

## Rumination in four parts: On visiting

### 1. shadow play

*The shadow slows down and becomes object; the shadow accelerates and becomes relation.*<sup>1</sup>

In her notebook publication *You May Keep the Letters but the Paper is Mine*, artist k.g. Guttman tethers “object” and “relation” within a paratextual space of shadow play. I approach *shadow* aligned with the “non-object” described by Paul Carter as that which “cannot be focused” and whose content is “of peripheral vision.”<sup>2</sup> From these reaches emerges contingencies, repressed movements, and stories that have held silence against the writing of history. Shadows demarcate a ground for redress. I approach *play* as doubly inflected: on one hand, a performative script for participation and, on the other, an improvised interruption of this theatrical device. Speed and slowness leverage how this play articulates itself in a culturally determined contractual space of aesthetic exchange. Following Guttman through this terrain of object and relation, shadows reflecting light and dark, and the visible and invisible, I am invited to revisit my own seeing practices as research for this essay.

The artifacts of research: photographic images, poetic descriptions, performative objects, and correspondences between Guttman and artist-interlocutors. Between these fragments are glimpses into a practice of visiting, which includes the actions of seeing another’s artwork and a self-reflexive study of the act of seeing itself. Guttman describes her approach as “somatic-political” in that it attends to and critiques Western socio-historical practices of exhibition and reception, refocusing the artifact to include one’s relationship with it—an act of looking, touching, and accessing. Guttman asks us to consider how our own bodies, senses, and perceptions interact with/in the edges of a work. Dwelling in the space of reception, she underscores a primal scene of encounter inscribed by aesthetic regimes predetermined by Western colonial sites of display. A play of habitus, how might we attend to our own embodied stories and micro-somatic movements in order to swerve, drift, or revise this compulsory site and the inertia of its objects? For Guttman, who identifies as a Canadian settler artist, the artistic labor of this question is centered in an ethics of hospitality.

### 2. opening: a paratextual space

Gérard Genette theorizes a work’s paratextual elements, its outlying “zone[s] of transaction”<sup>3</sup> that animate its site of emergence. The singularity of a work is always already within a complex ecology of comings and goings, detritus and animations, desires and memories. The prefix *para*

---

<sup>1</sup> k.g. Guttman, *You May Keep the Letters but the Paper is Mine* (Montréal: Dazibao, 2022), 34.

<sup>2</sup> Paul Carter, *Dark Writing: Geography, Performance, Design* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2008), 2.

<sup>3</sup> Gérard Genette and Marie Maclean, “Introduction to the Paratext,” *New Literary History*, Vol. 2, No. 2, Probing: Art, Criticism, Genre (Spring, 1991), 261-272, 261.

offers a way to think the anachronistic sway of aesthetic experience, where floods of feeling, remembering, and subjective experience participate in the polyphonic sounding of a given moment. Paratext complicates what Genette refers to as the “naked state” of the text by including all that surrounds and prolongs it, “Precisely in order to *present* it.”<sup>4</sup> The *give-ness* of this verb, “to present,” mobilizes across axes of temporality and participation. By theorizing the paratextual dimensions of a work through its discursive and tactile formations, Genette elicits a performative shift of the qualitative (or presentational) nature of the object—from one demarcated by limits or sealed frontiers to one modulated by thresholds between what is internal and external to the work. For Guttman, these thresholds or transactional zones are difficult to see, and must be approached with care and curiosity. Through the warmth of an invitation, seeing is refocused to become active witnessing.

I receive a package from Guttman containing gloves, an eyepiece, an envelope, and a sheet of instructions for employing these tactile, analog technologies. I’m invited to augment my body and viscerally explore the objects in the room, to walk through mine or another’s home. Holding these objects, my domestic environment viscerally sets up a counter-space to the studio or white cube, where I imagine these pieces might be created and shared. Home, as a space for cultivating creativity and embodied knowledges, stands starkly distinct from cultural institutions historically founded on extraction and exploitation. Each of Guttman’s augmenting technologies shuffle the stakes of apprehension.

