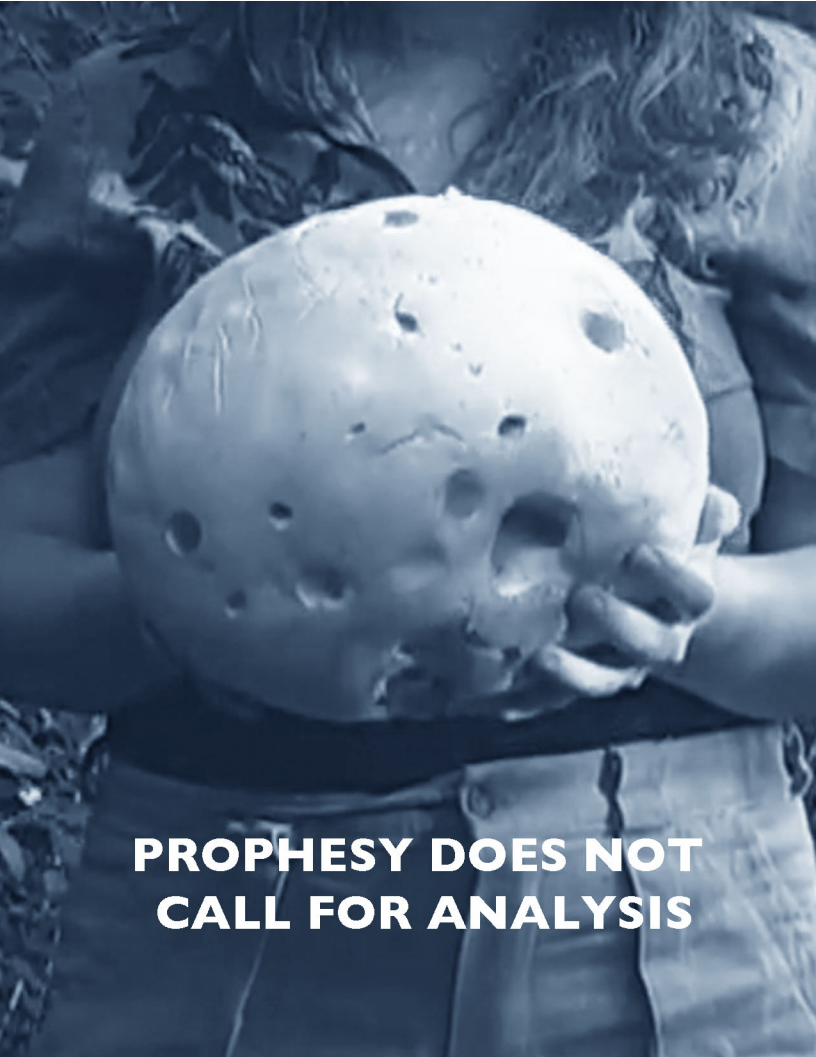


A person with long, curly hair is holding a large, light-colored, spherical object with many holes, resembling a large, hollowed-out fruit or a large, porous ball. The object is held in front of their face, and they are looking down at it. The background is dark and out of focus.

**PROPHECY DOES NOT
CALL FOR ANALYSIS**

PROPHECY DOES NOT CALL FOR ANALYSIS

by Steve Reinke and a contributing cast of
characters*

*It is against my entire code, but then, I have never even begun to
use my code, although I judge everything by it.*

—Miss Goering in Jane Bowles, *Two Serious Ladies*

It's difficult to pin down this singular comic masterpiece. *Two Serious Ladies* has some of the humor of Beckett, as well as a Buñuelian mixture of politics and surrealism (when the unconscious breaks through to daily life, it is imbricated with politics, forming a satire of both the social and the very foundations of subjectivity/agency). It might be said of Miss Goering and Miss Copperfield as well as Ahwesh and Montgomery: psychic life is more real, vivid and tangible than everyday life. Everyday life gains its meaning by the way in which it resurrects psychic fantasy.

Interpretation was useless. [...] Her people were mournful, impulsive, and as erratic in their particular journeys' flights as bats. [...] They thought continuously, obsessively, but had no thoughts exactly, no helpful method of perceiving the world or their positions in it. [...] No one knows how to live in these pages; they have developed no mechanisms to assure themselves that the life they have been presented with is their life. [...]

