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## Honeymoons

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**HONEYMOONS**

**A Thesis Presented  
by  
ETHAN KIERMAIER**

**Submitted to the Graduate School of the  
University of Massachusetts in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of**

**MASTER OF FINE ARTS**

**May 2017**

**Art**

**HONEYMOONS**

**A Thesis Presented**

**By**

**ETHAN KIERMAIER**

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**ABSTRACT**

**HONEYMOONS**

**MAY 2017**

**ETHAN KIERMAIER, B.F.A., MASSACHUSETTS COLLEGE OF ART**

**M.F.A. UNIVERSITY OF MASSACHUSETTS**

**Directed by: Professor Susan Jahoda**

Through investigating my installation, performance, video and collaborative practice, *Honeymoons* builds connections between timelessness in repetition, the sacred potentials of pop culture, the animation of matter and the relationship of the body to space. Central to these relationships are questions about the function of the erotic in a mediated world. How can a sensual experience help us to define what is real, what has value?

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## PART 1

### HONEYMOONS

*Honeymoons* took a long while to present itself. At first I set out to create a mixtape in space and objects, a theatrical experience driven by pop music. Then it was to be a multi channel video installation with an oblique score performed by couples exploring intimacy. Next I decided to build a stage that could be entered from behind, placing the unwitting viewer in the position of performer simply by walking into the space. What *Honeymoons* has become is a collage of some of these thoughts and forms along with others gathered from previous works, more of a remix than a mixtape. Like my previous work, *Honeymoons* contains both a meditation and a confrontation. A simultaneous embrace and disavowal of the mediated and the performed. An acknowledgement of both the presence and impossibility of true intimacy. The sense that time has stopped and continues at a bewildering pace. The party is over, the party has just begun.

*Honeymoons* is an installation composed of a dialogue between discrete parts. The work began with a series of videos shot while on a vacation in New Orleans and Florida. Hotel rooms were transformed with oversaturated lighting and the rotation of a disco ball to form spaces both enchanted and a bit ridiculous. In the videos my partner and I stand on a window ledge looking out, sit in a bathtub silently conversing, anxiously watch the world outside from the comfort of what is certainly a provisional situation at best. Two of the videos rotate slowly on their screens which are hung at odd angles,

leaning back to form spaces below edged with cheap foil curtains. These videos are non-narrative loops, functioning as textures and sculptural objects rather than traditional time-based media. The same can be said for the larger image dominating the room: a sunset rendered in a slowly shifting palette from blue to pink and back, rising and setting. A constant presence, it is projected on a stage, its back curved like a photo backdrop or skateboard ramp. The shelf over the stage wall holds a variety of theatrically lit plants and objects, mostly utilitarian with a set of high-powered work lights centered in the composition. The sound of rain in a forest comes out of public address speakers on either side of the stage. It is interspersed with occasional thunder punctuated by “lightning” that emanates from the work lights, occasionally illuminating the room. The animated rotations of the videos are not quite keeping up with the rotation of the three sculptures in the room that dangle from the ceiling: ladders, shelving, decorative fringe and other found detritus cobbled together to form assemblages gracefully spinning around. All powered by fans illuminating the dimly lit room with theater lighting, prisms and magenta grow lights.

The space of *Honeymoons* evolved from my investigations of time, performativity, intimacy and space. It is a world unto itself, a reality composed of its own particular set of logics and assumptions. A collage of slow textures, found media and objects, constructed sets, the feel of breeze on the skin, and the smell of sandalwood. In its attempt to create a fully embodied experience, *Honeymoons* can't help but fail even as it succeeds: we know that the sounds are canned, the watermark on the sunset tells us that



it's already been commodified, the aesthetics are revealed as cheap tricks every time the lightning flashes. Still, the enchantment presented is real or as real as it gets lately as we are presented with alternative facts and post truths. The relationship of the couple on the screens could be genuine even as it exists in a fantasy world, costumed, suspended in time, endlessly looping. We are left to wonder, is this suspension a kind of heaven or hell? Are the facades we've been presented with lies or revelations?

## **PART 2**

### **TWILIGHT**

Much of what I make takes on life in the half darkness. Twilight conceals, twilight reveals, twilight maintains a space where more is possible than in either the light of day or the darkness. A temporal transition is always implied and often experienced in half light, a time when worlds slide into each other and generate something new. There is a volatility inherent in these moments, a time of questioning and confusion but also a crucible; worlds are created somewhere in the in-between.

One of my favorite places in Los Angeles, the Museum of Jurassic Technology, uses twilight to great effect. Each of the rooms maintains a perennial twilight, the edges of things barely visible even as the content of each exhibition is illuminated by spotlights. The Museum narrates the line between fact and fiction, each exhibit generating as many questions as it answers. Exhibits that seem to have been generated from fantasy or conjecture exist alongside those that could have been displayed in a conventional natural history museum, calling into question boundaries of truth and the context in which they are displayed. There is an honesty here that doesn't seem to be present at other institutions devoted to clear explanation or teaching moments, an exaltation in the thought that information can be contradictory and contingent. The perpetual twilight of the museum, especially on the lower floors draws us instantly into this questioning, makes sure that we are at least dimly aware that we may be subject to cognitive slippage,

that our assumptions are laid bare.

Upon entering a nightclub, dim lighting gives way to lowered inhibitions and greater possibility. This faux twilight diminishes our capacity to take in visual information or at least to make concrete and intelligible form from it. We rely more heavily on our other senses, yield to the erotic, the air blowing sweat on our skin, the smell of bodies in motion, the rumble of the bass through our core. In this way twilight can function as a return to eros, to the sensate and to the body as an organ of experience. Audre Lorde in her essay “Uses of the Erotic” gracefully expands on the personal and political implications of the erotic through the lens of intersectional feminism: “The erotic functions for me in several ways, and the first is in providing the power which comes from sharing deeply any pursuit with another person. The sharing of joy, whether physical, emotional, psychic, or intellectual, forms a bridge between the sharers which can be the basis for understanding much of what is not shared between them, and lessens the threat of their difference.”<sup>1</sup>

The possibility for cognitive dissonance seems to go hand in hand with ways of experiencing that originate in erotic sensation, both opening the door to new possibilities and tending to dissolve artificial divisions thrown up by culture and politics.

