



# Main Space



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## ***the body as a fever dream* curated by Dallas Fellini**

Séamus Gallagher, Eija Loponen-Stephenson, Sheri Osden Nault, Camille Rojas, Lauren Runions, B Wijshijer

October 9 – November 7, 2020

“I’ve done women’s suits before,” he says in a thick, ambiguous European accent. “For women police officers I did a nice women’s suit pant. For uniform.”

I’m no woman police officer.

The fabric swallows me. He’s rolling up and pinning my pant legs, my sleeves, taking in the suit jacket at the back. Marking it with white chalk. There are a lot of white markings.

“Can you leave the shoulders, please. I like the wider cut on the shoulders.”

“Yes, it’s okay like this, it’s better with the shoulders smaller but I’ll do it like this.”

The whole store smells uncomfortably of fish. The neighboring shop in the market sells seafood.

“It’s good to keep the pants longer. For short men – and for women – like me and you it’s good to keep the pants longer.” Me and him are almost the same height, he must be 5’5” or 5’6”.

“Are you Italian?”

“No. I am Russian. I just went on vacation however so I have a tan.”

There are moments where we have felt ourselves disappear. Times where the monotony of existing weighs too heavily on us, fracturing our experiences of ourselves and moving us to exist in the inbetween. *the body as a fever dream* inquires into these moments: the moments when we can't feel our breath, when our physicality enters a limbo state between presence and absence. How can we be sure that we exist?

As a trans non-binary person, my experience of my body is characterized by fluctuations of comfort, understanding, and presence. These shifts materialize in public and in private, in sickness, in medicine. They materialize as I stand statue-still, getting fitted inside the men's suit shop. These are experiences shared by marginalized people across different identities, their presence in their bodies undone by external forces that render them alien, endangered, invisible or hyper-visible. We are left to navigate the space between feeling dispossessed by our bodies, or inversely feeling triumphant. Within my trans body, the specifics of how and when my body is understood are difficult to maneuver and leave me with questions about the ebb and flow of corporal presence.

When are our bodies politicized? When are they policed? How does my body exist as I get my garment tailored at the men's suit shop? How does my body exist when I sit in the sauna at the women's spa? How does my body exist when I (hypothetically) fuck my girlfriend at the Spa at the Four Seasons? When I refill my prescription? How does my body exist when my vocal cords thicken? When my slacks can no longer fit over the growing musculature of my thighs? When my form shifts? How is my body present as I compress it, as I will it to disappear?

The works in this exhibition confront the contradiction and duality of a bodily presence/absence. A digital dance performance ties this phenomenon to broader conventions of how the bodies of performers take form in gallery settings and how meaning is made in their absence. Positioned in a visual dialogue with the artworks in the exhibition, the

performers activate and un-inhabit, care for and then abandon these works, leaving behind an environment that is just as characterized by the traces of presence as it is by the heaviness of absence.

*in situ*

Eija Loponen-Stephenson's *Net Interface* hangs nearly from floor to ceiling, and spills out onto the gallery floor. The tarp-like device is made from privacy netting, a material often used to block off demolition and construction sites from the public. This tarp is supported by a scaffolding-like structure, secured in place by buckets filled with broken-up asphalt, recalling the sites for which this material is intended. Loponen-Stephenson understands privacy netting as a material that not only enacts a role as a physical divide between the public and sites we are not intended to access, but also as a visual barrier, keeping us from what we are not intended to see. Loponen-Stephenson imagines the rubble that exists beyond these barriers as being unsettling to a hypothetical viewer, undoing their understandings of architectural forms as unfluid, as they watch kitchen sinks and cabinetry intermingle with demolished external facades.<sup>1</sup> This material amalgamation is further complicated when human bodies are integrated. Extending from the surface of Loponen-Stephenson's textile are four gloves, cut from the same green mesh cloth, which invite subjects to touch and insert themselves into the work. Inside the gallery, the net forges itself into curtains and a rug, shapeshifting to embody indoor furnishings rather than demolished exteriors. Wheatpasted images dispersed around the space document a performance that Loponen-Stephenson facilitated in 2019, in which *Net Interface* was unfolded over a demolition site in Kensington Market, an area in Toronto that has fallen victim to severe gentrification.<sup>2</sup> In Loponen-Stephenson's images, five human bodies intermingle with the rubble underneath the netting, their presences unannounced except through the raising of gloved arms, or the vague shape of a head protruding from a sea of forest green. Loponen-Stephenson's device presents the potentiality for a body, a body that may be crawling through scaffolding and steel beams or that may only exist as a hallucination of flesh.

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<sup>1</sup> Loponen-Stephenson, Eija, in conversation with the author, September 22, 2020.

<sup>2</sup> Beaton, Bruce. "Kensington Market." The Canadian Encyclopedia. August 14, 2017. <https://www.thecanadianencyclopedia.ca/en/article/kensington-market>.

