An Aesthetic Disposition:
Art, Social Reproduction, and Feminist Critique

by

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Graduate Program in Literature
Duke University

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Dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Graduate Program in Literature in the Graduate School of Duke University

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ABSTRACT

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Abstract

This project focuses on the question: how might we understand the politics of contemporary art? Grounding my research in feminist political theory, I argue that art’s most critical function—in the US-based context of neoliberalism—may be found in art’s ability to perform the work of social reproduction. I draw the concept of social reproduction from feminist and critical theory to mean two things. First, regarding social reproduction as a paradigm for social change, I ask how works of art participate in building subjects and structures that prefigure alternative, life sustaining worlds. Second, regarding social reproduction as the labor of care, I develop a theory of art as a source of critical hope and sensible rejuvenation. My work thus complicates the common belief—held for example in critical theory—that sensible stimulation obscures critical awareness and encourages apolitical escape. To the contrary, I find art to offer needed resources for critical world-building precisely through the aesthetic dispositions that artworks prompt. I build this argument through close attention to the work of three US-based women artists: Simone Leigh, Roni Horn, and Mika Rottenberg. By foregrounding the work of these artists in conversation with recent feminist thinking on affect and political economy, my research reorients the discourse on aesthetics and politics away from an emphasis on knowledge and subject representation, toward the undervalued work of somatic care and subject formation.
Dedication

I dedicate this dissertation to my dear friend, Kelly Rae.
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Introduction

The following project takes up an enduring and unresolved question: how are we to understand the politics of contemporary art? This question remains unresolved not only due to its broad scope and complexity—two characteristics that make it a rich interdisciplinary terrain of debate—but also because it is a question that must be reevaluated at every historical juncture. To pose a set of criteria that qualify art as adequately political for the times is to, at the same time, evaluate the political circumstances in which one makes, receives, and interacts with a work of art.

It is for this reason that my approach to the politics of contemporary art in this dissertation is predominately positioned in conversation with feminist and critical theory (over and above art history). Feminist and critical theory lend great insight when evaluating the structures of power that shape and reproduce our historical situation. Feminist and critical theory also lend great guidance for keeping the political agenda of any approach to art in sharp focus. As two discourses of politicized critique, feminist and critical theory offer my research a model by which to conceive of the very practice of analyzing art as itself a practice
of naming power, cultivating desire, articulating potential lines of antagonism, and striving to constitute a counterpublic of more critical if not political subjects.¹

A second and related question guides this dissertation: what might aesthetics offer the way we do feminist and left politics at this historical moment? If in my first framing I pose feminist and critical theory as two invaluable discourses by which to understand the politics of contemporary art, here I suggest that aesthetics reciprocally provides great resource for reconsidering how we do feminist and left practice, subject formation, and critique. In short, the chapters that follow each in their own way investigate what feminist and critical theory might illuminate about the politics of contemporary art, as well as what the aesthetics of contemporary art make available by way of a reconsidered approach to feminist and left politics.

Several concepts bring these two lines of inquiry together in my work, the most important of which is social reproduction. In response to the question of art’s politics, I argue that in the US-based context of neoliberal precarity and the so-called crisis in care,² art’s most critical force is to perform social reproduction. By reproduction here I mean art’s ability to revitalize the senses and reopen a rebellious desire for more sustaining, connecting, and caring worlds. Similarly, in response to the question of what attention to art lends the

¹ I borrow the term “politicized critique” from Kathi Week’s 2007 article “Life Within and Against Work,” which I will mention more explicitly below in this introduction. Weeks identifies the academic project of socialist feminism as a “project of politicized critique,” which she defines as “critical evaluations with political intent or analytics that are attentive to possible lines of antagonism” (234). I use the term “counterpublic” here to refer to Michael Warner’s description of a counterpublic as an open-ended audience of unknown readers who come into being as a collective organized around counter-hegemonic values that are affirmed through the act of reading. See Warner, “Publics and Counterpublics.”
² I will explain the idea of the crisis in care in my first chapter.
political practice of feminist critique, I propose aesthetics as a critical practice that helps open feminism toward a utopian disposition of affirming, prefiguring, and desiring worlds that we might want. An aesthetic disposition toward feminist critique counter-balances many atomizing affects of neoliberal subject formation. This includes but is not limited to the tendency toward what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has influentially recognized as a “paranoid” disposition encouraged in dominant modes of critique. Aesthetics as such becomes an affective activity or exercise that shapes more vitalist, less isolating modes of life, consciousness, comportment, subjectivity, and world—which is simply yet profoundly to claim aesthetics as an activity of social reproduction.

In the following introduction I would like to clarify this point that aesthetics constitutes a critical practice of social reproduction by explaining in greater detail what I mean by social reproduction. In doing so I will indicate how the concept of social reproduction has operated in feminist theory, as an analytic that has made significant interventions into critical theory and mobilized new feminist political imaginaries. I will argue, moreover, for the relevance of turning to art when thinking specifically about the problem of social reproduction in our contemporary context. And finally I will explain, in turn, what the analytic of social reproduction illuminates about the politics of contemporary art.

It will become clear shortly that several additional concepts guide my thinking across the chapters of this dissertation. These include: neoliberalism, affect, aesthetics,

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3 See Sedgwick “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You’re So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay is About You.”
representation, subject formation, human capital, prefiguration, practice, institutions, and utopian feminism. It is my hope that the constellation of these critical ideas will sharpen with movement while never fully stabilizing throughout the reading process.

**Social Reproduction: Three Connected Definitions**

Drawing on Barbara Laslett and Johanna Brenner’s 1989 touchstone essay “Gender and Social Reproduction: Historical Perspectives,” the concept of social reproduction may be understood, first, as all of the “activities and attitudes, behaviors and emotions, responsibilities and relationships directly involved in the maintenance of life on a daily basis.” As they also put it, social reproduction is the “domain of necessary social labor”—necessary, that is, to the reproduction of life, subjectivity, consciousness, social relations, and society as a whole. The work of necessary reproductive labor includes the procurement of use-values such as food, clothing, and shelter, the socialization of children, care for the young, the elderly, and the sick, the maintenance of social relations, and the social organization of sexual reproduction. The division of reproductive labor within a society, i.e. who is responsible for doing this work, has been a core topic of interest in Marxist feminist analysis. I will map some of the debates and contributions associated with the term’s trajectory in feminist theory momentarily.

There is a second, related yet genealogically distinct, definition of social reproduction that must be established as well. This is the idea of social reproduction as a critical question about the reproduction of capitalist society, most notably raised by Louis Althusser but also

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5 Brenner and Laslett, 400.
to some extent Pierre Bourdieu (a figure whom I mention because I will return to when discussing the title of my dissertation). Here, the question of social reproduction prompts us to ask how society as we know it is reproduced or maintained. It does so, moreover, through a sensitivity to culture, ideology, and practice that models a multidirectional approach to the relationship between base and superstructure. This use of the concept—to investigate the maintenance of capitalist relations of production—connects to the feminist analytic of social reproduction—as the necessary labor of maintaining life—to the extent that the gendered, racialized, and global divisions of reproductive labor tend to operate in the service of reproducing class, race, nation, and gender hierarchies, both materially and ideologically. Approaching social reproduction in this way lends itself well to the project of critique; the critical task becomes one of exposing and naming those centralized and decentralized, repressive and productive, and personalized and systematic structures that reproduce the interests of the ruling class. I will not go into much detail about this Althusserian invocation of social reproduction since exposing those operations that maintain our current social order is not the approach to social reproduction that I am most interested in. It is important to mention Althusser’s inquiry into how structures get reproduced nonetheless, as it is foundational to my third and final definition which this dissertation does employ.

The third definition of social reproduction that I propose has to do with social change, rather than maintaining the current social order. I call this idea “critical social

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reproduction.” Other theorists have also called it social reproduction “from below.” Critical social reproduction, on my account, builds on many of the insights of the two definitions that I’ve just sketched while making room for an affimative politics of agency and change. Put another way, the political disposition encouraged by this framework is less one of exposing those structures dictated “from above” which maintain the status quo, as it is about recognizing the possibility of changing the status quo “from below” through, precisely, those daily necessary material practices that produce life. Here the activity of reproducing life, subjectivity, consciousness, social relations, and in turn society as a whole becomes a site of intervention. Critical social reproduction affirms some, albeit limited, agency within larger systems by seizing the idea (offered in Althusser’s concept of ideology) that practices create subjects and by extension social relations, and the idea (offered in feminist theory) that the necessary labor of regenerating life is intimately a domain of creative, skilled work that may be a source of power and knowledge redeemed from below.

With these three connected definitions laid out, I would like to now track with a bit more detail some of how social reproduction has been mobilized in feminist theory. I do so in order to establish the term’s relevance to, and expansion within, our contemporary political landscape.

**Social Reproduction and Feminist Theory**

The term social reproduction has gain renewed attention in the US academy since the post-Occupy rise in public discourse around capitalism and class. Widely circulated texts such as the reader *Social Reproduction Theory: Remapping Class, Rerecentering Oppression* (2017, edited

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7 I am thinking here of the work of Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri. See for example *Multitude.*
by Tithi Bhattacharya), which asserts the codification of a new school of relevant feminist thought (abbreviated as SRT), and the manifesto *Feminism for the 99%* (2019, written by Cinzia Arruzza, Tithi Bhattacharya, and Nancy Fraser), which uses the Occupy slogan of the 99% to mobilize a global socialist feminist political imaginary that is posed against a posited white-liberal feminism, both index an enlarged sense that both class analysis and attention to reproductive labor must be at the heart of contemporary feminist politics. Like these texts, my project grows out of an anti-liberal anti-capitalist feminist desire to foreground the systemic exploitation and generative resistance of the most marginalized populations: a trans-inclusive notion of ‘women,’ women of color, historically colonized peoples, and nature itself. The political hope invested in here is the notion that an analytic of social reproduction might enable feminism to envision a unified, participatory front of struggle against patriarchal, white-supremacist capitalism, toward prefiguring more sustainable worlds that some collaborative notion of a we-from-below might want.

Despite recent excitement, feminist attention to that which gets called social reproduction is not new. Nor is a feminist political perspective that is critical of liberalism and the accompanying liberal priorities of inclusion, individual private property, and equality under the law that all reinforce, rather than challenge, the systems that organize society as we know it. Any invocation of social reproduction today would benefit from an understanding of the longer feminist trajectory of the term, for at least two reasons. First, it opens social reproduction as a terrain of feminist debate and contestation in such a way that reveals its nuance, contribution, and unresolve. This in turn allows the concept to function as an object of critical investment that reflects shifting investments and historical contexts. It shows us, in
other words, what has become particular about social reproduction in neoliberalism, and how this requires an adjustment in the terms of debate. It also prevents social reproduction from becoming a flat, reified ‘good’ or an easily consumable and instrumentalized corrective to, for example, left critique by adding feminism, or feminist critique by adding the interests of working women of color. Second, accounting ever so briefly for the intellectual history of social reproduction that predates the term ‘social reproduction theory’ (or SRT) helps those invested in the hope for a unified struggle-from-below from relying on the habit of leveraging that hope as a ‘new’ project, posed against a posited ‘old’ characterization of feminism as too white, too liberal, and too capitalist writ large. As Clare Hemmings and Robyn Wiegman have incisively observed, such a reductive progress narrative tends to reflect more about the critic’s desire to be on the proverbial right side of history than it does an accurate picture of those past efforts which are inherited in the present. ⁸ This habit need not organize the constituting practice of critique by which feminist political subjectivity is established.⁹

I will start, then, with an orienting map of three different yet often understated preoccupations that, because understated, often result in people talking past each other when gathered together under the term social reproduction. I offer just a sketch here, as these lines of inquiry and debate which date back to the 1970s have been well accounted for already in Ellen Malos’s edited anthology *The Politics of Housework*, first published in 1980, and Kathi Weeks’ 2007 essay “Life Within and Against Work.” Briefly, these terrains of feminist debate

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⁹ I will come back to these ideas in my second and third chapters.
regarding social reproduction can be understood as 1) an investigation into whether the (frequently unwaged) reproductive labor that takes place in the gendered-female domain of the home technically produces value, and thus whether it accurately should be included in a theory of capitalist exploitation; 2) an exploration into how the labor of reproduction, often relegated to the so-called separate sphere of the domestic, shapes the experiences, subjectivities, and epistemological insights of those women who perform this work, thus offering a theory of sexual difference rooted in the gender-based division of labor and also asserting women’s privileged vantage-point onto the total system; and finally 3) an analysis of whether capitalism and patriarchy constitute one unified system of exploitation and oppression or two, and if two which is primary. As Weeks indicates, these strands of debate may be flagged as the domestic labor debates over value and exploitation (dating from the early 1970s), the feminist standpoint debates over the relationship between oppression, epistemology, and subject formation (dating from the late 1970s into the 1980s), and the systems theory debates over the relationship between patriarchy and capitalism as it pertains to exploitation, oppression, and subject formation (dating roughly between the two other debates).10

The important contributions from these debates that inform my research are as follows. The most foundational is the idea that the labor of maintaining life is indeed work, even if unwaged. On top of this, it is skilled and necessary work. The concept of reproductive labor expands the Marxist analytic of exploitation by revealing the way that activities which take place outside of the site of production, and specifically within the

domestic sphere, participate in the privatization of surplus value. This is the case to the extent that an unwaged (or cheaply waged) domestic worker is needed to reproduce the waged worker, and as such helps to keep the employer’s costs low. It is the case also to the extent that, as Silvia Federici and Maria Mies have keenly argued, the very division between those activities associated with use-values that are deemed ‘reproductive,’ and those activities associated with exchange-values that are deemed ‘productive,’ constitutes a process of primitive accumulation which enables the development of capitalism by rendering women, nature, and colonized peoples synonymous with a commons from which resources may be extracted and privatized.\textsuperscript{11} Drawing on feminist standpoint theory, my work is also centrally informed by the idea that what we do shapes who we become, as well as the idea that the knowledge gained from experience when we occupy structurally oppressed subject positions is both useful, and requires critical interpretation.\textsuperscript{12} Both of these feminist approaches to the privileged standpoint that oppression offers build on the Marxist notion that I have been calling ‘from below,’ namely the idea that the worker’s perspective lends insight into the total system and that workers’ individualized experiences may be mobilized collectively toward class consciousness and antagonism. Finally, synthesizing Iris Young's unified theory of the centrality of the gender-based division of labor to capitalism, with the Foucaultian feminism

\textsuperscript{11} See Federici’s \textit{Caliban and the Witch} (originally published in 1988), and Mies’s \textit{Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale} (originally published in 1986). I discuss this point further in my first chapter.

\textsuperscript{12} This is both an ontological and epistemological claim. For more on feminist standpoint theory see Harding, \textit{The Feminist Standpoint Theory Reader}, particularly the included essays by Nancy Harsock, Patricia Hill Collins, Dorothy Smith, Sara Ruddick, bell hooks, Uma Narayan, and Donna Haraway. See also Haraway, “A Cyborg Manifesto”; Hennessy, “Women's Lives/Feminist Knowledge”; Bar On, “Marginality and Epistemic Privilege”; Scott, “Evidence of Experience”; and Weeks, \textit{Constituting Feminist Subjects}. 
of labor anthropologists like Leslie Salzinger who hold that gender is not found ready-made and put to work but rather is produced through work,¹³ I hold that capitalism and patriarchy are best understood as an integrated system and that exploitation cannot be thought without an analysis of gendered and raced subject formation. This is a claim that the production of gendered and raced subjectivity through work is a lynchpin to understanding how capitalism is reproduced, functions, and might be changed. One can begin to see, through the Foucaultian-Marxist-feminist approach that I am describing, why questions of subject formation and the production of life itself are not tangential matters to the problem of exploitation but rather fundamental to an analysis of both how things operate and how they might change.

Two additional points must be plotted to clarify how the discourse around social reproduction has, and must, shift in light of political-economic changes since the initial feminist invocation of the term in the 1970s. The first point has to do with the issue of the separate spheres. As Weeks explains in her essay and Malos’s text nicely documents, early feminist considerations of social reproduction tended to focus on the domain of the domestic as the location in which reproductive labor takes place. This historical perspective relied on a then-legible and analytically useful division between the so-called separate spheres of the public and private realm in order to, precisely, demonstrate that such gendered domains are in fact interdependent and not actually separate. Today, the division between work and home or work and life has become less operative in neoliberal capitalism,

¹³ See Young’s “Beyond the Unhappy Marriage: Critique of the Dual Systems Theory” in the instructive reader on systems theory, Women and Revolution: A Discussion of the Unhappy Marriage of Marxism and Feminism, edited by Lydia Sargent. See Salzinger, Genders in Production.
particularly with the flexibilization of work and the model of human capital subjectivity (a critical concept that I will explain in detail in my first chapter). The focus on the domestic sphere that organized earlier social reproduction theories shaped feminist political claims and imaginaries in ways that should now be reevaluated to assess their enduring relevance. For example, as Weeks argues, the early domestic labor debates were critically important for successfully expanding the category of work to include the production of use-values in the home, yet it has since become clear that they did so through a framework of Fordist manufacturing that “tended to overlook or underemphasize caring labor.”14 The so-called immaterial labors of affect and care have only become more central to the analysis of social reproduction in neoliberalism. Much of the housework that involves producing use-values has become increasingly available for purchase on the market by those dual-earner households and non-married mobile workers with disposable income. With the rise of precarious employment, it has also become increasingly difficult to distinguish between use-values and exchange-values or work and non-work. This is because neoliberal models of work normalize a situation in which all things that the subject does to reproduce themselves either contributes to or detracts from their capital-of-self to be rented on the highly competitive personality market.15 With neoliberalism, in other words, the division between work and non-work, productive labor and reproductive labor, public and private, and waged and unwaged work has become blurred. As such, the ontological production of life itself—or what Michael Hardt has called the “biopower” of affective labor—comes to replace the

15 See C. Wright Mills White Collar for a foundational description of the post-Fordist “personality market.” I will explain the idea of capital-of-self in chapter 1 when discussing human capital.
reproductive work of domestic labor as the central analytic by which to address contemporary concerns about social reproduction and social change.\textsuperscript{16}

The second and final point of revision that must be made about social reproduction in neoliberalism has to do with the heightened racializing of reproductive labor that has developed across a global relay of care. With the global north’s coercive installment of export-driven production sites in decolonized nations since the 1970s, a global chain of export-driven reproduction has also developed in the form of what Arlie Hochschild refers to as a “feminization of migration.” As Hochschild explains in her 2002 essay “Love and Gold,” neoliberalism has produced an imperialist-style “care drain” in which resources of love and care are extracted from the global south to the global north in the form of racialized and gendered migrant workers.\textsuperscript{17} Evelyn Nakano Glenn’s instructive essay “Gender, Race, and the Organization of Reproductive Labor” further sketches adjusted trends in the division of reproductive labor witnessed in late capitalism by what she calls

\begin{footnotesize}
\begin{enumerate}
\item See Michael Hardt’s 1999 “Affective Labor” essay for a further elaboration of how affective labor functions as a central technique of control and site of resistance in late capitalism. As he writes it, “Polities has become a matter of life itself, and the struggle has taken the form of biopower from above against biopower from below” (99). The concept of biopower here directly resembles the idea of social reproduction that I have above sketched, with the addition of foregrounding the ontological connotations of affect. As Hardt explains, “Biopower is the power of the creation of life, it is the production of collective subjectivities, sociality, and society itself […] Biopolitical production here consists primarily in the labor involved in the creation of life—not the activities of procreation but the creation of life precisely in the production and reproduction of affects” (98-99). His idea of “biopower from below” (100) overlaps with what I am calling critical social reproduction.
\item I develop this issue further in my first chapter. It is worth noting here, however, that Hochschild maintains the Foucauldian-Marxist-feminist approach that I align myself with above. This can be seen when she states in her essay that, “On the one hand, the First World extracts love from the Third World. But what is being extracted is partially produced or ‘assembled’ here: the leisure, the money, the ideology of the child, the intense loneliness, and the yearning for one’s own children” all contribute to the so-called natural capacity of the gendered and racialized migrant worker to be a caring care-taker (25). Put more directly, the characteristic of being caring that gets mythologized as a natural extension of race and gender is produced in large part through the material conditions of the work.
\end{enumerate}
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“the race and gender division of private reproductive labor,” “the race and gender division of public reproductive labor,” and the “transnational race-gender division of reproductive labor.” As Glenn explains it, the race-gender division of social reproduction must be tracked across three major periods; we find ourselves in the last. From the mid-nineteenth century until World War II, she writes, “reproductive labor remained organized at the household level.” Women of color were hired in the home to reproduce the social status of white families by performing necessary reproductive labor. After WWII, she continues, aspects of reproductive labor became increasingly commodified and the reproductive labor still disproportionately performed by women of color now also took place in the so-called public sphere of market services. In neoliberal or global capitalism, “a growing demand for reproductive services among the expanding professional, technical, and managerial sector” of urban centers has created a global incentive for “women from the periphery to migrate to metropolitan centers to fill demands for both private and public reproductive services.”

All three periods witness a structure in which “less desirable or more onerous aspects of reproductive labor have developed on disadvantaged women of color, ‘freeing’ more privileged women for higher-level pursuits.” Neoliberal capitalism merely intensifies the unequal racialized burden of gendered reproductive labor by expanding it across a global scale. This consequently heightens the uneven interdependence of richer nations on poorer nations and vice versa. As Glenn concludes, a unified international feminist politics would

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19 Glenn, “Gender, Race, and the Organization of Reproductive Labor,” 73.
20 Glenn, 73.
21 Glenn, 73.
require that “improving the lot of racial-ethnic and Third World women necessarily involves the loss of privilege”\textsuperscript{22} and ease of living that is experienced by those people with the disposable income that can be spent on purchasing reproductive services across a global economy. Interestingly, the number of people with the available capital for purchasing reproductive services appears to be fewer and fewer, making conditions ripe for a movement of critical social reproduction in which we prefigure alternative modes of life production and sustenance from below.

\textbf{Affective Labor}

The idea of affective labor must be addressed further to understand why one would turn to art when considering late capitalist social reproduction (or, moreover, why one would turn to social reproduction when considering late capitalist art).

On a social level, my approach to the concept of affective labor is informed by Arlie Hochschild’s influential contribution to the discourse on post-Fordist work, namely her 1983 book \textit{The Managed Heart} and her concept of “emotional labor.” Here Hochschild defines emotional labor as the manipulation or management of one’s own feelings in order to solicit a desired set of feelings from another. This other-oriented labor has world-shaping and subject-forming consequences. The emotional laborer is formed through the repetitive performance of outward countenance that they embody to choreograph a desired affect. If performed successfully, they also shape the world around them precisely by producing in the other the desired affect. This work, as Hochschild illustrates through her ethnographic research, has historically been gendered (even though it is increasingly becoming a part of

\textsuperscript{22} Glenn, 80.
most neoliberal work). Hochschild’s critical observations have powerfully extended the discourse around social reproduction which, as mentioned above, initially focused on the material production of goods in the home. Her work does so by taking seriously both the immaterial labor of producing affects, and the centrality of affective labor in post-Fordist wage work.

My theory of art and social reproduction builds on Hochschild’s contributions by expanding the concept of social reproduction even further. I propose that we consider the non-human affective labor that is performed by the work of art. This of course is a complicated claim, as some of the artworks I will do close readings of in my chapters involve the mediums of video performance and social practice art that both still involve human actors. Nonetheless, I propose this paradigm of art-as-affective-laborer in order to consider the role that art place in choreographing desired affects through a designed outward countenance. The concern about emotional labor’s alienating impact on the worker becomes potentially less relevant here, since it is artworks that are doing the work in the encounter. The world-shaping impact of arranging affects remains just as forceful, even as the affective interactions are less social. My chapters will each consider the consequences of thinking about art as performing emotional or affective labor in this way, while attending to the way different media and different raced and gendered subject positions impact the stakes.

On an ontological level, my thinking about affective labor is also informed by the philosophies of life found in the writing of Benedict Spinoza, Henri Bergson, and Gilles Deleuze. Moments of reference to the latter two philosophers will pop up through the dissertation, but explicit reference to their writing for the most part has been sidelined in
order to focus on the contemporary artists, contemporary critical theorists, and contemporary feminist theorists who occupy the pages of this work. Since I do not mention Spinoza’s work at all in the dissertation, I will offer a brief gesture toward the ontological principles in his writing that nonetheless guide my thinking about the nexus between affect, life, politics, and art. A short explanation of how Spinoza’s ontology informs the theory of affective labor that is active in this dissertation will be useful toward showing how I connect affect to the question of social reproduction and art more broadly.\textsuperscript{23}

In his essay “Affective Labor,” Michael Hardt offers the following functional definition of affective labor. He writes, “What affective labor produces are social networks, forms of community, biopower.”\textsuperscript{24} It is possible to understand this claim through Spinoza’s ontology before attending to the social work that goes into such affective labor (which Hochschild’s writing helps us better understand). For Spinoza, affect connects to the idea of biopower—or life-force—through his ontological concepts of joy and sadness. When different bodies interact, a resulting sense of increased capacity would be what Spinoza calls joy, while a resulting sense of diminished capacity would be what Spinoza calls sadness. Despite the familiar sound of these words—being recognizable names of emotional states—the concepts of joy and sadness here name affective \textit{processes of change} in a body’s felt connection to world and community, the body’s range of options for action, and as such the body’s life force or power. Thus, to be affected by another body (which itself is a complicated term, as all bodies are made of multiple agents, processes, and bodies), is to

\textsuperscript{24} Hardt, 96.
experience a change in capacity and connection (and hence an increase or decrease in the agency that is lent by being networked into community, as Hardt above puts it).

Spinoza’s ontology allows us to imagine, at the affective level of life-force and world-connection, how we might generate power either by diminishing the power of others (i.e. a politics of power-over), or by enhancing collective joy through an enriched sense of community, an open sense of future, and an integration into collaborative networks (i.e. a politics of power-with). It is thus important in any political invocation of biopower and affect to evaluate whether we are dealing with a biopower from above (i.e. power-over), or a biopower from below (i.e. power-with). My theory of critical social reproduction is an attempt to name the latter. I am interested in the work that this distinction does when identifying the feminist political imaginaries we might cultivate: Are we organizing our left-feminist energies and hopes around an orientation of freedom-from those systems of oppression that power-over us and diminish our own power, or the freedom-to imagine other ways of generating sources of power, joy, and sustenance with each other, from below? My project recognizes the utter necessity of both of these orientations, while dedicating the bulk of its energy into the latter. I call the first disposition that of feminist critique, and the second that of feminist utopian prefiguration.

25 Hardt makes this point also, identifying Foucault’s theory of biopower as focused on power from above (98).

5 See for example Elizabeth Grosz’s “Feminism, Materialism, and Freedom” on the topic of freedom-from and freedom-to in feminist theory.
Art’s utopian role in affective prefiguration has yet to be adequately acknowledged. This project attempts to do so while asserting the specifically feminist stakes. My claim is that art’s capacity to organize affects performs a much-needed labor of social reproduction in late capitalism. Thus, I am not only suggesting that we look for the socially legible models of care that are being experimented with and prefigured in art (although I do exactly that in chapter 3). I am also suggesting that we consider the affective, ontological power that is organized through art’s aesthetic registers, and in this way view art as a source of power-generation, agential joy, and critical social reproduction in late capitalism (an argument I develop in chapter 2). Focusing on the prefigurative, affective features of art helps expand the discourse about art’s politics beyond the imperative that art’s political task is to offer critical representations, do the work of consciousness raising, or simply put, perform critique (a topic I take up in chapter 1). These three moves build toward my claim that art performs necessary affective or reproductive labor in late capitalism, and that attending to the aesthetic dimensions of art helps reorient the subject-forming practice of feminist critique away from a freedom-from disposition toward a freedom-to utopian orientation.

Social Reproduction and Art

The theme of social reproduction has recently begun to gain explicit attention in feminist art history and theory. This, however, is a new development, as Angela Dimittrakaki 26 There are several pertinent texts in critical theory that make a similar point to mine about art’s utopian capacity to reorganize the sensible in an anticipatory way. Most notably, one finds this idea in the thinking of Herbert Marcuse and Jacques Rancière. See for example Marcuse’s 1970 address “Art as Revolutionary Weapon” at the New School on the politics of art: https://youtu.be/9livuhNail4. I add to the conversation a feminist perspective that highlights art as a resource not only for critical political imagination, but also for sensible, somatic rejuvenation. This argument will become more clear in chapter 2. I also add an updated historical account of art in neoliberalism to this theory.

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and Kristen Lloyd observe in their 2017 special issue of Third Text dedicated to the topic.\(^27\) The authors state this fact plainly when they write that “feminist art history and theory does not, with few exceptions, engage ‘social reproduction’ as a core, rigorously examined concept within its complex analysis,” having tended to focus instead on the problems of the gendered gaze, the gendered body, representations of women, and “the monocausal endeavor of putting more women into capitalist art institutions.”\(^28\) Feminist art critics such as Dimitrakiki, Victoria Horne, Amy Charlesworth, Helen Molesworth, Siona Wilson, and Julia Bryan-Wilson make up a growing cohort of art history trained theorists who are working to change this by expanding the discourse of feminist art analysis through the Marxist feminist analytics of the gender division of labor, standpoint epistemology, and the division between work and non-work. Across this feminist art criticism, particularly in the writing of Dimitrakiki, Horn, and Charlesworth, we see the beginnings of what Charlesworth identifies as a “renewed relation between feminist politics and aesthetics” that “re-opens debates about political work promulgated some forty years prior” in socialist feminist writing.\(^29\) We see, in other words, what Dimitrakiki points to as a much-needed attempt to reconnect feminist art history with feminism’s ongoing political struggle.\(^30\)

While acknowledging this significant expansion of feminist art criticism, I would like to offer my own map of how I see the question of social reproduction shaping the discourse

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28 Dimitrakaki and Lloyd, 5, 13.
about the politics of contemporary art. On my view, three dominant frameworks currently exist. I propose my project as a fourth. The first has to do with the trend that I would associate with Dimitrakiki and contemporary critics such as Bryan-Wilson, Leigh Claire La Berge, and Gregory Sholette, which treats the artist as a gendered and precarious laborer in late capitalism. My approach differs from this—quite important—literature in that my project here is not concerned with the status of the artist as a worker. Rather, I am interested in the affective and aesthetic work that the artwork does in the aesthetic encounter, and the practice of attending to art performed by the spectator. The second framework has to do with the function of what has become a well-established genre of contemporary art called “social practice art,” and more specifically whether social practice art structurally performs the role of reproducing the neoliberal social order by filling in the care gaps that are produce by neoliberal austerity. Here I align myself quite closely to Claire Bishop’s polemic in her 2012 book *Artificial Hells* when I say that, yes, asking art to supplement care (in a fashion not unlike non-profits) *does* reproduce neoliberalism as we know it. Bishop’s critique of what she calls the “ethical turn” and insistence on the disruptive force of aesthetics has given my project liberty to think more carefully about what aesthetics actually does in neoliberalism. I value her refusal to let the aesthetic qualities of the artwork slip away (as can happen in the first framework). At the same time, I strive in my project to

31 See for example Sholette’s 2011 book *Dark Matter*, where he draws a parallel between the necessary reproductive labor of the unwaged domestic worker and the necessary reproductive labor of the unwaged ‘failed’ artist. See also La Berge’s 2019 *Wages Against Artwork*, Dimitrakaki’s 2013 *Gender, artwork, and the Global Imperative*, and Bryan-Wilson’s 2009 *Art Workers*.

32 I am very interested in this topic of the artist as a neoliberal worker in general, and have developed the course that I teach “Real Work & Dream Jobs” with this core analytic in mind.
carve out space for a less binary approach than Bishop’s, holding that care and refusal or social support and aesthetics need not be dualistically opposed. Indeed, I posit aesthetics as a kind of care and a kind of refusal of the status quo throughout the dissertation. Finally the third, and perhaps most classically Marxist, framework for considering the relationship between social reproduction and art harkens back to Althusser’s invocation of the term by considering how art may offer hegemonic or counter-hegemonic representations of the real, which is to say ideologies. As I’ve indicated already and I develop at length in my first chapter, my project moves away from this emphasis on representation and critique by focusing instead on art’s affective, aesthetic, prefigurative qualities.

An Aesthetic Disposition

One last point must be addressed before moving to a description of the chapters, and that is the idea of “an aesthetic disposition” stated in my title. This also, for me, raises the question of practice and institutions.

I borrow the term an aesthetic disposition from Pierre Bourdieu’s 1984 text *Distinction*. In this detailed sociological study of the social practices of class distinction and taste in French culture, Bourdieu illuminates the class interests embedded in the Kantian notion of aesthetics. As he writes, Kant’s ideal of a disinterested or “pure aesthetic is rooted in an ethic, or rather, and ethos of elective distance from the necessities of the natural and social world which may take the form of […] and aesthetic disposition as a universally valid principle [that] takes the bourgeois denial of the social world to its limit.”33 Bourdieu explains that while having an aesthetic disposition, or an open capacity to be moved by art,

33 Bourdieu, *Distinction*, 5.
necessarily appears immediate and natural (or disinterested, as Kant would put it), such a disposition is both learned (either through the “inherited cultural capital” of class “inculcation” or through “education capital”) and conditioned by a certain “life of ease” that “tends to induce an active distance from necessity.” The fact that aesthetics as such appears natural and immediate even while it is practiced and learned reproduces class distinctions. It reinforces the idea that those people who cannot escape need are inferior, while also rendering invisible the material relations that enable certain people to escape need and gain access to cultural institutions of so-called legitimate taste.

Bourdieu’s sharp critique of Kantian aesthetics here describes (and challenges) a theory of aesthetics from above. My project insists on a theory of aesthetics also from below. An aesthetic disposition from below would still treat aesthetics as a cultivated practice by which one becomes open to the capacity to be moved by art. It would treat aesthetics, in other words, not as a natural disposition as Kant posits, but a learned disposition as Bourdieu posits. This notion of aesthetics would also be sensitive, however, to the way that art’s organization of the sensible may serve to generate biopolitical power from below, rather than merely reproduce capitalist, patriarchal, white-supremacist class interests. Positing an aesthetic disposition from below allows us to consider the way that art may serve as a needed source of vital sustenance at the level of the senses—which is to say, both the level of the somatic body and the level of the cognitive-imaginative mind. My project understands an aesthetics from above and an aesthetics from below as co-existing. As such, it treats art

Bourdieu, 5. See also the introduction and chapter 1 of Distinction.
institutions as both mechanisms of class reproduction and armatures for repetition that may occasion the cultivation of an aesthetic disposition from below.

**Chapters**

*An Aesthetic Disposition* focuses on the artwork of US-based artists Mika Rottenberg, Roni Horn, and Simone Leigh. I present these artists as case studies for a feminist theory of art as social reproduction. I have chosen them for their shared historical context (having each exhibited new works over the past five years), their varied artistic approaches (spanning video art, minimalist sculpture, and social practice art), and their accepted institutional status as working within the terrain of identity politics. My project seeks, at the same time, to read these artists’ works against the grain of popular feminist political framings that associate the category of feminist art with the representation of minoritized identities. Centering art’s performative capacity to participate in social reproduction shifts the emphasis of “feminist art” from critique and representation to prefiguration and rejuvenation.

I build my argument across three chapters, each focusing on a single artist. In the first chapter, “Affective Realism,” I take up the video art of Mika Rottenberg (as exhibited in her 2019 touring retrospective *Easypieces*). Here I argue against the most prominent theory of art and politics in critical theory today: the idea that art should offer insight into political economic structures (an idea that Fredric Jameson has famously referred to as “cognitive mapping”). I contend that Rottenberg’s art combines an irreducible connection between the reality of gendered labor in the global factory on the one hand, and the western so-called crisis in care on the other, in a way that expands the concept of cognitive mapping beyond the emphasis on the “cognitive” toward a kind of affective realism. In the second chapter,
“This Work was Needed,” I feature Roni Horn’s minimalist glass sculptures (shown at her New York gallery Hauser and Wirth in 2017) to show how an aesthetic disposition toward art provides resources for somatic grounding within what feminist, queer, and marxist cultural theorists have all identified as a growing endemic of depression and mania in the US and UK neoliberal work society. Minimalist sculpture becomes a limit case for testing the argument made in my first chapter, namely that art’s non-narrative affective features do necessary political work in late capitalism. This chapter works with the following chapter on Leigh’s art to present two developed pictures of the way that art participates in the utopian or prefigural work of building life-sustaining worlds. While chapter two thinks about social reproduction at primarily the level of somatic practices of revitalization (and utopian imaginaries), chapter three moves primarily to the level of social institutions of care (and utopian imaginaries). In this final chapter, “Wanting More,” I consider Simone Leigh’s social practice artwork The Waiting Room (exhibited at the New Museum in 2016). I highlight the way that Leigh’s work refuses the common tendency to narrate political progress through an agenda of inclusion, diversity, and institutionalized intersectionality—an agenda that feminist theorists have influentially identified as also common in feminist theory and feminist art history. Leigh opts instead to challenge the politics of inclusion by redistributing funds toward insurgent care networks in such a way that positions herself both within and against the museum.

Taken together, my chapters strive to demonstrate the relevance of turning to works of art as objects that can themselves theorize advanced problems in feminist and critical theory. In doing so, I draw out a fresh set of utopian feminist political practices and
materialist feminist political imaginaries. *An Aesthetic Disposition* thus seeks to provide an important opening for reconsidering what we see as feminist about art by reciprocally bringing a theory of aesthetics into feminist theory and contemporary debates of feminist theory into Marxist approaches to art.
Affective Mapping

My inquiry into the politics of contemporary art starts with a commonly held approach in critical and feminist theory, namely that political art should do the work of counter-hegemonic representation. This idea can be interpreted in several ways. From a Marxist perspective, political art is tasked with offering a less mystified representation of the total system of capitalist relations—a system that we only ever get a fragmented impression of through lived perception or a distorted narrative of through dominant ideologies. From a conventional feminist perspective, political art is tasked with lending social representation to underrepresented identity groups, both through visual representations and by increased access to arts institutions (I return to this last premise in my final chapter). In both cases, the role of art becomes that of critique: the visual becomes synonymous with a semiotic system of cognitive meaning that, it is hoped, counter-balances dominant social systems of meaning.

My effort in this chapter is to offer an alternative approach to the politics of art by foregrounding the sensible or affective features at play in a number of complex and intriguing works of video art. These works present both representations of the global economic system and the racialized-gendered subjects at the heart of this system (combining a Marxist and feminist approach to representation), and also refuse the logocentric, ocularcentric, didactic clarity of representation-based critique. To explore other ways of
approaching the politics of contemporary art than merely representation or critique, I turn to
the artwork of Mika Rottenberg.

Representations of the Real

In 2015, the influential Nigerian curator Okwui Enwezor organized a number of
artworks for the 56th Venice Biennale.\textsuperscript{35} Featuring a live reading of Marx’s \textit{Capital} in its
central pavilion, this biennial was themed around the political-economic question of what
Enwezor called “All the World’s Futures.” One of the works commissioned for this biennial
was Mika Rottenberg’s 22-minute looped video piece \textit{NoNoseKnows}.\textsuperscript{36} On brand with the rest
of her work, \textit{NoNoseKnows} presents a representation of the gender-based global division of
labor. It does so, moreover, in an aesthetic style that Rottenberg herself has described as
“social surrealism.” In this chapter I ask, what does Rottenberg’s work offer by way of a
representation of the whole world (or global economic system), as Enwezor’s title prompts
us to consider? What does this representation do, politically? And how might her aesthetic of
social surrealism contribute to this political function? Through this inquiry I will consider as
well what Rottenberg’s art shows us more broadly about the politics of contemporary art in
late capitalism.

\textsuperscript{35} Enwezor died in 2019 at the age of 55. He was widely celebrated for his curatorial efforts to
decenter European and American art within major contemporary art institutions and exhibits.
\textsuperscript{36} A highlight of the biennial, \textit{NoNoseKnows} went on to travel internationally before arriving in the US
for the first time in 2017. After the 2015 Venice Biennale, \textit{NoNoseKnows} traveled to the Sishang Art
Museum in Beijing, then to the Yokohama Museum of Art in Japan, to the 2016 Glasgow
International, and to the Palais de Tokyo in Paris before being shown in 2017 in the newly acquired
Metropolitan Museum of Art contemporary art annex, the Met Breuer located in the old Whitney
Museum building. This is where I saw the piece for the first time, inspiring my returned interest in
Rottenberg’s art after following her studio-based works in the early 2000’s.
In response to these questions I suggest that Rottenberg’s work offers what I call an aesthetics of “affective mapping.” Like Fredric Jameson’s important concept of “cognitive mapping” (a term I will define momentarily and develop more fully later), Rottenberg’s work raises consciousness about our global system of political-economic relations. In a Marxist analytic, we might say that her art offers a representation of the economic “base” or the “real,” which can never be accessed directly. Rottenberg’s art “maps” the gendered logic of cheap labor that runs across neoliberal modes of work from global manufacturing to entrepreneurship. I replace the word “cognitive” in Jameson’s term with “affective,” however, to highlight two important elements of Rottenberg’s art. First, Rottenberg represents the gendered logic of neoliberalism through a primarily sensible (rather than primarily cerebral or didactic) register. Second, her work also speaks to the role of—and more specifically, the deficit in—reproductive resources within our current context of the so-called “crisis in care.” I associate the term affective with this structural deficit of reproductive resources in order to draw out the sensible dimension by which structural conditions may be felt at the level of the body. In other words, her work maps the gendered logic of neoliberalism through an affective register that resonates specifically in our late capitalist moment of the crisis in care.

