

The Reproduction of Certain Scenes

by Matt Morris

Last summer I was on a bus in Chicago, one of the busy east-west buses, often packed with bodies. People had been talking about ‘manspreading’ a great deal: that tendency among some male identified passengers of public transportation to sit with their knees far apart, taking up two or even three seats on trains and buses. Self conscious about latent signals of male privilege, I usually keep my knees touching. And so I was doing on this day, with my bag in my lap and my arms folded over it. My seatmate disembarked, and the bus idled as a long line of folks boarded. I wasn’t looking up when I felt the pressure of someone sit down beside me. A woman was pressed against me, overwhelming the space that defines one seat in the design of Chicago’s buses.

I was impressed by her and contemplative of the inversion here proposed along lines of materialist gender politics, how some men are electing to define their choice to take up too much space with a leg-framed lacuna—that’s funny, right? Meanwhile, here was this monumental figure positioned so that she vividly drew attention to the strictures of modern life. As the rolls of her body piled over my right arm and even onto my lap, a force was transmitted that took aim at the compulsory regulative forces that maintain social taxonomies, and further presume the shape (and somehow also the substance) of we who occupy the spaces they designate. She was living theory, an affront to a culture that hierarchicalizes ideals over the stuff that comprises one’s life, one’s body. Her size and girth and physicality valid insofar as they are material facts: I was in awe of how her very matter was positioned to matter.

But my own treatment of this experience also prioritizes an ideal, one for social transformation and personal courage. To describe our bus ride only as I’ve done above is to omit her trembles. She held her bottom lip in, and she was sweating. Her left arm and thigh and lips trembled. I pretended not to notice her glances over at me across the tops of her cheeks and rounded shoulders, wary of possible punitive measures with which I might react to her. And if her appearance beside me inspired political thought, so too did the disjuncture in our affects—hers and mine—and our bodies—hers and mine. For all of our fat, what were we both holding in, and why? My impulse to speak reassurance that I was not offended by our physical contact, but in fact excited by the possibility of her relationship to public space couldn’t be expressed; I felt a fragility between us, a heightened risk of misunderstanding, something disorderly in how I felt we might be aware of each other in ways we hadn’t elected to share.

If it’s hilarious and deadly predictable that men would assert themselves by stretching around their own personal void space in our shared train cars, the rub of my encounter with this woman is precisely how excess characterizes the shape of the unexpressed. If that sounds contradictory, welcome to life reported from the streets and homes, boudoirs, classrooms, and gallery spaces of global capitalism. Patriarchy manspreads, and seeming paradoxes are compressed across forms of otherness—minor no matter their stature. Within this anecdote are all the key components to wrestle with the complex ways interiors, exteriors, and the fleshy thresholds between them might be disrupted in wildly resistant ways.

Laura Davis’ installations, sculptures, and drawings combine objects into objections—upset histories and decorous environments tipping toward destruction. The pathways

taken by her remembering are darkly realistic in how she portrays the subject as embedded as much in shopping districts as her own diaries. Her assemblages mark out sharply the cultural sites in which a self appears as too much, is cut apart, and alienated from herself. Recollected and regulated, Davis' use of collage is the same tool used for social engineering, an enterprise that always cowers then acts out violently toward women and toward the psychological excesses that elude definition often attributed to the feminine. Davis cuts up to understand what was cut previously, especially thoughtful about what was cut out entirely. Hers is a project that might be described with Catherine Clément's objective in *The Newly Born Woman*, "Somewhere every culture has an imaginary zone for what it excludes, and it is that zone we must try to remember *today*."¹

One such obliteration is the term *jouissance*, which usually goes untranslated in English texts and is stricken from how we even conceptualize psychic life. Related to pleasure, especially women's pleasure, especially women's capacity for multiple orgasms, Cixous and Clément describe it as "something more than Total, something extra—abundance and waste (a cultural throwaway), Real and unrepresentable... a word with *simultaneously* sexual, political, and economic overtones."² Wildly untamed passions, wanting too much, deep loving, overwhelming attractive energies, an alternative pace to the mechanisms of modern life. At once exceeding capacity and forcefully excluded, *jouissance* was the potential being insinuated by my seatmate and me. Likewise, it is the troubled tensions around *jouissance* upon which Davis works.

