

Terms of Endearment

MATERIALS

MATERIALS

MATERIALS

MATERIALS

MATERIALS

MATERIALS

MATERIALS



Terms of Endearment

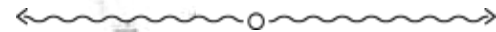
November 27 - December 24, 2021

Support, London

Katie Lyle

Ella Dawn McGeough

curated by Lillian O'Brien Davis



Dancing with Tantalus

January 21 - March 13, 2021

School of Art Gallery, University of Manitoba, Winnipeg

Gabrielle L'Hirondelle Hill

Katie Lyle

Ella Dawn McGeough

curated by Lillian O'Brien Davis

Greener than Grass

October 22 - November 21, 2020

Susan Hobbs Gallery, Toronto

Katie Lyle

Ella Dawn McGeough

curated by Lillian O'Brien Davis



greener than grass

Title Ideas or just some random words on a page...

Dancing with Tantalus

If you're reading this you've come to close

Terms of Endearment

Garden

Theatre

Dancefloors

Glance

Grapes

The Swimmers or *The Waves* or something like that, *The Gloves* , *The Corners* ldk

Corners

A list of 3 things, something like: HAND CUP SHELL - or just each of us pick one 'thing'...maybe related to touch? Images that have come up are blankets, mittens, pillows, frames, petals, grapes,

Peggy Baker:
Stone leaf shell skin

How about-> SWEAT SALT WAX

Name of a specific plant or insect? Like *Trillium*

Bodyglove

I'm Vulnerable

A Picnic

Garden People

Flower People

Antonietta Raphael
Mirror reflection. 1945/1961



And so on ...

We've tried to come together three times now. A delicate dance between three performers moving in and out of different frames, each dancer leading at different points and for different periods of time. What is seen here* are the residual results of our ongoing collaboration represented in an exhibition space. The real exhibition has always existed somewhere in between us three (four**) and then realized to different degrees of accuracy in space. A disjuncture between mind and body, which also acknowledges that they are one. What I've described in the past as an unsettledness and a curatorial decentering that threads the works on display together.

Each iteration has carried its own distinct set of conditions which has created three distinct but interrelated physical presentations.

How do you quantify a success or a failure?
Does it matter at all?

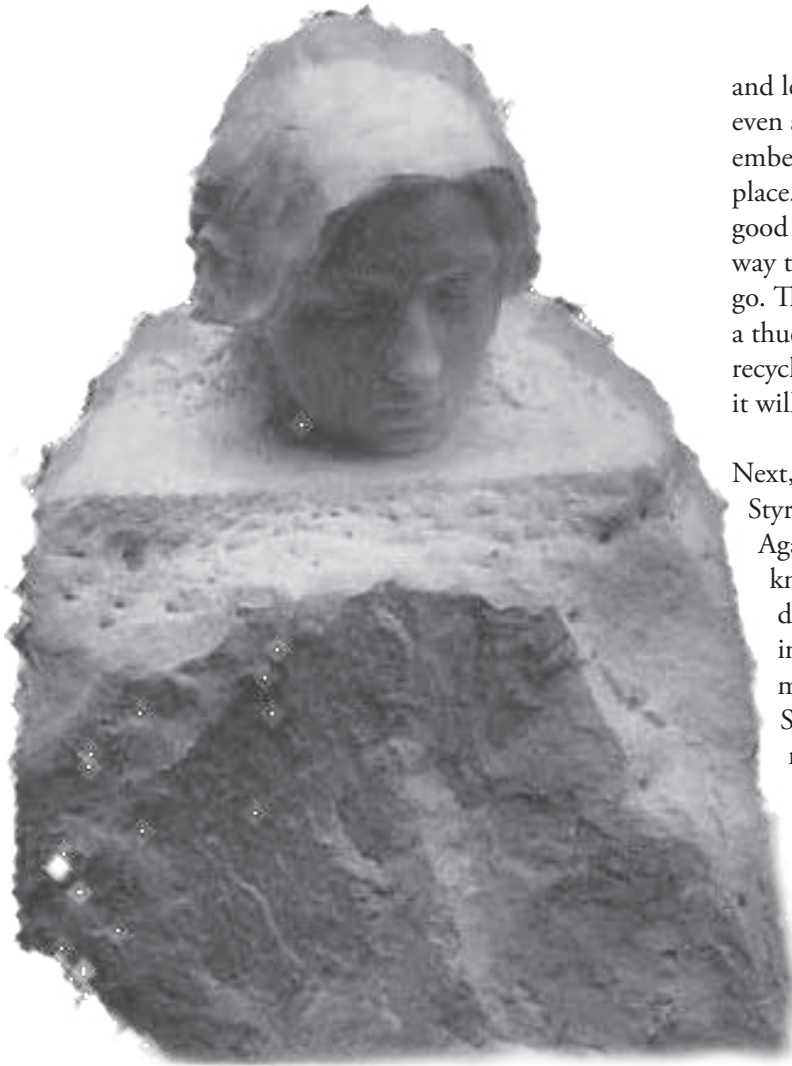
--Lillian O'Brien Davis, November 2021

*This publication, exhibition, iteration.

**This collaboration has been between 3 people and always a fourth person (Susan, Gabrielle, Simon, Nic, Brooks, Frances, Tegan).

