Contemporary Art and Nomadic Subjectivities:
Rethinking the Subject in an Interrelational Context

by

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Abstract

This essay interrogates the notion of subjectivity and poses the following questions:

How does one become a subject?

What positions constitute his/her subjectivity?

How are these positions interpreted by others?

How can we envision an ethics that doesn't take the unitary subject or universal moral norms as its foundation?

To this end, I trace poststructuralist discourses around identity and sexuality, and investigate the subject both as shaped by the self and called into being by an Other. The proposition presented as a result of this discussion is to think of the contemporary subject as a nomadic one, and to seek an ethics that can accompany this understanding.

Interpellation and power relations in Althusser and Foucault, resistance to power in Butler and Žižek, and nomadic subjectivity and ethics in Deleuze and Guattari and Braidotti form the core of this paper's theoretical explorations. These notions provide a framework within which my three studio projects *Indefinitions*, *Card No. IV* and *Dear,* can be thought. These projects investigate gay subjectivity, psychology as ideological power, and emotional vulnerability; respectively. Interspersed within the essay are further links drawn to some of the ways in which subjectivity is negotiated in contemporary art, with reference to specific artworks by artists Elmgreen & Dragset, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, and Sophie Calle.

Table of Contents

List of Figures

Acknowledgments

You will be organized, you will be an organism, you will articulate your body—otherwise you're just depraved. You will be signifier and signified, interpreter and interpreted—otherwise you're just a deviant. You will be a subject, nailed down as one, a subject of the enunciation recoiled into a subject of the statement—otherwise you're just a tramp.

Deleuze and Guattari, *A Thousand Plateaus*, 159

Introduction

My MAA thesis project, consisting of academic and practice based research, interrogates the notion of subjectivity. In this inquiry I question how one becomes a subject, what positions constitute his/her subjectivity, how these positions are interpreted by others, and whether the sum of these parts is a unified and coherent whole. Although my aim is to provide a framework that is applicable to deconstructing other kinds of subjectivities, I focus mainly on gay subjectivity as a case study of sorts. To this end I trace poststructuralist discourses around identity and sexuality, and investigate the subject both as shaped by the self and called into being by an Other through *interpellation*. I then propose that the contemporary subject is indeed a *nomadic* one, and try to imagine an ethics that can accompany this understanding.

The written component of my thesis research links my studio practice to a number of theoretical concepts. Throughout this essay I will try to blend my visual projects with these discussions and present my research as a whole, rather than two disparate parts of theory and practice. I will focus on the ways in which sexuality and emotions situate subjects in relation to each other, and I will specifically relate the concepts I use to contemporary manifestations of gay male identities. To come to a greater understanding of how a subject is shaped by Others, I will trace interpellation and power relations through Althusser and Foucault; and following Judith Butler, I will

suggest that a fixed subject cannot be said to exist[1]. Since fixed subjectivities have traditionally been perceived as indispensable to ethical behaviour, my discussion will strive to provide an alternative ethical framework for the kind of subjectivity I envision. This approach will entail continuously questioning one's position of accountability in relation to others in a spirit of generosity and mindfulness, rather than subscribing to universal moral norms. In this regard I will turn to the notion of nomadism and nomadic ethics in Deleuze and Guattari and Rosi Braidotti.

In order to present the trajectory of my studio practice in relation to the theoretical concerns this paper seeks to address, I will intersperse discussions of my studio projects *Indefinitions, Card No. IV* and *Dear,* in my essay. To relate my practice to current tendencies in contemporary art, I will refer to specific projects by artists Elmgreen & Dragset, Felix Gonzalez-Torres, and Sophie Calle. The work of these artists manifest some of the ways in which subjectivities are negotiated in contemporary art, and the following quotation from Chantal Mouffe illustrates why it is necessary to deliver a discussion of their critical engagement:

> The real issue concerns the possible forms of *critical* art, the different
> ways in which artistic practices can contribute to questioning the dominant
> hegemony. Once we accept that identities are never pre-given but that they
> are always the result of processes of identification, that they are
> discursively constructed, the question that arises is the type of identity that
> critical artistic practices should aim at fostering (4).

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[1] Thus when I refer to "the subject," I will be using the term as a grammatical placeholder.

My aim is to destabilize our habituated ways of thinking about ourselves and each other. This necessitates an awareness of each of ourselves as already many selves in one. We are not the same person to everyone, and we perform our selves differently to different people we are engaging with. Varying levels of intimacy, power and trust are at play when we are interacting with friends, lovers, families, co-workers, therapists, sex partners, and so on. While we may be aware of these changes to a degree, the common operations of sociability organize us into coherent wholes to be recognized by ourselves and others. We speak of identities and personalities, and hold on to our designated positions in the world. We feel at times that such persistence of our identities is absolutely necessary to speak up against wrongdoings, injustices and unethical behaviour, and sometimes we also stick to these categories even when they are crippling. But perhaps it is more appropriate to speak of identifications with different subject positions than of stable identities? And perhaps these identifications will not necessarily be with categories that have already been established? Perhaps there is room to expand the boundaries and introduce difference?

1.   Gay Subjectivities: *Indefinitions* and *Virtual Romeo*

In my exploration of the depiction of mainstream gay identities in social spheres, I examine some of the ways in which linguistic and visual signifiers construct and convey recognisable identities. Profiles on gay dating websites have been a major object of scrutiny for me in this process. I see them as compact pieces of information existing within primary sites of public articulation of gay identities, written by people with the aim of identifying themselves, or to help the readers identify them. I have used quotations from these profiles in my project *Indefinitions*, a series of 45 black and white textual photograms. These quotations show how a number of gay individuals present themselves to strangers while remaining largely anonymous.

