underlying operation of the larger culture is evident, but the point of stability is slightly skewed from the larger system. People develop cognitive schemas to create structure in order to navigate these subtle differences from one context to the next. However, with diverse people and the fluctuations with in each individual person, there is inevitably a large degree that is unpredictable in any given social situation. I am interested in how people notice and adjust to these different situations and where personality, behavior patterns, and social quirks start to emerge.

When entering a new environment there is a tendency to either adapt to the situation or assert ones disposition regardless of the surrounding scenario. For example, when walking into a small meeting with a group of people quietly waiting, people
In the presence of others, one is apt to become self-conscious, that is, aware of the self as a social object that can be observed and evaluated by others.

generally notice and adjust their demeanor to also quietly sit and wait. There is, however, sometimes the person who either decides to disregard the tone of the room or is completely unaware. This person carries out their given temperament whether that be talkative, irritable, or somber, despite the evident social cues or much acknowledgement of others. How then do we understand the person who is always self-aware and always posturing in direct relation to those around him? This person neither asserts himself nor adapts to the situation. He may be refusing to adapt in the sense that he maintains a constant awareness of self as separate from the group, yet he is acknowledging the new situation he has entered. He is responding directly to the presence of the others in the room.

I was sitting with a group of people at a restaurant in Los Angeles following the body language of the man who was talking to the group. He carried his words with confidence and ease. However, when he finished and the group turned their attention to the next person speaking, his awareness of self did not shift. I sensed a continued self-consciousness of how he felt he was being perceived. His facial expressions and slight smirk did not seem to
Studies show that power differentials between people are subtly revealed by how much one individual immediately echoes the linguistic style of the person they are responding to.

reflect a natural reaction to what was being said. It seems he wanted to continue to control the way others saw him despite the fact that he was no longer the center focal point. This affected my own awareness of self; clearly, I was still paying attention to his actions, and thus he remained at the center of my focus.

Is this manipulative? He is making a conscious attempt to control how others see him. Then again, every gesture, utterance, or facial expression we use to communicate could be viewed as a form of manipulation or control. These are all means of directing the way another person receives and reacts to information. His extreme self-awareness may be a sign of self-consciousness, but self-awareness does not always have to be self-consciousness. In this scenario it feels like he is attempting to remain in control to avoid being on the other side of the interaction in which one becomes more vulnerable.
Interoception is the sense of the physiological condition of the body.

Brief Release

The strength of our interoception is positively linked to the intensity of emotional experience. Interoception is the sensitivity to stimuli originating inside one’s own body. Those who are sensitive to their body also tend to be more sensitive emotionally.

During a critique the other day, Jessica stated that to be emotional is to be vulnerable. I want to explore this statement further. Within our society, showing too much emotion has been viewed as a weakness. This also ties in to gender politics.
The purpose of ego defense mechanisms is to protect the mind/self/ego from anxiety, social sanctions or to provide refuge from a situation with which one cannot currently cope.

and the idea of females being considered more emotional and therefore, on at least a subconscious level, this deems them the weaker sex. Many people face difficulty in openly expressing their feelings due to these social stigmas. As a counter perspective, I pose that those who are emotionally expressive could be viewed as confident and fluid in their ability to openly express their emotions despite facing the negative social connotations. Those who restrict their emotional expression hold on tight to protect themselves from some sort of deep-rooted fear of social rejection that has been ingrained in them. From this light, the emotional are more in tune with themselves, and therefore maybe at the core less vulnerable than those who cannot not yet face or accept their emotional selves.
A middle-aged woman entered the enclosed installation space; I saw her look of confusion and discomfort as she felt the wave of heat while the massage therapists gestured for her to take a seat. She stared at them for a while. She looked at the seat, then at their hands. She looked around the room, and quickly glanced away the moment she made eye contact with me standing at the end of the ramp. She never fully stepped into the room, always keeping her left foot on the top stair. She stood there for a good two minutes debating what she should do. She never once turned to notice the projection over her head. She just continued to look longingly at the chairs, but hesitant to fully let go and enter the room.
To enter the room is to go into some sort of unknown. She would have had to relinquish some control of knowing what came next. The angle of the reclined chairs, the massage, and the perfect viewing position for the screen asks viewers to relax and become comfortable. At the same time, those sitting become the center focus of anyone walking into the room. There are two performers sitting behind the chairs, and if no one is receiving a massage, then the performers role in the space is still unknown to those just entering the room. The woman from the above scenario showed signs of nervousness and intrigue. She seemed to have an internal battle as to whether she would give in to the experience or walk away. She
eventually chose to walk away. To enter and have a seat to receive a massage places the viewer in a more vulnerable position. When someone openly embraces the moment of vulnerability, I find that it actually shows far more strength than those who are reluctant, afraid, or some how feel above embracing the vulnerability of the experience. Then again, perhaps some just don’t care either way. This raises the question whether this apathy is truly apathy or stemming at the root from a desire to remain in control. Because apathy is also about having a lack of emotion, which as I have discussed may be coming from a more complicated place than simply lacking emotional concern.

Those who suffer from sweaty palms often discreetly stick their hands into their pockets and rub into the insides of the fabric.
Dampness

We hold our water inside. We don't want our drool dripping, our nose running, our spit spatting, our urine leaking. We keep it nicely tucked inside. I don't want my socks wet. I don't want my jeans wet. I don't want my body holding wetness on the outside unless I am submerged, unless I am in a pool, a shower, a tub. Then it is not my water. It is other water.

I put on wet jeans so I can feel them suck on my skin
Vita

Melanie McLain was born in Lakeland, Florida in 1982. She was raised in Tallahassee, Florida and earned her diploma from Leon High School. She studied at the University of Florida in Gainesville, earning a dual degree in 2006 with a Bachelor of Fine Arts in Sculpture and a Bachelor of Science in Psychology. Melanie earned her Masters of Fine Arts in Sculpture and Extended Media from Virginia Commonwealth University in 2012.