

Frankfurt School philosopher Theodor W. Adorno describes the work of René Descartes as part of the “main-stream” Western philosophical “tradition [for whom] there is a world of truth that stands opposed in principle to the fleeting nature of the world of phenomena.” Adorno continues, “This world of phenomena represents something of a delusion, and is therefore inferior when compared with that of truth.”<sup>i</sup> In Descartes’ pivotal treatise *Meditations on First Philosophy*, the philosopher famously discovers that the thinking mind is the only means to determine a firm, true basis for knowledge. Beginning with a proposal to scrutinize everything he believes to be true, Descartes intends to eliminate anything he might possibly doubt. Through this process, Descartes decides that his senses are an unreliable method of gaining definitive knowledge, and goes so far as to say that reason, rather than empirically given observation, is the only way to discover timeless truths. With this simple proclamation, he establishes the division between *res cogitans* and *res extensa*.

The exhibition “Descartes’ Daughter” disrupts the persistence of Descartes’ influence in ordering the timeless and the transitory, the conceptual and the material, the rational and the animal. What follows is an exploration of three artworks in the exhibition, works that pose salient questions about the thinking subject, and take us into new domains of the subject’s relation to knowledge and the world.

Miriam Cahn’s large charcoal drawing *L.I.S. strat. ortebergsee* (1986) is a swirl of fury taking up the extent of one wall. The dark, deep image, composed of stroke upon stroke of charcoal, depicts a bird’s-eye view of a valley. Part of her *Strategische Orte* series, the drawing conveys the point of view of “the bomber plane,” which Cahn describes as a “militarist’s view of the earth, as the viewer could be a pilot flying over the landscape in search of his target.”<sup>ii</sup> These works represent moments when particular patterns of everyday life on the ground become depersonalized and annihilated via a technical perspective. In the drawings, charcoal fingermarks shape mountain ridges and valley rifts, depicting a serene landscape in its last moments.

Cahn explains that her critique of militarization in *Strategische Orte* “dwells on the appropriation of the world by men through military endeavour.”<sup>iii</sup> Speaking on the extensive history of feminist work on the objectifying capacities of vision,

a discussion in which Cahn participates here, feminist scholar Donna Haraway points out: "The eyes have been used to signify a perverse capacity—honed to perfection in the history of science, tied to militarism, capitalism, colonialism, and male supremacy—to distance the knowing subject from everybody and everything in the interest of unfettered power."<sup>iv</sup> Cahn performatively assumes the "objective viewpoint" of the bomber plane pilot to explode it internally through her method. In contrast to such distance diabolically deployed, Cahn creates the work through literal over-proximity—making the drawings on the floor, she often lies directly on the paper. She says, "When I create these landscapes I stand right in the middle of them, I lie around in them, I'm not actually in control."<sup>v</sup> Using her palms and fingers to smudge the charcoal, the act of pushing herself onto the surface is itself a rejoinder to the perspectives of militarized techno-science. Cahn has described her method in making these works as reliant on "body memory," which is inaccessible through conscious awareness. Therefore, this technique registers neither personal expression nor affective impressions.

One can assume that, as she works, a moment comes where she slips into a state of quasi-consciousness. Similarly, Descartes, as he was writing his *Meditations*, found that surprising thoughts flow best in such a half-conscious state. The subconscious processes she deploys shape Cahn's conscious, abstract thoughts on systemic and social considerations, and bleed into them. Concepts developed on a cognitive level nevertheless create a host of bodily and affective effects. In this way, the artist layers subject matter and method, as political commentary and commitment mix with intuited actions that are harder to pinpoint in words. As such, the work cannot easily be filed on either side of the simple binary of the aesthetic and the political, and neither can it be understood as concerned with a solely individual subjectivity, nor with a collective social process. Cahn speaks of these pieces as conveying thought, which she allows to evolve in what are traditionally considered the margins of cognition. Both the conscious and subconscious mind apprehend patriarchal subjugation or militarized forms of power.

