



HOLD IT AGAINST ME

difficulty and emotion in contemporary art

JENNIFER DOYLE

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PREFACE

At the opening of *Mitchell's Death* (1978), Linda Montano's face appears on the screen as a ghostly blur just barely moving to the sound of her voice. That voice intones a monk-like chant. Montano is reciting the story of the death of her ex-husband from a gunshot wound. When her face comes into focus, we see that it is covered with acupuncture needles (fig. 1). Over the course of twenty-two minutes, Montano shares in a meditative drone the experience of absorbing the fact of Mitchell's death.¹ She takes us through the flow of events: the first phone call, then others, the turning of her mind to their relationship, the decision to fly to Kansas and attend the funeral. The performance is carved from the rhythm of the artist's breath as she pushes the story out and pauses for air. The story is sung with the same rhythm, in the same tone. She rehearses the cycles of thought and speech, the routines of grief. Finally, she describes being overcome by the need to see Mitchell's body, and touch it, to hold him. She sees him at the crematorium, touches his head, hands, and feet. As the story arcs from shock and grief to this scene, the image dissolves back into its ghostly blur.

Visually *Mitchell's Death* is restrained; we see only the artist's face, and it is immobilized. Montano's voice goes on and on; one's attention drifts and flows back. The story is a mantra; it feels as if it has been repeated so often



FIGURE 1. Linda Mary Montano, *Mitchell's Death*. 1978. Video (black and white, sound). Edited by David Wagner. From the archive and courtesy of Linda Mary Montano.

that its sequence is automatic for the speaker. Over the duration of the performance her voice is unwavering. The needles make her face a curiosity. It takes a little while to get used to the image. They tell us that there is a pain here that needs attention and that the artist performs this story as a healing ritual.

In spite of the difficulty of the image and the drone of her voice, Montano holds our attention. Her incantation radiates feeling as a strange hum. Addressing her decision to chant *Mitchell's Death*, she asks, "Don't singing words go to a more sensitive part of the brain than do spoken words?"² This might be true if only for the way her chanted delivery asks her audience to "tune in." To get it at all, you have to open and submit yourself to it.

Mitchell's Death is a difficult work in the sense meant by this book's subtitle. Its difficulty is inseparable from the emotions that the work produces. It is also woven into the form through which those feelings are produced. It is not a work one wants to watch. It has contradictory effects. On its surface it is conservative, offering only an image of the artist's face and the sound of her voice. At first glance, it looks and sounds boring. For those who commit to it, however, *Mitchell's Death* bodies forth the otherworldly texture of intense grief—that feeling of being removed from the world of the living, of feeling

like a ghost, of being numb with it, of being lulled by the sound of grief's rhythms. *Mitchell's Death* addresses too the toll grief takes on language—indeed on all expression. In the flow of events that Montano shares with us, in the things spoken over and over again by the artist in the hope that this will be the last time she needs to recite them—or as a way of keeping this experience of loss alive—Mitchell's death emerges as a black hole, an absence that organizes the space around it. When Montano's voice and image fade, they seem to recede into that void.

This book describes the process of learning how to write about work like *Mitchell's Death*, work that feels emotionally sincere or real and that produces a dense field of affect around it even as it seems to dismantle the mechanisms through which emotion is produced and consumed.³ The artists I work with turn to emotion because this is where ideology does its most devastating work. As Theodor Adorno once observed, “the supreme independence” that we experience as pure feeling, unadulterated passion or joy is “precisely the tool of society.”⁴ This is where we come to know the contours of our selves, our bodies, our sense of soul—and this zone is always under constant policing and negotiation. The artists that interest me turn to emotion, feelings, and affect as a means not of narcissistic escape but of social engagement.

