“Flip Off the Mirror as Protest”: 
Xiu Xiu and the Cause of Desire

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The voices that draw us in closest are often the ones that wound us the most. Jamie Stewart, the lead singer and frontman of the American art-rock band Xiu Xiu, has one of the more unsettling voices in avant-garde rock: floating somewhere between a whisper and a sob, Stewart’s voice creates a disquieting sense of intimacy with his listeners. It does not immediately elicit auditory pleasure (it lacks, e.g., the sheer, sad loveliness of Antony Hegarty’s mezzo-soprano; though Stewart’s and Hegarty’s shared interest in the queer pleasures of erotic debasement in some ways mark them as kindred musical figures). Imbued with a skittish sense of anticipation and, at times, nearly unbearable tension and strain, Stewart’s singing exemplifies the torrid, emotionally “excessive” style that defines Xiu Xiu’s sonic and presentational approach. But there is also an elusive aspect to Stewart’s voice that resists firm description.

In his recent book A Voice and Nothing More, the philosopher Mladan Dolar suggests that the human voice “can be located at the juncture of the subject and the Other [. . .] placed at the intersection of body and language, circumscribing a lack in both” (Dolar 102). Dolar here offers a remarkably apt account of the elusive quality that makes Xiu Xiu’s music and performances so riveting. Stewart’s voice is not ever a neutral “medium” to convey a song’s semantic “meaning,” nor does it simply provide listeners with a gleaming auditory fetish object for aesthetic adulation. Rather, Stewart’s singing voice acts with an uncanny, even terrifying sonic force, “circumscribing,” as Dolar would have it, a “lack” or inadequacy at the core of selfhood as such; sounding as if both the voice and the body from which it issues were hovering on the edge of abyssal collapse. Stewart’s voice registers the laborious exertions of will it sometimes takes for the self to cohere at all.

Dolar largely draws this understanding of the voice from the topology of what Jacques Lacan called the voice as objet (a)—a concept also sometimes called the “object-voice.”1 The objet (a) is Lacan’s term for the
elusive, inaccessible, yet nonetheless “real” object that elicits and structures the subject’s desire—which, as Lacan famously argues, “always finds its meaning in the Other’s desire” (Lacan, *Écrits* 222). This article attempts to account for Xiu Xiu’s marvelously disquieting musical and performance practices by considering their work alongside Lacan’s conception of the voice as objet (*a*). Resisting the temptation to subsume the totality of Xiu Xiu’s complex aesthetic within the logic of Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, I argue that Xiu Xiu’s highly inventive modes of expression can augment the Lacanian account of desire and its demands. In tracking the resonances between Xiu Xiu’s work and the Lacanian objet (*a*), I also hope to demonstrate that the object-voice is a productive concept for scholars of popular music, and performance more broadly, to engage. How might we understand vocal performance as an elaboration, distillation, or condensation of the objet (*a*), and how might such an understanding expand our theoretical lexicon in order to account for the powerfully disruptive circulations of identification and desire that so often saturate the scene of performance?

**Xiu Xiu and the Sound of Desire**

Emerging from the alternative music scene of late 1990s San Jose, California and taking its name from a 1998 Chinese film about sexual manipulation, Xiu Xiu was formed by Jamie Stewart and collaborator Corey McCulloch in 2002. The band has released seven full-length albums. While Stewart has been the driving force behind the band and its sole consistent member, an accomplished roster of musicians has played in Xiu Xiu over the course of its history, including Yvonne Chenn, Lauren Andrews, Caralee McElroy, Greg Saunier (of the San Francisco-based band Deerhoof), and Stewart’s most recent collaborator, the multi-instrumental percussionist Angela Seo. Xiu Xiu’s performance aesthetic is gripping, provocative, and often disturbing (the lyrics to “Grey Death,” the lead track of Xiu Xiu’s most recent album, make wry allusion to the band’s reputation: “if you are expecting consolation,” Stewart sings, “I will become outrageous/if you expect me to be outrageous, I will be extra outrageous.”) Describing the band’s distinctive sound in a review of the 2004 album *Fabulous Muscles* in the influential online music journal *Pitchfork Media*, critic Matt LaMay wrote, “Stewart plays with dissonance without succumbing to it, contorting electronic drones, drum machine beats and his own haunting tenor into a propulsive and elegant record. The songs are often tremendously dense, but the combinations and contrast Stewart teases out of the mix
are always immediate and striking” (LaMay). Layering Stewart’s haunting voice over intricately textured, electronically manipulated noisescapes, Xiu Xiu frequently blurs the distinction between musical order and chaotic noise. Moments of tightly controlled, quiet intensity are woven together with jolting bursts of activity—shouting, screaming, banging—only to surface again in modulated form. At the same time, Stewart’s affection for more conventional forms of popular music is often playfully in evidence: at their most playful, Xiu Xiu tracks can sound like pop songs tricked out in horror show drag.

