

“but at this disjuncture we know what is what”

27 May - 9 July 2023

Kevin Beasley

Banu Cennetoğlu

John Greyson

Amy Ching-Yan Lam

Ghislaine Leung

Sara Leydon

Mahshid Rafiei

curated by Jacob Korczynski

Cuttings of text and image come together to form Sara Leydon’s *Baroness de Lancinena* (1990) and *Alice Kyteler* (1990). Each a reference to a woman either identified or accused of practicing witchcraft, these two collages are part of a series first shown in a 1990 solo exhibition titled *Conviction* at Artspeak. Their history in this city is considerable, living long-term in the collection of Christos Dikeakos. Of the seven artists gathered here, Leydon is the only one to have lived and worked on the unceded traditional territory of the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish), and səliłwətał (Tsleil-Waututh) Nations upon which this exhibition is also hosted.

Befitting their eponymous titles, these collages foreground a lone female figure amongst their assembly of segments. The history of the Baroness of Lancinena can be traced to a single reference located in the pages of Jules Michelet’s study of witchcraft *La Sorcière* (1862), while the life of Alice Kyteler remains more deeply documented across multiple sources. While speculation about the end of her life abounds, the official records end with her flight for freedom prior to her sentencing.

With no evidence of capture, death, or other traces of a life beyond, Kyteler remains fugitive, her actions a continuous process against force imposed. Elusion ad infinitum.

“Constant escape is an ode to impurity, an obliteration of the last word.”<sup>1</sup>

This quote is taken from the preface to *Black and Blur* (2017), the first part of Fred Moten’s trilogy *Consent Not To Be A Single Being* which was followed by *Stolen Life* (2018), and *The Universal Machine* (2018). Moten underscores escape as interstitial space, an ongoing act that opens up a third stream.

A few years later in *No One’s Witness: A Monstrous Poetics* (2021), Syd Zolf continues some of Moten’s thinking around acts of elusion:

“Refusal (“No”) precedes the body, the person, the “one.” Refusal of easy capture, of productive outlay, of consumable meaning.”<sup>2</sup>

“but at this disjuncture we know what is what” concludes an informal trilogy of group exhibitions that began with *Surface Tension* at Oakville Galleries a decade ago and continued with *separation penetrates* at Mercer Union in 2017. The first exhibition tested the persistent materiality and tactility of images and the second exhibition considered interruptions inherent to artworks understood as a caesura. This third exhibition ends with escape.

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<sup>1</sup> Moten, Fred. “Preface,” in *Black and Blur*, Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2017, p. vii.

<sup>2</sup> Zolf, Syd. *No One’s Witness: A Monstrous Poetics*, Duke University Press, Durham and London, 2021, p. 21.

The final distich of Yvonne Rainer's poem *Labor Day Faces* lends this exhibition its name. It begins by testing connections before concluding with a rupture:

The negotiations  
around I am not you  
become moot  
at parting

a moue on one face  
Keaton on the other

each wave of feeling  
still roiled  
from household dithering

but at this disjuncture  
we know what is what<sup>3</sup>

Each of the assembled artists offer an active proposition of elusion: constant escape from confinement, constant escape from autobiography, constant escape from legibility, constant escape from artificial alignment, constant escape from a single configuration, constant escape from autonomy.

John Greyson's *32 of 1640 Letters from Theresa Paolone* (1979) is one of his earliest works, an artist's book that preceded his videos and films for which he is best known. The fictional title character is a female alter-ego for the artist, a subject who is inherently incomplete. The publication purports to capture a cross-section of select dispatches from a lifetime of neglected correspondence: missives that sever relationships and admonish institutions.

Although handwritten notes populate some of the pages, the cumulative pleasure and pressure of the book comes from following the permutations of the form letter and the tension between the templates taken and the subjectivity they offer room for. Here, the book is presented as an exhibition copy devised specifically for this exhibition, a video which moves through the selection of the thirty-two epistles, page by page.

Banu Cennetoğlu's practice takes distribution as material. Regardless of the medium engaged, her strategies enable an embodied access to groupings of image, text, and even combinations of colours that implicate the individual amid systems of economics, statehood, and technology.