—Joy Williams, *My Sister's Hand In Mine:*
The Collected Works of Jane Bowles

The Film Artist's Abjection

Film, they used to say, is an object, video is a signal. Film has a body and calls for direct physical engagement. You hold it up to your eyes and examine it frame by frame. Press it into the splicer lining up

the sprockets, cut the strip and glue it back together. Video, especially digital video, could be seen as involving a loss of immediacy, a loss of agency, a loss, even, of a direct connection between physical bodily perception of the thing in the world and its analogous projection on screen as a magically direct representation, an index.

How romantic these filmmakers were! The romance of chemistry. Film grain and bad metaphysics, as if all possibility for apperception was being lost along with the demise of the technology. Film: introspective, self-conscious, capable of providing a means of understanding things in terms of previous experience. Video: an electronic signal that flows free from agency, from authorship, good especially for stopping convenience stores from getting robbed.

This Is What Dead Means

Carl Bogner has said *Transitional Objects* “weaves together considerations of splicing, Winnicott, sewing, motherhood, new technology and loss of mastery.” He is not wrong. In fact, all of Montgomery’s work shares the quality of being on the one hand seemingly straightforward and, on the other, remarkably layered in a way that productively complicates its seeming straightforwardness. Part of the rigor (really, I want to say aggressiveness) in Montgomery’s work is the

way in which she can be so perversely literal. The film is indeed about transitional objects, in particular as theorized by British children's psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott. But it didn't begin with this topic—it transitioned from being a consideration of the shift from manual film editing to the digital editing of video.

What more literal way would there be to explore the movement from manual (by hand) to digital (toes as much as fingers) than by attempting to edit celluloid on a guillotine splicer with one's feet? But her feet are not up to the task, and become increasingly bloodied as the piece progresses. Video has castrated us, cut us away from our connections to the world and our ability to reproduce them.



In relation to the transitional object, the infant passes from magical omnipotent control to control by manipulation involving muscle eroticism and coordination pleasure. The transitional object may, because of anal erotic organization, stand for feces, but it is not for this reason that it may become smelly and unwashed.

—D. W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*

The abjection gets a structure, becomes part of an argument. Forget all the nonsense I said above about the romance of celluloid, the image is also doing something else—it is drawing a parallel between artmaking as a process (as exemplified by the image) and the child's developing sense of self and other as brokered by the transitional object.

This is what dead means: it is a matter of days or hours or minutes. Before the limit is reached the mother is still alive. After this limit has been overstepped, she is dead. In between is a precious moment of anger, though this is quickly lost, or perhaps never experienced, always potential and carrying fear of violence. From this we reach the position that the only real thing is the gap. That is to say, the death, or the absence, or the amnesia.

—D. W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*

Blood-Red Glass

Peggy Ahwesh once said, “When things start to fall apart, when the performers get bored or pissed and fall out of character, it’s time to turn on the camera.” In

The Ape of Nature, Ahwesh goes one step further in her search for performances that have the authenticity of disengagement; she hypnotizes her actor/collaborators. They become subjects, glacially elegant subjects. They inhabit a grand mansion on the skids. They perform ritualized choreographies of mundane activities. They speak prophecy.

The starting point for *The Ape of Nature* was Werner Herzog's *Heart of Glass*, in which all the actors were also hypnotized. It is the story of a medieval town of glassblowers which is doomed because of the loss of their recipe for bloodred glass.

Everyone in "Heart of Glass" is a kind of helpless seer, pointing to the hidden causes and inevitability of ruin. Herzog's use of hypnosis is designed to clear the way to the certainty of prophecy: minus the selfconsciousness of full consciousness, actors become pure vessels of prediction. Peggy Ahwesh's revisitation of Herzog's tropes of hypnosis, vision and loss stands at the other end of prophecy, looking backward. Ahwesh's hypnotized subjects describe the aftermath of disaster, and their wonderment is not so much at terrifying events to come, but at feeling the world's overwhelming infinitude, even in ruin.

—Jennifer Montgomery, *The Aftermath of Prophecies*

Yes, Ahwesh's is a strange kind of prophecy, in that it is a prophecy of indolence, an uneasy, static indolence. Southern gothic. She has always resisted narrative,

and pat psychoanalytic narrative in particular, and this resistance is feminist. One thing that her use of prophecy as a narrative strategy allows is the possibility of unconscious speech; a particular surrealism, that can stand apart from psychoanalysis. This is because prophecy, whether biblical or scifi, is one of the few narrative genres that is, at this time, stronger and more compelling than the narratives of psychoanalytic theory. Not only stronger, but resistant. Prophecy does not call for analysis.

