DONT FEEL TOUCH

Vanessa Jagodinsky

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doi: https://doi.org/10.57709/12528594

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ABSTRACT

*DONT FEEL TOUCH* is an art exhibition and thesis that combines sculpture and performance within a single space. The show’s installation consists of three-dimensional art objects, painted panels, and soft sculptures. Each piece emerges from a series of experiential traumas that span from childhood to adulthood. Embodying the behavioral and emotional distress that suspends my journey to autonomy, the forms work together to act as a sculptural foundation for a live performance. The goal of my thesis work is to understand the psychosocial impact of early childhood trauma through instinctual making and performance.

INDEX WORDS: Performance, Sculpture, Identity, Race, Gender, Class, Sex
DONT FEEL TOUCH

by

VANESSA JAGODINSKY

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in the College of the Arts

Georgia State University

2018
DEDICATION

This paper is dedicated to Esmeralda, who lives in the room down the hall.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to acknowledge those who have helped me physically, mentally, and spiritually in my journey to feel whole. I want to thank the staff, faculty, and students of Georgia State University who have supported my endeavors as an artist and assisted me in many projects. Thank you to my committee members for providing thoughtful critiques and support before and during thesis experience. A special thank you to my mother who has supported me in countless ways, being a huge supporter of the many things I do and for being a badass female role model all these years. Lastly, I want to show my gratitude to my sculpture family, past, present, and future. You have inspired me, you have educated me, and you have impacted my life forever. Thank you.
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1 INTRODUCTION

_DONT FEEL TOUCH_ is an art exhibition and thesis that combines sculpture and performance within a single space. The show’s installation consists of three-dimensional art objects, painted panels, and soft sculptures that emerge from a series of experiential traumas that span from childhood to adulthood. Each piece embodies the behavioral and emotional distress that suspends my journey to autonomy, while the forms work together to act as a sculptural foundation for a live performance. The goal of my thesis work is to understand the impact of early childhood trauma through intrinsic making and performance.

Broadly, my work is about self-identity and belonging. I think of identity as an umbrella. Under my umbrella are four main components: race, gender, class, and sex. The four components make up the foundation of my work and the basic categories within my sense of self. In my reflection of each element, I am often brought back to my early childhood. As a child, my development of self was largely interrupted by the absence of my father. His nonexistence in my earliest years subsequently impacted my ongoing struggle with abandonment, self worth, sex, and my sense of belonging in the world. Using performative expression and handmade objects, my work presents an intersection of these components and works to communicate the psychosocial impact of traumatic memories, their effect on interpersonal relationships and the construction of individual identity through instinctual performances.

My father’s absence, along with being raised in a primarily white area of the country, in Wisconsin, meant that I lacked exposure to black-American culture and lacked my own sense of blackness, for some time. Symbols of African-American history and contemporary black-American culture find their way into my work both deliberately and intuitively. Whether I have
an immediate understanding or one with hindsight, the consideration of these symbols and
customs help me to cultivate my own version of what it is to be a black American.

Adrian Piper is a conceptual artist and analytic philosopher whose work has helped me to
feel grounded in my identity and grapple with both racial and gender prejudices. She is racially
mixed, and I am too. Just as in Piper’s work, my work is a reflection of my experience being
racially ambiguous. Piper addresses the way she challenges her viewers by stating,

‘In my work up to now I’ve often reflected back to a viewer the racial discrimination and
misapprehensions, false expectations and assumptions that I always experience. I think
it’s an ingrained part of our cognitive capacity that we have to impose categories on
people no matter what. This work has been an attempt to show people what the categories
are, by describing them, by repeating them, and by mimicking them.’

Piper’s work addresses racial discriminations, cultural assumptions, and social hierarchies
through performance, installation, writing, and more. Through the lens of her own experiences
she creates work that confronts viewers, addressing them with racially and sexually transgressive
overtones.1 In her self-portrait from the Eileen and Peter Norton Collection titled, Self-Portrait
Exaggerating My Negroid Features, 1981, Piper selects physical attributes that are stereotypical
to black faces and incorporates them onto her own face (Figure 1). Piper explains, “I want to
enhance a certain level of self–consciousness, to effect a certain kind of internal transformation,
by showing and reflecting back to people what they’re saying and thinking—and I know what
they’re saying and thinking because they tell me these things.”2

