

more problems with form  
or,  
desire notes  
or,  
still woman

Lauren Bakst



You think you can change the form but the form  
changes you.

Shelter is the name of the first gay bar N and I go to our first night in a new city. It is a way of arriving—the Google search for “gay bar,” the subsequent following of what comes up. At Shelter, N orders us two drinks and the bartender tells him, “This is a gay bar but I’m not gay, and I think your friend is cute.” He is entitled to this. I practice avoiding eye contact and watch most of the other men in the bar look at N. Brad from Silicon Valley starts talking to me as a way of talking to N, who he eventually approaches by rubbing N’s thigh. Brad tells us where to go next: Construction. When he leaves, I say, “Nice talking to you.” Brad replies, “Really?”

What's happening right now is not a performance.  
I am a performer, a pretty good one, actually.  
It's just that I'm not performing right now.

“Perform” is another way of saying “through form.” It follows that performing is the action of doing “through form.” Through form, again and again. Does the doing through form, again and again, hold form in place?

Take the example of the well-trodden path. The path exists in part because people have used it. Use involves contact and friction, the tread of feet smooths the surface; the path is becoming smoother, easier to follow. The more a path is used the more a path is used.<sup>1</sup>

That was Sara Ahmed, writing on use and using this writing on use in service of working on the university and institutional transformation. I cross-read Ahmed to help me think through these notes on (my) intimate-social life-lives—the trembling spaces inside of relationships that surreptitiously live in alterity and yet, reproduce norms, making themselves beautifully and terribly inside of their own negation.

<sup>1</sup> Sara Ahmed, “Refusal, Resignation and Complaint,” *feministkilljoys*, July 2, 2018, <https://feministkilljoys.com/2018/06/28/refusal-resignation-and-complaint/>.

We had just had sex and we were both lying naked on the bed looking down at our pussies. He leaned his head over to me and quietly, he said, "Look, we're the same." Which, to me, also felt like a way of saying, "Look, how different we are."

I recently had this meeting with my ex. I guess you could say it was a goodbye ritual—that's what we called it anyway. It was a way for us to heal. To close the circle of our love, but in a really healthy way. I mean, it was mandatory, in a certain sense. Like, legally required. Lawyers were involved but in our minds, it really was this ritual for us to do together. And believe me, I was super on board and feeling really good about that. But then we were sitting across from each other at this conference table, signing paper after paper after paper, and all of a sudden, I hear this little click... Click. Click. I'm like, what is that? I look across the table at my ex, and he's taking my picture. I don't want to be captured. At first, I'm shocked and then I start to become enraged, but only on the inside. If you were looking at me, you wouldn't have known I was angry at all. You would have seen me smile for the camera. But actually I was furious.



I told you, I'm a really good performer.

At Construction, I find myself in a sea of gay men. I quickly spot the other two people in the bar who I perceive to fall outside of this category (I've developed something of an aptitude for this). I watch them negotiate the terrain and practice making eye contact. In these situations, it's like I could be attracted to anyone who might want me.

Holding erotics without resolution is an ethical practice.

I write about, or through, what was a marriage because marriage is a formal problem. What is lived in a space of alterity-making and un-making before it is solidified into what can be called form? What does a facade of solidity do to the people inside of said form? When I am a subject, I am a woman-subject—making and un-making this form, made and unmade by this form—and I live through the anticipatory- and after-effects of this subjection. Marriage is a problem for women-subjects. Marriage subjects women. “The more a path is used the more a path is used.”<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Ahmed, Ibid.

Simone Weil writes, “If the ‘I’ is the only thing we truly own, we must destroy it.”<sup>3</sup> Now that it’s now, the “I” is proving to be our most readily consumed object and thus the most difficult thing to destroy. I’m not a martyr. It’s just that I’ve been so choreographed and coded, it’s hard to know when I’m speaking, if it’s really me or some-one, some-thing else.

<sup>3</sup> Simone Weil, *Gravity and Grace*, trans. Arthur Wills (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1997). Cited in Chris Kraus, *Aliens & Anorexia* (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2013), 50.