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<sup>1</sup> Lorde, Audre, and Cheryl Clarke. *Sister outsider: essays and speeches*. Berkeley: Crossing Press, 2007. Print. p. 56

The implication of twilight in *Honeymoons* works to bring the viewer closer to a place where they can enter into a space of questioning and embodied knowing through the sensual. Sometimes this takes the form of a reveal, the space itself transformed into a twilight, a shift from the ordinary to the enchanted as in both *The Ladder* and *The Death and Resurrection Show*. Both projects begin with “room lighting” and are fully illuminated before gradually shifting into theatrical lighting. This shift could be construed as manipulative, a reversal of Bertolt Brecht’s alienation effect where the illusions of theater are punctured by intrusions or ruptures like an actor addressing the audience or otherwise exposing the mechanisms of theater.<sup>2</sup> The space, objects and participants begin fully visible, flawed and ordinary and descend into twilight, into the club. My hope is that these works can precipitate a transformation from the quotidian to the sublime, or at least open the door to this invitation.

Karaoke can perhaps evoke similar possibilities. The initial appeal of karaoke is that it serves as a lower risk entry into this space of instant possibilities and a convenient tool to facilitate shifts of identity. A karaoke performer is cycling through roles and identities in a fluid and ultimately transgressive way. These identities give the participant a safe, universal framework to work from in their real time explorations, not just of imitation but of the creation of new sets of possibilities to be actualized in their lives off stage. I can be Marc Bolan and then turn around and be Patsy Cline five minutes later or my

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<sup>2</sup> Brecht, Bertolt. *A short organum for the theatre*. N.p.: n.p., 1949. Print.

own version of them or nobodies. When my sister turned me onto karaoke five or six years ago I was skeptical and went to a rented room with her friends for her birthday mostly just to make her happy. That I took so readily to it was a surprise to nearly everyone there; but it was at that moment that the power of liveness re-entered my vocabulary as it does for so many karaoke converts through the lens of kitsch and melodrama.

*The Death and Resurrection Show* was one of the many projects I've executed incorporating karaoke as an aesthetic with the intent of examining these shifts from the ordinary to the theatrical, from daylight to twilight. Most successful as an individual experience, it can also work as a public one, though its affect can be more predictable often becoming a karaoke party or game when more than a few people are present. *The Death and Resurrection Show* begins as an ordinary room lit from above. A mirror hangs behind a microphone mounted on a stand. The sound of a cocktail party comes through a pair of public address speakers and a black and white video of the scene is projected on the wall opposite the mirror in real time, referencing a surveillance camera. If a viewer decides to stand in front of the microphone, the room begins to shift. The lights dim, a spotlight illuminates the singer, the video shifts to a close up of their face as a disco ball turns on. A random karaoke song is superimposed over their face and they can choose to sing. If they step away from the microphone and mirror, the room instantly reverts to its previously brightly lit state. Karaoke, generally a communal pastime, had been turned into an act of potential introspection. *The Death and*

*Resurrection Show* is a machine for revealing the potential of everyday social action.

Karaoke can be both banal and sublime, a way of creating a bubble of safety and space where uncomfortable or contradictory identities can have a chance to be performed.

Tension between the public and the private, the performed and the coerced are the twilight gaps that animate much of my work and thought. The stage set in *Honeymoons* with its endless repeating sunset and overt absence of performers draw out these tensions making them visible. The sunset is a not so subtle metaphor, recurring in endless repetitions keeping us in a temporal loop, a kind of eternal return. Does the empty microphone represent an opportunity for human interaction or is the sunset acting as the performer (and do we dare to upstage it)? The videos of the couple ask similar questions, are we witnessing a document or a staged performance, a private moment or a public feeling? The melodramatic lighting makes it clear that a performance is taking place but the actors seem unconcerned with the camera. Are they performing intimacy or enacting it, and is there a difference? Endless twilight simultaneously suggests the possibility of change and its preclusion, an in between space reminding us that our shifts through identity and culture might be waypoints on a broader journey.

**PART 3**  
**OVER AND OVER**

Some time ago I saw Tacita Dean's film *The Green Ray* at Mass MoCA. The film was installed in a room by itself with a looping 16mm projector. The projector was installed so that a button would actuate the two and half minute film every time it was pressed, enabling a viewer to see the image in its entirety whenever they liked without walking in on the penultimate moments or the drab beginning. *The Green Ray*, filmed on the west coast of Madagascar, is simply a single reel of film set to capture the moment when the sun dips below the ocean horizon. I watched it probably six times, each time anticipating the disappearance of the sun but not quite believing it would happen again. The fact that I had spent time on that very coast a few years before helped keep my interest even though the place from where she was shooting was secondary to the universality of the image she produced.

As I kept pushing the button for *The Green Ray* I thought about how travel can be a call to awareness and, like most trips, that one to Madagascar represented a turning point for me in ways I was still coming to grips with. I pictured myself on the beach with Tacita Dean recording that sunset, the hum of the Bolex between us as we sat on the sand, the instant melancholy as the rim of the sun fell over the rim of the earth. And

then doing it again and again. I had shot a similar image myself a few years earlier and used it as a set piece at an event: a digital projection of the sun setting over the water in Maine near where I had grown up, the hues of the scene shifting at an almost imperceptible rate. But Dean had created something more compelling by concentrating on the limits of her medium. The three-minute length of a film reel became the container for her sunset and produced a work in which duration and repetition were the primary content. The moment when the sun dips behind the horizon (again) is infinitely repeatable if you can merely push the button, the difference being that *we* have changed with each iteration.