A soft sculpture and score, *IKNOWVERYWELLBUTNEVERTHELESS* (2015-ongoing) is a phrase translated from psychoanalyst and author Octave Mannoni: "Je sais bien, mais quand même." Despite the concrete framework of the quote, its exact language is adapted for each iteration, ultimately determined by the location of presentation. Helium-filled mylar balloons that may typically spell out a name, an event, or a celebratory greeting are instead assembled untethered in service of the statement. The active element pushes against their placement and the temporality inherent to every exhibition eventually combines with the chemical conditions of the individual letters. Inevitably the falling and shifting collection of characters open up to other configurations, including illegibility.

If Cennetoğlu's approach to language enlists chance procedures and ultimately embraces its opportunities for discontinuity, Amy Ching-Yan Lam's poetry practice is demarcated by the limit of the printed page. Taken from her recent publication *Baby Book* (2023), *Force* is the shortest of the works gathered for the collection.

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<sup>3</sup> Rainer, Yvonne, "Labor Day Faces," in *Poems*, Badlands Unlimited, New York, 2011, p. 52.

In the economy of a couplet held by a title that is both noun and verb, the opposite movements of upwards and downwards are embodied in two separate growth cycles. Situating the reader in the middle of a rise and fall, her poem makes tangible what comes to bear upon the work of Cennetoğlu as well as Kevin Beasley. With this poem Lam stakes out a position also taken by the viewer: between. With the current lease winding down at 2954 West 4th Avenue, the garden behind the gallery continues to grow. Long after Unit 17 leaves, processes of *Force* continue.

The upward effort in Cennetoğlu's work initially appears to have its opposite in Kevin Beasley's *Bust* (2011-20), a sculpture indicative of his expanded practice with polyurethane resin and garments. But just as her work both rises and falls, *Bust* lifts itself into a haunting form as its materiality also weighs down its surfaces, both implying and absenting a body. Most of his works appear in an upright configuration, beholding our own presence before them. *Bust* on the other hand is an outlier amongst Beasley's oeuvre in that there are two different configurations that the sculpture can take. A dye-sublimated printed t-shirt combines with the extant rigidity of a motocross neck brace as well as a cervical neck collar, the latter ascribed to just the given name of Charles, thus intimating an intimacy. Like Lam's poem, Beasley's title is both noun and verb. *Bust* simultaneously suggests casting and catastrophe, underscoring the fragility of bodies against the force of industrial objects and the chemicals that constitute them.

Mahshid Rafiei's practice enmeshes process, material, and image leaving an entanglement for the viewer to either parse out or prise apart. In many of Rafiei's most recent works, extant objects are subject to her assembly, but with *trace* (2020) she offers an inversion of this appropriation with the possibility of her own object to be repurposed as a tool for reproduction.

*trace* like the title of works by Lam and Beasley, tethers together verb and noun. A sheet of tracing vellum folded into quadrants inscribed with a heavy layer of graphite, it also collapses distinctions between drawing and sculpture. Its title indicates its possible role in the drafting process and is also a reference to the process of its production. Graphite is a familiar medium, often offering one of the earliest opportunities for inscription. When encountering the dense composition of *trace*, tactile knowledge of mark making reveals the layered temporality of its production.

An assertion against autonomy, the scores of Ghislaine Leung are context-contingent as opposed to site-specific. Produced through a process of negotiation with the exhibition organizers, central to this exchange is an acknowledgement of the labour of art production required that exists with or without the artist.

This includes *Toons* (2019). Gloss white paint is applied to all the internal walls of the exhibiting gallery and the sheen of this dominant surface gathers reflections. Primarily these come from the lustre of overhead lighting, positioned in each space to provide an even appearance in the most unregulated of economies. But in the configuration of this curatorial proposition, a glow also pools from the proximity of *Toons* to *IKNOWVERYWELLBUTNEVERTHELESS*.

*Flags* (2019) is a separate score that could be seen as a companion to *Toons*, taking a different architectural feature of the gallery and the opposite colour as material. Gloss black paint is applied to the internal facing doors. They could signal storage or may provide access to an office. But each time they indicate a way out.

- Jacob Korczynski