

CRITICAL ETHICS

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17 September–08 October 2016

Yuula Benivolski, naakita feldman–kiss, Ido Govrin,  
Rachel Lott and jes sachse

with parallel writing projects by Hannah Black and  
Megan Toye

*Critical Ethics* presents Trinity Square Video's 2016 themed commissions, which were produced over a three-month residency at the centre.

Selected from an open call for submissions, these artists investigate what media art can offer ethical philosophy and dialogues. These new projects address the idea of critical ethics as a nuanced investigation into relational interactions between individuals, groups, technologies, environments and ideas. They embrace the complicated ethical entanglements in which we are always already embedded, exploring ethics as a site of negotiation rather than an execution of moral decrees. *Critical Ethics* pushes and reconfigures our understandings of ethics in the context of a highly mediated and mediatized world. What might a new philosophy of ethics seek to describe or understand in this contemporary context?

**Reading and Discussion Group**  
**Wednesday, 28 September 2016, 7 PM**

Considering the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action alongside the policy demands of the Movement for Black Lives. Pre-reading is required. Please visit [www.trinitysquarevideo.com/critical-ethics](http://www.trinitysquarevideo.com/critical-ethics) for more information.

**Artist's talk with jes sachse**  
**Saturday, 08 October 2016, 2 PM**

Join the artist in a discussion about crip navigations of contemporary culture.

Thanks to our funders and supporters for making this exhibition possible:



## UNTITLED Hannah Black

As a lesson in the limits of the ethical force of art, consider the young white men blasting rap in their cars and at the gym: what percentage of these listeners became appreciably more committed to or even interested in the political struggle that animates this music? Did the global popularity of former church singer Whitney Houston do anything to make Charleston less likely? I am only giving ordinary examples.

There's a special vibration in work that feels *real*, although who knows what real means. All most listeners know is Black music is just kind of exciting to listen to because it shakes with this symptom. The vibration feels warm and personal, but it's planetary and cold. Nothing is personal; if the person were personal, death would be unbearable, and the fact is people go on getting born.

Is art that wears its stakes on its sleeve always a form of propaganda, or have I stretched the word too far? If anything, the greatest propaganda is condemned to the greatest aestheticization, the greatest shame: to serve as a justification for the circumstances it was meant to abolish. It doesn't matter: writing begins with the goal of the writer's survival, and ends up living for whoever reads it.

In practice no one listens to you unless something about you seems familiar. We talk to those we know, and everyone else is just where the money comes from. I am romanticizing a little, to punish my desire to write something that would change your mind. Can there, really, be any ethics between a writer and her imaginary reader? To create drama, she unconsciously subs in one of the caricatures that populate her inner world, the Ex, perhaps, or the Mother, who always disapprove. The writing sloughs off the living self, an embarrassing remainder.

If an artist seems to teach us something, it's because we already knew it, even if the head had to be split open to get the new thing in. Ignore or forget what doesn't feel right. I believe this. At the peak of the

artist's powers, she finds the thing that is least hers.

I tried to learn Italian once with a special method that involved no memorizing or note taking. Guess what, I learned almost nothing, but I liked what the teacher said about learning: "There are no bad students, only bad teachers." There are no bad readers; there are just readers who feel they have no reason, one way or another, to care what I think. All I remember of the Italian lessons now is that they began with the verb *potere*; walking around with headphones in, I repeated, in Italian, "I can, I can't."

## LOOKING WITH CARE: TOWARDS A FEMINIST ETHICS OF SPECTATORSHIP

Megan Toye

My interest in ethical spectatorship grew alongside my passion for feminist art history. As a teenager I wanted to play with gender norms through aesthetic means and so, when I was 14, I shaved my head and grew out my other body hair. The repulsive gaze I received from my male classmates was intriguing to me as I became acutely aware of the ever-present gaze of patriarchy looking upon me with discomfort, confusion and maybe even fear.

When I began my studies in art history years later, I encountered Laura Mulvey's "Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema" (1975). This text solidified what I had previously experienced: my shaved head and hairy legs threatened the stable boundaries of sexual difference that patriarchy is dependent upon. The de-feminized image I was projecting as a teenaged girl could not be contained and fetishized by a male gaze that sought to perpetuate sexual difference and maintain gender inequality. Looking from afar, this gaze attempts to repress castration anxiety (fear that he will lose his phallus) by fixing and fetishizing female form through fragmentation (for instance, close up shots of certain body parts) or a flattening out (demystification) of the female through images. The filmic form often reflects an unconscious that repetitively and violently fetishizes and represses the threat of sexual difference. I understand now that my choice to not represent myself through the traditional codes of femininity was an attempt to thwart these processes.

From there on out, self-representation and the act of looking at representations of other people became an ethical issue for me. Looking is a political act that is imbued with the potential to violently control and fetishize difference; or conversely, to allow difference to speak and be heard. What does it mean to look ethically? Instead of gazing violently and fetishistically, is there a way to look with care? And what types of aesthetic strategies allow us to interact and engage with an ethics of care?

