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ART

FEMININE AIRS AND AWKWARD REMAINDERS: ALEXANDRA BIRCKEN, ANICKA YI, AND ELAINE CAMERON-WEIR

by Nicole Demby Jan 02, 2012

(BOMB on the Scene, BOMBlog)

Nicole Demby reflects on the aesthetics of femininity and the gendered codification of labor and the physical form within the work of three contemporary women artists.



Alexandra Bircken, *Think of me*, installation view, Kimmerich.

Aided by Man Ray in 1921, Marcel Duchamp emblazoned a perfume bottle with an image of his newly-created alter-ego, the bedroom-eyed *Rose Sélavy*. He entitled the work *Belle Haleine: Eau De Violette*, (*Beautiful Breath: Veil Water*). The name is a pun on both *Eros, c'est la vie*. ("Eros, that's life."), and *Rose Halevy*, a common Jewish name that means "Rose, the Levite" (Duchamp expressed the desire to make simply a Jewish alter-ego before deciding to make her a woman as well). As such, the artwork, which Duchamp attributed to *Rose Sélavy*, connotes both libido and otherness, the essence of woman as well as its abstraction from the physical body (in this case, Duchamp's, male).

In a strange way, *Belle Haleine* anticipates the idealized characterization of advanced capitalist society as one in which identity is completely fluid—in which culture and technology enable us to identify with whatever gender we wish, and the sustaining of our lives is detached from our bodies as work has become immaterial—cognitive, intellectual production removed from the brute physicality of industrial production. That *Belle Haleine* is a détourned luxury commodity is fitting; luxury goods advertise the possibility of simply buying in to a certain feeling, status, or lifestyle (who needs real work when one can simply buy one's way into a certain class or social group?). Fragrance, in particular, is the symbolic antithesis of material work; cosmetic and immediate rather than sustaining and sustained. Sexy rather than banal, it offers the possibility of imbuing the subject with a desired aura, a kind of magic potion that circumvents the tedium of working for the desired qualities. Yet that *Belle Haleine* is actually an empty bottle is poetically suggestive of the missing substance at the heart of the notions of immaterial labor: the body.

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As Silvia Federici makes clear in *Precarious Labor: A Feminist Viewpoint* (2008), immaterial labor suppresses more than a few forms of physicality that persist as fundamental features of the contemporary economy. Firstly, that our sleek, seamless, digitized contemporary capitalism is actually based on the very material labor of massive percentages of the population in developing countries, not to mention the physical labor performed in urban centers by low-income and frequently immigrant groups. Secondly, the notion that all workers are increasingly becoming immaterial laborers ignores the very physical, gendered work of birthing, nursing, and raising a child, as well as domestic work more generally.

Despite her criticism, Federici acknowledges that the theory of immaterial labor (largely forwarded by the Italian Autonomists) has been useful in understanding historic shifts in modes of production, as well as in organizing and drawing together various struggles against capitalism. Yet even to those relatively privileged people for whom the terms laid out by this theory apply, a lauding of labor's immateriality suppresses the possibility of the body's alienation under the circumstances of this labor. It belies the fact that sitting at a computer all day creates a historically novel gap between the business of work and the business of being a body, a gap reinforced by the fact that despite all of our advances in medicine and technology, the basic functions of our bodies are the same as they were hundreds of thousands of years ago, and still need to be attended to in fundamentally the same way. Three recent downtown shows by female artists addressed the status of the body as awkward remainder in a global economy characterized by both commodity and immateriality.

For feminists in the 70s interested in redefining domestic and reproductive activities as a form of work, a renewed interest in craft became a means of liberating a form of domestic work and using the body-affirming tactility of craft-related handiwork as a vital force. Third-wave feminists have rediscovered this interest, ushering in a new wave of craftivism and craft within contemporary art. Yet the status of craft today is perhaps complicated by the fact that the appeal and aesthetics of DIY culture has been tapped into and sold back to us by corporations—today, a unique-looking knit is just as likely to be found on an Urban Outfitters mannequin as on a committed feminist or environmental activist. In *Think of me*, her recent show at Kimmerich gallery, Alexandra Bircken uses sculpture to refuse associations between craft and unalienated work, similarly distancing notions of earthiness and organicity from warmth or life-sustaining properties.



Alexandra Bircken, *Think of me*, installation view, Kimmerich.

