

Seeing through the Wall: Objectification between Resistance and Acceptance

Nesreen Hussein (Royal Holloway, University of London)

In May 2007 I took part in a performance installation by Jerusalem-born visual artist Yael Davids. The piece, titled *A Line, A Sentence, A Word*, was part of the group exhibition *Memorial to the Iraq War* at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London. The exhibition interrogated the notion of memorial to a conflict that has not yet ended, inviting twenty six artists from Europe, the U.S. and the Middle East to step into the future and propose responses ‘that will encourage debate about what can or should be memorialised from this terrible episode’ (Sladen). Davids’ response was a performance installation that combined the notions of memorial and demonstration. It investigated the existential energy of expression in a situation when one cannot express and cannot protest, representing it in an architectural construction extended in time and space. Looking at Davids’ work from the outside, as well as from within, initiated my attempt to examine the work’s ability to offer a model of representational economy that functions within a ‘reversible’ mode of objectification. In other words, the paper will attempt to explore how the artist’s work places the human body in a condition of objectification that affirms rather than denies subjective experience.

A Line, A Sentence, A Word was initially inspired by journalistic photographs of demonstrations and by Davids’ memories as an individual growing up within the Palestine-Israel divide. The piece consisted of flat panels kept suspended in space by the mouths and hands of still and



A Line, A Sentence, A Word. ICA, London (2007)
Photo by Samantha Hart
(All images of Yael Davids’ work
courtesy of the artist and the ICA)

silent performers for the duration of approximately two hours interrupted by short breaks. In this seemingly simple position, performers – including myself – were confronted by the white surface of the panels placed inches away from their eyes which reduced their visual field to expanding whiteness; nothing was seen beyond blank ‘white’ like being on the verge of losing consciousness. Movement was restricted and intelligible speech was muted. Speaking was physically cut off in space, which was visually emphasised by the sight of human lips scattered on one side of the wall, slightly gaped as if in mid speech. On the other side of the wall performers were visibly holding onto the object, pressing their faces against it as if in a devotional ritual of solemn observance or in an act of desperate yearning that was blocked by the solid object. The result was an image of a confined subjectivity suspended in a vulnerable instance of metamorphosis between ‘thingness’ and ‘nothingness;’ speech and silence. The inability of the subject to secure an existence in either condition overlaid the work with a sense of nostalgia. The subjects appeared to be clenching to the object as if it was their only hope of reclaiming a lost state of being. The object as the paradoxical nexus of this subject-object dynamic prescribed the subject’s relationship to itself and to its surrounding, rather than the other way round.

While being part of this work, my corporeal experience was deeply marked by a transient sense of aggression against my self. I was muted, almost blinded, restrained and provoked, but unable to fully react. The strain of trying to keep my still position ran through my body and my breathing got increasingly heavy. Spectators were tempted to touch and poke their fingers at my disembodied lips visible from one side of the wall. My body was invaded and the physical restriction left me passive, open and vulnerable.¹

¹ The audience’s interaction was not invited, nor was it openly prevented which raised issues of the ethics of action and passivity in the performer/spectator exchange. In her essay ‘On Seeing the Invisible: Marina Abramović’s *The House with the Ocean View*’ (2004), Peggy Phelan touches on ‘the ethics of the act’ in relation to the audience’s intervention during Marina Abramović’s performance *Rhythm 0* (1974). Phelan

The curious interventions emphasised my status as object; I was both passive and in control. My experience was a paradoxical act of 'becoming,' a body 'never finished, never completed,' as in Mikhail Bakhtin's description of the grotesque body, where the gaping mouth is emphasised as a site of bodily drama and accessibility (317). The openness and penetrability of my body connected it to the outside. Bakhtin argues that within such orifices as the mouth, the exchange of flesh occurs, which is characteristic of the life of the grotesque body, or in his words, 'the body swallows the world and is itself swallowed by the world' (317). My sense of self was destabilised as a result of this corporeal juxtaposition, and the marked separation between myself as subject and the surrounding object was subverted; I became both.

