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Leering in the Gap: The contribution of the viewer's gaze in creative arts praxis as an extension of material thinking and making

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The contribution of knowledge and thinking in creative arts praxis is generated through the symbolic relationships formed via the resulting visual tangible manifestations of the studio practice investigations. While the materiality of the outcomes of arts research are frequently discussed as a method of producing a discourse through new material formations, the role of the viewer (the audience) to determine these readings must be considered. This paper will analyse the role of gaze as a contributing factor in the generation of knowledge through material thinking in creative arts praxis. Lacan's (1979) perspective on gaze is used to locate the potential for the viewer's experience to direct thinking and making in a creative arts praxis as the act of looking is fragmented and privileged through the self. Gaze *leers in the gap*, shaping and directing assumed notions of the body, objects and the tangible manifestations of creative arts praxis through the interpretative and reductive powers of the viewer's desires. Negotiations of the fragmentary gaze of the viewer (and viewed) are identified as an extension of the ongoing dialogue between creative practitioners and the manifested work through an analysis of my creative arts praxis inquiries of the in-between conditions of the corporeal body. The capability for gaze to shape the anticipated emotional and psychological responses of the viewer through the creative outcomes and exhibition of arts practice will be revealed through reflexive decisions made to navigate and direct gaze in my exhibition *Peel, Fondle, Ogle*.

The contributing role of the viewer (and viewed) to knowledge and thinking within creative arts praxis?

The viewer's position is evident when considering Lacan's (1979) notions of gaze as derived from Merleau-Ponty (1962) which distinguishes the function of the eye from the viewer's gaze. For Lacan (1979) the filtering of the visual through the eye composes meaning through the symbolic relations formed for things. Gaze filters and reshapes the observed through the viewer's perceptions and values; meaning gaze cannot see the real (Berger et al., 1972; Schneider, 1997; Schroeder, 2009). Part of this filtering process is due to the fragmentation, privileging and reduction of what is viewed through the symbolic and the identification with the viewer's ego (Lacan, 1977), which both extends the possible readings through the act of looking.

The ability of the tangible and visual to determine meaning through gaze is not a new concept as we engage with the world in a direct physical way through experiences before theoretical navigations (Barrett, 2013). Thinking through handling and making to generate knowledge in creative arts praxis is due to the symbolic relationships formed through the reworking of the materials into new forms. Carter (2004) extends on the discourse enabled by material thinking as the negotiation of information in material and tangible forms enables the viewer to form new dialogues and different perspectives. The potential for creative works to induce meaning or evoke an emotional or psychological response from the viewer is explained by Walsh (2013) due to the 'destabilising the mastery of the gaze, unseating the subject from its secure position of a surveyor of all that it sees' (p. 57). This alludes to the integral relationship the viewer's gaze potentially has to shape and direct creative arts praxis. Therefore the viewer's gaze can be considered as another element that the practitioner has to contend with beyond the creation of the tangible work in the studio context.

Lacan's (1979) notions of gaze are specific to the extension of thinking and making through creative arts praxis to generate knowledge due to the consideration of the viewer's body through gaze. Lacan's (1977, 1979) perspectives on gaze acknowledge the presence of the viewer physically (in body) and psychically (the mind) and symbolically (our relation to the value of things). Understanding gaze as experienced and filtered through the body in these varied ways demonstrates the potential for the gaze to incite an emotional, or physical reaction from creative work. Consideration of the viewer is significant to understanding gaze as part of this process. Mulvey (1989) established notions of gaze, which drew heavily on Lacanian ideas, however differ in her consideration of the viewer. Mulvey (1989) sees the viewer as both part of an audience and an individual through her discussion of the viewer in relation to cinema and film. Although she makes attempts to distinguish the individual from the mass audience in cinema, the viewer is discussed mostly as a group spectator. The mass audience is something that can be navigated through creative arts praxis as the creative practitioner can subvert this position and has potential to physically direct the viewer to create a more intimate experience (Crary, 1988; Walsh, 2013). Mulvey's (1989) views are problematic as they consider the viewer as static and rarely active in both watching and encountering through gaze. There is inflexibility in the viewer's position due to Mulvey's heavy reliance on the male dominant ideology of Freud and Lacan. Mulvey posits that the male gaze is possessive and the female position is never considered as a subject and only discussed as an object (Walsh, 2013; Stacey, 1988). Current theory from Grosz (1994) and Butler (2011) offers compromise as while the contribution of gaze to the symbolic, imaginary, cultural and social formation of the body is impacted upon by male dominant ideology, it is acknowledged as not limited to this position. Looking at the body's capacity to be performative through gender and sexuality reveals

negotiation of Lacan's (1979) theories. Butler (2011) proposes fluidity in Lacan's position through the performative nature of the body in how it is privileged, fragmented and reduced through gaze. Contemporary gaze can mediate the implications of gendered gaze and Lacan's (1979) theories enables the viewer to identify with the visual through the ideals or objectification of an image through the fragmentary way in which we see things.

