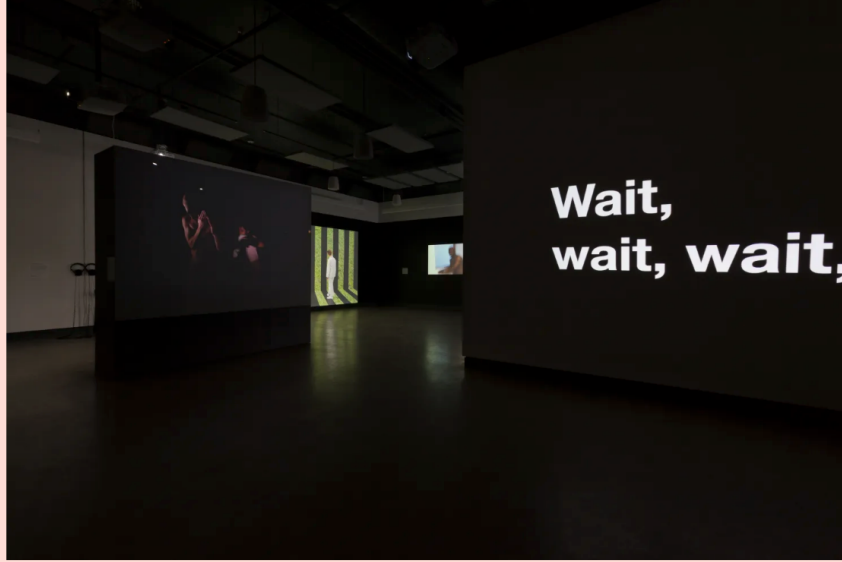


THE POTENTIALITY OF THE RETURNED GAZE

proximity, pleasure, plasticity: looking at performance at Dazibao



© Installation view of the exhibition *proximity · pleasure · plasticity: looking at performance*, Dazibao, 2022. Photo: Marilou Crispin.

By Maria Isabel Martinez

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Chukwudubem Ukaigwe, Deanna Peters/Mutable Subject, demi-mesure (Clara Cousineau + Marion Paquette), Every Ocean Hughes, Francisco González-Rosas, Freya Björg Olafson, Hannah Wilke, Ivetta Sunyoung Kang, Lisa Smolkin, Manoushka Larouche, NIC Kay, and Wan Yi Leung

The three keywords framing the exhibition, *proximity, pleasure, plasticity: looking at performance* cause me to search for the words in the works rather than allowing the works to speak amongst themselves. It's as if by this move to name, we are being instructed on how to look—perhaps this is a problem with titles more generally. *proximity, pleasure, plasticity* is a group show featuring twelve artists at [Dazibao](#), an art center in Montréal, developed by Emma-Kate Guimond, the Exhibition and Special Projects Coordinator, under the direction of France Choinière. As I move across the dimly lit space, one work offers a glimpse of a titular word only to have it dropped as I continue to another piece. The “looking at performance” part of the title can signal a few things: how someone appears; the act of viewing that an audience member participates in; the position of a camera towards artists and performers, a technology that captures a momentary happening within a permanent loop. But if, as written in Dazibao's exhibition poster, we're meant to consider the relationship between viewer and viewed, then the three P's of the title disturb such a simple directive. Instead, we're thrust into an exhibition of pluralisms that tries to fit within its titular constraints while begging to step outside them. The wordplay here is its own performance.



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A gaze mediated through a lens can be oppressive or liberatory depending on who holds it and what sort of image is produced. *proximity, pleasure, plasticity's* plurality gives space (literally and figuratively) to a diversity of experiences. Erected in the middle of the large room is a single wall; one side features Francisco González-Rosas's *Identity templates for a disordered body* (2022) and Wan Yi Leung's *Alone with the cat in the room* (2018) plays on the opposite side. As the title suggests, González-Rosas's work addresses identity and the virtual self through a drag persona, while Leung's work touches on the power dynamics of desire and a sexual economy. Curatorial decisions like these suggest that queer and feminist understandings of the three titular P's are suffused throughout the space and the pieces form a type of coalition toward challenging an obtuse spectator. As many of the artists put their bodies on display, the boundary between subject and object collapses. As the artist addresses their audience, we become implicated in their projects and begin to feel like the artist is the one doing the looking after all.

In Ivetta Sunyoung Kang's *Proposition 1: Hands* (2020), the viewer becomes a participant. A video plays directly across from the entrance, and below the projected image, a mat has been set up for gallery goers to sit and enact the gestures Kang performs on screen. The movements are based on a South Korean children's game ("Make Electricity on Hands") which Kang has transformed into a massage therapy. The project encourages the viewer to take a partner's hand in theirs, sense its properties, and with friction and other movements, enhance its warmth and sensations. The video opens by declaring: "This video is a proposition on tolerance of the uncertainty ahead of your future" and it suggests that our anxieties could be endured through contact with the other. Kang offers proximity, pleasure, and yes, plasticity through this exercise, but it requires that the viewer accept their desire for these conditions. We must see ourselves the way Kang sees us.



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The role of the viewer as the subject in Chukwudubem Ukaigwe's *The Shivering* (2020) collapses once more as the Black male participants in the video gaze back. The camera shivers and the participants appear blurred. The description of this work states that the blurred image “mirrors the fragility of their experience” and the camera’s shaking is indicative of the instability of viewing itself. Can we trust a camera as a technology of documentation? The piece prompts me to consider whether one could ever be an accurate observer. Moving image culture often portrays narrow depictions of Black masculinity as either violent and threatening or as targets of brutality. However, Ukaigwe puts this binary into disarray, as the subjects are still and the camera pans over them with a slight tremble. I find myself straining my eyes to get a more accurate look at the people on screen. The individuals looked into the camera, at times face-on and other times with their backs to the lens. It’s this mutual gazing that disrupts the neat binary between the viewer and the viewed: the participants appear to be as equally aware of us as we are of them.

The exhibition raises questions about how the presence of the lens alters our proximity to each other and the reverberations that surface from that emergent closeness. At times, the works seem to be reaching in different directions—Wan Yi Leung’s *Alone with the cat in the room* and Demi-mesure's (Clara Cousineau and Marion Paquette) aestheticized and choreographed video performance *de nature intérieure* for example. But this plurality serves as a gathering of different “pleasures,” splitting conventional definitions of the titular words into fractals. Proximity occurs explicitly in works such as Deanna Peters/Mutable Subject's *Something between my face and your face is always interesting* (2021), a livestream examining virtual distance.

Plasticity might be the hardest “P” to track across the exhibit, though the works serve as apt examples of engagements with the mutable quality of relations between the self/selves, technologies, and each other. The viewer/viewed dynamic takes on its own process of plasticity, through moments of closeness and delight at engaging with aesthetic experimentations. Ultimately, it is the camera and performativity that unite the pieces: how the artists exert themselves through the image, and raise questions, or taunt, the viewer about the fluid and sometimes disconcerting nature of spectatorship.

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