37 My use of the term “affective mapping” should be read as an intervention into Jameson’s term “cognitive mapping.” I intend no overlap with Johnathan Flatley’s 2008 text of literary criticism titled Affective Mapping: Melancholia and the Politics of Modernism, in which Flatley tracks a melancholic affect within works of modern literature and argues for the importance of loss as a mode of reconnecting with world.

38 I use the Marxist term “base” to refer to the productive forces and relations of production. The base, which makes up the “real” infrastructure of society, can never be accessed in its totality. Ideology is the representation of the real (or base) that we have access to as “reality.”
Below I will explain the gendered logic of neoliberalism, the crisis in care, and the term affect more fully after first discussing Rottenberg’s art. For the sake of clarity, however, let me now briefly establish what I mean by cognitive mapping.

The idea of cognitive mapping refers to our capacity to understand how our experience fits within larger material structures. Cognitive mapping occupies a central space in Jameson’s work because, as he explains, our epistemological-aesthetic ability to locate ourselves within the total system has become severely impaired in global capitalism. Those factors that contribute to our daily experience have become so spatially dispersed, so technocratically perverse, and so historically obscure that we cannot grasp them through phenomenological perception. A representation of our relationship to the real is needed that would serve as an aid to help us reinsert the richness of individual lived experience back into the totality of our global world system—a system to which our individual experience is inextricably bound.³⁹ Like ideology, an aesthetics of cognitive mapping would merely offer us a representation of our imaginary relationship to the real.⁴⁰ The political hope is that we might arrive at a representation that provides a more total picture than the reified image of commodity circulation upon which ideologies of nationalistic and individualistic autonomy have been built. Cognitive mapping functions in this way as a “new realism”⁴¹—which is to

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³⁹ I find the following explanation, written by Michael Hardt and Kathi Weeks in the introduction to The Jameson Reader, particularly succinct: “How can we do justice to both the phenomenological richness of individual existence and the immensity and complexity of the global world system to which life is bound?” (22).

⁴⁰ Jameson, Postmodernism, 51-53.

⁴¹ See Jameson’s call for a “new realism” in his conclusion to the Aesthetics and Politics reader (212).
say, a representational form empowered with the epistemological force of conveying the real such that it might contend against dominant ideologies of fragmentation and autonomy.

And here Jameson is clear, the goal of cognitive mapping is not to accurately represent the real so much as to improve our capacity to act. How, after all, are we to know how to act if we don’t first understand the complexity of our situation? And further, how are we to understand our situation when the system of global production and the legacy of colonialist exploitation (which export-led production is built upon) both thoroughly extend beyond the spacial and temporal limits of individual perception? For Jameson and those who follow, art’s most pressing political role in late capitalism is to perform this pedagogic task. As Alberto Toscano and Jeff Kinkle for example confirm in their recent book *Cartographies of the Absolute*, an aesthetics of cognitive mapping “would not merely be didactic or pedagogical,” but “would of necessity also be didactic or pedagogical, recasting what political teaching, instruction, or even propaganda might mean in our historical moment.”

The aspiration contained within an aesthetics of cognitive mapping is thus the hope that art might train us to think and feel more critically—which is to say, beyond individual perception—in order that we might more effectively politically act.

Rottenberg’s art flirts with an aesthetic of cognitive mapping by offering a representation of the geographically disparate yet interconnected global assembly line. Through editing and documentery-like international filming, the videos suture seemingly

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42 Jameson directly states as much when he writes in *Postmodernism* that “the pedagogical function of a work of art” is an “inescapable parameter of any conceivable Marxist aesthetic” at our historical juncture (50 -51).

disparate locations and activities within an international division of labor. Yet they do so in a way that is neither “didactic” nor even intelligibly narrative. The work is fantastic, haptic, and disorienting. The art foregrounds an affective dimension that interrupts the narrative intelligibility typically associated with logocentric or ocularcentric terms like “cognitive” and “map.” In this way, Rottenberg’s work recasts what we might understand as the politics not only of contemporary art, but also the very concept of cognitive mapping that is so central within Marxist approaches to aesthetics. Cognitive mapping as such not only lends great insight into the political meaning and function of Rottenberg’s art, Rottenberg’s art also lends great insight into the concept and experience of cognitive mapping.

In what follows I argue that Rottenberg’s art heightens our ability to critically feel something about the structural political-economic predicament we are in. In particular, the works link a felt sense of bodily precarity to a mapped logic of gendered labor. The emphasis that I place here on affect and critical feeling (in place of cognition and didactic meaning) does not contradict the political aims of cognitive mapping. Rather, it adds to how we might approach the project of cognitive mapping, and even the feminist framework of standpoint epistemology. In cognitive mapping and standpoint epistemology, our feelings are enhanced by a critical understanding of structure; the objective is to critically understand the structures that shape our feelings. Here, our understanding of structure is enhanced through critical feeling (and specifically in Rottenberg’s art, the felt need for sensuous rejuvenation). Art could be understood as specializing in this affective maneuver. Thus rather than pose affect as an analytic that corrects or replaces structuralist thinking (as many of the early proponents

44 For a definition of “haptic,” see footnote 76 below.
of affect theory in cultural studies have), I am arguing for an expanded notion of how we might recognize art’s critical, “pedagogic” role in late capitalism in order to bring affect and structure more dynamically into balance.

My attention will focus below primarily on Rottenberg’s three most recent videos—*NoNoseKnows* (2015, 21 mins.), *Cosmic Generator* (2017, 26 mins.), and *Spaghetti Blockchain* (2019, 19 mins.) I examine what Rottenberg’s art teaches us about the reality of our global political-economic situation. I do so moreover through close attention to the works’ aesthetic registers, exploring not only what the works mean, but also what they do. To best apprehend what Rottenberg’s artworks both mean and do, a Marxist feminist approach is needed.

**Women’s Work**

Mika Rottenberg (b. 1976) is a New York-based Argentine-Israeli video artist who has been exhibiting works publicly since completing her MFA from Columbia University in 2004. With her first major exhibit at the 2008 Whitney Biennial, Rottenberg has for over a

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45 See for example Brian Massumi’s often cited “Autonomy of Affect” where he writes: “There seems to be a growing feeling within media and literary and art theory that affect is central to an understanding of our information- and image-based late-capitalist culture, in which so-called master narratives are perceived to have foundered. […] The problem is that there is no cultural-theoretical vocabulary specific to affect. Our entire vocabulary has derived from theories of signification that are still wedded to structure even across irreconcilable differences (the divorce proceedings of poststructural terminable or interminable?). In the absence of an asignifying philosophy of affect, it is all too easy for received psychological categories to slip back in, undoing the considerable deconstructive work that has been effectively carried out by poststructuralism” (88). It is for this reason that he writes, “[a]pproaches to the image in its relation to language are incomplete if they operate only on the semantic or semiotic level,” and that, “[m]uch could be gained by integrating the dimension of intensity into cultural theory” (87). For a more recent text that posits a foundational opposition between affect and structure see Eugenie Brinkema’s *The Forms of Affects*.

46 While Rottenberg is standardly described as a New York-based Argentine-Israeli artist, her own self-description tells a story of war-driven migration and transnational non-identification. As she
A decade created space in the artworld in which viewers may reckon with the absurdity of feminized labor. This theme of women’s work is evident in the content of Rottenberg’s art at both diegetic (or representational) and non-diegetic (or indexical) levels.

At the diegetic level of narrative content, Rottenberg’s art presents imaginative representations of women in assembly-line production. The objects produced in these videos are often nonsensical and far less important to the narrative than the particularized attributes of the protagonists’ bodies from which labor power is extracted. In one video, for instance, the racially eroticized sweat of a Jamaican-born, Queens-based black female professional body builder (Heather Foster) is used to make tropical scented moist tissues as she drives a hot moving truck that doubles as the site of product assembly (Tropical Breeze, 2004). In another video, a body-positive 215 lb, 5’11” famously large-breasted cleavage-bearing white female wrestler and dominatrix-for-hire (Rock Rose) helps to muddle and mold the clipped red fingernails of an anonymous co-worker into maraschino cherries (Mary’s Cherries, 2004). In yet another, the allergy-induced tears of a Puerto Rican, Bronx-based size-activist, online explains it, her parents fled from Poland to Argentina during WWII. Rottenberg was born in Buenos Aires in 1976, but she soon moved with her family to Israel in the late 70s, amidst the “dirty war years” under Jorge Videla. Rottenberg lived in Israel until the late 90s, when she “fled” once again, this time to New York. Rottenberg indicates a neutral if not positive attitude toward her hybrid-identity, stating that “I’m still not sure exactly where I’m from...I’m comfortable not feeling any national identification with any country.” See Rottenberg, “Mika Rottenberg Interview: Social Surrealism.”

In the following descriptions, I try to stick as close as possible to the self-determined language that each performer uses on their own website or promotional material. The type of information offered for each performer varies here as a result. When a personal website is not available, I have turned to the language that is used on the performer’s wikipedia page (if applicable) and/or the descriptions published in catalogues of Rottenberg’s work. The 2011 catalogue Mika Rottenberg published by Gregory R. Miller & Co. is particularly helpful for the documented ephemera of performers’ websites and the inclusion of select interviews by Rottenberg herself with her hired collaborators.
writer, and semi-retired 600 lbs, 6’4” squasher for-hire (Raqui) are extracted to raise an endless stream of dough that is then packaged into individual units (*Dough*, 2005-6). And finally in another, the dextrous fingers of variously-aged Chinese women are employed to splice irritants into oysters and sort pearls in a pearl factory while trying not to fall asleep (*NoNoseKnows*, 2015). These activities are all just a fraction of what happens in each of the videos.

The last example of the way that women’s particularized bodies are put to work in Rottenberg’s art may sound more literal than fantastic to theorists of global production. As feminist theorist since the 1980s have noted, the logic of women’s so-called dexterity and docility has been at the heart of race-to-the-bottom international “development” from the 1960s onward. Rottenberg’s most recent works have indeed turned in a documentary-like direction as she has moved from sets that she builds in her studio in New York to on-site and on-the-job filming in locations of particular significance within the global production line. This can be seen in her 2015 artwork *NoNoseNose*. For this video, Rottenberg took footage at an actual pearl factory in China (the Zhejiang Angeperle Co Ltd factory in Zhuji

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48 I will go into this idea further below.
49 In a 2011 interview with Belgian art critic and museum director Ann Demeester, Rottenberg indicates that *Squeeze* (2010) was the first of her works to use “what you could call documentary material that is not shot or staged in the studio or within a constructed artificial film set” (16). This 20 minute video involves a mixture of studio footage and onsite filming. The documentary-like footage includes video of female Mexican migrant laborers (credited as “Martha and the Pick ‘N Clean Crew”) sorting lettuce on location at the Church Brothers Produce farm in Yuma, Arizona, and South Asian women (credited as “Mahesh Manohan and Workers”) processing rubber in the Boise Estate rain forest in Kerala, India. See the M-Museum Leuven and Nicole Klagsbrun Gallery Gregory R. Miller & Co. catalogue *Mika Rottenberg* for the above stated interview and production details for *Squeeze* (147, 184).
City), which she was granted access to by the factory manager. Rottenberg similarly traveled to international workplace locations for her 2017 *Cosmic Generator* (described further below). Here Rottenberg juxtaposes footage from a Chinese restaurant in the Mexico-California bordertown of Mexicali, with footage from the self-proported “world’s largest wholesale market of small commodities” in the international trade city of Yiwu, China.

These recent works incorporate a material trace of two of the most instrumental “free-export” or “free-trade” zones within the export-driven global economy—China and Mexico—regions that have been key in the development of a neoliberal political-economic strategy for shifting value from poor nations and poor people to multinational corporations based in wealthier countries. Herein lies the second or non-diegetic way in which

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50 Rottenberg admits that this was the first, and so far only, time in which she did not know with certainty whether the women she was filming fully consented to the filming. She reflects candidly on the unresolved ethical questions this raises in the New Museum *Easypieces* catalogue: “The boss agreed to the filming but I didn’t know if the workers all did. I used a translator to tell them a bit about it and to say that if anyone didn’t want to be filmed, they wouldn’t be. It is possible that their boss said that they had to be filmed, although I had no reason to think that; it is more likely that they simply didn’t ask. An ethical question comes up for me in situations like these, but in this case, I decided to do it. I don’t take for granted that it’s okay. Maybe it’s for viewers to judge. I do think there’s power in visibility and that there’s something beautiful in the way the workers sort the pearls, their skills and speed. At the same time, I see the women as confined by their work, with their bodies treated as machines. I really wanted to pay respect to the work they do by filming it with the best cinematic tools, showing the beauty and cruelty of it all. I was exploiting them too, in a way, to generate my own cultural capital, though I do think I ultimately gave the participants agency” (29-30).

51 [https://www.yiwuen.com/yiwu-market?gclid=EAIaIQobChMIkfRks7-5QIVBZSzCh0TAw7-EAAYASAAEgKHdPD_BwE](https://www.yiwuen.com/yiwu-market?gclid=EAIaIQobChMIkfRks7-5QIVBZSzCh0TAw7-EAAYASAAEgKHdPD_BwE)

52 As Salzinger, Frobel et al (1980), and Fuentes and Ehrenreich (1983) have reported, the maquiladora model in Mexico was established in the 1960s in “self conscious imitation of the export processing plants then established in East Asia (Salzinger, 11). See also Weber, “China and Neoliberalism: Moving Beyone the China Is/Is Not Neoliberal Dichotomy” for an account of the development of neoliberalism in China. Our current environmental precarity and situation of considerable wealth disparity (experienced both internationally and within the US domestic economy) may be directly linked to the foreign investment of US finance money into the establishment of export-led factories in China and Mexico, amongst other decolonized nations over the past several decades (for example, export-led factories and agricultural industries in the Philippines, Malaysia,
Rottenberg’s art addresses the topic of women’s labor at the level of content, through the geopolitical connotations of the locations in which she films.

It is worth noting that despite this recent move toward international on-site filming, Rottenberg’s reputation has largely been built on the earned acclaim of her other-worldly sets. Working with performers such as Foster and Raqui, who are both based in NYC, has allowed Rottenberg to literally design her sets around the dimensions and aesthetics of her collaborators. These artificial settings add a sculptural dimension to Rottenberg’s work, as she frequently transports parts of the set into the gallery space when her videos are exhibited. But even here, in videos filmed entirely within artificially constructed sets, Rottenberg’s art has always included a literal or documentary component. Since her earliest works *Mary’s Cherries*, *Tropical Breeze*, and *Dough*, Rottenberg regularly hires non-actors (primarily cis women) who already in some way sell an aspect of their particularized and feminized bodies for profit. By reaching out to these women (who she finds on the internet) during the planning process, Rottenberg incorporates the activity of negotiating labor

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South Korea, Singapore, Mexico, Sri Lanka, Thailand, the Caribbean, Africa, and parts of China. The labor-intensive industries located in these export-led free trade zones are primarily the so-called light-industries of non-subsistence agriculture, textiles, electronics, and toy manufacturing. Factory production in the urban areas of the above nations may also be supported by an informal sector in more rural areas, where women often work from home to process food or make handicrafts and small art objects, including jewelry and other luxury and cheap goods. Finally, sex work and care work have also become major industries in these countries—services that are sometimes offered domestically and sometimes treated also as an exportable good. (See section below on the export of care work).
arrangements and the performers self-determined visibility into the works.\textsuperscript{53} Once again we find the non-diegetic process of art-making added to the diegetic representations of women’s labor in the content of Rottenberg’s art.

The theme of gendered labor is thus addressed in several rich ways. The videos present and document women putting their bodies to work. They do so, moreover, across different types of neoliberal labor, from gendered manufacturing to gendered entrepreneurship. The videos document the hiring of women who have opted to navigate late capitalist options for so-called ‘earning a living’ by extracting value from their self-employed, socially-particularized bodies.\textsuperscript{54} The videos also document the neoliberal logic of global manufacturing, which privatizes surplus value within multinational corporations by naturalizing women as cheap labor within the global factory. We are thus presented with a diegetic representation of women working in a factory setting that speaks to the logic of neoliberal extraction in the global south, at the same time that we are watching a non-diegetic entrepreneurial or human capital\textsuperscript{55} strategy for gendered service work that

\textsuperscript{53} In an interview with art historian and critic Julia Bryan-Wilson, Rottenberg confirms that “[i]n the older work, it was very much a business transaction and framed as a discussion of empowerment and ownership of one’s body.” See Rottenberg’s New Museum \textit{Easypieces} catalogue, 29.

\textsuperscript{54} Here we find what Wendy Brown calls the “model neoliberal citizen”—one who, out of coercion, “strategizes for her or himself among various social, political, and economic options…” See “Neoliberalism and the End of Liberal Democracy,” 43.

\textsuperscript{55} By human capital I mean a model of historical subjectivity associated with neoliberalism that is characterized by the need to treat oneself as an investment. Whereas in industrial capitalism, a person could bring their labor to market and sell their time for a set period, returning afterward to the status of a citizen, in late capitalism the human has been fully subsumed (real subsumption rather than formal subsumption) and one’s whole sense of self at every moment must be cultivated toward appreciating (rather than depreciating) value. The worker themselves becomes a kind of fixed capital. See Feher, “Self-Appreciation; or, The Aspirations of Human Capital,” and Read, “A Genealogy of Homo-Economicus.”
epitomizes precarity not isolated to, but characteristic of, neoliberalism in the global north.\textsuperscript{56} I will explain all of this in more detail shortly. For now it is enough to say that Rottenberg’s art gives us a representation of the gendered international division of labor that indexes gendered manufacturing as the internal backdrop to (gendered) entrepreneurial precarity more broadly.\textsuperscript{57}

The oeuvre that results is equal parts intimate, piercing, and bizarre. Rottenberg’s videos stylistically operate in a register that she has described as “social surrealism”\textsuperscript{58}—a term that plays off the modern art categories of surrealism and social realism. Conventionally, social realist art employs a sober, unromantic style of resemblance-based representation to depict the lifestyles and interests of the working class in order to reject the supremacy of the elite whose lifestyles and interests have historically dominated the imagery of art. Rottenberg’s social surrealism similarly depicts the activities of working people, but does so through fantastic, non-sensical, and sometimes even magical scenarios of work. Instead of the earth-tone colors associated with realism, Rottenberg uses vibrant color, fleshy texture, and acute, haptic sound. Her work likewise shares certain characteristics with surrealism while meaningfully departing from others. Where surrealists draw on the juxtaposition of random images made available through the unconscious in dreams or chance, Rottenberg too relies on juxtaposition as a formal technique and intuition as a

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\textsuperscript{56} See for example Ong’s \textit{Neoliberalism as Exception} and Freeman’s \textit{Entrepreneurial Selves} for two theoretically piercing and ethnographically rich accounts of aspirational, middle-class neoliberalism in South East Asia and the Caribbean respectively.\textsuperscript{56}

\textsuperscript{57} I will explain what I mean by “(gendered) precarity” below when discussing the idea of a “vanishing mediator” in the subsection “Neoliberalism’s Dual Logic of Gendered Labor”\textsuperscript{57}

\textsuperscript{58} Rottenberg, “Mika Rottenberg Interview: Social Surrealism.” \url{https://vimeo.com/232314479}
method. But unlike surrealism, the randomness of Rottenberg’s images are rooted in what she calls the real. “I’m always interested in the real and actually going into the world,” she explains, “not [in an] attempt to make my work more realistic” so much as “to show that reality is as bizarre as my own fiction.” Like Marx and Marxist theorists who follow, the real for Rottenberg can be found in the structural relations of production that underpin our lives. These are relations that are spatially disconnected yet causally intertwined in such a way that, as Rottenberg puts it, “you press a button here and something happens in another part of the world.” The sheer normalcy of this physically disjointed proximity makes reality itself surreal.

Rottenberg’s art creates a gestalt sense of narrative continuity across distant locations, unrelated activities, and physically disconnected parts of her sets. She does so through the “movie magic” of editing, as she puts it. This use of juxtaposition resembles the formal technique used in documentary film to issue a pedagogic or didactic message about the harms of capitalism. One can imagine, for example, a film that links scenes of inhumane production in one part of the world with scenes of unassuming capitalist consumption in another. By placing such scenes next to each other within the temporally

59 Rottenberg, Mika Rottenberg, 16. One might notice that within both a Lacanian and Marxist framework, the “real” and “reality” are two different things. If we turn to Althusser, whose work combines Lacan and Marx for example, we could understand reality as our imaginary sense of the materially real, which is to say ideology. Because Rottenberg is not intending to use these terms technically when thinking through her work, I use context clues to interpret her use of “reality” here to be functionally synonymous with the material real.


62 A relevant example that comes to mind is the 2005 documentary about the production and consumption of Mardi Gras beads, titled Mardi Gras: Made in China. Here juxtaposition is directly employed toward didactic and pedagogic ends, to place the casual consumption of Mardis Gras
unfolding narrative of a film, the editing technique of juxtaposition creates a conceptual map. This allows the viewer to integrate their simulated autonomy and consumption of apparently ready-made goods into the larger system of exploitative relations that go into making such goods. Rottenberg employs the technique of juxtaposition to suture together an impossible view of the total system of global production.

But rather than “render [the viewer’s] place in a capitalist world-system intelligible” by “depicting social space and class relations”—as Toscano and Kinkle explain cognitive mapping is supposed to do—Rottenberg’s videos depicts social space in a way that heightens disorientation. The time-based unfolding of the video medium allows Rottenberg to stitch a felt sense of continuity even in cases where continuity produces nonsense. An instance of this can be seen in NoNoseKnows when Rottenberg juxtaposes footage of the young woman sorting pearls with her feet in a bucket in a Chinese factory, with footage of feet sticking up from a hole in the floor in an office space somewhere where the white white-collar female worker sits at a desk sneezing plates of noodles and spaghetti into beads in narrative continuity with the tedious and dangerous mass production of the beads in largely female-employed factories in China. One could also think of the more recent documentary Complicit (2017) that documents the physical harm done to Chinese migrant workers who travel from rural China to Chinese urban centers in order to work in factories and send money back to their families. The use of juxtaposition between production and consumption is less active in this film, however the juxtaposition could be said to operate across the forth wall, as the product that the workers are becoming sick processing are iPhones—a popular phone that is likely owned by many in the audience at screenings such as the Human Rights Watch Film Festival in NYC, where I encountered the documentary. Hence the title “complicit” speaks to an inferred juxtaposition and contrast between the experience of the people represented in the film and the viewing audience; where the film doesn’t map the totality of global capitalism diegetically in the film’s content, it does performatively in the film’s circulation.

63 Toscano and Kinkle, Cartographies of the Absolute, 21.
existence. This mapping of social relations makes little sense, and yet proximity is successfully sutured through the continuity of the feet which are cut-off from one frame only to emerge upside-down in the next. The continuity that is created confers no didactic message. The spacial sutures do not provide the cognitive clarity of a map. Yet something quite real about the reality of late capitalism is nonetheless suggested.

I will establish what that something is by moving chronologically through Rottenberg’s three most recent videos: NoNoseKnows (2015, 21 mins.), Cosmic Generator (2017, 26 mins.), and Spaghetti Blockchain (2019, 19 mins.) These works were on display together for the first time in 2019 at Rottenberg’s New Museum retrospective Easypieces, curated by Margot Norton. Rottenberg chose this title, Norton explains, to reference Richard Feyman’s 1994 book *Six Easy Pieces*. In this book Feyman sets out to explain the basic principles of physics in accessible language. As Norton puts it, Rottenberg too is interested in the ways we might “explain things that are almost inexplainable.” Without intending it, Norton’s curatorial framing here echos the Marxist concern with cognitive mapping. For Jameson and those who follow, an aesthetics of cognitive mapping is needed because it is so difficult if not impossible to represent the economic base of late capitalism. The critical artist on this account must indeed develop new methods for explaining things that are nearly inexplainable. As such, I take Rottenberg’s art as a series of studies in the question of

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65 The totality of late capitalism cannot be represented because it is beyond individual perception, and not reducible to an isolatable cause.
representing the material-real. I ask what it means for the politics of art in our historical moment that her work creates a sense of disorientation rather than the cognitive orientation of a map. Turning in detail to the art will clarify what is at stake.

- NoNoseKnows -

Two main activities can be seen in NoNoseKnows. In a set filmed within Rottenberg’s New York studio, the hired 6’3” fetish performer Bunny Glamazon is seen wearing a grey blazer and matching trousers sitting at an office desk. She arrives at this office by riding a scooter on a corporate campus to her building and walking through labyrinthian, low-ceilinged hallways with half-painted walls that seem to indicate the decentralized administration of bureaucracy. The setting inside Bunny’s office is small and dingey. Her space is mostly filled by a desk that is covered in piled-up disposable plates of old spaghetti and lo mein. Plastic-covered bundles of identical, grocery-store-esque flower arrangements line wooden shelves along the wall to Bunny’s left. One bundle of flowers is inserted into a vertical wooden stand that, with the help of a small metal fan, stands at the height of Bunny’s eyes and nose, exposing her directly to the irritant of pollen. The character sniffs and tears (in a manner similar to Raqui in Dough), wiping her nose until eventually her nose grows red and long and she sneezes several new, already old looking plates of noodles onto the desk. Outside of her office, large bubbles sometimes filled with fog oscillate and waver.

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66 For Jameson, it is possible to interpret all late capitalist artworks and cultural objects as attempts to understand and represent our global historical-economic situation. As he writes in The Geopolitical Aesthetic, “all thinking today is also, whatever else it is, an attempt to think the world system as such” (4).

67 In a video interview produced by the Louisiana Museum of Modern Art, Rottenberg reveals that the inclusion of noodles is meant to make reference both to China, where she filmed for this video.
undisturbed in the empty halls. Once enough plates of noodles are produced, the worker covers the flowers, leaves the office, walks back through the hallways, and gets on her scooter to leave work. The video footage of Bunny on this tiny scooter weaving along the paths of a corporate campus only loops back into her arriving at work, ultimately depicting a chiasma of off-work time that bleeds into back-to-work time.

Elsewhere, in the same video, a number of Chinese women that are mostly older sit at a long table bundled in coats. They use razor blades and glass slides (of the sort one would use with a microscope) to cut a mucusy strip of some fleshy substance into smaller units. This is an irritant that other women at the table then insert into live, pried open oyster shells with the help of long, thin crochet-like needles. Here Rottenberg has filmed actual women at work in the major freshwater pearl cultivation city of Zhuji. The footage captures the women doing their real job, save one young woman who sits among them, bundled in her coat, rotating the wooden lever of a pulley system. Amidst a collective of women with necks caved downward into their individual work, this young woman looks up into a hole in the ceiling to monitor the pulley. By abutting this shot with one of the office space in which Bunny sits, we are led to believe that the wooden pulley provides the energy that motors the fan atop the wooden flower stand at Bunny’s desk. In another room that is linked by color pallet to the first oyster processing scene, a single older woman uses a large blade to force

and the first record of noodles are accredited, and Italy, where the artwork would be premiered. She also likens her protagonist’s extended nose to the Italian cultural figure of Pinocchio, though she is not invested in these meanings being part of the public understanding of the work. It is more important to her that the visual decisions she makes during the creation process connect intuitively to her. See Rottenberg, “Mika Rottenberg Interview: Social Surrealism.” https://vimeo.com/232314479
open a mound of oysters and retrieve the cultured pearls. And in a final scene of pearl production, mostly young Chinese women sit bundled in coats covered by matching white lab jackets, quickly tapping their fingers across piles of pearls to sort out any that may be imperfect. A single woman sits at her own table on the assembly floor, napping with her head in her arms. The video pans down to show her feet submerged in a bucket of pearls. The camera then pans up to show the feet sticking up out of a bucket of pearls, toes wiggling and soles exposed toward the ceiling, in the front of Bunny’s desk.

There is no clear narrative or concrete causal relation that can be drawn from these spacial weavings. No “nose” knows what any of this is supposed to mean. The decentralized bureaucracy of derivative trading within international production can feel quite similar. Yet, Rottenberg’s work doesn’t stop at confusion. Several bits of meaningful information can be derived by merely describing the video’s imagery. First, a sense of proximity is issued through the editing of the video that gives the viewer an impression that the group of women working in China are a) adjacent to, and b) beneath the white-collar worker who takes personal/professional/individual pride in her work. We see here an image of the so-called global south region of China providing the subaltern material resources which maintain the middle-class lifestyle-aspirations of white-collar work. Two of the three scenes of pearl production in NoNoseKnows even look as if they are taking place underground, within a cold cool-blue cave setting. The Chinese factory is thus represented as the disavowed manufacturing that makes possible fantasies and realities of professional subjecthood. In this

68 As Lukács has persuasively argued in his 1938 debate over aesthetics and politics with Bloch, merely representing the disorientation of global production falls short of the pedagogic task of revealing capitalism’s underlying structure. See Aesthetics and Politics.
way, the work maps an integrated dual-logic of neoliberalism: On the one hand, neoliberal political-economic practices serve to accumulate wealth and power in multinational corporations by structurally hiring a labor force of interchangeable (i.e. replaceable), low-wage women workers for tedious manufacturing jobs, while on the other hand, neoliberal cultural ideologies govern aspirational subjects by isolating them and normalizing the imperative that one’s whole (supposedly unique) self must be cultivated in the name of value extraction even when the product or service being produced seems entirely unrelated.

This brings me to the second nexus of meaning delivered by the work. When watching the video, one viscerally feels the fact that labor power is being strenuously extracted from the body in both instances of labor, though in different ways. In the actual pearl factory, the body is worn down by long hours of sitting, arching one’s neck, straining the eyes, bending and extending the fingers thousands of times per day, and flexing the hands to pry open oysters. In the fantasy space of white-collar work—depicted here as a reality that is far less glamorous than one might hope to imagine—the body is strained by capitalizing on the personalized skill of the worker who sneezes noodles.\(^6\) This perhaps once-random specialty is rendered productive by mechanizing it day after day. Her sneezes are induced and controlled through the mechanic exposure to pollen. As a result, the white-collar worker’s nose appears already irritated upon arrival. The integrity of her sinus system is directly

\(^6\) See Mills, *White Collar* for a foundational description of the difference between manual labor and the then-new sector of white-collar work. Mills suggests that where manual labor primarily extracts labor power from the physical body, the “handling” of people and information involved in white-collar work extracts labor from the heart and mind. He goes on to associate this kind of labor with what he calls “the personality market,” explaining that one’s whole personality must be cultivated toward work for the labor of handling. Hochschild draws on Mills’ argument to build her landmark notion of “emotional labor,” developed in *The Managed Heart.*
jeopardized in the name of surplus value extraction. Yet she returns faithfully each day, even as the building appears otherwise vacant.

It seems important that the footage of factory work in this video documents reality, while the image of white-collar work is completely contrived. Unlike dominant representations of white-collar work that depict it as either comically mundane or respectable, Rottenberg offers an image that is both fantastic and actively bleak. The professional worker works alone. Her existence is a loop of leaving, arriving, and sitting by herself in her office. She wears a suit to work, but her task is fairly abject. And even her presentable dress and stylized hair go unrecognized in the absence of co-workers, surrounded as she is only by commodified plates of food. As the rosacea of her nose confirms, her job is essentially a feat in enduring the fact that work makes her sick. This daily, normalized exposure to irritants is a condition that is all too real for most women in the global factory.\(^7\) Rottenberg estranges our vision of white-collar professionalism and forces us to confront the reality of toxic capitalism. She does so by infusing the respectable sector of white collar work with the degrading conditions of real work that so-called dream jobs disavow. As such, Rottenberg’s work shatters the fantasy that neoliberal professionalism is separate from gendered global manufacturing in two ways: First by destroying the idea of national and individual autonomy, and second by reminding us that even middle class jobs which dangle the promise of stability and social intelligibility, suck the body’s vital resources dry for someone else’s profit.

\(^{7}\) See Funari’s *Maquilapolis*, and White and Zhang’s *Complicit*, for two documentaries that capture the impact of toxic exposure on workers in real time.
The second video I will consider, *Cosmic Generator*, similarly shatters the illusion of national and individual autonomy by interweaving scenes of work in China with scenes of work elsewhere, this time in the US-Mexico border-town of Mexicali. Mexicali is known to have a network of underground tunnels that run through the city. These tunnels are rumored to have been inhabited by Chinese immigrants upon migrating to the area to work on the railways at the turn of the 20th century. With this in mind, Rottenberg draws on the imagery of a tunnel to link the disparate locations of the film. In so doing she connects the empty, pre-service front-of-the-house of a Chinese restaurant in Mexico, to an intermediary space of “cosmic generation” (which I will describe momentarily), to a series of small indoor supply stores in China, and finally to a street vendor selling glimpses of perspective onto the whole operation along the border wall in Mexico. A gold waving-arm Lucky Cat on the counter in the Mexican Chinese restaurant links the locations further, as the video cuts to a wholesale room filled with Lucky Cats waving their arms, teeming around a woman who sits still behind a sales computer at her desk. As Rottenberg has noted, she thinks of the tunnel as a passage that runs through the world in the video, but not so much a passage for people as a passage for the movement of objects.  

Objects are indeed the star of this video. The gendered laborers who produce these objects are not represented this time (as they were in *No Nose Knows*), yet the plentiful display of cheap mass-produced goods still bring a shadow of these workers into the picture. The kind of work that is shown is strictly service work—specifically in the sectors of food and

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retail—and mostly service workers sitting around surrounded by objects at that. Once again, these industries are dominated by women in both reality and Rottenberg’s art. A Mexican waitress polishes silverware at the start of her shift in the Chinese restaurant, settling in to fix her hair and makeup once she is done. A number of Chinese women sit at desks in their small cubicles in the wholesale market, checking their phones, typing on their computers, napping with their heads on the desk, and leaning back in their chairs. The consistently mundane expression on their faces ignites a small flame of deadpan within these moments, as the workers are each completely engulfed in their own milieu of absurd kitsch. We are shown a delightful and dystopian mise en scene of glowing, buzzing, abounding, and chirping plastic goods. In one frame, a woman sits amongst hanging mounds of garland. In another, a woman is surrounded by inflatable toys. In another, a woman inhabits a forest of fake, twinkling Christmas trees. In another, a woman occupies a small room full of well ordered plastic fruit. In another, a woman sits amongst piles of clear sleeve-like bags. And in another, a woman is wrapped by three walls of blinking strands of lights.

Like all of Rottenberg’s videos, the viewer watches this video waiting for some event to occur that would indicate the movement of a plot. None does. The Mexican waitress lifts a round metal chaffing-dish lid off a mass-produced Chinese-stylized plate to reveal four pudgy identical white-haired white men in suits squirming on their backs like spring rolls on a garnish of lettuce. Later we see this man struggling on his chest to crawl through the tunnel. In another scene, the waitress lifts the lid to reveal three identical brown-bearded white men

72 Rottenberg notes that unlike NoNoseKnows, she established clear consent for this film. As she puts it, “I asked the women in the stores directly, so it wasn’t up to their boss. I gave them a couple days’ notice so they could prepare and dress up, and they were clearly excited.” Rottenberg, Easypieces, 30.
in taco costumes yawning and rubbing their eyes, laying again on a bed of lettuce. Once
more she lifts the lid, however this time to reveal the entry of a tunnel—a portal that she
peers into in a shot-reverse-shot sequence which both gives us access to a close-up of her
face, and allows us to peer through her eyes into the tunnel. We are made to enter the tunnel
through a tracking shot that moves us into the constructed passageway. Suddenly, we are
accompanied by the distinct sound of metal wheels on metal tracks, as if we are on an old
wooden rollercoaster gearing up for our first drop. We are in fact on our way to the
centralized hub of energy production that the title presumably refers to. The circular frame
of the underground passage turns into a circular image of multi-colored boiling water,
surrounded by the artificial after-effects of rotating, twinkling colored stars. This image
morphs through a sudden fade, into a close-up shot of a woman’s hands breaking jewel-tone
colored glass with a hammer. When the camera pulls back in another scene, we see a black
woman with a large afro, a white blazer, safety goggles, a glove on one hand, and a hammer
looking down into her work. She smashes colored lightbulbs on a table covered in confetti-
colored broken glass. Attached to her room, through an arched hole in the wall, we find a
break room in which the taco-man takes a nap on a plastic chair in the corner, having just
crawled out of the tunnel hole on the far wall in his room. We are placed back in the tunnel
and peer into the room from this opposite angle, getting a close-up view of the thick fleece,
lint-covered, black cargo-pocket sweatpants that this slim bearded man wears beneath his
taco top. A ceiling fan rotates, hums, and wobbles. A kitschy fountain in the center of the
room gives off the sound of running and dripping water. A trickle of the water is channeled
back through a PVC pipe that is rigged up to the fountain, running horizontally through the
hole in the wall that leads from the break room into the glass-breaking room. The garden hose that provides the water for the fountain is attached to this pipe; the water moves back through the PVC pipe into the room from which the hose feeds the water from a nearly-dry, popping dirty sink. The recycled drip of water is transported through the PVC pipe into a curly blue plastic tube that leads through a hole in the floor in the glass-breaker’s room, into the wholesale room in China where a woman sits amongst plastic bags. This woman packages the now aqua-colored water that comes out of the tube, tossing the half-full sleeve of packaged water into a cardboard box. Meanwhile, sitting amongst inflatable toys, another woman blows into a similar, yellow curly plastic tube that was fed through the hole with the blue one but appears hanging from the ceiling of her room. Her micro-gesture creates a sound that distinctly resembles the sound of inflating a pool toy. Based on the following shot, this air presumably supplies the air that makes the broken glass appear to boil—now we think, bubble—in a cosmic-confetti witch’s brew. The Mexican woman standing on the street with a vending cart waits calmly, aware of the value of her product, and offers those curious passer-bys a peek into the whole affair, once again by lifting a chaffing-lid that spurs a set of shot-reverse-shot facial close-ups.

Rather than interpret what this narratively disorienting video means—as a theory about commodity fetishism and what David Graeber has called “bullshit jobs” could apply but that is not the point I wish to make73—I want to emphasize what the sensible immersion of this video does. *Cosmic Generator* can be seen as a transition work that draws out

Rottenberg’s long-standing use of tactile color, texture, and sound toward her direct exploration of ASMR (autonomous sensory meridian response)\textsuperscript{74} in her next work. The cracking of glass on glass, the tapping blink of the LED strands of light, the various dings of the sales women’s cell phones, the metal-on-metal roll and pivot of the tunnel cart, the tinny ting of the chaffing lid being lifted, the rattle of a newly dried piece of silverware being dropped into the pile with the rest, the suction and click of a mascara brush being inserted back into its dispenser, the regular swish and wobble of the panel fan, and the dribble of the break-room fountain are all just a few of the acute sounds featured amongst the silence of the relatively large cast.\textsuperscript{75} This use of acute, isolated audio draws the viewers into an active enmeshment with the work, despite the fact that the work is barely narrative and relatively non-sensical.

One can see Rottenberg experimenting with haptic\textsuperscript{76} texture, sound, and color across her entire body of work from her earliest videos \textit{Dough} and \textit{Mary’s Cherries}. The now-popular

\textsuperscript{74} ASMR stands for “autonomous sensory meridian response.” It is a phrase that describes a reported tingling or “low-grade euphoria” that creates static-like sensation on the head and back of the neck, in response to audio triggers. As such, ASMR directly engages what I would call a haptic quality of sound. This experience is generally thought to be pleasurable, and has spurred an online community of people who identify with being particularly susceptible to having an ASMR experience, as well as popular “ASMRists” with channels of homemade videos on Youtube. These videos generally fall into what I would consider to be three categories: a recognized division between “intentional” (ASMRist-made) and “unintentional” (accidental or found) ASMR videos, and within the intentional category, two tendencies toward whisper videos or object-oriented videos. I will discuss the difference between these last two in the subsection on ASMR below. Notably, in the intentional videos a technique of binaural sound recording helps enhance the impact of haptic sound by simulating the acoustics of a three-dimensional environment.

\textsuperscript{75} No one speaks in this video save a brief moment when a Chinese sales woman answers her phone; this interruption only highlights the otherwise silent (and isolated) cast.

\textsuperscript{76} My use of the term “haptic” is drawn from continental philosophy to refer to the way that vision—and I would add sound—are felt synesthetically as touch. This framework for understanding the senses has several generative stakes. First, it moves away from the ocularcentrism of Cartesian
online video aesthetic and community of ASMR had not yet existed when Rottenberg started developing her own haptic aesthetic and material sensibility, but she has come to be directly influenced by it in her most recent work. She shares her thoughts on the matter with Julia Bryan-Wilson in the *Easypieces* catalogue:

I’ve been watching these ‘most satisfying’ video compilations on YouTube for hours […] these videos are all about matter and materiality and manipulating materials: cutting, melting, sorting, crushing…. Yet the device they are meant for, the screen, is not at all tactile. It confuses your expectations of touch; you virtually touch so many ‘things’ but everything feels the same, like cold glass. The videos are somewhat meant to compensate, using so many materials in various textures and bright colors to trigger your body to physically react. These videos had so much of what I was trying to do in my work and how I film materials and textures and record and manipulate sounds, that I really wanted to create my own ASMR factory. […] I also use color to compensate for the lack of physical interaction. Watching an art video is a screen experience and not a tactile experience, so the overuse of color compensates for the lack of touch.77

thinking (at the heart of Western science, for example), which casts distance between the knowing subject and the known object while positing vision as the primary sense that is most aligned with cognition, and as such able to ‘objectively’ transverse the gap between subject and object. In place of this, a model of touch is privileged that insists on the body’s immediate proximity to and enmeshment in the surrounding world. (This anti-Cartesian framework is embraced in affect theory and continental philosophy approaches to aesthetics.) Asserting that vision and sound involve touch—the touch of sound vibrations on ear follicles, for example—also causes a breakdown in the analytically discrete so-called five senses. A model more like what Deleuze has proposed as the “body without organs” (BwO) becomes thinkable, in so far as the skin itself becomes an active organ of perception to the world upon and through which intensities may pass, thus designifying the reification of the biomedical organs as we know them.