Evoking a world of outcomes that women have not been permitted to shape, Cahn critiques the patriarchal epistemic frame and tries to present the potential for another. Traveling the seams of the conscious and subconscious, physical and

mental, will and idea, Cahn sees *L.I.S. strat. orte bergsee* as a specifically feminine body of work. In this respect, one of the artist's strategies is to time the making of this work by a rhythm that is fundamentally corporeal: the internal rhythms of her menstrual cycle. She says of this approach, "It is really something very simple and something of an everyday nature and is concerned with the fact that I really would like women's culture to gain more importance again. At least that it should have equality with men's culture."<sup>vi</sup> One might object that Cahn goes too far in locating women's culture on the side of the body in contrast to rational thought, thus potentially playing into a long history of misogynist assumptions that excluded those gendered female from intellectual work. However, rather than asserting a primacy of the bodily or the affective, Cahn works as a subject not divided into objective reasoning and subjective impressions (a dichotomy retroactively produced through reified oppositions).

Marxist philosopher Alfred Sohn-Rethel argued that the Western epistemological tradition does not come to us only through this main line of philosophy, from Descartes to Immanuel Kant onwards. Rather, these philosophies were influenced by historical conditions of value production and exchange, which then became codified as categories of thought. Hence the separation of intellectual and manual labor, which is itself produced through a social milieu formed by the operations of exchange-value and abstract labor.<sup>vii</sup> Within this analytic, we would specify further that labor consists in wage labor on the one hand, and those constant unwaged labors, reproductive of society as a whole, that have fallen largely on the shoulders and bodies of women. As such, manual labor includes affective and emotional forms, often specific to the work that women have traditionally been consigned to perform. While use-value and exchange-value are the commodity's two aspects in capitalism, some traditional Marxists have likened use-value to the state of objects before capitalism. Similarly, the body, in the binary of mind and body, is often glorified as a means of overcoming alienation. In the case of use-value or the body, both need to be understood as produced in their present state through separation and transformation into a quality opposed to their opposite pole (of exchange-value or the mind), not as in themselves preserving a lost wholeness. However, in some cases body and utility

instead become emblems swollen with projection. Time and again, the tangled (im)balance of soma and psyche reasserts itself as a socially produced relationship that is ever-evolving, rather than configured in a way that is natural or primary.

In *The Creation of Patriarchy*, Gerda Lerner explains that women's experiences have never reflected a reasoning-sensing, mind-body dualism, saying that "women, like the poor, the subordinate, the marginals, have close knowledge of ambiguity, of feelings mixed with thought, of value judgments coloring abstractions."<sup>viii</sup> We find that it is just such a subjectivity that Cahn activates. This gives us an indication of how we might interpret her notion of women's culture, not falling on one side or the other of a mind-body dualism but in the forgotten space between. Asserting the need for feminist epistemology to transform the world-making knowledges of science and technology, Haraway explains, "Feminist objectivity is about limited location and *situated knowledge*, not about transcendence and *splitting of subject and object*. [...] It is precisely in the politics and epistemology of *partial perspectives* that the possibility of sustained, rational, objective inquiry rests. So, with many other feminists, I want to argue for a doctrine and practice of objectivity that privileges contestation, deconstruction, passionate construction, webbed connections, and hope for transformation of systems of knowledge and ways of seeing. But not just any partial perspective will do; we must be hostile to easy relativisms and holisms."<sup>ix</sup> What Haraway calls for here is a rethinking of theories of knowledge, from a perspective close to that of Cahn's, working from an understanding of the ways that "thinking substance" and "extended substance" are enmeshed.

While Cahn's drawings ask us to contemplate the patriarchal dimensions of the Western epistemological tradition, Rochelle Goldberg presents a simple sculptural procedure that brings many such questions into the present. Goldberg's work, *the space between two mirrors* (2013), is one of a few pieces in the exhibition that could be said to interrogate the notion of technology as an extension of the human. A black rough-hewn wood beam balancing on two legs of a thin metal frame is described in the exhibition materials as a "construction formed in human scale." Its contrasting material qualities—the heaviness of wood, the thinness of metal—add to its anthropomorphic quality, with legs supporting an expansive open frame for a head. Despite the work's appearance of

autonomous art, it displays a profane indication that it might be used *for* something. In fact, it becomes apparent, after some scrutiny, that the sculpture is sitting there quietly measuring itself ... at least in a fashion. An arm can be slid out of its center to a point where, if the arm reaches any further, the object's center of gravity will no longer be sustained. Thus, the piece demonstrates the point at which it will overextend itself, moving out of its homeostatic balance and being thrown into a state far from equilibrium.

A space between two mirrors is a zone of infinite regress, where things reflected are interminably repeated. The self-reflection implied by the title seems to refer to the self-measurement of Goldberg's object. Most measuring tools are directed toward an exogenous object. A measuring instrument that measures itself also measures its ability to measure. This self-relating system approximates the rationalist subjectivism of Descartes and the objective idealism of Hegel, but is further complicated by the thin coating of snakeskin on the object's over-extended measuring arm. Thus, we discover that *the space between two mirrors* is a system that measures its balance, warning us when it reaches disequilibrium by displaying a non-human sign.