Stranger Within

Lillian O'Brien Davis



Auguste Rodin
La Pensée, 1895
Non-finito, Camille Claudel

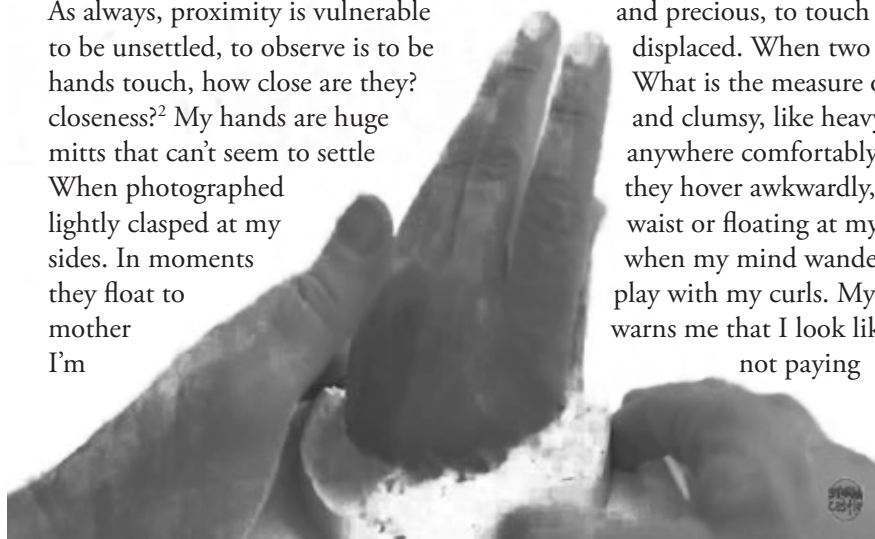
Lumbering around the gallery with my back hunched, arms low and legs awkwardly bent with a wide gait carrying the wax forms—some even surfaced with firm edges, others squished with ripples of wax, each embedded with soil, sand, or flora—moving them around to pick the right place. Some of the forms feel like fussy babies I can't quite manage to get a good grip on, heavy and delicate, smooth substantial masses with no right way to hold them. Making my way upstairs, I envision the moment of letting go. The dull thud as the wax lands and breaks. Not a smash or a shatter but a thud, so much like an ending. It's not the end of the world—wax can be recycled, reshaped into other iterations of itself—and yet a loss, still, in that it will never have this particular form again.

Next, we arrange paintings. Leaning them against walls and balanced on Styrofoam—taut and vulnerable canvas stretched across wooden bars. Again, visions: my foot swings out in front of me, hitting a painting; knees buckle as I ascend the staircase and I fall forward onto the painting, damaging its surface, scraping away at the layers of paint. In each of these imagined scenarios, it is somehow not my fault; my body has betrayed me, limbs flail or muscles give out in treason against my true intentions. Somehow, even as my mind plays through reels of calamity, my ego refuses to allow me to take responsibility for these disaster fantasies.

Meanwhile, in the world outside my mind where my body exists, each movement I make while working with these objects is carefully considered. As I perform this slow awkward dance these intrusive thoughts continue to plague. Against these thoughts, I work to link my mind directly to each step my feet take, each bend of my knees, and each lift of my arms. These are not my objects to break.

Later, not knowing what to do with my body, I sit aimlessly in a chair as the artists continue their work. Katie asks me if I wouldn't mind giving her some privacy while she gets started on her wall painting. I think of the readings we have done together—Anne Carson writing about Sappho, a poet who disappears in order to look. Carson explains, "*Greener than grass am I*

...,” she says, predicating of her own Being an attribute observable only from outside her own body. This is the condition called ekstasis, literally “standing outside oneself;” a condition regarded by the Greeks as typical of mad persons, geniuses, and lovers, and ascribed to poets by Aristotle.¹ Threaded through this particular essay, there is an uncertainty, a disjuncture between mind and body of the three women she is writing about that articulates an embodied anxiety that feels familiar to carrying these objects alongside an unsettledness that threads the work in the exhibition together. Carson calls it *Decreation*, a pattern of placement and displacement, three people but only two chairs. Brisk movements inspired by drawings, rubbed slightly away with water and rags and fingerprints pressed onto drywall coated with orange oil. As always, proximity is vulnerable and precious, to touch is to be unsettled, to observe is to be displaced. When two hands touch, how close are they? What is the measure of closeness?² My hands are huge and clumsy, like heavy mitts that can’t seem to settle anywhere comfortably. When photographed they hover awkwardly, lightly clasped at my waist or floating at my sides. In moments when my mind wanders, they float to play with my curls. My mother warns me that I look like I’m not paying



attention, which is true, I’m not. When I’m with my love I enjoy picking the sleep out from their eyes with my fingers, but I always end up poking them in the eye by accident.

On some of the pages of my PDF copy of Carson’s text there are images of fingers that must have been scanned accidentally when the physical text was put online.³ Traces of another person with a purpose that has nothing to do with mine. Two fingers, extended to hold down the pages of a book, a book I cannot touch and fingers I cannot grasp, a virtual proximity. The fingers look eerie, dark uncanny creatures lurking in the corner of the scanned page. If you held the page in the same place, you could almost miss them. It is a strange feeling to have your fingers cover the virtual fingers of another. It

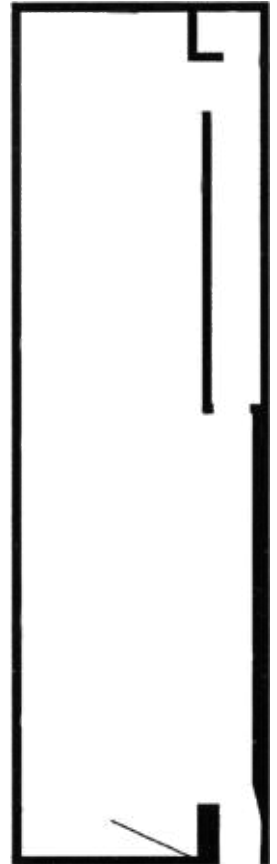
feels romantic, a tender gesturing of comfort, an intimate moment. Akin to playing with my ringlets or noticing that we have been holding hands. And yet, here, I catch myself and recoil after a few moments with these two digits—there is no one there!

If only I knew how to disappear there would be a perfect union of love between God and the earth I tread, the sea I hear...