In Sheri Osden Nault's work *Hold*, a discarded log sits upright in the space, its bark corroded by insects. Plaster hands seep out of the log, as if seeking to fill the inverse vacancies of Loponen-Stephenson's gloves in *Net Interface*. As Loponen-Stephenson's hands reach out, Osden Nault's reach in, seemingly offering a material presence to the empty gloves that hang flaccidly from Loponen-Stephenson's tarp. Accompanying *Hold*, are a range of other bodily works by Nault: *Sovereign Bodies 01* – a tree branch adorned with a fringe of straight, black human hair – and *Mimic, Lake Ontario* – a series of small plaster-cast body parts resembling stones, that are scattered throughout the space. These works explore the possibilities of an intimate symbiosis between human bodies and nature. Nault's positioning of the human as inseparable from the non-human is grounded in Indigenous ways of knowing. Their works create a queer landscape where the body remains in a state of indeterminateness, ungendered and unracialized. The plaster-cast fragments document Nault's own body over the course of two years. They distort and camouflage the body, speaking to trans practices of reimagining and reconstructing, depressing what was convex, swelling flesh to create a materiality in a place where it was previously absent.

As much as they speak to a physical absence, Nault's bodies speak to a historical (and ongoing) absence: the colonial forced relocation of Indigenous people in Canada. Nault, who is Métis, is the first of their family in over 150 years to live as far east as Toronto – a milestone foregrounded by decades of their ancestors' westward dislocation.<sup>3</sup> Nault's plaster cast body parts are molded as imitations of stones found at the shores of Lake Ontario, and sit among these stones atop pools of Lake Ontario sand, allowing for a sly reinsertion of their body back into a landscape from which it has been systematically removed. Elbows, lips, nipples, hands masquerade themselves in white plaster, becoming yet another stone on the shore. This work brings to mind early settler-colonial landscape paintings of so-called-Canada, which depicted the land as desolate, as a vast uninhabited wilderness ready to be seized through white manifest destiny colonialism.<sup>4</sup> Sheri Osden Nault allows their body

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<sup>3</sup> Nault, Sheri Osden, in conversation with the author, September 22, 2020.

<sup>4</sup> Nakamura, Naohira. "The Representation of First Nations Art at the Art Gallery of Ontario." *International Journal of Canadian Studies* 45-46 (2012): 420.

presence in a way that upsets this violent colonial myth.

Séamus Gallagher similarly presents the body through processes of imitation. Their video work *THINKING OF YOU THINKING OF ME* likens drag performance and experiences of passing and not passing<sup>5</sup> to mimicry in nature: “species that mimic other life forms for protection,” as Gallagher describes the phenomenon in their video. They perform this work as their drag persona Sara Tonin, appearing in a 3D-rendered paper mask that comprises Sara’s wig and face, as well as the heads of two balding male suitors who pucker their lips and kiss each of her heavily-blushed cheeks. Séamus Gallagher is a non-binary artist, but Sara is a womanly woman. She enters onto a stage through a pair of shower curtains, their synthetic surface printed with an image of a much more luxurious, velvet curtain. A sequined Jessica Rabbit dress hangs off of Sara’s paper tits, which are simulated using the same 3D-modelling technology that forged her paper face, fragmented into hundreds of interlocking triangles. The way that she holds herself, the way that she poses – angling her head on a slight diagonal and drawing her hands up to her hips with sultry grace – exudes femininity. She offers a few transgressions in her highly gendered performance: hair appears under armpits, stubble peaks out from under her mask. Gallagher assures us that these transgressions do not equate a failure but rather an intentional assertion. “I am a sight for sore eyes. A site for bewilderment. A lovely sight, have a real good look.”<sup>6</sup> Gallagher allows themselves to take joy in moments that are often dangerous, moments where the cis-gaze identifies you as other, where it rejects your body. They reframe these as moments where the queer body is embraced as uncategorical, where it refuses the preset classifications that allow it to be understood by the cis-gaze, rejecting a confining corporal presence.

In B Wijshijer’s video work *How to Edit Your Selfies*, they swipe through a myriad of filters on the facial modification mobile application FaceApp, each filter represented by a different icon: a white person wearing Makeup, a white person with a Smile, a white person wearing Glasses, a white person who is Old, a white person who is Male, a white person who

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<sup>5</sup> *Passing* is a term used within trans communities to describe being perceived as cisgender by cisgender people, rather than as the gender one was assigned at birth. If I were to use it in a sentence, I might say “I never thought that I passed at all until a beefcake daddy gay mistook me for a twink and started hitting on me at work.”