The most recent iteration of the band’s touring arrangement has featured just Stewart and Seo; both sing (and scream) and play a dizzying range of instruments. In live performance, they stand before a table arranged with a ramshackle collection of objects—cymbals and drums; toy keyboards; computer and audio consoles; various microphones; even a Nintendo PlayStation—which they manipulate over the course of the concert. At the performances I attended in Austin, Texas, and New York City in 2010, Stewart and Seo were so utterly absorbed in the array of objects and instruments in front of them that they exuded an almost scary level of concentration, ingeniously recreating, from scratch, the intricate, volatile sonic environment heard on the band’s albums.
Evoking a gothic stew of angst, trauma, bodily injury, and political rage, Xiu Xiu’s lyrics augment the band’s deliberately unsettling sound. Many of the songs draw upon queer and sadomasochistic representational tropes, and allude to non- or antinormative formations of sexuality and desire (Stewart is openly bisexual, and the band’s fan base has a notably queer bent). In a recent interview, Stewart explained Xiu Xiu’s explicit engagement with disturbing erotic subjects by saying, “For some people, sex and sexuality are really intense driving forces, or really intense aspects of personal torture, or a really deep part of personal identity and personal politics and social politics. I think because the band is all about those things, it’s not as if we’re a band that’s just about dirty, weird, fucked-up sex. Dirty, weird, fucked-up sex and sexual politics are part of life” (in Caine). Xiu Xiu’s music pushes the traditional pop song motifs of heartbreak, longing, and loss to the extreme. Indeed, it is not merely the lyrical “content” of Xiu Xiu’s songs, but also the highly concentrated, tightly controlled, “formal” manipulations of sound that contribute to the band’s explorations of sex and sexuality as “really intense driving forces.” Stewart’s comments recall Leo Bersani’s gloss on Freud’s account of pleasure in Three Essays on the Theory of Sexuality:

the pleasurable-unpleasurable tension of sexual excitement occurs when the body’s “normal” range of sensations is exceeded, and when the organization of the self is momentarily disturbed by sensations or affective processes somehow “beyond” those compatible with psychic organization. (38)

Xiu Xiu’s music and performances pleasurably deploy the disruptive force that sound can exert upon the body; like Bersani’s account of the Freudian theory of sexual excitement, Xiu Xiu plays upon a “pleasurable-unpleasurable tension” that the listener can experience when sound exceeds the bounds of normative musical or generic convention. In this sense, Xiu Xiu’s acoustic/aesthetic experimentations profoundly resonate alongside psychoanalytic approaches to thinking about sexuality, pleasure, and desire. Indeed, Xiu Xiu’s music grapples with many of the subjects that psychoanalysis, albeit in a different register, has long scrutinized: aggression, narcissism, paranoia, masochism, melancholia. Rather than subjecting these phenomena to the pathologizing glare of analytic scrutiny, however, Xiu Xiu instead invokes them in order to construct a musical and performance aesthetic of remarkably supple force and allure. The visceral appeal of Xiu Xiu’s music can in large part be traced to the inventive methods
they find for turning experiences of extreme negativity into sources of musical pleasure and aesthetic enjoyment. If, as I have suggested, Jamie Stewart’s voice is a principal object in and through which this quality of Xiu Xiu’s work is developed, it is to a particularly powerful psychoanalytic interpretation of the voice as the “cause of desire” that I now turn.