Lacan's (1979) notions of gaze identify the potential for the viewer to inject themselves into fantasy and desire through the engagement enabled with the body or objects through identification of the self. However, reducing Lacan's (1977, 1979) theories on gaze to merely identification of a like or familiar body or object are restrictive. Aligning gaze with Lacan's (1977) theories of the fragmentary nature of gaze, and its ability to privilege through the symbolic values assigned to the body and objects enables a wider discussion of the use of gaze to contribute to the creation of knowledge through creative arts praxis. The filtering what is seen through symbolic values contributes to the construction of fantasy and desire and identifies the presence of the fetish object within arts research. This link can be determined between the tangible manifestations of creative arts praxis to the fetish object as these art objects can act as a representation of merging fantasy with material outcomes through the ways in which they are seen (Malt, 2004).

In order to create new dialogues between the materials and the viewer, the creative practitioner needs to ask how they attempt to shape and direct the viewer's experience. How can the way we see things be used in creative arts praxis to extend the communication of the visual and tangible to the audience? Is it a question of subverting and modifying more traditional notions of exhibiting and displaying creative works?

The contribution of gaze to the in-between condition of the body

Gaze is specific to my creative arts praxis and is directly considered as a contributing factor to my investigations of the in-between condition of the corporeal body and the formation of the creative work manifested. The in-between condition of the body of focus in my creative arts praxis examines the body as an unstable entity, which is physically, psychically and symbolically ambiguous (Grosz, 1994; Lacan, 1977; Lacan, 1979; Lacan, 1981). In my research I suggested the body cannot be contained to the rigid frameworks assigned to them by the cultural, social and historical. The unfixed parameters of the body examined within my research apply to the inscription of desire and repulsion, as these values exist as constructions of these symbolic frameworks on the body. Gaze is examined within my inquiry of the in-between conditions of the body as it contributes to formed notions of the body as gaze fragments, privileges and reduces the body as an object through Lacan's (1977) erogenous zones. The detachable and uncontainable status of gaze is also investigated as contributing to the in-between condition through the symbolic

structuring of the body. Gaze extends the in-between conditions of the corporeal body as the reading of the body as both desirable and repulsive is facilitated through viewing.

Attempted navigations of gaze through a creative arts praxis in exhibition *Peel, Fondle, Ogle*.

In my most recent exhibition *Peel, Fondle, Ogle* the in-between condition of the body was investigated through a dialogue between the body, garment, object and performance. The position of the audience and their proximity to the work was directly managed to establish an intimate experience for the viewer. In this way, the role of the viewer became part of my creative arts praxis. The potential for gaze to *leer into the gap* was realised both through the viewer's identification with notions of the in-between body explored and continued to manifest and subvert the fragmentary way the body (and works) were experienced. The penetrative nature of gaze was considered initially within my research due to the fragmentary attributes of gaze that direct the ways in which we encounter the body and in order to communicate a more fluid dialogue between the body, garment, object and performance. It was significant to ask how it is possible to reform and subvert assumed bodily boundaries through the physical ways we encounter the tangible manifestations of arts research in the context of an exhibition?

I first attempted to consider the position of the viewer as a voyeur, to uncover why we *leer in the gap* and at what point do we feel most comfortable or uncomfortable in this experience. Identifying gaze as experienced by the individual was integral to my work as while symbolic relationships for the body are formed by the collective (Bourdieu, 1990), gaze is initially experienced as an individual (Berger et al., 1972). I wanted to deny the normalising comfort of a collective group and create intimate spaces for the viewer. By allowing the viewer to choose to *leer into the gap*, to permeate the private spaces of the body, the visual information of the tangible manifestations of my arts praxis were extended through the act of looking. This process mediated an intimate approach to viewing. This intimate approach was facilitated as it firstly enabled the viewer to encounter the body in new ways, exposing the viewer to uncomfortable situations, and secondly to allowed the viewer to indulge in these situations. This was achieved through relationships formed through the installation of the elements of the body, garment, objects and performance within a gallery context.

Installation

During the installation of the creative work I reflexively questioned the layout of the exhibition. Considering the role of the viewer and the viewed throughout the installation process determined the placement of static objects, film and performers.