- Simone Weil

This text was written for *Greener than Grass* at Susan Hobbs Gallery, November 2020

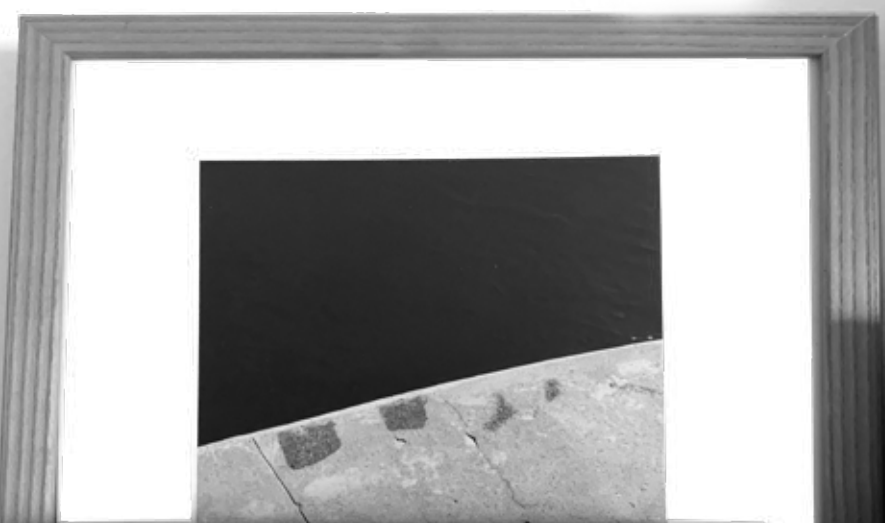
1. Anne Carson. “Decreation: How Women Like Sappho, Marguerite Porete, and Simone Weil Tell God.” *Decreation: Poetry, essays, opera*. Knopf, 2005
2. Karen Barad. “On Touching—the Inhuman That Therefore I Am.” *differences* 23 (3), December 2012, 206–223
3. Artist Andrew Norman Wilson explores this phenomenon in depth.




mark making

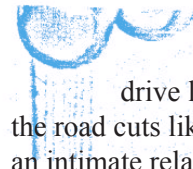
Simon Fuh

It was mid-summer, 2019, when we left the gallery's air-conditioned walls and followed the cool wind off river that guided us downward. Sitting on a sun-warmed concrete embankment, we watched the boats go by. rolled up my shorts to tan my legs and held an ice cream cone far outward after each lick so that the



drips fell into the water below. We remarked on the interior design, the gallery attendants, and how some of the sculptures made us want to throw up (in a good way). We sunned ourselves for a while, and when we stood up, we both gasped at the dark sweat stains that marked the surface beneath our legs. It was a surprise imprint, proof of our bodies at rest, their weight amidst the lightness of the moment. I patted my shorts for my phone to get a picture and watched in horror as the sweat evaporated before me. Each stumbling motion I made left the mark of our bodies more faded. Finally, I snapped the photo, and then forgot about it until many months later.





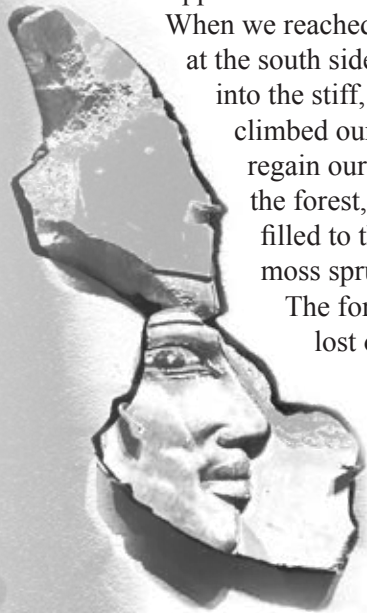
This September we spent some nights on an island in Northern Saskatchewan. The boreal forest appears on the drive like a wall of birch and black spruce trees, through which the road cuts like winding stitches. Black spruce trees are said to have an intimate relationship with the feather mosses below, which comprise a thick moist layer on their underside, and a drier layer on the top facing the sun. They cover much of ground near the spruce trees, keeping the roots cool and damp in the summer. In return, the abundance of conifers provides shade, while preventing the leaves of other trees to cover the moss. This moss also assists in an unusual, second way: the drier top layer speeds the travel of groundfire when the forest ignites. Black spruce are highly flammable and keep their seeds encased in waxy cones at their crown—high enough as to avoid direct flame, low enough as to melt the protective layer. After the fire runs its course, the seeds drop to the ground and regenerate the forest. A partnership in life, death, and rebirth.

Walking atop the moss, our feet sink several inches with each step, compacting the green spongy surface like snow. Rotten deadfall crumbles with a soft muted crunch. Branches respond to the touch by cracking, bending, and slapping the person behind us. The peaks of giant rocks that lie underneath this abundant growth appear and disappear like waves crawling at eternal pace.

When we reached our destination, a cliff face at the south side of the island, we jumped into the stiff, dark September water and climbed our way back up the cliffs to regain our body heat. A look back into the forest, and our tracks had all but filled to the surface. Indents in the moss sprung up like memory foam.

The forest had heard us, but we'd lost our path.

I remembered in that moment the sense of loss felt on the drive up, when, after about six hours had past, and the three of us



had subsumed fully into the terrarium of the vehicle, itself its own special social ecology, I noticed the tower connection that kept me tethered to the *before* had been lost. When I untether like this, either from the gradual uplifting of an airplane, or the sudden snap of a rush downstairs to catch the subway, I will sometimes, rather than putting my phone away and looking out the window, recline into my seat and take a deep look into the archive of my Photos app. I'll flick my thumb down several times like an impatient slot machine gambler; this time, as the camera roll slowed to a halt, I saw before me the green water of the South Saskatchewan river and those familiar dark stains on concrete. As the memory of that moment came back, so too did the memories of revisiting the photo months later. This time, however, I somehow saw the original, the crop, and the edits all at once, though they appeared dispersed in the default chronology of my iPhone. I wondered how it might be that these events, the supposed inception and its revisitations, might all live together at once within and through each other. I was soon reminded that quiet zones only exist between localities, and as we approached our destination my device "dinged" and vibrated. It was a friend calling me back that broke the spell: he'd rediscovered a hatchet marking on a tree made earlier to help us navigate back through the island's forest once again.