The Voice as Objet (a)

A notoriously difficult concept to describe, the objet (a)—Lacan’s term for the unattainable object of desire—has something to do with what Lacan proposed was an essential cleaving within the subject, a space within the “I” that is always marked or pierced by the “You.” Bruce Fink explains that the objet (a) “is that which elicits desire: it is responsible for the advent of desire, for the particular form the desire in question takes, and for its intensity” (86). For Lacan, the relation of the subject to the other is structured as an echo of an initial division or cleaving within the self—what Lacan describes, in his seminar On Anxiety, as “a partition within, inscribed in what will be the structuring of desire” (Lacan, Seminar X 114). This split within the self—a self-that-is-not-one—is inaugurated by the separation from the mother’s body experienced first at birth and then compounded in subsequent phases of infantile development (including in the famous “mirror stage”), as the subject is brought into the intersubjective realm of linguistic signification, sociality, culture, and law that Lacan calls the symbolic order. When encountered later in life, the objet (a) is that which reminds the subject of the essential incompleteness of this primary separation. In the objet (a), the other is reflected back to the subject not as a projection of her whole self, but rather as a part of herself that has been separated from her own body and that must be returned to her, just as she herself has been violently separated or cut off from a primary unity with the maternal by her entry into the symbolic order. Otherwise put, as Lacan maintains in his seminar on Anxiety, “If that which is most myself in the outside is there, not so much because I projected it there, but because it was cut off from me, the fact of my rejoining it or not and the paths that I will take to ensure this recuperation take on all sorts of possibilities, of evental varieties” (107). In this way, the objet (a) represents the uncanny remainder of the real that precedes our entry into language and sociality. The itinerary of desire, then, follows the “evental varieties” that transpire as the subject endeavors to rejoin that which has been cut of from himself by virtue of his entry into the symbolic.

While the theory of the gaze as objet (a) has become a much-discussed—and often-contested—concept in film studies, art history, and
related disciplines, the *voice* as *objet (a)* has only recently begun to garner critical attention beyond the confines of Lacanian psychoanalysis. The voice might seem to be unique among the primary *objets (a)* designated by Lacan (the others include the breast, excrement, the phallus, and the gaze) because it bears an intimate, seemingly inextricable relation to speech, language, and signification. But this is where the distinction between the everyday voice that we *hear*, and the *object-voice* as a “cause of desire,” becomes crucial. Paradoxically, the object-voice does not belong to the sonic register at all, but rather hovers, aphonically, *within* the voices that can be heard. As Dolar writes,

> Inside the heard voices is an unheard voice, an aphonie voice, as it were. For what Lacan called *objet petit a*—to put it simply—does not coincide with any existing thing, although it is always evoked only by bits of materiality, attached to them as an invisible, inaudible appendage, yet not amalgamated with them: it is both evoked and covered, enveloped by them, for “in itself” it is just a void. So sonority both evokes and conceals the voice; the voice is not somewhere else, but it does not coincide with voices that are heard. (74)

In a similar vein, Slavoj Žižek (in an essay that predates Dolar’s book) recalls that Lacan uses Edvard Munch’s famous painting *The Scream* to illustrate the status of the object-voice: in Munch’s painting, Žižek notes, “the scream we perceive is mute since the anxiety is too taut for it to find an outlet in vocalization.” The exemplary object-voice, Žižek writes, parsing Lacan, would be the “the scream that ‘got stuck in the throat’,” “the voice that cannot burst out, unchain itself and thus enter the dimension of subjectivity” (Žižek 48). In excess of both the body and signification, the object-voice cannot be fully detached from either, but acts as a “fantasy attempting to bridge the gap between separate symbolic existence and the unmediated biological ‘real’ of harmonious mix-up with the primal other” (Kirshner 89). It is a “lost object” in the sense it has lost the quality that renders it symbolically meaningful or intelligible. The object-voice is unattainable, unheard, aphonie, “stuck in the throat,” but it is nonetheless crucial for the production of the resplendent, elusive vocal qualities that draw us, sometimes unbearably, to certain performers’ voices. The object-voice is the inscrutable element that coaxes out, manipulates, shapes, but ultimately defers the fulfillment of desire—the desire to be heard, to become intelligible, and to be recognized by the other.
I find Lacan’s description of the objet (a) to be a particularly robust theoretical model through which to consider vocal performance, even as it is crucial to remain attuned to its limitations. In orienting our critical attention away from the normatively “perceptual” registers within which a performance takes place (visual, aural, even tactile and corporeal), and toward those elements of performance that exceed our perceptual grasp, the concept of the objet (a) allows for a different kind of engagement with the voice as an object of analysis. In so far as it is both seductive and unattainable, the object-voice both draw us to it and bars us from it—the dynamic of fort-da, presence/absence that psychoanalytic theory describes with such precision, and that Xiu Xiu performs with such baroque virtuosity. How might our approach to theorizing performance be enhanced if we began to consider the captivating sensible elements of a given performance—the hypnotic, compelling, enchanting modes of visuality, aurality, even smell, taste, and touch—as overly material, fetishized impediments that disguise or conceal the way performance can elicit, manipulate, and refract desire itself?