Cixous and Clément maintain the incompatibility between *jouissance* and patriarchy, the latter being the brute force by which the former is regularly excised from culture. So what remains in its stead? What transformation does it undergo to be somehow sensible? *Jouissance* repressed manifests as hysteria. Misread, shamed, conditioned for punishment, contained: hysteria is a category constructed by men to Other, and potentially a means of return—a roundabout excursion that finds the surrounding culture altered by its absence then presence. Says Cixous, "They, the feminine ones, are coming back from far away, from forever, from 'outside,' from the hearths where witches stay alive; from underneath, from the near side of 'culture;' *from their childhoods*, which men have so much trouble making women forget, and which they condemn to the *in-pace*."³ Hysteria, a *jouissance* life lived under the regime of patriarchal capitalism, is a quietly raging protest, irreducible, a willfully anachronistic move against repression, "a specific power, one of shifting, disturbance, and change, limited to imaginary displacements."⁴

This tension—between the will to control what is in excess and a personal defiance of those limitations—is pervasive in Davis' work. For *Threewalls*, she has prepared an installation using a shabby déclassé circular bed of Italian design piled under rocks and rubble. Neither the setting of a good night's sleep nor a sexual liaison, this hulking tableau is the retreat into a bedridden, depressive daze, a granddaughter of Louise Bourgeois' gloomy *Cells*. Again, from Clément, "Weeping is like an intimate celebration; the hysteric keeps her tears for herself and seems to be unfeeling and untouched,

¹ Cixous, Hélène and Catherine Clément. *The Newly Born Woman*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1986. Print, p. 6.

² Ibid. p. 165.

³ Ibid, p. 69.

⁴ Ibid, p. 9.

closed for use...After having interiorized all the stolen objects, she keeps her inner desires for herself, holding back her tears and swallowing her cries.”⁵

Bourgeois recurs elsewhere as one of the very few women who appear in the works comprising the drawing room in Davis’ exhibition. Each monumental sheet has been covered in Davis’ overlapping graphite renderings of the artworks and artists reproduced in several mid-century textbooks on Modern sculpture. Between Davis and those she depicts is a generation of women who took as their projects an exacerbation of the ways these art histories are crafted and imposed—women who may well represent the system-opposed hysterics and lonely sorceresses that Cixous and Clément describe. Rarely are Sherrie Levine’s drawings and watercolors discussed with as much attention as her photographs, but in the early 1980s before her absorption into the art world values she aimed to examine, she, like Davis, made drawings based on book illustrations rather than the formal qualities of the actual artworks shown. Davis’ own hand and handling shows her metric for establishing value, reevaluating these art histories put forth that are clearly masculinist and sexist, even Carola Giedion-Welcker’s 1960 *Contemporary Sculpture*.

Davis often quotes the art, design, and craft of mid-twentieth century in her work. And while the stuff comprising her installations often satisfies glittering, retro tastes, it is not nostalgia that directs her moves but more of a traumatic reenactment that strings together different moments in time and iterations of self. Her sculpture of her own legs protruding from one of the gallery walls explicitly copies Robert Gober’s sculptures of dismembered appendages. Latently, though, art history remembers as well the imitations of Robert Gober that Sturtevant exhibited in 1995 (Galerie Hans Mayer, Düsseldorf) and onward, as one of the (usually male, often gay, so deliberately gendered) artists whose processes of working Sturtevant would study and imitate.

