

Mind the Gap

by Joy James

Since at least the middle of the nineteenth century, modern art and philosophy have grappled with an understanding of the world in binary terms. Technology has been intrinsic to troubling these philosophical assumptions. Nowhere was this more evident than in the advent of early technological imaging systems. Photography, for example, was from its beginnings plagued by the inability to limit and contain extravagant proliferations of meaning. One of the difficulties the photograph presented was that it irrevocably eroded the boundaries between perceiving subject and the object of its attention. This lack of boundary with the photograph has been recently remarked on by W.J.T. Mitchell in his book **What Do Pictures Want? The Lives and Loves of Images** (2005). He suggests that if we have any doubt regarding the ongoing power of the medium, we take a photograph of our mother and cut the eyes out. He is, of course, relying on affect in proposing this exercise. In part, the affective power of photographs was and continues to be significant precisely because it focuses attention on the lack of a clear distinction between subject and object. The challenge this focus posed for the Western art historical project was that once the subject/object split comes under scrutiny representation no longer works to anchor meaning.

Currently, philosophical and theoretical work on the ruin of representation is taking place in the interstices of art, science and technology. For several decades now, these shared topographical spaces have received a great deal of attention not only from theorists and scientists, but also from those responsible for State policy and law, as they are forced to confront situations in which emerging technologies have outpaced our ability to understand their impact on human subjectivity, identity, and social relations. Technology is moving more quickly than we are able to comprehend its effects both individually and collectively. Artists have taken up the challenge. This entails a fundamental shift away from representation into what can best be described as the activation of an aesthetic of immanence. If the world can be said to be subject to a continuous process of force into form, then an aesthetic of immanence resonates to this dispersal that is simultaneously a becoming.

My essay is organized around a series of intensities formed by a focus on the synchronous dispersals and becomings generated by Reva Stone's 2006 installation, **Imaginal Expression**, and Rebecca Belmore's 2002 performance, **Vigil**. In both of these works the activation of an aesthetic of immanence depends on a correspondence between an art viewing situation and a life situation [1]. While Stone's installation involves a direct engagement with new bio-imaging technologies, Belmore's performance only indirectly, though no less powerfully, calls up relationships of art to science and technology. Here, I am primarily concerned with the affective capacities of the art and what these capacities tell us about exchanges between art's objects and the conditions of embodied existence.

Friedrich Nietzsche's concept of "becoming," hinges on notions of immanence. The concept of becoming is particularly relevant to twenty-first century imaginings because it recasts our understanding of the virtual and

the actual. Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, took up Nietzsche's work on duration and multiplicity to shift common meanings associated with the virtual and the actual, and to undo the authority of static notions of embodiment: "The present is what we are and, for that reason, what we are already ceasing to be; the actual is not what we are but rather, what we are becoming...the actual is the formation of the new" [2]. Becoming is immanence.

The potential I am suggesting for the work under consideration here is that it figures a moment when the world folds in on itself and produces something outside existing codes, a becoming not yet captured within articulated form. This approach to an investigation of the specificity of Stone's and Belmore's work can be used to think more widely about how the current flow of technological imaging systems across science, art and everyday lived experience, is involved in changing definitions of what it means to be human. The actuality of Foucault's assertion—that Man is a recent invention and would be, as conditions of thought changed, erased like a face drawn in the sand at the edge of the sea—is surely already upon us [3]. The questions regarding what shape this new being is taking can be usefully embraced to rethink the human in relation to the "dispersive anatomies" theme of this special issue of Leonardo.

The Affective Turn

Recently, conceptualization of the affective fact has entered discourse as a way of talking about areas of human knowledge not adequately addressed in contemporary critical theory. These include feelings, emotions, and intuition [4]. In the context of this essay, the concept of the affective fact is an important idea because it shows how empirical knowledge has been increasingly challenged. Phenomena such as the proliferation of the singularity and diversity of people's stories (always at odds with some aspect of hegemonic knowledge, institutional practice and the historical record), the contestation of the objectivity of science, and the constantly demonstrated fallibility of systems of law and justice, represent some of the types of dispersal that challenge and erode belief in the empirical fact, and in what previously may have passed authoritatively as "Truth." As well, technology, in its muddying of the boundaries between subject and object, me and not me, organism and machine, has contributed greatly to these processes of erosion. The result is an experiential gap between these two orders of fact, affective and empirical.