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In *Think of me*, Bircken abandoned her yarn-knit sculptures comprised of knitting, stretched over various armatures, supporting different suspended found objects and materials. Instead, the sculptures in the show were earth-toned and earthy, incorporating leather, metal, twigs, plaster, clay, and string, and produced using techniques such as bundling and stitching. In two pieces, however, Bircken, who formerly worked in fashion, retains her knitting technique. Yet rather than knitting with wool as in many of her previous sculptures, for *Think of me* Bircken knit tape cassette ribbon directly from the reel inside a tape player (with needles still attached) in one sculpture, and the cassette ribbon detached from the tape and interwoven with a tinsel-like material into a kind of blanket in the other. The effect is uncanny and strangely fashionable; Bircken produces an object using a technique that generally makes use of features like color, warmth and softness that is instead cool and distant, with iridescent slate gray sheen you might see on the front lines of the latest gothic-chic runway show.

Think of me evokes a restrained, morose earthiness that incorporates craft to align the body with Thanatos and quiescence rather than libido and production. Binding, drooping, and soft materials-rendered hard are prominent material features of the show. A piece on the wall looks like a quilt made out of shmatas with which one cleans the home, yet the rags are stiffened by concrete. A hanging sculpture made of stitched brown leather evokes both a female form, and a luxury punching bag. Bircken's organic and anthropomorphic minimalism implicate the body—the feminine body and historically feminine work in particular—yet in a way that suggests alienation from their physicality, problematizing the notion that the reclamation of feminine work can fully de-alienate the body in a post-Fordist society in which even physical labors of love and leisure are commodified.



Anicka Yi, *Auras, Orgasms and Nervous Peaches, Sous-Vide*, 47 Canal, 2011.

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In *Sous-Vide* at 47 Canal, South Korean-born artist Anicka Yi displayed objects that manifest the paradox of the body and bodily production in the anesthetized space of global commodity-culture, as well as expressing more insidious aspects of biopolitical control. Yi's work often combines ephemeral substances, from potato chips to hair gel, with sculptural elements—usually commercial products and materials. In *Sous-Vide*, oil streamed neatly down from three metal-lined holes in the exterior walls of a non-descript, ceiling-less enclosure. Inside, this non-room was fluorescent-lit and checkered with white bathroom tiles. A tempura-fried flower bouquet stuck out of the neck of a cheap red turtleneck sweater and bled oil indelibly into the fabric, dripping oil onto the gallery floor. With a nod to the name of the show (which denotes the method of slow-cooking food after vacuum-sealing it), a panel of vacuum-packed peanuts and pearls, popular American exports and suggestive of a kind of imperial American kitsch, is draped over a circular piece of plexiglass protruding from the wall. In another corner, a tiny projection of crosshairs drifted with quiet menace across the base of a transparent plastic, oil-drum-shaped container, which was slumped back slightly on itself.



Anicka Yi, *Sister*, *Sous-Vide*, 47 Canal, 2011.

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As Allese Thomson Baker points out in her Artforum review of *Sous-Vide*, the crosshairs on the gusseted oil drum bag were the same as those on the screen of the United States Apache helicopters, one of which famously shot and killed several Iraqis as long with two Reuters journalists in 2007. The video, released by WikiLeaks, is notable for the incongruity between the hypnotic floating of the target and the distanced perspective of the sniper-view, and the real brutality of the acts it displays. Yi reproduced this tension by projecting the floating crosshairs onto the anthropomorphically-slumping bag. Many of the sculptures in *Sous-Vide* expressed the disconnect between the visceral corporeality of the body, and the sterility of weaponized technology and the anomic nature of the non-spaces of capitalism. Yi rendered this incompatibility visible by forcing a physical confrontation between a mass-produced acrylic knit and the oils and secretions of the body it adorns, between the logic of packaging, the epitomic activity of a global commodity culture (a form of packaging that removes oxygen, a basic necessity for life, no less), and that of cooking, an ancient, life-sustaining act (specifically frying, a cooking technique that necessitates copious amounts of oil, a calorically-rich substance, the chemical definition of life-giving energy). The titles of the works in the show *Auras*, *Orgasms*, and *Nervous Peaches*, as well as those of Yi's older works such as *Skype Sweater*, *Digital Spit*, and *Excuse Me, Your Necklace is Leaking*, express this tension between the erotics of the body on the one hand, and the world of office-cubicle service economy work on the other.