On our return, I looked for photos to share on social media, and my heart sank as I realized I'd missed the instances that held gravity in my mind. I felt the fluffy bright green moss, the lichen-covered rock face, the unforgiving water, and the sunset both tantalizingly close and already fading. I asked the others what documents they had, and we stitched them together like investigators. Recalling the events, we remembered the two objects that fell into the lake other than our bodies: a large loose rock we tipped over the face in a climactic crash, and a blue sock that, after a series of failed rescue attempts, tumbled off and sank to the depths. I imagine them now, sitting beside one another, wondering how they got there and what might happen next. It's not so much that I believe a sock wants to be on a foot, but that it might momentarily reconsider what it is to be in waiting until the waiting just becomes being. And then there it would be, twenty feet under the surface with the algae, beer bottles, fishing lures and stones, warmed only briefly by the glittering brown sun directly above. Heaven is a place where nothing else happens; but eventually, nothing becomes everything.

We'd been sitting atop the damp rocks for a while—time was hard to keep track of. After a beer and a shot of rye, we disrobed and left our clothes in neat piles stuffed precariously behind. We waited for the clouds to part and were graciously treated with much more than a moment. After two overcast days we happened to time this jump just right. The water hit my skin with force; I spread my body out wide to prevent from sinking too deep. I couldn't bear the cold for long. I tread in place for a moment before rushing toward the rock face and lifting myself waist high in the water. It was a challenge to navigate the slippery rocks back up, but after a few moments I emerged shivering into a towel. We warmed together, jumped once more, and warmed again, balancing along the banks of moss. A frenetic, anti-beach experience. Eventually, as if possessed by jealousy, the blue sock flew down and got caught behind a small tree growing out of the ledge directly beneath us, just out of reach. I resigned to letting the sock stay there, afraid one of us might slip and fall on an attempted rescue, but out of concern for my warmth, you sought to grab the sock using two large branches like chopsticks. The sock balanced between them for a moment before escaping your grasp and falling below. Time stood still as it floated, and we crouched, evaluating whether it was to be saved. Finally, you made the decision to enter the water once more but took your approach too gingerly and landed directly on top of the small floating mass. The water immediately swallowed the sock, and I almost felt a sigh of relief knowing that it ended its partnership with me and its match in the way it seemed to want. Diving again, you failed to locate it, and as you surfaced, I wondered how the water could be so clear and so dark at the same time.

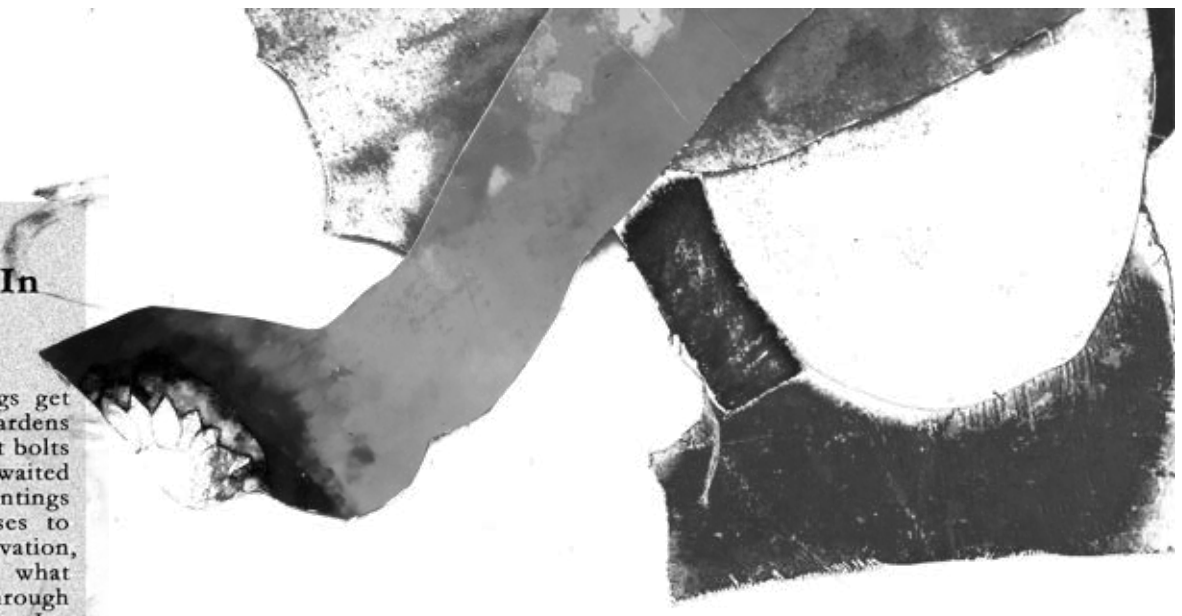
What impressions do impressions make? I find myself asking this question as I walk through *Greener than Grass*, a tactile experience. "I am affected not just by this one other or a set of others, but by a world in which humans, institutions, and organic and inorganic processes all *impress* themselves upon this me who is, at the outset, susceptible in ways that are radically involuntary."¹ The leaning, weight, pressure of Katie Lyle's painting is stretched onto a frame behind it, suspended in time like a drumskin not pounded but scraped and squeezed. Ella Dawn McGeough's warmly frozen wax pillows document the gesture of holding a head, bring it alive, and then take it on the road with wheels. These impressions impress the artists' touch on my memory—the ways they inhabit the space of the gallery, and the surfaces of other spaces they

bring into it. Like having the sweat that your body produces unexpectedly presented to you, or the disappearing shapes that your feet squish into moss, or the sinking of a blue sock in dark water, the touches leave imprints on both surface and mind. Revisiting these imprints can make for a memory in clearer focus, but memories themselves can be bent and shaped once again by new impressions. When I revisit the photo documentation of a touch, I close my eyes and search for the tactility whose presence can only be felt deep in my memory—but I fear the day that the path overgrows.

This text originally appeared in *FrameWork* 11/20, Susan Hobbs Gallery, November 2020

1. Judith Butler, *Senses of the Subject* (New York: Fordham University Press), 6-7.





Decreating the Grass and the Grass that It Slithers In

A Writing Workshop
with Jacquelyn Zong-Li Ross

There are plenty of myths about the way things get made. About babies delivered by storks. About gardens full of snakes, of good fruits and bad. About great bolts of lightning issuing forth the long-awaited epiphany—how novels get written and how paintings get made. But what happens when one chooses to circumvent familiar creation myths in lieu of excavation, subtraction, and unwieldy (re)invention? And what happens *after* the abolition of the myth? Through readings of Ursula Le Guin, Karen An-Hwei Lee, Joy Harjo, Layli Long Soldier, and Patricia Lockwood, we'll consider the possibilities of decreation at the level of the word, the beat, the line, in order to consider what it really means to “create” a so-called “work of art.”