*A sealed envelope arrives in the mail, nestled within a larger package of materials. The envelope holds the slightest riff of air but feels empty. The smooth edge of its seal is mute; a secret is held within its pouch. I play with the envelope in my hands, turn its sides, fanning it back and forth. Outside, the day is hazy, warm, balmy. Cicadas teem a symphony of late summer from the honey locust trees that line the street outside the window where I live in Detroit. Held up to the light, I peer a silhouette inside. It takes the shape of a bird with a quail-like sprouting headdress. I try to shake it free from the inner lining of the fold. Is it a tablecloth spilling over the side of a small table? The head of a volcano spewing hot molten earth? A few more turns and twists, the form confirms that its adhered. I can’t shake it free. It resists, a stain that I almost didn’t detect. The package contains a pair of gloves, beige on one side and red satin on the other. The fingers are long and protrude twice the length of mine. Five taught, cylindrical pads (like mini pool-noodles) run lengthwise from the wrist down the fingers and thumb. When I put the gloves on with these pads on the palm of my hand, I feel firm, continuous pressure, dampening the contours of each surface I touch. I turn them over and the satin finish accentuates any textural divot. The package has a sheet of instructions. It is also a structure for improvisation. The third prompt reads: “Please open envelope (while still wearing gloves).” I pick up the envelope and try to run the tip of my finger along the edge of the seal. It slips... slips... slip slip slip slips. I sweat. The envelope remains closed. A choreographic score mobilized by its impossibility. I consider biting the envelope and tearing it with my teeth but the image of that violent edge stops me.*

### 3. encounter: a parasitic relation

---

<sup>4</sup> Found emphasis. Gérard Genette and Marie Maclean, “Introduction to the Paratext,” *New Literary History*, Vol. 2, No. 2, Probing: Art, Criticism, Genre (Spring, 1991), 261-272, 261.

Guttman's practice of visiting is preceded by an inquiring gesture. She asks for consent. Another's artwork or exhibition is approached like that of a friend's home, where a step through the door and into its chambers is predicated by congeniality and mutual trust. In his translator's preface to philosopher Michel Serres' text *The Parasite*, Lawrence R. Schehr notes the word *hôte* in French corresponds to both host and guest in English. Each word implies the meaning of the other, denoting active and passive engagement.<sup>5</sup> For Serres, the parasite includes its biological, social, and (in French) a static dimensions. The static aspect of the parasite is its role as an interrupter, an agent that uproots, shifts, "a break in a message" that leaves its marks across a semantic field.<sup>6</sup> Serres describes these roles across social and spatial landscapes: "The traveller, the homebody, the fixed and the moveable, client and hustler, here and there—city and country." In the space of convergence, the shadow intervenes to rewrite the script of the play.

Let's return to Guttman's proposal. How do we see the shadow's speed? Where is it housed (or homed)? *The shadow accelerates and becomes relation*. As shadow, the ground of this relationship is parasitic. It interrupts. The body interrupts and shares a new story. I'm reminded of a moment in an essay by Yup'ik choreographer Emily Johnson, when discussing the fullness of stories held in our bodies and the presence of embodied generational trauma. She asks, "I wonder if what our bodies know can become accessible enough to change pattern when needed? [...] Can others learn to respect this information, letting the stories and experiences held in our bodies be of good use to the world?"<sup>7</sup> Johnson's question is preceded by excerpts of journal writings, descriptive notes on improvisation dance practices while a visiting artist in residence in Northern California. In each note she shares the sensation of wooden floorboards underneath her in the studio and then imagines a richly different soil, ground, and terrestrial environment of her birth and current homes in Sterling, Alaska, and Minneapolis, Minnesota. A convergence of intimate places that are remembered and brought forth in/as artistic practice. Johnson's notes resonate alongside Guttman's somatic-political practice of visiting.