After I saw *The Green Ray* I made a small tribute video to it. I searched YouTube for similar content: people recording the moment of the sunset often with the digital zoom cranked way up on their camcorders creating grainy compositions sometimes accompanied by ambient voices or the sound of waves. Downloading a dozen of these films I used three layered over each other with the moment of sunset synchronized between them. In the process I found one that had been professionally produced, several hours of anonymous crisp and clear HD video of a sunset perfectly centered in the frame. It could have been computer generated, though I'm sure it wasn't, and was watermarked in the lower corner. This sunset was part of a genre of videos that had been appearing on the web consisting of many hours of static images of nature with titles like *Relaxing 3 Hour Video of Tropical Beach with Blue Sky White Sand and Palm Tree*. The Sunset Video stayed on my hard drive after I finished the *Green Ray* tribute and it started



to work its way into all sorts of other pieces. As ambient environmental videos they were created to be default backdrops for modern life, to live as static windows into idealized timeless landscapes. This in dramatic counterpoint to the typical media landscape of today: short bursts of imagery consumed in rapid succession. Although I watched them with skepticism, I knew that there was unexplored material in a sunset video, with its infinite iterations and infinite patience.

First was the *Y's* video where the sunset became a backdrop for unanswerable questions, even as it simplified itself from a multitude to a single entity, as the sun dipped below the horizon. I used the sunset (rendered in blue tones) as the background for the video portion of the installation *On Temporary Loan*, lining up the horizon with the top of the baseboard to create a simultaneously concrete and ephemeral architecture. It came back again in *For Flight* as the background for the karaoke text in a performance and then again as a foundational image for *Boring Angel*, where it existed in two iterations, one pink and one blue, bluntly representing the cultural bifurcation of gender. By the time Hannah Patterson and I shot *Natural Lite* on a winter evening in New Orleans, projecting The Sunset had become a sort of default landscape, one that had grown familiar over the previous months. We rear projected it in vibrant pink over a scrim and used our bodies to break its constancy, to interject ourselves into the horizon and play in that timelessness, as the sun set again and again. In *Honeymoons*, the sunset appears in what will likely be its final iteration, keeping time on the stage, the centerpiece of a room composed of loops.

Repetition takes us to the timeless, the suspended. I was a teenager in the 1990's when electronic dance music was still an underground phenomenon in the United States even as it had begun to infiltrate pop culture in Europe. The revolution for me was that the music seemed unconcerned with easy narratives or solutions; it existed only in one long endless moment. Techno is composed of loops, small bits of sound layered on top of each other and digitally reproduced; there is no beginning, middle or end. When going to raves in 1996, the best DJ was the one who could convince us that no change had taken place at all, that the music continued unbroken and that time as we commonly experience it had ceased to exist. House and techno of the 1980's and 90's produced a utopic space of timelessness not unlike the experience of watching Tacita Dean's *The Green Ray* over and over again. That raves were social spaces was of course integral to their content; but the possibility always remained for hermetic moments and personal epiphanies. What really struck me as a teenager was the fact that these sounds were site specific, the site being the cultural space of a rave along with the physical space of a club. This was music that functioned far differently in its natural environment than it did on the stereo at home. The digital and looping nature of the music meant that it *sounded* the same anywhere it was played; but when it was combined with other elements to form the site of a rave, the effect became wholly different. And of course this was music that involved the body by its very nature; the dance became a part of the site and again that utopic timelessness took form as a physical act, something where the body was required to complete the circle.

It wasn't until much later in my life that I discovered minimalist music and its similarities to electronic dance music. If anything the work of Steve Reich, Philip Glass and Terry Riley seemed even more concerned with iteration as a technique for suspending time. It's difficult to discern much difference in the substance and intent of a piece like Steve Reich's *Six Pianos* from an acid house or minimal techno track besides the specific sites they occupy. It wasn't until I experienced La Monte Young and Marian Zazeela's *Dream House* that I felt like I understood the site for minimalism and the way that it could take the body out of time. *Dream House* does not operate on loops in the way most minimalist music from the 60's and 70's does; but it draws from the same tradition and has similar goals. A collaborative sound and light environment by La Monte Young and Marian Zazeela (1993), it is permanently installed on the third floor of a building on Church St. in New York. The light portion of the work by Zazeela consists of delicate calligraphic mobiles lit from each side with blue and red lights to form a magenta wash over the entire room. The mobiles drift with the ambient air currents in the space while the shadows they form on the walls take on dynamic hue and composition. The sound, created by four huge speaker stacks in the corners of the room is composed by Young and titled:

*The Base 9:7:4 Symmetry in Prime Time When Centered above and below The Lowest Term Primes in The Range 288 to 224 with The Addition of 279 and 261 in Which The Half of The Symmetric Division Mapped above and Including 288 Consists of The*

*Powers of 2 Multiplied by The Primes within The Ranges of 144 to 128, 72 to 64 and 36 to 32 Which Are Symmetrical to Those Primes in Lowest Terms in The Half of The Symmetric Division Mapped below and Including 224 within The Ranges 126 to 112, 63 to 56 and 31.5 to 28 with The Addition of 119, a periodic composite sound waveform environment created from sine wave components generated digitally in real time on a custom-designed Rayna interval synthesizer.*

The drones coming from the synthesizers appear constant and sometimes overwhelming upon entering *Dream House* but as you lie on the (by now somewhat filthy) carpet, you become aware of something else. What seemed a constant field is broken by your action and perception. Turning your head to the left or right produces wildly vacillating effects. It becomes possible to “compose” a piece of music simply by moving your body in relationship to the room.

*Honeymoons* operates on similar principles (and even borrows some of the magenta hues) as *Dream House*. As it is first experienced, its sights and sounds can be overwhelming; but as time is spent in the space they settle into a field of rotations and predictable patterns. Time is passing on the video screens but nothing is really happening. We are then left to “compose” the experience by moving our bodies through it, by settling ourselves in the breeze of a sculpture or with a view of a certain screen. What’s offered here is an escape from the simulations and loops driving *Honeymoons*. The tactile, olfactory and other sensual elements of the space ground us back into the

erotic, keep us aware of our bodies when we otherwise might be overwhelmed by simulation, displacement or basic representation.