Art is the ape of nature—the imitation, the mirror, the follies of human invention that strive for the divine.

—Peggy Ahwesh

The political ramifications of Ahwesh's work, as evidenced by her deliberate misreadings and misinterpretations of psychoanalytic theory, for example, assert an aggressive feminist aim that demands a form that does not comply with existing authoritative narrative structures.

—Lia Gangitano, *Warhol's Grave*

Embodiment, sex, female desire, the archive, language and performance – plumbing the detritus and fragments of the moving image for anarchic surplus.

It is the challenge for queer/feminist artists who deal with the subversions of the id (the subconscious, the death drive, etc.) to avoid the magnetic pull of

psychoanalysis. We need a surrealism freed from the tyranny of psychoanalytic discourse! Both Montgomery and Ahwesh have developed a range of techniques and strategies for this. Montgomery, as noted above, will initially apply psychoanalytic theory in a seemingly straightforward manner and then undermine it by layering other meanings and possibilities. Ahwesh is more inclined to fuck it up off the bat, often through misperformance. At other times she has adapted the subversions of Bataille to do a partial end run around all those Freudians (though one still gets one's ankle caught in Klein and Lacan).

The Love Object

Collections is about the spiritual currency of objects, the desire to hang on to the inexplicable... something profoundly related to subjectivity. The work does not stage a contest of material object vs. mental representation, but of verbal description or label vs. photographic representation.

[...] for while the object is a resistant material body, it is also, simultaneously, a mental realm over which I hold sway, a thing whose meaning is governed by myself alone.

—Jean Baudrillard, *The System of Objects*

After subject relates to object, subject destroys object, as it becomes external. And then may come object survives destruction by the

subject. But there may or may not be survival. A new theory thus arises in the theory of object relating: the subject says to the object, "I destroyed you," and the object is there to receive the communication.

—D. W. Winnicott, *Playing and Reality*

Collections controls—or, as Winnicott would have it, gains mastery over—its viewers through the temporal tyranny of the cinema. Ahwesh gives us time to read the labels, but slight glimpses, sometimes almost subliminal, of the photographs. Watching it on my personal device, I can merely freeze and examine the photographs (which seem to have been taken on a cell phone, too). *Collections* makes a connection between the temporal control it wields and the compulsively controlling nature of the collector. With these analogies in mind, Ahwesh shows how technologies give structure to affects and meanings in the moving image, a theme in much of her work, most notably *She Puppet*.

We Have Dead Fathers Everywhere

In making "Bethlehem," I worked through my archive of accumulated video footage. I pretended it was found footage from anonymous sources. What began as a tribute to Bruce Connor of the period of "Valse Triste" and "Take the 5:10 to Dreamland," with their deliberate pace and bittersweet memory of home, ended as a dedication to my father, as I wound my way through miscellany with distance and another aim.



Ahwesh doesn't name this "other" aim, but it seems to me to be intimacy. A cold, distant intimacy that can weather all sentimentality. Her images are protected within the confines of the archive, and not without a strange, confounding wonderment. One can begin with the pretense that one has a disinterested relation to one's materials, but this sadism is apt to open on to other vulnerabilities.

The sources of Ahwesh's footage are significant, such as the shot of her father in his open casket, and footage from "The Ape of Nature," the video installation for which "Bethlehem" was originally made. Treating a wild array of material as "found footage" is the closest a filmmaker can get to owning the film as object. In the

history of Abwesh's oeuvre, "Bethlehem" is the most explicit in its emotional investment. The music of Henry Cowell is the "sonic glue" that holds this piece together, and while the sound track is sentimental, it is also utterly sincere. "Bethlehem" foregoes irony and textual deflection in order to create an elegy for a lifetime of lost objects.

—Jennifer Montgomery

Brought In To Fill The Void

If *One Species Removed* was to me initially difficult to write about, it is not because it is an elegy to Montgomery's mother. I love writing about death more than anything, and death-of-the-mother is the sweetest death (after death-of-the-child). It is just that the piece seems so straightforward that the only relevant engagement would be iteration.

In each individual scene opacity is inextricably bound with its transparency. This is aporia country. The film elegantly explores the experience of mourning as a particular set of alienations of language, empathy and anthropomorphism.

The title reflects a pun, with two supporting sources. The first, that we often transfer our most profound emotions onto other animals, i.e., "one species removed." The second, the crackpot but very moving theories of Rudolf Steiner. He believed that animals have a group soul, used interchangeably with the term "species." When one animal

dies, the group replaces that part of itself. By contrast, each human being is an individual species/soul, so that when we die, a whole species is rendered extinct.

