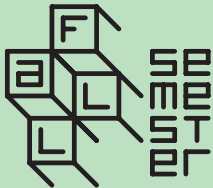


Patrick Staff





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I begin writing in response to a question I am asked: whether the “self” of the artist can be emancipatory. My first instinct is to assert that we need to dispel any idea of “the self of the artist” entirely. As it is well known, every new generation of artists is faced with the task of creating work that is uncommodifiable, knowing that it will not remain so for long. It is the song, the dance, the lie of the avant-garde¹. To believe that the ‘self of the artist’ exists through opposition or exception is a fallacy. To believe that the self exists in any discrete state at all is a song, a dance, a cycle and a lie.

On rewriting bodies of flesh and bodies of text, it’s interesting to note that an early edition of Rina Nissim’s *Natural Healing in Gynecology* replaced a segment of explicitly stated abortion recipes to *emmenagogues*. Herbs that encourage menstruation. This editing echoes an earlier obfuscation of knowledge around contraceptive and abortifacient plants. A 1705 edition of botanical illustrator Maria Sibylla Merian’s *Metamorphosis of the Insects of Suriname* included a notation under the Peacock Flower (*Caesalpinia pulcherrima*) indicating that it was used by “the Indians, who are not treated well by their Dutch masters... to abort children, so that their children will not become slaves like they are. The black slaves from Guinea and Angola have demanded to be well treated, threatening to refuse to have children. They told me this themselves.” A later edition of the book edited this notation out, along with any other indication of plants that could be used as abortifacients.

In Berlin in the late 1790s, the Savin trees (*Juniperus sabina*) were ripped out of the Tiergarten because visitors ‘showed too great an interest in them.’ In 1935, as pro-natalist Nazis clamped down on abortion, cultivation of the Savin tree was again forbidden. The Grimm Brothers’ fairy tale *The Juniper Tree* hints at this repressed knowledge of the tree’s contested bio- and necro-politics. In the tale, a mother makes a wish under the tree for a child. The child is born and the mother dies and is buried under the tree. The male child, the heir to the patriarchal lineage is later killed by the stepmother, but is resurrected in the form of a bird and aided in his revenge through the assistance of the juniper tree, as if the tree regretted its role in offing the Nation’s future little soldiers for the imperial, patriarchal project.

Most likely, it is the tree’s indifference that leads us to pluck and strip its leaves and bark – pounding, drying, mashing, drinking and smoking its parts in an attempt to still the moment where one points to the rings in a severed Sequoia’s trunk and says, “Here I was born, and here I died. It was only a moment for you; you took no notice.”²

But to return to this question of an emancipatory possibility of self, perhaps the question is how to position oneself critically outside of singularly oppositional modes of engagement. As an artist, my priority is to repeatedly to ask how we read the body within institutional sites and the spheres that feed into them. By design these spaces require a normalised body, whether that is one that acquiesces as a means to gain access or one that is neutralised by the process of its recuperation. Legitimation is always dependent on an illegitimate. What is rendered by the unproductive body? What does refusing strength do? What is edited out, and why?

Like many of my peers, under precarity, I am preoccupied by care. What is taken, and what is received. How we are held, and hold, and harm. I reach more and more for ways to describe how we are bound together, the positions bodies occupy, and the vacillations between immunity and infection. I came to these handles through the slow lessons of working with queer people who’re older than me; through a handful of deaths, and certain illnesses, and disabilities of

friends and lovers in my community through the ongoing grief and raggedness of my own queer identity and body—its marking and codification always in negotiation with you, whether you're a stranger, friend, lover, family member, physician, government, cop, or pig.³

As a queer person, my gender identity has been constituted of unbecomings, compromise, grief; this is a lived experience in opposition to the dominant narrative of “becoming” or “self-realisation” that enables one to live authentically – by which we mean freely. We know that the promise of being free – an impossible absolute in itself – from commodification and exploitation is always predicated on the commodification and exploitation of another, relying on countless unspoken terms of able-bodiedness, mobility, and access. Like it or not, the language of productive emancipation is infused with an ideological grab for power. It is necessary to refuse to cooperate with our own desires for assimilation and conquest, to paraphrase Terre Thaemlitz, and to dispel, or at least declaw, the positive language of self-determination and strive for divestments of power.

In *Lessons from a Starfish* Eva Hayward writes critically about theories of trans embodiment that see the body as a container that is somehow separate from the self. Like smoke, or a river, ‘the body, trans or not, is not a clear, coherent and positive integrity. The important distinction is not the hierarchical, binary one between wrong body and right body, or between fragmentation and wholeness. It is rather a question of discerning multiple and continually varying interactions among what can be defined indifferently as coherent transformation, decentered certainty, or limited possibility.’ Smoke is a collection of airborne solid and liquid particulates and gases emitted when a material undergoes combustion, mixed with the quantity of air that is otherwise in the mass. Smoke is commonly thought of as an unwanted by-product of fire: stoves, candles, fireplaces, arson, forest fires, burning oil fields. Of cigarette smoke: second-hand, stale on your clothes, on your breath, a rasping voice, lung cancer. Yet soot marks from the smoke of a hot burning house fire have been to known scorch a V into the walls. When an object catches on fire, it creates such

a pattern, as heat and smoke radiate outward; the bottom of the 'V' can therefore point to where a fire began.