The loops and repetitions in *Honeymoons* also relate to the relationship portrayed on the screens. There is something both idyllic and painful about the way time has stopped, a simultaneous desire for the safety of stasis and opportunities for change. Repetitions in a relationship form the basis of both our pathologies and our comforts, our repulsions and desires. They are how we come to know our partners and to know ourselves. We repeat domestic rituals, daily affirmations, gestures and touches, performing them almost as reassurance, a way of guaranteeing that what is here today may remain tomorrow, that all of our days will retain a constancy and, perhaps that the volatility of time passing can be buffered. The honeymoon is a time out of time. More than just a vacation, it is an idyll with purpose, a time to strengthen a bond and cement a beginning. Can the honeymoon be repeated, can it become multiple, indefinite, flow outside of time it's repetition endless? Would we want that? In the end the endless honeymoon would become a field like techno or *Dream House* or *The Green Ray*. It would become a meditation, a mantra. In the end the honeymoon would be over.

## PART 4

### IMPROVISATION

The Whitney Biennial of 2014 contained a piece by Miguel Gutierrez titled *Age and Beauty Part 1: Mid-Career Artist/ Suicide Note or \$:-/*. Tickets were offered while I was at the museum, and although I had no real interest in dance walking in, experiencing it unwittingly led me down a path toward the creation of *Honeymoons*.

Gutierrez says he makes “slow art: a space of contemplation for inconvenient, contradictory ideas.” *Age and Beauty* is largely a dance piece but like much of Gutierrez’ work, dives into the most compelling aspects of performance art, monologue, and cabaret to create an experience that feels at once unnerving and empowering. It’s difficult to tell where the action will go, the movements of the dancers simultaneously deadpan and sensual, the lighting flat and featureless until suddenly we are plunged into a hot pink world of club music. Mickey Mahar dances in duet with Gutierrez for the majority of the piece, his petite frame hidden by an oversized sports jersey forming an awkward juxtaposition to Gutierrez’ husky body stuffed into a pink leotard (swimsuit?) obviously designed for a female form. Their age disparity is immediately striking as well: Mahar is twenty years younger than Gutierrez. He’s pale with no body hair and there is disdain and fragility in his expression. He’s obviously the one with the power in the room despite the fact that we know he is being choreographed by Gutierrez: Mahar

will outlive him and they both know it. While they are having fun with each other, they're careful not to show it; and by the end you realize that they are navigating both generational differences and sexual battles. By the time the lights have gone pink and Gutierrez comes out to sing into a white microphone while bedecked in taffeta, we are exhausted by their interaction, by the real smell of their mingled sweat, by the weight of aging and reality of time.

Dance thrives on the interaction and generative potential of collaborative practices. Historically, dance is a social endeavor, an expression of the potential inherent in the interaction between multiple autonomous bodies. It has an implicit resistance to narcissism and machismo, the collaborative instinct softens the edges and invites more voices into the room. This sympathy for multiplicity extends toward the audience as well. Dance seems to be tuned to the needs and desires of the audiences it serves; and rather than relying on provocation as a default mode, it has the potential to use empathy and exaltation to greater effect. All of this adds up to the sort of ego dissolution, both for the performers and perhaps the audience, that brings the work of performance to a new level and something I rarely see in other contemporary forms. That dance is also frequently feminine or queer also sets the stage for radical potential. In Western visual culture the male ego is not eager for this dissolution, nor is it eager for the conditions of compromise necessary to create a true collaboration and draw out content and emotion that transcends itself.

Of course as Gutierrez is pointing out in *Age and Beauty*, dance is a form geared toward the young and even the most avant garde contemporary practices retain vestiges of virtuosity that can be barriers for entry to new converts approaching middle age such as myself. The summer after I saw *Age and Beauty*, I had the good fortune to spend more time with an acquaintance, Hana Van Der Kolk, as I was getting ready to enter graduate school. While I knew Hana was a dancer and choreographer, I really had no idea what her work was like until I was invited to a performance by her students at Marlboro College that fall. The piece was ecstatic and totally riveting for me: twenty college students changing into drag, talking to objects, grabbing audience members to give them simultaneous obscure monologues about phenomenology. What really struck me about the piece though was not the experience of the audience but that of the students. They were very obviously affected by their participation in the work. It showed on their faces, in their interactions, in the way they moved their bodies. Through the winter, I kept my budding interest in dance and movement active by injecting elements of it into my installation and video work and by starting to attend workshops and performances in the Pioneer Valley.

As school ended in May, Hana and I started to talk about working on a larger piece together. She had already initiated a collaboration with the dancer/choreographer Asher Woodworth and we all three met in July and decided to pursue the project together. Monthly weekend work sessions proved that we were all on the same page both conceptually and aesthetically and our brainstorming turned into a workable score that



incorporated elements of dance, theater, performance art, and spiritual practice. Since I had come into a project already in motion, my role was distinctly non-directorial. Rather than chafe against it, as I likely would have a year or two earlier, I found new satisfaction in watching the process unfold, interjecting content where it seemed needed and also stepping back to admire the work of the two director/choreographers. The world we built in those weekends was one where a certain kind of internal logic prevailed and decisions were made through moments of embodied improvisation and clear-headed conceptualization. The suggestions that were made (“Asher should be packed on ice!”, “I’ll clip that reading light to your head!”) drifted in and out of reason, their correctness only confirmed by our collective instinct. The Sade song I was to sing at the end of the piece was chosen by chance operation. This was the way of working I had been searching for, where the interaction between us blurred the lines of authorship and where I could step back and admire a result that felt much bigger than myself.