1 Adrian Piper, Maurice Berger, and Jean Fisher. Adrian Piper : a retrospective. n.p.:
Baltimore, Md.: Fine Arts Gallery, University of Maryland, Baltimore County; New York: Distributed by
2 Dislocations, Christopher Lyon, Sophie Calle, Bruce Nauman, David Hammons, Chris Burden, Louise
Bourgeois, Ilya Kabakov and Adrian Piper, MoMa, No. 9 ( Autumn, 1991), pp. 8
Figure 1. Adrian Piper, *Self Portrait Exaggerating My Negroid Features*, 1981, pencil on paper 10 x 8 in. collection of Eileen and Peter Norton, Santa Monica
There is comfort in the uncomfortable. Piper’s quote explains what I strive to achieve in my performance installations. I am the artwork. I am the installation. It is imperative that I position myself in a vulnerable space to both engage the audience and emote the essence of the performance. I do this because I want to elicit and provoke a particular level of empathy and connection with my audience. I also choose to deliberately confront the audience with a series of non-verbal interactions within a spectrum of visual and non-verbal manifestations designed to elicit a physical, psychological, and physiological response. For example, I might choose to incorporate non-traditional movements in close proximity to the viewer or direct eye contact. The audience is simultaneously allowed and forced to engage with me beyond an invisible wall that often separates the viewer from the performer. I choose to deliberately break past the fourth wall by shifting the power between the viewer and myself. Once the power is shifted, the vulnerability is both shifted and shared. My performances allow for the audience to choose whether they will succumb to such discomfort to explore the topics presented within the performance. In this direct and forced confrontation with topics that may be uncomfortable, the audience is forced to interact with me in a way that is unpredictable yet evocative. In this evoking of the psychological response, the audience subconsciously finds comfort in the uncomfortable.

As an artist I feel both comfort and discomfort exploring these concepts under my umbrella that encompasses race, gender, class, and sex. It is through my art that I hope to engage the audience in investigating these topics that I believe exist on a fluid spectrum of one’s identity. How a person identifies within race, gender, class, and sex all play a role in how the audience will interact with and respond to my work. This paper accompanies the art exhibition, *DONT FEEL TOUCH*, and outlines the structure and process of my work as it has evolved.
during my time at Georgia State University. Metaphors are used to align my work with the biological development of humans and animals, while resources essential to my research are shared in order to put my work into context with artists and literature, of the past and present.
2 METAMORPHOSIS

“My name is Louise Josephine Bourgeois. I was born on December 25, 1911, in Paris. All my work in the past fifty years, all my subjects, have found their inspiration in my childhood. My childhood has never lost its magic, it has never lost its mystery, and it has never lost its drama.” – Louise Bourgeois

Like the process of metamorphosis, we collect our sense of self, adapt to our environment, and inevitably, change over time. Butterflies are no exception. They are the product of metamorphosis; a developmental process that takes insects from immature forms to mature organisms. Butterflies go through four distinct stages of transformation that include: egg, larva, pupa, and finally, adult. Their immature form starts as a caterpillar and passes through the remaining two stages before emerging from a chrysalis and shedding their outer layer, like a second skin. A similar shedding action is demonstrated in my early performance of Coiffure et. Cocoon from 2016 (Figure 2). Here, my body emerges from a fabric cocoon made from rigid medium-density fibreboard and crocheted polypropylene rope. I slither out of the casing using slow movements. The expulsion of my body in some ways reflects the chrysalis stage of the butterfly and even the process of childbirth. Exposed to a new environment, our bodies become unprotected, susceptible to outside forces, and change. The physical and visual references made within the Coiffure et. Cocoon exemplifies the reoccurring theme of growth and development that can be traced through my later work.


Early childhood is a critical period in human development. It initiates the ways in which our minds process information consciously and unconsciously. In the image above, I am presented as infant-like and other worldly. This represents myself as the other and explores the younger versions of myself that exist within the core components of my subconscious. However, there is a physical and emotional metamorphosis that occurs beyond intuition and concepts of self that exist. This performance challenges the audience to think critically about younger versions of self that exist and metamorphose within the spectrums of race, gender, class, and sex. The performance speaks to comfort and discomfort. My goal is to provide an unsettling experience. The viewers are challenged to observe my awkward movements and painful positions; it is up to them to decide how long they will ride the wave of their own discomfort.
3 BECOMING VISIBLE: A PHYSICAL MANIFESTATION

In my earliest works, I began to transform myself physically by altering my hair. In the series *The Other I*, I used Styrofoam forms to create shapes beneath my natural hair (Figure 3). During this period I found influence from the artist Yuni Kim Lang, a Michigan based artist who manipulates synthetic rope and turns them into large coiffures (Figure 4). Lang’s textile sculptures are inspired by Korean Gache, a large wig that once signified a person’s status based on the wigs weight and size. Lang uses digital photography to provide visual evidence of her pieces. What Lang and I share is the use of documentation to create a visual archive of the temporary elements involved in our work.