<sup>6</sup> Séamus Gallagher, *THINKING OF YOU THINKING OF ME*. Video. 2019.

is Female. Wijshijer layers the “Male,” “Female,” and “Female 2” filters over their selfie until their image is unrecognizable, disguised under layers of deepened facial creases or sanded down entirely to resemble a 2D caricature of a “woman.” Their skin becomes concrete, their eyes glass, their body a glitch. In masculinizing and feminizing Wijshijer’s face, the software jumps back and forth between different skin tones and racializations, revealing that their identity as a mixed-race non-binary person is unlocatable to the algorithm, and suggesting an absence of diverse facial data within its training. This digital absence renders them as unreadable, and their body disappears under the algorithm’s inability to accurately categorize it. At the end of the video, Wijshijer scrolls through hundreds of saved images of their digitally altered face, some of them representing what the software understands as embodying hyperfemininity, and others hypermasculinity. An army of monstrous faces stare back: mutations derived from the app’s own gender-normative and highly binarized software. Wijshijer turns these softwares inside out, exposing their guts and using the fabric built by cis perceptions of gender to instead unravel these perceptions.

*through fever dreams and rage blackouts*

In an exhibition about the big, academicized term *the body*, how do real, visceral, experiences of the body actually take form within the space? How do we make meaning about bodily presence in a moment when bodies are being increasingly policed, when physical connection to other bodies is scarce and source of our collective anxiety?

On Monday October 12, 2020, a performance is hosted in the gallery space. No one is in attendance – in fact, the gallery is closed to the public for the colonial celebration of Canadian Thanksgiving, or, more accurately, simply in correspondence with Canadian statutory holiday laws. Two performers, Camille Rojas and Lauren Runions, enact an improvisational dance performance in the space, positioning their bodies in conversation with the exhibited works. The performance is documented through video, and eventually shared digitally through Xspace’s website and online platforms. In the transitional period between this performance existing as a private encounter and a public one, traces of past

actions stand in for the bodies that executed them: foot and hand prints are pressed into the sand on the gallery floor, objects are shifted, the details of how they moved from one place to another temporarily obscured.

This calculated absence operates in contrast to the expectations of hyper-presence in contemporary dance performances in gallery settings. Claire Bishop – a thinker who I periodically returned to while reformatting this exhibition to operate in alignment with Covid-19 guidelines – compares this hyper-presence to the webpage in her text “Black Box, White Cube, Gray Zone: Dance Exhibitions and Audience Attention.”<sup>7</sup> Bishop characterizes the contemporary dance exhibition as a site for audience distractedness, extended temporalization, and the omnipresence of technology, likening it to “the multiple temporalities of the webpage” with the “refresh rate of headlines, stories, videos, ads, banners, pop-ups.”<sup>8</sup> What is lost when we cannot gather in the gallery to witness dance performance? And what is gained? A technological omnipresence is fundamental in this moment; it is how we go to work and kiss our loved ones and attend openings at the gallery. It is also how we extend temporal access to all of these things, for better or for worse. A digital performance might produce a more present viewer, undistracted by daily operations within the gallery, but it also condenses the viewing experience into the same visual plane that everything else in our lives is now situated within.

Consume this performance from your work-from-home laptop, surfing between tabs for online shopping, public health stats, tabs for grant applications and mutual aid.

Consume this performance distractedly as it is the only way we can engage anything right now.

Consume this performance while committing time theft.

Consume this performance in the middle of the night.

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<sup>7</sup> Bishop, Claire. “Black Box, White Cube, Gray Zone: Dance Exhibitions and Audience Attention.” *TDR: The Drama Review* 62, no. 2 (2018).

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*, 34.

Consume this performance on a statutory holiday.

Consume this performance while thinking of a lover, watch arms pour into gloves and hands cleave to body parts in a way that feels foreign. Memorialize bodily closeness.

Camille Rojas and Lauren Runions position themselves in the deserted gallery space, enacting movements that are pedestrian and gestures that are characterized by care. They are six feet apart. Acting as companions to the works in the gallery, they slip their limbs into Eija Loponen-Stephenson's *Net Interface*, imbuing a presence into a space where absence used to reign. Here, in the gallery, this device can no longer join human bodies and rubble, but instead amalgamates the bodies of the dancers with the gallery space itself. Rojas and Runions turn to participate with *Mimic, Lake Ontario*, picking up Sheri Osden Nault's plaster body parts and letting them inform their movements. While they answer to the works they also answer to each other, reacting intuitively to the rhythms and gestures that each of them put forward. Stone-like body parts are lifted from the bed of sand they rested on and are pressed against human flesh: hands, hips, shoulders, in a series of actions that "fragment the body without it feeling like a violent gesture."<sup>9</sup> Their performance is informed by co-creation and mirrors the desire for a convergence of human and nonhuman bodies manifested in the work of Loponen-Stephenson and Nault.

After the performance is over, a pronounced absence hangs over the works. Shadows of Rojas' and Runions' bodies are left in the sand, chalk outlines evidencing moments of intimacy. The mesh netting that had acted as an apparatus to connect bodies hangs limp, already forgetting the just-passed moments where its arms lifted and its hands formed gestures. Perhaps it was just a dream.

- Dallas Fellini

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<sup>9</sup> Nault, Sheri Osden, in conversation with the author, September 27th, 2020.