*Boring Angel* moves through a number of different phases and vignettes over a 50 minute performance: Monologue, solo, meditation, dialogue, duet, death and rebirth. The action feels both tightly scripted and chaotic, the characters moving in and out of gender roles and shifts in power dynamics. I realized during the audience talk back after the second performance that the role I ended up playing was a sort of loosely pathological version of myself. The area I had constructed for myself on the stage, above the action on the dance floor below, was a rough reconstruction of my studio practice at its worst and weirdest. All screens and blinking LED lights and a mid-

century vibrating recliner. I was a sort of ambiguous gender, trickster god consumed by a mild narcissism, who interacted with the softer world of experience by illuminating it toward my own ends. In the talk back, an audience member asked me why I shot Asher during the redemptive duet he and Hana were executing. She was truly dismayed that my character had taken it upon themselves to end the only connective moment in a piece riddled with what can come across as alienation. In the world we had created, that shot was necessary to rupture the trend toward facile harmony, to bring us back to the “inconvenient and contradictory”. My character then steals the show after having been further queered, the in-between spaces take center stage as Hana flails in a fit of groundlessness and Asher is packed on ice by my two backup dancers. There’s the kind of ambiguous redemption in this moment that somehow I’ve been carrying as a thread for so long; and how odd and surprising in the end to see it expressed this way. I know that this couldn’t have come to the surface working on my own and it’s strange and beautiful to discover a new way of speaking through others, a gentler way of talking to myself.

This instinct to move toward the body, toward sensation, toward groundlessness, also informed the making of *Honeymoons*. Previous to making *Boring Angel* my process had largely been deterministic. Frequently, an image would come to me, often while out running and I would sketch it out either in words or images before constructing it largely as it was originally conceived. The results of this sometimes felt confined or sterile, my tendency to tightly control things on display as much as the artworks. Working on

*Honeymoons* often felt like a battle between these two ways of creating, between the intuitive and the programmed. While I had found it easy to settle into a certain chaos while working in collaboration, it became harder to do with just myself in the room and I tended to slip back into old ways of making. Throughout the winter, as I worked on certain elements in the studio, it became obvious that *Honeymoons* could only be completed as an improvisation, that the elements would need to be arranged in space and on the fly in order to fully take form. By the end of its creation, the installation had started to take on some of the qualities of a dance including sculptures that swing slowly around performing a twirl reminiscent of Sufi dervishes.

## PART 5

### BOTH SIDES TOGETHER

Hana Van der Kolk's father, Bessel Van der Kolk, is a world famous trauma researcher, which I realized while leafing through his newest book on her coffee table one evening. *The Body Keeps the Score* is written for a popular audience and details the ways in which trauma is held in the body, something Hana assured me dancers had always known and that scientists were just acknowledging. After reading through most of it, I decided to pursue one of the outlined treatment modalities. For years I had been involved with traditional talk therapy trying to treat chronic PTSD from a fatal car accident I had been involved with fifteen years earlier. It always had glimmers of effect and I benefitted from my sessions but it never penetrated below the surface. EMDR<sup>3</sup> was different. After half a dozen introductory meetings, the therapist and I proceeded to re-live my memories of trauma using mildly hypnotic somatic sensations brought on by bi-lateral stimulation through vibration. During the second session I was overcome by visions of the car accident as I mentally re-enacted my actions on that night that left me filled with guilt and horror for most of my adult life. It was a powerful experience and it felt as though my interest in dance had brought me there, had initiated a curiosity and acceptance of embodied experience. We are composed mostly of pairs. Pairs of hands, pairs of legs, pairs of eyes, pairs of buttocks, nostrils, calves, and hips. Only a few

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<sup>3</sup> Eye Movement Desensitization and Reprocessing (EMDR) is a somatic therapy developed by Francine Shapiro that uses light, sound and vibration to treat post-traumatic stress disorder.

things have escaped this splitting, notably the genitals, the mouth and most of the organs of digestion. The brain is famously split into hemispheres and we are often in the habit of using colloquial anecdotes concerning left- or right-brained thinking. I don't pretend to know much about anatomy or physiology beyond the reach of my own skin but I do know that the integration of these hemispheres and lateral bits is essential to a properly working human organism, as is their differentiation. It is possible that bilateral stimulation is acting to integrate parts of the brain that had previously been sequestered. Before my work with EMDR, I could feel myself compartmentalizing those memories that were uncomfortable, viewing them with a clinical and wary eye as I tried to rationalize what to do with them. Afterward, they were still present muted and didn't need the same sort of containment; they could roam around in the light of day and operate however they needed to.

Memories can go rogue. It's hard to know what they are up to. Traumatic memories become black holes of thought into which actual experiences can fall. For many years there was a literal blank space in my memory whenever I envisioned certain images, certain spaces. I was absolutely convinced that these blank spaces were functioning in ways that I could not comprehend, that they had their own agency their own agenda, that at any moment they could take control and run roughshod over whatever marginal security I had built up. They seemed to function like dreams and maybe expressed themselves there, inscrutable holes with experience piled inside them. Those black holes had clearly defined borders. They were distinct and separate from the other spaces of

memory that contained some daylight. Maybe EMDR confused that separation, made it harder for the dark to remain obscure, let me see them and be with them again. I would like my work to accomplish some of this. Shining lights into those zones too dark or inscrutable to see into, neutralizing a threat by integrating it into a greater story.

Allowing us to sit with our past and to act rather than just witness.

Symmetries and bifurcations, along with their dissolution, seem to have crept into much of what I have been making since my work with EMDR. The final scene of *Boring Angel* is one in which a symmetrical stage is built from a variety of objects formerly scattered about the space or composing other structures. Lights flash side to side reminiscent of the action of EMDR. A body is constructed, its boundaries are dissolved. *Two Tense* contains an obvious split: the mylar tents form mirror images of themselves, joined at the head where a unified organ of sensation is represented as an obelisk made of salt. The loops and repetitions present in *Honeymoons*, while functioning in all of the ways previously discussed, can also be seen as representative of Sigmund Freud's concept of "repetition compulsion," in which a subject subconsciously repeats aspects of a previous trauma in order to attempt to gain control over the narrative but are ultimately re-traumatized. Temporal transitions in the work are marked by a back and forth play of lights on the sides of the stage, subtly guiding us periodically out of the timelessness of the continuous loops and the never ending sunset, out of the stasis and repetition of trauma.

