TEMPERAMENTAL

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TEMPERAMENTAL

WORK BY

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CURATED BY

Erin Silver

JANUARY 5 - FEBRUARY 14, 2015


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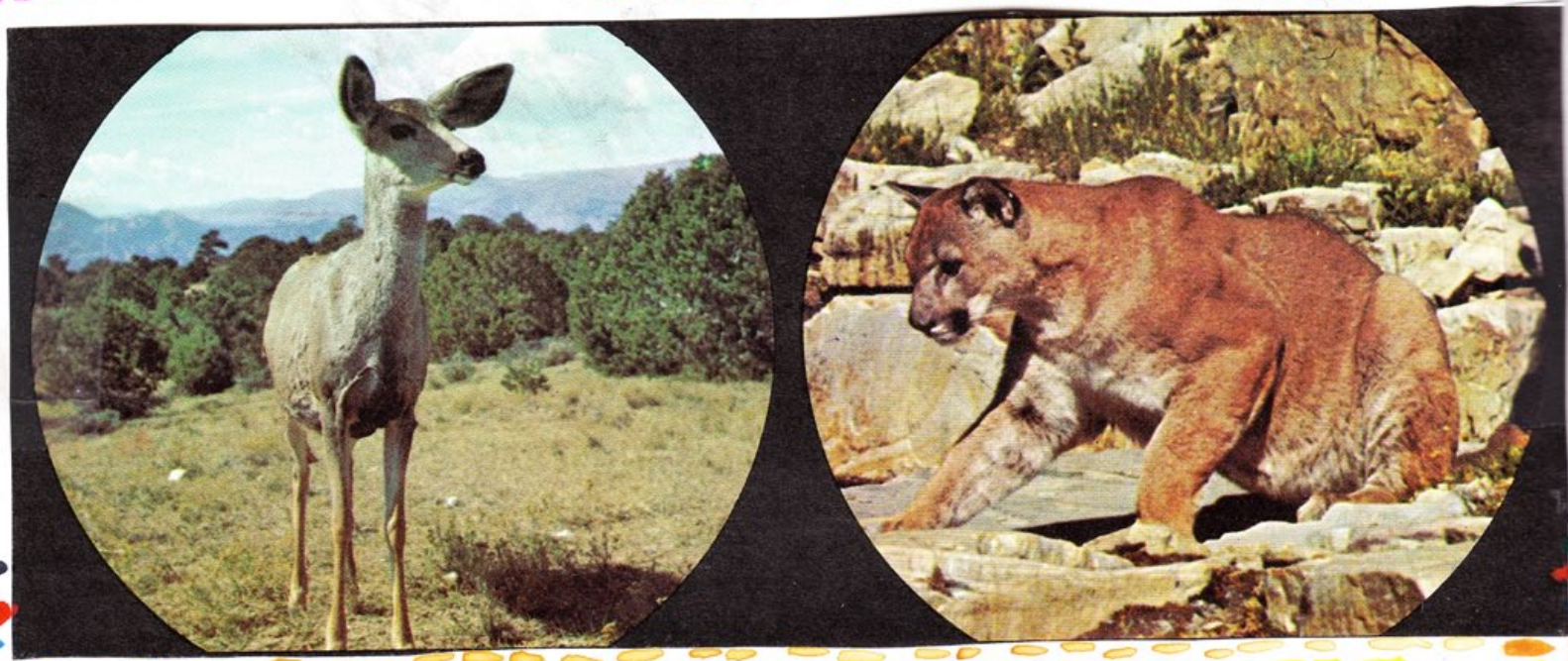

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Thinking Feeling: Art and Queer Affect

AMELIA JONES

Being queer (particularly for men aligning with gay culture) is often associated with excessive affect, either hyperbolic expressions of feelings or hypersensitivity. It is not surprising, then, that theorizing queer has evolved into thinking about feelings – particularly in the work of Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and her followers, such as former students José Esteban Muñoz and Jennifer Doyle, and in that of other key theorists, such as Heather Love, Sara Ahmed, Lauren Berlant, and Ann Cvetkovich.[1] How and why this is the case would take a lifetime to explore.