Over the past decade, I've been trying to write about how these artists take on emotion, as subject and material, especially where such work requires an engaged form of spectatorship. For years I sat with the work of three artists in particular: Ron Athey, Carrie Mae Weems, and David Wojnarowicz. For a long time, I made little progress and was deeply frustrated by the trouble I had writing about the three works to which I was drawn: *Dissociative Sparkle*, *From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried*, and *Untitled (Hujar Dead)*. All three are rich with affect, but none can be described as expressive in any traditional sense (none, in other words, can be explained as a representation of how the artist feels). All three feel political, but *why* they do is complicated. They are unnerving, depressing, or upsetting; none offers the positive message one associates with political art, and they each (differently) reject the basic geometries of identity and politics that normally ground discussions of art, identity, and politics. They leave us in a strange space: like *Mitchell's Death*, each work pushes the spectator away and draws her in at the same time. And as hard as they are (in subject and in tone), all three are deeply moving (for some, including myself).

That very fact seemed to cause me to stall. My initial attempts to write

about these works felt hollow and forced or maudlin. Sometimes the affect of my own writing was at complete odds with the work, adding a level of pathos to something that was actually restrained, or hesitancy where a work was furious or melodramatic. The book began to find its focus only when I started to pay attention to the nature of the difficulty of writing about these works: in each of the works that I was drawn to, difficulty itself was an integral part of its emotional landscape.

Difficulty has long functioned as a keyword in poetics, music criticism, and, to a lesser extent, film studies. Technically, when a literary critic identifies a poem as difficult she makes no value judgment: the word is used to describe the poem's accessibility (not only in terms of comprehension but in terms of pleasure). "Poetic difficulty," writes John Vincent, "serves as a trace of drift or pulsion into the unmeaning, unknowable, and unspeakable. Much of the most exciting modern and contemporary poetry hovers at this edge, its lexical and affective power arising from unmappable, but somehow accessible, journeys out of and back into the known."⁵ A poem can be hard to understand—actively so—and still be very good and very moving. When we teach such works, we often begin discussion by asking students not "What does this poem mean?" but "What makes this poem hard to read?" and "Is it hard to understand, hard to enjoy—both?" The answers to these questions might be textual (a density of references), contextual (its rhetoric may seem strange to contemporary readers), narrative (characters with whom one can't relate), or interpretive (the work may in fact resist the effort to make sense of it).

Usually the critic's mandate is to resolve difficulty when we encounter it, to write as if that difficulty doesn't exist for us, even as we produce that difficulty as a noble, productive challenge, worth confronting and working through. Instead of erasing the labor of interpretation and instead of writing as if the critic's aim is to resolve difficulty, in *Queer Lyrics: Difficulty and Closure in American Poetry* Vincent imagines certain kinds of difficulties as deeply pleasurable and important, *especially* where they can't be resolved. Some of the decisions I make in this book were directly modeled after Vincent's writing about these kinds of difficulty and the readers who are drawn to them. *Queer Lyrics* extends and critiques George Steiner's essay "On Difficulty" (1978). Today Steiner's insights are a given in literary criticism. Understanding a poem, he argued, requires sensitivity to the ways that a reader encounters poetic interference or obstacles to understanding. The failure to get a poem is not always taken as the reader's fault but may signal a defining aspect of the work's poetic structure; difficulty may in fact be integral to the work's overall meaning. Steiner offers an analysis of four categories of poetic

difficulty: contingent (the challenge posed by what you happen to know or not know), modal (the challenge posed by works produced from within communities whose values and sensibilities are alien to yours, often by virtue of historical shifts in taste and canonicity), tactical (the challenge created by the author who wants you to work to resolve the work's meaning), and ontological (the challenge of works that call into question the very nature of poetic expression). Steiner's categories are useful and provocative rubrics for thinking about difficulty within visual culture (and I discuss them substantially in the notes).⁶ But they are not as important to this book as is the place from which Steiner begins: the reader. His typology requires the reader and that reader's desire to make sense of the poem. His essay was part of a movement in literary studies toward understanding the literary text as dependent upon the context of our encounters with it.⁷ If I've consigned discussion of Steiner's categories to a long note, it is to make room in this preface for the reader.