**PART 6**  
**ARCHITECTURES**

I grew up in a house built by my parents as did many of my friends in rural Maine. There was no sense of history there, no sense of context. We were the first people to inhabit that house; and from my perspective we would probably be the last. Our home was a fresh and fully constructed reality grounded in the physicality of the house we lived in and the small patch of blueberry field that had been cultivated into a lawn and garden. The parameters of this world were closely defined by its creators; and it occurs to me that in many ways our home paralleled what Ilya Kabakov has termed a “total installation”<sup>4</sup>. Later in life I became a carpenter and was amazed at what even small changes in a living space could do to perception, to the felt experience of a room or house.

There is a pleasure in moving things around. I’ve found throughout my life that one of the easiest ways to effect a change of consciousness is to simply change the physical relationship of objects in a room in relationship to my body. There have been times in my life when the simple act of shifting the position of the bed in the place where I sleep has had a such a profound effect on my mood and general state of mind that I wonder what life was like before the change occurred. Shifting our consciousness through the

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<sup>4</sup> Kabakov, Ilya, Margarita Tupitsyn, and Victor Tupitsyn. "About Installation." *Art Journal* 58.4 (1999): 62. Web.

spaces we create is a constant reminder that the body is primary, that the distance I stand from an object or a wall or another body defines me in that moment. In a world of hyper-mediation where screens are becoming a default mode of interface, spatial awareness and intervention can act as a means of re-centering and grounding.

For these reasons, I find myself concerned with small changes in the relationship of objects to each other, to the room they inhabit, to the bodies that contemplate them. But bodies are always in motion and forms that are fixed in time and space quickly cease to accommodate them, demanding instead that the bodies of the human users or inhabitants become objects rather than subjects in relationship to the spaces they inhabit. It is important then that these relationships remain fluid, that these spaces form a flexible arrangement of forms inside the reified structures of the architecture. I tend to use common, found or disposable materials to accomplish some of this, to reinforce that the arrangement of things, though precise, has a precarity that constantly upsets its status as architecture.

At some point as a young person I found myself obsessively leafing through the 1973 book *Nomadic Furniture* that seemed like it was a staple on the bookshelves of back-to-the-landers in the 70's and 80's. The book contained designs for furniture that could be made quickly and cheaply from materials anywhere and then broken down to move again, facilitating what at the time seemed like a revolutionary lifestyle, one where the boundaries of one's life weren't defined by a historic conception of "home" or the



constraints of static architecture. The book contained designs for “Living Cubes”, delineations of space within space, each designed for a particular life function. An “Entertainment Cube”, a “Relaxation Cube” a “Sleep Cube”. These structures defined space within space in a flexible way, subverting the architecture in which they found themselves in order to establish zones that have different and perhaps more intentional relationships to the bodies they served. *Nomadic Furniture* became the basis for some IKEA products and an entire culture of disposable design feeding off the emerging economy of knowledge workers who had given up their affiliation with place based community to pursue provisional labor. Still, the original utopian inclination to subvert the stasis of architecture continues to hold a powerful draw for me.

Much of my installation works contain similar impulses to these “living cubes”: the formation of a soft architecture that must be entered into in order to be experienced. *Natural Light*, a collaboration with Hannah Patterson was an installation conceived of as a space to view a textural video piece; a way to lure an audience into a slower experience of media. The space of the piece formed a clearly delineated zone inside the gallery defined by pink foam flooring of the kind found in gyms or playrooms. The spatial relationship between the elements of the installation from the stone coffee table to the size of the screen were carefully considered in relation to the body of the viewer. Similarly, in the performance piece *For Flight* I defined an area of the floor and wall as a set by the simple use of a blue tarp that defined an imaginary three-dimensional space. I solicited money from passers by and asked them to tie it to a balloon that was then

ceremoniously released to the ceiling. The participants had to cross the threshold of the tarp as a small right of passage and enter into my nested architecture, becoming implicated not only in the performance action but in the volume of space I had created within the atrium of the Studio Arts Building. Even in *The Ladder*, a piece meant to be viewed more than entered, a kind of nested architecture was established by the extension cords hanging in arcs from the ceiling and creating a defined volume within the room.

Aspects of these works are responsive to some of the ideas of Gordon Matta-Clark and his *Anarchitecture* group, even as the strategies diverge. *Anarchitecture* (a conjoining of “anarchy” and “architecture”), though loosely defined, referred to various practices aimed at disrupting what the sculptor Richard Nonas called the “hard shell” of modernist architecture<sup>5</sup>. Nonas was referencing not only the literal material of buildings but also the stasis of culture enshrined in them. Matta-Clark famously enacted some of the amorphous theories of the Anarchitecture group in the 1970’s by cutting volumes of space through buildings (sometimes illegally), disrupting the “hard shell” through a graceful act of breakage and rupture. I seek largely the same ends only by defining space *within* an existing structure rather than *through* it.

In addition to the use of disposable and found materials I’ve begun to see screens as a part of this strategy of arranging space inside installations. Many of my videos tend to

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<sup>5</sup> Matta-Clark, Gordon, and Elisabeth Sussman. *Gordon Matta-Clark: you are the measure* ;. New York, NY: Whitney Museum of American Art, n.d. Print. p. 103

be textural or atmospheric rather than narrative, long static shots of scenes slowly progressing through time. There is usually already an architecture present within the videos, a clearly defined interior space that nests in the space of an installation, but only after consideration has been given to its scale and its relationship to the body of the viewer. Treating these video screens as sculptural objects rather than as discrete windows in space upends some of the conventions of contemporary moving images. Videos have become inherently portable, more accessible on your phone than they are in a cinema, mere content rather than embodied experience. When we can see any content we like, *anywhere* we like, all space begins to slide into uniformity; there is no reason to *be* much of anywhere. This also has the effect of neutralizing the body as an integral part of experience. If the scale and position of the video in relationship to *me* is no longer relevant, it could be easy to forget that a fully embodied experience is one in which affect matters, in which felt presence is a quality worthy of integration into our lives. In the absence of these things it seems as though empathy may be an impossibility or at least forgotten as we move toward a bland dismissal of both the specificity of place and the unique and ineffable qualities of human bodies.