The term haptic may be found in Merleau-Ponty’s writing, particularly in the *Phenomenology of Perception*, as well as Deleuze’s writing, particularly in his writing on the painting of Francis Bacon. Drawing on Alois Riegl’s theory of Egyptian art, Deleuze explains in *Francis Bacon, The Logic of Sensation* that haptic vision is a “close view,” “tactile” vision in which figure and ground (or subject and world) occupy “a single plane” (8-9). In haptic vision, the visionn behaves like touch and “acts immediately upon the nervous system” (31). Once again, this contrasts with the distanced and disembodied, cerebral model of Cartesian vision. Due to its intense vibrations, Deleuze also points out that color can be particularly haptic (45, 109, 112)—a fact that is evident in much of Rottenberg’s art on top of her use of haptic, binaural sound and haptic texture.

77 Rottenberg, *Easypieces*, 21-22, 24
It becomes clear from these comments that Rottenberg has long been interested in the tension that is created by the flatness, or non-tactility, of the video medium. Through the haptic qualities of sound, color, texture, and close-up shots, Rottenberg sets out to manipulate this flatness and "trigger" the spectator’s "body to physically react."

This medium-specific problem of flatness versus tactility is more important to the issue of representing global production than it may at first seem. As Steven Shaviro explains in his early, influential work of affect theory in film criticism entitled *The Cinematic Body*, the tension between film and video’s flatness on the one hand, and visceral corporeality on the other, is central to the cinematic form. He writes:

The antinomy of cinematic perception is the following: film viewing offers an immediacy and violence of sensation that powerfully engages the eye and body of the spectator; at the same time, however, it is predicated on a radical dematerialization of appearances. The cinematic image is at once intense and impalpable…We see images and hear sounds, but there is no substance beneath these accidents.²⁸

It is not entirely true that cinematic images have no substance. They are made of light, and dependent upon the material infrastructure of screen and cellulose or electricity, as well as all

²⁸ See Shaviro, *The Cinematic Body*, 25-26. See also Brinkema’s second chapter from *The Forms of the Affects* for an account of the development of affect theory in film theory. I disagree with Brinkema’s reading of Foucault and Deleuze on the fold (22-23), which she uses to move away from thinking about film’s affective impact on the spectator. It seems to me that Brinkema misreads Foucault and Deleuze’s attempt to think outside of the naturalized framework of interiority (given to Western society by Christianity and psychoanalysis), overgeneralizing it as a rejection of all concern with subjects. She, in other words, overlooks their attention to the way that subjects are made into subjects through historical-materialist practices, and strips their work of its politics. By contrast, my reading of Deleuze and Foucault informs my Marxist feminist approach to historical subject formation. As such, I am directly interested in the affective impact that Rottenberg’s art has on the spectator; the juncture between the artwork and the neoliberal subject—which allows the artwork to be received as soothing at this historical moment—is political. To put it another, I am interested in the historical-materialist fold between the spectator, the art, and the surrounding political-economic world. Nonetheless, Brinkema’s account of what she identifies as an affective turn in film theory, as well as her challenge to the idea that affect stands outside of interpretation, are both instructive.
of the mechanical parts that go into a film or video camera and projector—parts, that is, which may very well be soldered in an export-led global factory. Yet Shaviro’s comments about “dematerialization” still stand, and perhaps even more so because of his disavowal. The point is that the moving image and sound of film and video provides a “proximity without presence,” as he puts it elsewhere in his text.\textsuperscript{79} Film/video brings an image of objects to us that is disconnected from the materiality of objects.\textsuperscript{80} So too are commodities delivered to us in late capitalism, unaccompanied by the laborers whose corporeal material is key to their existence. The vital energy and physical labor of the worker becomes an absent materiality within the object, just as the object itself becomes an absent materiality in the cinematic image. Proximity without presence can be understood as a formal logic of both film/video and global production in this way.

Rottenberg’s art creates an event of sensible stimulation that takes place in the tension of proximity without presence—a tension that is part of both global production (what the work represents) and the video medium itself (what the work materially does). Her works exploit this tension toward an immersive spectatorial experience in two ways. They do so first by creating spacial continuities that remain discontinuous, and second by heightening the haptic register of digital video—a medium that Mark Hansen argues evokes an even more embodied response than film.\textsuperscript{81} The result in the first case is a keen sense of

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\textsuperscript{79} Shaviro, \textit{The Cinematic Body}, 44. I think it is worth noting that this approach to the ontology of film emphasizes an analytic of space through the work of proximity, as opposed to the common framework of time that connects the non-presence of photography and film to the question of memory.
\textsuperscript{80} Shaviro, 44.
\textsuperscript{81} Hansen, \textit{New Philosophy for New Media}, 9, 12.
\end{flushleft}
disorientation that is felt as nonsense. Here, the cognitive clarity of didacticism called for in cognitive mapping is refused, and the pedagogic orientation of a map is also denied. In the second move, however, the viewer finds themselves drawn in and strangely soothed by the stimulation of isolated sound, the vibration of dense color, and the tactile trace or “aura” (as Walter Benjamin has put it) that is available both through the close-up shot and the texture of Rottenberg’s hand-made sets. These elements stimulate an affective event that is felt at the interface of the artwork’s arrangement of sensation, the viewer’s body, and crucially, the historical context of late capitalism. The combination of these three elements is what I mean by “affect” when I say that Rottenberg’s art “affectively” maps.

- Affect -

The concept of affect that I draw on most directly in this chapter comes from Gilles Deleuze’s writing on art.82 Below I also consider Jameson’s writing on the role that affect plays in realism, in order to reframe how we think about the “new realism” of cognitive mapping. In my next chapter I return to the historical organization of the senses as well, but do so there through a more expansive approach that incorporates Henri Bergson’s writing on perceptual contraction, Benjamin’s writing on the historical sensorium, and several queer and feminist thinkers on the cultural politics of emotion.

82 I am concerned particularly with the two texts What is Philosophy and Francis Bacon: The Logic of Sensation as well as, to a lesser extent, Deleuze and Guattari’s discussion of music throughout A Thousand Plateaus. My reading is not influenced by Deleuze’s writing on cinema and the “affection-image,” however. It is for this reason that I do not encounter the conflation between “percept” and “affect” that Hansen elegantly wrestles with in his New Philosophy for New Media. Within the above stated texts, I find Deleuze’s treatment of affect quite sensitive to the idea—borrowed from Bergson—that affect is distinct in kind from percept, as well as the idea that affect involves a zone of indiscernability, indetermination, or becoming that enmeshes the material organization of sensation embodied in the art object with the material organization of the body and the encompassing milieu.
Here I invoke affect in the philosophical sense that is distinct from emotion (which is typically understood as a state that can be named and claimed as one’s own experience). In contrast to emotion, affect is theorized as not fitting within reified, socially intelligible categories of the symbolic order. Affect on this account can be understood as a pre- or extra-cognitive event of encounter with the material world. Affect as such also blurs the line which typically distinguishes an autonomous subject (who might claim to “have” an emotion) from other subjects, objects, and the surrounding environment. It is the word Deleuze uses to identify a “zone of indistinguishability.”

This idea of affect is definitionally relational and material; it attests to our “envelopment” with the “flesh” of the world, as Merleau-Ponty theorizes, or our “non-human” “contiguity” with the world, as Deleuze puts it.

Following Deleuze, Elizabeth Grosz similarly emphasizes art as a kind of human-nonhuman material becoming. She writes of this most directly in her book *Chaos, Territory, Art* where she suggests that art is a kind of agent which opens life and the body to the expressiveness of material in general. Grosz emphasizes this point when she defines the ontology of art in the following way: “Art is the regulation and organization of its materials—paint, canvas, concrete, steel, marble, words, sounds, bodily movements, indeed any materials—according to self-imposed constraints, the creation of forms through which these materials come to generate and intensify sensation and thus directly impact living

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83 He writes, “[i]t is a zone of intetermination, of indiscernibility, as if things, [animals], and persons […] endlessly reach that point that immediately precedes their natural differentiation. This is what is called an affect.” *What is Philosophy*, 173.

bodies, organs, [and] nervous systems." I bring this up to emphasize the way that Rottenberg’s art affects the bodies (and perhaps we might say nervous systems) of her viewers through the works’ organization of sense.

The point I wish to make is that Rottenberg’s videos employ haptic sound, color, and texture to trigger the viewer by heightening the tension of proximity without presence that is inherent to the video medium. In this way, Rottenberg layers a non-representational affective function into her work that cannot be separated from the highly provocative images of the gender-based global division of labor that her work presents. Her art choreographs a multi-layered approach to the representational form, one that prompts the viewer not only to read the work’s images, but also to feel the images’ haptic non-present proximity at the level of the viewer’s own body.

We may be affected at any point in our encounters with others, objects, and atmospheres. Art is merely a domain that specializes in this sort of affective event. This is because, as Bergson has intimated, affect involves an experience of being moved within an experience of immobility, or to put it another way, an opportunity for expansive thinking and feeling within the dreamy suspension of action. Deleuze’s comments about the role of the artist are additionally instructive here for thinking about art as a privileged site of affection. As Deleuze writes, artists are “the presenters of affects, the inventors and creators of affects. They not only create [affects] in their work, they give them to us and make us

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85 Grosz, Chaos, Territory, Art, 4.
86 Bergson, Matter and Memory, 153-154.
become with them, they draw us into the compound.” Rottenberg’s art indeed draws us in, through the intrigue of disorientation and the stimulation of tactile sensation alike. The ASMR-like techniques she employs render a palpable relationship between the artwork’s material organization, the viewer’s material body, and the surrounding material world. What I am calling the event of affect is precisely this phenomenal “compound” into which we are drawn.

Yet none of this exactly explains what sort of affective experience one has with Rottenberg’s art, or to phrase it better, what being affected by Rottenberg’s art does. To understand that we must first consider context. And this is the final point I wish to make by way of a definition of affect: The concept of affect is not useful to Marxist feminism without thinking about context in historical materialist terms.

John Berger’s writing on what he calls the ontological role of art offers unexpected guidance here. His often-overlooked essay “The White Bird” persuades his reader that art’s ontological capacity to move or affect us through its material composition is in fact necessarily context-dependent—a historical claim that may be compatible with Grosz’s ontology above even while not drawn out in her work. On Berger’s account, the encounter with art (and even more so nature) moves us specifically because we live in a world of bleakness and suffering:

It is within the bleak natural context that beauty is encountered, and the encounter is by its nature sudden and unpredictable. The gale blows itself out, the sea changes

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87 Deleuze, *What is Philosophy*, 173.
88 Berger distinguishes what he identifies as art’s ontological relation to humans, which he explores in “The White Bird” essay, from his analysis of what he calls art’s social relation to humans, seen for example in his Marxist analysis in *Ways of Seeing*. 
from the color of grey shit to aquamarine. Under the fallen boulder of an avalanche a flower grows. Over the shanty town the moon rises. […] However it is encountered, beauty is always an exception, always in despite of. This is why it moves us.89

We live in a world of struggle and suffering, at this point predominantly capital-made,90 that affirms the accumulation of capital over the dignity, sustenance, and thriving of life. In this, Berger gives us a theory of the affective event of aesthetics that is issued from below, e.g. within the material conditions of precarious housing and feces-filled oceans (a fate Berger perhaps did not mean to predict), rather than from the “disinterested” interests of the elite.91

Our historical materialist context is a necessary part of the affective movement of art. Our ability to be affected by art and nature alike attests to an ability that is still possible within us to be more than the reified and drained human capital subjects that we are been subjugated to become. It attests to the possibility of having an non-reified relationship with nature as well. Being affected by, or becoming with, the unexpected sensuous arrangement of art and nature reminds us—over extended, exploited, alienated, drained, and narrowly habituated historically specific subjects—that we are continuous not only with our species being, but also the non-commodified capacities of the non-human material world. This is felt as affective revitalization in the context of our current capitalist crisis.

90 In Fossil Capitalism, Andreas Malm convincingly argues that the idea of the “anthropocene” forwards a misleading notion that we have entered a geological age in which the environment is irreversibly impacted by human activity. As he makes clear, it is not human activity in general that has caused our global environmental crisis, but rather the activities and interests of the capitalist class in particular.
91 See Bourdieu, Distinction.
The Crisis in Care

The historical context in which I consider the affective dimension of Rottenberg’s art is what theorists have called the “crisis in care.” I borrow this term from a body of Marxist feminist writing that identifies reproductive labor as the prime domain in which the fundamental contradiction of neoliberal capitalism is currently being felt. To understand this claim, it is important to note the centrality of “crisis” and “contradiction” in Marxist theory.  

Briefly, the theory of crisis and contradiction is that capitalism has a built-in tendency toward self-destabilization, or an internal contradiction that leads the system perpetually toward crisis. This contradiction comes from the fact that, on the one hand, capitalism’s goal is unlimited accumulation, while on the other hand, unlimited accumulation both privatizes and drains the resources needed to sustain workers. Since the labor of workers is the key ingredient to extracting surplus value (that is, within the labor theory of value), an internal crisis in capitalism is caused when the resources for reproduction are dismantled—whether those resources be time, energy, drinkable water, affordable housing, financial stability, access to land, and/or mental health. In this way, capitalism as a system tends to destroy its own conditions of possibility. From the perspective of capital, some strategy of deferring complete deprivation must be devised (for example, the promotion of

92 My sketch here is general, and aimed at giving the reader a basic sense of the topic. See David Harvey’s 2010 *The Enigma of Capital and the Crisis this Time* for a detailed account of standing versions of the theory of crisis, as well as Harvey’s reading of crisis formation in Marx’s *Capital* and *Grundrisse.*
privatized consumer debt starting in the 1970s). From the perspective of the people, this systemic dismantling of reproductive resources may in the very least make conditions so miserable for the masses that alternative structures for sustenance must be developed and a utopian, revolutionary reorganization of society comes to seem practical. Nancy Fraser puts it well when she writes simply that “[n]o society that systemically undermines social reproduction can endure for long.”

To put it another way, capitalism depends on the free (or underpaid) labor of reproduction as an internal part of what regenerates workers. As such, reproductive labor is functionally undervalued in society. But for reproductive labor to be undervalued, it must first be distinguished from other laboring activities. Silvia Federici persuasively argues that this distinction emerged as part of the violent process of primitive accumulation that privatized the land and separated people from direct access to subsistence. She explains:

> With the demise of the subsistence economy that had prevailed in pre-capitalist Europe, the unity of production and reproduction which has been typical of all societies based on production-for use came to an end, and these activities became the carriers of different social relations and were sexually differentiated.”

It is only when wage-work emerged as an institutionalized relation of production that reproductive labor emerged as its other. A new category of “activity-for-market,” in Federici’s words, came to be treated as the only “value-creating activity.” Labor that created

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93 For a gendered reading of the privatization of social reproduction costs through consumer debt see Adrienne Roberts’ “Financing Social Reproduction: The Gendered Relations of Debt and Mortgage Finance in Twenty-first-century America.”
95 See chapter 26 in Capital Volume I for Marx’s explanation of primitive accumulation.
96 Federici, Caliban and the Witch, 74.
use-values “began to be considered as valueless from an economic viewpoint and even ceased to be considered work.” As such, the function of reproductive labor “in the accumulation of capital became invisible.” Subsistence activities, in other words, were excluded from the category of work entirely.

Returning to the idea of capitalism’s contradiction then we could say that capitalism’s tendency toward unlimited accumulation requires the creation and exploitation of a domain of activities deemed non-work. This status of non-work has considerable consequences in a “work society” like ours, as Kathi Weeks has termed it, which assigns social value, subjugates individuals, and enables access to necessary goods all through the status of work.

But if this explains how reproductive labor emerged as productive labor’s disavowed and undervalued other, how did it develop that this activity became “sexually differentiated” (as Federici phrases it in the long quote above)? Through primitive accumulation, reproductive labor became ideologically associated with uncultured, extra-economic materiality and deemed natural. Federici explains that those laboring activities associated with subsistence and reproduction (such as care, cooking food, raising children, tending to community, healing, etc) were “mystified as a natural vocation and labelled as women’s labor.” Reproductive labor became a sexually differentiated sphere associated with women, who subsequently also became associated with an ideologically sentimentalized approach to...

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97 Federici, 75.
98 Federici, 75.
99 See Weeks, The Problem with Work.
100 Federici, Caliban and the Witch, 75.
nature. The realm of women’s use-value production was thus framed as natural and extra-economic. All the while, capitalism relied then, and relies now, on this supposedly extra-economic activity. The gender-based division of labor that naturalizes reproductive work as women’s work, framing it as non-work—and thus unpaid work—is the disavowed internal necessity to productive labor. Patriarchal capitalism may thus be understood as a model of society that institutionalizes a “parasitic dependence on the free appropriation of nature and the body and work of women.”

Like Marx’s writing on primitive accumulation, Federici’s writing makes it clear that the gendered appropriation of so-called natural resources has been achieved through direct (and indirect) violence against women, indigenous peoples, indigenous knowledges, and the earth. These vital populations and life forms have all been naturalized (or rendered synonymous with nature) in the Enlightenment-Capitalist vision of nature that treats it as a resource to be controlled, cultivated, reaped, or raped. This critique links Marxist feminist criticism from the 1970s onward with contemporary indigenous and post-colonial feminist work. As Kim TallBear has recently argued, for instance, the “Euro/American standpoint”

101 See for example Boydston “The Pastoralization of Housework” and Davis “Women and Capitalism: Dialectics of Oppression and Liberation.”
102 It is important to be clear here that despite the often cited title of the 1970s feminist provocation “wages for housework,” the critical matter here is not the wage so much as the privitization of those things deemed natural, which is to say, primitive accumulation. Malos puts this well when she writes that “[t]he tendency for women to be excluded from wage labor […] is based on the tendency for the reproduction of labor power to be perceived as a ‘natural’ function outside of capitalism or any other economic system. The fact that it is unwaged is based on its privatization […]. In other words ‘wagelessness’ is secondary, just as the wage is, to a system in which the mass of women and men who do not own the means of production face the power of those who do.” See Malos, The Politics of Housework, 21. See also Week’s The Problem with Work and Federici’s “Wages Against Housework” for two readings of the “Wages for Housework” manifesto that complicate any simple interpretation of the original as a plea for wages.
103 Federici in the forward to Mies’s reissued Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale.
that is centered in the modern sciences “continue[s] to categorize some humans and nonhumans as more part of ‘nature’,” thus upholding a “settler-colonial nature/culture binary” that has been “at the heart of colonial resource extraction and literal exploration of others’ land.”

Maria Mies similarly describes this phenomenon in her 1986 *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale*, writing that from the 12\textsuperscript{th} century onward, “[m]odern scientists and doctors managed to demonize the skills of midwives and women healers to steal their knowledge in order to develop the new, scientific medicine.”

Through these feminist materialist analyses we recognize that the process of primitive accumulation, which separates people from subsistence by privatizing the land, also renders all things associated with nature and the land commodifiable resources. Such ‘things’ include women’s bodies, indigenous knowledges, and formally colonized peoples. So long as our global world order treats the natural world as a commodity to privately own, women and colonized or decolonized peoples will also be treated as a “resource to be exploited for the process of ongoing capital accumulation.”

As Mies provocatively contends, he who, through institutionalized violence and force, owns the land also owns the women of the land, and he who, through violence and force, owns the women of the land also owns the land.

Put simply, capitalism depends upon the creation, naturalization, devaluation, feminization, and appropriation of reproductive labor.

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104 See TallBear, “Feminist, Queer, and Indigenous Thinking as an Antidote to Masculinist Objectivity and Binary Thinking in Biological Anthropology,” 495.

105 See also Federici’s *Calaban and the Witch* for an account of this process as a kind of primitive accumulation that took place from the 12\textsuperscript{th} – 17\textsuperscript{th} centuries.

106 See Federici’s preface in Mies’s *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale*, xvii.

107 See Federici’s preface in Mies’s *Patriarchy and Accumulation on a World Scale*, xxiii.
The consequence of naturalizing women’s reproductive work runs deep, extending not only from the emergence of capitalism into our current age, but also into the sphere of productive work. Specifically, this logic has been used to justify cheap wages for women and work associated with women. For readers unfamiliar, the logic goes like this: Women’s labor is a natural expression of their nurturing tendency. As such, this activity is not work and unpaid; it is merely the stuff that takes place outside of the market in the home. A presumed white male head-of-household will provide monetary support for the presumed heteronormative household through a breadwinning wage designed with a non-working domestic worker wife at home. Any work that the presumed married woman of the house does do outside of the house is presumed extra, part time, and unnecessary. Any work that she does not do in the house but instead hires another woman to do is also deemed part time, undervalued, and a natural extension of the paid domestic worker’s racial-gendered identity. As a result, Marxist feminists have long pointed out, those sectors of wage-work that are associated with women’s work are treated as supplemental income. Regardless of the fact that a breadwinning wage barely still exists, and even when it did it was never unilaterally available, this set of ideological presumptions continues to justify low pay, contingent (“flexible”) work hours, little mobility, and little security for both actual women and those sectors of work associated with women.

With all of this we finally find the logic of gendered labor that I have been referring to: women’s work either equals cheap work, precarious work, or “non-work.” This is a logic

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108 See Hochschild’s “Love and Gold” for a keen analysis of the way that a loving disposition within hired care work is often produced through the material conditions of isolation that are endured by migrant care workers, despite being mystified as a natural (and often racialized) gendered trait.
that spans seemingly disparate sectors of work in our neoliberal social order, from the highly-gendered manufacturing of the global factory, to the seemingly non-gendered rise of entrepreneurial self-employment. Indeed, I spend this time belaboring the logic of gendered production in suspicion that it has itself been so thoroughly naturalized that we could consider it neoliberalism’s vanishing mediator.  

My analysis of Rottenberg’s art thus far has begun to draw out two of the most germane work sectors of neoliberal governmentality—multinational global manufacturing and human capital entrepreneurship—in order to suggest that a logic of gendered labor lies at the core of the total system. I want to fill in what I mean when I say that a gendered logic runs through these two sectors, before drawing out how this fits into our global crisis in care, and finally what I see Rottenberg’s art doing—at the level of affect—to map this dual-logic of gendered labor. I have already begun to make the case for what Rottenberg’s art maps (i.e. neoliberalism’s dual logic of gendered labor). By the end of this chapter I will also make the case for how Rottenberg’s art maps (i.e. through an affective register).

To do so I wish to address one more of Rottenberg’s pieces, her most recent video *Spaghetti Blockchain*. It is here that Rottenberg most directly and explicitly incorporates the techniques of ASMR. Like all of Rottenberg’s haptic strategies, the use of ASMR in her work operates to overcome the dematerialized flatness of digital technology. However, as attested to in scholarly and popular discourse, ASMR techniques are also sought to overcome the drain on vital resources experienced in late capitalism. Attending to this feature of Rottenberg’s work will bring together my concern with the artwork’s affective register, the

109 I will define what I mean by “vanishing mediator” below.
historical materialist context of the crisis in care, and neoliberalism’s dual logic of gendered labor that the works representationally map.

- Neoliberalism’s Dual Logic of Gendered Labor -

I am using this somewhat clunky term to insist on the gendered logic that operates as a contingent but necessary part of neoliberal resource extraction and appropriation. The word “dual” here refers to the two seemingly disparate sectors of, on the one hand, export-driven global production, and on the other, human capital entrepreneurship. The struggles of a precarious or aspirational self-employed neoliberal subject in the global north may seem too distinct (and perhaps privileged) to connect to the experiences of manufacturing workers in the global south. As scholars such as Wendy Brown have noted, neoliberalism’s “differential instantiations across countries, regions, and sectors” has made neoliberalism “globally ubiquitous, yet disunified and nonidentical.”110 Despite this appearance of disconnect, these sectors are nonetheless linked within the totality of our late capitalist global economy. They function, moreover, as two of the main techniques of neoliberal wealth extraction and subject formation. Rottenberg’s art is striking in part due to her intuitive focus on and interweaving of these seemingly disparate domains—a fact that is not adequately noted in the literature on her art.

I am drawn to the two sectors of human capital entrepreneurship and export-driven global production as stalwarts within the total system of neoliberal relations of production. It is possible to understand them as two compatible modes of governmentality within neoliberalism. The first, human capital, moves toward a normalized dismantling of work-life

110 See Brown, Undoing the Demos, 21.
differentiation paired with a structural diminishment of material security. The second, export-driven global manufacturing, moves toward the increased extraction of surplus value from poor countries, poor peoples, and natural resources through a race-to-the-bottom quest for the cheapest and least regulated labor. Both techniques of neoliberal capital accumulation have a gendered logic of exploitation at their core. This is the case even as human capital entrepreneurship has become seemingly gender-neutral, with the spread of precarity and temp-work as norms. The association between women and nature that subsequently treats women (and nature) as available material for resource extraction nonetheless justifies cheap wages and poor working conditions in both of these sectors. It is important to highlight this dual logic of gendered exploitation both with an eye toward understanding how neoliberalism works, and with an eye toward building perspectives that align resistance struggles across different contexts.

To elaborate my point, I turn first to the less obvious case: human capital entrepreneurship. Despite the fact that it has largely fallen out of view, a gendered logic runs through this aspirational sector of the neoliberal work society. I use the term human capital following thinkers such as Brown, Michel Feher, Lois McNay and others (all influenced by Foucault) to describe the historical subject of neoliberalism. We can see this kind of neoliberal subject incorporated into Rottenberg’s art through the self-employed fetish and sex workers that she hires, as well as the image of personality-trait farming that she often portrays. Human capital names a subject produced by being coerced to take themselves as their own enterprise; the subject of neoliberalism has little choice but to be an entrepreneur of themselves.
Brown and Feher’s similar description of human capital is useful for understanding how this mode of subjectivity is distinct from other historical modes. They point to several changes that have occurred between industrial (or liberal) capitalism and financial (or neoliberal) capitalism. Included in their accounts is the observation that we have shifted into a culture with little work-life divide that is distinct from the industrial capitalist culture of posited separate spheres. (And I say posited here, knowing as we do that reproduction was never actually extra-economic). Feher in particular argues that in neoliberalism, the ideology of the separate spheres has been replaced by the attitude that all behaviors, aspects, and activities of one’s life—reproductive and productive alike—are always contributing to the appreciation or depreciation of one’s investment-in-one’s-self.111 This 24-7 quality is heightened by what Brown additionally describes as a change from industrial capitalism’s market logic of exchange to late capitalism’s market logic of competition. As she writes it, the “subtle shift from exchange to competition as the essence of the market means that all market actors are rendered as little capitals (rather than as owners, workers, and consumers) competing with, rather than exchanging with each other. Human capital’s constant and ubiquitous aim [...] is to entrepreneurialize its endeavors, appreciate its value, and increase its rating or ranking.”112 The stakes of always having to appreciate one’s value are quite high when neoliberal political-economic policy has systemically dismantled structures for support, widened the wealth gap, and deteriorated a commons sense logic of human-dignity-as-freedom (replacing it, as David Harvey has pointed out, with an ideology of market-

111 See Feher, “Self-Appreciation.”
112 Brown, Undoing the Demos, 36.
Neoliberalism leaves us with “no guarantee of security, protection, or even survival,” Brown writes; this is a jeopardy that “reaches down to minimum needs for food and shelter.” In sum, human capital names the subject formed by these ideological and material conditions of 1) risk, 2) insecurity, and 3) a total subsumption of life into the market in such a way that deteriorates any semblance of a work-life divide. The neoliberal human capital subject is formed through these conditions regardless of whether they identify with the celebrated figure of the entrepreneur, the critical class category of the precariate, or some mix of both.

There are several reasons why human capital subjectivity is shaped by a gendered logic at its core even as it appears unmarked by gender. (Here I disagree with Annie McClanahan’s suggestion that 1970s Marxist feminist writing provides evidence for the irrelevance of human capital as a concept). The first is what Marxist feminists have noted as a lack of work/life distinction within gendered reproductive labor. In their 1976 essay “Women’s Domestic Labor,” Jean Gardiner et al. provide a description of the housewife in contrast to the wage earner that today could easily be mistaken for a description of the precarious human capital subject in contrast to the former breadwinning capitalist subject. As they put it:

[F]or the wage earner the home is the place where he consumes but does not work and where his time is his own. For the housewife it is her place of work but she does not go elsewhere for leisure. So in her life there is no rigid work/leisure distinction either in physical location or in time. She is not paid for her work, and the amount of

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113 See the introduction to David Harvey’s *A Brief Introduction of Neoliberalism.*
114 Brown, *Undoing the Demos,* 37.
115 See McClanahan’s “Becoming Non-Economic: Human Capital Theory and Wendy Brown’s *Undoing the Demos.*
time she spends is not the direct concern of anyone else, as long as the work is done […] she is to a large extent in control of her method and pace of working. She organizes her own time, given the constraints of fitting in with her surroundings.\footnote{Gardiner et al., “Women’s Domestic Labor” in The Politics of Housework, 177.}

In this passage, we are given an image of gendered reproductive labor as a mode of work that involves the so-called freedom of flexibility in which the worker has open reign to design and structure her time, paired with the condition of precarity wherein she is not paid, is never off work, and has no given access to public or communal space. The contemporary entrepreneur/precarious worker—whether we think of an artist, a free-lance writer, a private sex worker, a community herbalist, or any other “self-employed” human capital subject—occupies a similar position as the housewife’s described above when they work from home and are structurally forced to put in many unpaid, up-front hours in the hopes that a future gig might pay off. Mies’ writing on what she calls the “housewifization of labor” similarly draws out the gendered origins of what has become a commonplace deterioration of the (historically constructed) reproduction-production divide. Speaking of her 1982 ethnographic research on a group of lace-making women in Narsapur, Mies explains that she observed the way these women “had to combine ‘reproductive work’ with the lowest paid ‘productive work’” and called “this combination of both types of work the ‘housewifization of labor.’” She confirms in a 2014 revisiting of her essay that, “Today it is also men who have to sit ‘at home’ and work on a computer for the world market. Although they are not as poor as the lace makers in Narsapur, structurally their work conditions are similar. But today one calls this ‘precarious work.’” In Gardiner’s example of the housewife and Mies’s
example of the at-home manufacture alike we find a gendered image of work that justifies no or little pay through an unclear distinction between work and non-work. The contemporary neoliberal technique of blurring the boundary between work time and non-work time or productive labor and reproductive labor does not bring us back to some pre-capitalist moment before the distinction between the two. Rather, it generalizes the gendered extraction of value from the worker’s whole self by justifying limitless hours for low or no pay. We may understand this phenomenon as the feminization of labor.

There is a second reason why I claim that human capital subjectivity has a gendered history, and that has to do with the material history of temp work as an industry. Here it is even more clear that gender has functioned as a necessary condition of possibility for the advancement of neoliberal precaritization, even as gender has since fallen out of view in the temp economy. I borrow the term vanishing mediator above from Jameson to name gender’s function as a historically necessary factor in transition that has nonetheless become invisible. Erin Hatton’s materialist analysis of temp work advertisements from the late 1940s through the 1990s offers great insight on this matter. Hatton explains that in the beginning, industry leaders framed temp work as women's work, promoting it specifically as a respectable and flexible mode of labor that would allow white middle-class housewives to make extra "pin" money. Promoting temp work as the work of married white women—even though men, single women, and women of color were always also employed by temp companies—allowed industry leaders to avoid associations with the private employment industry that took advantage of migrants while also appearing like a non-threat to organized labor. "With this strategy," Hatton confirms, "industry leaders established a new sector of
the economy that would not only prove beyond the reach of a range of worker protections—including health benefits, unemployment insurance, [and] antidiscrimination laws—but also remain resistant to union organizing efforts."  

By the late 1960s, the success of this model of work led industry leaders to rebrand temporary services in a gender-neutral way so that tempification could expand into "breadwinning" jobs. Simply put, the public image of temp work as white middle class women's work allowed flexibilized labor to take hold. The so-called flexibility that was once sold to the housewife as a means by which she could work outside of the house without disrupting her domestic responsibilities, was now promoted to all workers as a means by which they could gain more autonomy. This has been a core strategy of neoliberal work restructuring over the last several decades. Needless to say, such flexibility has primarily saved stockholders money by cutting employee costs while breaking up organized labor and making workers more easily replaceable. Hatton’s research makes it clear that the relations of production which require a human capital subjectivity were first tested and systematically advanced through a logic of gendered labor before eventually becoming the pervasive norm of neoliberalism.

Entrepreneurial precarity is not the only mode of neoliberal exploitation that is rooted in a gendered logic. Scholars of the global factory have similarly observed the way that export-driven manufacturing is actively framed as women’s work. Here gender has not (yet) fallen out of view or become what I have called a vanishing mediator. The gendered dynamics of the international division of labor are still quite visible. We see them explicitly, for example, in the footage of actual global factory work within Rottenberg’s art. As feminist

117 Hatton, The Temp Economy, 22.
theorists since the 1980s have explained, the move toward global manufacturing has always been driven by a search for lower overhead costs. In this search, poor, single, and ideally young women have been promoted as an inexpensive, manageable, and disposable labor force. Ethnographer Leslie Salzinger describes this situation well when she writes that the “notion of the ‘cheap, docile, and dextrous’ third-world woman worker” lies at the heart of global capitalism’s “ongoing search for, and creation of, the prize of ‘cheap labor’.”

Gender justifies cheap wages within global manufacturing through the same—materially false—logic of supplemental income that I describe above. However, in the context of international production, the mythology that women are supplemental earners not only keeps overhead costs low for the employer—driving a wealth gap between the (male) capitalist and the (female) worker—it also disproportionately extracts resources from poor women of color in the global south and redistributes that wealth into the hands of white finance capitalists in the global north. In this way, an uneven extraction of resources from the global south for the benefit of a financial capitalist class in the global north has been implemented contingently but inextricably through a gendered logic of exploitation.

It becomes clear with these insights that the violence against women that Federici identifies as central to primitive accumulation in early capitalism remains arguably central to the so-called “development” expansion of global or neoliberal late capitalism. In this process, so-called developing nations have been pressured since the 1960s by international

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118 See for example Fuentes and Ehrenreich’s 1983 pamphlet Women in the Global Factory.
119 For Salzinger it is important that multinational corporations do not merely go out in search of ready-made docile women, but rather that particular gendered characteristics are created on the shop floor through particular management strategies.
governing bodies like the IMF and the World Bank to adopt economic restructuring strategies in the interest of multinational corporations.\textsuperscript{120} Such countries are coerced to promote the women of their own citizenship as cheap, trainable, submissive, and dextrous labor in order to incentivize multinational investment and compete against other economically vulnerable nations.\textsuperscript{121} The devalued status of gendered labor indeed lures multinational corporations into decolonized nations, yet only to bring the kind of temporary foreign investment that is highly deregulated and not held accountable for the environmental and human harm that such deregulations cause.\textsuperscript{122} The result is a deep violence perpetrated against the women, the environment, and the self-sustainability of formally colonized nations. Directly put, capitalism’s destructive expansion into an export-driven global assembly line has been executed against structurally vulnerable peoples and nations through a logic of gendered labor.

The image of women as cheap, docile, and dextrous labor has not been contained to export-driven manufacturing zones. It extends as well to the export-driven service work of care delivered through migration. For instance, in her important text on neoliberalism in southeast Asia, Aihwa Ong points to the way that Asian governments, NGOs, and labor recruiters for overseas markets advertise their own female citizen population as a flexible, docile, and adaptable export product suitable for gendered migrant work.\textsuperscript{123} As she writes,

\begin{itemize}
  \item \textsuperscript{120} See Harvey, \textit{A Brief Introduction to Neoliberalism} and Fuentes and Ehrenreich, \textit{Women in the Global Factory}.
  \item \textsuperscript{121} Fuentes and Ehrenreich, \textit{Women in the Global Factory} and Salzinger, \textit{Genders in Production}.
  \item \textsuperscript{122} For a vivid image of the lack of responsibility taken by multinational corporations for the harm they do in their temporary installment in free trade zones, see Funari’s above mentioned documentary \textit{Maquilapolis}.
  \item \textsuperscript{123} See Ong chapter 9 in \textit{Neoliberalism as Exception}.
\end{itemize}
“[y]oung, mainly unmarried women” have become “central to the capacity of the family, [the] community, and even [the] homeland” of economically vulnerable nations in such a way that allows these nations “to sustain a level of development otherwise not available without remittances from abroad.” Ong calls this gendered division of export labor a “transnational relay of family care”—a term that aptly implies the crisis in care at hand. Arlie Hochschild reciprocally identifies the way that wealthier nations in the global north have too become dependent, precisely on undervalued migrant labor. As she explains, we have found ourselves over the past several decades in a global trend wherein care resources from one part of the world are being extracted and exported to another part of the world in order to supplement the scarce reproductive resources that are created globally by neoliberalism. Hochschild names this trend a “feminization of migration” in which “women who normally care for the young, the old, and the sick in their own poor countries” face increasing pressure to “move to care for the young, the old, and the sick in rich countries.” With the global spread of neoliberalism, in other words, economically vulnerable nations have become dependent upon the remittances that are secured by sending women abroad to do the underpaid reproductive labor that wealthier nations have too come to rely upon. For those who can afford to hire help, migration becomes a “private solution to [the] public problem” of unsustainable relations of reproduction. And here the isolation, loneliness, and depression typically associated with the affective experience of first-world neoliberalism,

124 Ong, 199.
125 Ong, 208.
127 Hochschild, 18.
becomes productive in the experience of the migrant worker as well; as Hochschild keenly argues, the love between a nanny and the child in her care cannot be separated from “the intense loneliness and yearning for one’s own children” that the migrant worker feels.\footnote{Hochschild, 25.}

We see across these materially distinct cases of human capital precarity/entrepreneurship, global manufacturing, and transnational care that an ideology of women’s closeness to commodifiable nature justifies violent and exploitative measures of resource extraction for the benefit of capital. It is for this reason that I argue that gender is an organizing logic which runs through the uneven yet linked experience of neoliberal precarity writ large. Gender has served as a successful technique for naturalizing the flexibilization of labor. It continues to justify cheap wages and disposability as well. It has in fact been so successful in helping to restructure relations of production along a neoliberal political-economic agenda that one should be weary of its disappearance; when the gender-based division of labor that underlies flexibilization and global production falls out of view, we are at risk of normalizing a generalized attitude toward all subjects as cheap, disposable, and a materially available or “natural” extractable resource. I insist for this reason that the analytic of gender is indispensable for understanding how neoliberal restructuring has taken place.

But this is not all. Gender is also indispensable for understanding how capitalist crisis is being managed within our current crisis in care. Through the analytic of gender, we see that the neoliberal social order systemically passes the burden of scarce reproductive
resources along a gendered hierarchy of race and nation. Nancy Fraser makes this point when she writes in the recent *Social Reproduction Theory* reader that:

Typically, it is racialized and/or rural women from poor regions who take on reproductive and caring labor previously performed by more privileged women. But to do this, the migrants must transfer their own familial and community responsibilities to other, still poorer caregivers, who must in turn do the same—and on and on, in ever longer "global care chains." [...] Far from filling the care gap, the net effect is to displace it—from richer to poorer families, from the Global North to the Global South.\textsuperscript{129}

Passing the burden of politically-constructed scarcity from some (white wealthy) women to other (poor racialized) women along a global hierarchy merely defers the imminent crisis that is created within capitalism when resources for subsistence are popularly denied. This global division of gendered labor serves the neoliberal interests of reproducing an ever-more powerful while exclusive white financial-capitalist elite.

I have mentioned also a second way that capitalist stakeholders have managed popular outcry within the contemporary crisis in care, and that is through debt. Here again women and women of color have been disproportionately harmed. Internationally, “development” debt relations have made poor nations dependent upon the remittances secured by sending women abroad or employing women as cheap labor in toxic export zones. Domestically, the use of consumer debt to attain or maintain a so-called good (property owning) life has escalated already existing wealth inequalities, affecting single women and women of color most severely in the wake of the 2008 financial crisis. Adrienne Roberts sharply writes of this problem in her 2012 essay “Financing Social Reproduction:

\textsuperscript{129} Fraser, “Crisis in Care?,” 34.
The Gendered Relations of Debt and Mortgage Finance in Twenty-First Century America.” As she explains it, “the deepening of debt in general, and mortgage debt in particular” has been “part of a broader ongoing effort to re-privatize social reproduction under neoliberalism.” Neoliberal restructuring has “made it increasingly necessary for the lower classes to rely on mortgage loans,” creating a “privitisation of risk” that has “exacerbated existing inequalities” by targeting the economically vulnerable populations of single women and racial minorities for high risk or subprime loans. As a result, “growing sectors of the population, particularly the working classes, single women, and certain racialized minorities” have become dependent upon global financial markets to meet basic subsistence needs. This dependence weaves domestic and global economies in such a way that “ultimately serves to redistribute wealth upward, from the poor to the rich, from single women to men, and from certain minorities to white men and their families.”