By disrupting the relations of power and resistance between subject and object, the piece embodied the futility of protest and the impossibility of dialogue. The complex set of relations between subjectivity and objectification; between the experience of the performers and what the work raised for spectators, served as an existential meditation on the human condition in conflict. These notions were figuratively articulated through the metaphor of 'wall' negotiated in the piece, and that invoked images of various constructions of walls, lines or barriers that engage with human consciousness within different dynamics of segregation. The Israeli West-Bank barrier, the Berlin Wall and war memorial walls, are only few obvious examples of images of walls that carry powerful political connotations. The notion of objectification central to this dynamic, however, is not exclusive to the metaphor of political and social subjugation evident in Davids' piece, but it is one of the fundamental forces that govern the work's underlying structure and its representational capacities. Paradoxically, objectification is utilised as a

raises the following questions: 'what does it mean to act when full knowledge of the consequence of your act cannot be known in advance? What are the costs of refusing to act without such foreknowledge? What keeps us blind to the consequences of our action and our passivity?' (19). These important questions are also raised by the presence and accessibility of the live body in the gallery space in Davids' work, but they are not discussed in this essay due to space limitation.

representational device that *empowers* the subject. Such contradictory dynamic is at the heart of Davids' work, and is the main concern of this analysis that was explicated further through my presence as part of the performance. My condition as a subject assimilated into the object elucidated some of the implications entailed in placing the body at the centre of a work of art; a work that raises questions about the limits of objectification and about the presence of the body as a site of paradoxes and ambiguity in performance.

By examining Davids' current and previous work, it appeared that it has been created within a dynamic of representation that does not guarantee assurance of resemblance nor political fetishization, thus resisting the reproduction of otherness. This goes against the common view that representational visibility reinforces rather than challenges problematic aspects of reception that participates in the phallogentric dynamic of fetishism.² This view, as Amelia Jones explains, was typical of 1980s art critical discourse. Both feminist and otherwise, this discourse marked a shift away from appreciating the enactment of an artist's body. The criticism was particularly strong towards women artists who deployed their bodies as and in a work of art (Jones 22-4) especially in 1960s and 1970s performance art practices by women artists such as Carolee Schneemann, Yayoi Kusama (Jones 1-9) and Marina Abramović. As a way of dissolving the representation of women's bodies as objects of the gaze, this critique necessitated the removal of the female body from representation, or using what feminist art historian Griselda Pollock describes as Brechtian 'distanciation' (163) that comes from a Marxist distrust of art forms that engage spectators as passive consumers rather

² I am employing the notion of visibility as negotiated in Peggy Phelan's critique of the ideology of representational visibility in contemporary culture in *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (1993). In this seminal text, Phelan problematizes the connection between representation and seeing and between visibility and power when the boundary between subject and object is blurred. She argues that representational visibility is no guarantee of power; rather it should be questioned to see what kind of power is involved and what its implications are. This text is useful for my assessment of the visible representation of the body in Davids' work and how its value lies in the unseen within it.

than as active participants.³ Davids, on the other hand, uses a strategy of resistance that does not eliminate the presence of the body in the frame of the artwork. The body is visibly present, while at the same time it defies the reproduction of metaphors (of identity, sexuality and gender) imposed by hierarchical systems of value and condemned by the former critical discourse.

Resisting the Look

Davids emerges artistically from the mid 1990s, a decade that witnessed a regenerated concern with the implications of representing the embodied subject in art practices as fragmented, dispersed and particularized.⁴ As in Amelia Jones'



Pillar. Gerrit Rietveld Academie, Photos by Andre van Bergen Amsterdam (1995)

contextualisation of this body of work, it stresses 'the subject's interrelatedness with the world (of others as well as things)' and its inevitable simultaneous existence as subject and object (18). The interdependence between the body and material environment is demonstrated in Davids' consistent experimentations with the relationship between the body and domestic objects such as chairs, tables and walls. Since 1994, the artist has been presenting hybrid forms of objectified bodies or bodied objects housed by performers for relatively long durations. Those works, which she defines as 'performances without true beginnings or definite ends' (*No Object 6*), share the idea of

³ While I acknowledge this established and well-grounded critical project, like Jones, I am confronted by my sense of unease towards interpreting the representation of the body (in all its forms) through a hierarchical system of value that predetermines the ideological effects of such representation on the spectator. Such definitive evaluation of works of art in terms of an externally conceived structure of valuation, as Jones argues (25), reiterates the modernist authoritative critique that feminist theorists tried to dissolve. It overlooks the ability of works by artists like Schneemann to challenge the disembodied consciousness and the gender bias entailed in the disinterested Cartesian conception of self embedded in modernist art. These artists, through their works, attempted to question the reductive modernist mode of reception by presenting the fully embodied subjects in their particularities within an intersubjective dynamic of production and reception.