When video is specific to a context and a form such as in *Natural Light* and *Honeymoons*, the viewer is brought back into a relationship not only with their own body but with the room in which they find themselves. The size of the screen in relationship to the viewer is important here, so important that I've taken to clearly defining areas of seating or viewing. In *Natural Lite*, the figures on the screen are in

rough proportional symmetry to the bodies of the viewers clustered around the stone table, drawing them into a greater intimacy and sympathy with the bodies on the video. All of these strategies take cues from the work of Pipilotti Rist, who creates immersive video installations often positioned in corners or on floors or ceilings, taking advantage of the architecture of a space to highlight the vibrant and erotic content of the work by placing the body of the viewer in direct relationship to it. Rist also has a fondness for dictating a position for viewing the works often placing pillows, bean bags or beds in the area she's decided to be an optimal position for the experience.

*Honeymoons* works in a similar vein, the scales, heights and positions of the various images are considered as objects that can be approached and contemplated, subtly danced with, rather than simply viewed. The effect of all of these subtle interventions into the way in which videos are viewed removes them from the stream of ubiquitous information and transforms them into objects of contemplation with roughly the same character as other objects arranged in space. They become an architecture inside an architecture inside an architecture, a means of further breaking the hard shell, not just of the material of space but of the ways moving pictures have come to be experienced.

**PART 7**  
**ANIMATION**

When I was a child, it is easy to experience the world around me in conversation, as a bouncing, jostling party where all of the parts contributed to the song I heard everyday. As I got older, emotional attachment to material became a liability, a way to become ensnared and fallible, yet another vector for punishment at the hands of those who had maybe never felt the world as enchanted or had been shamed out of it much earlier.

Children's stories are often stories of matter maintaining sentience or of the rediscovery of its basic character and depth of feeling. The rejection of these qualities has become one of the only rights of passage we have left into adulthood and also into modernity. To become an adult means to view the world of matter as a series of discrete commodities.

What would the world look like if we were able to maintain our empathy for things? To again see the world of non-human entities as full of co-conspirators, lovers, fighters, pieces of songs and stories? Jane Bennett wrestles with these questions in her book *Vibrant Matter* in which she proposes a new (or perhaps ancient) relationship to the material world where a reverence for matter works to create a materialism not centered on consumption as the sole relationship available between the human and the non human:

*If matter itself is lively then not only is the difference between subject and object*

*minimized but the status of the shared materiality of all things is elevated. All bodies become more than mere objects, as the thing-powers of resistance and protean agency are brought into sharper relief. Vital materialism would thus set up a kind of safety net for those humans who are now, in a world where Kantian morality is the standard, routinely made to suffer because they do not conform to a particular (Euro-American, bourgeois, theocentric, or other) model of personhood. The ethical aim becomes to distribute value more generously, to bodies as such. Such a newfound attentiveness to matter and its powers will not solve the problem of human exploitation or oppression but it can inspire a greater sense of the extent to which all bodies are kin in the sense of inextricably enmeshed in a dense network of relations. And in a knotted world of vibrant matter, to harm one section of the web may be very well to harm oneself.<sup>6</sup>*

Bennett, and other theorists of Object Oriented Ontology (OOO) seem to be reviving earlier concepts and theologies that describe the universe as being interconnected and interdependent but arriving there through a critique of Kant by way of Bruno Latour rather than some other lineage which could have provided parallel conclusions. The origins of the English word *empathy* lie in the 19th century German concept of *Einfühlung* coined by Friedrich Theodor Vischer to describe the *magical* as a form of representation where the symbol and symbolized can not be distinguished. For Vischer, this way of perceiving the world was an attribute of all archaic or pre-modern culture

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<sup>6</sup> Bennett, Jane. *Vibrant matter: a political ecology of things*. Durham: Duke U Press, 2010. Print. p. 13

where logic had not yet separated the human from the non-human. His son Robert further developed *Einfühlung* to include a theory of art predicated on the “mutual experience of exchange between the body and the perceived object”<sup>7</sup>. Of course all of this is still an overly complicated means of arriving back at the mythological, a world in which plants sing and the sky has a name. It is likely that these thinkers are using the white, western, imperial tradition to arrive at the conclusions of indigenous cultures while subverting or ignoring the persistent ways of life that have always had at their core a respect for “lively matter”. As indigenous scholar Zoe Todd notes:

*It is so important to think, deeply, about how the Ontological Turn—with its breathless ‘realisations’ that animals, the climate, water, ‘atmospheres’ and non-human presences like ancestors and spirits are sentient and possess agency, that ‘nature’ and ‘culture’, ‘human’ and ‘animal’ may not be so separate after all—is itself perpetuating the exploitation of Indigenous peoples. To paraphrase a colleague I deeply admire, Caleb Behn: first they came for the land, the water, the wood, the furs, bodies, the gold. Now, they come armed with consent forms and feeble promises of collaboration and take our laws, our stories, our philosophies.*<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Nowak, Magdalena. "The Complicated History of *Einfühlung*." *Argument* 1.2 (2011): 301-26. Web. p. 304

<sup>8</sup> Todd, Zoe. "An Indigenous Feminist's take on the Ontological Turn: 'ontology' is just another word for colonialism (Urbane Adventurer: Amiskwacî)." *Uma (in)certa antropologia*. N.p., 26 Oct. 2014. Web. 12 Apr. 2017.