Considering both of these strategies I suggest that rather than let gender vanish from view, the category of feminized labor may be generalized as a unifying axis of struggle against the interests of the financial elite. The situations of global factory workers, migrant workers, precarious human capital subjects, and aspirational-entrepreneurial human capital subjects are not the same. They are connected, nonetheless, through a gendered logic of exploitation that has enabled neoliberal governance. They are connected, moreover, by the strategies currently in play for deferring the crisis in care, namely the expansion of private debt and the displacement of scarce reproductive resources along a global hierarchy of gendered labor. My aim in emphasizing the role of gender and the question of social

reproduction is not to disavow the meaningful racial, national, and even work-sector differences at hand. I do however want to emphasize the unifying nexus of exploitation that has been violently mobilized through a set of ideological assumptions about gender that are always at risk of being naturalized. Roberts writes it well when she states that, "[d]rawing attention to social reproduction opens an analytic space to view capitalism as a totality, involving a wide range of social relations that are indispensable for capitalist accumulation yet which have tended to be falsely considered 'extra-economic' or even 'natural.'"\(^{131}\)

Regardless of whether the analytic of gender adequately captures the intersectional damage done by neoliberal capitalism—and it does not, at least not on its own—gender provides a crucial analytic for understanding how neoliberalism 1) works and 2) unites us. This is the case ever more so as we flex the category of “woman” to become critically, creatively, and subversively plural.

**Returning to Rottenberg’s Work**

It might seem like a stretch to suggest that Rottenberg’s work maps the gendered logic of neoliberalism or represents the crisis in care, given the length to which I have just gone in explaining these concepts. I am, however, suggesting this. If my claim seems counter-intuitive it is merely because Rottenberg’s art does not represent the gendered logic of neoliberalism in a didactic or cognitive way. Her art “maps” these structural understandings of our current system in a haptic way that resonates at the level of the body.

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\(^{131}\) Roberts, 4. The idea that social reproduction in particular offers insight into capitalism’s unity—since social reproduction has always held the status of capitalism’s internal contradiction—adds a level of nuance to Lukács’ claim that we can best see the “underlying unity, the totality, of all of whose parts are objectively interrelated” in moments of crisis. Lukács, *Aesthetics and Politics*, 32.
Pedagogically (for if there is one thing Jameson is clear on it is that cognitive mapping’s goal is pedagogic), we may say that Rottenberg’s art invites the viewer into a disposition of critical inquiry wherein the viewer comes to know with the artwork in an event of affective enmeshment. This pedagogic approach differs from the distanced transfer of knowledge that one might assume to find if they approach the aesthetic of cognitive mapping as a kind of didactic text to be read.

Laura Marks’ theory of “tactile epistemology” is useful here. For Marks, the idea of a tactile epistemology aligns with feminist and de-colonial critiques of “ocularcentrism”—a concept she defines as both “the Cartesian privileging of vision, insofar as [vision] is the most ‘cerebral’ of the senses,” and the Western tendency to reduce non-Western cultures to spectacle in “a general will to knowledge of the other as a means to power.” Tactile epistemology provides an alternative approach to knowing that involves “an immanent way of being in the world, whereby the subject comes into being not through abstraction from the world but compassionate involvement in it.” This is an affective, rather than cerebral or abstract, mode of knowing arrived at through “compassionate involvement” with the compound of object, subject, and world. Knowledge is treated here “as something gained not on the model of vision”—as is implied in the idea of a cognitive map—but instead “through physical contact.” Marks names this tactile way of knowing mimesis. Drawing on Auerbach’s literary theory, she continues that the visual and literary arts hold the capacity to call up the material presence of the thing to be known in such a way that “each time a story

132 Marks, *The Skin of Film*, 133.
133 Marks, 141.
134 Marks, 138.
is retold it is sensuously remade in the body of the listener.” The story brought up and materially felt when viewing Rottenberg’s images of gendered labor is the story of wanting and needing more, at the level of the senses, in the context of our late capitalist crisis in care. To put it another way, Rottenberg’s art represents neoliberalism’s dual logic of gendered labor while affectively mapping the crisis in care through a mimetic way of knowing.

Being wary as she is of the primitivist tendency to associate mimesis with an uncultivated (even if celebrated) view of ‘going back to nature,’ Marks makes it clear that mimetic knowing involves a skilled, counter-hegemonic perceptual practice that is always rooted in the historical-materialist body. I agree with this account and am interested in tactile epistemology as an affective way of knowing that activates an occasion to raise bodily consciousness about the ways that late capitalism shapes our bodily needs, pleasures, capacities, and stressors. As I will suggest momentarily, the ability of ASMR to pleasurably draw the viewer in is necessarily conditioned by the historical context in which ASMR is experienced.

As a general claim about medium specificity, however, Marks also argues that the cinematic form of film and video lends itself particularly well to a tactile way of knowing. She draws on Vivian Sobchack to suggest that “the relationship between spectator and film is fundamentally mimetic, in that meaning is not solely communicated through signs but

135 Marks, 138.
136 She writes: “I would argue, then, that rather than give in to the prelapsarian or primitivist longing for sensuous knowledge that motivates many accounts of mimesis, we acknowledge that many cultures have cultivated mimesis and other forms of sensuous knowledge. […] Theorists who call for a return to the senses often treat sense experience as prediscursive and, hence, as natural. This is a position I dispute” (144).
experienced in the body.”137 The physical vibration of color on the eye, the auric experience of looking at texture, and the proprioception arrived at through memory associations that are anchored in the close-up are all examples that Marks offers to describe the affective enmeshment or tactile epistemology that occurs between film/video and the viewer’s historically impacted body. Thus, film/video brings what Marks calls the film’s sensorium to the affective encounter as much as the viewer brings their historical sensorium to the film. As she elegantly describes it, “[t]he cinematic encounter takes place not only between my body and the film’s body, but my sensorium and the film’s sensorium. We bring our own personal and cultural organization of the sense to cinema, and cinema brings a particular organization of the sense to us.”138 Marks’ writing offers a simple yet under-practiced approach to thinking about aesthetics through a both medium-specific and historical-materialist sensibility in this way.

I too wish to approach the question of affect in Rottenberg’s art through a both-and “materialist” approach.139 Rottenberg herself has acknowledged that her use of tactile texture, acute sound, and vibrant color is intended to overcome the flatness or proximity without presence of the video medium. Her interest in ASMR stems from this medium-specific desire. Yet, Rottenberg’s videos also affect the viewer’s body in a way that speaks to the historical materialist context that has shaped the viewer’s sensorium. The viewer here is drawn to and activated by the ASMR-like qualities of Rottenberg’s work as a testament to

137 Marks, 149.
138 Marks, 153.
139 I am thinking here specifically of merging the so-called feminist new materialist and feminist historical materialist or marxist feminist concerns.
the need for sensuous rejuvenation, soothing intimacy, co-presence, and non-instrumental pause—practices and values rarely given space in the life of human capital and extractive labor. At the same time, the sensible pleasure that is felt while processing Rottenberg’s images of gendered labor is delivered specifically through the formal tactics that she employs to overcome the proximity without presence of the video medium, namely the use of haptic color, texture, sound, and close-up. In other words, the affective encounter solicited by Rottenberg’s work is both formal and not strictly formal. It is an affective compound of artwork-body-context that is delivered, through the late capitalist specificity of these agents, as an experience of somatic titilation and relief. The works are felt as soothing because they register at the level of the viewer’s body a deficit in necessary resources for reproduction that is specific to late capitalist precarity. It is this affective enmeshment that affords the viewer a temporary aesthetic space to acknowledge the need for more replenishing reproductive resources and more sustainable structures of care. The affective encounter that is occasioned by Rottenberg’s art may thus be considered a kind of social reproduction: both in the sense of care, wherein the work rejuvenates the senses, and in the sense of critical counter-hegemonic subject formation, wherein the work holds space for bodily consciousness about our need for replenishment to begin with. This aesthetic opportunity for consciousness raising is solicited through the use of ASMR in Rottenberg’s art.

- ASMR -

The idea that ASMR’s appeal may be rooted in a late capitalist need for more intimacy or care is not new. It exists as a central question within the still young scholarly writing on ASMR. Yet within this literature, most of the attention that is paid to a desire for
increased intimacy/care in late capitalism tends to be concentrated on the genre of ASMR known as whisper videos. In these videos, intimacy is created between an—almost exclusively—female-identified ASMR artist and the viewer through whispered words of praise, solicited relaxation, and framing techniques that simulate a close physical proximity between the ASMR artist and the spectator across the digital screen. It is debated in the discourse on ASMR whether these videos successfully deliver care or whether, as one psychoanalytically informed critic has put it, the videos “only seem to stage a kind of perfectly caring satisfaction” while delivering instead a “distanced falseness” that “is exactly what the ASMR community craves.” I am interested in the prospect that what is craved is not actual physical intimacy but something more akin to what Elizabeth Bernstein has theorized as a neoliberal mode of “bounded” intimacy that, I would argue, responds to the lack of boundaries characteristic of human capital subjectification.

Given the nature of Rottenberg’s work, however, the issue of interpersonal intimacy is slightly beside the point. This is because Rottenberg’s art does not employ the techniques of whisper videos. Her work aligns with a different style of ASMR, namely those videos focused on objects, textures, and sounds. In this equally popular genre of Youtube ASMR content, there is no speaking subject in the video at all. The image is cropped in a medium close-up to highlight the arms and the—always manicured—hands of the ASMR artist as she

141 For example of whisper videos, see https://www.youtube.com/user/GentleWhispering
143 See Bernstein Temporarily Yours.
manipulates objects ranging from cheap commodities of the sort one sees in *Cosmic Generator* to homemade craft stuffs such as slime. The point of the ASMR artist’s gestures is to generate the kind of textured, isolated, and binaural-microphoned audio that might produce what Michel Chion has called “materializing sound indices”—a concept he uses to describe the way we sometimes feel the material trace of the object which has created a cinematic sound.\(^{144}\) Intimacy here is produced not through the simulation or satisfaction of interpersonal relation, but rather through affective, mimetic, materialist enmeshment.

Rottenberg’s 2019 video *Spaghetti Blockchain* draws on this object-oriented style of ASMR directly. Regardless of whether the viewer identifies as having the autonomous sensory meridians response trigger that ASMR is named for, viewers seem to agree that *Spaghetti Blockchain* is sensibly enthralling. New York Times critic Martha Schwenden has described the work as “seducing the viewer with curious sounds and images” that create an “under-the-skin-effect.” She goes on, this haptic quality “might be [the work’s] most successful aspect […] in a world where we’re supposedly ‘connected’ by technology yet subject to epidemics of alienation, loneliness, anxiety, and depression.”\(^{145}\) Adrian Searle of *The Guardian* has written that the work is “hypnotic,” “discombobulating,” and “visually and aurally arresting.”\(^{146}\) And Dan Cameron has expressed in the *Brooklyn Rail* that Rottenberg’s

\(^{144}\) See Chion’s *Audio-Vision.*

\(^{145}\) Schwenden, “Mika Rottenberg’s ‘Easypieces’ Transports You to Parts Unknown.”


\(^{146}\) Searle, “‘It’s hard not to panic’ – Istanbul Biennial targets waste, greed, garbage, and gorgons.”

aesthetic techniques create an “intimate nearness.” These critics do not claim to be physiologically susceptible to ASMR, and yet they attest to the material and historical materialist capacity for Rottenberg’s work to draw the viewer in.

Like her other most recent pieces, Spaghetti Blockchain weaves several geographically distinct strands of footage together through juxtaposition to create a barely narrative storyscape. The video includes footage from four locations: a studio space in which Rottenberg filmed a series of ASMR activities with the help of several performers; the world’s largest particle physics or “antimatter” laboratory called CERN, which is located on the border of Switzerland, France, and Italy; the Green Thumb Farms in Maine, which uses leading-edge potato picking technologies; and the mountain side in Tuva (a southern Siberian republic of Russia) where Rottenberg hired a local crew to film Choduraa Tumat—the lead member of the all-female Tuvan throat singing group Tyva Kyzy—as she stands alone singing, surrounded by the airiness of an open field. Despite the fact that Rottenberg has explicitly identified the work as having a “hexagonal” form and portraying an “ASMR factory,” Spaghetti Blockchain might be the hardest of Rottenberg’s all quite challenging works to explain. This is perhaps not incidental, given the difficulty also experienced when trying to understand the social significance and technical apparatus of blockchain itself. Indeed, if Rottenberg’s artistic project can be understood as an effort to represent the nearly inexpressible in accessible language, as New Museum curator Margot Norton suggests above, Spaghetti Blockchain bumps the viewer up against the limits of such cognitive

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accessibility and lands the viewer squarely in the grip of affective inertia that is characteristic of an ASMR experience.

- Spaghetti Blockchain -

Spaghetti Blockchain has no narratable narrative. It proceeds nonetheless through the multifaceted movement that is made possible through cinema. This includes the movement of the camera that zooms out in areal shots, the global movement of rotating or rolling apparatuses within the frame, the acute movement of arms and hands maneuvering materials also within the frame, and the editing movement of pacing, juxtaposition, and visual or audio resemblances that draw a trace across frames. Through these techniques, Rottenberg achieves a sense of narrativity in the absence of narrative by building up and releasing tension while weaving select images into the afterimage of others. In once set of juxtaposed scenes, for example, an image of a block of clay being scored by a woman’s hand with a small metal tool cuts to an arial shot of the scored earth on the farm as a large agricultural tool gleans the land for potatoes. Throughout the whole work, moreover, the guttural sound of the Tuvan throat singer travels beyond the medium close-up image of her standing alone singing within the landscape, effectively setting the soundtrack to the images of activity in the ASMR factory and eventually blending indistinguishably into the hum of a massive server that is pictured from the CERN antimatter factory. These resemblances—on the one hand between a block of clay being manipulated for ASMR purposes and cultivated land being manipulated for mass agriculture, on the other between the ancient tradition of throat singing and the technical machinery of a massive server—never resolve into conceptual sense. Their analogy remains visual and sonic in the work. This last attribute marks Spaghetti
*Blockchain* as somewhat distinct from the other videos discussed. Where the feet in *NoNoseKnows* and the Lucky Cat or tunnel portal in *Cosmic Generator* work cognitively to establish a map of the imaginative worlds Rottenberg creates, the resemblances here produce no such spacial proximity. They function more like a list of discrete yet mimetic material transformations—transformations, that is, which occur both diegetically within the imagery of the film, and performatively to the viewer’s body. As Julia Brian-Wilson suggests in her interview with Rottenberg, these pairings don’t necessarily work “conceptually,” yet they “resonate in the body to create similar somatic feelings.”

Perhaps most keenly in *Spaghetti Blockchain* then we see a shift in emphasis from the cognitive-narrative to the somatic-affective registers of Rottenberg’s work.

Nonetheless, if we take Rottenberg’s suggestion to interpret *Spaghetti Blockchain* as an ASMR factory, some sense of narrative becomes available. Within the factory we find a rotating and disorienting hand-built hexagonal space lifted up on a vertical plane that is also intended to suggest a number—it actually appears like more than 6—of brightly colored, monochromatic cubicles which exist on a horizontal plane. Each cubicle contains a different activity that is being performed by differently raced female arms, each with candy-colored manicured nails. The arms reach into the frame from off screen to manipulate a particular material in a specific way. A hand taps its fingers across colored plastic magnetic marbles making a tapping sound that echos back to the sorting of pearls in *NoNoseKnows*. A series of individual hands across a number of deeply satisfying shots use a butchers knife to cut slices off a number of differently colored, opaque spheres of jelly. Each time this gesture gives off

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a wet suction sound as the knife slowly cuts through the quivering tube and bleeds a drip of water until the circular slice lands on the countertop with a plop. In other scenes, the same jelly tube stands up on its end as another arm reaches in to slap the quivering, jiggling form, producing a blubbering sound until the hand reaches back in with attentive care to steady the form. Another hand squeezes the rubber pump of an old fashion perfume dispenser, spraying low-quality hair dye onto the back of an anonymous man's balding head. Other hands kneed cyan-colored dough in a close-up shot. Another arm holds a small scoring tool, scraping the surface of a brown block of clay. While still another hand shakes salt onto some kind of mounted soap-foam, causing it to fizzle as it dissolves. In an ultimately satisfying shot buried amongst the rest, all of the arms reach in from off screen and, with lighters in hand, set on fire small marshmallows that cap the ends of uncooked sticks of spaghetti that have been assembled into a tinker-toy like geometric shape which might likely represent the decentralized network of connections optimized in blockchain. In another scene, a PVC pipe contraption with a flat circular plain on its end comes down from top off screen and swiftly squashes the spaghetti structure. A thin cracking crush like that of bones produces a nerve-tingling sensation. And even more activity takes place in the implied center of the hexagon, where one finds an industrial-grade griddle ready to set off a series of material transformations. A drip of water comes down from off screen to sizzle upon contact with the griddle and evaporate into a puff of steam. A hand plops a slice of the jelly roll onto the griddle, applying slight pressure and rotating the circle with its fingertips as the jelly slice melts into a puddle of milky, colored liquid. The whites of an egg frying turn brown, bubble, and pop. And finally, a number of cotton candy bundles melt into a boiling and hardened
mess of flesh-like technicolor sugar, leaving the viewer with a close-up image that looks like something one might risk finding when typing their medical symptoms into Google search or WebMD. It is hard, with all of this, for the viewer to turn away.

At the level of diegetic content, *Spaghetti Blockchain* marks a slight departure from Rottenberg’s other work. It no longer presents an image of women in scenes of manufacturing or white collar work; the women here have fully moved into the terrain of creative labor associated with human capital entrepreneurship. Rottenberg continues to feature an all female cast and hire women who, as she has elsewhere put it, “advertise themselves or are renting out their bodies or… a part of their bodies” on the internet.\(^{149}\)

Videos of Choduraa Tumat throat singing, for example, are prominently featured when one searches Tuvan throat singing on Youtube. In this way, *Spaghetti Blockchain* indeed continues to present the gendered logic of neoliberal labor at a non-diegetic or documentary-like level. Nonetheless, the work departs from representing the way vital resources are extracted from gendered bodies.

Instead, the emphasis of this piece is on the way human efforts manipulate the vital resources of non-human material, and for Rottenberg also, the way “material has a kind of intelligence and ability to influence other materials.”\(^{150}\) This theme can be seen in *Spaghetti Blockchain* through the unexpected visual and sonic affinities she creates between human and non-human materiality (for example the Tuvan throat singer’s guttural vocal vibrations, which are already modeled mimetically off of nature, to the massive CERN server and the

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\(^{150}\) Rottenberg, *Easypieces*, 12..
ASMR-produced sounds). In her own words, Rottenberg states, “I like how one very bodily sound, from the bottom of your belly, and the other, the sound of technology—mainly the sound of the fans cooling the servers—connected so well together, and how they connected to this other ‘body of sounds’ I produced in the studio.”151 Within the diegetic content of the artwork such affinities affirm “humans’ relationship with matter” and matter’s “agency and intelligence.”152

As such, Spaghetti Blockchain foregrounds Rottenberg’s long-standing interest in the animate agency and transformative capacities of the objects, and not simply subjects, of labor. Rottenberg explains that for her, the question of object agency allows one to think more about the porous boundary between “where the self ends and the world begins.”153 She frames this emphasis on material agency in her most recent work, moreover, as a shift in interest from the writing of Marx on material transformation to that of “feminist new materialists” Dianne Coole and Samantha Frost (who’s 2010 edited collection New Materialisms she has more recently come across). As Rottenberg puts it: “If Marx talks about ‘dead labor’ and an energy or vitality that’s trapped in everything, New Materialisms is about the material itself having agency. This is not a new idea: it’s basically animism.”154

I am not particularly interested in the ontological claims of feminist new materialism here, or rather I am only interested in a feminist new materialist approach to materiality that also includes a feminist historical materialist approach to power. This is quite possible and

151 Rottenberg, 21.
152 Rottenberg, 22.
153 Rottenberg, 21.
154 Rottenberg, 26.
what I mean when I suggest a both-and method to Rottenberg’s work above. Regardless, however, I include Rottenberg’s comments—and specifically her acknowledgment of the indigenous foundations to materialist thinking—for the clarity they lend to why she might have woven the tradition of Tuvan throat singing into a work on ASMR. Throat singing and ASMR unite as two very different yet similar cultural practices of expanding one’s attentiveness to the mimetic porousness that exists between object, body, and world. We may understand them, in other words, as practices of aesthetic, affective, or mimetic epistemology in which one comes to know in intimate connection with the material world. These practices of aesthetic disposition that the viewer is also drawn mimetically into when experiencing Rottenberg’s art, are felt as stimulating, soothing, seducing, arresting, and intimate, to refer to the language used by critics above. In other words, if *Spaghetti Blockchain* is “about” something at the level of diegetic content, it is the affective labor that the artist—here the Tuvan throat singer and the ASMR artist as much as Rottenberg herself—performs by providing necessary reproductive resources through affective enmeshment.

**Realism in the Balance**

I end this chapter by returning to the concept of cognitive mapping. Within Jameson’s extensive and systematic body of writing on aesthetics and politics (amongst other things), cognitive mapping is often noted as one of the least resolved yet most important concepts. I am interested in the concept here first and foremost because of the way that Rottenberg’s art brings it to mind, and secondly because of the position that cognitive

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155 In the preface to *The Geopolitical Aesthetic*, Colin MacCabe for example has written that cognitive mapping is the “least articulated but also the most crucial of the Jamesonian categories” (xiv).
mapping holds as a go-to answer within critical theory when considering how art might be political in late capitalism.

Jameson himself is clear in his still incisive text *Postmodernism* that art’s most pressing political task in late capitalism is to perform the pedagogic task of cognitive mapping. There is little ambiguity in Jameson’s writing on this point. If art is to be political in late capitalism it should aim to offer viewers a representation of the total economic world system in order to inform our ability to collectively act. On this view, the visual and narrative representational forms of art are well suited to the task of depicting the social forces that shape individual experience. Art as such would offer a force of resistance against dominant ideologies. And this much is indeed widely understood amongst scholars of Jameson’s work: the aim of an aesthetics of cognitive mapping is not so much Truth as consciousness raising and pragmatic knowledge. Art may remain art, with all its fantastic capacities, so long as it brings forth a materially grounded sense of the overarching structures we are embedded within.

Thus, when critics refer to a certain uncertainty about the concept of cognitive mapping they are neither referring to an ambiguity about cognitive mapping’s goals, nor the concept’s relevance to contemporary art. The open-ended nature of cognitive mapping has to do instead with what exactly an aesthetic of cognitive mapping might look like. This is

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156 See for example *Postmodernism*, 50.
157 *Cartographies of the Absolute* and *The Jameson Reader* offer two clear and thorough explanations of cognitive mapping toward this end. Hardt and Weeks write for example in *The Jameson Reader* that the goal of cognitive mapping “is not to arrive at Truth with certainty, but rather to produced adequate, practical knowledge” (23).
because Jameson himself has said he doesn’t yet know. In their well received elaboration of Jameson’s work, Alberto Toscano and Jeff Kinkle explain that from Jameson’s first articulation of the concept—which they identify as “a combative conference presentation in the mid-eighties”—Jameson never claimed to be describing an aesthetics of cognitive mapping that already exists. Instead, they argue, cognitive mapping has always operated as a proposition or call in Jameson’s writing. As they put it, Jameson issued cognitive mapping as a call for the "elaboration of a cultural and representational practice adequate to the highly ambitious (and, Jameson suggests, ultimately impossible) task of depicting social space and class relations in our epoch of late capitalism or postmodernity." The one clue readers of Jameson and Jameson himself do offer toward this end is that cognitive mapping would definitively not involve a literal map.

I bring all of this up because I find it noteworthy that the didactic, narrative, and ocularcentric connotations of both “cognitive” and “map” remain unchallenged in scholarly approaches to cognitive mapping despite consensus that cognitive mapping would not entail

158 Jameson writes in Postmodernism, "An aesthetic of cognitive mapping—a pedagogical political culture which seeks to endow the individual subject with some new heightened sense of its place in the global system—will necessarily have to [...] invent radically new forms in order to do it justice" (54).

159 Toscano and Kinkle, Cartographies of the Absolute, 7.

160 Toscano and Kinkle, 7.

161 Jameson writes, “Since everyone knows what a map is, it would have been necessary to add that cognitive mapping cannot (at least in our time) involve anything so easy as a map” P 409. Hardt and Weeks also write, “The metaphor of mapping, however, is somewhat misleading, as Jameson himself points out, because it makes the endeavor seem easier and more concrete than it really is and, more important, it implies that the representation can have a mimetic relation to reality” 22-23. And Toscano and Kinkle write that cognitive mapping is a concept “which was meant to have a kind of oxymoronic vaule and to transcend the limits of mapping altogether” (416).
the literalness of a map. I suspect this is because any move away from the intelligibility of
cognitive meaning would throw the action-oriented aim of cognitive mapping into question.
Consider Toscano and Kinkle’s writing for instance when they explain that “[w]orks
emerging under the banner of this aesthetic would enable individuals and collectives to
render their place in a capitalist world-system intelligible,” that “[t]he absense of a practice of
orientation” is “debilitating for political action,” and that "[w]hat is at stake is the figurability
or representability of our present and its shaping effect on political action.”

Across this literature one finds the idea that cognitive *intelligibility* and the *orientation* of an aerial view are
necessary pre-conditions to effective political action. I read Rottenberg’s art as a challenge to
this premise for two reasons. First, we are not often afforded the time to wait to have a
sense of orientation before we must act. And second, we should be well aware at this point
(as affirmed in the literature on post-critique) that even good structural knowledge doesn’t
necessarily translate into an individual no less collective will to act.

My attentiveness to a different approach to cognitive mapping in Rottenberg’s art
has been informed by my own reading of Jameson’s concept in a prior moment of his
writing, one that reaches back beyond the conference address and Postmodernism book that
both date to the late ‘80s – early ‘90s. I find the concept instead within Jameson’s 1977
conclusion to the Aesthetics and Politics reader. Extending Jameson’s thinking about
cognitive mapping back into this prior moment does not change its historical
periodization—we are still solidly located within what most theorists would identify as

\[^{162}\text{Toscano and Kinkle, 7-8.}\]
\[^{163}\text{Jameson writes in the conclusion of “a disease of that mapping function whereby the individual subject projects and models his or her insertion into the collectivity” (212).}\]
neoliberalism or late capitalism. It does, however, situate Jameson’s thinking about cognitive mapping more squarely within the question of “realism” that stretches from his reading of the Bloch-Lukács debate in this reader, to his recent (and otherwise seemingly disconnected) 2013 book *Antinomies of Realism*.

I argue that it is critical to contextualize the concept of cognitive mapping in Jameson’s writing on realism in order to balance what tends to be an over emphasis on the “didactic” or intelligibly narrative way cognitive mapping is understood. As Jameson argues at length in *Antinomies of Realism*, realism—which is to say, the aesthetic form at any historical moment that is granted the epistemological force of representing the real—is not synonymous with narrative intelligibility. Despite the fact that colloquial understandings of realism tend to privilege narrative, Jameson argues that from the turn of the 20th century onward, that which we call realism (particularly in literature but also in film) has actually been an aesthetic register which occupies the tension between narrative intelligibility or orientation and affective unintelligibility or presence. Contemporary realism contains both of these “two chronologies,” as Jameson puts it, of “storytelling” and “narrative situation” on the one hand, and “affect” or “the scenic impulse” on the other. For a contemporary work of art to have realist grip, an “irrevocable antagonism between” these two “twin (and entwined) forces” must be maintained; they can “never fold back into one another in some ultimate reconciliation and identity.” What better example might there be than Rottenberg’s art, as a work which revels in the dynamic tension between affective

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165 Jameson, 11.
enthralment and a teased-yet-denied sense of narrative intelligibility. It is exactly the charged unresolve between these two entwined forces of narrative and affect that enables the viewer to occupy a disorientated sense of bodily knowing when encountering Rottenberg’s art. I call this aesthetic affective mapping not to refute the role of cognitive intelligibility, but rather to throw these two elements back in to balance and keep any presumption that cognitive mapping should be didactic in check.

It has been a wager of this chapter that emphasizing the didactic role of art, as Toscano and Kinkle above explicitly do, without also emphasizing art’s aesthetic capacity for affective unintelligibility, falls short of the political task of cognitive mapping, for three reasons: 1) didactic art fails to take hold or affectively enmesh with the historically situated sensibilities of the late capitalist viewer, 2) approaching cognitive mapping as a didactic aesthetic overemphasizes the role of revealing structure and fails to, quoting Hardt and Weeks, do “justice to both the phenomenological richness of individual existence and the immensity and complexity of the global world system to which life is bound”166 (emphasis added), and finally 3) rendering the pedagogic role of art synonymous with didacticism underestimates affect as an non-cognitive experience which precisely activates bodily ways of knowing embedded within the historically situated, contextually infolded subject. To appropriate Lukács’ pithy title in his 1938 response to Bloch over the polities of aesthetics, realism is currently in the balance. Rottenberg’s haptic aesthetic helps balance our approach to the aesthetics of cognitive mapping by challenging the desire for didactic or narrative intelligibility that we might habitually fall back on when we want art to be pedagogic or, to

put it simply, when we expect art to stop being art and become critique. Why not instead recognize the way art’s affective registers not only activate embodied knowledge, but also offer the kind of sensible rejuvenation that might actually, in this historical moment, be more important than knowledge for our ability to politically act.
2

This Work Was Needed

I pick up this chapter where I left off in the last, with the claim that art’s most forceful political capacity in late capitalism may actually be its ability to provide sensible reproductive resources rather than its capacity to provide critical knowledge. In the first chapter I take up Mika Rottenberg’s quasi-narrative video art in order to model a both-and approach to art that balances an emphasis on representational reading with an insistence on the affective dynamics of the work. In this chapter I take up a limit case: the non-representational, anti-narrative minimalist sculpture of Roni Horn (1955, b. New York). I do so in order to develop a theory of the way that art’s aesthetic dimensions may provide somatic reproductive resources. These resources should be understood as political in the context of late capitalism, even when the art appears seemingly apolitical at the level of content. Ultimately I argue that the encounter with Horn’s minimalist sculpture does not tell us anything about the world we live in. Rather, it momentarily releases the body from the sensible organization of our current world.

Below I elaborate what I mean by the sensible organization of our current world through what I call the “neoliberal sensorium.” Drawing on insights from a range of theorists interested in the affective tendencies of neoliberalism and the cultural politics of emotion, I offer a picture of our neoliberal sensorium that is characterized by what I identify
as a somatic disposition of “contraction.” In the context of our milieu of contraction, works of art such as Horn’s occasion a counter-hegemonic disposition of “dilation” that affirms our critical capacity to want a different, actually rejuvenating world. Thus, far from being escapist or compensatory, the aesthetic encounter with Horn’s non-narrative art operates as a spur for utopian feeling and a resource for necessary reproductive revitalization.

My interest in the non-representational politics of Horn’s minimalist sculpture—and, perhaps, minimalism more broadly—may be introduced by turning to an essay on Horn’s work by the late artist Felix Gonzalez-Torres (1957-1996, b. Cuba). Gonzalez-Torres’s essay “1990: L.A., ‘The Gold Field’” provides a rich object of material history that details the chance encounter with Horn’s work *The Gold Field* amongst the confluence of neoliberal austerity measures and biopolitical abandonment—specifically the US-based AIDS crisis—that were both underway in the late 1980s. By way of an entry to my argument as a whole, I wish to offer a brief close reading of Gonzalez-Torres’s essay that is warranted both for the echoes it sounds back toward my first chapter and for the anticipatory resonance it sounds toward our current political moment.


Gonzalez-Torres’s essay opens with a forceful account of neoliberal restructuring that is imbued with a sense of frustration toward public inaction:

1990: Already ten years into trickle down economics, a rise in cynicism, growing racial and class tension, and the widening gap between the very rich and the rest of us. L.A. before the riots of 1992. A time of defunding vital social programs, the abandonment of the ideals on which our country was supposedly founded. The erasure of history. The Savings and Loan bailout with our tax dollars. “The economic boom” of the Reagan Empire thanks to the tripling of the national deficit. The explosion of the information industry, and at the same time the implosion of meaning. […] How could the famous "taxpayer" remain idle and voiceless when for
every dollar we spent for welfare the government spent six dollars for the Savings and Loan orgy? That was our money that ended up paying for mega takeovers, super mergers, environmentally destructive “developments,” and bigger and better (now empty) office spaces. Because it does not mean anything. The American family doesn’t know how to get upset [...].

From the very first line of his essay through the next two paragraphs, Gonzalez-Torres details the accelerated transfer of public wealth to private interests that was initiated under the Reagan administration. In a now familiar account of neoliberal restructuring, these political-economic adjustments include the defunding of Keynesian social programs, the use of public tax dollars to supplement private finance institutions, and the privileging of corporate real estate development over affordable housing. As Gonzalez-Torres goes on to detail through a series of statistics in the following two paragraphs, this restructuring also included an increase in the ratio of housing to military government spending (from 1:5 in 1980 to 1:31 in 1989), an increase in the number of reported Americans living in mobile homes (nearly 16 million, or 1 in 16, by the end of the decade), a 130% increase in the number of people incarcerated, a 21% increase in the number of children living in poverty, and the highest proportion of pregnant women without prenatal care in 20 years, disproportionately affecting black women in particular. By including these statistics, Gonzalez-Torres achieves two things: First, he offers a vivid image of the material consequences of what we would now call neoliberalism in the US, and second, he raises the problem of representation that I address in my first chapter under the term “cognitive mapping.” As Gonzalez-Torres puts it, “[t]he list of hard data from that fabulous decade”

1 See Gonzalez-Torres’s re-published essay online: https://www.art-agenda.com/features/237616/felix-gonzalez-torres-s-1990-l-a-the-gold-field
alone is “depressing,” but it is “[e]specially [depressing] in the face of public inaction and the absence of an organized reaction to so many devastating statistics…” Information, he writes, has become meaningless. As he makes clear in the passage quoted above, increased circulation and availability of information simply has not been enough to insight political action.

It is not obvious, considering this interest in the problem of representation as it pertains to the need for political action, why Gonzalez-Torres would turn from his description of neoliberalism to a work of non-representational minimalist art. The Gold Field consists of a rectangular sheet of annealed gold, a fraction of a millimeter in depth, placed directly on the floor. Ever so thin, ever so fragile, this 49 x 60 inch sheet of pure gold sits alone in the gallery casting subtle halos of gold glow in the gaps where the foil lifts slightly from the ground. As Horn describes it, “I wanted to put the gold out there, self-sufficient, purified to the fullness of what it is and laid out on the floor—not as an accompaniment to some other idea, but just itself.”

It is, in other words, just a sheet of gold, not a metaphor for or representation of something more.

It is only in this turn to Horn’s minimalist sculpture that the question of care (over representation) is revealed. While Gonzalez-Torres’s essay as a whole points to the need for better understandings and better narratives of the political events of the day, the status of Horn’s work in Gonzalez-Torres’s essay points to a very different kind of need. Namely, that of a non-narrative need that is spurred from the feeling of indeed knowing, on a bodily level,

3 Quoted in Neri, “Roni Horn: To Fold,” within Roni Horn (2000), 34.
the reality of biopolitical abandonment all too well. It is, in other words, possible to read Gonzalez-Torrez’ essay as grappling with both the crisis in representation that is precipitated by late capitalism, and the crisis in care that is intensified by neoliberal privatization, austerity, and abandonment. We find in the latter concern a theory of the politics of aesthetics that is located within ordinary labors of sensible rejuvenation over and above the aspirational promise of finally arriving at the right representational knowledge.

Consider the following long quote, located in the essay after the above account of neoliberal restructuring:

L.A. 1990. Yes, it was very depressing, and very hard to sustain any sense of hope in such a bleak social landscape. How is one supposed to keep any hope alive, the romantic impetus of wishing for a better place for as many people as possible, the desire for justice, the desire for meaning, [the desire for] history?

L.A. 1990. Ross and I spent every Saturday afternoon visiting galleries, museums, and thrift shops, going on long, very long drives all around L.A., enjoying the “magic hour” when the light makes everything gold and magical in the city…Ross was dying right in front of my eyes. Leaving me…It was a time of desperation, yet of growth too.

1990, L.A. The Gold Field. How can I deal with The Gold Field? I don’t quite know. But The Gold Field was there. Ross and I entered the Museum of Contemporary Art, and without knowing the work of Roni Horn we were blown away by the heroic, gentle horizontal presence of this gift. There it was, in a white room, all by itself, it didn't need company, it didn't need anything. Sitting on the floor, ever so lightly. A new landscape, a possible horizon, a place of rest and absolute beauty, waiting for the right viewer willing and needing to be moved…Ross and I were lifted. That gesture [of the work's presence] was all we needed to rest, to think about the possibility of change. This showed the innate ability of an artist proposing to make this place a better place. How truly revolutionary.

This work was needed.⁴

What strikes me most about Gonzalez-Torres’s account of *The Gold Field* in the quote above is the lucid insight it offers into the triangulation between structural precarity, care work, and aesthetics. When Gonzalez-Torres happened upon Horn’s work on a weekend afternoon in 1990, it was a time not only of political darkness but also personal hardship, as he and his partner Ross Laycock built their days around rituals of care in anticipation of Ross’s death from AIDS just a few months later in 1991. It was in this context that Gonzalez-Torres was “blown away” by *The Gold Field’s* simple “presence.” It is the seemingly apolitical, non-narrative character of Horn’s work that lends Gonzalez-Torres rare resources for what he calls the “revolutionary” ability to “rest” and “think about the possibility of change.” Horn’s minimalist sculpture does not offer a critique of the bleakness of the world. Rather, it offers necessary and momentary relief from it. What is most forceful about Horn’s art, in otherwords, is the critically necessary relief *and not* the pointed critique provided by its gentle chance encounter.

The overriding force of the affective encounter with Horn’s art that is given space in Gonzales-Torres’s essay, despite the context of political urgency that surrounds it, offers an occasion to think more carefully about the left political and identity-invested role of non-representational, non-didactic art in late capitalism. Following the trajectory of Gonzalez-Torres’s essay, with an eye also toward the contemporary U.S. political milieu in which reproductive resources are scarce but there is no lack of political analysis or identity-based critique, I am not convinced that what we most urgently need of art is to provide more maps, narratives, or critiques. It often follows that for art to be political it is assigned the task of representation, either by resolving the so-called crisis of representation precipitated by late
capitalism (for example through an aesthetic of cognitive mapping), or by lending representation to an under-represented identity group. I attend to Horn’s art in order to consider and alternative thesis about the politics of art in late capitalism: namely, the concrete way that aesthetics offers a place for developing counter-hegemonic practices of somatic disposition which operate as a kind of care amidst the dominant affective dispositions of neoliberal culture. I am compelled by the non-narrative, non-representational, so-called disinterested aesthetics of minimalism here, and suggest that these qualities should be reconsidered in the interest of a collective body tightened and strained by the biopolitical governance of neoliberal affect. Thinking about art as an aesthetic, affective, or sensible resource for strengthening our capacity for critical dreaming and breathing—which is to say utopian revitalisation and social reproduction—provides an alternative to established frameworks of thinking art’s political importance as either one of critique and representation or else destined to complicit, compensatory distraction. Minimalism certainly does not lodge a critique, provide representation for an underrepresented group, or offer an orienting narrative of economic structures. Yet dismissals of so-called disinterested or autonomous art need reattunement in the context of the neoliberal sensorium. One misses the affective operations choreographed by such work when they view it as simply apolitical.

In what follows I turn to the aesthetics of minimalism within Horn’s body of work and argue for the counter-intuitive political value of its non-narrativity. The challenge I set for myself is to articulate the politics of non-didactic, non-representational aesthetics at play here. I share Horn’s contention that her work does not mean anything metaphorically, linguistically, or politically; the works do not offer any critique or produce knowledge about
the real toward raising the spectator’s political consciousness. Yet the work does do something political, or in the least critical, in the context of neoliberal biopolitics. Theorizing the politics of such non-narrative art requires different concepts than the heuristics currently established in aesthetics and politics discourse. As mentioned above, I propose the concepts of contraction and dilation to meet this task. Before moving to Horn’s art, let me sketch their meanings.