⁴ This came after the period mentioned above that was largely characterised by a turn away from representing the live body in art practices in an attempt to resist the fetishizing effects of the male gaze.

absence that is contained within the present body and share a consistent sense of loss. In works such as *Pillar* (1995), *No Body at Home* (1996), *Body Parts* (2001) and *Cupboard* (2001), Davids tries to enact the diffused contemporary subject by literally presenting the body as fragmented, abject and vulnerable with no coherent subject to be assumed. The scattered bodies reflect the spectator's own incoherence, a self caught in a moment of being and becoming, as 'a point of transition in a life eternally renewed, the inexhaustible vessel of death and conception' (Bakhtin 318). The performative installations confront spectators with a destabilizing experience by questioning the familiar demarcation of body and object and by negotiating a presence and absence dialectic.



No Body at Home: Chair. Gerrit Rietveld Academie, Amsterdam (1996).
Photo by Andre van Bergen.



No Body at Home: Stool. Video still (1996).
Photo by Andre van Bergen.

The unsettling image of David's own body in *No Body at Home: Stool* for example immediately lends itself to the logic of opposites, which is one of the typical features of the grotesque life of the body for Bakhtin, 'the essential topographical element of the bodily hierarchy turned upside down; the lower stratum replaces the upper stratum' (Bakhtin 309). By constructing a different relation between the looking

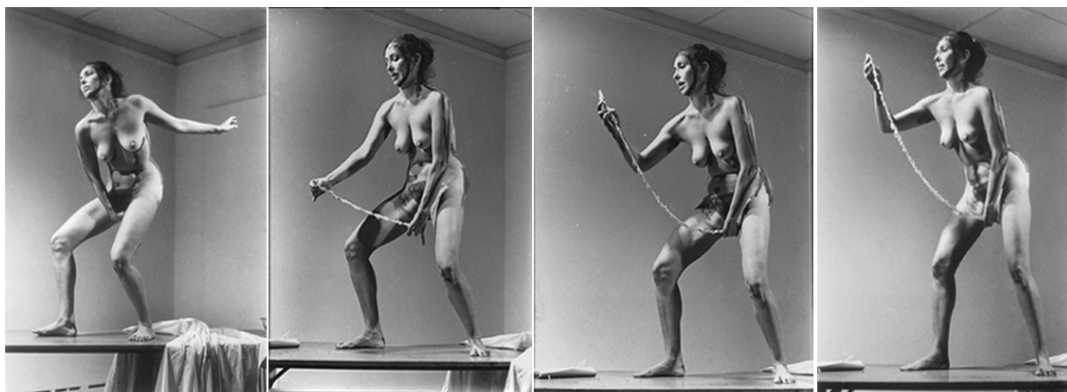
subject and the image of the other, the conventional viewing experience and the stability of projection, identification and objectification are disrupted. In spite of a body being objectified and visibly displayed, it resists being represented as an object of consumption. The focus on the human form does not satisfy a fascination with likeness and identification that encourages fetishistic looking. The female body, with its subverted parts and contorted position, its ambiguous relationship with its surroundings, disrupts the process of looking as Jacques Lacan identified it in the mirror stage.⁵ Far from being an image of a body as a totality, it becomes '[an] image of the body in bits and pieces' (Lacan, 'Some Reflections' 13) as that which appears in dreams and fantasies as a result of disruption in the early stages of ego formation during the mirror stage, and which Lacan compared with the grotesque figures in Hieronymus Bosch's paintings (*Écrits* 4). The failure to recognize a familiar physicality is emphasized by the inevitable failure to meet the gaze of the performer, marking the status of the body as hidden, not really there; unmarked. No particular body is assumed. The lack of reciprocal gaze between the body and the spectator eliminates the onlooker's illusion of mastery over the image, thus displacing the Lacanian experience of recognition.