Figures 1 and 2. Erdem Tasdelen, *Indefinitions.* 2009. 2 of 45 photograms. 11"x14" each.

The self-definitions found in *Indefinitions* can be divided into two categories that are not mutually exclusive and can be compounded: The first is the directly qualitative kind ("I would describe myself as very unique"), and the second implicitly suggests indefinite qualities ("I love animals. I talk to them in high pitched voices because I like to think they understand me better"). Though the adjectives in a qualitative statement can be interpreted in different ways too, suggestive texts are more reliant on collaboration between writer and reader to make meaning. Looking at the second example I have given, one can argue that the writer writes with an idea of what he wants to evoke in the reader. But the meaning carried by the text must be activated by the reader, who projects his/her own experience and knowledge onto it in order to interpret what kind of person loves animals and talks to them in high pitched voices, by categorizing and stereotyping to form an image of a character in his/her mind.

This kind of linguistic representation does not allow to expose the complexities of a subject, both because there is very limited information given and because a consensus on what this information implies is not guaranteed. In personal ads, one's multiple selves are reduced to a short description in hopes to be recognisable for a large audience, meeting the expectations of a genre determined by social constructions. We might do well here to turn to Judith Butler's warning against the loss of complexity of subjectivity:

> The insistence on coherent identity as a point of departure presumes that
> what a 'subject' is is already known, already fixed, and that that ready-
> made subject might enter the world to negotiate its place. But if that very
> subject produces its coherence at the cost of its own complexity, the

crossings of identifications of which it is itself composed, then that subject
forecloses the kinds of contestatory connections that might democratize
the field of its own perception (*Bodies* 115).

Perhaps for some, arguing that personals fail to fully articulate individuals'
subjectivities is merely stating the obvious: Of course there will always be more text to
be written, more explanations to be made, more stories to be told. But when one is
immersed in this limited economy of exchange, it is easy to overlook what the text
conceals and to dismiss the complexity of the "I" that writes. The reason I want to draw
attention to such a failure is that personals are a very widespread technique of self
expression for many gay individuals today, and online communities are one of the
primary facilitators of social interaction with other homosexuals. In this sense personals
and social networking websites are principal areas of investigation when trying to
understand some of the ways in which contemporary gay subjects are produced.

The quotations I borrow from the online realm are transferred to a photographic
medium, and there are a few considerations at work for this choice. My artistic practice
was largely based in staged photography when I began my MAA studies, and I have
produced some photographic projects during my time here. But I felt that representation
of subjectivity in staged photography was inevitably essentializing and simplified. I spent
a considerable amount of time thinking about how photographs represent, and the
conception of *Indefinitions* came at a time when staged photography had come to a dead
end for me. The project was a way for me to address the failure of both the quotations I
borrowed *and* photographic portraiture, but the latter became more tangential to my

process in time. This is why I am not engaging in a detailed discussion of photography as a representational tool in this essay.

There is a resonance between *Indefinitions* and Scandinavian duo Elmgreen & Dragset's 2007 project *Virtual Romeo*, where the artists have fabricated a character on the European gay dating website GayRomeo with the username *juniorboyz*. This character's physical description is based on the most popular characteristics found on the profiles of GayRomeo. In their exhibition *This is the First Day of My Life* at the Malmo Konsthall in Sweden, Elmgreen & Dragset built an installation consisting of two rooms, which were to be two copies of this character's bedroom. The only difference between the two rooms was that a wax sculpture of *juniorboyz* on the bed was present in one and missing in the other. In both rooms there was a laptop on the floor, on which visitors could see invitations to chat or date popping up on GayRomeo, as in the following example:

> *From: amasing, At: 09.Jan 07:07, hi! ;) how are you? Tomorrow I'll be in Berlin, but only for some hour... are you for date with me? P.S. You're very cute ;) kiss* (Elmgreen & Dragset 45).

Figure 3. Elmgreen & Dragset, *Virtual Romeo*. From the exhibition *This is the First Day of My Life*, Malmo Konsthall, Sweden, 2007. Mattresses, lamps, posters, guitars, amplifiers, volley balls, trophies, laptop computers, iPods, headphones, wax figure, jeans, t-shirt, hooded sweatshirt, socks, sneakers, stickers, pens, condoms and lubricants. Dimensions variable. Courtesy the artists. Photo: Anders Sune Berg.

In *Virtual Romeo*, a character and a mise-en-scène are invented with reference to the most popular ways of existing as a gay subject, and the countless responses to the online profile expose how recognisability becomes the desired object, regardless of whether *juniorboyz* exists as a real person or not. As in many of their works, Elmgreen & Dragset are being humourously dubious in *Virtual Romeo*, as it is not possible to detect their point of view. Is *juniorboyz* being glorified or humiliated? Does this project point to the fact that the subject is more desirable if s/he fits into the tiny box made for the perfectly recognisable object? By encouraging these questions, *Virtual Romeo* implicates the audience and challenges them to consider their own involvement with desire.

My engagement with personals, much like Elmgreen & Dragset's *Virtual Romeo*, is an ontological inquiry: I am interested in seeing how individuals perceive their places

in the world and understanding the thought processes through which they choose to represent themselves in certain ways. Although in personals one has the agency to write one's self, so to speak, even a quick glance reveals that most personals merely subscribe to majoritarian[2] ways of representing masculinity (e.g. "I am a man. I can catch, kill, gut, skin and cook anything with just my bare hands," "Top here, and not a top who tosses his legs in the air first chance he gets," "I'm not advertising myself here like a whore").