The Original Territoriality of the Mouth

These are the questions that I would like to consider in relation to Xiu Xiu’s work, and specifically to the music video for their song “Dear God, I Hate Myself,” released on the album of the same title in 2009. Directed by Stewart and featuring Stewart himself and band mate Angela Seo, the video has become a source of some controversy; certain fans and online commentators have deemed it to be excessively grotesque, even by Xiu Xiu’s standards. In a notable departure from the conventions of the music video genre, “Dear God, I Hate Myself” consists of a single, sustained shot, in which Seo and Stewart stand facing the viewer in front of a black and white checkered wall. Both are shot from the chest up, but while Seo’s full face appears in the frame, Stewart eludes full visibility: only the lower right quadrant of his face, as well as his right hand, are visible for the full duration of the song. As the video opens, Seo’s and Stewart’s faces are devoid of any overt emotional engagement: their affect is flat, ambiguous, inscrutable. The song begins to play: a dissonant and disjunctive clash of electronic squacks, crashes, drum hits, and yelps finally resolving into a steady (if distorted) beat, as Stewart’s distinctive voice begins to intone the song’s lyrics:

Despair will hold a place in my heart
a bigger one that you do do do
and I will always be nicer to the cat
than I am to you you you you
dear God, I hate myself
dear God, I hate myself
and I will never be happy
and I will never feel normal
don’t ask me if this line is about you
what do they do there tonight tonight?
why do they go there alright alright?
why do they live there tonight tonight?
and why do they live at all alright alright?
dear God, I hate myself
dear God, I hate myself
and I will never be happy
and I will never feel normal
why do they live there tonight tonight?
and why do they live at all alright alright?
flip off the mirror as protest
who the fuck are you you you?
and I will never be happy
and I will never feel normal
dear God, I hate myself
dear God, I hate myself
As the song plays, Seo matter-of-factly sticks her fingers in her throat and begins to induce vomiting: at first, small bursts of clear liquid—saliva?—issue from her mouth, though gradually the vomit becomes more solid and viscous as the heaving intensifies. While the drama of Seo’s self-induced vomiting transpires, Stewart begins to unwrap and eat a bar of chocolate. This is the sum of the action of the video; the only hint at narrative progression or coherence in the piece can be tracked in Seo’s eyes, which begin to water and eventually stream with tears as her vomiting convulsions gain intensity. As the strain of this self-induced vomiting becomes more obvious in Seo’s face, Stewart’s consumption of the chocolate bar gains buoyancy, becoming almost giddy; we catch quick glimpses of an enthusiastic smile, even as his band mate projects ever more voluminous qualities of liquid from her mouth, eventually directly vomiting upon Stewart’s only partially visible body.

It perhaps goes without saying that this video is, at best, unpleasant to watch: for many viewers, the extremity of the action that Seo performs makes it nearly impossible to sit through. The response the video elicits from viewers is visceral and immediate: by causing some viewers themselves to experience a feeling of nausea, the piece might even be said to mimetically induce the very corporeal response that it represents. In this sense, the video resembles the disruptive aesthetic tactics of body and durational performance art more closely than it does a traditional pop music video; in its simplicity and directness, as well as in depicting a particularly harrowing act of bodily self-harm, the video recalls the performance work pioneered by body artists such as Marina Abramovic, Gina Pane, and Kira O’Reilly. In her recent book *The Transformative Power of Performance: A New Aesthetics*, theater historian Erika Fischer-Lichte argues that the so-called “performative turn” in the arts since the 1960s can be defined by what she calls the collapse of the semiotic body—that is, the body as representationally mimetic—into the phenomenological body—that is, the body as it “really” is, with the experience of pain and durational collapse of the performer’s body occurring in “real time.” The primary way that performance art effectuates this collapse, Fischer-Lichte argues, is to “emphatically direct the audience’s attention to the specific and individual qualities of the actor’s phenomenal body” (88). In so spectacularly displaying the body’s excorporating, abject excess, Xiu Xiu’s video not only represents this collapse but actively performs it.