![Figure 3. The Other I, 2013. 30" x 40"](image-url)
In contrast to Lang, I use the symbol of the coiffure to include other parts of the body. My work incorporates techniques like braiding and twisting that are historically grounded in African culture and appear in contemporary popular culture. I am focused on the application, grooming, and treatment of hair to reflect personal identity and allude to multiple versions of self. In *Facial Extension* and *Pubic Extension*, I use glue to attach synthetic hair to my face and pubic area (Figure 5 and 6). Both works depict a physical transformation and are performed for camera. Conceptually, they sit parallel to one another, illustrating sexual maturity and time.
Figure 5. *Facial Extension*, Time-Based, Performance for Video, 2015.

Figure 6. *Pubic Extension*, Time-Based, Performance for Video, 2015.
In my performance titled *Consume, 2017*, I use a polypropylene rope to create a large merkin, or artificial covering that goes over the pubic area (Figure 7). Here, I rely on the nude body to reference a developed and mature character signified by the breasts and pubic hair.

Performance aesthetics and props provide a physical transformation that can alter a performer’s appearance. Components such as makeup, wardrobe, and wigs are used to dramatically change one’s appearance to resemble a character or symbol that fits within the desired role. Performers of Japanese Butoh, a form of modern dance from the 1950s, exhibit different costuming techniques that can include painting their bodies from head to toe with black, white, or gold body.
paint. The paint strips them of their individual characteristics and neutralizes their bodies causing them to take on an aesthetic that is otherworldly (Figure 8).  

![Image](image_url)

Figure 8. Yoko Ashikwa, *Intimacy Plays its Trump*, 1986, Tokyo.

In some performance iterations, similar to Japanese Butoh, I take on an otherworldly-aesthetic by using a substantial amount of costuming. To achieve a unique look, I apply light colored makeup to my face and wear a thin nylon-bodysuit to cover my torso and legs. I refer to the bodysuits as “Skins” and use them as a veil to mask any distinct features. Each “Skin” is customized and embellished for each performance.

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As a child, I felt a distinct presence that continues to exist inside of me. Like an internal mass of energy, that I can feel, separate from of my own. The presence has remained with me in my adulthood and finds its way into the world through my performances.

I looked into the techniques of method actors to find examples of how they are able to transform into their roles. In the documentary Jim & Andy: The Great Beyond, Jim Carrey takes on the role of Andy Kauffman. As a result of playing this role, Carrey goes on to portray Kauffman’s comedic characters, including Tony Clifton, an aggressive practical joker. In the documentary, Carrey expresses what it was like to embody these personas, describing a loss of awareness or “fugue state”. Upon entering this state, Carrey’s entire presence and demeanor changes, evoking an alternative appearance, voice, and set of morals. Here, Carrey speaks to how Andy Kauffman brought him into a fugue state:

‘I was sitting in Malibu, looking at the ocean and thinking, ‘Where would Andy be right now? What would he be doing?’ I bet he’d be doing something like try to communicate telepathically. …I decided for the next few days to speak telepathically to people. It was absurd. … But somehow it worked. That’s the moment when Andy Kaufman showed up, tapped me on the shoulder and said “Sit down. I’ll be doing my movie. What happened afterwards was out of my control. …It’s as if I went into a fugue state, and Hyde showed up. I have a Hyde inside me that shows up when there are people watching… Jim goes away and Hyde comes out. … But it’s a good Hyde. It’s not a hateful Hyde. It’s a loving Hyde.’

Like Carrey, I slip into a fugue-like state of consciousness during a performance. I find his description to be a helpful way to articulate and understand the transformations I endure from one performance to the next. Emerging from a dormant state, inside my body, interior selves come to the surface of my conscious mind; using my body as a surrogate, I am placed into a kind

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7 Ibid.
of trance. Although, there are multiple versions of self in the trance, my body and mind follow the desires of the specific character that chooses to present itself. Altered from one another on a physical level, each self is made up of a set of basic human-like traits. During a live performance the character takes control, reacting and making choices based on its surroundings.