Steiner's reader is a remarkably abstract and depersonalized figure. As Vincent rightly observes, his reader is looking for the same thing (understanding), seeking the same pleasures (of knowing), and reading for the same reasons (a sense of mastery over the text). "Steiner celebrates the extreme edge of sense making, but decries and disregards nonsense making. His typology . . . holds when a reader's only desire is the desire for sense, elastically defined but referencing a fantasy of sheer lucidity."⁸ The forms of difficulty addressed by Steiner all revolve around the frustration of the desire to understand, and they are ultimately solvable. Vincent asks, "What about other kinds of readers?" Is it possible to imagine readers who *don't* want closure, whose reading practices are not fueled by a penetrative, epistemic drive, moving always toward "deeper" levels of meaning? What about the "perverse" reader who takes pleasure in those aspects of a poem that frustrate, that don't fall in line, *ever*. What about the reader who enjoys the surface of writing? This reader is more attached to what Roland Barthes called "the pleasures of the text" (the fluid creation which is always unfolding in the act of reading) than in reaching any definitive meaning that would bring such a process to a conclusion.⁹

Vincent works with an expanded sense of difficulty; he even makes room in his practice for difficult people, such as the poet Jack Spicer, who drank too much and hated the "poetry establishment" and generally made it very hard to write about his work. He gives us a way to think about such artists without apologizing for their refusal to cooperate with disciplining mechanisms, placing the poet's failures at the center of an ethics of radical refusal. Vincent furthermore takes a strong stand against Steiner's "project of cataloging difficulty." That typology, however provisional, "disregards the fundamentally constitutive

vastness and variety of interpretive communities and readerly desires.”¹⁰ Maintaining his commitment to the fluid complexity of some forms of difficulty, Vincent decides against packaging his insights into the writing of Spicer, Marianne Moore, and John Ashbery as an accumulation of discrete categories.

Vincent’s approach to poetic difficulty leads the way for us, as art critics, to ask what people want from works like *Mitchell’s Death* but also indicates the care one must take in order to avoid simplifying difficulty.¹¹ My aim is not to produce a reader who can point and declare, “The difficulty of this performance belongs to category 4.” Nor will this book tell the reader how to identify specific emotions as they appear in works of art. I hesitate to add more negative promises regarding what this book *won’t* do, but I also avoid naming, once and for all, the difference between an affect, an emotion, and a feeling. I am not convinced that art defined by its work with affect, emotion, or feeling can be appreciated using a critical language that presumes (even provisionally) that feelings are self-evident, that emotions can be parsed and catalogued, produced and consumed at will. In any case, mastery over the terms *difficulty*, *emotion*, and *affect* won’t lead to a better understanding of the individual works I discuss here. Each takes us to a different place, where emotion is a site of unraveling and dispossession. This book uses the terms *difficulty* and *emotion* in order to take up the questions of who is being dispossessed of what, who is being unraveled, how and why.

One of the most significant forms of unraveling addressed by this book is that of the art controversy. We will spend time with the work of three people who have appeared in news headlines as scandalous examples of what artists get away with (Aliza Shvarts, Ron Athey, and David Wojnarowicz). In these cases, their work was presented as universally shocking—not because it is emotionally intense but because the subjects of their works are so politically charged. Art controversy invariably simplifies its object. The announcement that an artwork has become controversial is a promise that we will not be given the chance to talk about its difficulty; discussion of the work will be organized by the controversy it provoked and not by a need to come to grips with the work itself—even as that difficulty may well be the very thing that moved people to outrage.

Work marked as controversial is oversimplified and marginalized not only by journalists and politicians but also by scholars and critics. It is troubling that in the long wake of the culture wars of the late 1980s and early 1990s, we have rarely attempted to explain such work. Even those of us who defend it often do so at the cost of actually confronting the work itself: we tend to defend controversial work by asserting what it is *not*, what it does not do. To



FIGURE 2. Electronic Disturbance Theater / b.a.n.g.lab (Ricardo Domínguez, Brett Stalbaum, Micha Cárdenas, Amy Carroll, and José Najarro), *Transborder Immigrant Tool*. 2011. Courtesy of Electronic Disturbance Theater 2.0 / b.a.n.g.lab.