Containing a striking and unusual proposition, Goldberg's object is better understood when the sculpture's unexpected juxtaposition of animal viscera with the measurement of a virtual possibility is considered in relation to the present moment at the center of contemporary biopolitics. It is the measurement of the virtual, of system regulation, and of the regulation of human boundaries. We are reminded of a passage from philosopher Giorgio Agamben's book *The Open: Man and Animal*. "First philosophy," Agamben writes, "is not an innocuous academic discipline [...]. From the beginning, metaphysics is taken up in this strategy: it concerns precisely that *meta* that completes and preserves the overcoming of animal *physis* in the direction of human history. This overcoming is not an event that has been completed once and for all, but an occurrence that is always under way, that every time and in each individual decides between the human and the animal, between nature and history, between life and death." He continues, "In our culture, the decisive political conflict, which governs every other conflict, is that between the animality and the humanity of man. That is to say, in its origin Western

politics is also biopolitics.”<sup>x</sup> As Agamben explains, the animal, as the limit of the human, has forever lurked at the edges of the Western metaphysical tradition, and is reproduced in the regulation of the “animality” of physical bodies, corporeal sensations, and affects at stake in the management of populations. Once again, we return to Descartes and the limits that the philosopher set between man and animal, mind and matter.

The measurement of the virtual disequilibrium in Goldberg’s svelte sculpture could be compared to a primitive computer whose input and output are the measurements of its simple sliding arm. The conjunction of deployed elements points us toward this pressing moment of contemporary biopolitics and its expansion through digital statistical analysis (big data). The staggering ability to comprehend the social as micro and macro all at once, never before accomplished in such detail, has made probability an object of relentless mapping and management, via continuous data measurement. A dizzying range of materials is rendered measurable today in order to project future potentials. As a result, a new culture of measurement is emerging in culture today: “quantified selves,” quants, and quantitative analysis.

The “virtual” is central to current evolutions in the age-old collaboration of capital with science and technology, practiced everywhere through projection and probability, and deployed through forced consent. In this way, financial, commercial, and governmental entities dig compulsively into the unknowable future and shape subjects in relation to always-anticipated states of value extraction. The virtual is made manifest as a constant social presence—for instance, in ratings of probability based on credit rating, allotted to every kind of entity from banks to countries to hospitals. The algorithmic fragments that emerge are in turn deployed as subject-defining projections with future-annihilating certainty. While financial risk stalks the halls of medical establishments, the definition of the human is at stake as the body is increasingly a domain of the virtual. The imposition of future time onto “extended matter” is materialized in predictive diagnoses of medical probabilities (recently popularized by Google’s Sergey Brin and Angelina Jolie), sculpting the social landscape as relentlessly as others pursue potential in the financial sphere.

While Goldberg’s instrument addresses the quantified and predicted parameters of subjects in capital today, another

work in the exhibition, a performance by Malin Arnell, entitled *I am not quite sure. This is an arduous terrain* (2013), constructs a picture of conditions that pushes us to think about the constitution of embodied subjects through their interrelations in the present.

The performance is built from interpersonal intimacies and connections that are poetic but not posed, either suggesting movements or occasionally engaging in motion. The static moments are also inevitably physical, located in the interaction between two people (always Arnell and another), often with a tenderness of intimacy—though at times this self-presentation is decidedly matter-of-fact. A person lying on top of another person; a person cradled in another's arms; a person sitting alone in a corner with legs wide; two people pushing against either side of a wall; two people standing next to one another; two others leaning against the wall as if spooning in bed. The invitation that Arnell sent to those who participated offers an insight into the genesis of these actions, whose starting points were simple gestures devised by Arnell and each participant, and then built up by both together. The resulting movements transmit messages between or beyond words, infinitely interpretable because they are not fixed or bound linguistically. What is communicated in the tenderness of each pair is a tending to one another, suggesting that those involved in the work are people that the artist holds dear. At the end of three days, they all reappear together, no longer in pairs, reiterating the poses all at once. The experiments between two people multiply into a room of many, revealing the actions as not only defined by one-on-oneness alone, but also evidencing a more expansive connection between the actions and people, even if most individualized subjects would normally experience the interpersonal in pairs.