I'm unaware that I never use "I" in my text messages until you tell me. I know you appreciate what troubles you. I know you are angry. On my birthday, you send me a poem, and as a result, I start looking for tautologies everywhere. The word, "or," for instance. Or, a work of art in which a cactus stands in front of a life-size photograph of the very same cactus, next to an enlarged placard with the definition of "plant" printed on it.<sup>4</sup> I locate my-self shuttling between this triangulation of image, thing, word. Living this way requires a particular kind of attention.

Later, I watch a lecture by a French philosopher on YouTube.<sup>5</sup> She argues that the feminist anti-essentialist project is violent to women. If woman is formed by what negates her (i.e.: violence), women therefore possess a negative essence. With skepticism I practice saying, "I am not not," and wonder, what is the materiality produced by such a negation?

<sup>4</sup> Joseph Kosuth, *One and Three Plants*, 1965.

<sup>5</sup> Catherine Malabou, "Post-Gender Theory and the Feminine" (lecture, 7th Subversive Festival: "Power and Freedom in the Time of Control," Cinema Europe, Zagreb, December 5, 2014).

I read Simone White's poem "on, or being the other woman" again and again and again. Each reading feels like falling apart, or a soliloquy to the many parts I already feel I am, moving in many directions and through many temporalities at once. Desires and pleasures dwell in difficulty. Simone White writes to trap music:

i cannot think of a single poem [...] / using language to say / when at last i am with you again and you begin to press yourself inside me / an inch or two at a time / i am so relieved not to be myself and never want to be myself again and have felt grateful for all the ways i have aged, my vagina has aged, all of me seems to have lived up to now / as pathway / for what passes through us

And I am reminded of when you said, "Language is the renewable resource of erotics." And how this language opens me up with all of my desire to live inside the multitude of ways it feels so good to feel "not me." I return to YouTube, this time viewing a talk by White in which she speaks of the panic that acting on her desires has caused in those closest to her, or in those she may have least expected it to. This, I think, is a phenomenon I am becoming and will continue to become familiar with. (Because the desires don't add up, don't match, don't make sense, have no clear path.)

Earlier in the talk, White remarks that her three-and-a-half-year-old son never asks, "What am I?" or "Who am I?" but rather, "Where am I?" This is instructive.

<sup>6</sup> Simone White, "or, on being the other woman," *e-flux journal* 92 (June 2018).

<sup>7</sup> Simone White, "Erotic Power / Erotic Punishment," (lecture, "We Who Are Not the Same," Savvy Contemporary, Berlin, May 20, 2018).

I am at the Underground, a small theater on the Lower East Side for N's show.<sup>8</sup> Just a few days earlier, I had gone with him to Sherwin-Williams so he could buy more Spalding Gray paint for the floor. The whole room is now more or less the same taupe-grey shade, but it feels as if it were always, were always meant to be this way.

I take my seat on the stage, across from the balcony where N sits as we enter. Suspended, his legs hang over the edge; his arms drape over the railing. His face is obscured by a wig.

In one scene, the theater is utterly dark save for the red glow and smoke emerging from the tech booth. Lit by hanging kitsch chili-pepper lights, N and his fellow performer-technician Rose share a cigarette and quiet conversation. I wonder if their conversation was scripted; if the care for the construction of the situation is what allows an affective intimacy to emerge within theatricality.

I am reminded of a discussion during a class N and I teach together, when N heeded a student's assumption that the authentic would always reside in the new. What if authenticity is only possible by virtue of repetition and rehearsal, and the (un)knowing feeling that emerges from having to do something together more than once?

Nearing the end of the performance, again in the dark, N dances the hardest he has danced all night. Because it is dark, I see him with my ears and skin. This is how we

<sup>8</sup> Niall Jones, *Sis Minor, In Fall*, Abrons Arts Center, New York, June 3, 2018.



are meant to see, to see without looking, to see without looking for.

He is incandescent and alone. I reach out to touch the arm of my friend Chanterelle who is sitting next to me. Our fingers find each other's fingers in the dark. "If you want my body, just reach out and touch me." Later, when I ask her what she thought of N's show, she remarks, "It was like listening to a piece of music."