Figures 4, 5 and 6. Erdem Tasdelen, *Indefinitions.* 2009. 3 of 45 photograms. 11"x14" each.

Seen from this perspective, *Indefinitions* looks at the ways in which gay individuals re-circulate the social values and codes of the heterosexist paradigm. Why do these people feel that they need to *be* certain things and *not be* other things? What is it that makes it so crucial for these individuals to assert their adherence to already existing categories of

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[2] Majoritarian, a Deleuzian term, refers to privileged identities in society. It does not refer to the number of people that belong to a group, but to their position of dominance.

male subjecthood? In the next chapter I look into the notion of interpellation in Althusser

to trace how subjects are made into what they are, through what he calls *subjectivization*.

2. Interpellation, Ideology and Power

To give an account of how ideology interpellates individuals as subjects and causes them to recognize themselves as such, Althusser imagines a scene where a police agent yells to an individual: "Hey, you there!" Althusser continues:

> Assuming that the theoretical scene I have imagined takes place in the street, the hailed individual will turn round. By this mere one-hundred-and-eighty-degree physical conversion, he becomes a *subject*. Why? Because he has recognised that the hail was 'really' addressed to him, and that 'it was *really him* who was hailed' (and not someone else). Experience shows that the practical telecommunication of hailings is such that they hardly ever miss their man (174).

In this scenario, the subject is said to be *subjectivized* (made into a subject) through *interpellation*, which is the hailing. Althusser's scenario is a predecessor for Foucault's theories of power, which assert a cyclical process where power produces the subject by way of interpellating and organizing him/her, and the subject in turn unwillingly maintains the structure of power by virtue of being subordinated to it. Foucault contends that power is a network of relations that exist everywhere, and that it is impossible to escape this domain. In other words, there is no social relation that is completely detached from power. Power changes position, it does not stay put, and is never centralized in one location. It is not a singularized entity, but a multiplicity of relations, using knowledge to control its subjects.

Foucault has written extensively about how power has produced docile bodies through disciplinary techniques in law, psychiatry, medicine and sexuality throughout the 19th and 20th centuries, but he has also argued that power can actually multiply what it seems to be repressing. Two examples of this he has provided within his oeuvre are the theses that the prohibition to speak about sexuality in the Victorian era was a sign of its preoccupation with sex and therefore produced the possibility of a discourse on it, and that the birth of the prison system was what produced delinquents in the sense we understand them today[3]. Rosi Braidotti, following Gilles Deleuze's analysis of Foucaldian power[4], takes issue with the fact that power is possible to recognize only in retrospect in such a schema: "The Foucauldian diagrams of power describe what we have already ceased to be; like all cartography, they act a posteriori and therefore fail to account for the situation here and now" (*Post-human* 199). If this is the case, the pressing question is whether it might be possible to form a timely resistance to power through such an analysis.

Many have criticized Foucault for designating the subject as a helpless mechanical tool that reiterates power, unable to enter into a field of resistance to it. Slavoj Žižek engages in such a criticism when he says that "Foucault does not consider the possibility of an affect escaping, outgrowing its cause, so that although it emerges as a form of resistance to power and is as such absolutely inherent to it, it can outgrow and explode it" (256). Foucault's objection to this kind of criticism might be that power is

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[3] See Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality Vol. 1: The Will to Knowledge*. New York: Vintage Books, 1980, and *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison.* New York: Vintage Books, 1995.

[4] See Deleuze, Gilles. *Foucault*. Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 1988.

not always a tool of oppression, but also allows for resistance through self-empowerment. One form of resistance against subjectivization that Foucault has conceptualized takes the form of *subjectivation*, where the individual takes agency, actively shaping him/herself through what he calls "technologies of the self". He defines these practices as those which "permit individuals to effect by their own means, or with the help of others, a certain number of operations on their own bodies and souls, thoughts, and ways of being, so as to transform themselves in order to attain a certain state of happiness, purity, wisdom, perfection, or immorality" (225).

Žižek's criticism of Foucault's theory of power maintains that power *does* indeed produce the subject, but that it also produces an excess in the subject which amounts to more than it can fully control. In this sense, Althusser's scenario accounts for the very moment in which the subject comes to exist by being interpellated, but it also creates a surplus that cannot be accounted for as easily:

> In so far as ideological identification succeeds precisely inasmuch as I perceive myself as a 'full human person' who 'cannot be reduced to a puppet, to an instrument of some ideological big Other', is not the thesis on interpellation's necessary failure the very sign of its ultimate success? An interpellation succeeds precisely when I perceive myself as 'not only *that*', but a 'complex person who, among other things, is also '*that*' – in short, imaginary distance towards symbolic identification is the very sign of its success (Žižek 258-259).

For Žižek, this excess that interpellation produces in the subject is a process of accumulation that continues until it can no longer be contained, and paves the path to resistance. He calls for a radical transformation of norms of sociability to undermine the hegemonic field, whereas Judith Butler, on a more grounded level, argues that what give the subject agency in this resistance are subversive reiterations of performative acts, since power relies on its subjects to guarantee its perpetuation:

> This does not mean that the subject can be *reduced* to the power by which
> it is occasioned, nor does it mean that the power by which it is occasioned
> is *reducible* to the subject. Power is never merely a condition external or
> prior to the subject, nor can it be exclusively identified with the subject. If
> conditions of power are to persist, they must be reiterated; the subject is
> precisely the site of such reiteration, a repetition that is never merely
> mechanical (*Psychic Life* 16).

