Body's in Trouble
Vida Beyer
June 25 – July 20, 2015

("Two cursors, approximately 'hand sized.'"[1])

Vida Beyer's installation *Body's in Trouble* is framed by a large needlepoint banner of a computer window, which hangs on the North wall of Xpace's Project Space like digital heraldry. It includes lyrics sourced from a 1988 song by Mary Margaret O'Hara from which Beyer's installation takes its name. ("Who, who, who do you talk to?/ Who do you talk to?/ Who do you talk to?/ When your body's in trouble."[2]) It is a song about difficult embodiment, lyrics navigating the uneasy terrain of attachment and isolation, and is displayed in CAPTCHA-style text: distorted words commonly used to distinguish humans from computers. Referencing a pop song from the year of her birth (and mine, incidentally), the banner bookends the quasi-autobiographical iconography of Beyer's installation as a whole: an uncanny assemblage of oversized cursors and icons, densely drawn video stills, new-age remedies, and hand-made glitches. Nostalgias and cynicisms for an internet made tactile.

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[1] A note from Vida Beyer to me about *Body's in Trouble*, May 27, 2015.
[2] Lyrics from "Body's in Trouble" by Mary Margaret O'Hara.

Body's in Trouble reconfigures the digital world of Beyer's memory as a strange yet potentially inhabitable space. ("I come from the net."[3]) In my mind, it's a living room. Objects are resized to meet the scale of the body, reformatted in soft contours. There's a tarot deck described by the artist as "the size of a low-ish coffee table,"[4] and a shag rug emblazoned with the LiveJournal logo. There are dense drawings that read like open browser windows or perhaps even images on the walls of a home. Living rooms are often configured for a body's comfort and care – a meeting-place for family and a site of relaxation or play, where troubled thoughts (or troublesome people) are not permitted entry. Nostalgia is perhaps the living room's most prized sentiment: the nostalgic also deals in the comfortable and familiar, the softening of an object's edges, a yearning for when things were simpler, easier, better. A view of a rosy past is a helpful balm for anxieties in the present. ("Permanent Gaycation."[5]) Nostalgia doesn't leave much space for difficult people, and I hardly need to outline the anxiety felt by many queer and feminist folks in the living rooms of our families. However, like many others, I feel a palpably soft nostalgia for the internet of my teens as a space for navigating desire and developing forms of digital intimacy and community. My old LiveJournal as an alternative living room, a world for queer self-care. ("*Your favorite place to go?* my computer."[6])

Yet the ideal of nostalgia is given uneasy ground in *Body's in Trouble*. Like feminist philosopher Sara Ahmed's queer furniture, these objects push back against the bodies they are presumably designed for; their promised comforts are troubled. ("Is a queer chair one that is not so comfortable, so we move around in it, trying to make the

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[3] Line from opening sequence to the television series *Reboot.*
[4] A note from Vida Beyer to me about *Body's in Trouble*, May 27, 2015.
[5] Pencil-crayon drawing hung in *Body's in Trouble.*
[6] Line from a quiz sourced from my LiveJournal account, active 2004-2006. May 24, 2004.

impression of our body reshape its form?"[7]) An oversized soft sculpture of Bach Rescue Remedy rests lumpily on the floor, a new-age cure rebuilt without its therapeutic powers. Only one tarot card is overturned on the floor – the Five of Cups – and it signals disappointment. Even the sketchy quality of the video stills on the walls presents a complicated relationship to a body. These pixels are hand-drawn in pencil crayon, the difficult and intensive process disrupts the presumed immediacy of the source material and renders it dense, belaboured, imperfectly human. One of the drawings features a still from the 1985 iconic queer film *Parting Glances*, and the caption speaks further to the failure of an ideal, the breakdown of communication, and the imperfect translation of politics into lived experience. ("Not everyone can be as politically correct as you and Nick."[8]) Throughout the internet-turned-living-space that is *Body's in Trouble,* then, Beyer mines both personal and public idealisms regarding digital experience and considers their shortfalls in the realm of embodiment.

Like Beyer's pencil crayon drawings, CAPTCHA technology works to confirm the presence of a human hand using imperfect digital material. Like *Body's in Trouble*, the glitches and disruptions in CAPTCHA artifacts often speak to wider worlds of reference. ReCAPTCHA is a common form of CAPTCHA technology that was acquired by Google in 2009, and sources its distorted script from digitized books that cannot be deciphered through optical character recognition (OCR) software. Word-by-word, unknowing users have been transcribing texts from the digital archives of the New York Times and Google Books and slowly accumulating greater access to this material online. (However, another branch of reCAPTCHA's software released in 2012 made users decode unreadable home address numbers on Google Maps: the underlying cynicism in Beyer's work makes me less

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[7] Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Duke University Press, 2006): 168.
[8] Line from *Parting Glances*, dir. Bill Sherwood.

inclined to romanticize this form of self-assisted surveillance.)[9] Small, almost tactile

disruptions on the internet can connect to bigger pictures: like a distorted word isolated

from a larger story, or perhaps an obscured, potentially familiar face that emerges in a

glitchy portrait of Drake, sourced from the personal archive of Beyer's MacBook

Photobooth.

Being struck by something bodily and familiar while wading through what's

distorted and unclear: *Body's in Trouble* works to visualize the uneasy feelings of a

uniquely digital uncanny. (A living room made unhomely.[10]) Throughout the installation,

Beyer builds a strange and tactile landscape, populated with a dense personal

iconography that charts her own nostalgias, anxieties, and cynicisms for an online world.

Decoding *Body's in Trouble* is an ongoing process. However, piece-by-piece, it opens us

up to a whole new realm of texture, memory, and potentially self-care, rendered both in

stitches and pixels.

- Daniella E. Sanader

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[9] http://techcrunch.com/2012/03/29/google-now-using-recaptcha-to-decode-street-view-addresses/
[10] Unhomely (*unheimlich*) from the Freudian definition of the uncanny. Freud, Sigmund. 'The Uncanny,' [1919] in *The Uncanny,* trans. David McLintock (Penguin Books, 2003), 126.