Feminist care-ethics was first theorized by Carol Gilligan in her book *A Different Voice* (1982). Here Gilligan argues that individualism, autonomy and self-empowerment are the dominant virtues of (patriarchal) society, while qualities such as care, empathy and relationality (traditionally associated with femininity) are undervalued and overlooked. An ethics of care, then, asserts the importance of compassion, interconnection and relationality—the fact that we are dependent upon and co-constituted through one another—as the basis of an ethical disposition.

So the question is this: how does one become interconnected and interdependent as a spectator of art? Relational aesthetics, as Nicholas Bourriaud coined it, explores just this (but without reference to the lineage of feminist praxis that has fought for the importance of these values). What does media art offer to this conversation, as a distinctly feminist conversation, when the work is no longer just a flat film screen viewed by a distanced (male) viewer, but is composed of multiple screens and various sources of sound, dependent on different types of spectatorship? Can the spectator really control, grasp and contain difference (be it sexual, racial or bodily) in an aesthetic circumstance where the subjects of the work are dispersed across a large space, with multiple other objects and sounds, no longer self contained and controllable (i.e., fetishizable and abiding to the patriarchal virtue of autonomy)?

How, if at all, do the aesthetic forms in *Critical Ethics* ask us to embrace and engage with a feminist ethics of interconnection, relationality and care? Perhaps it is through the ways each work in the exhibition speaks, leaks and touches—mutually informing the others—that a feminist ethics of care is provoked and then collectively performed by spectators as they inhabit, move in-between and encounter different voices in the exhibition space.

## PROJECT DESCRIPTIONS

### **Conversations** (2016)

Yuula Benivolski

with Anonymous, Jessica Karuhanga and Amy Lam

*Conversations* is a series of video collaborations that activate Internet chat transcripts through the tropes of silent film to narrate first-hand stories and collective experiences with systemic discrimination.

### **Grandma's Crystal Flowers** (2016)

naakita feldman-kiss

*Grandma's Crystal Flowers* offers a glimpse into an intimate conversation between three generations of a maternal line. As the evening progresses, the three women speak about home and belonging, race and identity, history, their shared lineage and the intersections of their personal experiences.

The work examines what it is to be a grandmother, mother, daughter and granddaughter, both respectively and collectively. The conversation highlights the differing and converging experiences of being an immigrant, a first generation or a second generation person in Canada. Throughout the evening documented in the work, character traits and family dynamics emerge through the recollection and negotiation of family histories and mythologies.

### **Tears, Fears and Flashes** (2016)

Ido Govrin

*Tears, Fears and Flashes* considers the relationship between interpersonal understanding and propagandist rhetoric with respect to an audio-visual aesthetic experience. It speculates on the ethical implications of this difficult but often present relationship.

### **day-dreams** (2016)

Rachel Lott

The digital plane is a collection of imprints: image, thought and utterance. The Google search engine transcribes thought into data, the next shift in

consciousness, moving away from the body and into the transcendent plane prototype that is the Internet. This installation delves into the moor of guilt, apathy and uncertainty that arises when the cultural body is faced with the consequence of its consumption. It places carriers of data into figurative arrangements which exemplify the physical bodies of data. The screen, port or connector is an orifice, and it doesn't care who plugs who, as long as it feels connected. The blood-and-bone body is faced with the wire-and-port body. Technology just wants to transcode, with you or with anyone.

### **Micro Comedies, Macro Tragedies** (2016)

jes sachse

What does it mean to be happy? What does it mean to be happy? *Micro Comedies, Macro Tragedies* is a poetic meditation on the reliance on screen-based technologies to mediate sadness when those technologies are often at the root of uncomfortable feelings. In light of this contradiction, *Micro Comedies, Macro Tragedies* proposes a non-technological perseverance as a means of existing otherwise. Captions throughout are sourced from an conversation between Louis CK and Conan O'Brien on the topic of true happiness.

## BIOGRAPHIES

**Yuula Benivolski** is a Toronto-based multidisciplinary artist working in photography, video, sculpture and writing. Her work investigates social behaviours, transitional states, feelings and memory through personal narratives. She has recently exhibited at Videofag and Art Metropole in Toronto.

**Hannah Black** is an artist and writer currently living in Berlin. Her work is assembled from pop music and auto/biographical fragments, and draws on feminist, communist and black radical thought. Her videos have recently been shown at W139, Amsterdam; Embassy, Edinburgh; and MoMAW, Warsaw. Her writing has been published in magazines including *Dazed Digital*, *The New Inquiry* and *Art in America*.