Sunday November 15th, 2020 - 2 PM EST/ 11 AM

Some possible prompts for the reverse-creator:

- What happens if I begin at the end and end at the beginning?
- What is the opposite way of going about it? What are some sidelong ways?
- What is the most obvious and least obvious way?
- What method could only be considered a detour?
- How can I make it clearer, but also stranger?
- Where does it deserve to be wound or unwound?
- What are its constituent parts?
- Where can I undo the teachable part?
- Where does it deserve to be defiled, undone?



Clean Hands

Lillian O'Brien Davis

My hands feel huge, like mitts that will cover over, crush, land too heavily or make a mess of anything they touch. To make contact is horrific because I am frightened the mark I make will last too long, be too big. When I do make contact, often the effect is not immediate—there is enough of a delay to make me think that maybe my fears were unfounded, but eventually the mark, my mark, appears.

When asked to define the concept of “infrathin,” Marcel Duchamp replied that it is a concept that is impossible to define, that “one can only give examples of it.” For instance, the warmth of a seat which has just been left, he explained, is infrathin.¹ How do you visualize the space in between where two things meet, such as the space between a seat and a bum? Consider the story of Tantalus, a figure from Greek mythology who stole ambrosia, nectar, and the gods’ secrets of immortality for his people. As punishment for his crime, Tantalus was made to stand in a clear pool where water receded before he could drink, and underneath trees laden with fruit that forever escaped his grasp. Tantalus’ unquenched desire is his torture, to have what he needs just out of reach. *Dancing with Tantalus* is an exploration of an attempt to embody the space of unfulfilled desire and to occupy the narrow and eternal space in between two things that nearly meet.

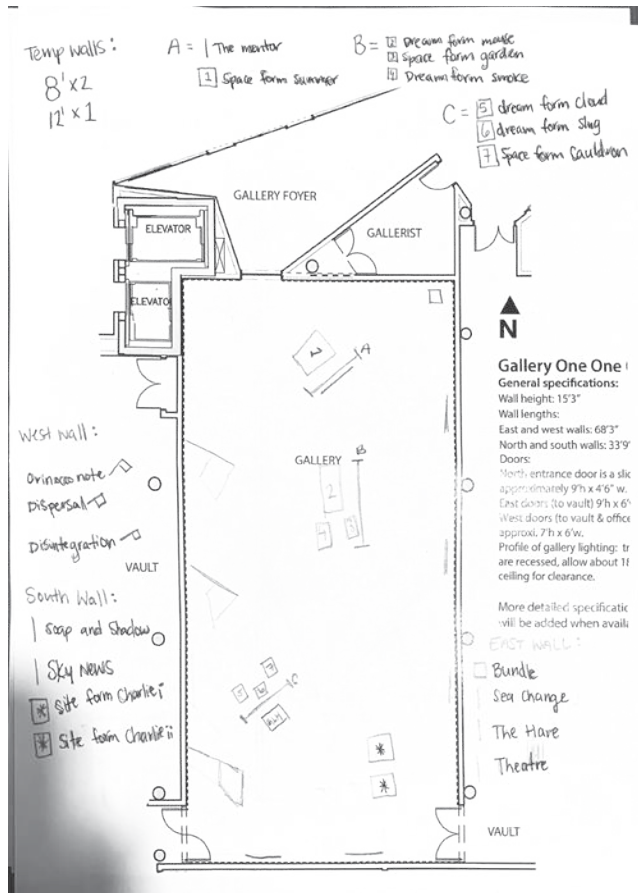
The works of the three women in this exhibition, Gabrielle L’Hirondelle Hill, Ella Dawn McGeough, and Katie Lyle, engage with the implications and resonances of contact—between people, surfaces, and objects. This project is the outcome of a year-long collaboration resulting from a series of conversations between myself and the artists related to the implications of touch. We were particularly interested in situations where contact or touch, and its lack become caught between desire and crisis—the circumstance of Tantalus. The exhibition explores poetic physical touch, though the term ‘contact’ also carries the weight of colonial violence that often accompanies “contact” as a



concept. Writer and poet Anne Carson writes that “every touch is a modified blow,” a violation of a fixed boundary where one does not belong.² Carson writes in her essay, *Dirt and desire: the phenomenology of female pollution in antiquity*, that the ancient Greeks were highly sensitive to the necessity of personal and extrapersonal boundaries for the maintenance of human order.

Women, strangers, intruders, and beggars in ancient Greek society were considered to lack the ability to control their own boundaries and therefore needed to be externally regulated.³ Tantalus, a thief and intruder, violated the boundary between gods and men and his punishment was to remain within the interstice forever. Contact and its absence are multilayered experiences and each has consequences that extend indefinitely.

The artworks featured in this exhibition serve as haptic portrayals of the delicate dance of proximity; a continuous cycle of moving close, pulling away and circling back again. Like Tantalus, the viewer who moves through the space will become implicated in a choreographed proximity: a dance in which everyone moves but nobody touches. Imagined touch is erotic—an experience of anticipation—a fantasy of contact that never arrives, of intimate and infinite nearness.



What could be considered an infrathin distance between touch and its absence? By exploring the permeability of surfaces, the artists in *Dancing with Tantalus* collapse the boundaries between form, content, and process. Each of the artists explore the crisis of contact through the accrual and erasure of material by working through the precarious process of translation between idea and surface. Their various materials—wax, copper, tobacco, silk, and paint—are caught in a contradiction: sensitive to touch, they explore the limitations of the surface. The artists have worked into their surfaces, building up paint on canvas and then stripping it away, melting and reforming wax, or sewing together tender and delicate tobacco leaves.