These reproductions of Davis’—of art history books and canonical artworks—decry the male dominated art world in which she is situated. But further (and back to the woman on the bus) they attempt to locate where she might matter, and what kind of place she can make outside of the prescribed position she is permitted by this patriarchy. (In Davis’ installations this patriarchy to which I refer is itself often invisible, apparently absent. The roles and powers men have been afforded are treated as preconditions of and contexts for the worlds she conjures.) Confessional autobiography, fantasy, play, and misuse conspire in Davis’ tactics to step in and out of the social positions available to her and her art. She risks admitting something she shouldn’t. She reworks gallery settings so that sometimes they are made to appear differently than they are (something a home decorator might call aspirational aesthetics), while just as often she installs fixtures (mannequins, display systems, textual devices) to reveal the complicated ways that even non-profit and not for profit art spaces are complicit in projects of capital.

Davis draws together consumer products into her installations that serve to underscore the contradictions between being commodified and being fetishized. The artist has told me that in her making process, she doesn’t particularly distinguish between the components of her artworks which are handmade in her studio and those for which she has shopped. Commonplace in an art history where *bricolage* methodologies are thoroughly digested, this is nonetheless a risky proposal, no, to have internalized the means of exchange that most characterize capitalism as a system? What are the

⁵ Ibid, p. 35–36.

footholds for resistance in an incorporation of the selfsame bought-and-sold patriarchy that so orders vibrantly untamed *jouissance* into shuttered-down, anti-social behavior called hysteria? Is the sculptor-as-shopper a solaced compliance?

Is it worrisome that identity politics seems to emerge out of established industrialized, capitalist commodity culture? While there are no doubt historical explanations that have been made for the relationship between self-conscious positions of identity and the surrounding Industrial-Revolution-goods-economy-super-mall landscape (disrupting of gender roles for factory workers during World War II, modern efficiencies permitting women to spend their time on projects other than cooking and housework, etc.), I'm less inclined to annotate a relationship between manufactured products and manufactured self-awareness than to worry that they are the same. Rosie was first of all a riveter, literally a position along an assembly line economy of manufactured goods. Davis combines her own physical gestures recorded in malleable materials like self-hardening clay, cement, and soft metals with her trappings from thrift stores, furniture warehouses, and other shopping destinations; in so doing, she effectively wrecks any preciously held notions of a sanctified selfhood.

If this compromised self is hysteric as I have claimed, however, there must be dissent, a pressure against the vulnerable spots in this tenuous yet persistent system of power. In the section of Karl Marx's *Capital* entitled "The Fetishism of Commodities and the Secret Thereof," he indicates the disjuncture between an object's (use) value established as a commodity and those values it accrues through fetish, which for Marx's purposes is a catchall all for the ways social relations, constitutive labor, and desire are associated with that object. The system in which the object circulates prefers when its fetishization serves its determined exchange value, but Marx allows for their divergence, connoting the fetish object as mysterious and mystical, mostly because these relational forces between subject and object, and between subjects around an object, are unpredictable, nonmathematical factors in how a thing is understood and appreciated.

Davis' practice diverges from the system of commodities into which she electively embeds her work when she charges humble forms with far more than they could hope to hold and communicate. Seemingly simple things serve as placeholders for momentous memories: fantasies of romances with animals, teenaged ennui, the loss of a parent, staining recollections of social alienation. The links between things and the affective dimensions to which they are associated are always going haywire in this work. We may track how one component is added to another one, but invariably these parts seethe with untold values.

The prolonged life of our current economic system and its objects pent up with contradictions circles back on itself. Fetishes and associative affects are absorbed into the production of consumer objects that then serve as tools for emoting. Back in 2002 before the lifestyle store Anthropologie had grown to the behemoth it is today, it clearly preferred a fantastical fetish over a cool commodity in its brand identity. *Fast Company* spoke with several of its company heads. Kristin Norris, visual director: "We try to create little environments that tell a story. The idea is to capture a customer's attention so that she'll explore every corner and let her imagination go." Store architect Ron Pompei: "We wanted to create an experience that would set up the possibility of change and transformation... People would start to connect the dots in their own way and tell themselves a personal story." And then-president Glen Senk: "Our customers are our