Guttman creates new pathways for approaching an artwork. She is moved by shadows— aesthetic, political, visceral, and literal. Her embodied practice of visiting could be thought through an active labor of reading what Paul Carter theorizes as "dark writing," namely the marks, blemishes, and contours underscoring colonial violence. "The assembly of shadows, the organization of optical phenomena that resist the light, the look of things that suggest a face, the depth of bodies that cannot be unconcealed – all of these fall under dark writing's jurisdiction. Like the ground, the meaning of dark writing cannot be excavated; it resides in the footstep, the leap and the instant between two strides."<sup>8</sup> In her correspondence with artists Sameer Farooq and Mirjam Linschooten about their exhibition *The Figure in the Carpet*, Guttman writes, "Thinking about the shadows artworks generate helps me interrogate the ethics of becoming a guest at the

---

<sup>5</sup> Michel Serres, *The Parasite* (London: John Hopkins University Press, 1982), 16.

<sup>6</sup> Michel Serres, *The Parasite* (London: John Hopkins University Press, 1982), 8.

<sup>7</sup> Emily Johnson, "The Stories in Our Bodies," in *The Sentient Archive: Bodies, Performance, and Memory*, Ed. Bill Bissell and Linda Caruso Haviland (Middleton: Wesleyan University Press, 2018), 113.

<sup>8</sup> Paul Carter, *Dark Writing: Geography, Performance, Design* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 2008), 1.

edge of a fellow artists work, how works might be indeterminately connected.” Shadows, in this case, both prolong the artwork and are prolonged by the movements of its witness.

#### 4. bodily interruptions

*A small cardboard box. Oblong, two perpendicular sides have small, punched holes. I look inside one of the holes and a blurry reflection appears before me of the room I'm sitting in. I try to make out the objects, edges of the walls, furniture. My eyes begin to focus the small frame of vision. I realize that the image is 90 degrees to my left. As I abruptly turn my head and the image jumps to my left. I slowly turn my head and filter across the horizon of the room. Each object is intimately familiar. Spatially skewed it shares with me an anachronistic position. It asks to be seen anew. Holding the periscope to my left eye my right eye tries to trace this periphery. I close it. I turn the device in a slow clockwise direction while looking through the lens and the room begins to revolve as if I'm performing a languid cartwheel. My body sits still and yet I imagine the motions of this cartwheel. My sight grazes across the close-up contours and colors of my own bod still seated. I'd lost myself. The movement stops with a quick arrest.*

In 2004 I began practicing the Five Eye Practices developed by dancer and choreographer Barbara Dilley. I'd recently returned to my home city after a three month residency abroad that revolved almost exclusively around a rigorous, endurance-based practice loosely described as “dancing with eyes closed.” Eight hours a day structured to unlearn, unravel, and retool my dancing self through this practice. At the end of the residency, my collaborator and I were invited to perform the culmination of choreographic research and we struggled with presenting process in the frame of a product. Our practice was adjacently inspired by the partner-based somatic practice of Authentic Movement, involving moving with one's eyes closed alongside active witnessing. Both practices effect turning one's vision inward and seeing through the reach of accompanying senses. In addition to Closed Eyes, Dilley's practices include Infant Eyes, Peripheral Seeing, Looking Between Things, and Direct Looking. One might spend time in each of these or engage multiple registers at once. For, “Even when we look directly at someone, we are checking things out at the ‘corners.’”<sup>9</sup> I continue to practice the Five Eye Practices and have come to realize that Peripheral Seeing is one of my favorites. As I settle into the edges of the visual field, my back body unfurls, and sensing takes on a new dimension. My body awakens with a new sense of invitation and connection when vision dwells in the edges of the ocular field. Peripheral seeing illuminates a mobius rhythm of relation between my body and the room where I sit and write.

*k.g.'s letter sits beside me. My eyes graze the paper's surface and land on a cluster of letters: “If you wouldn't mind thinking of yourself as one continuous shape—meaning how you are in the room and the room is in you.”*

---

<sup>9</sup> Barbara Dilley, *This Very Moment: Teaching, Thinking, Dancing* (Northampton: Contact Editions, 2020), 123-124.