Žižek thinks Butler should be criticized for the way she regards performative acts. He argues that these subversive acts of displacement still remain *within* the hegemonic field, they exist only in so far as they define themselves in accordance to the norm of that field, and they conduct an "internal guerrilla war of turning the terms of the hegemonic field against itself." Instead, he calls for a "thorough reconfiguration" of this hegemony to shake the system of normativity from its roots (264). But how does the subject know what the reconfiguration would be if it hasn't experienced itself outside of the hegemonic field? The pervasiveness of interpellation and power does not permit the subject to wage such a utopian war; so perhaps one can do nothing but commit singular acts of

displacement that will slowly shift collective perception, as Butler has suggested, and some of these practices may be in the form of Foucault's "technologies of the self".

Let us go back to Althusser's scenario of interpellation for a moment, specifically to this rather curious sentence: "Experience shows that the practical telecommunication of hailings is such that they hardly ever miss their man." Is not Althusser's claim redundant, in that for us to recognize interpellation as having taken place, it must always already have reached its destination and succeeded? Shouldn't it go without saying that hailings don't miss their destinations, if they are only recognized as hailings after they are received, as Deleuze and Braidotti suggest? In this sense, there is no such thing as a failed interpellation; interpellation exists in so far as it successfully calls a subject into being. Perhaps Althusser is referring specifically to his exemplary scenario where a police agent already knows which individual s/he is hailing? Is this scenario, then, not a simplistic or inadequate version of how power is imposed on subjects?

Althusser's conception of subjectivization asserts that ideology interpellates individuals and produces them as subjects, but in the scenario he offers, is not the police agent himself also a subjectivized individual, rather than an incognizant instrument of an ideology? Such a theory must recognize that ideology is not a cognitive being that maliciously chooses who to subjectivize. It is the total concept of a multiplicity of interrelational acts, where subjects impose certain types of behaviour on others. Interpellation is the tool of ideology, but ideology itself is not a free agent, it is actualized through its subjects' singular acts.

Recognizing that ideologies rely on their intermediaries to persist would suggest that it is one's ethical responsibility to be aware of how one's acts circulate ideologies. In the following two chapters I will return to the question of sexuality and gay subjectivity, focussing on the notion of *insult* to expand upon how gay subjects are interpellated and subjectivized, and I will take issue with the discourse of psychoanalysis as one that perpetuates problematic ideologies. This will call for an alternative ethical framework, which will be discussed in the subsequent chapter through the concept of nomadism in Deleuze and Guattari and Rosi Braidotti.

3.   Insult

The homosexual subject negotiates its place in a culture that takes heterosexuality and female/male gender performances as given norms, and must find a way to see itself as a part of that culture. The people who give short descriptions of themselves in *Indefinitions*, specifically those feeling the need to reassert that they are "very masculine" or "straight acting," are indeed specifying where they stand in relation to the law of the gender binary, which within the dominant ideology of sexuality is the law that determines who is sexually desirable. In this matrix, one is desirable as either fully man or fully woman, and must ensure that one is masculine or feminine enough to express one's wo/manhood.

To protest against this schema is not exclusively a queer agenda; the heterosexual subject is quite helpless in navigating this matrix too. But the reason that such theoretical debate has primarily been a queer concern is because the heterosexual subject will have at least achieved one goal successfully: to desire the opposite sex. Having failed on both counts, the homosexual subject internalizes the constant external pressure to fit within this scheme, and becomes all the more traumatized. His/her very existence is "insulted" merely by virtue of being subjectivized as a homosexual in the social sphere, and those who regard this proposition as an exaggeration should remember that there are countries in the world where homosexuality is punishable by execution, and that even in Western urban cultures where homophobia has been in decline, homosexuality is a deviation from the implicit norm that still assumes a default heterosexuality.

Didier Eribon's notion of insult describes the production of a paranoid subject who is indirectly interpellated every time the category of the homosexual is insulted, and has to find a way to shield him/herself from this insult. In other words, the homosexual youth who witnesses someone else being called a "fag" in the schoolyard knows that he belongs to that category also, and thus could easily be the object of such bullying should he fail to adhere to the demand of behaving masculinely.

> "Insult works by way of generalization rather than by particularization. It globalizes more than it singularizes. It works by attributing to a category (treated as a whole or treated through the example of one individual) a group of characteristics that are conceived of as derogatory and that are considered applicable to each and every member of that category. Thus an insult can reach a person who is not its direct target, for in fact that person is also targeted" (Eribon 72).

In a world of insult continuously threatening the homosexual subject, how can s/he act differently? What does s/he need to risk in order to transgress imposed norms? Judith Butler further asks: "What would it mean for the subject to desire something other than its continued social existence? If such an existence cannot be undone without falling into some kind of death, can existence nevertheless be risked, death courted or pursued, in order to expose and open to transformation the hold of social power on the conditions of life's persistence?" (*Psychic Life* 88). What Butler is implying here is that insult might reach such a degree that one cannot bear to live with it anymore, and resists the imposed power by risking irreconcilable harm to oneself. Is this not precisely what Žižek means

when he says that power has the capacity to produce an excess that cannot be contained? For one individual to take such risks is not a thorough reconfiguration of the whole hegemonic field, but if many individuals take these risks singularly, will it not add up to something that the hegemonic field can no longer control?