—Jennifer Montgomery

The video is a series of distinct scenes, each proceeding through a different kind of translation or remapping. The first is a circuit: a quote of a text in English, translated to Morse code and knit into a vest, from which the original E.M. Forster text (via Morse code) can be reconstituted.

The second section has four still images – two dogs, two cats – while a male voiceover describes each pet in an increasingly anthropomorphized way. There is a great deal of playfulness here. One cannot always immediately determine, through the ambiguity of pronouns, who is pet and who is human. The last two are explicitly stories of loss. In the third section, we see a handwritten letter, illuminated by a flashlight. Montgomery reads the letter slowly. As it progresses, we become aware that it is a letter from Louise to Montgomery on the occasion of her running away.

[Hababa! This is my mother's last piece of writing in a state of full dementia, weeks before she died! But I think I like this misreading; or rather, the superimposition of dog onto mother].

—Jennifer Montgomery

The grammar of the sentences is primitive, though the sense is usually clear. Emotionally, at any rate, the content of the letter is perfectly clear. And the writing is quite beautiful, like Gertrude Stein channeled through Leslie Scalapino. A projected empathy which is not a circuit, as it begins and ends with a single desperately anthropomorphizing subject, but that nonetheless clears a space within which loss and mourning can be rationalized.

In the fourth section, Montgomery, in conversation with a friend, describes the Real (or, possibly, just the real) in voiceover. The images are closeups of squid being cleaned, their ink being harvested and, in a *mise en abyme* of cannibalistic empathy, used to draw a representation of the squid itself.

There is a long tradition, particularly strong in experimental film of trying to “step back” from language, which posits language as a corrupting force which blocks our direct access to the sensual universe of the prelapsarian Real. Montgomery, obviously, is not such a romantic. She is developing possible dynamic relations of experience and linguistic behavior.

Once we give up on the project of “stepping back,” we will think

of the strange ways in which philosophers talk not as needing to be elucidated out of existence, but as suggestions for talking differently, on all fours with suggestions made by scientists and poets.

—Richard Rorty, *Wittgenstein and the Linguistic Turn*

Rorty falls short of the correct conclusion. It is not philosophers who will develop new ways of talking with suggestions of poets, but rather poets, such as Ahwesh and Montgomery, who make the philosopher secondary.

In the fifth section, Montgomery and her sister play a language game as they talk about the recent death of their mother.

We had to speak without using the letter “o.” There is a superimposed explanatory title toward the beginning: “Without O,” but no one ever seems to notice or get it. Not sure it matters, but I thought I’d point it out.

—Jennifer Montgomery

One forgets a language game is being played and sinks into the affective/narrative content. From here (the last third of the video) games are dispensed with and the work becomes an extraordinarily resonant elegy.

Keeper Of The Camera

It is perfect to end the program with Ahwesh’s

Martina's Playhouse, as the work contains all the other work as a seedbed contains the garden. It is a hologram of the program.

We begin, after a few moments of hand-processed Super 8 abstraction, the importance of which cannot be underestimated, with Martina on the roof, warily, confidently returning the camera's gaze as she eats a sandwich. This is a film about eating. Or, this is a film about putting things into your body such as food and camera equipment and about extracting things from the body, such as juice and milk.

Then, flowers and a voiceover...

If one expresses love with the aid of a flower, it is the corolla rather than the useful organs that becomes the sign of desire. The substitution of juxtaposed elements for essential elements is consistent with all that we spontaneously know about the emotions that motivate us. Since the object of human love is never an organ but the person who has the organ.

—Georges Bataille, *The Language of Flowers*

With that, we return to the roof. Martina has entered language and finished her sandwich. She is ready to speak, and spells her name and then demands to have her name spoken. She is a speaking subject. The ritual is repeated, and we hear Ahwesh, keeper of the camera, repeating Martina's name at the child's

demand.

More Bataille... on displacement and genitals vs. people quotes from his text "The Language of Flowers." It is almost psychoanalytic theory, but something else. Perhaps religious? Not spiritual, religious.

...the tradition of the language of flowers also recalls the early nineteenth-century work of the French visionary and communist Charles Fourier, beloved by both Karl Marx and Walter Benjamin. Although he nowhere makes mention of the fact, Bataille's language of flowers thus emerges from two centuries of tradition with its roots in secrecy, the occult, orientalist fantasies, and an appeal to a logic of nature that makes accessible divine wisdom. Yet at the same time his essay marks a radical departure from this tradition.