- Contraction, Dilation -

My choice of the term dilation has been influenced by the affect theories of Henri Bergson and, by extension, Gilles Deleuze. Neither Bergson nor Deleuze explicitly use the term dilation in their writing.⁵ I come to it through the contrasting tendency of contraction, which they do elaborate. Briefly put, contraction refers to an ontological disposition that is geared toward the usefulness of habit and reductive means-ends thinking.⁶ In a state of contraction we tend to recognize resemblances rather than differences or nuance. Our

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⁵ Bergson uses the french word “détente” as the opposing tendency to “contraction,” while the translators of Deleuze’s Bergsonism variously use “relaxation” or “expansion” to suggest a detensioning or release of pressure that allows an element (such as gas) to open. See the translators’ introduction to Bergsonism pp. 9-10. I use “dilation” in accordance with Bergson’s memory cone diagram, which indicates a movement of opening between, on the one hand, the cone’s point of contraction located on the “plane of actuality” where action, language, and sociality happen, and on the other, the uppermost circumference of “virtuality” where dreaming, day dreaming, memory, and intuition happen. I find in this image a strong description of the practice of aesthetics, which can be understood as an exercise in uselessness (temporarily withdrawn from sociality, action, and intelligibility) that is vitally useful (in offering room for dreaming or the expansion of sense and sensibility). Bergson’s scheme suggests that the movement between contraction and dilation is what makes vitality strong. As he writes, “[g]ood sense, or practical sense”—and I would add the political goal of an inhabitable world—is “probably nothing but” a life lived “between the two extremes” of contraction and dilation (Matter and Memory, 153). It is my contention that neoliberal affect tends too strongly toward contraction at the expense of dilation.

⁶ Bergson, Matter and Memory, 169.
perception is “confined to” or “inhibited by” habituated thinking and feeling. For Bergson, this is useful because it allows us to call upon past in-kind experiences and draw on preexistent understandings so that clear options for action can be readily available. It is, in other words, a mode of pattern recognition and action-as-reaction. We are contracted regularly when we occupy the realm of society in which we must speak and act with others. Contraction is a practical tendency that we possess out of necessity, yet also one that comes with a set of sacrifices. If we remain “always swayed by habit,” we will “only distinguish in any situation that aspect in which it practically resembles former situations.” We would, in other words, be “incapable, doubtless, of thinking” (emphasis original). Contraction thus names a disposition in which our perception, our thinking, and our feeling are limited “to the necessities of action” and that which already exists. It demands “the greatest possible simplification of our mental life” on Bergson’s account. At the level of cognition and perception then, contraction describes a mode of pattern recognition and a means-ends disposition toward the world.

In combination with Bergson’s interest in contraction as a cognitive disposition, I also use the term to suggest an embodied mode of comportment. Contraction in this sense refers to the tightening of the body under duress. I am thinking here of the way that bodies tense under chronic and acute forms of stress or trauma. Muscles tighten, jaws clench, fists

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7 Bergson, 154, 158.
8 Bergson, 155. This is because cognition, for Bergson, is nothing more than the delay, lag, or slowness afforded by non-action; that which we call cognition is the temporal gap between stimulation and response which may expand our options for action. The aesthetic contemplation afforded by art offers an opportunity for delay. The delay or slowness occasioned in the aesthetic experience of art is, once again, part of what I am calling dilation.
9 Bergson, 154.
10 Bergson, 166.
grip, shoulders tense, breath shortens, circulation constricts, vision blurs, and thought patterns loop—these are all examples of physical contraction. To say that one is “triggered” might be another way of naming the dual physical and perceptual contraction I am describing, whereby possibility is reduced to the pattern-recognition of involuntary reaction and the body assumes a stress-induced tightness.

By contrast, I call the affective disposition occasioned by Horn’s minimalism dilation. It is a term I use to invoke a comported opening of sense.11 In short, I use the word dilation to name a practice of bodily presence and sensory experience that allows for a sensitivity to nuance, unresolved complexity, imaginative thinking-feeling, and slowness. This stands in opposition to the contracted biopolitical aesthetics of, as one theorist of neoliberalism and aesthetics has recently put it, “punctuality, functionality, mobility, and fungibility” that leave us “disembodied and relationship-poor” with each other and the world.12

For Bergson, the nuance and imaginative revitalization afforded by what I am calling dilation becomes available to us when efficiency and immediacy are suspended. In rare circumstances such as sleep, suspension comes naturally. Otherwise, dilation requires effort. In sleep however, we “renounce the interests of effective action and replace ourselves, so to speak, in the life of dreams.” Sleep restores “imaginative life” by allowing us to relax the

11 In defining dilation as a comported opening of sense, I follow the French continental tradition that takes sense (sens) to mean two things. The first idea refers to one’s embodied perception of and being in or with the world. This suggests a way of knowing and being through feeling that is otherwise called “sensation.” The second idea refers to social and cognitive intelligibility, or those registers of being and meaning that appear organized enough to be recognized as “making sense.” Making sense is a prerequisite for evaluating and contesting which sense makes the most sense, and which should be common sense.

12 Van Marle’s “‘Life is Not Simply Fact’: Aesthetics, Atmosphere, and the Neoliberal University,” 308. I will return to this article in the last section of my chapter.
“tension of the nervous system [that is] ever ready during waking hours.”\textsuperscript{13} In sleep, the “needs of the moment” are not pressing. Restful sleep relaxes the body and “prolongs time between stimulation received and reaction,” which is to say, opens the durational lag that Bergson calls consciousness informed by memory. Dreams epitomize dilation. Sleep is thus an exercise in non-acting life during which we can dilate our imagination, rest, and dream. I suggest that aesthetics too offers an opportunity to practice such dilation. It is a waking practice in which the uselessness of art temporarily releases the nervous system from the contracting demands of the moment such that we might critically dream.

In sum, contraction names a comported tightening, an ontological compression of perceived possibility, and a tendency toward efficiency thinking and feeling. In the opposite direction, dilation names an opening of delay at the level of the thinking-feeling body, or what in trauma-informed somatic practices might be called a practice of grounding. Practices of dilation release the nervous system from its tightened, reactionary disposition, allowing thinking and feeling to slow and open toward a wider range of observations, responses, and world-envisioning (rather than pattern-recognizing) possibilities for action. Below I argue that a range of what scholars have identified as the dominant affects of neoliberalism coalesce under the disposition of contraction. Dilation is critical in this context to the extend that it is crucial, or needed, and runs counter to dominant biopolitical affects. It is a practice due to the effort and occasion that it requires. And it is historical to the extent that it’s function or political force is necessarily context dependent.

\textsuperscript{13} Bergson, 154.
It is worth noting at this point that calling attention to the affective force of aesthetics in light of many, much more urgent political problems of the day may appear avoidant, escapist, or irresponsible. The artworks I am about to discuss are consistently tucked away in museums and galleries. They participate, moreover, in upward wealth distribution through art markets and the philanthropic tax write-off system of non-profit institutions. On top of this, the aesthetic disposition I am thinking of operates at the level of the individual body.\textsuperscript{14} I am not arguing that dilation is necessarily scalable in an organized political way either (although it possibly could be). All of these matters are grounds for skepticism that I will address.

Yet there is also something about the practice of aesthetic dilation that feels needed. It is needed for more space, in the realm of appearances or collective sociality, to be “open.” It is needed also for more practices that work against the contracted dispositions—both affective and cognitive—of contemporary living. Paradoxically, dilation is thus an aesthetic or embodied thinking-feeling disposition that at once articulates a historical need, and is practiced by suspending the needs-based demands of immediacy, efficiency, and pattern recognition. It is no doubt a luxury to think about the value of aesthetics as such. And yet, it is also perhaps a fundamental priority, to the extent that aesthetics provides necessary resources for vitality. Aesthetic revitalization does not replace the co-existing need for pointed political organization or cutting political critique, but it can make both ongoing

\textsuperscript{14} While I say “individual” here, I do so only to differentiate it from the political collective. I am not, however, talking about a sovereign or self-same notion of body, nor am I referring to a self-possessed notion of the subject. The body at hand would be better understood as the non-sovereign agential, relational body that is constituted through encounters with other bodies, as for example is theorized in affect theory.
struggles more livable. One might thus read my intervention as insisting on a harm reduction approach to the aesthetics of politics.\textsuperscript{15} I think this is accurate. It is a prefigurative approach as well.\textsuperscript{16} Turning to Horn’s art will allow me to develop this non-purist, utopian theory of the politics of contemporary art.

Horn’s Art

Roni Horn is a New York-based artist known for her multidisciplinary work that explores themes of change, identity, and what she calls “androgyny” against a backdrop of her longterm interlocution with the weather and landscape of Iceland. Much like androgyny, Horn’s art transverses a variety of media—including sculpture, installation, photography, drawing, and writing—while never fully settling into any one category. Much like the weather, her work can also be described as atmospheric, place-making, or even as she has been known to put it, moody. Exhibited widely in the United States and internationally, Horn’s first solo show took place in 1980, following her first of many trips to Iceland in 1975. Her body of exhibited work spans over four decades, including select pieces from her undergraduate BFA at Rhode Island School of Design (1975) and her MFA in sculpture from Yale University (1978). The rich body of exhibition catalogues, short-form essays,

\textsuperscript{15} “Harm reduction” is a movement and social justice framework/approach that has developed as a way to respond to the issue of drug use by acknowledging the fact of drug use—thus meeting people “where they are at” rather than condemning the behavior—and organizing around risk reduction. My interest in harm reduction comes out of volunteer work that I do in Philadelphia with a drug use and sex work or “street economies” grassroots organization in Kensington, a dense region in the nation for opioid use. A harm reduction approach applies here due to the rejection of a moralistic approach to assessing peoples ways of coping with capitalism. Below I explicitly discuss the use of drugs in relation to aesthetics and capitalism when addressing Buck-Morss’s essay “Aesthetics and Anaesthetics.” See the Harm Reduction Coalition website for a list of principles regarding harm reduction: https://harmreduction.org/about-us/principles-of-harm-reduction/

\textsuperscript{16} I offer a definition of prefigurative politics in footnote 71 in chapter 3.
interviews, and artist writings that accompany her work reflect a mature artist with a steady career, a philosophical sensibility, and a distinct talent for articulating the priorities that drive her work.17

Horn’s art provides an interesting case due to the way it simultaneously functions on the art market and embodies aesthetic qualities that are antagonistic to market values. Within the literature on aesthetics and politics, such antagonism toward established common sense is often called aesthetic autonomy or aesthetic negation. To say autonomy is misleading, however; one should foster no false hope that art can exist outside of the market in late capitalism. Yet, art may maintain a tension between being a part of market common sense and antagonistic to it. So-called aesthetic autonomy in contemporary society must thus be understood as a hybrid status that designates art’s position as both autonomous and not.18 Art is not outside of the market yet its antagonistic or negating stance toward the totality of market common sense may affirm the desire and need for a different arrangement of sense. Through the material arrangement of the artwork, something that doesn’t exist may be affirmed.

I bring up the idea of arts semi-autonomy here to link it to the theme of utopian prefiguration that runs through this chapter and my next. The utopian theory posited in the

17 Major US museum exhibitions include the medium-specific solo show focused entirely on her glass sculpture that recently took place at the Nasher Sculpture Center in Dallas in 2017, and a high-profile 2009-10 retrospective organized by the Tate Modern and the Whitney Museum of American Art entitled Roni Horn aka Roni Horn, highlighting the theme of identity and the technique of doubling frequently found in her work. Her art is held in various museum collections including MoMa and the Guggenheim in New York, Krüller-Müller in the Netherlands, and Kunstmuseum in Basel.
18 As Rancière has argued across his body of work, semi-autonomy is the only way art can be critical in the “aesthetic regime” of late capitalism—a period in which the once-posted separate spheres of life and work, culture and economy, and life and art no longer resonate as separate spheres. See for example The Politics of Aesthetics.
aesthetic concept of semi-autonomy is not one of concrete or programatic politics. Rather, the utopian function of art on this model is to affirm that alternative arrangements of sense are possible. This in turn expands the shrinking sense of possibility that comes from living under continued crisis, austerity, and precarity. As Horn explains, it doesn’t matter if we ever arrive at the places we dream of that don’t exist. We nonetheless need these pre-figurative and ephemeral places “that we may never go to. We need them, not for escape, but for measure: of all the places we have been to, and even—of ourselves as well. We need them as a way of balancing what is with what might be…These are places that are at once actual and acts of imagination. They function to keep the world large, hopeful, and unknown.”¹⁹ To undervalue these imaginative places, she continues, “to allow them to be destroyed, is to live in a smaller and meaner world.”²⁰ For Horn, places like art that occupy the tension between what is and what isn’t “offer us extension and breath, hope and faith.”²¹ It is thus misguided to think of art’s utopian function as one of spurring concrete collective action toward an established plan. Rather art may, merely yet powerfully, open room to breathe.

The idea of utopia as a place that is at once actual and an act of imagination can be seen most directly in Horn’s relationship to Iceland. A nation now largely dependent on tourism, Horn admits that the Iceland alive in her mind is a thing of the past. For Horn, Iceland exists in her head as an “Oz” or a “muse.” It was the place that she visited in the formative years of her life as a young queer artist in her 20s, when the mythology of the landscape could be felt as an all-encompassing atmosphere. As she describes it, Iceland at

¹⁹ See Horn, “My Oz” in Roni Horn (2012), 93.
²⁰ Horn, 93.
²¹ Horn, 93.
the time was a place in relative isolation from the forces of globalization and what she has since called the “adrenaline line to social media.”

The barren landscape allowed her to dissipate into the environment and the demands of the weather, outside of the interpellation of pre-established social categories (such as identity) or the reach of technological availability. It was here that Horn trained herself to become sensitized to the pleasure of subtle modulations in those elements which appear to remain the same. The weather and the landscape of Iceland attuned her to perceive minimal shifts in color, texture, density, movement, form, temperature, and pressure. In other words, Iceland cultivated in Horn a practice of dilation. As she explains it, her art has since become a way to practice this mode of attention and occupy the utopia of the missing Iceland that remains in her head.

Spurs for utopian dilation may be found in the formal qualities of subtlety, steadiness, stubbornness, unintelligibility, and slowness in Horn’s art—all qualities that she learned to cultivate in her apprenticeship to the weather and landscape. These attributes generate the semi-autonomous tension of her work as well. They are what makes her work so alluring, while facilitating the work’s ease of circulation on the largely unregulated art market. The formal refinement, material majesty, and non-narrative sparseness of Horn’s aesthetic lends her work to the sensibilities of a design-oriented culture industry with a taste for the reputed edge of formalism but the vapidity of abstraction. On top of this, her steady or slow practice over several decades ensures potential collectors with confidence that her

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23 See “Roni Horn on Politics in Art” and “My Oz,” 93-94 in Roni Horn (2012).

24 See “Roni Horn on Politics in Art” and “My Oz,” 93-94 in Roni Horn (2012).
work is a safe investment. And yet at the same time, the formal abstraction and non-narrativity of Horn’s art also stands stubbornly in resistance to institutional efforts that benefit from framing the work through easily consumable discourse with culturally relevant themes. Horn’s own prolific body of writing insists that her work does not mean anything (despite frequent attempts by critics to find metaphor in the work). One can see the frustration produced by the work’s unintelligibility in the way discourse pools around it. As exemplified in the catalogue of Horn’s major Whitney retrospective Roni Horn aka Roni Horn (2009-10), phrases like “Horn’s practice defies easy categorization” and “It is difficult work to hold on to” are commonly found at the start of essays on her art.25 Thus, while the steadiness of Horn’s career, the flexibility lent by the work’s abstraction, and the formal refinement of the work’s design all contribute to Horn’s status as a “blue chip” investment in the eyes of those with investment capital and a “creative” tech sensibility, the slowness, unintelligibility, and subtlety of the work all also produce the resources for dilation, pause, and novelty. In the latter case, the artwork helps to replenish the senses. In the former, it becomes a tool of surplus value extraction. It is necessary to recognize that these realities co-exist. Upon the bourgeois interests of the art market, Horn’s art nonetheless provides a glimpse of what the sensible world could be, but isn’t: namely, a world that actually feels replenishing.

To better understand the way Horn’s art performs the labor of replenishing that I am calling dilation, it is necessary to approach the art formally. Both a provocative theory of

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25See first two essays in the catalogue Roni Horn aka Roni Horn, 19, 23.
identity, (particularly in its contrast to the popular identity politics often found in the arts) and a much-needed model of reverence to the land (particularly in contrast to the human-caused climate crisis that we face) can be developed out of Horn’s art. I am less interested in these narrative registers than I am in the sensible rejuvenation that her work provides, specifically in light of the crisis in care that I detail in my first chapter, and the subsequent conditions of widespread precariousness and loneliness that I will detail below.

Drawing on Horn’s own language, I suggest that the aesthetic practice of dilation is facilitated by three formal principles which drive her art: material presence, the paradox of androgyny, and doubling (or twinning). The presence of materiality works to dilate the corporeal senses. The paradox of identity challenges categories of recognition. And doubling temporally opens a moment for pause. In the next section of this chapter I will show how dilation constitutes a critical practice more specifically when considered in the context of the contemporary cultural politics of emotion. Below I remain close to Horn’s own thinking and the artworks, as a way of understanding them first on their own terms.

- Material Presence -

The principle of material presence provides a foundation for understanding Horn’s diverse body of work. Horn explains that she is not a “materials based artist” in the way many artists work in a particular medium, but rather someone with “a sensitivity to materials” that has been unforgettable shaped by her time in Iceland. Material concerns

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26 See “No. 294: Roni Horn” interview with Tyler Green in accompaniment with Horn’s show at The Nasher Sculpture Center: https://manpodcast.com/portfolio/no-294-roni-horn/
drive her work more than any cultural, social, or art historical interests. Horn began this way of working during her undergrad practice, when she first started dealing with colored glass. During her senior thesis show in 1975, Horn displayed several hand-sized color-rich glass wedges on custom shelves in an old colonial house. She describes having felt a longing at the time for the experience of stained glass in a church. The modest hand-sized glass wedges that she produced to satisfy this longing were made to sit on little shelves “anywhere you thought you wanted an intense moment of color to occur.” Horn recalls that this way of thinking about the viewer’s sensible, intimate encounter with the materiality, color, and light-modulation choreographed by her work “became a role model for the experiential” in her process moving forward. I am interested in the transformation that takes place in this translation of Horn’s desire for intense sensation—from, that is, the communal and ritual experience of stained glass in a church to the individualized, temporary transcendence that is flexibly made available through the sculpture—but I will return to this factor later.

Attention to materiality is key to engaging Horn’s sculpture for two reasons. First, the principle of materiality connects to Horn’s insistence that her artworks are not metaphorical. Second, her works’ material literalness—that they are just what they physically are and do not represent anything beyond their medium—renders the viewer “more present.” As Horn explains:

27 While I feel no need to be faithful to the artist’s intentions, I agree that the dynamism of her work—the sculptures in particular—is produced through the work’s material sensibility. My training in sculpture and installation makes me inclined to take seriously the space of materiality as a domain of thinking and feeling, even if non-narrative.

28 Horn, “No. 294: Roni Horn” interview with Green.

29 Horn, “No. 294: Roni Horn” interview with Green.
Looking for a metaphor [in the work] can be very limiting, [and] it is usually at the expense of the work. People often reject a work if they can’t find the metaphor. But when metaphor is not there, you have to be more present. I prefer to look at less familiar things, to allow the vocabulary of the work to educate me. It’s the opposite of cloud watching—where you’re projecting yourself onto the cloud, and trying to make it more like yourself.30

As Horn explains, the need to find an intelligible metaphor within her work reflects more about the viewer’s own desire to remain in control (or project themselves onto the work) than anything about the work.31 Material presence by contrast asserts a mode of thinking-feeling in which the viewer must relinquish the desire for cognitive intelligibility. The fact that Horn’s works just are what they literally are—whether a block of colored glass, a sheet of gold foil, or a cylinder of copper—frustrates the viewer’s desire to make cognitive sense of them. The reward of overcoming this frustration, however, is what Horn describes as a “slow process of learning to see what you are [actually] looking at.”32 The minimalist art object asserts its literal status over its representational status in such a way that prompts a felt co-presence, slowing perception and grounding the viewer in the embodiment of their senses.33

30 Horn, Roni Horn (2012), 162.
31 In this way, Horn’s art anticipates a hermeneutic desire for sovereignty that resonates with what Sedgwick has famously called “paranoid reading.”
32 Horn, Roni Horn (2000), 17.
33 Within the discourse of art history, two critics are particularly pertinent here. Most notably with regard to minimalism, art critic Michael Fried has similarly called this the “theatricality” of the “literalist” sculpture, writing in his 1967 essay “Art and Objecthood” that the “literalist sensibility [of modern sculpture] is theatrical because, to begin with, it is concerned with the actual circumstances in which the beholder encounters the literalist work.” Fried introduces the notion to art criticism that minimalist objects phenomenally “confront” the viewer with “a kind of stage presence.” Rosalind Kraus additionally describes the way that modern sculpture has expanded the aesthetic field of the artwork into the terrain of lived experience in her 1979 essay “Sculpture in the Expanded Field.” As she argues, prior to the 1950s and 60s it was conventional for sculpture to operate as an allegorical reference to some other place and time, in the tradition of memorial or monument. By the 50s and
Take for example *The Gold Field*. Horn writes that at the time she made this work, she had been interested in the way that gold is a physical material that is burdened with signification. Gold has become merely a representation of itself, she explains. *The Gold Field* was produced with the goal of “giving the physical reality of gold back to itself.”34 To do so, Horn had a sheet of highly purified, 99.99% pure gold annealed into a very thin and fragile foil. Compelled by the physical properties of pure gold through this process (for example, she notes just how self-adhesive and malleable gold can become when thin), Horn was most surprised to behold the “fire light” glow it produced. In the presence of this glow, “the whole history of mythology,” signification, and violence around gold became, for Horn, literal and material once more. *The Gold Field* estranges the gold material from its cultural signification as a sign of money. It is rendered instead an affective experience of texture, lightness, fragility, and glow.

The social politics involved in reinforcing the auspiciousness of a material whose mythological status has justified histories of colonial violence and cultural genocide are questionable. And yet at the same time, the artwork here negates the exchange value of gold by turning it into a resource for concrete affective or sensible use values such as light, pause, warmth, and opening or breath. The thin foil, placed nonchalantly on the floor, too fragile to be easily moved, loses—at least temporarily—its abstract value and becomes a physically present conduit of experience. For viewers, the gold provides the gift of an intense

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34 Horn, “No. 294: Roni Horn” interview with Green.
concentration of light, similar in experience to the intimate intensities of color provided by the glass wedges mentioned above. The material presence of the gold begets in the beholder a reciprocal presence, now encouraged to engage the material on a sensible rather than cultural or cognitive level. This is important for Horn as a mode of balancing the intellect by re-sensitizing the body to the qualities of objects.

An additional artwork may be useful for understanding the principle of material presence before moving on. Horn’s *Things that Happen Again* (1989) involves two identical copper cylinders or cones placed directly on the floor in (most often two separate, but occasionally the same) adjacent rooms. In this example, Horn discusses the felt presence of what cannot be known or seen. Rather than light or color, her concern here is with the felt presence of weight. The sculptural objects Horn displays are constantly solid. This solidity is on display in the case of her various sized glass blocks, which are constructed through an optimal glass casting process that results in a color-rich translucency. But Horn insists on making her objects solid when they are not transparent as well. It is important that these objects weigh a solid ton, even though the viewer will never know for certain that they are in fact solid. Solid objects possess a different presence, she explains, by which their density can in fact be felt even if not known. As Horn defines it, presence is exactly this phenomena of “the thing sensed, never known.” Like the ASMR, Tuvan throat singing, and haptic qualities of Mika Rottenberg’s art, Horn’s project occasions and opportunity to dilate

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36 Horn, *Roni Horn* (2012), 94.
relational perception and re-sensitize the body to non-cognitive ways of sense-, tactile-, or mimetic-knowing.

- The Paradox of Androgyny -

The second formal principle that Horn speaks regularly of is the paradox of androgyny. Horn’s frequent invocation of androgyny (along with her own gender presentation) has caused critics to regularly interpret her work as being about the fluidity of identity. Yet Horn contends that androgyny functions as a formal concept in her work, including but not limited to subjective identity. This can be seen most clearly in her regard for water as androgynous. One can only interpret such a statement as a metaphor, against Horn’s own instruction, when the concept of androgyny is limited to a claim about the space between masculinity and femininity. Horn defines androgyny instead as a formal operation of movement that refers to shape-shifting, creativity, indecisiveness, and context specificity. It refers to the way that water, for example, absorbs its surroundings and becomes the form of its environment. As Horn puts it, “[w]ater is very elusive, it’s more a state of perpetual relation, it offers a complexity that defines identity as a much more open ended thing.”37 It refers also to the way that a body of water, as she puts it, is “never the same thing twice in itself.”38 This is for Horn the paradox of androgyny: that identity, or any body, is never self-same, considering the way that all bodies absorb their contexts and express the passageways and impasses around them. Water exemplifies this paradox to the extent that it “tolerates” or

37 Horn, Roni Horn (2012), 162.
38 Horn, “No. 294: Roni Horn” interview with Green.
forms to” everything around it while still reading as its own moody self. Put this way then, water offers a guide by which to reconsider the androgyny of subjectivity, rather than the other way around.

While I find Horn’s theory of identity both poetically appealing and resonant with contemporary theories of gender studies, trans studies, and affect theory, the implications regarding subjectivity do not primarily concern me here. I am more interested in the embodied practice of attending to formal paradox that her work occasions. Horn describes this process in her own words in relation to water:

One paradox about water that I return to again and again is how something so intimate and familiar constantly presents itself as unfamiliar. That is a quality of water that I’m attracted to, that it’s possible to have such intimacy with something that will always be unknown to me. When you’re looking at water, you don’t know what you’re looking at, except in the most generic of senses […]. This open-ended quality carries over all of my work.

The attraction that Horn describes registers as a pleasure felt when one becomes estranged from the (useful yet reductive) categories through which we process the world around us. A pleasure gained through renewed intimacy is felt in this practice of perceptual dilation. And this is important, as such pleasure is needed to sustain the difficult process of thinking and feeling with less instrumentality and less immediacy.

Horn’s artworks are thinking-feeling objects for exercising one’s attunement to the way we don’t know what we think we know. To experience the art is to be drawn into a space of open-ended tension. Lines in drawings don’t meet where you think, or thought at

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30 Horn, “No. 294: Roni Horn” interview with Green.
40 Horn, Roni Horn (2012), 162.
first, that they should, yet the image as a whole give the appearance of totality and balance. This visual phenomenon could be embraced in Horn’s work as a powerful metaphor for the utopian possibility of difference and discord within the collective whole—that is, a theory of cooperation which maintains plurality and fissure. But reading the art representationally in this way does very little toward making organizing across difference any easier. The physical practice of looking, slowly, with patience, and with struggle that such drawings require does, however, occasion the development of a comported skill which could help if brought into the dissensual communal space of building worlds through conflict across difference. In the case of Horn’s fragmented drawings, pleasure precisely arrives in the physical effort or haptic strain that is needed to navigate the visual confusion of the drawings’ movement. This is the value of Horn’s art: it offers an occasion to exercise skill in, and even find pleasure in, remaining open to organizations of sense that don’t affirm those categories of sense we bring to the work.

Horn suggests that her artworks prompt the viewer to fall into doubt.41 I am not certain that the cognitive connotation of “doubt” gets it quite right. Rather, the resistance the objects provide to intelligibility, if overcome, is felt as a kind of physical opening of sense—that is, a dilation of sense beyond instrumental sensibility that slows down the thinking and feeling process into an aesthetic activity. This practice offers a moment of healing pause, comported refusal toward instrumentality, and sensible rejuvenation for those subjects whose vital energies are coercively operationalized as human capital or systemically contracted through the daily trauma of looming violence and existential uncertainty. This is

41 Horn, “No. 294: Roni Horn” interview with Green.
increasingly all of us. Aesthetic dilation as such should be understood as a temporary exercise in strengthening one’s non-instrumental capacities by building on the assemblage of skills and needs our world has made of us.

- Doubling/Twinning -

The final formal principle central to Horn’s work is that of doubling. Horn’s art can be understood to refuse the progressive movement of time through this technique. Her work produces a queer, if not macabre, pleasure in the visual stutters of repeated identical images and objects.\(^{42}\) By framing two of the same images of a taxidermy bird side by side, for example, or placing a sculptural copper cone on the floor in one room and an identical one on the floor in the adjacent room, Horn creates gothic twinnings that thicken the span of a given moment through the opacity of that which seems the same yet unintelligibly different. The works haunt the beholder with the felt presence of what is not being said, as if the stillness provoked through repetition suggests an intense hidden or withheld dynamism.

Horn began the method of doubling or twinning in the 1980s with a series of paired sculptures in which geometric volumes, often fabricated in metal, are displayed in two distinct spaces. Things that Happen Again is an example of this. She has gone on to use this technique with framed drawings as well, often repeating one drawing that resembles another across the space of two adjacent rooms such that the viewer cannot definitively tell whether they are the same or not. Horn will also double objects or images in the same room side by side. This can be seen, for example, with the Water Doubles (2013-15) glass sculptures that I

\(^{42}\) I use the term queer here to suggest both the aesthetics of the uncanny associated with gothic twinning, and Elizabeth Freeman’s theory of temporal drag in Time Binds: Queer Temporalities, Queer Histories.
will soon turn to, as well as Horn’s *Dead Owl* (1997) framed diptych of a photographed taxidermy white owl mentioned above. In the separated pieces, the gallery goer is surprised by the reoccurrence of an object they’ve already considered. They might feel annoyed or confused or subtly elated by the deadpan repetition of this gesture. The viewer is left out of the meaning and even the temporality of the joke which renders time strange. The work encourages time to pool across architectural space. In the case of the adjacent doubles, the theatrical interruption of progress once again flexes and frustrates the viewer’s narrative sense-making capacities, as the viewer is confronted with two identical objects or images that seem to have no reason to be presented twice. The continuity that creates unity whereby an object is itself now, and then now, is made discontinuous by representing both of these moments as coexistent repetitions in a shared plane. This flattens the temporal depth of time by spreading it out; the conventional tendency of imagining time as a linear sequence of this *then* the next moment is performatively negated by literalizing the spatialization of time as a simultaneous representation of this *and* the next. The result, ironically, is a swelling of durational time. Doubling dilates duration and creates the slowness or delay that Bergson sees as needed for dreaming. It solicits the occasion for aesthetic thinking-feeling based in expanded perception and the registration of nuance. Aesthetic dilation of this kind contributes to rebuilding affective strength in the context of the neoliberal depletion that Gonzalez-Torres hints at above and I will detail below.

- Water Doubles -

With these three formal principles in mind and a foundation for what I mean by dilation established, I turn finally to a most recent exhibition. In the summer of 2017, Horn
exhibited a body of new works at the gallery Hauser & Wirth that represents her in New York. For viewers not familiar with Horn’s work, the exhibit could easily appear to be produced by three different artists.

This show includes three distinct series, two of which concern me only as stage design in the experience of the minimalist sculptures on view. In the first room of the exhibit, one finds two similar bodies of drawings entitled *The Dog’s Chorus* and *The Rose Problem*. These drawings combine Horn’s literary fragmenting technique—in which she incorporates fragments from modernist poets into her work—with her visual fragmenting technique—in which she cuts drawings into shards and rearranges them into a new composition. The result is a series of colorful yet barely discernible posters with awkward associative phrases like “Let Slip a Dead Certainty,” “Let Slip A Tissue of Lies,” and “Let Slip to the Ends of the Earth.” Compared to the labored spareness of Horn’s past fragmented drawings, these text-based images feel gimmicky and prepared for auction.

Moving to the final gallery, one finds the second distinct series. Here the viewer is surrounded by a montage of 67 white-framed images, this time photographs rather than drawings, entitled *The Selected Gifts (1974 – 2015)*. The photographs in this room depict intimate, unassuming, and quirky objects that the artist received as gifts over a 41 year period. At least two of the images result from the friendship developed between Horn and Gonzalez-Torres before his death. Verging toward the most autobiographical of Horn’s works, these photographs become the most narrative, and lean as a result toward some of the least interesting. The provocative, almost uncanny deadpan quality deployed in Horn’s
presentation of the dead owl, for example, is lost to the sentimentality of autobiographical signification that is asserted but withheld in this body of work.

As just one viewer visiting the exhibit in the summer of 2017, fixated in thought and tight in comportment under the stress of normalized economic uncertainty, I neither had interest in the text-based collection of clever auction house filler presented in the first room, nor patience for the personal trinkets of Horn’s relationship-rich life mounted in the last. I moved quickly through the show, disappointed but unfazed by this disappointment. I use myself as an example here only to suggest that perhaps, it is exactly this regular tendency toward flat affect, resentment, and weighty inner dialogue that is phenomenally felt under an increasingly common structural experience of economic precarity, future uncertainty, an over-work fatigue, that conditions the grand impact of experiencing Horn’s *Water Doubles* in the central space of the exhibition.

Upon climbing the creaky wooden stairs that raise the gallery goer off the streets of Manhattan into the frenetic war cries of *The Dog’s Chorus* gallery, one moves through a narrow doorframe adorned with stage curtains into, unexpectedly, a cavernous warehouse-like room. It is here that the viewer is confronted by the steadfast calm of four large glass blocks. The surprise slows one down immediately. The viewer is caught off guard to find these works inhabiting a vacuous space, having just traveled through a more conventional gallery with several dozen chaotic drawings. Pushing aside the weight of the velvet curtains contributes to this further by giving the viewer the sense that they are venturing into a qualitatively different, perhaps a bit unreal world. Horn’s *Water Double, v. 1* and *Water Double, v. 3* sit with startling gravity in the central space of the exhibition. The sculptures are fixed
yet dynamic. Between the arresting stillness of the glass medium and the charged emptiness of the surrounding room, one is struck with a low frequency kind of impact that takes your breadth away and invites you in.

Each of Horn’s *Water Doubles* consist of a pair of two solid glass blocks fashioned in the shape of water basins or barrel hot tubs. The sculptures were fabricated between the years of 2013-15 at the SCHOTT glass productions headquarters in Germany (where Horn regularly produces her glass works) and shown in the US for the first time at the 2017 Hauser & Wirth exhibition. Each individual block stands 52 inches tall at approximately chest height, and sits slightly wider at 53 – 56 inches. The objects taper at the bottom, making it possible for the viewer to approach and peer in them without touching the objects with their feet. The viewer is indeed drawn to peer *into* the sculptures, as if they have insides, appearing like vessels full of water while at the same time clearly solid. The tops of the objects glow with a glossy contoured finish, having made no contact with the mold during the casting process. This is emphasized in contrast to the textured sides of the sculptures that show the trace of the casting process. The viewer is consistently lured by the glowing horizon of light that shimmers on the top surface of the object, as if light on a pool of crisp, cool water. With no track-lighting in the room, natural light seeps through a few high-positioned windows and illuminates the objects with subtle shifts in the mood of the day. This effect creates a profound sense that the objects are softly breathing. *Water Double, v. 1,* evokes this feeling in particular, due to the cool slate blue and cloudy-clear color of the highly translucent blocks that make up this pair. Daylight collects in and moves through these objects, causing them to glow with the soft illumination of a glacier. *Water Double, v. 3,*
differs in this regard, consisting of a clear and black pair, both of which are finished with ashy exteriors that resemble the volcanic landscape of Iceland. Taken all together, the opacity of the black glass stands out. It provides an exception to the illusion of interiority that is produced through the transparency of the other three, in a way reinforcing the striking quality of their interiority-effect. But this is not to say that the black block is uninteresting. The refusal of transparency produced by the black glass emanates its own profound capacity to absorb the surrounding light with a thick depth not readily disclosed.

Horn’s Water Doubles confront the viewer with the striking elegance of their materiality. The works create an atmosphere around themselves. One can’t help but be affected by this, often mimicking the comported disposition of the objects in the space. The objects slow the body of the beholder to the temporality of liquid glass, allowing the viewer to become reciprocally affected by subtle shifts in the natural light. One feels almost thick with presence, alert, porous, buoyant, and steady. This effect is replenishing, even while temporary. The cool blue color of the one block in particular anchors the impact of this calm, resembling the color produced when mountain sediment disperses through fresh moving water in the pacific northwest. The sculptures quiet. Inner dialogue relaxes and the body lets go of a least enough tension to notice how much it was holding. As Gonzalez-Torres writes of The Gold Field above, this artwork’s “heroic, gentle…presence,” offers a “place of rest and absolute beauty, waiting for the right viewer willing and needing to be moved.”

We intuit the reproductive resources found in being sensuously moved when we

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listen to music in order to find energy, or listen to sad music when we are sad in order to find affinity. The arrangement of rhythm and tone, the blocks of sensation and negative space in music animate the materiality of our bodies and dispose us particularly to the world. So too do the *Water Doubles* move us through their specific arrangements of light, weight, and materiality. They allow us to claim the space to breathe, which is to say, to overcome the defensive wariness, cynicism, or contraction that understandably builds up from repetitive attack and structural injury. “A place to dream, to regain energy, to dare.” The aesthetic disposition of presence nurtures us by allowing us to assume a porous comportment toward the spontaneity of the world in a way that is not efficient or pre-determined.

But saying that aesthetics reunites us with spontaneity is different than saying that such a disposition occurs spontaneously. An air of happenstance can be found in Gonzalez-Torres’s narrative of stumbling upon Horn’s work. It can be found in my telling of the Hauser & Wirth show as well. Yet, as Pierre Bourdieu points out (in his critique of Kantian aesthetics), the capacity to assume an “aesthetic disposition” is not as natural as the feeling of spontaneity may imply. The aesthetic disposition of openness described here requires a practice of sensitizing one’s self to the sensible environment. Horn claims that the barren volcanic landscape of Iceland laid the foundation for this in her practice. Gonzalez-Torres describes a ritual of regularly taking long drives on the west coast at the time when the light makes everything shine gold. In the urban environment of New York, where open space and golden light are less common, entering the contrived space of the white cube gallery might

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44 See Gonzalez-Torres block quote above.
45 Bourdieu, *Distinction.*
help do the trick. When we practice an aesthetic disposition toward art, we become more susceptible to happening unexpectedly upon a chance encounter with dilation. We become more skilled at not relying on pre-established frameworks of intelligibility. And we become more skilled at working against the tendency to contract.

Empty space, solitude, the bracketing off of the world for a moment of peace—these are the conditions of possibility for a minimalist encounter. Yet they are also the hallmarks of privatized wealth. Hauser & Wirth, as I’ve mentioned, counts in the art world as what is known as a “blue chip” gallery. The term blue chip comes to the art market from the stock market where—alluding to the highest valued poker chip—it refers to a reliable and worthwhile investment. Blue chip galleries like Hauser & Wirth, Gagosian, Mary Boone, David Zwirner, Paula Cooper, and Pace (to name a few in New York) function institutionally as gate keepers that ensure collectors and art visitors that the artists represented within their elusive walls may be trusted to carry proven artistic status and reliable market value. Cues to this hierarchy may be read phenomenologically in the sheer square footage of unadorned space that many blue chip galleries cordon off from the surrounding loud, dirty, crowded Manhattan streets. A concurrence thus exists between the practice of aesthetic dilation and the privileged space of art which might, rightfully, leave one weary.

Tucked away as these artworks tend to be in museum and gallery white cubes, the clearing they offer is nonetheless a clearing for the generation of counterpublic feeling. The concept of “counterpublic,” introduced by Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner in their 1998 essay “Sex in Public,” has been foundational in the “public feelings” discourse for rethinking the
aesthetic withdraw and dilation I am arguing for is not restricted to galleries, yet the gallery does offer at least two useful attributes. First, galleries can be understood as designated spaces or bracketed terrains within which the exercise of aesthetic dilation may be practiced (much like, for example, one would practice building muscle in the designated space of a gym, develop self-narrative in the bracketed space of therapy, or exercise thinking in the designated space of the classroom). Second, galleries exist in the semi-public space of appearances in which one may be seen and interact amidst strangers in a way similar to being at a cafe or bar. This is what I mean when I refer to Lauren Berlant and Michael Warner’s idea of “counterpublic” feeling at the start of this paragraph. Yet unlike cafes or bars, galleries create public occasions for counter-hegemonic feeling in the company of strangers, generative force of intimacy when performed collectively in public. See also Warner’s 2002 “Publics and Counterpublics” essay, and my 2019 co-authored article “Counterpublic and Counterprivate: Zoe Leonard, David Wojnarowicz, and the Political Aesthetics of Intimacy” for a theory of how the gallery and/or museum may function as a space for cultivating counter-hegemonic aesthetic values (such as that of openness) amongst strangers in public.

The practice of aesthetic dilation that can occur in the designated space of the gallery differs, for example, from the sensible dilation that might occur when immersed in nature—which is to say, during experiences like Horn’s retreat to Iceland or simply a walk in the woods. This is because immersion in nature often involves an intentional removal of one’s self from the public space of appearances. The practice of dilating one’s senses in apprenticeship to nature is perhaps superior to the practice of doing so in relation to gallery art due to the non-human affection and historical depth that might be possible to sensitize one’s self to the natural world. At the same time, the space of the gallery does prepare the viewer to develop skills of dilation amidst the contraction of social life and commerce, in a way that is distinct from the retreat-quality involved when we immerse ourselves in nature. Ideally, both practices would reinforce each other. The practice of dilation available through art is also different from that of meditating at home, which may indeed help cultivate skills of comported dilation as well, but does not require one to leave the house and enter into the public domain where one might interact with the spontaneity of strangers. From a harm reduction and disabilities standpoint, cultivating a practice of meditating at home might be a great option for practicing dilation, and perhaps could also be supplemented by inviting others into the space.
without having to buy anything. Gallerías are no doubt classed and raced in terms of access and interests. But they are also, in theory, open to the public as spaces with no admission fee and no products explicitly for sale. One needs only to drag cultural capital to gain access, no actual material wealth is needed. Of course, the whole gallery is a show room for private collectors. Yet from the perspective of those without investment capital, galleries are also open-access public brackets for aesthetic experience that could function as sites of social reproduction from below. I will be clear here: I think these institutions are central to the problem of privatized wealth, speculative investment, and tax evasion. And yet, following the prefigurative utopian thinking that I develop further in my next chapter, I argue that it is worth cultivating as many practices as possible for disobediently taking resources from those institutions which currently exist toward instantiating organizations of sense that we want to exist.