4.   Psychoanalysis, Psychology and *Card No. IV*

Psychoanalysis has been of interest to my project as a tool of power over the psyche and sexuality. The inception of psychoanalysis can be considered in light of Foucault's theory that the repression of sexuality and the prohibition to speak about it were actually indeed a proliferation of its discourse[5]. The discussions enabled by psychoanalysis have provided a framework within which sexual identities could be thought, but the last few decades have also seen a strong attack on its normative assumptions, which insist that individuals should acquire their designated roles of masculinity and femininity in order to become socially and emotionally healthy parts of society. I concur with Rosi Braidotti where she remarks that psychoanalysis is a "perfectly adequate reflection of our culture and its dominant norms," and that it cannot be blamed for bringing the bad news. She states, however, that her quarrel with psychoanalysis is when it reasserts the historical necessity and immutability of the conservative, heterosexist and phallocentric regime (*Post-Human* 6).

We must, here, distinguish between two functions of philosophy and cultural production at large: The first as a critical reflection on what is at hand, and the second as a sphere in which difference can be imagined and positivity injected. The second function might be implicit in the first insofar as criticality is maintained, and I see my own work as operating on this level. But a lack of criticality is precisely why such issue

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[5] See Foucault, Michel. *The History of Sexuality Vol. 1: The Will to Knowledge*. New York: Vintage Books, 1980.

is to be taken with psychoanalysis: It reflects on the psyche and sexuality without criticizing the assumptions upon which it is based. That is not to say that psychoanalytic discourse has never been utilized as a critical tool; such a claim would be unfounded and ignorant of the work of many feminist thinkers. But Braidotti, among others, offers the possibility of speaking within an alternative paradigm that does away with the heterosexist and phallocentric parameters of psychoanalysis altogether.

It is in this critical sense that I am interested in psychoanalytic treatment, and psychology as a field of study. These are proclaimed as scientific tools of analyzing and regulating individuals, defining norms of healthy behaviour with the aim of correcting what they deem incorrect or unhealthy. The methodologies used in these practices take many forms, and there are many psychological tests that supposedly allow analyzers to make sense of subjects. One of these is the especially contested Rorschach inkblot test. As is widely known, the test consists of ten cards that the tester exposes to the subject, recording his/her responses to assess patterns of perception and cognition. The common misconception about this test is that the results are primarily a reflection on the content perceived, whereas in reality it is the subject's behaviour while responding that is considered much more significant, as there are specific meanings or areas of investigation already assigned to each card. The test bases its assumptions on results that can only be deduced once and thus the subject must be seeing the cards for the first time when s/he takes the test. This is why the ten cards are not intended to be available to the public (although they can actually easily be found on the web). Those who dispute the scientific validity of the test argue that the analyzer can never be absolutely objective,

and that results are contingent on the specific conditions of the time at which the test is taken, and therefore unverifiable (Lilienfeld, Wood and Garb, 82-87).

In my project *Card No. IV*, I appropriate the fourth of the ten Rorschach inkblot cards in sculptural form. The gesture of turning the inkblot into an art object turns the tables and redefines it as an object of study, thereby undermining its status of power. The original inkblot succeeds as a tool for psychology insofar as it incites speech, reaction or confession in its subject, but here it is stripped of that intended function. In this case, rather than the spectator being interrogated, it is the image itself that becomes a spectacle to be analyzed.

Figure 7. Erdem Tasdelen, *Card No. IV.* 2009. Acrylic on plywood. 32"x23"x1".

Psychologist Irving Weiner describes this specific card as:

"...generally perceived as a big and sometimes threatening figure; compounded with the common impression of the subject being in an inferior position to it, which serves to elicit a sense of authority. The human or animal content seen in the card is almost invariably classified as male rather than female, and the qualities expressed by the subject may indicate attitudes toward men and authority" (392).

What is objectionable about this explanation is that it assumes a default relationship between the male sex and authority, and bases this assumption on the fact that the figure is described by most as threatening and masculine. Could these two qualities not be interpreted separately from each other? Is it necessarily *because* the figure is likened to a male that it seems monstrous? And even if this were the case, how exactly might the subject's response to a highly ambiguous figure provide insight into their relationship with masculinity and authority? Is this not an incredibly simplistic association to make, given the unexplainable complexities of our unexpected reactions to things? And by operating on this norm, does it not perpetuate a problematic perception of authority?

5.   Felix Gonzalez-Torres' Portraits, Nomadism and Nomadic Ethics

Up to this chapter, I have critically engaged with some of the ways in which subjectivities are produced and interpreted. What I would like to propose in this chapter is a way of looking at the subject as unsedimented and always in flux, and to acknowledge that the specific positions it occupies change through time and cannot be said to form a unified and static whole. In order to do so, I will first refer to a set of works by Felix Gonzalez-Torres, and then I will introduce the concept of *nomadism* in Deleuze and Guattari's thought.

Felix Gonzalez-Torres' artistic oeuvre is generally known to have been a highly personal one, incorporating subtle and minimal gestures that were decided upon very carefully and particularly. But the personal qualities of his works never operated on a confessional mode; they always concentrated on his subjectivity and self-awareness in ways that pertained to history, politics and interpersonal relationships. His approach did not separate the personal and the political, but instead asserted that the personal itself is always a product of a set of rules established through the political.