cite cases I address in this book: responding to the scandal of Aliza Shvarts's performance in 2008, in which she artificially inseminated herself, the few critics who defended her explained that she did not give herself abortions, as was asserted by conservative pundits. In defending the artist against headline accusations, critics and scholars have explained that in *Four Scenes in a Harsh Life* Ron Athey did not expose his audiences to HIV-infected blood, as was asserted by myriad newspapers and by the Republican senator Jesse Helms in his assault on the National Endowment for the Arts in 1994. Art historians and critics have explained that David Wojnarowicz's work is not the pornography the American Family Association represented it to be in 1990. (The artist himself won a lawsuit against the AFA for misrepresenting his work in a pamphlet.) We have more recently defended his anti-Catholic diatribes by asserting the artist's spirituality.¹²

Apologies and denials like this are at best weak defenses of these projects, and in some cases they are complete disavowals of the work's politics. Take, for example, the accusation that Ricardo Dominguez and his b.a.n.g.lab collective produced an artwork designed to help people to cross the Mexico-U.S. border (*Transborder Immigrant Tool*; fig. 2). Those of us defending the project often did so by explaining that the accusation was unfounded and that Dominguez is not a migrant-smuggling "coyote." The artists themselves, however, present *Transborder Immigrant Tool* as a working mobile phone ap-

plication designed to map water sources for those crossing the border. Ignoring their assertions of its practical application with the apology “It’s only art” is not a defense of the work: it is a bad faith capitulation to its critics. The work of defending artists against accusations launched by people who hate the idea of the work (or of the queer, feminist, antiracist, migrant artist) has derailed us into declaring that their work has no real-world impact. Most of our defenses of these practices minimize the challenge of these works and the anger that the work can provoke. But we’ve been shown again and again that this kind of response to the discourse of controversy does nothing to quell scandal, to calm the nerves of extremists and reactionary politicians. If anything, we bare our throats with the exclamation “But it’s only art.” I can think of no more effective argument for privatizing the arts than the assertion that an artist never meant to make a difference.

Although b.a.n.g.lab’s work is clearly pitched at an anti-immigrant public sphere, shocking conservatives is not the work’s aim, nor is it the aim of any of the works discussed in this book. *Four Scenes in a Harsh Life* is about power and desire, pain and pleasure. It has the blood-and-flesh poetics of art practiced in the shadow of the AIDS pandemic. Although the actual performance was misrepresented in the phobic press, the fears spoken by Athey’s critics tap into something quite real about his work. Athey’s performances are intense not only for those uneasy with the sight (and smell) of blood. They sometimes hover over intensely masochistic scenes and foreground the unnerving intimacy of aggression and desire. And his audiences are drawn to that. Shvarts’s untitled project depends on and exploits the deep stigmatization of abortion in even liberal discourse. The artist deliberately left open the possibility that she may have interrupted a pregnancy in her action. How people have responded to the idea of this possibility is a part of the work. In the wake of recent attempts in the United States to defund Planned Parenthood and expand the criminalization of abortion, this aspect of her project has only become more relevant, more politically loaded. Wojnarowicz’s work is explicitly concerned with desire, love, and intimacy between men. It is frank in its depictions of a sexual life, and he sometimes used gay pornography as source material. He was quite clear about his hatred for the Catholic Church and suspicious too of institutional discourse on spirituality. (As he put it himself, “I have about as much spirituality as a humpback toad.”)¹³ Given its prohibition of condom use, one would have trouble arguing against his characterization of the Catholic Church’s policies as murderous. Many of the Catholic icons that appear in Wojnarowicz’s work are there to signal Church hypocrisy, to question the destruction of spirituality by institutionalized re-

ligion, and also to tap into the queer underbelly of Catholic iconography. He worked with images of violence and suffering lifted from the lives of saints, the same archive used by Athey and other queer artists, from Caravaggio to Jean Genet and Pier Paolo Pasolini. Before we can argue successfully for the necessity of work that pushes most people past their comfort zones, we need to acknowledge what that work actually *does*. We need to tune in to how they do this and absorb their methods. That is the lesson I learned from Linda Montano. If we want to hear what this work is about, we need to listen to it more carefully and allow ourselves to be moved.

