

MIT List Visual Arts Center
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An Inventory of Shimmers: Objects of Intimacy in Contemporary Art

May 19 – July 16, 2017



COVER Lisa Tan, *Waves*, 2014-15, HD video with sound, 19:12 minutes
Installation view *Lisa Tan: For Every Word Has Its Own Shadow*, Galleri Riis, Stockholm, 2015
Courtesy the artist and Galleri Riis, Stockholm and Oslo

ABOVE Jason Dodge, *Anyone*



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An Inventory of Shimmers: Objects of Intimacy in Contemporary Art

Hayden and Reference Galleries May 19 – July 16, 2017

Bringing together a group of twelve international artists, this exhibition considers our entangled, intimate relations with and through objects. The works included variously act as vehicles for affective engagement or transactions of desire between people, or are directly engaged with actions of care, trust, and love. Many objects in the exhibition carry traces of things we can't see but have to trust, intuit, or perceive in ways that are not related to vision or hearing. Throughout the show, artists engage with modes of address and content that are variously tethered to affect, emotion, or feeling yet at the same time eschew sentimentality and expressivity.

The exhibition was originally inspired by ideas of *affect*, which, in the most general sense, describes a set of unconscious states that determine how bodies—human or nonhuman—are shaped, modified, or affected by the intensity of their interactions. The “affective turn” gained currency across a range of disciplines in the 1990s but has roots in the work of 17th-century philosopher Baruch Spinoza; it has more recently resonated with contemporary artists, curators, and critics. To characterize the shifting, elusive territory of affect, the show borrows its title from French philosopher Roland Barthes's *The Neutral*, in which he stated that “the inventory of shimmers is of nuances, of states, of changes.”

The recent interest in affect (alongside emotion or feeling) responds to a consistent critical privileging of cognitive and visual engagement with works of art at the expense of the other senses. It is also propounded by our living environment, ever more defined by the network and disembodied forms of communication which, perhaps only logically, not only prompt a reconsideration of our relationship to physical objects but amplify the interest in empathy, emotion, and intimacy in the other. Rather than illustrating theoretical ideas around affect, however, the show focuses on intimacy, which is necessarily affective. While intimacy requires some kind of reciprocity between discrete entities, and proximity (actual or felt), the exhibition also considers affective relationships with things not necessarily considered animate. Because if we are affected by something, it not only shows that feelings are always embodied but also that they take objects, living and not.

Andrea Büttner

b. 1972, Germany; lives and works in London and Frankfurt am Main, Germany

Brown Wall Painting, 2006

Interior emulsion paint

Courtesy the artist; Hollybush Gardens, London; and David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles

Little Works, 2007

Single-channel HD video with sound, 10:42 min. Courtesy the artist and Hollybush Gardens, London

Tent (psychedelic), 2012

Woodcut print on paper

Courtesy the artist and David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles

Curtain, 2013

Woodcut print on paper, ed. 5/10, plus 2 a.p.

Courtesy the artist and David Kordansky Gallery, Los Angeles

Büttner's video *Little Works* engages with notions of reciprocity, care, and a certain mindfulness expressed through objects. The artist gave a camcorder to a London convent of Carmelite nuns, which they used to document the sharing and creation of their "little works,"—handmade items such as scented sachets, baskets and candles. These modest objects are exchanged within a community and function as tokens of shared beliefs and faith. Throughout her career, Büttner has been committed to ostensibly "unfashionable" or antiquated subject matter and mediums, such as woodcuts inspired by popular prints from the 15th century depicting religious scenes. Her "shit space," by contrast, which comprises a wall painted brown up to where the artist's hand can reach, references repression and embarrassment through both its color and process. In so doing, she highlights shame and the inherent vulnerability involved in exhibiting works of art.

Sophie Calle

b. 1943, France; lives and works in Malakoff, France

Secrets, 2014

Two safes, engraved plaque, and framed contract, ed. 5/7, plus 2 a.p.