Carson expands on her framing of contact as crisis by using the example of the traditional ancient Greek wedding ceremony. The moment of the ceremony where the bride removes her veil so that she might be seen by her betrothed indicates the precise moment that the bride becomes “touched” by the bridegroom. She draws reference from a fragment of a poem by ancient Greek poet, Sappho, who describes the first instance of a bride being unveiled in front of the bridegroom:

He seems to me equal to gods that man
 who opposite you
 sits and listens close
 to your sweet speaking
 and lovely laughing—oh it
 puts the heart in my chest on wings
 for when I look at you, a moment, then no speaking
 is left in me
 no: tongue breaks and thin
 fire is racing under skin
 and in eyes no sight and drumming
 fills ears
 and cold sweat holds me and shaking
 grips me all, greener than grass
 I am and dead—or almost
 I seem to me ...

Carson explains how Sappho’s wording uses perspective to wreak havoc with boundaries, changing the perspective of the narrator (Sappho) to intercept the moment of touch: “Sappho has chosen the most solemn and

authoritative of the rituals that sacralize female boundaries and used it to explode the distinction between the outside and the inside of herself.”⁴

Like Sappho, the artists in *Dancing With Tantalus* deliberately seek to explode the boundaries of their materials. Sappho attempted to undermine the perceived mutability of the female boundary, using an instance of ceremonial touching to disrupt the moment of contact between bride and groom. Tantalus sought to cross the boundary between gods and men and for that was banished into a state of eternal yearning. In both contexts the interstice cannot be defined, only experienced. *Dancing with Tantalus* presents work that embodies the experience of the precipice, just before the fall, asking: what would it look like to escape our barriers? A question that cannot be answered, only felt.

This text was originally published by The School of Art Gallery, University of Manitoba, January 2021

¹ Marcel Duchamp, quoted in *Art and Popular Culture*. 2019. “Infrathin.” Last modified May 12, 2016. [http://www.artandpopularculture.com/Infrathin#:~:text=Infrathin%20\(French%3A%20inframince\)%20is,just%2Fbeen%20left\)%20is%20infrathin](http://www.artandpopularculture.com/Infrathin#:~:text=Infrathin%20(French%3A%20inframince)%20is,just%2Fbeen%20left)%20is%20infrathin)

² Carson, Anne. “Dirt and desire: the phenomenology of female pollution in antiquity,” in *Men in the Off Hours* (New York: Knopf, 2000), p. 130

³ Ibid.

⁴ Carson, p.150-151.





Mar. 7, 2021

Choreography as Premonition//The Imaginary Event of Presentation: A Movement Workshop with Katie Lyle and Shelby Wright, 12:00 to 1:30 p.m. CT

Aching Distances

Jillian Groening



It has been more than a year since dance artists have been able to experience skin-to-skin contact with collaborators. But this absence is now offering generative spaces for explorations of proximity and touch.

Ali Robson's performance response to the visual art exhibition *Dancing with Tantalus* considers what is cultivated through the dynamic proximities of bodies, surfaces and art objects in virtual space. Presented by the University of Manitoba School of Art Gallery, *Dancing with Tantalus* was curated by Lillian O'Brien Davis and featured the work of Gabrielle L'Hirondelle Hill, Katie Lyle and Ella Dawn McGeough. The works were on display at the Winnipeg campus from January 21 through March 13, and Robson's performance took place in the final days of the exhibition. Livestreamed on March 11, and currently available on the school's YouTube channel, the performance remains as a virtual choreography documenting a dance of proximity.

By navigating thoughtful, measured movements across a corner area of the gallery, the 10-minute solo imparts a yearning for contact that is lulling yet vibratory, removed and yet grasping. Through the precise, minimal articulations of limbs clad in simple dark clothing, Robson invites proprioceptive experiences of touch and a heightened attunement to the sensations of air on skin, feet on ground and the weight of a shoulder against a wall. In a short amount of time, Robson sensorially maps the body in proximity to the objects and architectural parameters of the gallery space. What is revealed by this mapping is a resonating ache of the palimpsestic imprints remaining from past experiences of touch.

In her exhibition essay for *Dancing with Tantalus*, titled *Clean Hands*, O'Brien Davis brings forth the concept of "infrathin," which Marcel Duchamp conveys as "the warmth of a seat that has just been left," she writes. O'Brien Davis accesses infrathin in the context of visualizing "the space in between where two things meet." This charged space between matter is further illustrated through the Greek myth of Tantalus, who

was punished for a crime by being “made to stand in a clear pool where water receded before he could drink, underneath trees laden with fruit that forever escaped his grasp,” writes O’Brien Davis. Looking to the resonances of touch as well as to the implications of colonial violence that the term “contact” carries, the visual artworks featured in *Dancing with Tantalus* explore touch and its absence through the manipulation of surfaces: “building up paint on canvas and then stripping it away, melting and reforming wax, or sewing together tender and delicate tobacco leaves.”

Robson’s performance could be perceived as simulating the unfulfilled reaching of Tantalus. The result is an affective encounter that generates a sensation like *infrathin*. Robson was filmed from a distance with a stabilized camera, and while watching, I found myself reaching towards the spaces she created with her movements. Curled towards my screen, I clung to the sound of Robson’s skin against the smooth concrete floor and followed her weight against the gallery wall with my own body. In spite of the distance, I felt her movements in vivid spatial and tactile imaginings. As Liz Clayton Scofield writes, “Can we reimagine distance? Distance not as measurement, but... how far does it feel? Is a centimeter six feet or miles when you can’t hear a heartbeat?” How might performance audiences reorient towards notions of distance and proximity that allow for affective configurations virtually?

One moment of Robson’s performance that evokes clear inquiries around distance, touch and virtual spaces is when the artist circles a blue-painted moveable wall upon which is mounted a green painting, fuzzy and distorted through the camera lens. Her movements resemble the continuous crashing of waves, summoning a sense of forces that flow over and pull under. As Robson orbits behind the wall and out of sight, her shadow appears on the gallery wall, framed by a bright white light. The shadow is doubled and the overlapping forms loom over the gallery space. Not only do the shadow forms perform their own dance of (close) proximity, the relationship between live performer and shadow performer is destabilized by the virtuality of the audience’s realm. For viewers, it is another moment of grasping towards something, of leaning in towards someone who is out of reach.