**naakita feldman-kiss** is a Montréal-based Canadian artist and writer trained in media art and performance. Her practice explores the impact of technologies on social interactions, sharing culture and the structures of oral tradition. The artist's works have unfolded within Internet communities and locally through relations built with strangers through these interfaces. Recent presentations of the artist's works include New York MoMA PS1 (2012), YTB Gallery Toronto (2015), and Galerie B-312, Montréal (2016). feldman-kiss's writing and critical analyses have been published in *KAPSULA* (2015) and *Queer Codes* (2016), among other online and print publications.

**Ido Govrin** is a multidisciplinary artist and scholar whose practice includes sound, installation, printmaking and text. He holds a BA in philosophy from Tel-Aviv University, an MFA from the University of Toronto and is currently a PhD candidate at Western University (London, Ontario). Recent solo exhibitions include *Silent Maps* (2016), *To return to a place, is, like dying* (2015) and *Vaalbara* (2014). Between 2008 and 2012, he was the director of Musica Nova ensemble. Since 2005, he has run the record label Interval Recordings.

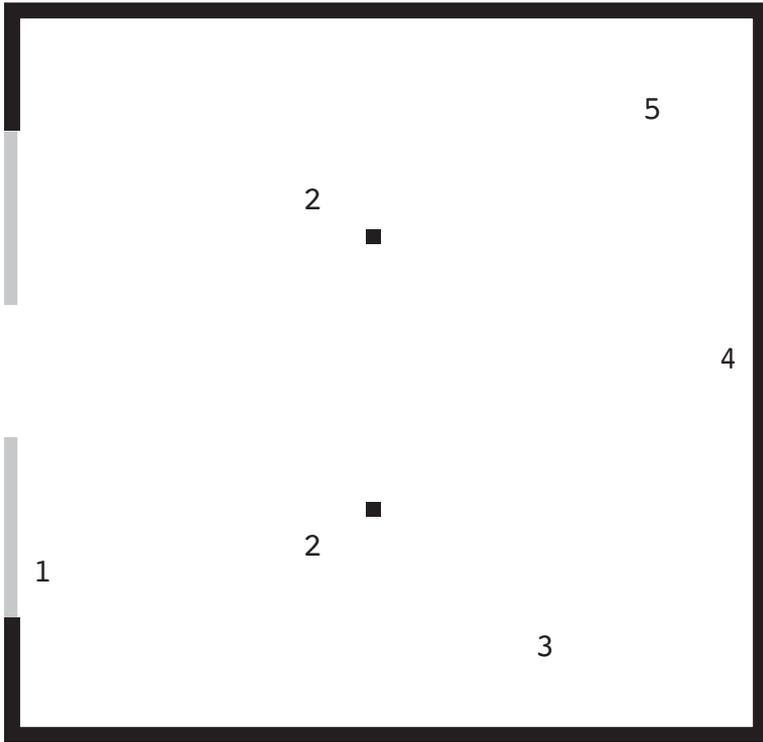
**Rachel Lott** is a Toronto-based artist who envisions her work as a time stamp. Bending objects and video into the absurd, she then pushes their warped bodies up against

our culture's wall of fear and insecurity, a culture bled from our dependence on technological comforts and object fetishism. Her sculpture and video work is an extrapolation of the personal within the cultural, and of the individual within the machine of comfort production.

**Jes Sachse** is a Toronto-based poet, artist and curator obsessed with disability culture and the age of the Internet. Living across the blurred lines of autism, genetic disability, genderfluidity and madness, they are currently working on their first illustrated novel, *Gutter*, which portrays these dilemmas through a multi-modal narrative form. Their work and writing has appeared in *NOW Magazine*, *The Peak*, *C Magazine*, *CV2-The Canadian Journal of Poetry and Critical Writing*, and the 40th anniversary edition of *Our Bodies, Ourselves*.

**Megan Toye** is a PhD candidate in Art History and Visual Culture at York University. She completed her M.A. in Art History at McGill and worked as an assistant curator at The Alternator Centre for Contemporary Art in Kelowna, BC. She is a recipient of the SSHRC Doctoral Fellowship and has been published in *Drain Magazine* and the *Journal of Curatorial Studies*.

## EXHIBITION MAP



1. *Conversations* (2016)  
Yuula Benivolski, with  
Anonymous, Jessica  
Karuhanga and Amy Lam  
Single-channel video,  
silent, 18 minutes

2. *Grandma's Crystal  
Flowers* (2016)  
naakita feldman-kiss  
Two-channel video  
installation, sound,  
115 minutes (total length  
of both channels)

3. *Tears, Fears and Flashes*  
(2016)  
Ido Govrin  
Single-channel  
installation, sound, 30  
minutes

4. *Micro Comedies, Macro  
Tragedies* (2016)  
jes sachse  
Single-channel video,  
silent, 4 minutes

5. *day-to-dreams* (2016)  
Rachel Lott  
Two-channel installation,  
5 minutes (total length of  
both channels)