In an interview from *The Los Angeles Review of Books*, media theorist John Durham Peters says: «the question of what clouds mean is a deep one; reading clouds is the paradigm case of how to interpret nature and how not to.» Clouds, he says, raise the fundamental questions of where significance lies. They are dense yet, some say, meaningless. They are packed full of signals: ask a sailor, a pilot, a farmer or a fireman what a cloud means.

The engineer may seek to harness the many emanations of smoke for fumigation, communication or cooking; for its offensive and defensive capabilities. For flavouring and preserving; for internal combustion. Pressure. In these instances it may become a usable toxin, a directed load and thrust, or a series of readable signs. In these instances, as is common in human engineering, it is mostly disembodied from its source, and its own ecosystem and significance. A smoke screen not just obstructing an image, but thoroughly scrambling it.

Thousands of centuries old, redwood trees are mostly composed (97%) of tissues we consider dead. Only a small rim of cells along the edge of the trunk is living. Similarly, we could view the Earth as a seemingly small crust of living organisms around a core we call 'inanimate.' Viruses too are considered inanimate, while bacteria are the animate, and in fact, the most prevalent life form on Earth. Bacteria initially populated the planet and have never relinquished their hold. In what ways could we imagine that clouds are alive?

We could say, the clouds are eating us. Even as we ingest their amorphous, malleable forms, their bodies hang within our "dead space": reorganising, buoying. From within the cloud, we recognise our bodies are porous, despite the socio-scientific project that seeks to lead us to believe that our skins are an impermeable layer, a firewall. The earth's crust, the Sequoia's rim, the soot-marked V. We are, in fact, temporary coagulations of matter.

To come back again to the emancipated self, it is worth remembering that the production and management of the body under capitalism has evolved beyond dualisms of

non-commercial/commercial or free/exploited. Beyond the good and bad, the living and the dead. Queer-theorist Paul B. Preciado has provided very necessary insight into how the management of subjectivity and identity is now related to the very materiality of the body itself and its somatic apparatus. For centuries the policing of sex, race and gender was implemented by arranging bodies within architectures. Now, it is ingested. I find myself preoccupied with constitution: affinities, plasticity, toxicities, nutrients, and vitalities. To reframe our conditions as constitutional allows for possible expanded, distributive practices; more trans than post. The cross-pollination and infection between bodies, ecosystems, and institutions. This begins to potentially redefine subjectivity and temporality. What is interesting about constitution is that everything becomes a question of relationship and care, dosage and tolerance; and reveals possible strategies of counter-disciplines, malpractice and misuse.

This is not about seeing the world as a series of systems and codes, but rather about seepage and viscosity. This is inherently challenging to historical allegiances and strategies that were dependent on a material solidity and solidarity, and the terms which we have so far been dependent on. As I talk about intimacy, bitten and choked, it is not an intimacy that is soft and sweet, but one of an almost unbearable heat. One that challenges tolerance, and where resistance is calcified. You and I, the city, violence, the text, are intimate and on a knife edge. It is not clean, it cannot be fixed or inoculated; to try to flush it out and sterilise is a violent deception. It is not the space where vanilla fucking prevails. Instead, in fact, there is this unbearable heat, a weight and heat through which our togetherness is constituted. We do not cleanse one another, but I might be undone by you.

1 To paraphrase artist Jesse Darling.

2 Segments of this text are adapted from Patrick Staff and Candice Lin's *Reading and Smoking*, 2015

3 Segments of this text also include adaptations of Patrick Staff's *\$5 To Those Who Deserve It*, 2016

Patrick Staff is an interdisciplinary artist who works with film, installation, dance and performance to investigate dissent, labour and the queer body. Recent solo exhibitions have taken place at Chisenhale, London, UK; Spike Island, Bristol, UK; Institute of

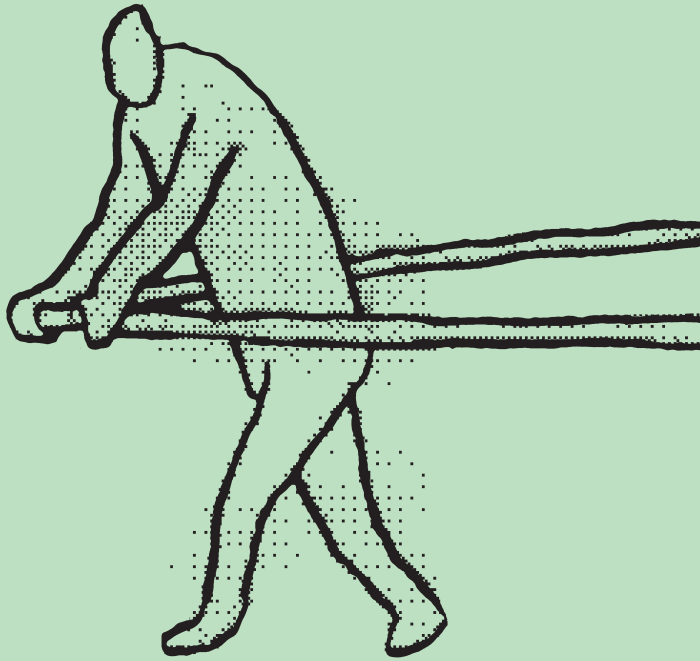
Modern Art, Brisbane, Australia; and Contemporary Art Gallery, Vancouver, Canada. They are currently part of British Art Show 8, which tours venues throughout 2016, and their first US solo exhibition will take place at MOCA Los Angeles in 2017.



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