Yi incorporated liquid and ephemeral substances, usually associated with the consumable and the cosmetic, into the realm of sculpture, historically tethered to permanence and solidity. It was the tension between the sculptural and the cosmetic that Yi's collaboration with Maggie Peng, *Shigenobu Twilight*, expressed. According to Immanuel Kant in *Critique of Judgement*, by virtue of being chemical, and penetrating the body in a visceral manner, taste and smell are not senses that allow for the objective removal necessary for aesthetic contemplation. Yet for *Shigenobu Twilight*, the artists created an undeniably heady fragrance, one "inspired by the Fusako Shigenobu, former leader of the Japanese Red Army, who was believed to be in exile in Lebanon for many years after orchestrating some of the group's most political statements." It consists of the scent of cedar wood, a tree regarded in Lebanon as a national emblem, as well as Japanese scents such as yuzu and shiso leaf. The bottles the fragrance comes in are abstract, sculptural objects, themselves made out of cedar wood. *Shigenobu Twilight* creates a conflict between the immediacy of smell and the easy transmission of the product description, and the presumed substance of the sculptural and historical object. At a price of \$160 and available through specialty websites, *Shigenobu Twilight* also conflates the art object and the luxury good.

The cosmetic—oils, balms, fragrances—suggest a historically gendered form of bodily care. They evoke a visceral realm below or beneath labor, the work of tending to one's body, of hygiene, of the most basic, most tactile forms of care for, and maintenance of the self. If Bircken complicates the notion that handiwork can be a de-alienating activity, then by applying cosmetic and culinary techniques to objects and spaces evocative of contemporary commodity and surveillance culture, Yi addresses the biopolitical dimensions of contemporary existence. Not only does Yi's work allude to the body and its processes, orifices, and secretions, but her sculptures reflect the subsumption of these processes within neoliberal forms of governmentality.



Elaine Cameron-Weir, *Blond*, 2010.

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In her recent show, without true bazaars, at Ramiken Crucible, Elaine Cameron-Weir also made use of fragrance. *Midnight Sun* consists of steel mesh stretched over canvas, over which the artist applied wax, perfume (L'Heure Bleue, by Geurain), guaiacol, and coumarin, a sweet-smelling and mildly-toxic pant-derived substance. An essay published alongside the show describes Cameron-Weir's work as sculpture without qualities. The title itself refers to the figure of the dandy or the flâneur who strolls through the marketplace without aim or purpose other than aesthetic experience. Cameron-Weir used the gesture of anointing or imbuing as a way of retroactively permeating her minimal work with added qualities; in some of her other sculptures, she rubs or infuses surfaces with oil, perfume, and flower petals. The contrast between these hard, angular forms, and the ephemeral, fragrant substances the artist applies to them, suggests the total abandonment of aesthetics determined by function, or possessing any purpose at all other than that to add an alchemical or mythic value (the type of value embodied by luxury goods).

If Yi's work presents the body as a kind of awkward remainder—a puddle of oil on the counter of a sleek, luxury condo in the downtown of some global metropolis—Cameron-Weir's sculptures suggest the decadent unhinging of necessity and function from bodies and objects exemplified by luxury goods. The artist uses labor-intensive material processes, yet to an elusive and minimal effect that aligns hand-oriented work with the aesthetic appeal of these rarified goods more than the visceral tactility of craft. Cameron-Weir eschews a relationship to objects in which material goods and the body work in necessary symbiosis to sustain life in a de-alienating manner.



Elaine-Cameron Weir, *Torso of a Young Woman*, 2009.

This was evident in Cameron-Weir's *Torso of a Young Woman*. The sculpture consisted of stacked materials: a rectangular wood and concrete base, topped with butcher paper and a round of marble under a smaller, thicker round of concrete that supports a sanded plaster mound, an anthropomorphic shape resembling a ham or an upturned thigh around which the artist has placed a ring of tape. Atop the plaster mound sits a bar of yellow soap. *Torso of a Young Woman* is reminiscent of Janine Antoni's *Lick and Lather* (1993), for which the artist created a bust of herself out of

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soap and chocolate, then proceeded to repeatedly wash herself with the former and lick the latter until the sharpness of her facial features in both was obscured. Antoni's work expresses a loving care of the self through materials of hygiene and sustenance. She erases her own features in an act of uniting the split subject, a holistic, healing, and even onanistic gesture. By contrast, Cameron-Weir's work remains an assemblage of discrete materials, suggesting no such fusion. It presents the hygienic as an extraneous ornament with no vital connection to the compilation of primarily sculptural materials meant to suggest the body upon which it sits. The anthropomorphic mound is awkward as it is organic, eliciting a sense of the body much less-unified than that elicited by Antoni's symbolic, psychological act of self-care.