Collection of Alex Hank; courtesy the artist and Paula Cooper Gallery, New York

A secret will be locked inside each of the safes on view: one from each individual comprising the owners (a couple). Calle, much of whose work since the 1970s has revolved around exposing her own intimate affairs and pursuits, as well as those of others, inserts herself as a secret keeper. Only she knows what the secrets say, and only she knows the combination to the safe. *Secrets* highlights the notion that intimacy requires trust and also renders visible the notion that all our personal relationships are shaped by secrets, by who does and doesn't know something. Calle's work also alludes to a marriage contract, or a promise made in the effort to fix love's potentially fleeting nature.

Alejandro Cesarco

b. 1975, Uruguay; lives and works in New York

Fragile Images That Keep Producing Death While Attempting to Preserve Life: Flowers found in crime scenes_001–004, 2011

Archival inkjet prints, ed. of 5

Courtesy the artist and Tanya Leighton Gallery, Berlin

The closely-cropped photographs on view disclose little of their surroundings, but their title tells viewers they were found at crime scenes. Cesarco has appropriated newspaper images and eliminated all but the flowers. His characteristic strategy of absence and withholding cloaks the works' affective and romantic underpinnings. The flower images are as much about what they don't show (a violent crime and possibly death), and ask what it means, if anything, for a flower to witness a death. Whether a plant could be affected by an act of violence is of course speculative. Plants are living beings, although not sentient ones. However, the viewers' recognition that these flowers have been close to a human death makes all the difference, cognitively and perhaps affectively. That is, if we trust Cesarco's claim about the compositions' origins in the first place.

Jason Dodge

b. 1969, United States; lives and works in Berlin

Anyone

Dodge's work *Anyone* consists of stacks of folded, clean bed sheets that are interspersed throughout the gallery and exchanged weekly by a commercial linen service. Temporarily relieved from the linens' relentless cycle of use, the utilitarian items become curious objects. They are at once uncomfortably intimate, having been slept on by many different people in a hotel, and completely anonymous, regularly laundered and stripped of their users' physical traces. Drawn from a setting in which intimate encounters occur, the sheets also serve as reminder that our most personal moments often look a lot like those of everyone else.

Felix Gonzalez-Torres

1957–1996, United States, b. Cuba

“Untitled” (Loverboy), 1989

Blue fabric and hanging device
Private collection, New York

Gonzalez-Torres, whose work is the only historical piece on view, functions as a point of departure and center of gravity in the exhibition. Combining formal economy and conceptual rigor with deeply affecting content, “Untitled” (Loverboy) is an homage to his partner, Ross Laycock, who died from complications of AIDS in 1991. One in a series of curtain pieces, the work is fabricated each time it is shown in the artist’s signature blue. Blue, in English, is associated with melancholy, and in German romanticism a blue flower symbolizes longing and infinity. Light blue also evokes the sky (and by extension heaven). As this work was made during a time when the artist’s partner was already ill, it is difficult to not read the curtains and windows as connected with death, with passing from materiality to immateriality, with the “fluttering of souls.”

Antonia Hirsch

b. 1968, Germany; lives and works in Berlin

Object T, 2015

Single-channel HD video installation with heated bench, 12:06 min.
Courtesy the artist and Republic Gallery, Vancouver

Black Echo, 2017

Glass, steel, and Plexiglas
Courtesy the artist and Republic Gallery, Vancouver

Object T comprises a video of two women interacting with a black cube and a heated granite bench, whose smooth surface echoes that of the cube. The video scene is bathed in a light that evokes the aesthetic of Dutch still-life painting. The work also riffs on amateur ASMR videos posted on YouTube. ASMR refers to “tingly” and relaxing sensations triggered in some people by videos featuring whispering voices, the handling of objects, actions of care, and other gestures. The videos also generate revenue for their protagonists, serving simultaneously as advertisements for the objects they handle. Hirsch recognizes the peculiar phenomenon as a node where immateriality and materiality, intimacy and commerce coalesce.

Black Echo prompts a consideration of our physical and affective relationship to natural and designed objects. The piece appears to be a volcanic rock’s cut surface and also resembles the screen of an iPhone. Scientists have defined our current geological epoch as the Anthropocene, in which no molecule is unaffected by humans and which blurs boundaries between nature and technology, human and thing, on molecular and conceptual levels. In *Black Echo*, the object’s implied handling with gloves is at once an interaction of care and one that remains at a remove.