Establishing a relationship between the creative manifestations of my research and the viewer allowed the questioning of the representation of the body. The in-between condition was explored through a construction of intimate spaces, which enabled the viewer to encounter the ambiguity of the body through its presentation as fragmented and reduced. Small mirrors were placed in ways that isolated parts of the body (Fig. 1). In this manner the viewer's gaze was directed to engage with the body in a specific way. Gaze facilitated the reforming and recreating of erogenous zones by allowing the viewer to leer into new openings or gaps in the body through garment (Cavallaro and Warwick, 1998; Lacan, 1977). The body was further framed through lighting and the mirrors, which fragmented, isolated and reduced the ways in which the viewer could engage with the work.



Figure 1. A detail of *Peel, Fondle, Ogle* that demonstrates the placement of mirrors and lights to direct the viewer's gaze.

Film

The partial and fragmented way the body could be encountered was enhanced through the use of film. Situated in undulating fabric frames, small tablets played a looped film clip that only allowed the viewer access to the partial body through an isolated filmed section of a performer repeating fondling gestures. In these pieces the viewer can take the position of the voyeur, leering through the gap in the desire to look and view the normally private sphere (Denzin, 1995). The viewer (Fig. 2) physically leers between folds of fabric to small and intimate screens that deny a

large audience by allowing space for only one or two viewers at a time. In this way the performer is not able to return the gaze of the viewer and can only be active as the object of their gaze. Schneider explains the engagement of the viewer as gaze 'is an inscription of distance and penetrability – a distance across which desire can be constructed as insatiable, as so constructed, can work its magic as the unending drive to accumulate, appropriate, possess, acquire' (Schneider, 1997, p. 68).



Figure 2. Detail of *Peel, Fondle, Ogle* showing a viewer engaging with a video work.

Performance

Without an active live body in the exhibition the viewer is able to remain active as the subject. In contrast the represented body, the performer displayed in the film clips, the garments and sculptural body objects are passive because they cannot return the gaze. This is the more traditional role that occurs in an exhibition context but a creative arts praxis can challenge these established roles through gaze, which has the potential to unveil the viewed through the transfer of the counter gaze (Schneider, 1997; Walsh, 2013). By using performers within the work, the viewer encounters these bodies differently from the objects and films. The change in proximity and the transference between viewer and the viewed alters through the counter gaze. The potential for the return of the gaze marks an unfixed position that navigates Mulvey's (1989) perspectives of the passive viewed subject. The viewer is no longer passive and the question of who is watching arises?



Figure 3. Viewer engaging with a performer from exhibition *Peel, Fondle, Ogle*.

The use of performers evokes a physical reaction to the work, with the changing of the proximity of the viewer to the performers (Fig. 3). There is also potential for an emotional or psychological response of feeling uncomfortable when presented with a real life performer undertaking, in a public space, what would normally be considered private and intimate moments of fondling. This contributes the notion of gaze to the in-between as it identifies the unfixed and awkward space that gaze occupies. The use of a physical body through live performance in the exhibition created a dialogue between the body, object and gaze by allowing the audience to question their position as the viewer through the physical presence of the viewed.

Concluding reflections on leering, thinking and making

The viewers' experience and fragmentary ways of seeing while embodying the role of a viewer, voyeur, and the viewed (through the opportunity of the counter gaze)

reveals many possibilities for negotiation of the dialogue occurring within a creative arts praxis. The role of the viewer in this aspect is performative and acknowledgement of the presence of the body and gaze should be considered when generating and exhibiting the tangible manifestations of creative arts praxis. Creative arts research does not exist without an audience (Crouch, 2007) and this paper has attempted to establish the unfixed parameters that the viewer's role has within one creative arts research project. If material thinking (Carter, 2004) is accomplished through the emotional and psychological responses of the viewer to the tangible outcomes of creative arts praxis (Barrett, 2013) than it seems limiting for the creative practitioner to ignore gaze as a contributing element of the making process. Additionally, as diverse and critical audiences frequently view creative work the exhibited manifestations of creative arts praxis investigations can no longer be made without consideration of gaze. The observations within my exhibition *Peel, Fondle, Ogle* noted the potential for the viewer's gaze and the manifested creative work to be both passive and active. Rather than thinking of the viewer as acted upon by the creative work, there was an exchange of roles through gaze within this exhibition. Gaze has a part within the creative process and is an extension of thinking and making. If creative arts research desires to create an experience for the viewer to generate new knowledge through material thinking, we should also ask: How do we see it?

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