Peggy Phelan argues that all Western representation exploits the capacity of 'looking,' or the exchange of gaze through looking, to inform the desire to see the self through the image of the other (*Unmarked* 16). The gaze represents a point of identification in which the spectator invests her/himself in the image, which turns looking into a form of self-representation: 'one needs always the eye of the other to recognize (and name) oneself' (Phelan, *Unmarked* 15). According to Phelan's psychoanalytic reading, this proposition is itself differently marked for men and women. She suggests that 'when the unmarked woman looks at the marked man she sees a man;

⁵ The moment a child recognizes an image of its body as a totality in a mirror that is crucial for the ego formation. The image of the body in Davids' piece is an inversion of that moment.

but she sees herself as other, as negative-man.’ The image of the woman is located within the frame of the phallic function as an image of the ‘not all’ which belongs to the man (*Unmarked* 17).

Dauids in *No Body at Home: Stool* made a strategic use of this formulation of the gaze in an ironic allusion to the phallogocentric dynamic of looking: the viewer is confronted by female genitals looking back where one would expect a male face of a body (gender is assumed from the way the figure is dressed, and as suggested in Dauids, *No Object* 128). She enacted on her figure a subverted projection of the forces of desire of the man who is seeing her. Thus the piece breaks the reciprocity of the visual exchange disrupting the psychic and aesthetic dynamic of the masculinised gaze which turns the visible image of the other into a sign for the looking self. Dauids turns the pleasure in looking into the shock of realization, reclaiming authority over her image. The image of the female body in *No Body at Home: Stool* (and to a degree, the body in *No Body at Home: Chair*) seduces spectators into a close examination of such extraordinary body, but at the same time, it resists the consuming gaze. The performer’s body becomes active in its vulnerability through negotiating the invisible within the visible, or in Dauids’ own words, presenting ‘the rules of the visible that render invisible’ (*No Object* 110).



Carolee Schneemann. *Interior Scroll*. East Hampton, New York and Telluride Film Festival, Colorado (1975).
Photographs by Anthony McGall

Other performance artists used the particulars of their female bodies as architectural referents, exploring the politics of the body to confront the dominant patriarchal moralities of Western culture (Yeon Kim 205). In a well known performance titled *Interior Scroll* (1975), Carolee Schneemann pulled out a paper scroll out of her vagina to read a male critic's attack on her work. To challenge masculinised reception, and its modes of evaluation, Schneemann performed herself as embodied subject who is also an object in relation to the audience. She deployed her sexualized body in and as the artwork against the grain of masculinist assumptions that govern the modernist artist (Jones 2-3). By enacting an intersubjective exchange of reception and production,⁶ Schneemann compromised the disinterested attitude of art criticism and modern practice, exposing the fact that she is not a lacking subject; not an image of the 'not all.'⁷

Dauids also negotiated the shift between the interior and the exterior of her female body, thinking of the vagina as a sculptural form, but unlike Schneemann, Davids did not project herself within an erotically charged narrative of pleasure. The strategic exchange of desire and identification negotiated in Schneemann's performance is not dealt with in Davids' whose extremely defamiliarized body is not represented as a site of pleasurable looking. The body is displayed as still, silent, absent from expression and from its own subjectivity, a kind of a stoic body or a sacrificial object.⁸ The piece

⁶ The phenomenological notion of 'intersubjectivity' views existence as a condition of reciprocity; an experience of the world as directly available not only to oneself, but also to the Other. The field of intersubjectivity, for Edmund Husserl, constitutes 'not only the internal coherence of one ego's experiences, but also the external coherence of one ego's experiences with those of another' (Laporte 341). This suggests experiencing oneself as different from the Other and at the same time available to her/him.

⁷ In a later example, performance artist and sex trade worker Annie Sprinkle invited the audience to examine her cervix through a speculum in *A Public Cervix Announcement* (Sprinkle). The performance was an attempt to undermine the traditional masculine erotization of female genitalia and to challenge the fetishistic myth constructed around the female body.