At the same time, one conventional view of artistic creation has been that it is produced through the artist's expression of feelings. The nexus of interrelated terms – queer, feelings, art – thus begs for analysis and understanding, given their interrelation in queer theory and in art practice and art history (particularly in romanticism and high modernism). At the very least, for an exhibition intriguingly entitled *TEMPERAMENTAL*, it is worth exploring the contours of these associations – queer, emotions (or emotionality), art – to ask why excessive feeling is associated with queer experiences of the world and at the same time with art. What happens when all three come together? And, in relation to *TEMPERAMENTAL*, how does the direct expression or navigation of feelings provide a creative means to explore questions of marginalization by particular kinds of subjects working in the visual arts?

The emphasis on emotional excess or sensitivity as being linked in a politically radical way to queer sensibility or gay subjectivity begins at least as far back as the early 1960s, with Susan Sontag's 1964 "Notes on Camp" (probably further, but Sontag crystallized a mode of thinking about urban white gay male experience that had been knocking about in Europe since the late nineteenth century and in post-WWII U.S.A.). Also during this period and also in New York, the emotionally and sexually extravagant performance and film work of Jack Smith and Barbara Rubin and others provided queer alternatives to mainstream art practices being celebrated by dominant institutions at the time. While Smith and Rubin created communities of characters interacting in overtly excessive ways in performance and on film (viz. Smith's hilariously camp film *Flaming Creatures* and Rubin's queer sexual tableaux in *Christmas on Earth*, both 1963), Sontag famously explored camp as not an idea but a "sensibility," or mode of feeling and experience. In the end, she argues, camp comes down to "sincerity," which in its primary sense indicates the alignment of feelings and intentions as manifested in one's expressions or creative productions.[2]

As suggested, Sedgwick's work consistently argued and enacted the links (malleable but tenacious) between queer and excessive feelings or sensitivities – revaluing these as positive ways of being with others in the world. Her 2003 book *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* definitively sutures together the confluence of queer and the "temperamental" or acutely feeling subject. If queer is linked to performativity through the latter's "tenuous … ontological ground," then it is the performative putting-into-juxtaposition (putting "*beside*") that promises to evoke queer relationalities in space that might address the "texture" or "touch" of feeling. By touching feeling we might in turn evoke a kind of middle-range affect as offering "space for effectual creativity and change."[3]

José Esteban Muñoz argues in a 2006 article, "Feeling Brown, Feeling Down," that a particular kind of feeling characterizes the experience of the subaltern – in the case of his analysis, the queer "brown" North American. As such, minoritarian subjects occupy a depressive position wherein they are forced to tend to others, modelling relationality and care. The minoritarian subject is quintessentially caring, enacting what he calls a kind of "brown feeling" that "chronicles a certain ethics of the self" and learning to stage a kind of "reparative" relation touted by Sedgwick in her work as radical and transformative in its refusal of oppositional antagonisms.[4] Heather Love's 2007 *Feeling Backward* argues that a queer politics might involve embrac-

ing the "backward feelings" that being queer entails, looking backward to historicize "earlier forms of feeling, imagination, and community."[5]

Finally, among many other examples connecting queer and feeling or affect, Jennifer Doyle explores a particular kind of "difficult" art that pricks or disturbs us, specifically in relation to how it creates emotionally charged relational bonds with spectators, often through sexually charged means. Doyle explores controversial art practices as "unnerving, depressing, or upsetting," but as specifically *not* offering "a representation of how the artist feels" or "the positive message one associates with political art." Doyle notes that this kind of "difficult" art work "turns to the viewer, in some cases making him or her into a witness, or even a participant," concluding that this "can make people uncomfortable in ways that feel distinctly personal."[6] It is this *solicitation of us as the work's (or the artist's) "other"* that interests me here in thinking about the works in *TEMPERAMENTAL*.