While the arrangements feel intimately private (two people spooning), their placement in the white cube, with its minimal exhibition setup, presents these bodies and actions as isolated in a different sense, as if floating in Cartesian space. In her invitation, Arnell explains that participants would be transitional objects for one another, objects of comfort and reassurance, faced as they (the performers) would be with a gallery environment that is not immediately hospitable to sheltering attachments. These affinities are built on a body of affects that might include trust, love, familiarity, desire, and

many others. However, interestingly, Arnell does not impart the representation of affect: the performers' own experience of intimacy is the object of the work as much as the audience's view of the performers and their gestures. However, these are not the only two elements of the piece—the audience might also project their own perception of memories onto the subject position of the performers. These exchanges, based as they are on specific histories and relations between Arnell and the participants, are capable of almost involuntarily calling up fragments of personal memories. These factors distinguish the work from other performance practices where intimacy or affect appear as a representation in general, for instance in Tino Sehgal's *Kiss* (2002). Particular affects of specific relations are a background in Arnell's work. There is nothing iconographic standing in for "intimacy" here. This lends the actions the quality of being witnessed when seen, but not necessarily represented when shown. The gestures are developed from the particularities of lived relations between people, condensing into shapes that may or may not be legible.

A work like this offers a model for conceiving of the affects of shared experience in a way that is not defined solely by an audience-performer relationship, and is distinctly associative. This enactment of intimacy elicits strange questions: What is the work here if it is not a representation made for an audience, but also not solely an experience intended for the participants? If it is not wholly centered around the viewer's act of looking, what is the focus? If many of the actions seem derived from personal relations particular to two people, how does the work communicate and operate publicly?

One might turn again to feminist epistemology, this time to philosopher and physicist Karen Barad and her conception of "agential realism," through which Barad rethinks assumptions of the Western metaphysical and epistemological tradition, many of which emanate from the foundational thinking of Descartes.<sup>xi</sup> Barad's understanding of the relation between the mind and the world is predicated on questioning the notion of there being a separation between that which is represented (in the world) and its representation (e.g., in thought, in language). Barad's theorization is derived from the work of physicist Niels Bohr, whose speculations on the nature of reality are unusual within quantum physics for having sought fundamental explanations of experimental results.

For Barad, the world is made up of phenomena that are the products of “intra-acting agencies,” and any object is ontologically formed and produced by such intra-action, rather than preceding it as the Western epistemological tradition would have it. She therefore considers the way that subjects and things are understood to be discrete, ontologically basic entities, the products of “dynamic (re)configurings of the world, specific agential practices/intra-actions/performances through which specific exclusionary boundaries are enacted.”<sup>xii</sup>

Barad’s understanding resonates with Arnell’s configurations, which, when seen through Barad’s lens, present a model for dismantling well-worn notions of spectatorship. Just as Bohr “rejects the atomistic metaphysics that takes ‘things’ as ontologically basic entities,” revealing instead that “things do not have inherently determinate boundaries or properties,” Barad questions “the idea that beings exist as individuals with inherent attributes, anterior to their representation.” She calls this “a metaphysical presupposition that underlies the belief in political, linguistic, and epistemological forms of representationalism” where “that which is represented is held to be independent of all practices of representing.” In other words, the notion that there is “knowledge (i.e., representations), on the one hand, and the known (i.e., that which is purportedly represented), on the other,” implies “the existence of a knower (i.e., someone who does the representing).” Within these conventions of the Western epistemological tradition, “representations serve a mediating function between independently existing entities.”<sup>xiii</sup> Barad argues against such a conception. For her, the main precept of Cartesian doubt—that knowledge of objects in the world cannot be verified, whereas representations in the mind allow us to grasp truth—lives on in “representationalist” approaches in the humanities, even though it has no validity for the natural sciences. Through Bohrian physics and a feminist, queer, and non-human epistemology, Barad concludes that some of these distinctions between representation and represented, knower and known, must be rethought. Through an interest in intimacy, the relations that Arnell orchestrates between participants as well as between participants and spectators evince a similar understanding which uproots a traditional epistemology and puts in its place a generosity of agencies.