This is where the work of Stone and Belmore functions. The relation of the art to this experiential gap is to occupy and activate, to be in attendance to this place that cannot be specifically located anywhere, minding and attending to, become tending. The work actively engages in this careful delineation of space. The effect is a contradiction in terms, really, because the gap is precisely a space that cannot, by definition, be delineated. It is uncategorizable because too much is involved, too much is at stake. Nothing sits still long enough for the nature of the space to be determined. The gap is at best a non-space or non-place, a shifting terrain, an aporia. It is this ambiguity, the undecideability of the gap, that is its usefulness and what makes it a dynamic territory to occupy. Both of the artists' works that I discuss here create, out of the gap, temporary autonomous zones that resist colonization by hegemonic forces. So then, the work of the art, as I will be discussing it, is not so much about critique as it is activation of this gap between force and the form it will take. As such, the work is concerned with an aesthetic of immanence. What is important in both of these pieces is the *emergent affect*. And this affect is not subject to colonization. It evades ownership by anyone. It is not property in the sense that it can be successfully claimed by the hegemonic order or by any one constituency or special interest

group. It is multiple, diverse, and fluid, because it is constituted in the responsive embodied knowledge of the singularity of the viewer. The durational aspect of these works is significant in how affect is generated. The time it takes to experience the work implicates the viewer, her body and its senses, in particular ways that make it difficult to fix the effect of the work, and instead open it to singular encounters.

There is much more to say about these works by Stone and Belmore than the current space allows, so in each case I am going to concentrate on sketching out the territory of the gap referred to in the title of my essay. In each work, the gap that trips the viewer to attention and opens the way for the installation of a temporary autonomous zone, is the physical reaction or affect activated in the imaginary evocation of inside and outside in relation to the terms of embodiment.

Show and Tell

Reva Stone's installation exhibition **Imaginal Expression** at the Surrey Art Gallery immersed the viewer in a responsive sensory environment consisting of a continuous flow of images across a 48 x 9 foot span of gallery wall [5]. The enormous images adapted from the arsenal of bio-science's technological rendering systems, were animated by interactions between viewers and the work's computer program. Stone describes the process on her website:

When the visitor enters the gallery space, a large, constantly moving "soup" of molecular components is seen projected on the wall. Real time animation based on inverse kinematic physics causes this motion to constantly change with no repetition. As the visitor is sensed in the gallery space some of the components begin to coalesce into a complete molecule that follows the movement of the visitor. This response is initiated by a computer visioning system that was developed as part of the software. In addition to responding to the movement of a viewer, a molecule also has the capability to exchange its fleshy covering with another molecule when the motion or more than one viewer brings them into proximity with each other. When a visitor leaves the space, that molecule will degenerate over time. As a result, the visitor participates in a continuous cycle of generation, mutation and dissolution [6].

The affective importance of the fleshy covering that Stone refers to is what I will explore further. But first I want to say a little about the familiarity that viewers bring with them into the gallery space regarding contemporary bio-technological imaging systems. This familiarity is propagated not just by "serious" news reporting on the latest breakthroughs and controversies of biological science. What is probably more significant in creating this kind of pseudo-literacy is the litany of popular television shows that work off these new imaging technologies. Programs such as **Bones**, **House**, and **CSI (Crime Scene Investigation)* use this kind of imaging to establish an authoritative view of scientific knowledge. The level of significance such views have achieved is indicated in the recent introduction into discourse of the "CSI Effect." This was the topic of a national academic and professional conference of forensic specialists held in Halifax, Nova Scotia, in February of 2006. Shows such as **CSI** are radically changing actual courtroom practices. Not only is it the case that jurors are placing more importance on forensic evidence such as DNA typing, than on eye-witness testimony, and policing work must adjust to this change, but lawyers, when interviewing prospective jurors are choosing those people who are familiar with these shows, because they feel their superior understanding of biotechnology—learned from these television programs—allows such jurors to more readily

identify weaknesses in the prosecution's case. It is this familiar visual language that is activated for viewers when they enter Stone's exhibition. Over and above the importance of this to Stone's piece, which is significant, this activation process provides an example of the prevalence and pervasiveness of the exchanges, translations, and transactions between popular culture and State policies and practices.

It is within this familiar visual context that Stone is able to disrupt and redirect her audiences' attention. She takes the highly abstract though immediately recognizable images of molecules and coats them with tactile, equally recognizable but discordant images of the surfaces of her own body: hair, nails, and skin (sometimes bruised and scarred). In so doing she reworks for her viewers, the inside/outside relation of the body both seen and imagined. The highly unsettling effect produced is dependent on the experiential gap that the viewer falls into when they are unable to make inside and outside cohere. The effect depends on the sense of radical dislocation enacted when embodied knowledge is contravened. While the viewer is aware of the factual certainty associated with the empirical knowledge of science, the uneasiness of the experience introduces doubt as a kind of ground. This embodied doubt infects the assumption of scientific certainty in a reversal of Descartes' emphasis on the intellect.