The collapse of a representational/semiotic aesthetic regime in favor of one that privileges the “real” and the “material,” can be productively read
alongside the concept of the object-voice as theorized by Lacan and Dolar. I would like to focus specifically on the way the video plays with—even might be said to theorize—the mouth in relation to the voice. The video visually represents two mouths: the first belongs to Stewart, who consumes an aluminum-wrapped bar of chocolate; the second belongs to Seo, who manipulates her body to the point of inducing vomiting. The relationship between these two mouths thus might be thought of as a kind of bivalved machine, in which an action of consumption/incorporation (here performed by Stewart eating the chocolate bar) is specularly reversed, thrown into a feedback loop, and transformed into an action of rejection/excorporation by Seo. Perhaps the video’s raw visceral charge can be traced to the way that Seo’s and Stewart’s mouths—and even their bodies—together form an “assemblage” for producing and regulating alimentary mediation: a two-headed machine in which the chocolate that enters Jamie’s mouth uncannily transforms into the vomit that exits Angela’s. Or, alternatively, the reverse could be true: Jamie might be ingesting in the form of the chocolate bar the abject material that Angela expels as vomit.

But there is also, I would suggest, a third mouth present, or at least invoked, in the video, and this is where Lacan’s notion of the object-voice enters the scene even as it remains unseen and—crucially—unheard. This third mouth is the one that produces Jamie Stewart’s singing voice as it is heard on the video’s sound track: a voice that is disembodied, its mouth-origin unseen, even as it is visually evoked by the representational presence (albeit, a skewed and partially deferred one) of the temporally dislocated body of Stewart himself. Dolar hones in on the ways that the voice mediates the materiality of the body and the formation of interiority that we recognize as the locus of “consciousness.” He writes that what he calls the “floating voice” is

a bodily missile which has detached itself from its source, emancipated itself, yet remains corporeal. This is the property which it shares with all the objects of the drive: they are all situated in a realm which exceeds the body, they prolong the body like an excrescence, but they are not simply outside the body either. So the voice stands at a paradoxical and ambiguous tropological spot, at the intersection of language and the body, but this intersection belongs to neither. (73)

This is exactly the role that Lacan assigns to the objet (a): it marks the point of intersection of language and the body while never attaining self-presence
in either realm. I would like to consider, then, the way that Xiu Xiu’s video performatively recapitulates the topology of the voice as objet (a). As noted above, the object-voice is in a crucial sense aphonic—it is the unheard voice that is concealed within the self-presence of the audible voice, but that nonetheless coaxes audibility out of the subject, as desire—and specifically as the desire to be heard, as an appeal to the Other. In the video, we are provided with an audible, self-present voice: that of Jamie Stewart, who sings the track. But, crucially, we are denied visual confirmation of the corporeal origins of the voice we are hearing. In other words, Stewart’s voice is acousmatic; it sounds but its source is unseen, unconfirmed, mysterious. This is in direct contradiction to the normative generic conventions that the form of the pop music video has conditioned us to expect. Instead, as if to taunt these expectations, we are confronted with two corporeal mouths that are not singing, speaking, producing meaning—but instead, eating and vomiting. Both are processes that are in excess of meaning, but that are nonetheless bound to meaning in some essential way. This fact is considered by Deleuze and Guattari in *A Thousand Plateaus*:

Any language, rich or poor, always implies the deterritorialization of the mouth, the tongue and the teeth. The original territoriality of the mouth, the tongue and the teeth is food. By being devoted to the articulation of sounds, the mouth, the tongue and the teeth are deterritorialized. So there is a disjunction between eating and speaking. . . .To speak. . . is to starve. (in Dolar 186)