Robson’s performance response to the *Dancing with Tantalus* exhibition asks how contact with surfaces, skin and shadows might inform how distance is perceived when watching performance in virtual spaces. By engaging with the palimpsestic qualities of touch, the work draws lines of connection through notions of distance that cause temporal and spatial boundaries to overflow.

This article was originally published by *The Dance Current* (www.thedancecurrent.com) on March 24, 2021.

Crossing a Threshold: The Second Crime of Tantalus

Nic Wilson



King Tantalus is best remembered for his first crime. This son of Zeus often stole ambrosia and nectar from the gods while drunk and brought them back to his people, bestowing immortality on them. While this would have been enough for the gods to inflict horrific, allegorical punishments upon him, Tantalus' final crime offers a much more grievous portrait of his pathology and motivation for testing the Gods. The allegory of Tantalus and the depths of his transgressions are informed by the social and political context of ancient Greece—by how this society understood power, its roots, and its vulnerabilities. These understandings of power are bound to the conditions of citizenship and an anxiety of touch that moves beyond the so-called surface of the body, towards an understanding of our insides and what it means to touch or be touched beyond that surface.

Citizenship was not guaranteed in Greece. To claim this position, or rather, to have it bestowed upon you, meant the negation of several factors. First of all, you could not be a woman, second you could not be a slave, and third—though this is by no means an exhaustive list—you had to be a man.¹ As is the case today, the distinction of “man” was fragile, contingent, and often bound to social conditions with both political power and political volatility. As is also the case today, to be somehow less than a man was a diminishment based in misogyny. Of the long list of possible disqualifiers for “manness” (and concomitantly, citizenship), long hair, youth, and the reception of anal penetration were among the top transgressions. The body of the Citizen was an impenetrable instrument of power and therefore capable of political sovereignty through domination.²

The unpenetrated body of a Citizen was a precarious possession, as anal penetration was also recorded by the Greeks as a form of punishment for a man who slept with another man's wife.³ Beyond the implication of a wife as the possession of her husband, this punishment illustrates the fragility of the unpenetrated body, how it is susceptible to a loss of status and political agency relatively easily. This humiliation, this violation, this act of dominance is echoed in Tantalus' second crime against the gods. During a feast on Mount Olympus,



crime
he

devised a chilling scheme to test the gods' omnipotence, the ultimate challenge to their divine superiority, through the taboo of human sacrifice and cannibalism. In preparation for the feast, Tantalus killed and dismembered his infant son Pelops and served the child in a stew, hoping that the gods would not perceive the taint of human flesh, thus exposing the fallibility of their perception.

I read Tantalus' test as an attempt to dominate his superiors through an act of both symbolic and literal penetration—following the logic that the penetrated body is at best, a diminished male body, and at worst a female one, which should be read in this context as effectively inhuman.

A general anxiety about the symbolic and literal porousness of human bodies persists to this day. The porous body is a messy body. We need tight meals, tight sphincters. Contagions and bacteria are the number one cause of food-related deaths around the world and so called "clean" "superfoods" with "cleansing" and "detoxifying" properties drive a booming economy of chain health-food stores and juice bars. The anxiety of ingestion is inflected by the impulse to regulate what goes into the body and what is denied, engaging the crisis of touch in an entirely different key—one which denies the reality that this regimen of bodily autonomy is transgressed with every breath you take.

I often wonder where the inside of a body begins and why some interiorities are emphasized while others are ignored. The human body, regardless of its anatomical composition, is an engine of intake, of openings, cavities, and thresholds. Nicotine can be absorbed through foliar contact and tobacco's aromatic properties are the smallest bits of contact. Smell is not the ethereal transference of immaterial vapours that one might imagine, it is the tiniest bits of what you are smelling making contact directly with your brain. When you catch a whiff of something, whether it be appetizing or revolting, it has already entered your body. What happens to that particulate once you have taken it in? Do you breathe it back out or does it simply become part of you? I also wonder if

there was a way for someone to regain their status after losing it? Was this doctrine of penetration enforced and policed or was it effectively a tool of rumour?

Each instance of permeability has its own affective specificities. Their ability to infer a meaning through which political and social power are distributed and withheld are illustrated by Kenneth Dover in his observation of several ancient Greek comedies. He observes scenes in which the old guard of the Greek citizenship use the inferred meaning of penetration (and its implied effeminacy) in an attempt to disqualify larger and larger groups from participating in political life. This crisis of dwindling power and the disqualification of new voices who threaten an established elite is a familiar swansong. In this song, a privileged anxiety is weaponized and used to disenfranchise another recognizable subset of the population.

The anxiety over the leaky female or effeminate body sometimes seems like a way to deny the very fact of being a human body, with its multitudes of portals and interiorities. To arbitrarily view some bodies as porous (and therefore of a diminished status) and others as impenetrable, (an impossible state for a human body) is to cast the second group in a fantastical, even allegorical imaginary—much like the one inhabited by the gods.