This is precisely the gap that installation artist Ann Hamilton wrote about experiencing (though not naming it as such, and not referring to, in Hamilton's case, the highly technologized gap that Stone evokes) when she was working with taxidermists to prepare for her show **Between Taxonomy and Communion** [7]. In an interview, Hamilton spoke about the effect of tampering with the geography of inside/outside when it comes to bodies:

When I'd go to the taxidermists and see the inside and the outside of an animal simultaneously, I felt nauseous. If it were just the outside or just the inside even if it were dead, the sickly feeling wouldn't arise. But it's when those things are crossed that there is a physical reaction (64).

The gap occasioned in Stone's **Imaginal Expression**, then, produces a kind of violence against embodiment that stops the viewer from being seduced into a complacent and appreciative acceptance of the work. At the level of the body the uneasiness of the gap is palpable and persistent and interferes with the viewer achieving any sense of closure or certainty concerning either the content of the work or the integrity of the body viewing the work. The body is disbursed across a wide experiential field, covering a distance from the highly abstracted molecular model of the genesis of life, through to the messy and dangerous conditions of material existence that allow us to witness the scarred and wounded tissue of the body's outer perimeters. The viewer is left in an open-ended space of contemplation. From this place, bio-science's innovations regarding knowledge of the body are considered in the context of what the body knows: the body constituted here is the dispersed and simultaneously becoming body, the body in the throes of imag(in)ing itself otherwise. When the advances of science are brought into proximity with the body's discomfort in this way, it has the effect of creating a temporary autonomous zone where there is the potential for viewers to sidestep received knowledge about the questions implied in the work and be turned back on the authority of their own history of experiences and understandings of the world.

While Stone's **Imaginal Expression** concentrates on an imaginary dispersal of the body's anatomies, Belmore's **Vigil** reinstates the fundamental integrity of the body after it has been forcibly dispersed. As I write these words the Canadian media is reporting that the trial of Robert William Pickton will probably be completed within the next three weeks. Pickton has been charged with the murders of dozens of women who have gone missing from Vancouver's Downtown East Side over a period of two decades. Almost all of the women were sex trade workers and almost all of the women were of First Nations descent. Families and friends of the women, alongside community activists tried for years to get the police to take the disappearances seriously and begin an investigation. The trial started on January 30th, 2006, more than twenty years after the first of the women went missing. Rebecca Belmore's **Vigil** is a response to this ongoing trauma, the investigation and reporting of which spanned several years previous to the onset of the trial. In my work on this event the art object represents one area of inquiry located within an expanded field determined by the multiple competing forces involved in the case. Much has already been written about this trial, the events leading up to it, and the ethical concerns framing any response to it [8].

A fundamental question in my own work has been one of approach. How can we "think" the disaster when rational models of thought fail utterly? How can we approach that which must but cannot be addressed? How can we counter sensationalizing events already made spectacle by the media? How can we speak and show other than this?

When the trial began an incredible fascination with the forensic imagination seemed to hold the media and its publics hostage. Night after night television news programs provided warnings for the feint-hearted among their viewers, about the graphic quality of what was to come. Night after night people pressed the off button on the remote to vanquish the feared images and words. But the afterimages, if only anticipatory in nature, were not so easily switched off. The strength of these images was drawn from the fact that the forensic frame of reference in the reporting of this case entailed a special kind of violence against the terms of embodiment. The afterimages produced a kind of "affective" fact that worked against the litany of empirical facts conveyed to television audiences. The affective facts stood against the empirical facts in shaping peoples' reaction to their experience of the event.

Vigil was a half-hour long performance enacted on June 23, 2002, at the corner of two streets known to be an abduction site. The video of this event became part of Belmore's touring exhibition, **The Named and the Unnamed**, and was shown at the Morris and Helen Belkin Gallery in Vancouver, British Columbia, at the end of 2002 [9]. In reflecting on the work, Belmore speaks about the ability of words to shape experience and says that **Vigil** was conceived out of a need to find a way to "speak the unspeakable" [10]. Belmore uses her body to do the speaking. Through a series of forceful affective actions she names the missing women, adopting a strategy that allows her to acknowledge and to attend to women sentenced to the outside of recognition, to the outside of the protection of the law, women relegated to the barest of lives. She scrawls the names of the missing women across her body. Words written on flesh. She raises her voice and calls out the names. Words screamed, names of women absent into presence. Then, the mouth, from which voice emerges, through which sustenance is taken, is momentarily rendered speechless, and becomes an orifice that is violated, violenced with ripping flesh thorns of a rose, as Belmore deflowers a long-stemmed red rose through clenched teeth. Words silenced in ripping bare the rose. A rose by any other name... a rose longstanding Western symbol of love. These actions are repeated again and again as names escape into the ether, names as

ephemeral as lives gone missing. The intensely singular nature of the naming process is powerful in eliciting an emotive response from the viewer that is similarly singular in nature.