friends, and what we do is never, ever, ever about selling to them.”⁶ Ten years later, Lori Waxman wrote to Chicago Tribune readers of Anthropologie in relation to exhibitions by Molly Zuckerman-Hartung and Cathy Wilkes, “It was all so terribly appealing... Everything looked like an expensive knockoff of something I'd found in a thrift store a decade ago.”⁷ Waxman’s sensitivity to how the store preyed on her memories and feelings goes on to notice the ways contemporary art seems to be tracked into and out of such marketplaces. The felt relationship one might make to an object is now an aspect of its design. The awkward adjustments between goods and services economies. Object or feeling or both manufactured in excess.

It may be that even rupturing the desires attached to things is already a wholly anticipated maneuver within a psychologically oppressive regime. Is this how we might account for loneliness? An artist whose every trait is pre-purchased then reproduced and retailed. Feelings are perhaps best expressed standing agape at the pile ups—those at the ends of assembly lines, clearance racks, galleries whose inventories are out of sync with current market popularities. Mechanical reproduction in this age of art dashes away longing and desire. These realized forms are unwanted, afeared so. A perverse imitation of *jouissance* is surplus.

Partway through my childhood, my father’s parents built a second, smaller house on their property in rural Louisiana so that our growing clan could gather for meals and holidays with better ease. My grandfather built a set of long tables and simple wooden benches that lined either side of them. This was before my mom was eventually diagnosed with Type 2 Diabetes, and she was very large. She tended to wear voluminous denim dresses, white sneakers, and some kind of festive brooch. We would all make our plates buffet style in the kitchenette adjoining the long room where the dining table was set up.

At one such gathering, my father had said a prayer for the meal, and we were all seated, tucking into lunch. Conversations grew in small pockets up and down the room. We sopped up gravy with dinner rolls. Suddenly there was a loud crash and the sound of breaking boards. My mother groaned from the floor where she’d landed when the bench she sat on by herself gave from underneath her. First I heard the bang of her collapse, then I heard several of my cousins suppressing laughter. I watched my relatives’ eyes dart from one to another, concerned and knowing. A beat later people were up to help her to her feet. I can’t remember if I jumped into action or only watched. The cracked and broken boards were removed to my grandfather’s workshop, and a chair was brought over from the sitting area in one corner of the room so that my mother could seat herself again at the table. I can’t tell you what her face looked like. I remember it, but I can’t write about it.

This past Christmas we were back in that room for a big lunch as a family. We’ve grown older and many of us brought spouses and partners with us. My grandfather who built the dining furniture passed away almost ten years ago. A few of my cousins have kids who exuberantly resisted sitting down for a meal. In hushed exclamation, one of my family members remarked on my mother as she withdrew to the sitting area in the corner

⁶ Labarre, Polly. “Sophisticated Sell.” *Fast Company*, December 2002. Accessed online Thursday, August 13, 2015: <<http://www.fastcompany.com/45703/sophisticated-sell>>

⁷ Waxman, Lori. “Molly Zuckerman-Hartung, Cathy Wilkes draw on strikingly similar themes in separate exhibitions.” *Chicago Tribune*, February 15, 2012.

of the space, “I guess Cindy isn’t going to sit with the rest of us, even at Christmas.” It was the kind of hissed judgment especially common in polite southern company. As if she would ever sit on one of those benches again in her lifetime.

Laura Davis’ exhibition at Threewalls is entitled *Legacy of Loneliness*. In it, *jouissance* smolders amidst fetishes, commodities, and objects recovered from discard. In it, memory transgresses—a risk to show how these pasts led into one another, “a question of the reproduction of certain scenes which sometimes one may reach directly and sometimes only in passing through intervening fantasies...they represent protective constructions, sublimations, the embellishment of facts that serve at the same time as justifications.” (Freud’s *Origins of Psychoanalysis*, letter 61). In it, a woman turns inward and redecorates. She is not only the artist, she is whoever and whatever doesn’t fit—in books telling narrow art historical accounts, buses, benches, and beds.