—Michael Taussig, *The Language of Flowers*

Next, Jennifer Montgomery, performing for the camera, an exuberant, joyous scream, casually holding the mic in her lap.

From these portraits of single people, we move into scenes with characters interacting. Ahwesh becomes more of a character too, with Martina and her mother playacting in the living room. Martina is in her underwear, dressing a stuffed frog. She's not ready to perform. "I'm not ready!" she cries to Ahwesh/camera. "Ready?" Ahwesh asks, Martina glances up and says

“Nope” as Ahwesh keeps filming.

From here, scenes of Martina playing with her mother are intercut with Montgomery playing with Ahwesh/camera. Martina changes the gender of her frog and without knowing it references the gender bending identities of *PeeWee's Playhouse*. She tells stories based on mass culture images cut from magazines. She wants to be a baby, then her mother is the baby. In a beautiful gesture, back to the camera, she shrugs off her shirt and climbs up on the couch offering her nipples to her mother. One is milk, the other one is juice.

Meanwhile, Montgomery has a more direct relationship with Ahwesh/camera. There is no mother to cathect to, but there is always the maternal phallus. Montgomery mimes blowing the microphone, rubs it along her body, almost inserts it. “Stick it up yr ass,” Ahwesh says dryly, but the film runs out before we see if Montgomery does.

In some descriptions of the film, it is said Montgomery comes on to Ahwesh, and although she appears exuberantly horned up, she talks only of the performance as a substitution for a seduction and the resulting sex. Nor is Montgomery merely coming on to the camera in a simple act of exhibitionism. Rather, it is this new entity Ahwesh/camera which structures the

libidinal flow in this video.

Perhaps Ahwesh is a paternal figure, Ahwesh/camera maternal and the microphone the maternal phallus. The microphone is separate from camera and Ahwesh, but the camera cannot separate from Ahwesh/camera.

One way *Two Serious Ladies* is germane to thinking about Ahwesh and Montgomery is the shared conviction that psychic life is more real, vivid and tangible than everyday life. Everyday life gains its meaning by the way in which it resurrects psychic fantasy. While much of Bowles' imagery is positively Freudian, as is its repetition, the pleasure she takes runs counter to orthodox psychoanalysis in that it elaborates pleasure/fantasy without guilt or anxiety. And the reiterated fantasy does not involve condensation or displacement so much as a 1:1 remapping that, because it has not been repressed, does not require dreamwork/interpretation. There can be no narrative pat Ah-ha moment in which the masterful analyst explains it all for us. These ladies simultaneously understand profoundly and do not understand at all.

Daily gallery program:

Peggy Ahwesh

The Ape of Nature, 2010, 24 minutes, video

Collections, 2012, 6 minutes, video

Bethlehem, 2009, 8 minutes, video

Martina's Playhouse, 1989, 20 minutes, film

Jennifer Montgomery

Transitional Objects, 2000, 19 minutes, film

One Species Removed, 2013, 38 minutes, video

During the course of the exhibition, the gallery will
host evening screenings and discussions.

Wednesday, September 16th, 6:30 pm

Jennifer Montgomery, *Art For Teachers of Children*
(1995, b/w 16mm sound film, TRT: 84 minutes)

Wednesday, September 30th, 7:00 pm

Salon discussion of the exhibition, with Ahwesh and
Montgomery, moderated by Sonel Breslav.

Friday, October 9th, 6:30 pm

Jennifer Montgomery, *Notes on the Death of Kodachrome*

(2006, video and Super 8 sound film, TRT: 48 minutes)

Gordon & Tara Nelson, *End of Empire* (2015, loop, Super 8, 16mm and HD)

Friday, October 23rd, 6:30 pm

Peggy Ahwesh, *Neither Day Nor Night* (2015, HD, TRT: 25 minutes)

Moyra Davey, *My Saints* (2014, HD, TRT: 30 minutes)

Steve Reinke produced a preliminary text for the exhibition. In the spirit of our work, we used Reinke's text as the basis for this essay, interpolating quotes from various sources.

*Peggy Ahwesh, Georges Bataille. Jean Baudrillard, Carl Bogner, Jane Bowles, Lia Gangitano, Jennifer Montgomery, Richard Rorty, Michael Taussig, Joy Williams, and D.W. Winnicott.

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Murray Guy

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