Jill Magid

b. 1973, United States; lives and works in New York

Dearest Federica, 2013

80 slides, slide projector, and low table after Luis Barragán
Courtesy the artist; Labor, Mexico City; and Untilthen, Paris

Dearest Federica is part of Magid’s ongoing project *The Barragán Archives*, in which she has forged a sort of *ménage à trois* between the modernist architect Luis Barragán, architecture scholar Federica Zanco, and herself. Zanco, as director of a Swiss foundation that owns Barragán’s professional archive, has been drastically limiting access to the material while she completes the architect’s catalogue raisonné. Barragán’s personal archive remains in Mexico and is open to the public. Magid found the images of young women comprising *Dearest Federica* in the personal archive. Projected as 35mm slides, they are accompanied by a recording of a message that Magid wrote to Zanco combining her own writing with excerpts from a letter Barragán wrote to a lover.

Park McArthur

b. 1984, United States; lives and works in New York

Contact C, 2016

Plastic cup, disposable cups, drinking straws, catheter kit, enema kit parts, travel toilets, cleaning solution, lubricant, latex gloves, and stainless-steel tray
Collection of Carlomar Rios

Contact S, 2016

Disposable mouthpieces, masks, cannulas, and stainless-steel tray
Courtesy the artist and ESSEX STREET, New York

Contact T, 2016

Tubing, swabs, and stainless-steel tray
Courtesy the artist and ESSEX STREET, New York

McArthur’s sculptural assemblages comprise items variously considered cold and sterile, though they are used in the service of intrapersonal care. They are used to penetrate and protect the body’s boundaries, actions that necessarily entail a specific kind of physical proximity, although it is not often or usually an intimate one. At the same time, this proximity contains the possibility of intimacy, and McArthur’s work resides precisely in that liminal space. The *Contact* pieces make reference to ideas, drawing on lived experiences, advanced in the field of disability studies that call into question normative demarcations between the body and its supports. That recasting of boundaries further insists on the necessary interconnectedness of sensory, mental, and affective states.

Lisa Tan

b. 1973, United States; lives and works in Stockholm

Waves, 2014–15

Single-channel HD video with sound, 19:12 min.
Courtesy the artist and Galleri Riis, Oslo and Stockholm

Inspired by Virginia Woolf's novel *The Waves* (1931), in her video Tan reflects on how looking at Gustav Courbet's painting *The Wave* (1869) online links her to Google's data center in Finland—digital waves connect her across oceanic waves to look at pictorial waves. Tan's subjects all represent attempts to articulate the ungraspable, as she considers Woolf's text or her own experiences of cognitive and affective dissonance while trying to perceive distances that digital communication and online space abstract and collapse. Tan's project is concerned with liminalities: between water and land, language and nonlanguage, consciousness and subconsciousness. Rather than describing them, however, the piece aims to take liminal form itself, attempting to capture, as the artist narrates, "whatever is lurking behind thought."

Erika Vogt

b. 1973, United States; lives and works in Los Angeles

Secret Traveler Navigator, 2010

Single-channel digital video installation, sound, 13:23 min.
Courtesy the artist and Overduin & Co., Los Angeles

Secret Traveler Navigator unfolds like a magic trick, a ritual, or an incantation. The narrator handles, or navigates, a set of objects, evoking operations of the unconscious. In this elliptical narrative, different characters—capitalist, artist, charlatan—are represented through their objects, while the "actual" objects used in the film's making are present in the darkened space. Filmed like a shadow play, it renders humans and objects equally abstract, as silhouettes against backgrounds of changing colors. Vogt's work negotiates a number of juxtapositions, oscillating between distance and closeness, illusion and reality, magic and the mundane.