Another way to view this trance-like phenomenon is to think of the interior selves as parasites. Specifically, I’ll refer to a parasite called a *Fetus in Fetu*, a type of developmental abnormality that can develop inside a person’s body. Its characteristics include a mass of tissue that will sometimes grow hair, teeth, and deformed digits. The biological anomaly cannot exist on its own and does not possess a full body of working organs; it requires a host body to survive. Similarly, the interior selves are unable to exist without me and rely on performance to manifest physically into the world. The parasites and the performance selves demonstrate the source for instinct and impulse, controlling the host body. They are primitive, illogical, irrational, and fantasy driven. Performance movements are based on these primitive needs and change fluidly but exaggerated and slow. At the time of a live performance they demand attention (on their own terms), my fixated gaze and calculated movements charge the space. In this capacity I consider the art object, the performer, and the spectators to be my materials and I use them in combination with one another in order to form an emotional bond and a visceral response among them.

Following several live-performances that led up to my thesis exhibition, I noticed several behavioral patterns and a general lack of alignment between my mind and body. Until further reflection, I was not fully aware of what this meant or what was happening to me, internally.

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Feelings ranged in intensity from one piece the next and could go on to last for a period of days or even weeks. I can now understand that my transformations are deeper than surface level. So, what happens? How does it feel? — the physical feeling is difficult to articulate in words. Inwardly, it feels like there are two prominent forces present, at once, neither of which is fully conscious.
4  EXHIBITION INSPIRATION

There are some experiences that I fail to remember. For the experiences I fail to remember and the trans-generational traumas that I have not directly experienced, but have been passed down to me, I acknowledge their innate complexity and my instinctual need to process them. To gain an understanding about things you do not know makes the interpretation and articulation of those things extremely challenging.

Prior to the thesis exhibition, I performed Candidate 23 in 2015. The piece was a part of a formal critique seminar and intended it to be an exercise that could be used as a reference for other work. Pubic Extension, Consume, and Candidate 23 share an element of exaggeration and absurdity that places attention to my body’s pubic area. Leading up to the DONT FEEL TOUCH exhibition show, I frequently visualized the Candidate 23 performance and paid special attention to the green fabric-form that hung between my legs (Figure 9). I started to replicate the fabric-form in multiple materials like foam, wood, clay, and ink drawings.
Figure 9. *Candidate 23, Time-Based Performance, 2016.*
I also broadened my research to include psychoanalytic therapy to explore the intersections of race, class, gender, sex, and relationships. The research included signing up for online sessions with a licensed therapist who specialized in the intersections of these concepts. The therapist conducted several exercises for in-depth personality analysis that explored the degree of contact with reality, fears, and obsessions. The exercises included drawings with interpretations and a critique of some of my work. The exercises provided a clinical viewpoint and an unconventional critique that allowed me to consider my work from a non-traditional perspective. The drawings depict discomfort, peculiarity, and vulnerability in a two-dimensional way. The two-dimensionality creates a distance between the viewer and the work. Unlike the flatness of the drawings, the live performances bring discomfort and vulnerability in every direction that surrounds the viewer. The level of discomfort that is brought to the space manifests real-world complexities of dealing with race, sex, gender, and identity.

By using myself as the sculpture, I give a live first-person perspective of how I observe and experience the world. Adrian Piper helps to articulate this by explaining: “…I tried to depict, from more of a first-person perspective, what it is like to be in that position; to be, for example, the only black person in a white social community; to be the only person who racially denigrating terms are attached; and to feel as though one has to be on one’s guard at all times, defending against those terms coming in from all directions—back, front, and both sides.” 9 The same reflection can be made about sex, gender, and class as it is for race.

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Through interpretation, a repetitive performance element emerged amongst the work that correlated with the drawings (Figures 10 and 11) created within the online sessions. Although each performance element is constructed differently, all of the forms create some kind of barrier to the body. Visually, the forms are easily consumed but their physical characteristics suggest the opposite.

Figure 10. *A Person in a Storm*, sketch, 2017.
When it came to making the DONT FEEL TOUCH exhibition work, I wanted to create work that simultaneously made viewer want to touch the sculptures because of the materials used (e.g., furry or shiny), but also to question temptation. Work with the therapist happened simultaneously with some experiments made with spray foam to make gestural and three-dimensional text used in DONT FEEL TOUCH exhibition. DONT FEEL TOUCH came out of this type of “studio play” and felt closely connected to the Candidate 23 form analyses and drawing interpretations discussed with the therapist. All interpretations then became the main focus and inspiration for the remaining works that would be in the DONT FEEL TOUCH exhibition show.
5 DONT FEEL TOUCH: THE EXHIBITION

_DONT FEEL TOUCH_ is a thesis exhibition that includes a series of three-dimensional objects that present the dichotomy between temptation and control through the making and installation of, objects that encourage touch. The works are motivated by my obsessive investigation of my implicit memory and demonstrate an abstract interpretation of what I have retrieved. Formal elements from previous performances are reimagined and used to reference the shielding and conservation of the body’s interior.