It's with some trepidation then that I take up these ideas at all: the world is replete with narratives both infantilizing and lauding the indigenous world view and I hope I don't fall into either trap. Still an urge to re-enchant the material world lies at the heart of much of my work. In the first month after I arrived at graduate school, a beam of light came through the window of my basement studio illuminating the top of an empty wire rack shelf and reflecting onto the wall in an entirely unexpected and beautiful way; a distinct pattern of light with its own weight and personality persisted only until the sunlight faded. These moments of everyday enchantment, where the conversations of the material are the most loudly heard, can become the best beginnings. I took the shelf and attached it to a long chain on a disco ball motor so it floated close to the floor with four long streamers of silver tinsel splayed out along the floor like flaccid legs. The shelf was lit from a similar angle as that evening in the studio with a theatrical spotlight. As the motor turned, tension built up on the chain and the shelf began to inch hesitantly around as if preparing. After long moments of hesitation, the tension released and it started to spin gracefully, winding up the tinsel streamers into a tight ball below as it settled into a steady rotation. I watched this moment of grace and release over and over again on the video documentation I had made of the project trying to figure out why it compelled me so deeply. Certainly matter had been enchanted here, had stepped over the boundaries of utility into a space where the shelf was a performer, a participant in a greater story. What started as a sketch seemed to end up a fully formed idea and I titled the piece "Bound 2" after the Kanye West song of the same name but more as an homage to the video in which West and Kim Kardashian ride a motorcycle through a



series of idealized landscapes superimposed in the background. At the time I wasn't entirely sure why I had chosen the title but with time the relationship between the works seems clearer. Kim and Kanye have been objectified as media figures and then worked backward to re-enchant the matter of their own bodies through their unapologetic embrace of the romantic. My *Bound 2* attempted to do the same thing with the shelf by placing it in a performative context reviving its material.

All of this talk of interconnection and animation of the material takes on other sorts of layered meanings in a world of material just beginning to be networked into a constant state of frenzied production and centralization. The Internet of Things, a concept first coined in 1985, is an attempt to describe the increasing connection and networking of physical objects into a vast conglomeration of matter with a different kind of vibrancy. In 1983, the first networked object was put online at Carnegie Mellon University, a coke machine able to remotely report on its stock and temperature. Since then the attempt to add basic kinds of logic and connectivity to physical objects has been slow to reach a crescendo but seems to be ramping up dramatically in the past five years amidst all sorts of concerns, primarily about the lack of security inherent in these networked thermostats, alarm clocks, refrigerators, automobiles and toothbrushes. This is a kind of intelligence that is different from that which is discussed by Bennett and indigenous scholars, the process of objects being placed further into a web of production rather than spirit. They are becoming rational actors and tools rather than co-conspirators, and while this may seem like a natural extension of their use value (especially for objects

made by human hands toward specific ends) it is the kind of intelligence that could end up subverting their ability to become agents of the ineffable or unknowable.

There is a certain anxiety here, all bound up in the world of matter becoming a machine rather than a muse, of the arc of history tending toward the commodification and assimilation of all attributes of matter into a productive capacity. It seems important then to give these things back some of their “thing power” in what might be blunt and simple ways. The artist Mark Leckey attempts to do this in a number of ways particularly where he literally gives voice to the inner lives of appliances and other works of art in pieces like *GreenScreenRegrigerator* or his curated show *The Universal Addressability of Dumb Things* where works of art are placed into conversation with each other in front of a green screen and on green pedestals. Leckey has quoted Walter Pater in saying that art should “aspire to the condition of music”<sup>9</sup>, meaning perhaps, to the affective, the ineffable and maybe the unintelligible. Sarah Sze also attempts a form of animation of objects through very different tactics. Her installations combine anonymous utilitarian objects into intricate compositions tailored to each room largely through the process of meticulous arrangement and layering of forms. The revivification of these objects is accomplished by highlighting their subtle relationships to each other and their re-entry into the world of form rather than function.

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<sup>9</sup> Haus Der Kunst. *YouTube*. YouTube, 24 Feb. 2015. Web. 01 Mar. 2017. <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ISuwkvoJCZI&t=212s>>. 12:18

*The Ladder*, a piece I completed in the spring of 2016, was a combination of these strategies, animating objects in a literal sense with an eye toward placing them in relationship with one another in space. The piece was a music video in the round composed of simple found objects, some of them “characters” who came from *Boring Angel*. The Prince song “The Ladder” served as the soundtrack broadcast through several FM radios hanging from the ceiling by their own cords while a six foot step ladder rotated over a box fan all adorned with a variety of simple theater lights. The action was provided by rotation of the ladder, the blowing of the fan, and the tight synchronization of the lights to the music similar to a stage show or animatronic display. Again the objects became performers in their own drama, their enchantment literalized almost as simply and dumbly as the inclusion of the object of the song title in the principal role. It was these things I had come to appreciate about pop music generally, it’s unabashed straightforwardness, the almost reductive quality of the lyrics and tone, the way it could provoke a memory or emotion almost by the press of a button. This all had started to seem an asset in a mediated world composed of post-truths and layered innuendo. During a critique of the piece the question came up as to why I included the ladder as the central actor. The answer I gave in a haze of exhaustion still seems apt: “Because it’s in the title of the song”.

Echoes of these pieces show up in *Honeymoons* not simply in the re-use of some of the “actors” (a ladder, a wire rack shelf) but in the strategies for animating them, the care given to their movements. The fans that turn the three sculptures are accomplishing a

kind of superfluous labor, contributing to a dance rather than actuating their intended purposes of cooling and ventilating. In this way maybe their matter has become more vibrant, their “thing power” more obvious. They are artists rather than technicians, actors in a play rather than workers, performing themselves the best way they know how. They are returning to a vibrant state of matter even as they forever turn in space.

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**PHOTO OF THE ARTIST AT WORK**