Taking up Deleuze and Guattari’s notion Dolar concludes that “by speech the mouth is denaturalized, diverted from its natural function, seized by the signifier” (186). As we recall, the objet (a) is precisely that which is inassimilable into language; it lives in the register of the real and coaxes, directs, and shapes desire. Angelo Seo and Jamie Stewart—the two bodies in the video’s visual frame—are not producing sound, sense, or self-present vocality; they are instead engaging the “original” territoriality of the mouth—eating, vomiting; incorporating, excorporating. Indeed, the objet (a) might be said to condense into representational form in the video, precisely as chocolate bar and vomit: “a bodily missile that has emancipated itself from its source,” as a bodily excrescence that marks the limit of self and other, body and language. Stewart’s trembling voice, heard acousmatically as the image’s accompaniment, looms over the video as a reminder of the essential disjunction that the video stages between body and its excorporations and
the excesses that pass through the mouth and yet fail to find a foothold in the symbolic register. In putting into play—and aesthetically scrambling—three mouths, and three *functions* of the mouth—Xiu Xiu dramatizes the drama of the *objet (a)* and the tragedy that it implies: namely, the desperate desire—and also the impossibility—of filling the lack that is at the subject’s core. The aestheticized image of eating and vomiting that the video presents to the viewer is thus incomplete without the soundtrack of Jamie Stewart’s singing voice, and is shaped by the desire for which the object-voice is the cause. The video might be staging the forcefulness and even violence of desire that can grab hold of the subject to re-find the object that was lost by the cut that marks her conscription into signification, culture, and sociality.

The visceral qualities of Xiu Xiu’s video—and its over-the-top title (“Dear God, I Hate Myself”)—partake of an almost baroque display of negative feeling, of aggression directed toward the self. Angelo Seo’s performance might even be considered masochistic to the extent that she exerts a kind of aggressive violence upon her own body. But a more nuanced reading of the video helps us to locate the ways that speech and language—as carried by the voice—can reperform and reiterate the violence of the “cut” that, in the Lacanian account of the development of the ego, inaugurates the subject into language. For perhaps the most powerful aspect of Lacan’s description of subject formation is the degree to which it allows us to understand the experience of desire, pleasure, loss, and suffering as processes that are driven and conditioned by the inevitable failure of the self to live up to the phantasy that a primary, pre-symbolic unity with the maternal might be re-found. Xiu Xiu turns to music and performance as aesthetic practices capable of registering the dynamics of such phantasies and their failures; their work helps us to imagine the possibility of finding enjoyment “beyond the pleasure principle”—a form of enjoyment that Lacan called *jouissance*.

**Flip Off the Mirror as Protest**

Despite the recuperative aesthetic dynamics I have been tracing, Xiu Xiu’s video might reasonably be accused of trafficking in questionable—even problematic—representations of both gender and race. Such reservations might cause us to ask, whose phantasy is the video representing? Whose circuits of desire are activated in the video and in the song, and how might the object-voice, as cause of desire, contribute to—or possibly disrupt—the potentially troubling gendered and racialized dynamics that the
video evokes? The fact that Stewart’s recognizably male acousmatic voice provides the sonic frame (or “envelope”) for the video’s visual field recalls Kaja Silverman’s reading of sound in classical Hollywood cinema, in which she argues that the male voice is located at “the point of apparent textual origin, while establishing the diatonic containment of the female voice” (45). For Silverman and other feminist critics, such cinematic representations of the female voice augment and reinforce the cultural encoding of female subjectivity as a threatening void, a lack that simultaneously haunts male subjectivity even as it consolidates its hold on discursive mastery and control. The video also blatantly—even painfully—invokes the representational index of anorexia-bulimia, and the gestural repertoire of Angela Seo’s body (contorting her face, mouth, fingers, throat) conjures the culturally loaded subject-position of the bulimic woman or girl. As scholars such as Susan Bordo have argued, anorexia (and by extension bulimia) as a historically contingent medical phenomenon is impossible to separate from the cultural demands placed on women and girls to conform to an idealized, culturally mandated notion of corporeal femininity.4

This problematic arrangement is compounded in the video by the fact that this power differential is also racialized: Stewart (who is white) performs the “pleasurable” task of consuming chocolate, while Seo (who is Korean-American) is tasked with the “painful” action of producing the bodily excrescence that lends the video its disturbing potency. In presenting the spectacle of a white male body experiencing gustatory pleasure at the expense of a female Asian body’s abjection and ultimate breakdown, the video recalls what Karen Shimakawa has called the “national abjection” of the Asian American body in performance, a process that “sublimes (racialized) corporeality into discursive structures of national belonging and exclusion” (130). When these gendered and racialized dynamics of the video are taken into account, the piece might be read as reiterating—albeit in a stylistically heightened form—a wearyingly familiar representational trope: that of the white (American) male shoring up the position of masculine privilege through the abjection of the racialized and gendered other.