The violence against embodiment noted above in relation to Stone's piece, is called up again in Belmore's **Vigil**, but is put to work differently. This time it has something to do with the clinical objectivity of analysis afforded by biotechnologies used in the investigation, and the tendency of this scientific frame to create distance, sanitize, or otherwise drain the horror of the situation. But it also involves a failure of recognition of the terms of embodiment in that even though these findings operated at the level of closure - of purportedly bringing certainty - they also, simultaneously, served to activate further unsettling dispersals. Forensics is such a literal interpretation of the adage that memory and trauma are held in the body, that the body remembers. In media reports the underlying assumption of scientific objectivity in the presentation of biotech evidence, clashed with the visceral cataloguing of various body parts found. Reports of DNA analysis providing the identity of victims were mixed haphazardly with references to heads, hands, and feet. In this case, the sickening produced from this simultaneous presentation of inside and outside of mixing the abstracted model of DNA identification with the shards of bone and tangles of hair that enabled identification was dangerous because it precluded people being able to stay the course and provide witness to what had happened. The violence to embodiment that the inside/outside mix occasioned dropped people into a gap that was more like a black hole, and pushed them to vacate their bodies, turn away from and flee the unthinkable, the unimaginable. Belmore's **Vigil** functions in precisely this place. Without ever actually referencing the media and forensic context within which, for its viewers, the piece was situated, *Vigil* brings viewers back into an integrated embodied experience and the possibility of providing witness.

The concept of representation is no longer equal to twenty first century understandings of the function and potential of images. The complicated lives of the proliferation of images both seen and imagined in Stone's and Belmore's works and in the contexts out of which these works emerged, are constitutive of subjectivities. At the beginning of this essay I referred to Mitchell's anecdote about the continuing power of the photograph. Regimes of the image involved in new technological imaging systems are, like the photograph, constitutive rather than representative, they participate in the multiple singular becomings and dispersals swarming around definitions of what it means to be human and the effects of these definitions on actual bodies. The affective power of **Imaginal Expression** and **Vigil** engages an aesthetic of immanence able to meet emerging imaging technologies on their own ground. Each work takes advantage of duration and the terms of embodiment to make itself felt in the gap between emergent forces and the form they will take.

References

[1] Roger Buergel and Ruth Noack, artistic directors of the documenta 12, spoke at the Vancouver Art Gallery in November 2005 about their attempt to shape the exhibition entirely around notions of "a corporeal correspondence between a life situation and experience, and an art-viewing situation or experience" and the potential for this correspondence to "activate an artwork." I agreed with them on the potentiality of these circumstances to activate an artwork, but differed with their understanding of the way such an event brought a public into being. I have pursued these ideas in a book length manuscript currently in progress. I am indebted to Buergel and Noack for the intellectual engagement they stimulated on two separate occasions in Vancouver, and for their practice of these ideas in the execution of documenta 12.

- [2] Deleuze, Gilles and Felix Guattari. **What is Philosophy?** Trans. Hugh Tomlinson and Graham Burchel. (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994) p.112
- [3] Foucault, Michel. **The Order of Things** (London, New York: Routledge, 2002)
p.422
- [4] Brian Massumi's work has been important for my own. His introductory essay in **A Shock to Thought**, and his essay "The Future Birth of the Affective Fact," are particularly relevant for my formulation of how Stone and Belmore operate within an aesthetic of immanence.
- [5] Video and still images, and exhibition information on Stone's installation can be found on the Surrey Art Gallery website: <<http://www.surrey.ca/Living+in+Surrey/Arts/Surrey+Art+Gallery/default.htm>>
- [6] Artist's statement, 2004, <www.revastone.ca/imaginal_as.php> Accessed April 18, 2007.
- [7] See the exhibition catalogue **Ann Hamilton** (San Diego: Museum of Contemporary Art, 1991) p64
- [8] The most recent publication regarding the events surrounding Pickton's trial is a collection of essays in **West Coast Line**. This edition provides a number of viewpoints on the Vancouver trauma and the larger context in which it can be read. With many references to the wider discourse the text is also a useful starting point for readers not familiar with these events.
- [9] It is beyond the scope of this essay to address the specifics of the gallery installation as distinct from the performance, or the limitations and opportunities that may have accompanied the gallery context. I address these ideas in manuscript currently in progress. See exhibition catalogue **Rebecca Belmore: The Named and the Unnamed** for a fuller description of the elements of the performance.
- [10] **Rebecca Belmore: The Named and the Unnamed** p18

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- "Representations of Murdered and Missing Women," **West Coast Line** 53 vol 41 no 1, (Spring 2007)