⁸ Even though the body in the piece belongs to Davids, but its identification as particularly hers is not emphasised, giving the sense that the work can be performed by any female body. This underscores the absence of subjective expression as a constituent of representation in this work.

confronts the gaze with an uncompromising image of an exposed body that defies its own vulnerability and abjection. The body claims its own authority almost aggressively by facing the spectator with an object of desire and consumption in a volatile and destabilizing form.

Resisting Erasure

In *A Line, A Sentence, A Word*, as well as in her former works, Davids claims that the body is systematically placed in situations where it is denied the ability of expression, where the self is negated. For her, 'objectness' in those works is to negate the 'I' of the subject, and to perform an act of erasing that strips the body from its ego, its history and its meaning to locate something new (Davids, 'Interview'). This is often indicated by concealing direct human references and by negotiating the tension embedded in existing in simultaneous opposite states: present/absent; inside/outside; up/down; occupied/vacant. Fragmented body parts, unseen faces, concealed eyes; something is always hidden from the body in almost all of Davids' work, the body never appears in its entirety, it never appears coherent. There is always something bitten off the body by the object turning it into 'a wounded language' (Davids, 'Interview').⁹ The ambivalence towards human subjectivity, and the attempt to transcend the body from personality is reminiscent of Modernist art practices where a recurrent desire to denaturalise the body; to present it as something other than itself was manifest (Garner 53-63). Davids in turn creates moments of engagement between body and object in a dynamic of reciprocal transcendence as an attempt to inscribe both entities with new connotations. The discursive acts of *erasing* and *denial* that she describes occurring in the durational

⁹ Especially the eyes very rarely confront the spectator. They are mostly invisible as in *No Body at Home: Mirror* (1996), *Corner* (1997), *Table* (1998), *Mattress* (1998) *Pillow* (2001), *Face* (2000-01) and *Music Box* (2003). In those works the face is either buried inside pieces of furniture or concealed by objects. Davids represents the face as 'a negated object of seeing' (Davids, *No Object* 121) that signifies the loss of language.

process of creating the work are embodied in language for her. The Hebrew word for 'abstract' literally means 'naked,' so by representing the body as abstract at its meeting with the object, it is stripped naked into a state of pureness (Davids, 'Interview'). However, what the work actually offers is an experience of subjectivity as embodied rather than as transcendental; as transformative, interconnected with the world. The subject is conceived as simultaneously decentred; never fully coherent and also embodied; not purely 'abstracted.'

The work as I read it, and indeed as I experienced it, does not wholly function within a dynamic of reduction or erasure as suggested above. For, while represented as object, the body defies its own objectification. This could be explained in terms of a dialectic of negativity as framed by Julia Kristeva in *Revolution in Poetic Language* (1984) as 'the mediation, the supersession of the "pure abstractions" of being and nothingness in the concrete where they are both only moments' (109). Kristeva reads Hegelian negativity as a contemplative system that links the objective and the subjective, and although it is objectivity itself, negativity is at the same time the 'free subject' of Hegelian aesthetic. It is freedom 'for itself' that is the highest form of nothingness; negativity that goes as deep into itself as possible, and is itself affirmation (Kristeva 110). Thus the contradictions become transcended; Being and Nothing are both contradictory and at the same time inseparable, this thesis prevents the closing up of the subject within



No Body at Home: Mirror. Gerrit Rietveld Academie, Amsterdam (1996).

Photos by Andre van Bergen.

an abstract understanding, concluding with what Kristeva termed as *affirmative negativity* (113). This concept, established by the Hegelian dialectic, is understood as a

process that constitutes identity and freedom of subject in place of perceiving Being and Nothing separately as abstract, static identities. The process is founded on a fundamental reorganization of oppositions while maintaining those oppositions (Kristeva 113). Thus negativity recasts the thesis of contradictions; of being and nothingness; outside and inside; negation and affirmation. Accordingly, meaning in Davids' work lies in the moment of 'Becoming' caught in a divergent state of denial and affirmation within a dialectical process of appearance and disappearance that produces a subject in process. A moment of '[...] *Becoming* that subordinates, indeed erases, the moment of rupture' (Kristeva 113).