The politics of aesthetics I am proposing through Horn’s art does not escape total capitalist subsumption or strive for redemptive non-alienation. It is non-purist in this way. I am more interested in a realistic, critical, utopian approach to the politics of aesthetics that embraces the project of redirecting complicit affective resources toward prefigurative worlds than I am in being purist about where and how we find resources for power, joy, and struggle. This is perhaps a “cyborg” aesthetic disposition, to borrow language from Donna Haraway, to the extent that dilation builds on the technoaesthetics (a term I will define below) of the late capitalist world rather than some posited sphere outside of capitalism. The

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48 See Berlant and Warner, “Sex in Public.”
49 Gallerías are tools of gentrification that tend to exist in creative-tech urban environments, practically limiting access to large populations of people who live outside of or have been pushed out of these areas. On top of this, a large majority of philanthropic funds (i.e. tax evasion donations) have historically gone to the arts instead of social justice non-profits.
practice of dilation occasioned by art provides a way to find sensuous resources for regeneration amidst the monstrous resources of the art market. As Haraway writes, “We require regeneration, not [the purity of] rebirth, and the possibilities for our reconstitution include the utopian dream of the hope for a monstrous world…⁵⁰ Being non-precious about where we find space, in the realm of the public (or realm of appearances), for nourishing sensation is a cunning, cutting, and realistic strategy. The sensuous dilation occasioned by art provides a kind of unpure “regeneration” that keeps the subject open to utopian dreaming.

**The Historical Sensorium**

*What is political art? It is, in all its variety, contextualized, critical practice.*

Susan Buck-Morss, “What is Political Art?”

I have raised dilation as a salient aesthetic category within the US cultural context of late capitalism that spans the time in which Gonzalez-Torres was writing to the present. Using Gonzalez-Torres’s own language, I propose dilation as a felt “need” in the context of neoliberalism. In doing so, I am not offering a symptomatic reading of neoliberalism through the concept of dilation, as for example postmodern “flatness” may be read as a symptom of financial globalization (a theory forwarded by Fredric Jameson), or the categories of “zany,” “interesting,” and “cute” may be read as correlates to neoliberal production, circulation, and consumption (a theory developed by Sianne Ngai).⁵¹ Rather, the aesthetic or affective *symptom* of neoliberalism on my account is contraction; dilation is the subsequent need and critical practice that responds to this need. It is thus specifically in the

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context of neoliberal contraction that, counterintuitively, non-narrative artworks which occasion dilation take on a political value and register as a critical practice. More specifically, I argue that within the practice of dilation we find a historically conditioned need for openness and care being worked out at the level of the senses in the realm of aesthetics. The works articulate a utopian longing for what is missing—that is, the conditions of possibility for sensible openness and imaginative dreaming—while also helping to manifest resources for what we want from what we have. Thus approached through the dual lens of social reproduction as both the labor of care and the prefigurative work of social change, Horn’s art can be seen as a positive cast in the mold of something missing.

In this section I draw on a body of queer and feminist cultural theorists to establish what I mean when I say that the historical period and dominant subjectivity of neoliberalism—that is, the subject of human capital (as discussed in my first chapter)—may be characterized by an affective tendency toward contraction. In periodizing the tendencies of contraction and dilation, this chapter fits within a larger conversation in critical theory and cultural studies that takes up the historical specificity of collective feeling. Marxist, feminist, queer, and cultural studies theorists have all pursued this topic through a variety of terms. What links these theories is a shared understanding that the most intimate and seemingly

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52 Such terms include Marx’s early writing on the “estrangement” (or alienation) of the senses caused by capitalist relations, the Frankfurt School writing on the social “sensorium” accredited predominately to Walter Benjamin, the cultural studies theory of “structures of feeling” coined by Raymond Williams, the notion of “waning affect” offered by Fredric Jameson, the philosophical idea of “the distribution of the sensible” popularized by Jacques Rancière, Fred Moten’s “holosensual” writing on the ensemble of social sense, the embodied experience of “precarity” described by Judith Butler, the Marxist feminist analytic of “emotional labor” spearheaded by Arlie Hochschild, and the archive on “public feeling” developed by queer and feminist cultural studies theorists Lauren Berlant, Ann Cvektovich, Kathleen Stewart, Avery Gordon, and others.
personal experiences of feeling, affect, emotion, and sensation are in fact conditioned by the material structures and dominant ideologies of a given time.

In this chapter I have borrowed the term sensorium from Walter Benjamin to refer to the existence of historically shifting dominant organizations of sense that affect people collectively yet also at the level of individual bodies. Even though my interest is ultimately in what might be called the neoliberal sensorium, Susan Buck-Morss’s reading of Benjamin’s concept of the modern sensorium lends valuable insight toward my argument for two reasons. First, it offers a rich account of Benjamin’s theory of numbness and distraction (or what Buck-Morss calls “anaesthetics” and “phantasmagoric compensation”) that has profoundly shaped the critical discourse on aesthetics and politics over the past several decades. Second, it provides a thick sketch of the modern sensorium, which we might consider the sensuous pre-history of the late capitalist present.

- Phantasmagoric Technoaesthetics -

In her essay “Aesthetics and Anaesthetics,” Susan Buck-Morss provides a compelling picture of the modern-industrial sensorium as characterized by a “simultaneity of overstimulation and numbness.”53 Numbness, she explains, is produced when the subject is trying to cope with that which is overwhelming about the modern world. Overstimulation, it follows, is sought as a compensatory response in an effort to temporarily feel something. In short, the modern subject’s capacity to feel the world is distorted by the alienating conditions of capitalism, and compensatory experiences of sensible stimulation (whether through the

arts and entertainment or recreational drugs) are deemed mere distraction from the constituting alienation of modern life.

It is significant that Buck-Morss uses the word “anaesthetics” to describe this phenomenon of a generalized social numbing. She draws here on the original meaning of the term aesthetics, used in the eighteenth century writing of the German philosopher Alexander Baumgarten to refer to what Terry Eagleton has also called a “discourse of the body.”54 As Buck-Morss puts it, prior to Kant’s narrowing of the concept of aesthetics to refer to the man-made object of art and the cognitive capacity for judging beauty, aesthetics named our “physical-cognitive apparatus” or capacity for knowing-through-feeling that is at play in our “prelinguistic” being in the world.55 The idea that aesthetics refers to a nexus of mind, body, and world that includes but exceeds the experience of art has been key to the French continental philosophy that informs my thinking as well, as found in the theories of both art and embodiment in the writing of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Gilles Deleuze (by way of Spinoza and Bergson). With terms such as milieu (which names the way we are shaped through our environments) and sens, (which is used to suggest both cognitive sense and physical sensation), each of these two thinkers in their own way articulate a model of being enmeshed in the world that rejects Cartesian mind-body dualism and registers aesthetics as a mode of comported thinking, perceiving, and feeling that is rooted in the shared materiality of body and world. It is in this way that I use the term aesthetics in this chapter and have used affect in the last—to refer to a mode of thinking-feeling and cognitive-physical sense

54 Buck-Morss, 6.
55 Buck-Morss, 6.
that registers our historical being in the world. This Baumgartian and French continental approach to aesthetics resembles current discourse in affect theory in such a way that makes my turn from aesthetics to thinkers of neoliberal affect and the cultural politics of emotion both interdisciplinary and continuous.

Considering this definition of aesthetics, Buck-Morss's negation of the concept in her term *anaesthetics* is striking. Her characterization of the modern sensorium is one in which our aesthetic capacity to register our environments through our embodied perception has been distorted by the technological abstractions and normalized violences of modernity. As she puts it, quoting Benjamin:

Being “cheated out of experience” has become the general state, as the synaesthetic system is marshaled to parry technological stimuli in order to protect both the body from the trauma of accident and the psyche from the trauma of perceptual shock. As a result, the system reverses its role. Its goal is to numb the organism, to deaden the senses, to repress memory: the cognitive system of synaesthetics has become, rather, one of anaesthetics. In this situation of “crisis in perception,” it is no longer a question of educating the crude ear to hear music, but of giving it back hearing. It is no longer a question of training the eye to see beauty, but of restoring “perceptibility.”

Anaesthetics implies for Buck-Morss a “crisis in perception” whereby our perception of the world is involuntarily yet strategically blocked. Aesthetic experience—in invoked in the quote above as both Kant’s notion of perceiving beauty in art and Baumgarten’s idea of being open to the feeling of the world—has been transformed into a norm of *anaesthetics*. As this dominant account goes, industrial capitalism shifts collective sense from a sensorium of synesthetic enmeshment in the world to a collectively felt detachment from the body, others,

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56 Buck-Morss, 18.
57 Buck-Morss, 18.
and world. As she puts it elsewhere, our embodied experience transforms from a “mode of being ‘in touch’ with reality to a way of blocking out reality.” Numbing provides a way to live in which we deflect the world in order to survive it at the expense of feeling incorporated into it. In other words, the modern sensorium described here is one in which we become relationship-poor with and closed off to the world, feeling isolated even as we are surrounded by stimulation and company.

The idea that capitalism numbs, alienates, or anesthetizes our collective senses has been central to the discourse on aesthetics and politics since the neo-Marxist writing of the Frankfurt School. This analysis of the affective or cultural register of capitalism informs much of the skepticism cast toward art by left critical theorists who, as I’ve indicated above, believe art must perform critique in order to not become compensatory, complicit distraction. In Buck-Morss’s essay, the idea that sensuous stimulation constitutes a technique of distraction is vividly detailed through what she calls the “technoaesthetics” of the “phantasmagoria.” Examples of technoaesthetics in Benjamin’s and Buck-Morss’s analyses include the symphony (specifically Wagner’s), amusement parks, films, the market in Baudelaire’s writing, and even a mural (which expands beyond our periphery). These are technoaesthetics to the extent that they are techniques of social control that operate by initiating variations in the sensible body. They produce phantasmagoric effects to the extent

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58 Buck-Morss, 18. “Here, as seldom elsewhere,” Buck-Morss explains, “Benjamin relies on a specific Freudian insight, the idea that consciousness is a shield protecting the organism against stimuli […]. Under extreme stress, the ego employs consciousness as a buffer, blocking the openness of the synaesthetic system […]” (16, emphasis added).

59 This includes Benjamin. See also Adorno and Horkheimer, “The Culture Industry,” and Debord, Society of the Spectacle.

that they flood the senses and temporarily approximate the feeling of being enmeshed in the world once more. Like a recreational drug, the aesthetic encounter of phantasmagoric artworks produces a renewed sense of openness by either stimulating all of the senses simultaneously or stimulating an isolated part of the senses particularly. This experience of sensuous flooding momentarily relieves the subject of modern numbness. And where drugs operate on an individual level to make us feel when we are otherwise “cheated out of experience,” the semi-public experience of a symphony or a film occurs collectively, giving the beholder an added sense of being part of a collective whole once more.

With these concepts one can see more clearly where the suspicion toward the sensuous experience of art comes from in critical theory. Phantasmagoric experiences are viewed as temporary appeasements that mask the conditions of alienation and exploitation which underpin such experiences. As Buck-Morss writes of Wagner’s music, the symphony’s dubious role “is to warm up the alienated and reified relations of man and make [those relations] sound as if they were still human.”61 The pleasures solicited by technoaesthetics such as music, art, and drugs may all be “‘real’ enough,” she continues, but the “social function is in each case compensatory.”62 This is because phantasmagoric pleasure is understood to be hiding the loneliness, alienation, exploitation, and anaesthetics of modern existence. The technoaesthetics of art, drugs, and entertainment are treated as nothing more than depoliticizing distraction here. Subsequently, if art is to be political in this framework, it must wake the body-politic up from its depoliticized, drugged, and numbed state by offering

61 Buck-Morss, 33.
62 Buck-Morss, 22-23.
critical knowledge rather than sensuous pleasure. What follows from this theory is thus a dominant approach to aesthetics and politics that places its faith in the projects of reason and representation (over embodied sensation) in the form of consciousness raising, ideology critique, and cognitive mapping.\(^{63}\)

This stance needs to be nuanced and updated. First, such a phallogocentric fantasy puts too much faith in the idea that we will act if we know while also obscuring the powerful regenerative resources found in sensuous pleasure.\(^{64}\) It underestimates the spectator’s ability to be both aesthetically moved and politically informed. A Marxist feminist attentiveness to the necessity of sensible rejuvenation, paired with an affective-ontological attentiveness to the power of sensible revitalization reveals that it is in fact misguided to dismiss those affective-aesthetic experiences that enhance our sense of connection to and with the world. Second, such a theory harbors too strong an investment in redeeming the purity of some posited non-alienated state that is deemed lost. This kind of zero-sum thinking restricts the range of resources from which political power may be generated. It encourages a hypervigilant scanning for potentially “complicit” agents. By contrast, as I’ve indicated at several moments above, I hold that there is (currently) no outside of capitalism from which to glean reproductive resources that may be directed toward our prefigurative, utopian worlds. In this

\(^{63}\) See for example Jameson in *Postmodernism*, when he writes that the task of political art is to “endow the individual subject with some new heightened sense of its place in the global system”; and, that art’s political task is to help us “begin to grasp our positioning as individual and collective subjects and regain a capacity to act and struggle which is at present neutralized by our special as well as our social confusion” (54).

\(^{64}\) For the feminist analytic concept of phallogocentrism, see Irigaray’s *Speculum of the Other Woman*. 143
way I take what could be called a harm reduction, Spinozist, or cyborg approach that rejects the categorical condemnation of phantasmagoric pleasure, and allows the use of technoaesthetics such as art and drugs to be assessed case by case. The cyborg aesthetic disposition of dilation that I am proposing embraces the complicit (or “monstrous”) technoaesthetics of phantasmagoria as sometimes exactly what is needed to generate the resources for 1. basic social reproduction in terms of continuing on, and 2. critical social reproduction in terms of prefiguring more sustainable, more connected, and also more sensuously pleasurable worlds. The aesthetic technique of phantasmagoric experience opens the affective subject to a felt porousness toward and with the world. This is both compensatory and regenerating within the late capitalist sensorium of contraction. My theory of dilation thus intervenes in the standing approach to aesthetics and politics by treating the pleasure of phantasmagoric stimulation as a historically necessary source of critical care and social reproduction.

It is worth pointing to a now relevant observation: The experiences that Horn is drawn to in Iceland are phantasmagoric. The pleasure she finds in the weather is phantasmagoric. And the aesthetic disposition of dilation or openness I am attending to results from minimalism’s capacity to phantasmagorically activate the space. In these examples, a similar aesthetic operation to that of the symphony is occurring, in which a strong feeling of atmosphere places the otherwise displaced body within a temporary feeling of presence. When considered in light of the theory of compensatory stimulation detailed

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65 See Deleuze’s lectures “On Spinoza” for a lucid reading of Spinoza’s ethical-ontological-political project.
above, contemporary critical theorists might be skeptical of the phantasmagoric character of Horn’s work. Yet there are two meaningful differences I would like to point out between the phantasmagoria of Iceland and minimalism versus the simulacra of modern spectacle.

The first point has to do with the precision or dexterity of the senses engaged with minimalism, which I have detailed above through the three formal principles that guide Horn’s art. Unlike the case of minimalism, the spectacle of an amusement park or a Hollywood film (as classically theorized by Guy Debord, Theodor Adorno, and Max Horkheimer),\(^66\) sweeps over the viewer with the social effect of pacifying the spectator. Buck-Morss reserves the term technoaesthetics for exactly this phenomenon, writing that phantasmagoric technoaesthetics have “the effect of anaesthetizing the organism, not through numbing, but through flooding the senses.”\(^67\) By contrast, minimalism withholds from the senses—most prominently the cognitive sense making capacity of arriving at meaning through metaphor or realism. Minimalism does not reinforce the illusion of “reality,” as the phantasmagoric simulacra of narrative cinema tends to, and as such it does not pacify the viewer. As I’ve explained in the previous section, the aesthetic disposition solicited by minimalism renders the beholder attentively present with the art object and exercises the senses. The minimalist encounter sharpens the skilled practice of embodied perception in a way that circumvents the ready-made intelligibility of “reality.” As such, the phantasmagoric presencing of the minimalist encounter invites an opening and a flexing or exercising of

\(^{66}\) See Adorno and Horkheimer “The Culture Industry,” and Debord’s *Society of the Spectacle.*

\(^{67}\) Buck-Morss, “Aesthetics and Anaesthetics,” 22.
one’s embodied thinking-feeling capacities, rather than reinforcing so-called passive consumption.

One finds a description of the sharpening of the senses that occurs through phantasmagoric minimalism in Horn’s own writing on her relationship to the atmospheric weather of Iceland. Consider her account of the difference between the spectacular experience of a crisis-oriented weather event that occurred in her youth, and the minimal shifts in the atmosphere that Iceland eventually trained her to register:

My weather began back in grade school. In class, the teacher announced a hurricane was on its way. With that she dismissed us and emphatically instructed: “Run home!” I guess it gave me such a thrill I’ve been running to Iceland ever since. But here in Iceland, dramatic weather is not necessarily the most memorable. My time here has brought me an awareness of the less perceptible things. And being here has exerted a great influence on my work. It was in the matter of learning to see—in the sense of experience that Iceland became essential to me. Sounds like a simple achievement, but it’s an act of will that took me years to grasp. I learned to be present in the here and now, I learned the unchangeable nature of each moment as it passes and locks into other moments forever. I learned the importance of being in the place I am, of paying attention. This was my discovery of the Highlands.68

In the case of weather-crisis and daily weather alike, the atmosphere provides a phantasmagoric feeling of being placed in time and space. This feeling is pleasurable because it articulates a need—a need for connection and location which we are well aware of, both physically and cognitively, in our placeless, alienating, lonely, globally abstracted world. The latter example of less dramatic weather, however, offers an opportunity for Horn to practice perceptual dexterity and develop embodied thinking-feeling skills. The atmosphere of minimalism in this way occasions the cultivation of a counter-hegemonic aesthetic disposition that is based in openness, slowness, presence, unintelligibility, and non-

68 Horn, Roni Horn (2012), 91.
instrumentality. These qualities are crucial for denaturalizing neoliberal common sense toward the establishment of a new common aesthetic or common sense—an idea I will elaborate below.

Beyond the difference between spectacular stimulation and minimalist stimulation, the second distinction between the technoaesthetics of spectacle and the phantasmagoric quality of Horn’s work has to do with historical context. Phantasmagoric dilation, as a practice, cannot be evaluated as political, apolitical, depoliticizing, or any assessment of this sort without contextualizing it historically. For this a sketch of the biopolitical sensorium of neoliberal affect is needed.

- Neoliberal Contraction: Mania and Depression -

In what follows I characterize the neoliberal sensorium through two dominant tendencies consolidated under the dominant disposition of contraction. The first tendency is toward mania. The second tendency is toward depression. Returning to my definition of contraction above, it is possible to understand both mania and depression as two modes of embodied thinking-feeling geared toward utility-based or means-ends functioning that tighten, mechanize, and close our openness toward the world. This in turn diminishes our capacity for joy, critical imagination, and collective connection or power.\(^6^9\) Mania and depression are felt in late capitalism not as the collective emotional registers of generalized numbness, but rather as the dominant coping mechanisms available by which to deal with precarity. As I will argue, mania is the contracted tendency that results from disavowing

\(^{6^9}\) I am thinking here of the technical concept of joy found in Spinoza’s affect theory. See Deleuze, “On Spinoza.”
structural precarity while depression is the contracted tendency that results from sinking into it. Thus, as is indicated in psychoanalysis, mania and depression are merely two connected while apparently distinct iterations of coping with loss. The loss of late capitalism that I am calling precarity is the loss of a semblance of stability and the thinking-feeling capacity to imagine an open future. I am interested in dilation at this juncture of manic-depressive contraction as a critical embodied practice (or alternative coping mechanism) that is still built upon the historical conditions of precarity but cultivates the opposite tendency toward slowing down and opening up. More specifically, I read the aesthetic disposition of dilation that is occasioned by minimalism as a counter-hegemonic coping mechanism or critical practice that enables utopian thinking-feeling in late capitalism.

In the first chapter of this dissertation I offer a gendered analysis of neoliberalism with regard to changes in the global division of labor and the gendered flexibilization of labor generally. Here I am interested in the increasingly widespread experience a felt uncertainty and future foreclosure that Judith Butler, amongst others, has called precarity. As Butler explains (drawing on Foucault’s notion of biopolitical governance), precarity is the

70 Following Sigmund Freud and Melanie Klein, mania and melancholy are examples of what happens when the process of psychically healthful mourning is blocked. As Judith Butler details in the Psychic Life of Power, “melancholia is a rebellion [against loss] that has been put down, crushed” and turned inward. This inward turn “often enough succeeds in driving the ego into death” (190). Mania, on the other hand, “appears to be the energetic throwing off of the attachment to the lost object,” Butler contends, marking “a temporary suspension” of loss, even while the loss “remains structurally ensconced” (192). If melancholy disavows loss by incorporating the fallen object or ideal into the self in a form of self-loathing and a weakened drive toward life, mania disavows loss by frenetically keeping it away through constant activity. While more lively, mania too constitutes a kind of death drive. In general then, mania and melancholy, or what I am calling depression to suggest a more colloquial experience, can be understood as two modes, styles, or tendencies of embodied being that register a constriction of possibility and vitality in the face of acute or repetitive harm.
feeling we collectively have as individuals in response to the neoliberal technique of managing populations by first stripping away a common sense of collective participation and then leaving populations both unprotected and disposable. 71 The feeling of precarity results from many of the structural conditions of neoliberalism discussed in my first chapter. These include increased private debt, the flexibilization of work, the diminishment of care structures, and the isolating force of human capital self-responsibility. I will come back to these ideas below. My aim in this section is to propose precarity and the subsequent coping tendencies of mania and depression as the terrain of our current, neoliberal sensorium. 72 I do so in order to update critical thinking about the historical sensorium in aesthetics and politics discourse. Rather than continuing to return to the modern sensorium of numbness and distraction (understood as compensatory responses to alienation), we must appreciate mania and depression (understood as coping responses to precarity) as the ground upon which we evaluate art’s counter-hegemonic force.

Scanning the contemporary literature in queer, feminist, and cultural studies on the cultural politics of emotion, one finds a number of accounts that can be organized under the two main affective tendencies of mania and depression that I have identified. Many scholars have indeed pointed to an increasingly widespread experience of depression that

71 See Butler, Notes toward a Performative Theory of Assembly.
72 I use the language of “coping” tendencies rather than “symptomatic” tendencies in order to insist on an active, at least partially agential approach to thinking about base-superstructure relations. The language of symptom used in psychoanalytically informed Marxist cultural theory, for example in the work of Fredric Jameson, has been highly influential to the literature on aesthetics and politics, for good reason. Using the language of coping here, however, allows me to remain consistent with what I have been referring to as a non-moralistic, non-purist evaluation of practices through a harm reduction approach. I use the language of coping mechanism rather than symptom also to reinforce the idea that we treat artworks through the performative, affective model of asking what they do and what aesthetic practices they encourage, rather than reading them as objects to be interpreted.
characterizes late capitalism. Mania has been less explicitly noted as such in the literature, but a nascent recognition of a manic tendency can nonetheless be found in descriptions of compulsory pleasure seeking, compulsory critique, and the compulsory imperative to continually appreciate one’s worth as human capital within entrepreneurial subjectivity. I will here briefly detail the literature on neoliberal depression and mania to establish how these affects are part of the neoliberal sensorium, drawing out how I view them as part of a contracted disposition along the way.

The idea that depression is a collective feeling and a historical-political experience may be found in a variety of texts within cultural studies. In his book Capitalist Realism, for instance, Mark Fisher persuasively argues that capitalism has caused a depression “endemic.”73 As he puts it, “with post-Fordism, the […] psychiatric and affective disorders that [have] spread, silently and stealthily, since around 1750 (i.e. the very onset of industrial capitalism) [have] reached a new level of acuteness.”74 Neoliberal capitalism broadens the reach of depression due to the systematic dismantling of what had once been secure, life-long structures of sustenance and meaning, as well as due to the dismantling of a felt sense of agency within what Fisher calls the control society of bureaucracy.75 Fisher’s claim is not only that capitalism causes depression, however. He also argues that the discourse around depression reinforces capitalism. Mental health discourse reproduces the mythology that capitalism exists as an indisputable organization of the real—which is to say, as “reality.” The discourse defining depression and other mental health issues serves as “a paradigm

73 Fisher, Capitalist Realism, 21.
74 Fisher, 35.
75 See Fisher chapters 5 and 6.
case” for Fisher, exemplifying how political imagination becomes foreclosed (or contracted) to the point of making capitalism seem inevitable. It does this by naturalizing the idea that distress is individual and biological rather than collective and political. Writing within the context of British neoliberalism, Fisher condemns capitalism’s individualizing common sense, explaining that:

[In Britain, depression is now the condition that is most treated by the NHS. [...] Instead of treating it as an incumbent on individuals to resolve their own psychological distress, instead, that is, of accepting the vast privatization of stress that has taken place over the last thirty years, we need to ask: how has it become acceptable that so many people, and especially so many young people, are ill? The ‘mental health plague’ in capitalist societies would suggest that, instead of being the only social system that works, capitalism is inherently dysfunctional and that the cost of it appearing to work is very high.](emphasis original)

As Fisher makes clear here, depression is not natural and individual but rather the political and collective consequence of a human-made organization of the social world. It is a political feeling: The collective impact of depression is caused by capitalism, the systematic disavowal of depression as a collective feeling functions as a technique of social control, and the counter-hegemonic recognition of depression as a collective feeling issues a powerful call to organize our world otherwise.

Queer and feminist cultural theorist Ann Cvetkovich similarly describes depression as an infolding of our historical-political world in her recent book *Depression: A Public Feeling*. Here Cvetkovich states clearly that depression is one of neoliberalism’s prime affects. On her account, depression registers several aspects of the neoliberal world. These include the shrinking public sphere, the need to keep up with the pace and efficiency of a corporate

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76 Fisher, 19.
77 See Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feeling*, 42. See also Cvetkovich, *Depression: A Public Feeling*, 11-12.

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market economy, the subsequent feeling of failure in not being able to keep up, and the relentless standard that we be “sovereign individual[s] defined by the ability to create [our own] distinctive projects and agendas.” Depression registers the "environmental poisoning" of these competitive standards that add toxicity to our relationships with ourselves and others, causing the “transmission of bad feelings across bodies, people, and groups.” Depression registers the existential threat of climate change on the horizon as well. And for many racially, globally, and economically minoritized populations, depression makes sense as a consequence of the quite literal environmental poisoning that has already taken place.

Like Cvetkovich, I hold that it is possible and important to acknowledge the disproportionate impact which depression has particularly had on oppressed and exploited groups, while also making a case for depression as “a way to describe neoliberalism and globalization, or the current state of political economy, in affective terms” more generally.

The experience of depression will always be varied and complex. At the same time, depression has taken on the collective status of an “insidious effect in a culture that says

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78 Cvetkovich, Depression, 12.
79 Cvetkovich, 158.
80 Scholars of decoloniality, black studies, and queer of color critique have all recognized the way that ongoing, acute, structural, and foundational violence (or loss) have made depression a common technology of racialized subject formation. Citing one example, José Esteban Muñoz writes of the “depressive position” of “feeling brown” which, as he puts it, chronicles a “performative” “ethics of the self” that is experienced and “deployed by people of color and other minoritarian subjects who don’t feel quite right within the protocols of normative affect and comportment.” Depression on this account may occur from a feeling of comported non-belonging that registers hegemonic norms of belonging at the level of the lived body. Depression may also, however, open onto a realm of mutual recognition and subsequent belonging amongst racialized and minoritized subjects through a shared “position” or comported tendency toward “feeling down.” Muñoz, José Esteban. “Feeling Brown, Feeling Down: Latina Affect, the Performativity of Race, and the Depressive Position.” See also Fannon, Black Skin, White Masks; Viego, Dead Subjects; Khanna, “Touching, Unbelonging, and the Absence of Affect”; and Eng and Han, “A Dialogue on Racial Melancholia.”
81 Cvetkovich, Depression, 11.
people should be sovereign agents, but keeps weighing them down with too much (or too little) to do." 82 Acknowledging depression as an “insidious” structural feeling that nonetheless remains individually particular helps us to see the way that depression operates as a biopolitical mode of control.

The experience of depression is a contracted affect that makes people feel individually “small” and “worthless.” 83 This is biopolitical because it manages populations by closing them off from the world, a sense of futurity, and connection with others. As Cvetkovich explains, neoliberal depression is a “violence that takes the form of minds and lives, gradually shrinking [subjects] into despair and hopelessness.” 84 It diminishes one’s feeling of connection to the body and our sense of meaning. 85 It keeps people “silent, weary, and too numb to really notice the [political] sources of their unhappiness (or in a state of low-level chronic grief—or depression of another kind—if they do).” 86 We feel a heightened sense of isolation when we are made to believe we must survive on our own and it is our own responsibility if we don’t. The neoliberal ideology of self-cultivation and individual aspiration makes it hard to let go of the double-edged belief in self-responsibility that harms us as much as it drives us. Neoliberal depression may thus also be understood as a contracted consequence of what Lauren Berlant has called “cruel optimism;” 87 it is the increasingly normal feeling of a world that tells us we must be the sovereign or self-

82 Cvetkovich, 158.
83 Cvetkovich, 13.
84 Cvetkovich, 13.
85 Cvetkovich, 192.
86 Cvetkovich, 12.
87 See Berlant, Cruel Optimism.
responsible cultivators of our own successes and failings, even while the material infrastructure for sustainable living diminishes around us. The attributes of isolation, anxiety, and depression that result from all this make us tight, strained, defensive, and closed off, both physically at the level of the body and cognitively at the level of imagination.

But where depression is a shut-down way of responding to precarity, mania is a hyper turning outward. Both entail a tightening of thinking-feeling. What I am calling mania here is an embraced attempt (rather than sunken refusal) to meet the compulsory pressure that we cultivate, and perform, ourselves in order to survive in the hustle landscape of neoliberalism. We find this mania, for example, in the coerced tendency and naturalized skill of performing one’s self on the market which has become a common mode of entrepreneurial subjection amidst dismantled structures of job security. The concept of human capital discussed in my first chapter is relevant here once more. As Michael Feher argues, we find ourselves today in a situation in which all of the things we do “contribute to either appreciating or depreciating the human capital that is me.” As subjects of neoliberal culture and material infrastructure, we must constantly perform our lives in such a way that enables our value to constantly appreciate. Life itself resonates as an investment in self-realization. Human capital may thus be understood as the manic subject of late capitalism, who rather than settle into a depreciated state of depressions strives to appreciate through the conscripted economic regime of efficiency, hustle, and cost-benefit analysis.

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Sianne Ngai’s concept of “zaniness” adds a relevant gendered and aesthetic connotation to the idea of human capital as a subject of manic performance. As Ngai describes it, zaniness can be understood as the “perpetual improvisation and adaptation to projects” in which “incessant doing” becomes constant “self-making.” This style of being correlates to neoliberal modes of work that are guided by hyper-productivity, the naturalization of the personality market, an imperative toward entrepreneurship, and massive tempification. The subject of zany mania is not the “self-possessed,” masculinized subject of liberalism that C. B. McPherson or C. Wright Mills posits as putting themselves on the market. Rather, Ngai argues that the zany subject is context-dependent, other-oriented, feminized, always read as a support to others, always as such at risk of falling apart on her own, and only experienced as whole through constant doing.

For the zany herself, the work of manic performativity produces a nervy experience of hyper-attuned, ultra-responsive, instrumentalized subjectivity. The ideal neoliberal zany/manic/entrepreneur is skilled at decoding patterns across changing context and responding accordingly. Such adaptability is indeed a (gendered) skill. The trouble results from the intensity of contraction that is necessary when one’s precarious livelihood requires that one remains, compulsorily, thrown into this other-oriented and pattern scanning tendency.

Emphasizing the feminist stakes of this phenomena, Arlie Hochschild’s classic concept of emotional labor is useful for gaining a better picture of the toll that is often

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89 See Ngai, Our Aesthetic Categories.
90 Ngai, 189.
91 See McPherson, The Political Theory of Possessive Individualism; Mills, White Collar, and Feher “Self- Appreciation.”
endured as part of the skill of operationalizing one’s self in the other-oriented, adaptive service of comporting to an externally dictated context. On her account, emotional labor involves a contortion of one’s felt and expressed feeling in order to solicit a desired emotional response from the recipient. In the ethnographic research of her 1983 text *The Managed Heart*, Hochschild finds that the skill of “managing” one’s own feelings to solicit a desired response in the other often causes considerable fatigue and an activated nervous system that one must come down from after work. It is common, for example, for service workers from food and beverage servers to the flight attendants Hochschild interviews to speak of being wound up yet exhausted at the end of every work day. Simply put, other-oriented mania frequently drains one’s vital energies in order to produce desired affects in another. This is significant, considering the fact that a component of emotional labor has seeped into most interpersonal jobs within a US economy dominated by service work today. My point here is not to posit an authentic, lost self that the subject is alienated from (as Hochschild’s early writing on emotional labor might suggest), but rather to name the contracted quality which is repetitively induced by the manic, other-oriented work of affective labor which has become a regular part of human capital subjectivity.

An accompanying account of mania manifests at the cognitive register of thought or knowledge production as well, found this time in what Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick has famously

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92 As one example of a labor ethnography that documents the physical toll of barista work, see Simon, “Consuming Lattes and Labor, or Working at Starbucks.”
93 See for example Trott, “Affective Labor and Alienation: Spinoza’s Materialism and the Sad Passions of Post-Fordist Work.”
called paranoid reading. Once more we find an outward-facing relentlessness, which Sedgwick describes as a “hermeneutics of suspicion” that operates as a “mandatory injunction” in the critical thinking of the 21st century. This tendency towards suspicion speaks to a self-preserving aversion to surprise (or what I would call a manic warding off of uncertainty) that indexes a narcissistic desire for sovereignty. It produces, as a result, a sort of vigilant scanning for that which the subject already knows, with the effect of disavowing all but the most immediately useful and mobilizable ways of knowing. This is exactly the description of contraction that I began my chapter with above. Paranoid hypervigilence resembles contraction to the extent that only the most means-ends, “teachable” “maxims,” as Sedgwick puts it, register when in a state of paranoid contraction. It is a mode of “selective scanning and amplification,” or a contracted disposition of “tautological” “over-organization” that is enacted through “performative” knowledge assertions aimed at establishing the subject’s invulnerability to the unexpected and, consequently also, the surprise of nuance or novelty.

The practice of manic scanning for that which one already knows produces a “diminished ability to respond to environmental (i.e. political) change,” as Sedgwick puts it. On her account, “weak theories”—or what she calls “other ways of knowing” based in the positive affects of joy, hope, and the pleasures of surprise—are needed to counterbalance

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94 See Segwick, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You’re So Paranoid, You Probably Think This Essay Is About You," in Touching Feeling.
95 Segwick, 125.
96 Segwick, 136, 127.
97 Segwick, 135, 124.
98 Segwick, 144.
the hegemonic rigidity of paranoia. Dilation offers one such other way of knowing. As such, Sedgwick’s naming of a critical disposition based in paranoia (i.e self-preserving manic contraction) verses one based in hope (e.g dilation) informs my thinking throughout the dissertation. This theory makes it possible to see the manic scanning for complicit agents as a contracted disposition that harms the collaborative capacities of any social movement. A manic critical stance reinforces an accusatory position toward others and the world. By contrast, practices of dilation may help cultivate the sort of disposition—on an embodied, thinking-feeling level—needed to remain more open to the generative conflict, disagreement, novelty, discernment, hope, nuance, and plurality that are part of left participatory politics.

Finally, what I am calling mania also includes a late capitalist tendency toward the need for compulsory stimulation. Returning to the Capitalist Realism text quoted above, Fisher names this manic tendency a “depressive hedonia.” As he puts it, “Depression is usually characterized as a state of anhedonia, but the condition I’m referring to is constituted not by an inability to get pleasure so much as by an inability to do anything else except pursue pleasure.” And here the distinction I have made between the phantasmagoric overstimulation and the phantasmagoria of Horn’s minimalism becomes even more important: the dilation precipitated by minimalism’s stripped down presence and so-called androgynous unintelligibility lends the neoliberal subject who is conditioned to seek pleasure a chance to pursue such pleasure in the slow opening onto engaging with the difficult unintelligibility of art toward balancing the quick consumption of late capitalist stimuli.

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99 Segwick, 144.
100 Fisher, Capitalist Realism, 21-22.
In sum, traits of mania and depression are both common and not mutually exclusive under neoliberalism. Where overstimulation and numbness were the norms of the industrial capitalist sensorium of anaesthetics, as Buck-Morss describes it, manic-depression has heightened overstimulation and numbness into forms of productive and depreciated human capital in the neoliberal sensorium of precarity.\(^{101}\) Indeed, the depressive tendency toward hopelessness paired with a manic attachment to aspirations of neoliberal performativity can be seen as central to Butler’s description of the “biopolitical situation” of precarity. As she puts it,

\[\text{[W]e are in the midst of a biopolitical situation in which diverse populations are increasingly subject to what is called ‘precaritization.’ Usually induced and reproduced by governmental and economic institutions, this process acclimates populations over time to insecurity and hopelessness; it is structured into the institutions of temporary labor and decimated social services and the general attrition of the active remnants of social democracy in favor of entrepreneurial modalities supported by fierce ideologies of individual responsibility and the obligation to maximize one’s own market value as the ultimate aim in life. In my view, this important process of precaritization has to be supplemented by an understanding of precarity as effecting a change in psychic reality…}\(^{102}\]

My invocation of the historical sensorium aligns with Butler’s point that the economic restructuring of neoliberalism has changed our psychic reality. I, however, approach this problem through the aesthetic rather than the psychic to insist on the non-dualistic approach of thinking-feeling that recognizes a change in our comported reality as well. Despite Butler’s emphasis on the psychic only here, I nonetheless quote her to now explicitly point out the

\(^{101}\) I say “productive” instead of “appreciated” because it is precisely a strategy of neoliberal precarity to make it such that one can never finally reach a secure state of appreciation. Depreciation looms as a state one can be stuck in; appreciation is always a goal.

\(^{102}\) Butler, \textit{Notes toward a Performative Theory of Assembly}, 15.
dual contractive tendency of mania and depression which in fact structures the experience of neoliberal precarity. As Butler explains, neoliberal economic restructuring and ideology “acclimates populations over time” to the depressive qualities of living in “insecurity and hopelessness.” Life shrinks to mere necessity in this state. One finds themselves closed off from a drive toward anything more than what it takes to merely get by. This is the contracted tendency of depression. At the same time, in the reverse direction, neoliberalism also compels an “entrepreneurial modality” of “individual responsibility” aimed at the hope that one may fulfill “the obligation to maximize one’s own market value as the ultimate aim in life.” We find in this the manic tendency of contraction. The subject here tightens toward mere instrumentalization once more, with the difference that depression yields an unproductive, ill-adapted subject while mania yields an adaptive, productive subject. If depressive contraction lends itself to a feeling down or turning inward, and manic contraction results in an outward turn toward hyper-productivity, both nonetheless exemplify the way that neoliberal precaritization contracts subjects into a state of means-ends being. Dilation becomes a needed critical exercise within this context.

To be clear, the efficiency-oriented disposition of contraction is useful in the realm of the social. The gendered tendency to be porous, other-oriented, and pliably able to adapt to rapidly changing contexts entails many honed and desirable skills as well. But when pattern recognition and instrumentality become compulsory tendencies, our thinking, feeling, bodies, and connections to the world tighten. It is with this in mind that I would like to finally establish a theory of the practice of dilation, exemplified in the encounter with Horn’s work, as a critical exercise in the politics of a “new aesthetics.”
The “New Aesthetics” of Dilation

An interdisciplinary set of concerns run through the argument I have presented in this chapter, some of which I have elected to emphasize more than others due to the disciplinary nature of scholarly work. While I present my theory of dilation in philosophical, aesthetic, affective, and historical materialist terms, it could just as relevantly be framed in relation to the academic field and clinical practice of social work, specifically trauma-informed grounding techniques and somatics.103 This overlap makes sense considering the space I wish to carve out for recognizing aesthetics as a practice of care and critical social reproduction in late capitalism.

What would it take to instantiate a new aesthetics that works against the depleting, foreclosing, and disconnecting contraction of neoliberal common sense? The utopian proposal I offer here is one of process, not plan.104 It would take the cultivation of prefigurative aesthetic practices, and structures of support that enable repetition. The practice of dilation occasioned by art offers one such critical practice in the context of neoliberalism, and the institution of the gallery space offers one such, monstrous, armature for repetition/return.

