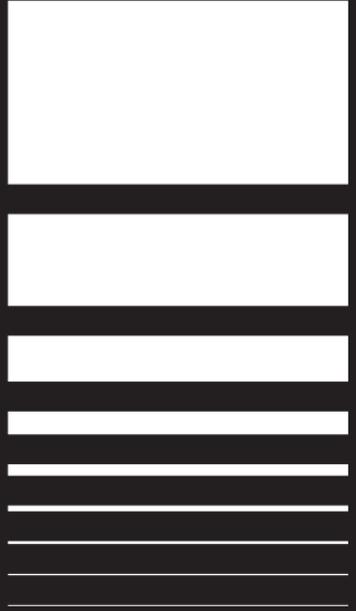


Gales Gallery
May 2 to 13th 2016

Ellen Bleiwas
Kriss Janik
Erin Vincent



After
great pain,
a formal
feeling comes

This is a Curatorial Intensive exhibition sponsored by the Art Gallery of York University in collaboration with York University's Art History Department in the School of the Arts, Media, Performance & Design.

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After great pain, a formal feeling comes –
The Nerves sit ceremonious, like Tombs –
The stiff Heart questions ‘was it He, that bore,’
And ‘Yesterday, or Centuries before’?

The Feet, mechanical, go round –
A Wooden way
Of Ground, or Air, or Ought –
Regardless grown,
A Quartz contentment, like a stone –

This is the Hour of Lead –
Remembered, if outlived,
As Freezing persons, recollect the Snow –
First – Chill – then Stupor – then the letting go –

-Emily Dickinson

After great pain,
a formal feeling comes

After great pain, a formal feeling comes asks: how do melancholic feelings take form? Is there away to get to melancholia's affect—the sense experience of pain, loss and grief—by attending to the material specificity of aesthetic form? And in what ways can visual forms and temporal structures act as metaphors for melancholic subjectivity?

In his 1917 text *Mourning and Melancholia*, Sigmund Freud distinguished between a person who is mourning and a person who is melancholic: when mourning, the individual projects the loss outward and engages in a process of working-through or healing, while the melancholic subject holds onto this loss and incorporates it into the structure of self, making the ego “poor and empty.”¹ The works featured here by Ellen Bleiwas, Erin Vincent and Kriss Janik manifest this internalized emptiness of melancholia by incorporating a sense of loss or element of incompleteness within their formal structure, provoking engagement with what Freud termed the “particular and peculiar ache” of melancholic loss, pain and grief.²

Freud argued that melancholia resists language and verbalization: the melancholic subject cannot consciously elaborate or recognize what they have lost as the source of his/her pain and grief. In many ways, melancholia, and the affects of pain, loss and grief that are associated with it, can be said to resist formalization and structuration: the loss has no stable object or referent. As Elaine Scarry notes: “pain does not simply resist language, but actively destroys it.”³ The question then becomes: how can the creative exploration of aesthetic form allow melancholia to speak? Is there a way to give the specificity of melancholia's affect a voice by attending to the way in which pain, loss and grief circulate and “stick” to certain material forms?

In “After great pain, a formal feeling comes,” Emily Dickinson gives us partial phrases and fragmented sentences that attempt to capture the melancholic experience. Dickinson relies on specific materials (wood, ground, air, stone, snow) to metaphorically stand in for the emotional content of pain, loss and grief. Similar to Dickinson's poem, each piece featured in *After great pain, a formal feeling comes* takes up material elements to communicate affectively. That is, the works here not only rely on the materiality of their form for their composition, but they actively embrace and showcase this materiality as central to the meaning and constitution of the work. Materiality is what contains the works' affective texture; the material is the irreducible specificity of the form, the peculiar and particular ache, of the melancholic subject.

Ellen Bleiwas' immersive installation, entitled *Passage No. 160501-1*, is a labyrinth-like square structure with two interior enclosures. The walls are composed of industrial felt off-cuts that are compressed together vertically. Felt is sold in large rectangular sheets, and in order for the manufacturer to create this rectangular shape, they must cut off the frayed woolly edges of the felt. Bleiwas has taken these edges and has played on their duality: one side of the felt off-cut is frayed and raw, exposing the woolly materiality that makes up the felt form, while the other side is cut straight and is flat. Thus, when viewers first approach *Passage No. 160501-1*, they will see the textured edge on the outside of the structure, and, upon entering the structure, will encounter the flat and rigid edge of the cut side. This is then reversed in the second enclosure, wherein the flat edge forms the outside of the structure, while the woolly, frayed edge composes the inside. The duality between texture and flatness creates a flow between haptic and optical visibility: the grainy woolly edge activates a sense of embodiment that “turns the eye into an organ of touch,” while the more rigid and flat cut of the edge encourages a

¹Eugenie Brinkema, *The Forms of the Affects* (Durham, London: Duke University Press, 2014), 67.

²Freud used the term “besondere Schmerzlichkeit,” which Brinkema translates as the “particular and peculiar ache,” 67.