The reclamation of craft by female artists is related to the sexual self-care evoked by Lick and Lather. In her essay, *Queerly Made: Harmony Hammond's Floorpieces* (2009), published in *The Journal of Modern Craft*, Julia Bryan-Wilson describes the queer femininity of Harmony Hammond's braided, circular, painted floor pieces that bare a resemblance to traditional braided rugs (Antoni, too, has used techniques of craft in her work, specifically braiding). Bryan-Wilson describes the sexual awakening embedded in Hammond's process:

"She had to bodily enact the various handiworks of braiding, spiraling, stitching, and painting. Hammond writes, 'I find that materials which suggest direct hand manipulation . . . seem to carry with them sexual references.' This new exploration of bodily processes connected her work to onanistic sensuality—as she related making by hand to 'touching oneself' and reveled in the 'heightened erotic sense she felt in her studio.'"

The labor-intensive processes through which Cameron-Weir makes her work, and their resulting tactility, suggest that the artist is interested in hand-making. Yet the sexuality evoked by her handiwork is related to their "sexualized, futuristic minimalism" (*Sculptures Without Qualities*, Mike Egan for *Ramiken Crucible*), an erotics more suited for the internet age than for the time of sexual self-discovery in which Hammond's work was made.

If the Second-wave Feminism of the 60s was fueled by women's frustration with their lives as housewives, and their disaffection from the domestic labor this role entailed, then the work of these three artists suggests the anomic disaffection caused by immaterial labor, a disaffection related to the awkward status of the body in post-Fordist society. Perhaps it is because the feminine body has historically been connected to forms of work that are most inextricable from the immediate needs of life and care, forms that have the potential, especially if gone unrecognized, to be most disaffecting, that it is female artists questioning their relationship to commodity, corporeality, and immaterial labor. Rather than expressing an active reclamation of labor as de-alienating, the color-poor nature of *Think of me*, the extreme minimalism of Cameron-Weir's work, and the oil bleeding into Yi's red sweater, display at once an aesthetic effacement and a viscerally languid refusal to propagate the myth of immateriality.¹



Elaine Cameron-Weir, *Behind the Veil, Beyond the Grave*, 2006.

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Alexandra Bircken, Think of Me
Ran September 2 through October 29 [exhibition now closed]
Kimmerich
50 White Street

Anicka Yi, Sous-Vide
Ran September 21 through October 23, 2011 [exhibition now closed]
47 Canal
47 Canal Street

Elaine Cameron-Weir, without true bazaars
Ran May 8 through June 19, 2011 [exhibition now closed]
Ramiken Crucible
389 Grand Street

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1. My analysis of the relationship between the work of these artists and post-Fordist labor excludes a meta-critique of how artists are in many ways the paragon of immaterial laborers. Though many still produce material things and get pleasure from working with their hands, critical discourses around art since modernism have lauded artists as producers of ideas. Moreover, characteristics that have historically been associated with artists and art markets, attributes such as freedom, genius, poly-mathery, individualism, and value-creation, are now symptomatic of the logic of professions from the manager to the engineer, as well as subjectivity in developed societies more generally. Most insidiously, perhaps, artists and their habits are harnessed by neoliberal governments who co-opt them as labor for the sake of branding places as creative capitals in order to bolster economies. The presence of Think of me in a gallery in Soho, paradigmatic of a neighborhood that went from studio bohemia, to gallery-ville, to luxury mall, and Sous-Vide and without true bazaars in galleries in parts of the Lower East Side still largely occupied by Chinese immigrants and low-income families, suggests the labor of gentrification often performed by artists and gallerists. These groups act as lichen for capital, moving into cheap neighborhoods and raising rents, displacing local communities and eventually themselves. What is the status of the artist's body under contemporary capitalism? How to break with the body's own complicity in the exploitation and alienation wrought by capital? There are no easy answers.