There is much to be written about Gonzalez-Torres' practice, but I will limit my discussion here to a specific set of projects he produced. These are his textual portraits of himself, of his loved ones and of those who commissioned theirs[6]. The texts in these portraits display dates accompanied by short notations of formative experiences/events,

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[6] These were Gonzalez-Torres' only commissioned works, and were produced collaboratively with the commissioners.

and are painted directly on the wall in silver lettering, just below where the wall meets the ceiling. The entries in these pieces are subject to change, and the last version of Felix's own portrait from 1995 (shortly before his death) is as follows:

> *Red Canoe 1987 Watercolors 1964 Paris 1985 Supreme Court 1986 Blue Lake 1986 Our Own Apartment 1976 Rosa 1977 Guaimaro 1957 New York City 1979 Pebbles and Biko 1985 Ross 1983 Civil Rights Act 1964 Mariel Boatlift 1980 White Shirt 1984 Julie 1987 An Easy Death 1991 CNN 1980 Black Monday 1987 Berlin Wall 1989 Great Society 1964 Venice 1985 Wawanaisa Lake 1987 U.N. 1945 Mother 1986 Myriam 1990 VCR 1978 Dad 1991 Bay of Pigs 1961 D-Day 1944 Interferon 1989 Jeff 1978 Silver Ocean 1990 H-Bomb 1954 The World I Know Is Gone 1991 Bruno and Mary 1991 Madrid 1971 MTV 1981 Rafael 1992 may 1968 Andrea 1990 Twenty-fourth Street 1993 LA 1990 Placebo 1991 George Nelson Clocks 1993 A view to remember 1995*

Image removed due to copyright restrictions

Figure 8. Felix Gonzalez Torres, *"Untitled".* 1989. Paint on wall. Dimensions variable.

These portraits blend together events we consider "public" and "private", and the events are listed non-chronologically to illuminate the heterotopic nature of memory. If the portrait is of someone else, the person portrayed is entitled to change the events listed as time goes by, and "the idea of subtracting events – the liberation of letting go of or moving beyond an event which at one point you considered to be intrinsic to your being – becomes a tangible example of how out and out *loss*, *forgetting*, becomes beneficial" (Rosen, 52). Such an approach not only emphasizes that the subject is always in flux, but also provides individuals with a kind of agency in how they wish to depict themselves.

Here I will turn to the concept of *nomadism,* which Deleuze and Guattari pitch against rigid organization:

The nomad has a territory; he follows customary paths; he goes from one point to another; he is not ignorant of points (water points, dwelling points, assembly points, etc.). But the question is what in nomad life is a principle and what is only a consequence. To begin with, although the points determine paths, they are strictly subordinated to the paths they determine, the reverse of what happens with the sedentary. The water point is reached only in order to be left behind; every point is a relay and exists only as a relay. A path is always between two points, but the in-between has taken on all the consistency and enjoys both an autonomy and a direction of its own. The life of the nomad is the intermezzo. (Deleuze and Guattari 380).

The psychic *nomad* in Deleuze and Guattari's thought always moves from one subject position to another, as opposed to the *sedentary*, who stays put. The nomad is

similar to the *migrant* in its mobility, but is differentiated by the principle of its movements. The migrant's moves come out of a starting point and anticipate an end point, and these points are the reason why the migrant is in transit; whereas for the nomad, the movement itself is precisely what is celebrated and constitutes the very principle of existing. This line of thinking privileges nomadic thought over sedentary or migrant thought in a subject's self-empowerment, but it is incommensurable with the notion of the unitary subject that Western philosophy has been grounded upon. The movement of the nomad affirms and embraces uncertainty and inconsistency, but this challenges the traditional view of the fixed subject, who has a responsibility to be firmly grounded in non-contradictory positions.

Nomadic thought is difficult to come to terms with without the dimension of ethical accountability that Rosi Braidotti argues for. The sense of agency that the nomad is endowed with may at first glance be perceived as one that could encourage an "anything-goes" attitude with no regard for others, or provide a framework for doing harm to others with no accountability. But this would be a hasty misinterpretation of the concept. Instead, a radical re-evaluation of ethics supplements the movements of the nomad, where s/he is aware of his/her positions in an interrelational context, always singular but collectively bound. Braidotti turns to Baruch Spinoza and Deleuze and Guattari for an ethics that takes the nomad itself as the very architect of ethical conduct, detaching her way of thinking from a subject that must follow universal moral obligations. Here, the nomad, striving for positivity, is concerned with how his/her movements implicate and affect others. Rather than taking as its foundation exterior

truths, such a project distinguishes the ethical from the unethical through interiority and corporeality:

> If the point of ethics is to explore how much a body can do, in the pursuit of active modes of empowerment through experimentation, how do we know when we have gone too far? How does the negotiation of boundaries actually take place? This is where the non-individualistic vision of the subject as embodied and hence affective and interrelational, but also fundamentally social, is of major consequence. Your body will thus tell you if and when you have reached a threshold or a limit. The warning can take the form of opposing resistance, falling ill, feeling nauseous, or it can take other somatic manifestations, like fear, anxiety, or a sense of insecurity. Whereas the semiotic-linguistic frame of psychoanalysis reduces these to symptoms awaiting interpretation, I see them as corporeal warning signals or boundary markers that express a clear message: "Too much!" (Braidotti *Affirmation* 5)

The nomadic ethics proposed here is not easy to implement as it challenges our usual modes of existing: It is not an attempt to reflect on the current state of affairs, but envisions a world we must strive for, a world of empathically aware individuals. This process cannot be a painless one, as it involves undoing many habits we have been taking for granted. The next chapter focuses on my project *Dear,* which comes out of such a frustration with identification and ethical behaviour. It proceeds to complicate Braidotti's proposition of nomadic ethics and corporeal warnings.