This book places controversial works into an expanded conversation about difficulty, emotion, and identity. There is already room in the art world for acknowledging that certain forms of difficulty are good for us: the illegibility of nonfigurative and nonrepresentational work; the austerity of abstraction and minimalism; the rigor of institution critique. There is a lot of language out there celebrating the silence of John Cage, the sparseness of Donald Judd. The difficulty of a work of art that withholds, that turns its back on the spectator, that eliminates sentiment and romance is so fully absorbed into the sociology of contemporary art that for the fully initiated such works don't feel very hard at all. The difficulty under examination here is quite different: it turns to the viewer, in some cases making him or her into a witness, or even a participant.¹⁴ This can make people uncomfortable in ways that feel distinctly personal.

Finally, a few more words about the structure and content of this book: its arguments unfold cyclically and cumulatively. Its chapters explore the idea of difficulty, ideologies of emotion, and how emotion circulates in and around art in flows that are directed by histories that are simultaneously personal and political. The tone and pace of this book shifts. Readings of individual artworks reflect their affective pitch. The book's opening chapter examines the project's central terms and revolves around an analysis of my own resistance to the idea of *Held*, a one-on-one performance by Adrian Howells. This chapter is followed by three studies of works that offer different roads into a conversation about difficulty and emotion: Aliza Shvarts's *Untitled*, Thomas Eakins's *The Gross Clinic*, and Ron Athey's *Dissociative Sparkle*. Four additional works form the backbone of chapters 3 and 4 and their discussion of the relationship between emotion, identity, and politics: Franko B's *I Miss You*, Nao Bustamante's *Neapolitan*, James Luna's *History of the Luiseño People*, and Carrie Mae Weems's *From Here I Saw What Happened and I Cried*. The

affective economy of these works differs significantly from the works in chapter 2: all four are much more explicitly about emotion, but as we move from Franko B to Weems, those emotions will be put under increasing pressure and into more and more overdetermined environments. In these two chapters I regularly step back from discussion of these specific works in order to consider why contemporary art criticism has such a strange attitude regarding work like this, and then develop my points regarding difficulty and emotion, the relationship of emotion to identity, and the way discourses of emotion, identity, and history come together.

Thinking about emotion and art requires thinking about the nature of expression. It also requires thinking about identity as a thing produced through (and dissolved in) emotion. The deeper we get into this subject, the closer we get to issues at the core of art history and the challenge of acknowledging a broader spectrum of viewers, seeking a wider range of experiences than those recognized by traditional articulations of that discipline. The term *history* comes under unique pressure here, especially in Luna's and Weems's works and in the book's concluding discussion of Wojnarowicz's *Untitled (Hujar Dead)*.

My bibliography is strongly informed by other fields: film criticism, feminist philosophy, queer and critical theory, literary and cultural studies. I have tried to write this for the nonacademic reader interested in contemporary art, by which I mean the reader who is not fully saturated with art criticism and theory. For this reason (with a few exceptions) I have moved many of the book's most obviously academic points to notes. The tone and structure of this book closely resembles how I teach this material. Recognizing that the material itself is hard, in the classroom I usually take a soft approach. I give more time to individual works with a dense and what I call "noisy" affective field, encouraging a nonjudgmental attitude in my students as they look at work that challenges their ideas about what art is, as well as their ideas about fundamental social issues. (Nearly all of the work discussed in this book does both.) As a teacher, I also advocate for a rigorous but also generous classroom environment, in which students can ask questions without fear of seeming ignorant or naïve. Expecting students to be familiar with sadomasochistic performance, for example, is both impractical and wrongheaded.

It turns out, however, that some of our students are far more receptive to this work than the average art critic. I've found these supposedly noncosmopolitan students to be open-minded and eager to make connections to the emotional intensity of Wojnarowicz or the political complexity of Weems

and especially the music they listen to (which, in the Inland Empire, is a lot of rap, punk, and heavy metal). That contrast—between the interest and openness of some of our students and the jaded disaffection of much art criticism—led me to put terms like *emotion* and *sincerity* at the heart of this book. To insist on them. They may operate in critical parlance as synonyms for the naïve and the simple, but they are the very things that make these works difficult, complicated, hard to talk about, and worth the effort.

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