While it is not necessarily my aim to mount a “defense” of the video, I would like to consider the possibility that the piece is not simply reproducing the power differentials it evokes, but might, in fact, be contesting the very terms of these representational dynamics in order to point toward alternative conceptions of identification and desire. This alternative circuitry has to do with what might be called Xiu Xiu’s queer expressivity, which is to say the band’s interest in cultivating oppositional or antinormative modes
of political, sexual, and aesthetic expression. Recent work in queer theory has drawn attention to the productive, reparative, and pleasurable qualities that queer and other minoritarian subjects have found in experiences of abjection, debasement, and shame.\(^5\) In not just aestheticizing, but rendering sensible and expressive, the experience of self-loathing (the song, after all, \textit{is} called “Dear God, I Hate Myself”), I would like to read Xiu Xiu’s work in this video in consonance with such projects. In this vein, one of the lyrics that Stewart sings in “Dear God, I Hate Myself”—“flip off the mirror as protest”—can be understood as the crucial code for the video’s gendered and racialized schema. Beyond its obvious resonances with the Lacanian concept of the mirror stage, this lyric provides one point of entry for us to conceive of the video’s visual and sonic schemas as a “flipping off” of the imaginary’s insistence that identity be consolidated through the fantasy of a whole or stable body through recourse to a corporealized \textit{jouissance}. \textit{Jouissance}—a concept that occupies an equally central, and equally enigmatic, position in Lacanian psychoanalytic theory as the \textit{objet (a)}—names, among other things, the non-symbolic mode of sensation that attends the subject’s encounter with the \textit{objet (a)} at its most puissant. It is an experience of enjoyment that is so powerful and disrupting that it threatens the stability and coherence of the subject’s sense of autonomy, but that nonetheless, paradoxically, hints at the possibility for a recuperation of the subject’s primary absorption in the real. \textit{Jouissance} “is neither transgressive nor forbidden,”\(^6\) but rather an “evental variety” that desire might encounter upon its always-incomplete path toward realization and fulfillment. Xiu Xiu’s work allows us to consider the aesthetic, even the aestheticization of suffering and pain, as one possible form for desire to take. In the video for “Dear God, I Hate Myself,” \textit{jouissance} becomes mobilized as a kind of expressive force both felt and performed at the level of the body, through the mouth and its “deteritorialized” function as an organ that eats and vomits. The video’s representational approach sidesteps, or proposes an alternative logic to, the territorialized notions of (white, male) personhood that depend upon the abjection of racial and gendered alterity in order to attain self-coherence.

Thus, we might understand the topography of desire that the video employs not simply in terms of conventional matrices of masochistic pleasure or despair, but as a queer invitation to “flip off the mirror as protest.” In response to the superego’s demand that the body and the self cohere as an idealized, stable object for the Other’s desire, Xiu Xiu stages a playful, almost joyful scene of bodily in- and ex-corporation. If the video
expresses, as Stewart has said about the song, “the tension between feeling hopeless but also feeling as if spiritual love is possible and there for you if you want it” (Stewart), Xiu Xiu’s invitation calls us to recognize that the desire of—and for—the other should not be limited to the performers themselves, but should also encompass the band’s broader and more diffuse network of listeners, viewers, and interlocutors. Xiu Xiu both stages a fantasy of the recuperation of the lost object, and invites us to recognize the pleasures that can issue forth when we “flip off the mirror as protest”; when we expand our ability to recognize and articulate other configurations—or, as Lacan describes them, “evental varieties”—that desire might find.

Notes

1. In Lacanian psychoanalytic theory, the objet (a) is sometimes written as the “objet petit a.” It is beyond the scope of this article to provide a complete account of the concept of the objet (a) as it was developed and transformed throughout Lacan’s later work. The clearest delineations of the function of the objet (a) as I am using it here occur in Lacan Seminar X, Seminar XI, and Ecrits.

2. Licia Fiol-Matta, for example, uses Dolar’s exegesis on the Lacanian object-voice in her study of the Puerto Rican popular singer Myrta Silva, suggesting that Silva’s voice “certainly served as a blind spot for the listener; and grew into an aesthetic disturbance to dominant, cultural-nationalist culture.” See Fiol-Matta 288.

3. On the acousmatic voice in cinema, see Chion.

4. See Bordo.

5. I am thinking here of the attention within queer theory to the generative political and cultural aspects of “gay shame” inaugurated in Sedgwick and expanded (not unproblematically; see Halberstam) in Halpern and Traub.


Works Cited