³Elaine Scarry, *The Body in Pain: The Making and Unmaking of the World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1985), 4.

cold and optically distant form of perception.⁴ *Passage No. 160501-1* can thus be said to activate a perceptual antagonism, as viewers shift from a highly embodied and tactile sense experience to one that is more mechanical, rigid and controlled. The combination of a tactile and embodied experience with one that is more distant and isolating manifests, or materializes, the affect of melancholia: the grainy texture of the raw edge evokes the openness of a wound that seemingly leaks off of the form and touches the body of the viewer, while the rigid, straight cut of the inside edge condenses and represses this affective texture and the emotive content it embodies, incorporating it into the formal structure of the industrial felt itself.

In *Passage No. 160501-1* the sense experience of loss is evoked as viewers lose the ability to see anyone or anything other than the dense weightiness of the felt that surrounds them: the passageways are narrowly constructed and purposefully restricting, providing room for only one person to move through it at a time. This sense of loss is further underscored through the muffling of sound that the density of industrial felt creates. Once viewers reach the centre of *Passage No. 160501-1*, they are thoroughly immersed within two dense walls that isolate and threaten to suffocate them. They cannot hear much from the external environment and are surrounded by the open-ended raw wounds of the wooly off-cuts. Here, viewers are asked to be with, and mull within, an affective structure that metaphorically materializes the experience of grief. Eugenie Brinkema reminds us of the etymological definition of grief, which points to “the felt experience of heaviness, of being weighted down, of pushing and pressing, as on one’s sternum in sighing, choking breaths that do not fully arrive.”⁵ In *Passage No. 160501-1* this weightiness of grief, and its suffocating effect, is materialized and put into process through viewer engagement with the industrial felt form.

While Bleiwas’ piece evokes the sense experience of loss, Erin Vincent’s *balloon, string, rock* (2016) embodies it, effectively giving form to

⁴Laura Marks coined the term “haptic visuality” to designate the way in which “the eyes themselves function like organs of touch” during certain filmic viewing experiences, in *Touch: Sensuous Theory and Multisensory Media* (Minneapolis/London: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 2.

⁵Eugenie Brinkema, *The Forms of the Affects* (Durham, London: Duke University Press, 2014), 73.

melancholic subjectivity. For this exhibition, Vincent has created five different versions of *balloon, string, rock*. Consisting of what the title names, *balloon, string, rock* stages a precarious relation between the airiness of the balloon and the weightiness of the rock. Through the use of string, Vincent has tied a helium-filled balloon to a small rock that does not completely weigh the balloon down, but rather allows it to move around, following the wind current created by the movement of viewers within the exhibition space. Each version of *balloon, string, rock* is slightly different: some have larger rocks, while others have lengthier strings. Seemingly having a life of their own, each *balloon, string, rock* wanders aimlessly throughout the exhibition without destination or purpose. Similar to melancholic subjectivity, *balloon, string, rock* has no object to attach itself to, no stable referent to ground it: the rocks only partially weigh down the balloons, while the balloons, which are filled with an airy emptiness, embody the introjection of loss within the structure of self.

The temporal structure of Kriss Janik’s *Fragmentation* (2016) allows the noisiness of pain to speak. Through the use of a 1986 JVC double-cassette player, Janik has recorded onto one cassette the sound of a video file from his phone. After making this initial recording on one cassette, Janik then re-recorded it onto a second cassette tape. He then took the second re-recorded tape and re-recorded it again, onto the initial cassette. He has repeated this process multiple times, resulting in the noise that materializes through this repetition. The original audio from the video file is lost and with it, the memory that the audio triggered. The soundscape that *Fragmentation* creates is one that is noisy and aggravating; it emanates the sound of a cassette tape being pressed to its limits and on the brink of collapse. Here, the sonic memory of a past event is made to disintegrate, while the materiality of its affective texture is exposed, allowing it to speak. Julia Kristeva asks, “How can one speak the truth of pain, if not by holding in check the rhetorical celebration, warping it, making it grate, strain,

and limp?"⁶ Here, pain begins to make itself heard through the warping, grating and straining of the analogue cassette, the content of which is obfuscated and made to testify to an unrecoverable loss.

For Freud, melancholia is characterized by an attachment to an unrecoverable and lost object of the past. The objects in *After great pain, a formal feeling* comes do not attempt to recover or give this loss a stable referent, but rather allow it to flow, move, and disintegrate. Here, viewers are asked to get close to melancholia's affective texture as it circulates, disperses and takes form throughout the exhibition space. Taken as a whole, the exhibition affirms loss: the particular and peculiar ache of melancholia is not resolved nor healed, but is rather heard, felt and encountered. If there is an ethic here, it is one that is faithful to a (Lacanian) lack: the works formally embrace incompleteness and metaphorically materialize the irresolvable gap at the heart of subjectivity, paradoxically bringing people together through a common sense of being apart.

⁶ Julia Kristeva, *Black Sun: Depression and Melancholia*, Translated by Leon S. Roudiez (New York: Columbia University Press, 1989), 225.

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Monday to Friday
10:30am to 4:00pm

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