6. *Dear,* **and** *Take Care of Yourself*

The subject occupies endless different positions, but cannot understand them fully by itself. To illustrate the necessity of multiple points of view in determining where one stands in relation to others, Alain de Botton writes:

> What does it mean that man is a social animal? Only that humans need one another in order to define themselves and achieve self-consciousness, in a way that molluscs and earthworms do not. We cannot come to a proper sense of ourselves if there aren't others around to show us what we're like. 'A man can acquire anything in solitude except a character,' wrote Stendhal, suggesting that character has its genesis in the reactions of others to our words and actions. Our selves are fluid and require the contours provided by our neighbours. To feel whole, we need people in the vicinity who know us as well, sometimes better than we know ourselves. (108)

Though one's position is determined by oneself and others in collaboration, it would be a mistake to suggest that a consensus as to the precise nature of these positions might ever be reached. Subject positions are contingent on perception, but perceptions differ from one subject to another, from one position to another. The frustrating aspect of sociability is that one is never quite what one thinks of oneself to others, and this frustration is amplified when one assigns another a position of vital importance in defining who one is; when one is obsessed with another and what this other thinks of one.

My project *Dear,*[7] creates an archetypal character in such a crisis of identification. What the audience stumbles upon when entering into this installation is the workspace of a writer and the artefacts that can be observed in his/her absence (I use both gender pronouns, as neither the gender of the writer nor that of the addressee is made explicit anywhere). On top of the writer's desk lie a large number of printed love letters in the process of being edited by hand, addressed anonymously as "Dear," and unsigned. There is also an obscure photograph of a figure walking, which plays with the notion of authenticity, creating a tension between fiction and nonfiction. The pens, the dirty mug, the cigarettes, and the ashtray on the desk perform the writer's absent presence in this scene. Centered on the desk is also a digital photo frame, on which a looped 9 minute video plays. In the first half of the video, abstract black grains form a big pile, and the reverse of this constitutes the second half, where the pile flows back up and disappears. On the floor underneath the desk is a large white pile of Epsom salts, and a quick visual association can be made between this and the black pile in the video. Hung haphazardly on the wall above and beside the desk are more obsessively edited letters. A glance at the letters reveals that much of the text is about the inability to find the right words, not knowing what the addressee thinks of the writer, and how the writer's perception is changing over time.

At first sight, the fact that the letters are initially printed and not written by hand conceals whether the editor and the writer are the same person, as does the confusion of pronouns in the edits (the writer sometimes refers to him/herself as "I" and sometimes as

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[7] Please see visual documentation CD provided for images.

"you"). When the letters are read, however, a peculiar self-reflexivity reveals that it is indeed the writer who is editing his/her own letters. Such a gesture signals an intention of looking at oneself from a distance, and an act of trying to understand oneself through one's position in relation to the other. It soon becomes apparent that this relation is one that cannot be identified – although the Other is always addressed as "Dear," this turns out to be more of an ongoing effort to interpellate the Other as a dear, rather than displaying a relation already defined. The contradiction is that this attempt at interpellation may not be leaving the site of imagination and might never reach its intended destination, as there is no evidence of any of the letters having been sent off. There is an ongoing obsessive process of writing and editing letters with the hope that the right kind of letter can be written and sent some time in the future; and the outcome of this process is never effective communication, but the impossibility to communicate one's thoughts satisfactorily. What complicates the process even more is that some of the letters turn out to be written from the imagined point of view of the addressee, and then edited by the writer as him/herself. There is a yearning here for the possibility of understanding through imagination, but this act can potentially cause even further miscommunication.

There are strong elements of symbolism in *Dear,*. The strikingly deliberate choice of minimising colour to a black and white palette, two extremes signifying opposite ends of a spectrum, can be interpreted as an obsessive desire to keep things simple and safe in one's own environment, where everything is either one way or the other. Much of this project is about the amount of control (and lack thereof) one has over one's own subjectivity, and the contrived effort of sticking to non-colour humourously points to this

yearning for control. This preoccupation with control is also a struggle with time: The piling up of the black grains in the video, and its reverse that follows, show a never-ending process of accumulation and disintegration. The moment where full capacity is reached, that moment at the very middle of the video where time flows neither backwards nor forwards, is concretized in the white pile on the floor. The phenomenological presence of this element already signifies a burdensome weight, but the knowledge that it is made of Epsom salt brings another poetic dimension into play, where a process of cleansing or healing is quietly implied.

There is a recent popular project involving a love letter that needs to be mentioned here, in order to point to some similarities and differences. Sophie Calle represented France at the 52nd Venice Biennale in 2007 with her project *Take Care of Yourself*. In this project she put under scrutiny a breakup letter she claimed to have received from a former lover. She gave this letter out to 107 women of different professions and asked for their professional interpretations, which constituted the visual manifestation of the project. In the short text accompanying the project, she writes that she wanted the participants to *"analyze it, comment on it, dance it, sing it. Dissect it. Exhaust it. Understand it for [her]. Answer for [her]"* (Calle, np). The responses took a variety of forms, from photographs and videos to a crossword puzzle or a children's book. While trying to analyze the letter's writer, her helpers offered pieces of themselves.

What made *Take Care of Yourself* explosive for the art world, in my opinion, is that it came at a point in time when collective action and multiple points of entry had long been a focus of contemporary art, with the advent and popularization of relational

aesthetics[8]. Calle utilized relational methods to investigate subjectivity in romantic life, arguably a realm accessible to a very wide audience. To guarantee the popularity of the project, however, she seems to have been banking on a populist strategy. The issue to be taken with it is that she has asked for responses only from women and no men, reinforcing the stereotype of the woman as the more emotional or fragile of the two sexes: the Carrie Bradshaw that contemplates and analyzes relationships to no end, situated in opposition to the cold and uncaring male. The emotions brought into view in *Take Care of Yourself* are experienced by all kinds of people, and making a deliberate decision to represent only female responses is a questionable gesture, especially at this point in time. The most important divergence between *Dear,* and *Take Care of Yourself*, then, is that *Dear*, is about *the notion of subjectivity* rather than being about *a specific subject*.