All of the works in *TEMPERAMENTAL* explore this confluence of queer, emotionality, and art in one way or another. The show displays the way in which art practices of a performative and immersive type are particularly suited to purveying and engaging feelings in ways that make us think hard about how we negotiate and interact with the others around us. This kind of practice – as artists long ago figured out – directly stages an embodied relationality, positioning us phenomenologically within a field of objects and/or bodies so as to point to our psychic and physical contingency on the materialities around us, both subjects and objects, and the stuff in between. As such, the works play on or solicit particular kinds of emotional bonds in order to make us "think" through "feeling."

Exploring how this strategy works and has worked historically will enable me to connect it to queer modes of being and politics. To this end, let's go back to an early moment that seems directly related to an earlier work by taisha paggett – one of the artists whose work is exhibited in *TEMPERAMENTAL*: *Decomposition of a Continuous Whole* (2009-2012).[7] The moment I have in mind is that of Carolee Schneemann's *Up to and Including Her Limits* (1973), a premier example of the messy, often hypersexualized, excessive practices of what I have historicized as body art – practices in which the artist enacts her body as the work itself (differentiated from performance art, which includes body art but also much more narrative and theatre-based performances).[8] As Schneemann has described the work, where she hangs in a harness that dangles and twirls her body through space and extends her arms to draw on sheets of paper hung on the surrounding walls, it phenomenologically extends her body into "literal time and literal space" to compose the work. *Up to and Including Her Limits* had nothing to do with personal expression in the conventional sense, as attached to abstract painting practices celebrated at the time, but puts the body in motion to cover the space around it, creating a "residue" of embodied action that becomes a monumental drawing.[9]

Schneemann noted in 1980 her motivation to perform the body as and with the art in order to "see better":

> Early on I felt that the mind was subject to the dynamics of its body. The body activating pulse of eye and stroke, the mark signifying event transferred from "actual" space to constructed space. And that it was essential to dance, to exercise before going to paint in order to see better: to bring the mind's-eye alert and clear as the muscular relay of eye/hand would be.[10]

In relation to Schneemann as producer, a work such as *Up to and Including Her Limits* thus provides both a mode of performative expression and a strategy for engaging others in the processes of creation a means of "transfer" from eye to hand, and from making to receiving bodies, both at the

time through the live experience of the work and later through the huge abstract drawings and the videos acting as the residue of the creative actions.

The context of Schneemann's radical dance through space has been made clear by the artist in her writings and in interviews. By the early 1970s, Schneemann, who identified as a painter, had spent over a decade addressing directly and indirectly the New York art world's unmitigated celebration of the male abstract expressionist painter with his occupation of large spaces and planes, with his body and its expressions – the body necessarily male but veiled as "only in an anonymous heroic structure."[11] If Jackson Pollock could be celebrated still fifteen years after his death for his "action painting" and the resulting wall-sized canvases, then a feminist artist could – through an explicitly performative activation of the making body – produce equally vast "images," which nonetheless were rendered clearly inextricable from the labouring and markedly *female* body.

Inspired by feminist rage, Schneemann's active bodily practice was fuelled by the awareness of how the art world excluded women as artists. As she noted to the feminist body artist Barbara Smith, "There is a deep uneasiness about the female as a castrating form of male especially when she enters into the arena of creative arts. If she's [castrating] … she's probably going to try to get your art power or your cock power."[12] Clearly feminist, *Up to and Including Her Limits* is nonetheless not overtly queer – Schneemann's project has been to interrogate heteronormative binaries of gender, not to explore alternative modes of sexuality or other aspects of identification.