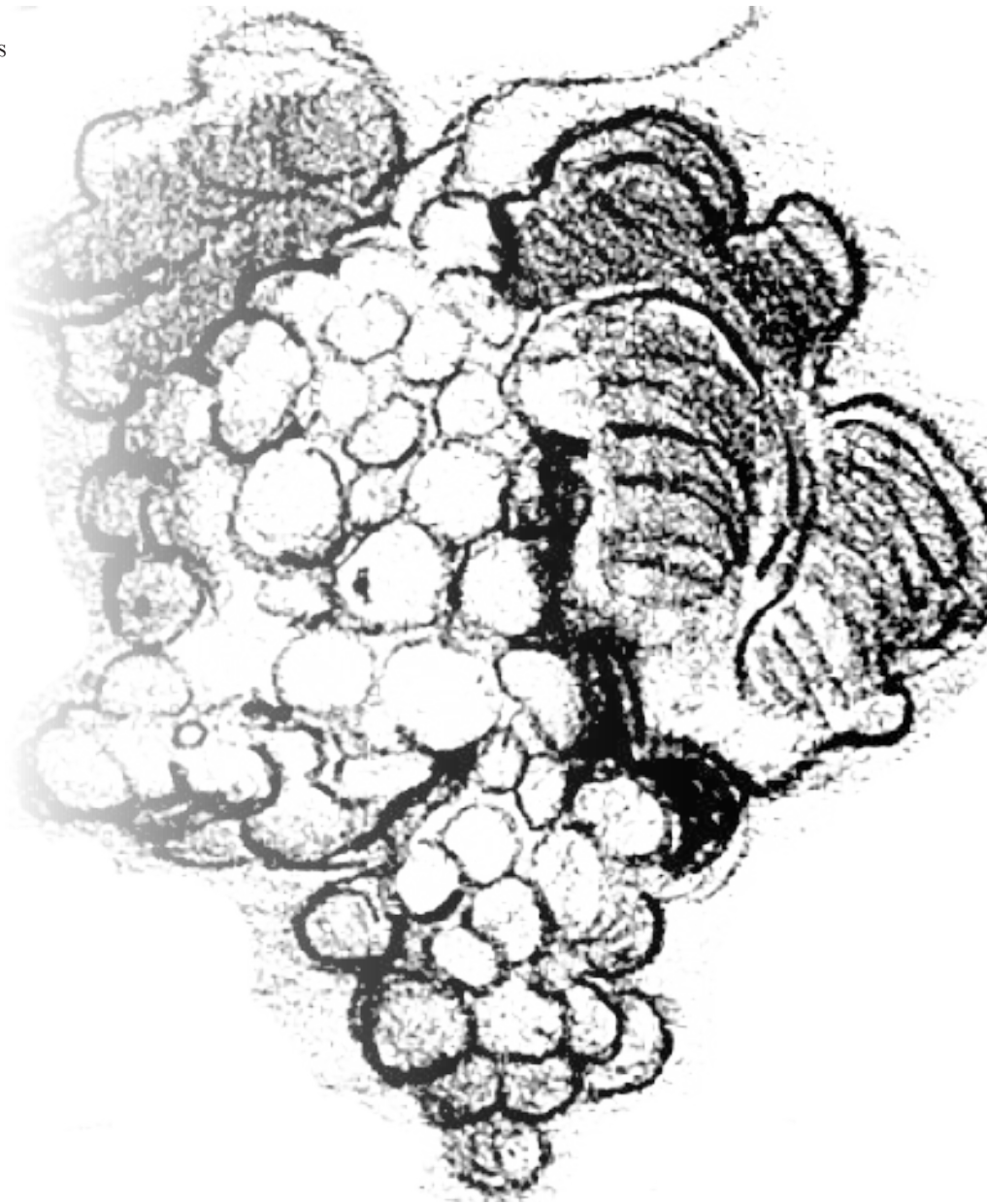
This fearmongering, where collective anxiety is passed onto a foreign other, is a symptom of the fascist tendency to medicalize the state and view it as an ailing body which is susceptible to further contamination. More often than not, this strategy identifies these contagions as other people, people who are often brown, or "foreign," or who speak a different language, or who are thought to be deficient, disabled, or criminal—and therefore dangerous and delinquent in multivalent capacities. This creates immigrant detention centres and travel bans, mass deportation and militarized borders. Seeing the state in the image of a lone, unpenetrated male body is a horrific fantasy forged at the expense of living humans.

The antidote to this fantasy might be accepting the inevitability of leaky bodies and messy bedsheets. It might be the understanding that to dance with Tantalus might not be to take his hand but to embody his actions in a different key, where the act of poisoning becomes an act of nourishing

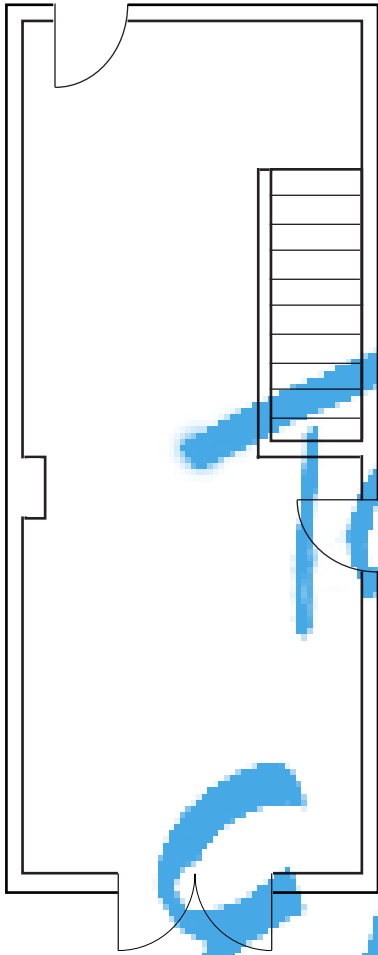
care or convivial togetherness; where an act of individual hubris becomes the collective enactment of the fuzzy places where bodies awkwardly, joyfully, and collectively smear together.

This text was originally published by The School of Art Gallery, University of Manitoba, Spring 2021

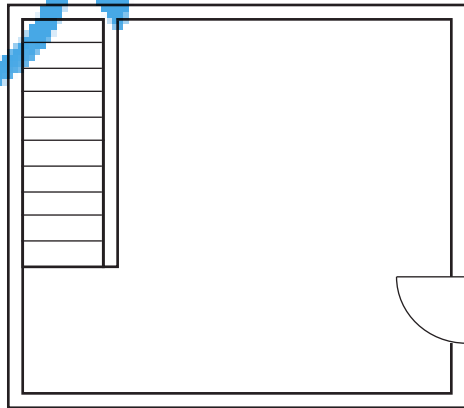
1. JK Dover, *Greek Homosexuality*, (London: Duckworth Press, 1978), 142.
2. Foucault, Michel *The History of Sexuality* Volume Two: *The Use of Pleasure*, trans. Robert Hurley (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1992), 220.
3. Dover, 140.



GALLERY MAP



Forms of
Endearment
xxx





Support is a project space based in London, Ontario. It is organized by Liza Eurich, Tegan Moore, and Ruth Skinner.

supportsupport.ca
260b Clarence Street

Support *v.* hold up, carry, prop up, keep up, reinforce; give assistance to, give comfort to, care for, suggest the truth of, advocate, to keep going; *n.* a thing bearing the weight of another thing; material assistance, maintenance, upkeep, sustenance.