Susanne M. Winterling

b. 1970, Germany; lives and works in Berlin and Oslo

Vertex (Metabolic), 2015

Medium-density fiberboard, steel, black-light bulb, and gypsum powder 3-D print
Courtesy the artist

Winterling's recent research has centered around microscopic marine organisms called dinoflagellates. These protists are bioluminescent: when mechanically activated—by the movement of swimmers or boats—populations of dinoflagellates cause a blue glow in the water. Physicist-cum-philosopher Karen Barad cites "dinos" as one instance of "queer" nature: they "are neither plant nor animal, but can act as both." Winterling calls the bioluminescent dinoflagellates and the ecosystems in which they are embedded an "affective, haptic system." The teeny organisms react to touch in a way the artist compares to a living touchscreen. In this, she deliberately blurs the lines between the human hand, technology, and plankton. The viewer is put at eye level with the suspended and enlarged organism, albeit one that doesn't have eyes or a central nervous system. Winterling's sculpture thus also considers the limits of empathy and possibility of interspecies communication.

Anicka Yi

b. 1971, South Korea; lives and works in New York

After Democracy, 2016

Silicone on panel, artificial flowers, and nylon filament
Collection of Nasiba and Thomas Hartland-Mackie

Childless Comfort, 2016

Silicone on panel, artificial flowers, and nylon filament
Collection of Marguerite Steed Hoffman

Our Brand Is Crisis, 2016

Silicone on panel, artificial flowers, and nylon filament
Collection of Fern and Lenard Tessler

Yi's work has investigated notions of the hybrid: between human, animal, and plant; the animate and inanimate; and the organic and inorganic. The works in her "chicken skins" series contain artificial flowers mounted in a frame of stretched silicone cast from ostrich skin, fleshy surfaces pocketed with goosebumps. The works gesture toward how different species experience bodily affections, in ways very similar and different. *Goosebumps*, experienced by animals and humans alike, are caused by cold, as well as intense emotions like fear, disgust, and arousal; they are, in short, affective. They are also not unique to humans. Yi's amalgamation of human, animal, and plant characteristics in these works throws their supposedly natural and hierarchical delineations into question.

PUBLIC PROGRAMS

Symposium

Saturday, May 6, 10 AM-5 PM

Thinking Feeling: An Affect Symposium
Bartos Theater

Speakers: Brian Price, Associate Professor of Visual Studies at the University of Toronto; Kathleen Stewart, Professor in the Department of Anthropology at University of Texas at Austin; Karen Redrobe, Elliot and Roslyn Jaffe Professor of Cinema and Modern Media and Chair of the Department of the History of Art at the University of Pennsylvania

Moderators: Sandy Alexandre, Associate Professor, MIT Literature Section; Eugenie Brinkema, Associate Professor, MIT Literature Section; Stefan Helmreich, Elting E. Morison Professor of Anthropology, Program Head, MIT Anthropology

This event is sponsored by the MIT Literature Section and the MIT List Visual Arts Center.

Public Reception

Thursday, May 18, 6–8 PM

Talk and Discussion

Friday, May 19, 12:30 PM

Intimacy with Technology

Speaker: Sun-ha Hong, Mellon Postdoctoral Fellow Comparative Media Studies/Writing, MIT

Graduate Student Talk

Friday, June 2, 12:30 PM

*Getting Goosebumps:
Sensations across Species*

Speaker: Emily Watlington, Curatorial Research Assistant, MIT List Visual Arts Center & graduate student, History Theory and Criticism of Art and Architecture Program, MIT

Tour

Sunday, June 4, 2 PM

Intimacy: 12 Affects, 12 Artists

Speaker: Emily Watlington, Curatorial Research Assistant, MIT List Visual Arts Center & graduate student, History Theory and Criticism of Art and Architecture Program, MIT

Film Screening

Thursday, June 15, 7 PM (Pizza at 6:30 PM)

Married to the Eiffel Tower (2008)
Dir., Agnieszka Piotrowska, 45 min.
Bartos Theater

Film Screening

Thursday, July 6, 7 PM (Pizza at 6:30 PM)

Her (2013)
Dir., Spike Jonze, 126 min.
Bartos Theater

An Inventory of Shimmers: Objects of Intimacy in Contemporary Art is curated by Henriette Huldish, Curator, MIT List Visual Arts Center.

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All programs are free and open to the general public. RSVPs are required.

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