We asked: What is Arnell’s work, if it intersects personal

relations and public forms of viewership? It is perhaps a call to use social practice in order to produce new understandings of the boundaries between agents, by opening up manifestations of lived knowledges which contradict the neat subject-object relations observed in a patriarchal philosophical tradition. As with Cahn's work, we see again that the building of a feminist epistemology is dependent on rethinking not just who is included within the construction of knowledge, but also an entire reconception of knowledge. Similarly, Arnell's work, which is directly influenced by feminist epistemology, can be seen to be a feminist work not only because many of the persons participating might visually signify to be gendered women, but also because of the form of questioning it presents. When all the performers congregate to replay their actions with the audience members gathered around them, the performance presents many nodes in a constellation that includes all of these people. Arnell's intention does not appear to have been to "activate the viewers" in the classic sense. Rather, she opens a field in which anyone in the room or outside the space visible through the front window becomes an aspect of the scene. Arnell's alternate approach to affect and intimacy allows us, at least imaginarily and conceptually, to inhabit a position that is neither subject nor object, but located in relations of proximity and distance, familiarity or unfamiliarity.

This brings us back full circle to the epistemological frame of contemporary biopolitics and the ordering and administration of subjects that it entails. Would the altering of current subject-object relations create obstacles to capitalist practice and population administration? As a new horizon of more integrated relations between subjects and capital is currently pursued across many markets, a concept like intra-relationality disrupts the current tendency to delimit the ambiguity of affect and make it readable and measurable—at least on the level of ideas. Today, start-ups (with ridiculous sci-fi names such as "Affectiva") collect data on facial expressions to better read the affective reactions of consumers. Meanwhile, the analysis of cultural moods is mined from reams of text published online, so as to pick up on bubbles of public emotion among consumers and investors. The imperative to stay ahead of the market on all fronts of life in capitalism renders the measurement of affect indispensable today. As a result, affect is reconceived and socially produced

as ever more flat and instrumental, and thereby more lucrative. The transformation of affect into fungible gain reminds us that, as Donna Haraway said of feminists, we have to “insist on better accounts of the world.”<sup>xiv</sup>

Rethinking frameworks set out by Descartes through a consideration of feminist epistemology helps point us toward an understanding of how the categories of *res cogitans* and *res extensa* undergo transformation, as contemporary subjects are remade and reshaped in the contemporary landscape of capital and biopower. In the present, at the limits of the human and the edge of futurity, we have entered an arena where Descartes' perception of body and mind in relation to knowledge can only go so far. What was once metaphysical becomes increasingly rearticulated in biophysical terms, and woven into the certainty of localizable and measureable matter. New lines are being drawn around the human. There, mental processes linked most closely with the “animal”—the affective, the subconscious, and the involuntary—expand as a new undiscovered terrain not just of mind, but of the virtual in cognition. If these new horizons are socially re-inscribed and colonized in the period to come, how will cultural workers, in their excavation along the outskirts of the rational, stake out new directions or potentially help to change the ordering of subject-object relations? A feminist rethinking of classical epistemological categories can inform the formulation of counter-knowledge, as demonstrated in the work of Cahn and Arnell, within the limited framework of art production. Miriam Cahn finds a new synthesis of the mind's faculties, Rochelle Goldberg's measuring arm extends into a dark zone where the virtual and the corporeal refashions the *cogito*, and Malin Arnell offers a response on the level of intra-relation. The place where these three works meet is clearly on the level of the embodied subject, with its changing topography of metrics, capital, science, and technology, opening onto new ways of organizing the human.

## Endnotes

- i Theodor W. Adorno, *Kant's Critique of Pure Reason*, trans. Rolf Tiedemann (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2001), 24.
- ii *Mountains*, 1985, Tate Gallery, catalogue entry T04922, [www.tate.org.uk/art/artists/miriam-cahn-846](http://www.tate.org.uk/art/artists/miriam-cahn-846).
- iii Ibid.
- iv Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective," *Feminist Studies*, 14, no. 3 (Autumn 1988): 581.
- v *Mountains*, catalogue entry.
- vi Ibid.
- vii Alfred Sohn-Rethel, *Intellectual and Manual Labour: A Critique of Epistemology*, trans. Martin Sohn-Rethel (London: MacMillan Press, 1978).
- viii Gerda Lerner, *The Creation of Patriarchy*, vol. 1 (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986), 224.
- ix Ibid.
- x Giorgio Agamben, *The Open: Man and Animal*, trans. Kevin Attell (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2004), 79.
- xi Karen Barad, "Posthumanist Performativity: Toward an Understanding of How Matter Comes to Matter," *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 28, no. 3 (2003): 810.
- xii Ibid., 804.
- xiii Ibid., 816.
- xiv Ibid., 815.