Turning to paggett's *Decomposition of a Continuous Whole*, we find a similar set of actions and residues, varying only slightly in each version of the work. In one videotaped version, we see her moving in a deliberate, choreographed fashion throughout what looks to be a room in a house, her arm extended with what appears to be a crayon in hand, her eyes blindfolded.[13] She cannot see, but allows her body to see/feel the contours of the space. In another version documented photographically, she stands, dressed in black and with arm extended (again with what seems to be a crayon or stick of pastel), or lies blindfolded on the floor, arm crooked awkwardly, drawing on a white wall. paggett's action reads even more explicitly than Schneemann's as a space-claiming act of phenomenological exploration. What can happen when a black female body claims the creative space of the gallery for herself, choreographing a performative act of expression not for the content of what ends up on the wall – which is not visible and so not visual for her – but for the process of space-claiming itself? The remaining marks, which we can see in the videotape documenting the piece, are surprisingly consistent, given that she cannot see where she is drawing, confirming the discipline necessary to her choreography of moves.

If Schneemann's work, explored in the larger context of the artist's career as a whole, speaks directly to the feminist need to establish creative gestures, actions, and spaces for women artists, paggett's work establishes a queer time and space in the terms outlined by Sedgwick. If Schneemann unsutured "art" from "male artist," "agency" from "veiled male body," paggett detaches "art" from "invisible white male subject expressing his emotions" and "black woman" from "object of white male desire." Both artists disconnect "art work" from "passive object." Art is action. Art is empowering and performative space-making: art becomes the very means through which paggett enunciates her agency as artist. In her 1993 book *Tendencies*, Sedgwick defines queer as that which challenges the normative suturing of values and identities with particular spaces, occupations, things:

> What if instead of [the pairing of families/Christmas] there were a practice of valuing the way in which meanings and institutions can be at loose ends with each other? What if the richest junctures weren't the ones where *every-*

> *thing means the same thing*? … That's one of the things that "queer" can refer to: the open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality aren't made (or can't be made) to signify monolithically.… [14]

paggett's action seems to ask, "What if instead of the pairing of 'white male' with 'artist' there were a practice of valuing black women's creativity as 'art'?" Regardless of the sexual orientation of Schneemann, her work is feminist; regardless of the sexual object choice of paggett, I'd like to suggest her work is *queer* (per Sedgwick's compelling description) in its bodily enactment, gender-critical and anti-racist agency, and claiming of space.

Where does this leave us with the so-called "temperamental" qualities of the work? Returning to Doyle's observations, and in relation to Schneemann's similar earlier piece, I would argue that paggett's performative dance/art work – which mobilizes her own body as highly trained and expressive within the spaces of art – moves us through its graceful and quiet insistence of the right of this body to create in this way in this place at this time. This is not overtly "difficult" art in the sense Doyle identifies, but subtly complex "difficult" art that challenges us to rethink which bodies we expect to be acting in which spaces. Moving with the grace and purposiveness of the professionally trained dancer, paggett enacts an emotionally expressive body as a creatively expressive body, one that taps into cultural memory (triggering memories of Schneemann's actions) and with the agency to *mark space*. The "temperamental" body artist can be overtly expressive, like Karen Finley (screaming her rage against racism, homophobia, and misogyny), or she can be quiet, deliberate, sublimating excessive emotion into elegant bodily "speech," such that the very act of making is parsed out as a singular gesture into and onto cultural space.

The evocation of a live expressive body can solicit our participation as emotive reminding us that all feeling is relational, between and among subjects—reminding us that all feeling is fundamentally *social*. Both Schneemann and paggett, at particular moments and in particular spaces, performed elegiac creative gestures, drawing us into the act of art-making as a potentially social (rather than secret, veiled, and privileged) practice that compels an act of interpretation in return. Such is the power of the "temperamental" gesture and its implicit politics: it insistently positions us as sharing in the production of meaning and value that allows or refuses this particular artist cultural space. In this way, these practices mark a particular kind of creativity as a queer space where (in Sedgwick's words above) not everything (an artist's body in an art space) means the same thing (a hidden source of creative genius, always implicitly white and masculine, regardless of the actual identifications of the body in question), and, in acts of generosity, allow us to feel we are ourselves "creating" the range of feelings and values associated with this gesturing body.