In an understated, and unexpected, 2018 article written by the South African law

103 My interest in dilation as a political aesthetic practice came out of a conversation that I had with a social worker during my time teaching a community-engaged immersive learning feminist theory program in NYC. The social worker was explaining practices that she has youth engage in when they are with her in the children’s room at a Family Justice Center in New York (i.e. while their parent is seeking resources regarding domestic violence and gender justice). I was struck by how much the trauma-informed “grounding” practices that she described resembled the sort of training that one would undergo in art school in order to cultivate an aesthetic sensibility.

104 See Weeks, The Problem with Work, 186-225. I describe this more fully in footnote 39 in my next chapter.
professor Karin Van Marle, we find a similar utopian call for the possibility of a different aesthetics to that which I am proposing.\textsuperscript{105} Van Marle casts her concerns in the essay entitled “‘Life is Not Simple Fact: Aesthetics, Atmosphere, and the Neoliberal University” as a proposal for a different way of imagining the space of the university than what it has become in neoliberal “common sense.”\textsuperscript{106} Much in the same way I am presenting the gallery, Van Marle treats the university classroom as a bracketed space for experimenting with common sense that should not be underestimated. At the core of her argument, Van Marle inquires into how a different aesthetic sensibility to that of neoliberalism—one that is capable of “acknowledg[ing] bodily-presence, sensory experiences, complexity, and the need to slow down”—might “counter or at least problematize neoliberal power” by “step[ping] aside from [the] counting, competitiveness and suffocation” that has become a norm.\textsuperscript{107} My chapter shares in this concern, and I will return in my final chapter to the connection I have just begun to draw between the university and the gallery (as two potentially complicit resources for critical social reproduction).

I wish to end this chapter with the likely unfamiliar work of Van Marle for the insight her concept of \textit{atmosphere} (as centrally stated in her title) lends. Van Marle proposes the idea that neoliberalism operates through atmospheres. This claim adds a new layer of meaning to both the idea of the phantasmagoria, and the concept of a historical sensorium. Namely, it suggests that the sensorium of neoliberalism has become a phantasmagoria. Neoliberalism revels in the technoaesthetics of phantasmagoric atmosphere. To refer to

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\textsuperscript{105} Van Marle, “Life is Not Simple Fact,” 294.
\textsuperscript{106} Van Marle, 303.
\textsuperscript{107} Van Marle, 309.
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Horn’s quote above, it is as if the event of weather crisis has become the mundane of daily weather. If spectacular atmospheres in the modern sensorium once functioned as an outside to work that distracted and reproduced the worker, phantasmagoric atmospheres in the late capitalist sensorium dissolve the division between work and life, along with production, consumption, and reproduction. Neoliberalism is a technoaesthetics (or what Rancière would call an “aesthetic regime”) of capital-life immersion. The human capital subject is skilled in and subjugated through atmospheres.

The technoaesthetics of atmosphere are central to my analysis both because of the role that atmospheres play in reproducing neoliberal common sense, and because of the occasion that counter-hegemonic atmospheres may offer in fostering alternative aesthetic dispositions toward thinking, feeling, and being. Atmospheres help make all work seem like the non-work of living while turning all life into immersive training for potential but ever elusive and temporary work. The technoaesthetics of atmosphere thus help create the neoliberal subject of human capital by contributing to what Feher identifies as a key breakdown of the liberal separate spheres. In blurring the distinction between life and work or production, reproduction, and leisurely consumption, they train the subject to be acquainted with this historically new mode of being fully yet precariously on the market. Atmospheres make the neoliberal situation of entrepreneurial selfhood both more palatable and more total. They are a technoaesthetics of control like that of “Skinnerian psychology

Elizabeth Povinelli shares a similar idea in her sketched research “Four Axioms of Critical Theory” when she argues in the third axiom that the difference between the catastrophic event and the quasi-event has collapsed. Listen to her discuss this topic in an e-flux interview here: https://soundcloud.com/e_flux/elizabeth-a-povinelli-on-the
[and] today's cognitive-behavioral therapy, where the aim is to modify the patient's behavior and make them more efficient by modifying his or her environment,” as Feher puts it. The subject of human capital is thus governable through atmospheres which incite the subject “to adopt certain conducts deemed valorizing and to follow models for self-valuation that modify their priorities and inflect their strategic choices.” Neoliberal technoaesthetics of atmosphere train us to understand our basic reproductive needs, from intimacy to food, as temporary and affectively intense aesthetic experiences to be sought, cultivated, and satisfied on the market as speculative investments in the appreciation of our human capital-as-self.

On the other hand, counter-hegemonic atmospheres may also train us to be otherwise. Van Marle calls for this in her concept of a “new aesthetics.” A new aesthetic economy of atmosphere may serve two purposes with political stakes. First, new aesthetic atmospheres may provide an occasion to breathe, to slow down, and to develop a common sense “attitude of patience,” as Van Marle describes it. These aesthetic values resonate with the reason why Gonzalez-Torres finds Horn’s minimalism so “truly revolutionary.” In light of the biopolitical affect of neoliberalism, the gesture of designating room to breathe and public space for sensuous rejuvenation serves as a utopic, political end in itself. Minimalist atmospheres urge us to take the time for openness, presence and slowness. The contracted, neoliberal technocratic world renders these values practically unintelligible otherwise. Secondly, and importantly, dilation also trains us to become better at registering the way that

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110 Feher, 28.
atmospheric technoaesthetics work on us. Van Marle writes toward this point that “atmospheres could play a role in aesthetic education,” proposing that an aesthetic education of “atmospheric competence” might not only do the work of making us more bodily present, but also “show us how to recognize and learn the meaning of bodily presence,” and in the process gain “a conscious engagement with atmosphere.” Art is one way that we may practice such an aesthetic education through the creation of counter-hegemonic atmospheres.

Horn’s work exemplifies the way that art can create bounded occasions for counter-hegemonic aesthetic training. The Water Doubles, for example, train us to slow, calm, and breathe. In the language of trauma-informed practice, they teach us grounding skills. The fragmented drawings and doubled works train us to see small differences in what is apparently the same, making us patient and leaving us more open to that which otherwise falls outside of what we already recognize as intelligible. Through material presence, works like The Gold Field utopically affirm the possibility of a world that has room for us—one that feels hopeful, less lonely, warm, open to vulnerability, and sensibly replenishing. I wish to assert the need of such non-narrative political aesthetics within neoliberalism, not in place of other modes of representation-based left critique, but in addition to them. The desirable relief and challenging sensibility of minimalist atmospheres provides a resource for care in the historical sensorium of precarity. As I have put it earlier, such qualities reveal the triangulation between aesthetics, politics, and care, or structural precarity, care work, and

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112 Van Marle, 308.
common sense that constitutes a terrain of critical practice and counter-hegemonic subject formation in neoliberalism. The critical practice of aesthetic dilation prefigures a utopic thinking-feeling that is not yet supported by this world but verdant with a glimpse of rare resources for regeneration. The practice of returning to this place that exists only provisionally is the practice of dilation; it is a practice of opening our thinking-feeling capacities to that which we don’t yet know and that which is not yet useful. So long as such a practice of aesthetic dilation is not yet supported by the hegemonic values of this world, it will remain difficult and skilled work. It is, in other words, a practice that requires effort. In the context of the normalized manic-depression of neoliberalism, however, the pleasure of this struggle might be incredibly useful.

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A tension exists throughout this chapter between the individual disposition of dilation and the project of communal world building or participatory politics that I am interested in. Why would one engage in the solitary struggle of cultivating a disposition toward art to overcome depression or fight against mania when, as Butler has persuasively argued, the collective performative of public gathering more directly addresses the isolation caused by neoliberal “responsible” at the same time that it organizes subjects around political demands. As she puts it, assembly opens onto a “nascent and provisional version” of “plural and popular sovereignty.”113 I do not disagree. And yet, I refuse to idealistically treat this as the whole picture. As Cveticovich has written, sometimes knowing that the problems one faces are political and not their own responsibility does not make it any easier

113 Butler, Notes toward a Performative Theory of Assembly, 16.
to get out of bed in the morning or out of the house in the afternoon. The need to address mania and depression on a collective political level is real. The need to attend to the individual registers of such affective structures is also real. Only by doing both may we find the vital resources to keep going.\textsuperscript{114}

It is possible to understand the impetus driving Horn’s work, from the beginning, as one of finding sensuous, while solitary, resources to keep going. Returning to what she identifies as her first successful work, Horn states that she wanted to experience the intense color of light through stained glass anytime she might want to individually experience it. One hears in this the desire for several historically constituted needs: The desire for a sense of place through the haptic sensation of being enmeshed in a sensuous environment or atmosphere but without the institutional baggage of religion; the desire for bounded intimacy, able to be picked up and put down on one’s own terms; and the desire for an individualized experience of aesthetics, removed from the communal ritual of going to church but deeply connected to the desire to risk being open to others and world. Attributes

\textsuperscript{114} I find Douglas Crimp’s writing on the coexistent need for both individual mourning and collective militancy instructive here. Writing in the context of AIDS activism shared with Gonzalez-Torres, Crimp argues that left political activist and theorists must better attend to the political need for both “mourning \textit{and} militancy,” even as we recognize that “mourning, for Freud, is a solitary undertaking” (7). While collective political action against structural problems is fundamental, he asserts that it is impractical to think that the matter of enduring such structural problems doesn’t need to be dealt with on the individual level as well. Not dealing with individual psychic or affective resonances inevitably sabotages collective action. Crimp explains that the demand for outward action, associated for example with ACT UP’s collective militancy, was not enough to address the internal dynamics of deep loss that might, for example, cause individual activists not to seek personal treatment or get tested for AIDS even as they were fighting to demand more treatment centers. As he writes, by “ignoring the death drive” that remains embedded in the mania of militancy, “that is, by making all violence external [and thus externally actionable], we fail to confront ourselves, to acknowledge our ambivalence…Unconscious conflict can mean that we may make decisions—or fail to make them—whose results may be deadly too” (17-18). See “Mourning and Militancy.”
of neoliberal aesthetics such as flexibility and individuation are unabashedly woven into these desires. This is what I am calling the non-pure regeneration of aesthetics.

There is no going back to some pure time when art might have not been subsumed by capital, our desire for sensuous pleasure wasn’t conditioned by fatigue, loneliness, and alienation, or the vitality of both thinking-feeling and reproduction wasn’t blended with economy. I see little value in challenging the conditions of late capitalism through a political vision that recalls a non-alienated or non-instrumentalized condition. My theory of aesthetic dilation works from the skills that we are coerced to develop as technoaesthetes of human capital: dexterity in affective labor and a sensitivity to the cues of atmosphere. The critical difference in dilation has to do with the project to which these skills are set. The other-oriented porousness of the emotional laborer who is skilled at registering and incorporating cues from their environment into their performative becoming is operationalized, ironically, toward non-instrumental regenerative ends here. A technoaesthetic constitution of subjects attuned to atmospheric enmeshment is put to good use toward the capacity to become bodily present in the way that Horn’s work invites. We are all aesthetes now, sensitized to the aesthetically designed environments that shape who we are and create of us machines for entrepreneurial self-reproduction.

Following Haraway’s utopian vision for a late capitalist socialist feminism, no one is innocent and redeemed purity should not be our goal. Following Feher’s theory of human capital, the critical task at hand is to “embrace the neoliberal condition, much as workers’ movements adopted the figure of the free worker, and allow it to express aspirations and
demands that its neoliberal promoters had neither intended nor foreseen.” The need to embrace our neoliberal conditions and fight over their uses is “not only a sound tactical move. More decisively, it may also be a way of warding off the current melancholy by means of reentering the domain of the enviable and desireable—of raising, from its own perspective, the question of what constitutes an appreciable life.”

I have claimed that the aesthetic experience of dilation occasioned by Horns art is needed in the context of neoliberal mania, depression, and means-ends contraction. Aesthetic dilation is needed as a critical practice—critical in the way that it is counter-hegemonic, and critical in the way that it articulates a fundamental longing for the openness of another register of thinking-feeling that is based in bodily presence, nuance, indeterminate contemplation, doubt, hope, and slowness. This latter point—that aesthetic dilation is a basic need—should be heard as an argumentative assertion on my part, not unlike the feminist political act of reframing reproductive labor as work. Despite the suggestion of austerity in its title, the aesthetics of minimalism challenge us to make more rich and expansive the category of use-values or need. Naming the sensuous pleasure of aesthetic dilation as both counter-hegemonic and a need is a political claim about what gets to count as an appreciable life.

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115 Feher, “Self-Appretiaton,” 25. See also Hardt and Negri on the figure of the entrepreneur in Assembly
116 Feher, 41.
Wanting More

I present in this chapter a final case study for thinking about the feminist, left, and utopian politics of contemporary art. A change in scale will be required. In chapter 2, I took up the issue of social reproduction by thinking about the vital resources of sensible rejuvenation that are offered in the encounter with art. Here my concern with social reproduction shifts from the level of the body to the level of subject formation and society organization. More specifically, I consider the way that art and the socially legible practice of care found in the participatory politics of mutual aid, may operate together as a practice of critical social reproduction that struggles toward social change. Thus, if I propose aesthetics as a somatic practice of revitalization in my second chapter, I consider art as a social practice of care and antagonism in this chapter. Appropriately, a shift in medium is also required. Video art aided my investigation into art and representation in my first chapter, minimalist sculpture aided my investigation into art and sensible embodiment in my second chapter, and a work that falls into the contemporary genre of “social practice art” will aid my investigation into art and institutional/societal antagonism in this chapter.

I should be even more specific—the kind of subject formation and social reproduction that I am interested in here is the feminist subject formation and social reproduction that takes place in the institution of art. While investigating the politics of
contemporary art more generally, I also in this chapter interrogate the forms of feminist political desire and subject formation that are being currently reproduced under the heading of contemporary feminist art. To do so I consider two recent exhibitions that took place over two consecutive summers in New York City: Simone Leigh’s *The Waiting Room* at the New Museum (2016), and the group exhibit *We Wanted a Revolution* at the Brooklyn Museum (2017). Ultimately I argue for an interpretation of Leigh’s work as a prefigurative, utopian feminism that demands more—for example, than mere inclusion—from progressive institutions and feminist art.

**Feminist Art**

In the summer of 2017, the Brooklyn Museum held a major exhibition in their well-established Elizabeth A. Sackler Center for Feminist Art. *We Wanted a Revolution: Black Radical Women, 1965-85* (April 21 – September 17) gathered a powerful presentation of the diverse artistic, cultural, and political contributions of black women artists and activists during the US-based women’s and civil rights movements of the 1960s, 70s, and 80s. This group exhibit was developed as part of the Brooklyn Museum’s *Year of Yes: Reimagining Feminism at the Brooklyn Museum* (fall 2016 – winter 2018), in an effort to celebrate the Sackler Center’s 10th anniversary by “push[ing] back against conventional barriers while expanding the cannon” of feminist art. As the Brooklyn Museum’s website describes it, *We Wanted a Revolution* constitutes the “first exhibition” of its kind to offer a “long-overdue account of the

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centrality of women of color in second-wave feminism.” Through an impressive display of historical objects with still-relevant political aspirations, *We Wanted a Revolution* critically intervenes into the exclusive tendencies of art history while institutionalizing intersectionality at the center of feminism’s past, present, and future.

One summer prior, also in New York, the New Museum showcased an exhibition and series of programs similarly themed around the cultural production and political organizing of black women artists. In this solo show entitled *The Waiting Room* (June 22 – September 18), artist Simone Leigh installed a postminimalist style “apothecary” on the top floor of the museum. The apothecary functioned as both a sculptural installation and a meeting space for a series of social practice art events. Leigh organized a number of free “Care Sessions” centered on healing that were open to the public. She additionally held a series of private, women of color only “Underground Partnerships” focused on critical awareness. This latter series of underground events eventually grew into an organizing

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3 I use the term “postminimalism” to refer to the sculptural practice of replacing the stripped down, industrial, geometric shapes and materials found in minimalism with everyday, personal, found-object, and hand-made forms. As a sculptural strategy, postminimalism brings conceptual elements that refer to the body and/or social context into the characteristically depersonalized, autonomous quality of minimalism. Common themes in postminimalism include: intimacy (for example in the work of Felix Gonzalez-Torrez and Roni Horn), power (for example in the work of Melvin Edwards and Teresa Margolles), mass production (for example in the work of Tara Donovan, Gabriel Orozco, and Alex da Corte), and the possibility of transcendence in late capitalism (for example the work of Wolfgang Laib and Ann Hamilton).

4 “Social practice art” (also variously called socially engaged art, relational aesthetics, and/or social sculpture) refers to a collaborative, participatory genre of contemporary art that takes people and social dynamics as its primary medium. This work challenges the site of the museum or gallery as the principle domain of art insofar as it decenters conventional modes of exhibition that are based in putting discrete artworks on display. Social practice art has a genealogical connection to 1960s performance art and happenings, as well as theater more broadly and other non-art social practices such as political activism, community building, and the labor of social reproduction.
apothecary installation and social practice art events occupied the top floor of the New
Museum as part of the museum’s inaugural R&D residency program. As the New Museum
describes it, “*The Waiting Room* inaugurates the Department of Education and Public
Engagement’s annual R&D Summers, a research and development residency and exhibition
program that foreground[s] the New Museum’s year-round commitment to community
partnerships and to public dialogue at the intersection of art and social justice.”5 While the
museum’s emphasis on “art and social justice” here does not explicitly locate *The Waiting
Room* in the context of feminist art, the exhibit’s emphasis on the problems of care and
agency affecting black women in the United States directly embodies a politics of
intersectional feminism which aligns thematically with the Brooklyn Museum show.

The fact that these two exhibits took place during the consecutive summers of 2016
and 2017 places them squarely within a period of US political awakening and social unrest.
Reflecting this context, we find in *The Waiting Room* and *We Wanted a Revolution* the contours
of what resonates as political art suitable for our time. Both exhibits foreground the role of
women of color—and more specifically, black women in a US context—as political
vanguards and under-acknowledged culture makers within social struggles of the past and
the present. Both shows inhabit the museum as examples of feminist art with race-based
analytics at their core. Echoing the example set by Black Lives Matter (which had gained
significant popular appeal by 2016), in the wake of a white woman not becoming president

5 “Simone Leigh: The Waiting Room.” *New Museum.*
(also in 2016), the exhibits exemplify an ethos of collective women of color leadership and intersectional feminism which has become a core tenet of the current US progressive political imaginary in the arts and beyond.

Black feminist theorist Jennifer Nash has written extensively on the primary role that intersectionality has come to play in contemporary visions of social change. As she explains it, the analytic of intersectionality has developed what she calls an institutional life in the US that positions it as the imagined agent of corrective politics and social progress. Intersectionality serves as a “primary program-building initiative,” a “remedy to (white) feminist ills,” and an “institutional and ethical orientation.” The key term functions as a mechanism for attaining institutional resources and expanding institutional programs, while the visibility of the women of color who the term has come to index serves to signal the institution’s progressive character. This burden of corrective labor that institutions place on the concept of intersectionality and the women of color associated with it is all the more intense in institutional spaces haunted by the perceived wrongs of feminism’s past. Nash describes this way that white harm and the corrective promise of intersectionality shape the program-building initiatives of women’s studies departments when she writes that intersectionality—and black women in particular—has been institutionally positioned as feminism’s “‘progress narrative,’ acting as a sign of how much the discipline has overcome its past exclusions and how deeply the discipline has [since] refused so-called white feminism.” This corrective burden is equally operative in institutions of feminist art. In

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7 Nash, 4.
academia as much as the so-called artworld, we thus find a situation in which the rich political and conceptual project of intersectionality is prescribed an institutional life of performing the corrective labor that is deemed necessary to fix the racialized exclusions that have been committed under the universalizing signifier of “woman” in feminist domains.

At the institutional level then, *We Wanted a Revolution* and *The Waiting Room* may be read as two efforts to respond to the social unrest of the contemporary moment and the historical harm of feminism’s past by promoting intersectional feminism at the center of their program-building initiatives. The Brooklyn Museum’s *Year of Yes* and the New Museum’s R&D Summers help to reorient the general institution of art by expanding the demographic of practitioners whose work gets recognized as significant. This consequently alters the range of concerns platformed by the museum, and may ultimately help to redistribute the material resources allotted by major institutions. Each exhibition, in other words, demonstrates an institutional effort to become more politically active and correct historical harms by amplifying the work of women of color.

Such corrective efforts are unambiguously important. The growing demand that institutions of art shed the liberal convention of so-called neutrality is long overdue.\(^8\) The arrival of intersectionality at the heart of institutionalized feminist art is also overdue. It is important as well, however, to interrogate *which* versions of intersectionality are being institutionalized in efforts toward reform, and by extension *which* feminist imaginaries are

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\(^8\) See the “Museums are not Neutral” project that gained wide circulation in the form of a twitter hashtag, t-shirt fundraising campaign, and instagram feed starting in 2017 through the efforts of La Tanya Autry and Mike Murawski.
being naturalized as progressive feminist politics. The socially transformative capacity to desire different worlds is at stake.

In what follows I consider *We Wanted a Revolution* and *The Waiting Room* as two examples of contemporary political art and intersectional feminism in order to draw out the meaningful difference between them. While *We Wanted a Revolution* reinforces the reformist notion that progress equals institutional inclusion, *The Waiting Room* gestures toward the revolutionary desire for more—a desire for more that feminist art might inspire by working both within and against the institution. Cultural institutions like the Brooklyn Museum’s Sackler Center, which claims to “educate new generations about the meaning of feminist art” facilitate transformative and/or conservative social reproduction through the dissemination of certain kinds of ideas, the shaping of certain kinds of desires, and the choreography of certain kinds of subject-producing practices. The aim of this chapter is to think formally about which feminist political imaginaries are being institutionalized by the museum under the name of feminist art, here through the political content of intersectionality. How does the institutional form of the exhibit manage revolutionary feminist desires? And how do artists cultivate creative negotiations of this institutional containment? In asking these questions, I am guided by the lessons of feminist theoretical work that has, over the past two decades, self-reflectively called into question the kinds of feminist thinking and feeling that get reinforced within the institutional context of the

9 My method may be understood as a kind of reception theory that mixes historical materialism, Foucauldian discourse analysis, and a phenomenological sensitivity to the formal attributes of art, toward an investigation of the way that each exhibit affects, produces, and shapes its audience (under particular historical conditions).

10 “Year of Yes.”
Leigh’s work joins in dynamic conversation with these theories, even as she bypasses the project of critique and instead prefigures a different set of expectations that we might hold for progressive institutions and feminist art.

To avoid confusion, I wish at this point to be clear: my aim is not in any way to be critical of intersectionality, or to dismiss the need for reform. Rather, I propose Leigh’s work as an alternative to the institutional use of intersectionality that promotes diversity in the name of social justice while at the same time managing the revolutionary desire for political participation and structural change. The Waiting Room instantiates a capacity to critically inhabit the institutional life of intersectionality through what I call in this essay a utopian feminist "both-and" disposition that is capable of holding together both revolutionary desires and pragmatic reform. A both-and disposition allows us to refuse the constricting expectations of standing institutions while using their resources and pushing them to formally change. Leigh’s Waiting Room embraces the need for institutional inclusion while also nurturing the disobedient practice of demanding more. I am interested in Leigh’s work for this reason, precisely as a compelling practice of intersectional feminism that functions both within and against the institution of contemporary art.

The Waiting Room

In a 2015 interview between scholar Rizvana Bradley and artist Simone Leigh, Leigh closes the conversation with a provocative suggestion: “Perhaps it is time to do as the Tents

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Leigh is referring here to the United Order of Tents, a secret society made up primarily of African American women, frequently trained as nurses. This organization was established in 1867, just two years after the passage of the 13th Amendment, by ex-slaves Annetta M. Lane and Harriet R. Taylor. Through mutual aid and the creation of shelters across various chapters in the southeast, the United Order of Tents continue to provide a grassroots system of care for those in need within the conditions of abandonment and siege that have been a part of black “freedom” since Reconstruction. Inspired by the Tents, Leigh launched a series of invite-only “Underground Partnerships” as part of her 2016 Waiting Room exhibition that occurred less than one year after her interview with Bradley.

Leigh’s research into the Tents’ clandestine care organizing was spurred by an interest in disobedient subject formation that itself developed as a response to the story of Esmin Elizabeth Green. Green was 49 when she died on June 19, 2008 in a hospital waiting room in Brooklyn after waiting for 24 hours to see a doctor. Surveillance footage shows Green fall from her chair after blood clots from her legs moved to her lungs, only to be attended to by a nurse 30 minutes after she had already died. In addition to the blatant violences—both passive and active—that the U.S. healthcare system has continued to enact on non-wealthy, non-white, non-able-normative, and non-heterobinary life, Leigh describes the more subtle disciplinary violence of subject formation at stake here. As she explains in her conversation with Bradley:

Obedience is one of the main threats to black women’s health; it was a survival mechanism that Green waited 24 hours before collapsing […] I wanted to expand the idea of medicine to include other self-defense and care mechanisms like strategy, or even desire, as alternatives to the stamina and obedience that is expected as normative behavior.13

The Waiting Room’s “Underground Partnerships” provided Leigh an opportunity to develop these reflections on Green’s story into an organized act of disobedient desire creation in the legacy of black women organizing exemplified by the Tents.14

The Waiting Room was the second of Leigh’s works to address the political question of care in response to Green’s story. The first was more directly informed by the radical organizing of the Black Panther Party’s mutual aid efforts, which Leigh had been working to incorporate into her art prior to learning of the Tents.15 Leigh’s 2014 Free People’s Medical

14 I thank Jennifer Nash for pointing to a feminist echo of “disobedience” in Adrienne Rich’s 1981 Women’s Studies Quarterly essay “Disobedience is What NWSA is Potentially About,” which similarly takes up the themes of institutional racism, coalitional anti-racism, visibility, and the subject formation spurred by feminist theory as a project of political desire.
15 Leigh began researching the Black Panther Party upon being asked to participate in the 2011-12 Now Dig This! exhibit, curated by Malik Gaines and Alex Segade. Leigh cites Alondra Nelson’s important 2011 text Body and Soul as influential in her research for this commission. Ultimately, Leigh did not participate in the Now Dig This! show, but her preparatory research stirred a strong interest in the BPP’s mutual aid organizing. It was after the Now Dig This! project couldn’t come into fruition that Creative Time asked Leigh to propose a site-specific work in Brooklyn on the theme of black self-determination. Leigh pursued the idea of reenacting a BPP mutual aid structure through this new opportunity, and in the process of doing more research learned about the Tents. Leigh cites two archives in particular as introducing her to the Tents: the Weeksville Heritage Center and the Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture. By the time Leigh put together The Waiting Room at the New Museum, she had been thinking about Green, the BPP, and the Tents for several years. See Leigh’s interview with Bradley for an account of this timeline. See also Nelson’s Body and Soul for a detailed account of the BPP’s care organizing, including an account of the ways that gender played into their mutual aid and hierarchal structures. Nelson’s work offers a rich account of the way that the BPP envisioned their medical initiatives as fundamentally transformative by fostering the goal of redistributing medical knowledge amongst lay people while also requiring volunteer medical experts
Clinic (FPMC) established a month-long community health center through a re-performance of the Black Panther Party’s People’s Free Medical Clinic (PFMC). This site-specific event (sponsored by Creative Time) was installed in the Stuyvesant Mansion building located within the black historical community of Brooklyn called Weeksville that is now part of the Crown Heights neighborhood. During the course of the installation, the functional clinic provided free HIV screenings, allopathic healing services, movement- and posture-based workshops, and DJ gatherings for people who lived in the neighborhood. Leigh adapted the FPMC project to the museum space for The Waiting Room exhibition by adding the invite-only underground sessions and the apothecary installation. The installation served as both a sculptural work onto itself and a meeting space for the care-themed social practice art events that accompanied the exhibition. Despite the fact that most viewers (myself included) would only gain access to the installation component and not the underground gatherings, I am interested in both aspects of the show.

Formally, the installation was both calming and charged. Upon entering the gallery, the viewer was immediately invited into the carefully designed apothecary. Delicate herbs to attend anti-racist, anti-capitalist study sessions. I thank GerShun Avilez for introducing me to Nelson’s work.

16 Weeksville was founded in 1838 by James Weeks, and was one of the first free black communities in the nation. The first black female obstetrics and gynecology doctor in NY, Dr. Josephine English, lived in the Stuyvesant Mansion.

17 In what follows the reader may notice that I analyze both the apothecary installation and the underground sessions but only offer a close description of the installation. I have intentionally chosen not to interview Leigh or the participants of the underground sessions to find out what happened during these meetings. The meetings were not intended for me. I am impressed by Leigh’s ability to keep the sessions underground within the museum, and write this essay in a way that aims to respect the need for clandestine, black-affirming organizing spaces by myself refusing to subject the underground sessions to the capture of public display or documentation.
displayed deep and desaturated colors in a dynamically paced spectrum contained within large glass jars that lined several white shelves along the wall. Facing the opposite direction, a receptionist-style counter sat atop a barrier wall of white sandbags that created a staggered pattern of pillow-like bricks, adding a subtle texture of white-on-white against the gallery wall behind. A hint of chamomile filled the space. In the way that Eva Hesse renders tactile the minimalist cube-form through her use of translucent skin-like wax, or Robert Gober queers the found object fountain-form through his installation of ceramic sagging sinks, Leigh’s work here grounds the display vitrine-form in the presence of herbal smells and earth weight.\textsuperscript{18} The sandbags in particular suggested a deeply political affair.\textsuperscript{19}

\textsuperscript{18} I link Leigh’s apothecary to what I have called the “vitrine-form” to evoke the power dynamics of visibility central to the history of modern medicine and the construction of race and gender. Robyn Wiegman, amongst others, writes compellingly about the importance of visibility to contemporary power structures in her 1995 text \textit{American Anatomies: Theorizing Race and Gender}. Here Wiegman presents an analysis of visibility as modernity’s privileged epistemological framework, disciplinary technology, and tool for ideological mystification. She calls these three factors (modern epistemology, disciplinary surveillance, and popular representations) the “economies of visibility” through which race and gender have been enforced. Visibility, in other words, has always played a central role in the construction and inscription of race and gender. See also Frantz Fanon, Luce Irigary, John Berger, bell hooks, Saidiya Hartman, Adrian Piper, and others for various discussions of the raced and gendered subject formation produced through the epistemological technology of visibility.

\textsuperscript{19} Leigh’s sandbags carry a trace of the history of disobedience and mutual aid practiced within the Black Panther Party’s \textit{People’s Free Medical Clinic}. She shares this story in her interview with Bradley when she recounts the arrival of an unexpected pair of guests on the last day of her \textit{Free People’s Medical Clinic} in Brooklyn:

I am also reminded of the last day of the clinic, when two doctors from one of the original Black Panther Party clinics visited. They told me that when they were working in the same neighborhood in the 60’s, they were so besieged with direct conflict from the police that the facade of the building was covered in sandbags. They said it was much more like a bunker than a hospital. We are so besieged now.

Leigh reflects on the intensity of anti-black besiegement that had once again come to the surface of public awareness at the time she was speaking with Bradley in 2015, amidst the rise in organizing against police attacks on black life. The closing line quoted above, that “Perhaps it is time to do as the Tents do, go back underground,” directly follows this story in Leigh’s interview.
While Leigh held both public “Care Sessions” and private “Underground Partnerships” in the apothecary during the course of the exhibition, the underground meetings were unique in two ways. First, the underground sessions were held after hours and closed to the public. As the New Museum website describes it, the underground sessions would “occur out of the public view, offering intimate classes to ongoing and newly affiliated New Museum partners.”20 Despite the formality of this language, the “ongoing and newly affiliated New Museum partners” involved in the underground sessions were primarily Leigh’s friends.21 The invite-only underground series was developed to raise political consciousness, insight political desire, and sharpen political organizing skills amongst a multi-generational group of black women located in New York and the nearby area of Philadelphia. These events were not designed to promote the museums’ dedication to social justice or lend the general public an entry point into Leigh’s work so much as establish a separate, specifically black feminist occasion for radical organizing and mutual aid.

The second way that the underground sessions were distinct from the public care sessions also held in the apothecary has to do with funding. It was importantly the social practice art granter A Blade of Grass (ABOG) and not the New Museum that sponsored the particular series of underground sessions entitled “Home Economics” which most aligned with Leigh’s investment in the creation of disobedient desire. As the New Museum describes it, Home Economics was to be “a series of courses geared toward creating an arsenal of skills to sharpen the critical thinking, self-awareness, and strategic planning of young black

21 Sayej, “Simone Leigh's The Waiting Room”
women in New York.”22 Following this surprisingly militant language of an “arsenal of skills,” the New Museum clearly states that “Home Economics was supported by Simone Leigh’s A Blade of Grass Fellowship for Socially Engaged Art.23 Indeed, Leigh proposed the “underground” programming, as a series of private events, to ABOG a year prior to her New Museum residency. The external line of funding that she gained from ABOG was in turn specifically dedicated to supporting the Home Economics underground sessions that were nonetheless hosted at the New Museum. It was specifically ABOG, that is, who supported Leigh in her effort to redirect non-profit resources to the disobedient, private gathering of her friends and associates.

I point to this element of funding in order to draw out the structural intervention that Leigh’s work achieves. The Waiting Room channels the institutional allowances afforded by art—particularly the platform of the museum and the aesthetic value of art’s indeterminacy—toward an impulse of utopian institutional refusal. In a reversal of the hierarchy of command built into neoliberal granting structures, ABOG helps Leigh do so by obeying her unapologetic desire to take the money underground. Despite the fact that both ABOG and the New Museum are non-profit institutions, and thus directed by a private board of trustees while upholding the ideology of servicing the public good, ABOG has unusually built into its mission a detour that protects artists from the accountability and measurability imperatives which accompany grants. ABOG holds that they will not treat the applications of their fellows as contract agreements that determine the strict use of

22 “Simone Leigh: The Waiting Room.”
23 “Simone Leigh: The Waiting Room.”
fellowship funds, thus protecting the quality of indetermination that they feel is an asset to art. As a granter, ABOG serves as a buffer between the artist and the private funders—funders, that is, whose interests the artist directly works against by applying institutional resources toward redistributive desires and disobedient subject formation.

*The Waiting Room* thus takes on a grassroots horizontality through the Home Economics gatherings that cultivate collective power in the black radical tradition of the Black Panther Party and the Tents, at the same time that Leigh works to redistribute funds from private capital to a common good through the vertical structure of the non-profit system and the museum. On a provisional scale with institutional support, Leigh uses her status as an artist (i.e. an entrepreneur *par excellence* in the so-called creative economy) to redirect the privatized resources afforded by art toward counter-hegemonic assembly, disobedient subject formation, and care. Even while Leigh’s work goes underground (i.e. remains closed off from the public), her effort to establish non-capitalist visions for health support and communal care serves a public good: the *Waiting Room* prefigures a world in which reproductive labor and pluralistic health support would be commonly available and

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24 I collected this information about A Blade of Grass by attending one of their 2017 Fellowship application workshops in NYC in July of 2016.

25 Leigh herself reiterates the role that aesthetic indetermination plays in her ability to create the underground space for disobedient, redistributive politics when she describes the Black Women Artists collective that grew out of the underground sessions in the following way: “Some people have asked me: What is the goal of Black Women Artists? We support Black Lives Matter. Other than that, we insist that we don’t know. We will have varied goals and outcomes along the way. We’re not trying to meet some benchmark. That’s why it’s art” (Steinhauer). Leigh’s comments suggest a rejection of the metrics of productivity and means-ends measurability that are hallmarks of neoliberal institutionalization. She does so at the same time that she uses institutional resources and works within the museum structure.
involve collective participation. The very notion of “public” transforms in this configuration from an object to be technocratically serviced to a participatory plurality.

This political-economic redistribution of privatized wealth to collective practices of social reproduction is just one way that Leigh utilizes the framework of art to challenge the material structures of the neoliberal state and non-profit system. By closing the underground sessions off from public view, Leigh’s work skillfully navigates the New Museum’s program-building desire for intersectionality while also sabotaging the aesthetic economy of visible diversity through which intersectionality often traffics. Leigh and her friends meet after hours for the Home Economics programing. This was an “underground” space for black study and planning, within the historically white institution of the museum, that was closed off to all but the women of color Leigh invited. The gathering of these women lent credibility to the New Museum’s “Department of Education and Public Engagement” program-building initiative by fulfilling their mission promise that the residency would demonstrate “the New Museum’s year-round commitment to community partnerships and to public dialogue at the intersection of art and social justice.” Yet not only did Leigh refuse to articulate the measurable outcomes of these meetings, she also closed them off from broader public access. Leigh’s work circumvents the logic of visibility through which—as Amber Musser, Sara Ahmed, and Rachel Lee amongst others have all pointed out—the bodies of subjects with visible indexes of “diversity” come to do the work of signaling an

26 I am thinking here of Fred Moten and Stefano Harney’s concepts of study and planning in their text The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study (2013).
27 “Simone Leigh: The Waiting Room.”
28 See footnote 25.
institution’s commitment to justice and social good in such a way that institutions may elide actual institutional change. Musser describes this problem in her 2015 article “Specimen Days” that addresses the affective labor involved in navigating the demand for visible and invisible diversity markers in the academy. While the current institutional desire for intersectionality may help bring an overdue advantage to historically and structurally disadvantaged subjects on the job market, Musser explains that the entry afforded into the academy on these terms “actually just means more labor.” Leigh’s work soberly and creatively confronts this bind by redistributing the institutional funding she receives underground. *The Waiting Room* hosts an occasion to practice both the insurgent refusal of surplus value extraction that occurs through the visibility and affective labor of women of color, while also embracing the overdue reformist gesture of diversity-based resource allotment which the museum offers in the name of social justice.

A useful contrast to this can be seen in the 2017 group exhibition *We Wanted a Revolution: Black Radical Women 1965-85* at the Brooklyn Museum. The temporal proximity and shared geographic context that these exhibits possess invite a comparative lens. This kinship is reinforced by the explicit themes of black feminism, intersectionality, and progressive politics expressed in each museum’s press release. As the Brooklyn Museum

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30 Musser, 8.
31 A slippage often occurs in the museum press releases between the specific reference to black women artists and the generalized reference to “women of color.” Both *We Wanted a Revolution* and *The Waiting Room* take up the topic of black feminism in particular. When addressing these shows I attempt to maintain this specificity. The fact that both institutional statements move back and forth between the language of black women and women of color is noteworthy, however, insofar as it relates to the institutional use of “intersectionality” that this article is interested in: For this reason, I
describes it, *We Wanted a Revolution* sets out to be “the first exhibition to highlight the voices and experiences of women of color” who were making art during the 1960s to 1980s US-based feminist movement. They do so “in order to reorient conversations around race, feminism, political action, art production, and art history in this significant historical period.”\(^{32}\) The New Museum similarly emphasizes the goal of centering the work and voices of women of color, writing that Leigh’s exhibit “demands that the concerns, roles, and rights of women of color be recognized as central, rather than pushed to the margins.”\(^{33}\) Despite what appears to be a shared political commitment within these statements, the resulting exhibitions differ considerably in the political imaginaries they forward.

*We Wanted a Revolution* consists of forty women of color artists and activists working in a diverse range of media, from painting and sculpture, to print, textile, photography, and video. This exhibit presents an impressively researched and well-collected archive of art and cultural documents that detail the many roles women have played in various strands of black political thought and activism. It simultaneously accounts for the many positions black women have held in or in opposition to feminist movements that functioned both inside and outside of the art world at the time. As art critic Holland Cotter describes it:

*[We Wanted a Revolution]* leads us to at least one broad conclusion: that the African-American contribution to feminism was, and is, profound. Simply to say so […] is easy, but inadequate. It fails to take the measure of lived history. The curators of *We* use the term “women of color” when discussing the diversity labor that women of color in general are often called upon to do in the name of intersectionality and in the service of institutional agendas.\(^{32}\) "*We Wanted a Revolution*

\(^{33}\) "Simone Leigh: The Waiting Room."
*Wanted a Revolution* do better than that just by doing their homework. They let counter-narrative contradictions and confused emotions stand.\(^34\)

The show’s wall text alone attests to the “homework” Cotter suggests. Each blurb offered a specific window into moments of productive conflict not popularly circulated in narratives of the period. The wall text titled “HERESIES,” for example, teaches viewers in two brief paragraphs about the emergence of the landmark Heresies Collective publication on feminism, art, and politics (1977-1993), as well as backlash against the journal’s *Lesbian Art and Artists* issue due to its full exclusion of women of color, and, moreover, the crucial intervention taken by the Combahee River Collective, with results yielding varied levels of satisfaction. This sort of historical detail and narrative craft, combined with the compelling works of art themselves, helped the Brooklyn Museum achieve a difficult task in popular political discourse. *We Wanted a Revolution* tells a nuanced, intersectional story of the radical yet completely ordinary desire for more that encompasses frustration and unsung accomplishment, solidarity and conflict. The Brooklyn Museum even allows this controversial desire for more to be named, in a positive light, as revolution.