What's happening right now is not a performance.

I am a performer, a pretty good one, actually.

(So are you.)

It's just that I'm not performing right now.

The 23-year-old slaps my ass as hard as he feels comfortable. I can tell he wants to hit harder. He is studying political philosophy. Noam Chomsky is his idol, he tells me fervently. The way he thrusts his fingers inside me, I know he would like his arm to disappear. Later, he asks me, "Do you feel respected?" And I think this question is more about him than it is about me.

If there is one thing life has taught me, it is to move less and less. (Form's really got a hold on me.) In fact, I've learned to move so little that I've become very good at being watched while being very still. (I have always been a good student.)

I knew how to stage a wedding because I know how to make a performance. Weddings are performances. This should not imply that weddings, or performances, are artificial. Or if they are, it is to say that their artificiality matters, is mattering. This is to say that there are material effects inside of what we are called, what calls us, what we call ourselves to perform. A wedding performs a relationship's consent to the state, and therefore to an imposed relational structure that falls somewhere out-of-time with what might actually be occurring between two people. The wedding-performance mobilizes this symbolism, these roles, into a new (old) reality. "The past becomes a well-worn path, what usually happens still happens."<sup>9</sup> You, you, you, you, you, you, you, you, you, you think you can change the form but the form changes you. For weeks after my wedding, I was depressed.

<sup>9</sup> Ahmed, "Refusal, Resignation and Complaint."

We sit on a tiny bench across from a screen playing a video by Harry Dodge, and, I am smitten.<sup>10</sup> You had already been to the exhibition, and the video hadn't peaked your interest much then. But now we sit, each with our respective headphones, and we watch, sometimes exchanging glances or a barely audible laugh. People pass by us, moving quickly through the galleries, pausing to look at the video over our shoulders. Let them pass. I like it, I like sitting here with you. In the video, a series of performers disguised as interviewees are brought on-camera to a some-place that feels like no-place in a California-kind-of-way. From behind the camera, Harry asks each performer, "Does this remind you of home?" To which they each reply, "No."

No, no, it doesn't, it doesn't remind them of home, but it does, uncannily, remind them each of a video they'd like to make. What ensues is a series of distinct monologues, each one describing highly detailed, perverse, fantastical scenes that conjure a nearly unfathomable series of images to behold. But we do behold them, imaginatively, viscerally. What happens to bodies in these phantasmatic videos? Well, can I even say that there were bodies to begin with? There are parts, fleshy matters, teeth that spiral, lawnmowers standing in for clitorises. These parts are endlessly moving, transforming, enveloping or shrinking the frame. And this is where the pleasure lies. Some patience, some time—34 minutes to be exact, maybe even multiple viewings—is required for saturation in the work's ordinary strangeness. It betrays all appearances, and therefore the economy in which it participates. This, this is what I love about it.

<sup>10</sup> Harry Dodge, *The Ass and the Lap Dog*, 2013.

Finalmente is where we end up. The oldest gay bar in the city. Carlos—a recent addition to our tiny entourage—brings us here for the nightly 3:30am drag show. N and Carlos find a spot by the bar and I make my way between the tightly-packed bodies to the front of the small stage where one row of chairs line the edge. I snag a seat. Behind me, the friction of skin and sweat and beer and smoke is palpable, but here in this chair, it's as if I can disappear into the well-worn glory of this particular stage. The show is perfect—it's been running for forty years—and I do, disappear.

You are beautiful, and I love you. I love you. I love you,  
and I promise we're there. I promise we're it. We can  
be whatever we want, we can have whatever we want.  
Do you want it? It's violent. It's violent to have it. We  
are. We are not not. We are not that. We are standing in  
the hallway waiting for the elevator and he remarks on  
the sterility of the proceedings. When signing divorce  
papers, it is clear that what is happening is bound by the  
state. It will not be masked or made pretty. We are not  
not. There is no we are. There is no you are. There is no  
I am.





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