Simple shapes and solid colors are used throughout the work and are combined with tactile qualities similar to children’s toys and educational products. Motivated by the desire to challenge the use of color within my work, I decided to create colored panels that intended to be used as backdrops. The colored panels were made to provide a colorful contrast to the sculptural objects. The minimalist presentation is an attempt at control, precision, and calmness. It is also important to me not to have a visually cluttered space when performing as the character becomes an equal part of the composition in which color, size, form all need to be taken into consideration.

Upon entering the exhibition space, visitors are confronted by the wall piece, and title of the show, _DONT FEEL TOUCH_ (Figure 12). Each of the words is centered on the wall and arranged vertically to form a fragmented command that is authoritative but confusing in its meaning. Sitting Below the letters is _Untitled (Furry Tongue)_ , a soft sculpture that is 2.5’ x 1.5’ x 3.25’ (Figure 13). Moving to the right of the letters are two performance artifacts including a 2’ x 5’ orange panel displaying a _Skin_ and a 30” x 40” mounted photo document, both from the performance _Candidate 23_ (Figure 14). Next, is the piece _Untitled (Blob w/ Panel)_ , a sculpture
paired with a panel cutout (Figure 15). Shifting to the other side of the gallery and to the left of the letters is *Untitled (Furry Legs w/ Panel)* that measures 2’ x .75’ x 3’ (Figure 16). Moving left again, is the 2.25’ x 1’ x 3.5’ sculpture *Untitled (Pinchy Crotch w/ Panel)* (Figure 17). Each of the panel combinations are hung at a height of 47 inches to bring the pieces below the average hanging height and to reflect my own viewing height.

Figure 12. *DON’T FEEL TOUCH*, Foam, Resin, 2018
Figure 13. Untitled (Furry Tongue), DONT FEEL TOUCH Installation, Faux Fur, 2018.

Figure 14. Installed Artifacts from Candidate 23, 2018.
Figure 15. Untitled (Blob w/ Panel), DONT FEEL TOUCH Installation, Foam, Resin, Wood, 2018.

Figure 16. Untitled (Furry Legs w/ Panel), DONT FEEL TOUCH Installation, Foam, Faux Fur, Wood, 2018.
The exhibition ran for four days prior to the live performance. Up to this moment the sculptures stand-alone. On the evening of the reception I enter the space and lay down on a small rug in the middle of the gallery. The rug is sage-colored and made of faux fur. The majority of my body is clothed with a nylon Skin adorned with wefts of human hair and my exposed skin is coated in castor oil (Figure 18). Shadows are cast of the panel’s edges and also of their unique cutouts. A shadow is also cast while the arched of the sculpture is situated just in front of the empty space. Figure 19 demonstrates the DONT TOUCH FEEL installation view.
Figure 18. Performance with *Untitled (Furry Legs w/ Panel)*, *DONT FEEL TOUCH* Installation, 2018.

Figure 19. Installation View, *DONT FEEL TOUCH*, 2018.
6 CONCLUSION

The DONT FEEL TOUCH exhibition provided me, as an artist, the opportunity to explore race, gender, class, and sex through my own personal lens as well as the interpretation of reactions and responses of the audience. The installation space provided a deceptively simple environment with colorful and tactile objects by which to explore the human definition and identification of race, gender, and sex along a non-traditional perspective. The space also provided an opportunity for my child-like character to exist and engage with the audience. It allowed for me to form an emotional connection with the viewer and challenged their physical boundaries in the gallery. Further, the DONT FEEL TOUCH exhibition conjours the psychosocial concepts that intersect with the sense of empathy and vulnerability that inherently exists between the artist and the viewer.

Within the context of race, DONT FEEL TOUCH grappled with the “other” feeling that exists between those who identify within the diverse spectrum of racial identity. Within the context of gender, DONT FEEL TOUCH investigated the the female form considering the barriers and intrinsic protective factors that are associated with the physical aspects of the female body. Last, within the context of sex, DONT FEEL TOUCH challenged the viewer to accept this simplified perception of the complexities within sex, body, safety, control, and general human connection. The features of the exhibit challenged the viewer to simultaneously exercise both temptation and control as it came instinctually.
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