By organizing, presenting, archiving, and acknowledging the stories and objects in this show, the Brooklyn Museum intervenes into (art) history in a momentously important way. It is hard not to be impressed by the exhibit’s sheer accomplishment of archival representation. And yet, there are reasons to remain wary of this. While the show’s representation of underrepresented histories and artists is pragmatically progressive and

indeed nuanced, the reformist curatorial impulse of *We Wanted a Revolution* actually tames the radical political imaginary its title claims to celebrate. By investing the show’s political impetus fully in the content of “Black Radical Women,” the curators risk reproducing the same formal logic of liberal inclusion performed by the white feminist artists they claim to decenter. The irony here is profound, considering the way the curatorial text which heralds black feminist activity as more radical than white mainstream feminism literally wraps around the permanent installation of Judy Chicago’s *The Dinner Party* from the same period. This curatorial juxtaposition spatially engulfs Chicago’s work, as if to suggest that the exclusion of racial diversity in Chicago’s manifestation of feminism can no longer be disavowed. Yet, perhaps due to limitations in the museum form itself, or perhaps due to limitations in the popular political imaginary, the curators re-enact the very politics they wish to reject by framing the *We Wanted a Revolution* exhibition as a whole as a sort of complaint and corrective to exclusion, rendering the show’s political imaginary formally identical to that of *The Dinner Party*.

To name these limitations is not to deny the radical desires and disobedient demands historically and continually enacted by the *artists* included in the *We Wanted a Revolution* exhibit. An example of these desires and demands can be seen in a public symposium that accompanied the show, as artist Faith Ringgold skillfully upends the unidirectional power

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35 Judy Chicago’s 1979 *The Dinner Party* consists of a large triangular table that is permanently installed in its own triangular room on the top floor of the Brooklyn Museum in the Sackler Center for Feminist Art. 39 unique place-settings sit upon the table, each with a handcrafted porcelain plate dedicated to a historical or mythical woman. Epitomizing a gender-inclusive politics of what may often be called “herstory,” the Dinner Party aimed to insert forgotten and excluded women into the male dominated archives of history. The work has been at the center of several controversies, including debates over the vulva-design of the plates and the majority white subjects who are honored. See the Brooklyn Museum “The Dinner Party: Curatorial Overview.”
dynamic between herself and her interviewer, the Brooklyn Museum curator Catharine Morris. It is worth pausing to describe this interaction, as it may too be seen as an example of insurgent inhabiting and utopian refusal on Ringgold’s part.

Toward the end of their 30-minute interview, the museum representative and head curator Catherine Morris attempts to bring the established, guest artist Faith Ringgold’s commentary to a close. With clear concern for respectable time constraints, Morris goes as far as to coax the audience into applause with the closing statement: “Faith Ringgold! Thank you very much.” Ringgold, who had not finished her thought, replies, “Now, wait a minute.” Refusing to be orchestrated, Ringgold continues to tell the story of her painting *For the Women’s House* for another 4 minutes, culminating in a crowd-pleasing call to the museum, announcing: “So, we need that painting in a safe place. Safe!” The audience applauds, to which the curator stands and applauds, saying nothing. To which Ringgold continues: “I’m glad you agree. And that… safe… place is… [standing] the Brooklyn Museum! Yay!!!” Ringgold’s at once apparently innocent celebration of the Brooklyn Museum doubles here as a performative demand of coercive interpellation, hailing the curator into a contract agreement that the museum will purchase Ringgold’s work. As if to attest to the silent tension of this moment, the video documentation of the event immediately cuts out.

I am, in other words, not suggesting that Leigh’s art practice and skilled negotiation of the museum institution is new or more radical than the ongoing negotiations and refusals performed by the artists that make up the content of the Brooklyn Museum show. I wish to highlight the way that the liberal notion that progress equals inclusion gets materialized, reinforced, and institutionalized in the curatorial form of the *We Wanted a Revolution* exhibit.
If *The Dinner Party* sought overdue entry for “women” into the archives of history, the Brooklyn Museum similarly strives to be “the first” museum to open a proper place for “black women” in the archives of history. Both shows conclude with a place at the same, pre-set institutional table. *We Wanted a Revolution* reproduces the same formal political imaginary as *The Dinner Party*, while celebrating the content of “black feminism” as a testament to superior radicality and social progress in contrast to the now legible limitations of “white feminism.”

The rhetorical framing of *We Wanted a Revolution* portrays a false divergence between a past of “white feminist” occlusion and a future of “black feminist” inclusion that represents the (curatorial) desire to be a good, awakened, progressive political subject/institution more than it represents any actual, formal change in the institution’s political imaginary.³⁶ *The Waiting Room* offers another way. Leigh’s work redirects the institutional resources of exhibition and funding toward a sculptural installation and series of events aimed at nurturing the disobedient desire for more: more than mere visibility, more than liberal (“white”) feminism, more than representational politics, more than acquiescence, and more than the lure of inclusion. Such utopian refusal creates the conditions for more radical subjectivity, more radical solidarity, and more radical institutions. *The Waiting Room* exemplifies an artist’s efforts to creatively negotiate the limited legibility offered by the liberal rhetoric of diversity that is habitually practiced in representation-focused art and curation.

³⁶ See Meagher’s “Telling Stories About Feminist Art” for an analysis of the habits of “disidentification” in feminist art curation that aim to frame the narrator/curator/museum as a good political subject. Meagher draws explicitly on Hemming’s *Why Stories Matter*, which develops a similar critique in the context of academic women’s studies—a text which significantly informs Nash’s work.
While refusing the demand to put identity on display, Leigh nonetheless takes earned advantage of institutional resources that are granted to her in part as an overdue corrective to the structural disadvantage that black woman artists such as herself have historically faced. Her exhibit deftly inhabits the museum and non-profit granting systems while rejecting the terms of instrumental legibility and compliance required by these institutions.

In what follows I consider Leigh’s work more specifically in the context of the institutional life of intersectionality. I ask what Leigh’s work does to construct alternative forms of imagination and desire for feminist politics by working both within and against the museum’s institutional drive for diversity.

**Institutional Intersectionality**

Intersectionality remains a productively unresolved concept in women’s studies. My intention in this essay is not to stabilize or define it. Rather, following Jennifer Nash, I find

While this essay does not set out to define “intersectionality” or lay claim to any existing definition of the term as more valid than another, I offer the following frameworks and foundational texts to establish a shared point of departure. Intersectionality may be understood in general as: a theory or method that names the existence of interlocking structures of oppression; a remedy to the erasure of intersecting harm (particularly experienced by black women in a US context) that can be obscured through the singular analytics of race, class, or gender; a move to center women of color as privileged subjects in a global context around which to organize political action toward social change; the revaluation or centering of the experience of black women and women of color as a privileged standpoint from which to expand scholarly knowledge production; and a discursive nexus of historical-material subject formation.

A list of foundational texts that have contributed to the interdisciplinary field of intersectional analysis include (but are not limited to): Sojourner Truth, “Ain’t I a Woman” (1851); Frances Beal “Double Jeopardy: To be Black and Female” (1969); Combahee River Collective, “A Black Feminist Statement” (1977); Sharon Harley and Rosalyn Terborg-Penn eds., *The Afro-American Woman: Struggles and Images* (1978); Bonnie Thornton Dill, “The Dialectics of Black Womanhood” (1979) and “Race, Class, and Gender: Prospects for an All-Inclusive Sisterhood” (1983); Angela Davis, *Women, Race, and Class* (1981); Cherrie Moraga and Gloria Anzaldúa eds., *This Bridge Called my Back: Writings by Radical Women of Color* (1981); Akasha Gloria Hull, Patricia Bell-Scott, and Barbara Smith, eds., *All the Women are White, All the Blacks are Men, But Some of Us are Brave* (1982); bell hooks,
it useful to recognize the way that intersectionality functions in at least three ways: 1) as a rich, still unfolding field of black feminist inquiry and critique, 2) as a metonym for women of color, and 3) as an object of projected political aspirations and institutional positioning. I use the language of “object” in this last instance to suggest the psychoanalytically informed way that feminist theorists such as Robyn Wiegman and Lauren Berlant have used it in their texts *Object Lessons* (2012) and *Cruel Optimism* (2011). Objects conceived as such are less things-in-themselves than projected nodes of attachment and desire. Berlant explains this effectively when she writes that “When we talk about an object of desire, we are really talking about a cluster of promises we want someone or something to make to us and make possible for us.”

Wiegman carries this idea a step further in relation to what she calls “identity knowledges” or fields of study organized around identity categories. As her work demonstrates, the “objects of study” that we invest in through scholarly pursuits are not

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For two relevant essays (amongst many others not cited here) on the intersectional topics of (a) black women’s reproductive labors, and (b) black women artists’ institutional status, see respectively Saidiya Hartman’s “The Belly of the World: A Note on Black Women’s Labors” (2016) and Michele Wallace’s “Why are There No Great Black Artists?: The Problem of Visuality in African American Culture” (1992).

neutral. Objects such as gender, whiteness, intersectionality, etc. are “politically arranged across various identity knowledge domains” in ways meant to assure the political legitimacy of both the critic and the field.\textsuperscript{39} Thinking about “intersectionality” as an object in this way transfigures it from a concept that names particularized subjects to what Joan Wallach Scott has called a “useful category of analysis” through which we might access and assess the historical power relations that precipitate such naming. Nash continues in this tradition of feminist thinking when she attends to the institutional desires and political promises that intersectionality as an object is projected to fulfill.

My argument similarly works to take stock of the institutional labor that intersectionality is tasked with fulfilling. Tracking the object of intersectionality through US cultural institutions is important in our historical moment when intersectionality has become a densely-cited horizon of feminist and left-leaning political thought.\textsuperscript{40} Treating intersectionality as a horizon of hope or an object of desire that reflects its surroundings provides a way to analyze the structures that reproduce limited, hegemonic frameworks for feminist thinking and feeling. In saying this I wish once more to be clear: there is nothing about intersectionality-in-itself—as a field of knowledge (function 1) or a synonym for women of color (function 2)—that limits the feminist political desire for different and better worlds. The \textit{institutional investment} in diversity that is here named intersectionality (function 3) does however have a track record for managing utopian impulses, in the academy in

\textsuperscript{39} Wiegman, Object Lessons, 4-5.
\textsuperscript{40} See the opening pages of Nash’s \textit{Black Feminism Reimagined} for a handful of popular invocations of intersectionality as such.
The move toward expanded inclusion in the arts must be contextualized within this phenomenon. To do so, I shift Nash’s insights about the institutional life of intersectionality from the domain of academic women’s studies to the domain of feminist art.

Since my aim is to think about feminist art in relation to political desire creation and social change, it is important to identify the dominant modes of subject formation that stifle movements for social change. I suggest that there are at least two. The first can be understood as management by way of inclusion. The second can be understood as the building of conservative (rather than transformative) anti-utopian consensus through the performative claim to progress. Both of these operations occur as much in academic feminism as in feminist art, both have an anti-utopian or desire-delimiting function, and both are active in the *We Wanted a Revolution* show. Developing an account of these operations (as I do below) highlights the subtle force of *The Waiting Room’s* demand that we cannot wait for a better future to arrive at some unspecified time or be satisfied with archiving revolutionary impulses as part of the celebrated past. Some of us, after all, still want a revolution.

Roderick Ferguson’s *The Reorder of Things* (2012) is instructive for thinking about the first mode of anti-utopian subject formation. Ferguson offers an analysis of the way that  

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41 While “diversity” and “intersectionality” have different intellectual histories, the meaning between these two terms has been largely blurred in the context of how they are put to use in the neoliberal university. As Nash describes it, the term intersectionality has been “rhetorically and symbolically collapsed into diversity, and thus taken up as an inclusion project that resonates with the mission of the so called corporate university” (12).

42 Nash and Musser are both similarly influenced by Ferguson’s *The Reorder of Things* in their writing on diversity work.
Ferguson, 11.
Ferguson, 13, 182. (emphasis added)

Ferguson, 204. See also The Twilight of Equality for an account of what Duggan calls the “pro-business activism” of the neoliberal center and right that successfully launched strategic "attacks on downwardly redistributive social movements” of the 1960s and 70s, “especially the Civil Rights and Black Power movements, but including the feminism, lesbian and gay liberation, and countercultural mobilizations” (xii).
redistribution that has been cultivated in the academy has “quickly become the face of social reproduction” more broadly conceived.\textsuperscript{47} The diversity inclusion strategy developed in the wake of 1960s - 70s US student movements reduced insurgency not simply by repressing it—although this certainly happened in the form of police violence and criminalization—but also by redirecting disobedient desire toward “normative ideals and protocols of the state, capital, and [the] academy.”\textsuperscript{48} The embrace and management of minoritized difference in dominant institutions has, in other words, helped redirect political desires for social transformation away from utopian insurgency and toward incremental professionalism. As Ferguson notes, however, the lure of inclusion makes up just one part of this strategy: the generative technique of managing 1960s and 70s unrest through obedient subject formation has been achieved as much through the carrot of institutional success as through the stick of austerity. For instance by the 1980s, austerity attacks on public resources and the mobilization of the “culture wars” by the neoconservative right made it hard to resist what small security representation without redistribution offered.\textsuperscript{49} We see here the institutional history of anti-utopian politics: politically induced scarcity makes the world-reshaping demand of representation \textit{with} redistribution seem like too much to ask.

\textsuperscript{47} It is not hard to recognize the privatized value that is accrued through corporate celebrations of diversity. One can easily think of banks like Wells Fargo sponsoring Pride, Nike promoting transnational feminism, the neoliberal academy’s embrace of “global citizenship,” and the World Bank and IMF’s promotion of race-to-the-bottom wages as “opportunity” for women in the global factory.

\textsuperscript{48} Ferguson, 48. See also INCITE’s \textit{The Revolution Will Not Be Funded} (2007) for a similar history of the way that insurgent organizing from this period was redirected into obedient professionalism through the neoliberal development of the non-profit sector, or what several authors in the anthology call the “non-profit industrial complex.”

\textsuperscript{49} See Melinda Cooper’s \textit{Family Values} for an account of the intricate convergences, and paradoxical divergences, between neoliberal and neoconservative economic and moral ideology in the US during this period.
The first technique of subject formation thus tames the utopian desire for social change by turning insurgency into obedience and redirecting political desire toward institutional inclusion. The professionalism required for one to fit into hegemonic institutions such as the academy, the non-profit, or the museum does not inevitably tame the disobedient desires in our revolutionary hearts, but it does shrink space for dissensus. As Nash has written, “the work of diversity…is not meant to transform social institutions,” it is meant “to insert bodies into existing structures.” Inclusion as such means becoming a subject that fits in—a figure of consensus.

It is important to recognize the way that diversity inclusion functions as a containment of the desire for social change. It is equally important to issue this critique of inclusion from a realistic standpoint that recognizes the limited access that minoritized subjects have historically been granted, as well as the aggressive neoliberal scarcity that makes having a job increasingly a privilege. While institutional inclusion tends to manage disobedient desire, it also offers a semblance of stability that is needed for us simply to reproduce ourselves in exhausting times. What I am calling “both-and” thinking emerges as the most feasible way forward when both of these realities are acknowledged. It is possible and necessary to both critique the institutional technique of diversity inclusion for the way that it tames radicality, and demand the institutional expansion of resources to structurally excluded and historically exploited subjects. Doing so flexes the popular political imaginary and allows us to want more than temporary fixes that are deemed practical.

Leigh’s project moves in precisely this direction of flexing our feminist political desire by appropriating institutional stability while redirecting resources toward disobedience. Her work occupies the institutional desire for diversity in such a way that takes advantage of the economic and aesthetic resources that are granted by the museum on the terms of diversity inclusion, while also changing the terms of such institutional inclusion. Leigh channels the resources of the museum underground toward a series of collective gatherings that generate subjective agency through the process of refusing, first, to be put on display, and second, to obey the liberal imperative to become a consenting subject. The underground sessions accept the invitation of diversity inclusion in order to apply the institution’s resources toward the reanimation of insurgency. In this way, *The Waiting Room* challenges any strict dichotomy posited between representation and redistribution, reform and revolution, or ameliorative and disruptive art. It creates a space for militant care and the institutionally supported practice of disobedient desire.

The second technique of subject formation that I am interested in occurs in the performative claim to political progress. Here political interests are not traded in for

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51 See also the idea of “disinvesting” proposed by Anna M. Agathangelou, Dana M. Olwan, Tamara Lea Spira, and Heather M. Turcotte in their co-authored article “Sexual Divestments from Empire,” published in the same 2015 *Feminist Formations* special issue on Women’s Studies in the corporate university as Musser’s “Specimen Days.” Describing the idea of disinvestment as a practice of critical occupation distinct from that of divestment, Agathangelou et al. write: “Here we distinguish divesting from empire (that is, removing our lives, labor, and bodies from institutions of violence and war) from disinvesting in empire. Disinvesting in empire is an active project of building up alternative institutions and social relations so as to ‘crowd out’ empire.” P 5

52 See Grant Kester’s *Conversation Pieces* and Clare Bishop’s *Artificial Hells* for entry into this debate over ameliorative versus disruptive art that has been significant in shaping the way politics and aesthetics are analyzed in social practice art. Within this debate, Kester has been positioned as promoting the virtues of ameliorative, collaborative art while Bishop defends the need for antagonistic, aesthetically disruptive art. One reason I became interested in Leigh’s *Waiting Room* to begin with has to do with her rich complication of this binary.
professionalism, as occurs in the first technique. Instead, political commitments are made clear, and often in good faith. Such declarations can nonetheless take the place of actual structural change. Sara Ahmed has called this kind of performative operation a “non-performative,” wherein the “slight address” of a problem such as racism becomes “a way to not address” the problem.\(^{53}\) Ahmed is keen to observe the way that institutional commitments to diversity (or as Nash points out, intersectionality) accumulate value for the institution by signaling the organization’s progressive character without disrupting the structural flows of power. No change in organizational values or resource distribution is required beyond signaling a commitment to diversity.\(^{54}\)

It is possible to read the *We Wanted a Revolution* show as committing the institutional non-performative that Ahmed describes. The curatorial claim to revolutionary ambitions serves as a way to archive and contain revolutionary desires while signaling the institution’s progressive character. The visibility of women of color in the show works toward assuaging the museum’s guilt and correcting historical exclusion, while at the same time doing little to reallocate institutional power. It reinforces the incrementalist idea that representation with redistribution is too much to ask. It leaves unaltered the non-profit funding structure that museums rely upon—a structure that enables private donors and corporate actors to secure tax breaks and appear socially generous through philanthropic donations even as they privatize public wealth and cause public harm. On top of this, the past tense of the exhibition title and archival impulse of the show redirects attention away from living

\(^{54}\) Such signaling occurs through the language of diversity/intersectionality, and the visibility of minoritized subjects.
revolutionary desires toward a narrative of accomplished progress. Asking an exhibition to take on structural problems such as these might seem like too much to ask when the curators have already provided a well-researched and much needed corrective to feminist art history. This kind of can’t-do thinking, however, lacks creativity and naturalizes an anti-utopian agenda. It also obscures efforts to demand more that are already underway in the arts.

The tradition of institutional critique—which gained popularity in the 1960s in the context of redistributive social movements, and again in the 90s with the influence of structurally-informed AIDS activism—has once more seen a resurgence in the post-Occupy and post-2016 US political landscape. An embrace of the both-and thinking of revolution and reform or redistribution and representation can be seen in many of these efforts. Groups like Decolonize This Place, for example, have applauded the 2019 Whitney Biennial for including indigenous, black, and brown artists, while simultaneously organizing nine weeks of actions leading up to the biennial which demand that the vice chair of the Whitney board, Warren Kanders, be removed from his position. Kanders owns the Safariland company that manufactures tear gas canisters used against asylum seekers on the US-Mexico border. Also in 2019, photographer and queer activist Nan Golden figure-headed a group of protests at the Metropolitan and Guggenheim museums, demanding the removal of the

Sackler family name and funding. The Sackler family created and owns Purdue Pharma, the OxyContin manufacturer that has been charged with misrepresenting and profiting from the drug’s addictive character. Since 2016, Gulf Labor Coalition has organized several protests demanding that the trustees of the Guggenheim Foundation be accountable for the forced migrant labor practices that they profit from in the building of museums in Abu Dhabi. And since 2004, Not an Alternative has worked to eliminate the fossil fuel interests built into our museum structures, particularly by demanding the removal of the Koch brothers from the boards and endowments of several national Smithsonian and Natural History Museums. These efforts and more build on the preceding institutional critiques of artists such as Hans Haacke, Art Workers’ Coalition, Mierle Laderman Ukeles, Adrian Piper, The Guerrilla Girls, Andrea Fraser, Fred Wilson, The Yes Men, ACT UP, and others. They bring an aesthetic of protest and organizing into the museum and demand that our vision of political progress involves reimagined institutions and structural change. As Not an Alternative explicitly puts it in one of their interview series, these works provoke us to ask, “What would it look like for museums to act as agents of change and forces of good?”

It is important to critique the museum for its ongoing investment in racist capitalist structures. It is also important to imagine alternative visions for the institutional form of the museum. Leigh’s work does not explicitly do the former. The Waiting Room does not, for example, inhabit the New Museum as a protest of the museum institution. It does, however, inhabit the museum in a way that works both within and beyond the institutional norm of

57 The Sackler family name is also on the Brooklyn Museum’s center for feminist art.
liberal progress. The work’s prefigurative freshness comes from working with what we have toward expanding visions for what we want. It helps us imagine other feelings that we might have toward and within the museum. This expansion of imagination and political desire occurs not through the narrative form of didactic critique, but through the embodied form of gathering, refusal, and care. It reminds us that ideology is an embodied practice. To put it another way, The Waiting Room operates within the ideological, sensible, and economic medium of social reproduction. The utopian desire for more that occurs in The Waiting Room functions at all of these ideological, economic, and sensible levels.

My analysis of the underground sessions has thus far discussed the political form of The Waiting Room. I want to turn back now to the apothecary installation in order to address the sensible formalism of the work. One of the more striking elements of The Waiting Room as an example of social practice art comes from the way that Leigh integrates the aesthetics of postminimalism through the apothecary. When Leigh transferred her Free People’s Medical Clinic project from the Weeksville location to the white cube, the artwork took on a withdrawn posture of “disinterestedness” or “autonomy” that is familiar within the formal operations of minimalist art in the gallery. The Waiting Room was both aesthetically stunning (and thus inviting) and closed off in this way. It was closed off formally through the convention of minimalist aloofness that makes minimalist sculpture appear as if it is an

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59 Louis Althusser famously argues as much in his second thesis of “Ideology and Ideological State Apparatus” (1970). As he puts it (and Michel Foucault further develops): “Pascal says, more or less, ‘Kneel down, move your lips in prayer, and you will believe’” (186, emphasis original). Our ideological understandings of the world do not proceed practices, but rather are the effects of practices. Ideologies are always produced and reproduced through apparatus of practices. They are, in this way, both ideal and material, historical and embodied, individual and social.
object uninterested in the viewer’s reception (thus animating the work with a vibrating
object-ness and a withdrawn subject-ness). *The Waiting Room* was closed off socially as well,
perhaps in a more literal way, by disallowing a popular, white audience from gaining access
to the underground happenings that charged the space with collaborative energy and
political life after hours. Leigh powerfully cultivated these two dispositions of semi-
autonomy toward the museum—one aesthetic and the other social—without requiring them
to fold into or compromise the other.\(^6^0\)

Within the gallery, Leigh pursues a project of establishing mutual-aid strategies and
black networks of care. Leigh’s work generates collective agency and insurgent desire
amongst a private group of participants after hours. By closing these gatherings of black
women off from a spectatorial gaze, Leigh refuses the affective labor of visibility that
typically accompanies the institutional life of intersectionality. In the absence of such
visibility, the apothecary installation itself comes to *signal*, but this time not progress so much
as insurgency. The sculptural installation signals a legacy of black separatist gathering that
replaces, and transforms, the role of signaling that women of color are typically tasked with
in the service of the institution’s progressive character. Minimalism is militarized in this way
by bringing an urgent yet institutionally untimely legacy of black radical organizing and living
revolutionary desire into the gallery.

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\(^6^0\) The fact that Leigh has to this point primarily worked in sculpture and not the genre of social
practice art shines through in her attention to the aesthetic choreography of the apothecary. Leigh’s
attention to texture, line, form, balance, and morphology contributes to the atmosphere of dynamic
calm created within the installation.
Not only is minimalism militarized within the apothecary, militancy is also aestheticized. The effect this has is not to depoliticize the art (as the term “aestheticized” often suggests) so much as rejuvenate the senses. Put directly, we might say that the apothecary installation both signals militancy and performs care. Here the exhaustion caused by diversity work is replaced by sensible rejuvenation and the calm of the apothecary’s formally soothing yet socially charged aesthetics. The sandbags isomorphically transform into the suggestion of soft fluffy pillows, only to shift back to the declaration of gritty strength. The repetition, of both the herbs and the sandbags, orchestrate an atmospheric pacing that slows the viewer’s embodied temporality. The monochrome white-on-white of the sandbags against the gallery wall, paired with the desaturated vibrancy of the dried herbs, dispose the viewer to a quiet attentiveness. The formal sensibilities of the installation create not just a meeting space within which to practice disobedient desire, but also a grounding space within which to practice sensible restoration. It is in these ways that Leigh redistributes the sensible life of intersectionality toward utopian both-and glimmers of the institutions we might want, within (and against) the institutions that we have.

It should not be ignored, by contrast, that a sense of fatigue can often be felt when viewing shows like *We Wanted a Revolution* and *The Dinner Party*. This sense does not simply result from the social weight of the corrective declared, or the sheer number of historical materials presented. It also comes from the feeling of being hailed into a predetermined script of what a “good” feminist subject should be. One anticipates the conflict one might feel in knowing that they should appreciate the show even if they find it aesthetically draining. *The Waiting Room* provides a prefigurative example of how we might reimagine the
institutional form of feminist art by emphasizing sensible rejuvenation and the creation of fresh political desires. This aesthetic, utopian method of critical social reproduction must be added to the also needed, established methods of inclusion, protest, correction, and didactic critique that currently make up our visions of politics in art. Such an addition allows us to expand the political thinkings and feelings that get rendered realistic through the institutional naming of “feminist art.”

**Utopian Desire**

Rather than waste time on impractical and untimely demands, so the argument goes, feminists and others should conserve their meager energies and set their sights on more politically feasible goals [...] What if we were to respond to [this] charge of utopianism not with embarrassment or defensive denial but with recognition and affirmation? What might such a utopianism without apology look like?

Kathi Weeks, “The Future is Now” in *The Problem with Work*

I dream of a black feminist theory that puts pressure on women’s studies to recognize the utopian world-making work of our still unfolding political dreaming, which includes but also exceeds intersectionality.

Jennifer C. Nash, “Some of Us are Tired” in *Black Feminism Reimagined*

I end this essay with two quotations of feminist utopian thinking. The quotes above are pulled from recent works of feminist theory that, each in their own way, critically reflect upon the political, historical, and affective dispositions common within women’s studies.  

While *The Problem with Work* (2011) and *Black Feminism Reimagined* (2019) take up fairly different topics, the texts are united by a dedication to expanding the practice of feminist

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61 This body of meta-theoretical feminist work has developed as an effort to reflect upon the impact that institutionalization has had on the field of Women’s Studies. It is greatly informed by the affective analysis that Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick offers in her reading of the practice of critique in *Touching Feeling* (2003). Nash characterizes what I would call a self-reflective or meta-theoretical turn in feminist theory as women’s studies’ “introspective times” (12).
theory beyond the reactive and reformist orientations that can often prevail within the field. What is immediately striking about these quotes is the clarity with which each author identifies the desire to do more with feminist theory as part of a utopian political disposition. To call a version of feminist theory that extends beyond pragmatism utopian is not to suggest that such a feminist theory is improbable. Rather, the invocation of utopia affirms the world-making estrangement and subject-forming desire that has been at the core of feminist thinking and feeling all along. It calls forth feminism as an untimely, counter-hegemonic practice that celebrates the not-yet-practical dreams issued from revolutionary desires. Attending to feminism’s utopianism, as Jennifer Nash and Kathi Weeks here do, allows feminist theorists and practitioners a way out of the reactive and reformist politics that institutionalized feminism can tend to be backed into.

I bring these quotes by Nash and Weeks together to highlight another issue as well: that of our overextended and under-supported energies. The texts express an unexpected convergence on this matter. As Weeks explains in the chapter cited above, the “pressures of getting by” within economic hardship tend to strain the energies needed for creative political thinking. It seems more practical to channel those meager energies that we do have toward the needs of the present rather than the project of imagining alternative futures.62 In this way, structurally produced crisis and austerity carry within them what Weeks identifies as an “anti-utopian” impulse that has led, in part, to the “diminishment of utopian energies in US feminism in the 1980s and 1990s.”63 This management of utopianism through manufactured

63 Weeks, 182-3, 175.
crisis and precarity must be refused, Weeks argues, despite the real scarcity of energies that economic restructuring has produced.

Nash’s reflections pose a different yet compatible perspective on the viability of utopianism within the context of limited energies. Here Nash focuses on the way that the sparse resources that “some of us” endure may be understood as *cause for* (rather than pernicious justification against) a turn to feminist utopianism. As Nash puts it, the defensive posture that black feminists have developed as a reasonable assertion of agency in response to structural overextension and attack nonetheless “hinders black feminism’s theoretical and political imagination.”64 Ultimately, she explains,

> the defensive position is an exhausting one for black feminists, who are both shielding themselves from attack and relentlessly guarding imagined territory. It is tiring precisely because of the radical dreaming it forecloses, and because it relentlessly reduces rich debates to accusations of trespass and practices of recovery […] Letting go allows us to put the visionary genius of black feminism to work otherwise. [Letting go] is, thus, a practice of freedom.65

It is in light of intersectionality’s overburdened and restricted institutional status that Nash calls for a utopian feminism—one that would allow black feminism, and black feminists, to “let go” as a way to do other work than assuaging guilt and correcting “past” institutional harms. Nash ends her book with the above quoted lines in a gesture toward the future that could be otherwise for both black feminism and feminist theory generally. Her comments flirt with the utopian politics of prefiguration, more explicitly stated in Weeks’ thinking, wherein freedom is imagined as a creative practice by which we might bring forth better

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65 Nash, 138.
futures now.\textsuperscript{66} It is through such utopianism that Nash imagines a way for black feminists to not simply be tired, but to find the energy to dream. Indeed, the exhaustion produced when we are left only with the anti-utopian options of reactionary defensiveness and incremental reform quickly becomes unsustainable. In light of such exhaustion, the vitality generated through utopian dreaming appears, in fact, \textit{more} practical. The work of Weeks and Nash thus coordinate on this point of the vital practicality of utopianism, even as they arrive at the claim through different concerns.

These two priorities may thus be understood as guiding my interest in turning to Leigh’s work: first, an investment in paying attention to the way that art may rejuvenate the vital energies that go into political imagination toward social transformation, and second, an investment in practicing utopian modes of feminist both-and thinking-feeling that allow us to expand desire beyond the limited institutional contours of critique, inclusion, and liberal reform. As Nash indicates in the epitaph above and Weeks develops elsewhere, feminist utopianism may in fact best be understood as a world-making practice that both includes and exceeds the pragmatic politics of reform. We need, after all, a world that we can currently inhabit in order to sustain the difficult co-extensive work of continuing to want more. Leigh’s work bypasses explicit critique (which she could rightfully lodge at the historically white institutions of art and/or feminism) in order to cultivate feminist desire and prefigure a relation to the institution that we might actually want. Following Weeks’ suggestion that utopianism may operate as “a reformist project with revolutionary aspirations,”\textsuperscript{67} I have

\textsuperscript{66} See for example the title of the chapter quoted above.
\textsuperscript{67} Weeks, \textit{The Problem with Work}, 136.
considered the presence of utopian desires that are currently being cultivated within (and against) the reformist institutional life of intersectionality within Leigh’s work.

If one understands utopia, as Weeks suggest we might, as a “glimmer” of the future—otherwise that is provocatively prefigured now,—art provides feminism a compatible habitus for practicing provocative glimmers. Tracking the contours of feminist political desire and imagination through art is fitting due to the tension that both art and utopia occupy between being at once concrete and fleeting, or actual and virtual. Art’s attributes of reorganizing the sensible, instantiating social gathering, and inhabiting a space of provisionality are yet to be fully appreciated as creating the conditions for the practice of feminist utopianism.

Contemporary art offers a disciplinary domain that embraces the utopian values of process and indetermination over program, rebalancing the hegemonic values of predictability and quantification that are integral to neoliberal rationality and algorithmic capture. It is for these aesthetic and utopian reasons that I am not particularly concerned with the scalability,

68 In the full quote Weeks writes, “By providing a vision or glimmer of a better world, particularly one grounded in the real-possible, the utopian can serve to animate political desire, to engage our aspirations to new and more gratifying forms of collectivity (206).

69 While literature has been considered a core cultural form through which utopianism has been developed, starting from Thomas More’s term-coining literary work Utopia to contemporary science fiction, the value of the visual arts for utopian practice has been less often observed in utopian studies. My effort to bring a concern with feminist utopianism into the discourse of art criticism can be seen, however, as in conversation with the writing of feminist art critic and historian Griselda Pollock. Pollock has similarly articulated the value of feminism’s future-oriented force for thinking about the politics of aesthetics. Pollock’s own creativity as a feminist art historian has additionally made generative strides in connecting the ontological provocations of feminist philosopher Elizabeth Grosz and the project of art.

70 See pp 186-225 in The Problem with Work on what Weeks identifies (borrowing from Ernst Bloch) as a process model ontology of utopia. The conception of utopia-as-process departs from the more conventional notion of utopia-as-program, or in other words a plan for an ideal society. My inclination toward utopia is aligned with the process-ontology version that Weeks elaborates in her work.
transferability, or permanence of Leigh’s art when considering its feminist political value. Rather, I am interested in the force of refusal, the re-imagination, and the creation of counter-hegemonic desire that her art provokes. I am interested, in other words, in art’s prefigurative capacities. Like utopia, the encounter with art at its best might be understood as a creative practice—of sense organization, embodied attention, and subject formation—that produces the insurgent desire for more and inspires the drive toward dynamic repetition that might let this desire form new institutions. *The Waiting Room* cultivates in its participants a skilled capacity to critically inhabit the institutional life of intersectionality while at the same time refusing the burden of visibility and the disciplinary lure of mere inclusion. As such, *The Waiting Room* offers a glimmer of what a feminist art might already look like when it refuses the imperative to wait for more sustainable worlds sometime down the line. I read Leigh’s art in this way as part of a feminist, intersectional, utopian practice of creating the conditions that affirm our desire to desire more.

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71 Prefigurative politics names a theory and mode of political practice organized around the performative idea of bringing into being a social order that is not yet supported by dominant structures of society, by enacting or embodying the anticipatory order in advance. This political orientation is intimately connected to the process-model of concrete utopia in which a desired, not-yet existent future is striven for through the conditions of the present. The principle of direct participation typically constitutes a central tenant of prefigurative politics, in such a way that notably rejects the liberal method of seeking justice through indirect representation. Articulations of prefigurative politics can be found in the (feminist) political theories of Hannah Arendt, Judith Butler, Linda Zerilli, Sheila Rowbotham and others, as well as various anarchist schools of thought.
Conclusion

Throughout the dissertation I have consistently taken what I have called a “both-and” approach. In chapter 1, I consider what Rottenberg’s video art maps representationally about the global economy, and how Rottenberg’s art maps it affectively at the level of the body. In chapter 2, I insist that Horn’s minimalist art is embedded within suspect institutions of privatized wealth, and occasions an aesthetic practice of dilation that nonetheless offers critical resources for grounding and somatic revitalization to those affected by neoliberal precarity. Finally in chapter 3, I similarly take a both-and approach to the status of Leigh’s social practice art within the museum, while also modeling an approach to identity politics that is invested in representation and critical of any project of representation that is not also invested in economic justice and structural change.

I have learned this both-and approach—as fundamental to feminist thinking—from the anti-identitarian feminist poststructuralist theorists trained in the Foucaultian and Derridian tradition (for example Judith Butler, Luce Irigaray, Gayatri Spivak, Wendy Brown, and Linda Zerilli) who were considered required reading when I started my graduate training in an MFA program at the start of the financial crisis in 2006. In the 10+ years that have since transpired, it feels like a lot has shifted in the terrain of what counts as required reading in the academic classrooms of feminist and critical theory. My scholarly attitude nonetheless has been fundamentally shaped by what I understand to be a feminist both-and

72 See for example Zerilli’s Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom (2005), Brown’s States of Injury (1995), and Butler’s co-edited (with Joan Scott) reader Feminists Theorize the Political (1992).
form of thinking, and my subsequent immersion in Marxism, Marxist-feminism, and anti-racist social and economic movements has continued to co-exist with the skepticism toward liberal identity politics that characterized my early feminist academic training.

It is perhaps worth addressing the matter of identity in my theory of art and social reproduction more explicitly, considering the central role that identity is presumed to play in any project designated as feminist. I have suggested in the introduction of this dissertation that my project extends the conversation about art and feminism by focusing on social reproduction rather than identity-based representation. Moving away from representation is not the same as moving away from identity, however. One might notice, for example, that each of my chapters centers the artwork of female-identified artists. I have foregrounded (in both chapters 1 and 3) the ways that political-economic issues disproportionately impact women of color. And even when my interest is in the abstract art of minimalism and the generalized experience of precarity (in chapter 2), I situate this consideration squarely within the historical cross-section between neoliberal restructuring and the homophobic biopolitical governance of the 1980s-90s US-based AIDS crisis. My point is thus: The oppressed, exploited experiences of minoritized identity groups must and should be accounted for in any approach to critical social reproduction, in the arts or otherwise. At the same time, this effort to recenter the perspectives from which stories are told may also be practiced while directing a feminist political disposition toward structural goals and world-visions that are not formulated primarily around the analytic of identity. As such, my treatment of each of the works of art in my chapters can be read as an attempt to carve out a mode of doing feminist political theory that is fundamentally committed to identity as a central-yet-complicated hinge.
point between both the feminist freedom-from politics of critique, and the feminist freedom-to politics of utopian prefiguration.

I would like to end this dissertation with a mere gesture toward a vision of feminist world-building that holds a recognition of identity-based injury at its core while also not organizing political desires around injury, resentment, or even recognition. Political efforts are directed instead toward that which makes it more possible to sustain the vitality of connection with others, building fragile networks of trust, and having the opportunity to change when a mistake is made—which is to say, keeping the future open. Part of what makes this vulnerable work of collaboration across difference in precarious times possible is exactly acknowledging the structural harm that has been disproportionally held by minoritized communities over a long history. Put another way, even when proposing a freedom-to politics of focusing on the world features we might want (for example, sustenance and joy rather than injury) we still must radically acknowledge the fact of structural and ongoing injury if we are going to get anywhere toward building the trust that enables the kind of dilation that combats atomization and allows for connection, hope, and collective strength.

In her 2005 book *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom*, Linda Zerilli offers a three-part schematic of how feminist political imaginaries have been organized. She calls these the subject question, the social question, and the process-oriented question of action, freedom, struggle, or world. She explains that feminism has tended to organize its political investments in the first two frameworks. The subject question phrases feminism as a project of individual agency. For Zerilli, this applies to both liberal feminism and poststructuralist
feminism; even though the latter is a negation of the former, both are nonetheless organized around the problem of individual agency.73 Feminism posed as a social question, for Zerilli, constitutes a social justice orientation invested in advancing the conditions of a group and its members. This is problematic also, however, because it presumes that the interests of a group (or even the group) exist in advance of doing the work or politics. It turns feminism into a utility-oriented, instrumental endeavor rather than a participatory, creative endeavor. And it risks also becoming paternalistic in its efforts to represent group interests.74 Finally the last, and for Zerilli the favored, category of feminism as an action-oriented practice posits that group interests may bring us together, but the goal of politics is not to represent pre-established interests, it precisely is to come together toward participating in the struggle for a common world. Zerilli here draws on the work of Hannah Arendt to argue that “‘p]olitical freedom in this sense of world-building cannot simply be [a relation to the self] but must involve, from the start, relations with a plurality of other people in a public space created by action, that is, by the very practice and experience of freedom itself.”75 In a mode aligned with the ontological threads that run through this dissertation, Zerilli thus argues that political power is generated when we come together and act together. Plurality and participation are essential to the practice of politics.

But why would I turn to the aesthetic encounter with art for a vision of feminist politics that is conceived here as necessarily 1) action-oriented and 2) involving other people? I believe this question clarifies an important point about my claim that art performs

73 Zerilli, *Feminism and the Abyss of Freedom*, 12.
74 Zerilli, 2–3, 8–9.
75 Zerilli, 16.
a kind of social reproduction in late capitalism which lends resources not only to strained subjects in general, but also to the ongoing work of critical social reproduction and feminist critique. Art—or more specifically, the practice of cultivating an aesthetic disposition of dilation that is occasioned in the non-instrumental sphere of art—trains us in the kind of feminist subject formation needed for this work—which is to say, a subjectivity that can find renewed strength, sustenance, and disobedient desire within the inevitable vulnerability and non-sovereignty of being with others in the world.\textsuperscript{76} The both-and complexity, open-ended nature, and grounded rejuvenation of art are resources that help reproduce or revitalize feminist subjects within the ongoing struggle of working across difference toward a freedom-to project of collective power amidst the very real and often dividing needs of freedom-from.

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\textsuperscript{76} Zerilli too writes of non-sovereignty in her conception of freedom: “Rather than seek solace in an impossible fantasy of sovereignty, declare a crisis of agency, or turn away from the public realm to preserve sovereignty or avoid crisis, we might take leave of the tradition and affirm freedom as non-sovereignty. Non-sovereignty is the condition of democratic politics, the condition of the transformation of an I-will into an I-can and thus freedom” (19).
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