NOTES

1. My title, "thinking feeling," refers both to Sedgwick's 2003 book *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* and to Doyle's chapter "Thinking Feeling: Criticism and Emotion" in her book on "Difficulty and Emotion in Contemporary Art," *Hold It Against Me*. I self-consciously channel both scholars here with my title as an overt homage to those who have fully understood how feeling, queerness, and art come together and what it means when they do. Notably, aside from Muñoz, whose work I cite below, this field of inquiry is dominated by women queer theorists. Muñoz; Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009); Sara Ahmed, *The Cultural Politics of Emotion* (New York and London: Routledge, 2004); Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2011); Ann Cvetkovich, *Depression: A Public Feeling* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2012).
2. Susan Sontag, "Notes on 'Camp'" (1964), in *Against Interpretation and Other Essays* (New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1966).
3. Sedgwick, *Touching Feeling*, 3, 14, 13. Sedgwick actually uses the term "texxture," from the work of Renu Bora, rather than "texture." For Bora, texxture goes beyond mere tactile sensation; it is "a kind of texture that is dense with offered information about how, substantively, historically, materially, it came into being." From Renu Bora, "Outing Texture," *Novel Gazing: Queer Readings in Fiction*, ed. Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997), paraphrased by Sedgwick on 14.

4. José Esteban Muñoz, “Feeling Brown, Feeling Down: Latina Affect, the Performativity of Race, and the Depressive Position,” *Signs* 31:3 (2006), 675-88, quote from 676.
5. Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007), 30.
6. Doyle, *Hold It Against Me*, xi, xvii.
7. Documentary information on this performative dance/art piece can be found at: http://taishapaggett.net/Taisha_Paggett/works/Pages/Decomposition_of_a_Continuous_Whole.html; accessed 30 December 2014.
8. See my book *Body Art/ Performing the Subject* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1998).
9. See Carolee Schneemann’s description of the work in the video “Behind the Scenes: On Line: Carolee Schneemann,” and Connie Butler’s description of the drawing as a “residue” in the Museum of Modern Art archives; both available online at: http://www.moma.org/learn/moma_learning/carolee-schneemann-up-to-and-including-her-limits-1973-76; accessed 30 December 2014. On the version of *Up to and Including Its Limits* performed at the Kitchen in New York, see Madeline Burnside, “Carolee Schneemann,” *Arts* (Feb. 1980), 24.
10. Schneemann, “Fresh Blood” (1980), cited in Ted Castle, “Carolee Schneemann: The Woman Who Uses Her Body As Her Art,” *Artforum* (Nov. 1980), 70. In my photocopy of this article, which I obtained from Schneemann, she has crossed out “As” and written over it “WITH” (her body thus functions *with* not “as” or in place of the work of art).
11. Schneemann has noted, “I will die saying I’m a painter, but I don’t use paint. My whole work has been finding ways to enlarge and transgress those principles [of painting].” Cited in Heather Mackey, “Body Language,” *The San Francisco Bay Guardian* 25, n. 20 (February 20, 1991), 19. Schneemann on male artists “working with the body only in an anonymous heroic structure,” in Barbara Smith, “On the Body as Material,” interview with Carolee Schneemann, *Artweek* 21 n. 32 (Oct. 4, 1990), no pages visible.
12. Smith, “On the Body as Material,” interview with Carolee Schneemann, no pages visible.
13. See the video at: http://taishapaggett.net/Taisha_Paggett/works/Pages/Decomposition_of_a_Continuous_Whole.html; accessed 30 December 2014.
14. Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1993), 6, 8.