While being part of *A Line, A Sentence, A Word*, my fluctuation between contradictory states became strikingly manifest when my lips were touched in a shocking instance of realization that I became a work of art.¹⁰ However, that same act of objectification extended the boundaries of my body, connecting it to the surrounding and highlighting its phenomenological presence. The open flesh blends with the object and with the external world, defying its own boundaries. Maurice Merleau-Ponty contextualised the intersubjective exchange between self and other in terms of a carnal being, at once subjective and objectified. He argued that vision is embedded in touch and touch in vision, and their chiasmic crossing is the flesh of the world,

If [the body] touches [the objects] and sees them, this is only because [...] it uses its own being as a means to participate in theirs, because each of the two beings is an archetype for the other; because the body belongs to the order of the things as the world is universal flesh. (Merleau-Ponty 137)

Merleau-Ponty suggested through the notion of flesh a two-sided boundary; that the body is both subject and object, visible and tangible, and it uses its own thingness to gain access to the world. There is a reversibility of 'insertion and intertwining' between

¹⁰ A moment of invasive physical intervention also occurred in *No Body at Home: Stool* when a spectator touched the exposed genitals in one of the exhibition spaces where the piece was displayed (Davids, 'Interview').

the seeing body and the visible body; between the touching and the touched, which crosses the boundary between the body and the world, since ‘the world is flesh’ (Merleau-Ponty 138). So being touched by spectators highlighted my status as object, but it also simultaneously emphasised my subjectivity. The interdependence of tactile experiences between my body and the spectator’s reminded me of my fully embodied subjectivity within that moment of objectification. The relation to the self, to the other, and to the world was affirmed. I am therefore suggesting, as explained through Merleau-Ponty’s concept of flesh, that the reduction of the body to an image in Davids’ live installation is defied through negotiating the limits of objectification. The latter notion is negotiated to insist on the body’s status as Being. By enacting objectification, objectification itself is contested.

Conclusion: Accepting Objectification

While performing myself as part of a work of art I wondered: am I a subject? Am I an object? These two questions were at the heart of my phenomenological experience in *A Line, A Sentence, A Word*. The paradoxes embodied in the piece ruptured my conception of my own subjectivity and at the same time enacted the pain inherent in subjectivity. It highlighted the sense of loss at the heart of human consciousness in its fluctuation between subjectivity and thingness. This paradox is implied in Phelan’s comment on the capability of performance to use the body ‘to frame the lack of Being promised by and through the body’ (151), and Davids enacts this lack of Being through the staging of otherness and mis-recognition. The body is represented as a site of displacement and absence instead of seeing it as a site of pleasure and desire as in mainstream forms of representation.

Dauids' work disrupts the stability of projection and identification through experimenting with structures of seeing and visibility. My body was visibly present to be looked at, and sometimes to be touched, but by re-plotting the relationships between subject and object, perceiver and perceived, the traditional complicity of visual exchange between the seen and the seer is challenged, and the act of looking as a site of desire and objectification is questioned. As I suggested in the opening of this paper, the paradox of seeing objectification as a force of empowerment is fundamental to this work: only by acknowledging my vulnerability as objectified could my presence as free subject verify itself, and the fragility of 'looking' is unveiled. This dialectic of negativity gives power to the invisible within the visible, or in Phelan's words 'the blind spots laced through the visual field' (1). Dauids' work actually lies in those blind spots where the gaze of the spectator is invited, as she articulates, '[t]he "thought body" refracts objectivity and transfers its visibility to the process of representation itself. The object loses its objectivity and the body its physicality' (*No Object* 130).

The 'wall' in *A Line, A Sentence, A Word* is not just a symbol of political and social segregation, but it also stands as a marker of the tensions caused by paradoxical human experiences. The subjects' engagement with this object/wall signifies their oscillation between an act of denial and that of acceptance; a contradiction fundamental to our existence.



A Line, A Sentence, A Word. ICA, London (2007). Photo by Samantha Hart

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