Sophie Calle is known to use experiences from her personal life in her art, challenging boundaries between the private and the public. But it matters little whether the breakup letter is genuine or not in *Take Care of Yourself*. The resulting artwork is a piece of fiction that situates two characters as writer and receiver, and it is rather the tension between fiction and nonfiction in such a mise-en-scène that I find more relevant to my project. *Dear,* uses a similar strategy to *Take Care of Yourself* in terms of obsessively interrogating the subject positions of two people romantically involved, where it is not clear if the scenario is an authentic one. The very nature of this

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[8] Relational aesthetics is defined by curator and art critic Nicolas Bourriaud as "a set of artistic practices which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context, rather than an independent and private space" (113).

interrogation necessitates that a definitive conclusion about where the two people stand be impossible to draw; it is the act of obsessively interrogating itself that is brought into view, where an objective truth is unattainable. I believe that this allows for an open-ended discussion of emotional vulnerability in a relational context, as well as of ethics of love and its representations.

Going back to Judith Butler's idea of "falling into some kind of death" in order to transform the social structures imposed on one (*Psychic Life* 88), it is possible to consider the letters in *Dear,* as a collection of trite performative acts of resistance in an emotional crisis. Although they do not effectively change one's position in the eyes of the other, they are ongoing solitary efforts to displace and re-place the self in relation to the other. Taking one's vulnerability to humorously obsessive extremes is indeed a "technology of the self," where subjectivity is interrogated to such a degree that the possible configurations of one's subject positions are trivialized by their proliferation. It is no longer possible to point to a coherent subject.

The way the piece functions is interrogative: questions are repeatedly asked and indirectly implied, while direct answers are never given. Here, there is potential to complicate Rosi Braidotti's nomadic ethics, in which corporeal warnings are said to constitute the criteria for detecting unethical behaviour. Some possible questions that may be posed here are: whether there is a hierarchy to breaches of ethics, whether these unjust breaches can be measured in relation to each other, and whether this assumes a fair proportionality between injustice/injury and the corporeal signs that signal them. Different individuals respond to injuries differently, because they have different psychic

structures and affective inclinations. Some experience emotional pain more intensely than others in the face of similar injuries. If ethical behaviour is being mindful of what grief one causes to another, and if unethical behaviour can be identified through corporeal warnings felt by the one who causes grief, how is it possible to take into account whether the grief felt by the griever is appropriate? Is it fair to say that the injury is more severe if its victim is feeling disproportionate pain? Is it not an injustice to those who are assumed to have engaged in injurious behaviour if the claims to injury are dramatized and exaggerated? By what standards can a response to injury be identified as an exaggeration, if there are no external norms to draw from? Is the proposition of nomadic ethics appropriate for emotional attachments, or can the same ethical framework even be applied to all aspects of social life? I see *Dear,* as my way of working through these questions, but I do not believe that such questions should be answered hastily. They will, rather, sustain me in my future explorations.

Conclusion

Artistic production requires one to engage with their work discursively, and it seems there are dos and don'ts one is warned of from the outset in an academic programme: The theory should not override the work, but the work should not be devoid of discursivity either. Visual and conceptual qualities of art works are expected to be somewhat balanced, while the categories "commercial art" and "academic art" are recognized and set in opposition to each other by most. "Academic art" is thought to be predominantly conceptual and usually lacks the spectacular aestheticization of "commercial art," while the economic value given to the art object in "commercial art" is thought to make its potential in social and political realms secondary. I would like to think that it is possible to be critical of both approaches, while enjoying everything that happens in between.

What I would hope for my work to achieve is to be suggestive of the concepts I have outlined in this essay, without being concrete illustrations of them. I take much pleasure in theory, and I would like my work to allow me to have these conversations with others who do so too. But I would like it to be accessible also to those who have no desire to have such theoretical debates through the reading of art works. That is why I wish to stress that I see this academic essay and the visual projects as having their individual functions and territories. (If I were standing with you, the reader, in front of one of my pieces, and we were having a conversation about it, it is likely that our topics of discussion would be quite different from the ones presented in this essay) This paper

was written in hopes to provide a coherent and concise context for my body of work to function within, but I am aware that it may hinder other possible readings, or fail to mirror the phenomenological experience of it. I would like it to be seen as one possible dialogue among others, and I hope that it will manage to generate an open-ended structure for future projects and the conversations they will enable.

I have consciously chosen not to write about my own subjectivity while presenting my projects. This is because I see my work as being about subjectivity, rather than myself as a subject. I do not see my life as separate from my practice, but I have no desire to make myself central to the reading of my work. I think it is quite obvious that these projects come out of very personal experiences without me having to explicitly say so. They have been a way for me to fashion ways of looking at the world that are continuously shifting. Although this is a "conclusion," these discussions are by no means concluded.

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Appendix A

Visual Documentation on CD

All images from:

Erdem Tasdelen, *Dear,.* 2010

Desk, chair, inkjet and ink on paper, pens, pen holder, lamp, digital photograph print in Plexiglas frame, mug, cigarettes, lighter, ashtray, plastic spoon, video on digital photo frame (9'02"), Epsom salt

01.jpg, 02.jpg and 03.jpg: Installation views

04.avi: Video on digital photo frame (9'02")

05.jpg and 06.jpg: Detail views

10.jpg, 11.jpg, 12.jpg, 13.jpg, 14.jpg, 15.jpg and 16.jpg: Digital scans of inkjet and ink on paper