

“Fiona Connor, Sydney de Jong, Audrey Wollen”  
Fiona Connor, Sydney de Jong, Audrey Wollen

29 October — 10 December, 2016  
Opening: 29 October, 5-8 PM

Press Release #3:

## Notes on Flesh and Smog

### Without telling you too much

—since you haven’t seen the show, and since I haven’t seen the work—I will remind you that a press release (written before a show goes up) is a kind of projective-generative phantasm, a sort of promissory note cum vortex, cum vacuum=horny, aching and fertile. Proximate, brimming, and braced. (Like a wince, but planar and more outward facing.)

### Without telling you too much—

I will say that this exhibition, “Fiona Connor, Sydney de Jong, Audrey Wollen,” is interested in how both art production and art objects (including thoughts) no matter how objective they may seem, are infused with lives lived. The show asks its audience to consider the interpenetration of one thing by another, and more, the interpenetration of all things by all other things. The juxtaposition of these specific works suggests an attentiveness to permeability, provisionality, symbiosis—perhaps an attentiveness to the urgency of a global paradigmatic shift from human exceptionalism to collaborative survival.<sup>1</sup> The exhibition invokes intractable questions regarding the dynamically indeterminate relationship between form and the informal out of which form emerges.<sup>2</sup> How does difference function in a discussion of symbiosis? Why do we seek the skin of art?

### 9 am. Marina Del Mar. California.

It’s morning. I rub my eyes and grab a pencil. *Do you mind if I take notes?* I say. I know I’m a dork. Audrey scoffs and offers the briefest of disquisitions in response: During a class called

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*Film Today*, professor-filmmaker Thom Andersen exhorted his students to take copious notes, buttressing the advice by reminding them that Sontag even took notes at porno movies and everyone thought she was a dork, but then she turned out to be Susan Sontag. I have told Fiona and Audrey ahead of time that I like sausage, but instead they have an abundance of bread-items on service at the table where we sit. Thinking apparently uses a good deal of calories so I smash a corner off one these blueberry scones with a fork. There's a cat watching us from the couch. *The old cat*, Audrey explains. *The new cat is back there*. She points to a door in the back of the living room, which is closed.

They tell me I'm the first of 5. That they will spend today guiding a series of thinkers, writers, friends through an introduction to the exhibition they are planning together. Audrey and Fiona have solicited a small crew of folks, hoping for a variety of press releases. *Some will be conventional, many will not*.

After a social moment, they re-direct: stern taskmasters. *Ok come look and we'll show you some of the work*. I follow them to the back of the living room, tug lightly on the doorknob, when a cat hisses and oozes through the impossibly narrow interstice I've just created. The old and new cats suddenly entwine generating a convulsion of sound and fur. Fiona runs toward the rhubarb and yells at them, *Stop! Stop!* While Audrey, moving more deliberately, directs, *Don't run, don't run. That's not helping*.

House tour first. We arrive onto the patio, a low, covered concrete slab inundated with what I assume are clone-cuttings of a particularly flower-like maroon succulent. There are 50 or 60 pots of the same species of plant. I've never seen anything like it—a tidal rush of sameness and difference. I mention that on page 30 of *The Neutral*, Roland Barthes writes, "Art=refined practice of difference: don't treat objects the same way: treat what appears to be the same as though

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different." *Because it is*, I finish, and they agree. I write down, *Will each visitor today be treated to the exact same explanations?*

We find the den and sit side-to-side on a small couch. Fiona transports a large, striped ceramic dish and cup set (by de Jong) from a high shelf to a small coffee table at our knees.

*The idea for the show initially came when I found these photos.* Fiona opens her laptop and mobilizes a series of black and white photographs, taken by Frank J. Thomas, of John McLaughlin's handsome minimalist paintings. We agree that the photos come off here as oddly contemporary, and attribute this to the fact that in the background of each image, a viewer is able to make out a Los Angeles-style yard: garden, grass, spigots/hoses, potted plants, scrappy trellis, milk crates, dusty concrete stoop. It's clear the photos were taken to be cropped and used as functional painting documentation i.e., *slides* (in the parlance of the pre-digital). Paintings in each photo are perched on things: buckets, crates, cement blocks. Sometimes the stripe of back-lot border is so narrow that it's hard to decipher what fragment has been inadvertently captured. Is that a raincoat or some shrubbery? Is that a Bozo-the-clown toy or a half-dead rose?

That the accidental background (green screen) of these paintings is *garden* (a contrivance whose history is exactly, baldly, the evolution of human intervention into wildness) is rich indeed; fear-based extirpation of the surround gave way (slowly, quickly) to grooming, vetting, domestication and eventually to design conventions constituted by pure (aesthetic) exploitation, decontextualization, and control. *Form clearly emerges from the informal*, I say, pointing at this tight geometric abstraction, this painting leaned carefully against a dirty stucco house. *It's an unlikely instance of that, but it's here. These things were made somewhere, and by someone in particular.* Fiona's absolutely interested

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in minimalism's historical urge to transcendental experience, as frustrated in these photos, by their re-presentation as canvas, paint, frame (and desire) tainted, or even, say, *reclaimed* here by the everyday: flesh, smog, cheap toys. *Existing in chaos*, Audrey says. *So let's make a show*, we all seem to say together, nodding.

The uncropped, found photos—as documentation of documentation—offer a reverse-frame, where the border (here the few inches of backyard between the edge of the painting and the edge of the photo) — instead of re-inscribing a periphery, suggest the amaranthine, or excessively proliferative qualities of an artwork (or even, say, Art). The narrow but viewable slice of garden (unsightly, contextualizing) punctures, creates epic leakiness.

