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Fat space: a textual encounter between multiple material bodies

25 MARCH 2022 | BY JULIEANNA PRESTON | ESSAYS



A terrain of material bodies is the site of a slippery encounter

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Listen, closely.

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It does not take long to recognise the sound of ablutions. The privacy of the sonic space beckons a memory of entering that tabernacle of smooth, durable, water- and stain-resistant surfaces, alone, locking the door behind you, knowing full well that the room resounds beyond its borders.

TRANSFORMATIONS: CONTROL AND FREEDOM THROUGH COLLAGE

11 AUGUST 2021 | BY LUCAS CRAWFORD

Look into yourself. Like William W Braham suggests, inspect your own image as if it were a historical account. How long can you hold that gaze under public scrutiny? How long can you bear to maintain outward composure when your interior is all a twitter? How long can you indulge in the rapture before twitching self-consciously at your vicarious encounter of another?

No, wait.

Your ears detect multiple bodies involved in the vitriolic intercourse of nearly frictionless caresses. On this occasion, you cast aside any propriety, shame or inhibition to be drawn into the aqueous soundscape of rushing, lapping, sloshing and trickling – as Barbara Penner states – to give way to a bath's seductive anchor to the empire of the senses. It's easier (to endure) if you close your eyes. In darkness, writes Electa W Behrens, bodies listen differently; sound becomes 'inherently subversive', an unfolding range of 'texture, melody, percussion', 'not something external', 'no separation between "it" and "I"'; 'darkness is an (im)materiality that performs' as a 'meta-sense'.

A terrain of slippery bodies emerges behind those translucent lids – mounds, plains, valleys, lips, folds, eddies, mouths, drains, divots, swales – hard and shiny skins cavorting with supple and fleshy dermal membranes complemented by a scented 'austere' oval cake with a 'perfect reserve', and a torrent 'gushing with impatience' to loosen its dry mute tongue, so says Francis Ponge.

It is here that sound plays out its emotive, political and erotic materiality, the three traits of feminist Katherine Behar's object-oriented feminism. Without a crack, crevasse or sharp edge for bacteria to breed, dirt to settle or detritus to snag, the room's ambivalent allegiance wavers between purity, virginity, cleanliness and virtue, and pollution, waste, crime, grime and soil, a conundrum we owe to Mary Douglas. The room is constituted by a myriad of mutually independent material bodies that in unison shape a single surface that keeps things in circulation, a plumber's dream.

Lower yourself into the tub, that mechanical, commanding, industrial fixture, a democratic utensil – the fascination of Sigfried Giedion. Water creeps up your torso, tending to fill

the voids while the humble soap lurks close to the edge ready to leap. Unafraid of germs, nudity or mortality lingering at the dream of the smooth white tub, the 'pearly slobber' commences to frolic in its own froth. A slippery, steamy little fish, writes Ponge, that lives its unsung heroic life at the call of cleanliness, at the mercy of water, and the management of smelly odours, and more so, the luxury of leaning back for a good long soak in redemptive leisure among the joy of bubbles.

It's an aural dreamscape, white sound with deep rumbling hues of pink noise among reflective blushing tones, limbs, lobes and emulsified salty lipids. Here, in this space, colour is audible. Far from a black hole or alien planet, says composer Tara Rodgers, it is a space that does not skimp on the power of sound, not spoken words, but sound's own visceral descriptive voice bent on stimulating dense emotive atmospheres and nervous systems. Virginia Woolf would thrive here. It is a fatty space – one that Jenny Saville would covet for the unapologetic, unadorned and uncensored way the sound touches the sagging, rolling, wrinkling and bulging adipose surfaces with the texture of warm tallow. It is a fat space – akin to the contemporary sound synthesiser known 'to produce a thick sound like no other reverb does and excel at both real room modelling and unreal spaces alike'.

As the soap sheds its volumetric potential, and the bath loses its thermal allure, the spell of the dream is broken. Eyes wide open. A thin milky film adorned with a matrix of short curls clings to the murky water's surface. The mist clears to reveal the pragmatics of grouting, spouting, piping and caulking. The poetics of the interior landscape linger only momentarily as condensation on the mirror jeopardises the silver foil it harbours; everything appears hard in the light of day – stones. Brittle stones made of collagen and calcium phosphate wrapped in supple meaty tissues lie limber. A slithering sliver of alkaline lipids skirts mischievously out of reach. Durable, waterproof, flat, petunse-like stones stand proud of their plasticity and structure, due to the chemistry between ground sand, kaolin and fire. White voluptuous vitreous figures cast of feldspar, quartz, soapstone, lime, bone ash and alabaster pose indiscreetly. The perspective bears out lapses in hygiene maintenance underneath it all. Nakedness replaces nudity, fraught with goosebumps that raise all kinds of fine hairs to attention. The drain swallows the last vestiges of the aqueous adventure in a grotesque belch.

Fatty Solids was a sound installation at the 2015 group exhibition f generation: feminism, art, progressions at the George Paton Gallery in Melbourne, curated by Veronica

Caven Aldous, Juliette Peers and Caroline Phillips. Marking 40 years since International Women's Year in 1975, the exhibition reconfigured this rich history while examining contemporary modes of provocation in feminist art practice. With no windows or ventilation to speak of, the small one-room gallery was stifling hot; even the works were too close for comfort. There were no signs of pared-back modernism or monochromatic pretensions at play; it was an exhibition that indulged in the pluriverse as it appeared to shun curatorial judgement or editorial discretion on the selection and spatialisation of works. This performative essay revisits Fatty Solids as a textual encounter, not of one human body, but between multiple material bodies bound up by the suggestive nature of thick description.

Lead image: Miroslaw Balka, *260 x 9 x 9*, 2019. Image:
Miroslaw Balka / White Cube / Theo Christelis



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