In *Objects or Themselves*, Audrey Wollen's 20-minute video work, she employs an image of a single painting, Velázquez's *Rokeby Venus* (1647-51) as the durational backdrop for her recorded voiceover. A naked woman, Venus, is facing away from the viewer, lying on a sumptuous couch draped with silks. She seems to gaze at her own reflection in a mirror that is steadied by her son Cupid—a cherub rendered here with tiny, feathery wings. Her face is centered in the mirror however, and we quickly realize that that means (maths of trigonometry unforsook) she is looking directly at *us*. In 1914, suffragette Mary Richardson, a member of the militant Women's Social and Political Union (WSPU)—whose motto was DEEDS NOT WORDS—slashed and damaged the painting (which was quickly sutured and re-hung) in order to bring light to the issue of sexual inequality in turn-of-the-century England. In her video, Wollen calls this act a “smooth ripple of violence.” Richardson is quoted as saying, “I tried to destroy the most beautiful woman in mythological history.” Wollen's riveting monologue weaves together three strands of narrative: the longer history of the *Rokeby Venus* (politics of female representation and representational art in general), the events and ideas that make up the history of Mary Richardson and the WSPU, and Wollen's

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own trials in dealing with treatment for cancer as a teenager. (*Slash/slasher/slashed*, Audrey offers plaintively. And adds, *I am interested in how this painting—or any painting—can invisibly contain the marks of real bodies fighting for something real.*)

Fiona Connor's piece, *Insert (door) #1-#6*, involves the removal of all doors in the gallery from their jambs (cabinet doors, entrance door, bathroom door, closet doors, security gate). These will be embedded forthwith into gallery walls so that they read as flat images. (Where the security gate has gaps between its bars, studs will be visible through it and greasy fingerprints, scuff marks will all be retained.) I laugh and remember that here in Los Angeles, Fiona's neighbors had recently called the police to report her front door as missing. (Connor had removed it as part of a project taking place in her apartment.) I think, *Hemorrhage*. Taking a moment to picture a gallery I've never seen, without its doors, I realize quickly that I'm nonetheless able to conjure a detailed image of what this maneuver will provide. The doors are frozen in time, removed from use, made historical. (*Remember when we used to have doors, ha ha?*) Privacy is hard to come by. Any minimalist, purist visual aesthetics favored by the gallery is contaminated by the necessary detritus of staying alive, which is now exposed: grime in cabinets and closets, dishes, napkins and drinking glasses, clothes that have slipped off of hangers, leftover-food, cleaning products, crumbs, unorganized heaps of tools, tape, lumber, back-up toilet paper, gallery/artist inventory, etc. Gleefully I realize that the bathroom, too, will have no door. Fiona, unmoved, announces that she would pee in public. Neither Audrey nor Fiona would like to crap without a door on the john. I suggest a fog machine be switched on for those few desperate moments of privacy. Audrey disparages the idea, citing toxic particulate. I follow up with the idea of a huge fantastic spotlight placed near the toilet and focused (away from the sitter) toward the door-less jamb. We laugh together for almost a full minute. Light as door.

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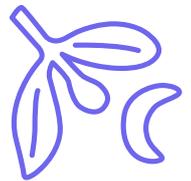


Sydney de Jong's *Colored Clay Pieces* look, initially, like hand-made, highly-colored ceramic home-ware: teacups, plates, saucers, bowls—something you might find in an artist's kitchen cupboard, or even on display in a high-end design store—the one product with urgent, organic edges. These would be the items designated to deliver (the poetics of) *body, care, intimacy, unexpectedness, affect, color* in a room otherwise full with the clean hairless evidence of machine fabrication. I am told that de Jong is not interested in categories (or attendant hierarchies) like art, craft—indeed that she is not even interested in destinations, galleries or otherwise. I am told that de Jong proudly refers to the work as home-ware, that she has biding trust in the process of making and that she has been known to say, *I want to create pieces for friends and family*. I wonder fleetingly why she has agreed to the show, and decide that this mildest of assents, the narrative of ambivalence (disinterest smashes into avidness) is a spicy illustration of the assent to art discourse in general, the movable filter cum headspace that finally makes any object into art—we agree to put the object in a certain context and explore it under certain terms: historical, formal, aesthetic, contemporaneous relevance, etc. (Much like a deck of playing cards—one day Poker, another day Crazy 8's.) The terms by which we address the object shift, and (miraculously) the latter filter doesn't necessarily vex any former use (value).

This is an exhibition that joins (and generates) a discussion-in-motion, one swimming in that melty space, the expanded skin of art. This is an exhibition that somehow con-figures Januslike language-and-thought-objects (*these solemn jetsam gizmos! no less real for being in motion!*) buoyant in the tortuous membrane of surf that is neither and both, art and living.

—Harry Dodge

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<sup>1</sup> In her 2013 book *The Posthuman*, Rosi Braidotti theorizes ‘a plural subject’ and defines it, among things, as “a relational subject constituted in and by multiplicity...which is both embodied and embedded.” She aligns herself with “an ethics of becoming which, for a non-unitary subject, proposes an enlarged sense of interconnections between self and others, including the non-human or ‘earth’ others, by removing the obstacle of self centered individualism.”

<sup>2</sup> Stefano Harney and Fred Moten, *The Undercommons: Fugitive Planning and Black Study* (Wivenhoe: Minor Compositions, 2013).

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