

Touch: in Memoriam

Siebre Versteeg's *In%20Memory* presents a virtual exhibition as an emailed checklist linking directly to a new collection of separate and, sometimes, disparate online works. There is neither autoscroll nor the "next" button found in all too many virtual viewing rooms. Rather, each piece in the show stands as a kind of portal, chapter, and reflection on months spent in quarantine in New York City and upstate in Woodstock. The works include algorithmically generated "paintings", a meditative video of toilet paper, a live webcam feed of a miniature sculpture, and a ready-made stuffed monster reading a game book from Dungeons & Dragons. Taken together, they connect to form a fragmented elegy, an abstract and all-encompassing lament for our contemporary circumstance.

1. Painting

In *The Sleep Chamber* (2020), Google's half-billion pixel scan of Van Gogh's *The Bedroom* (1889), is reimagined in a gallery context as an enormous photograph of the original work (think Gursky or Ruff). At this scale, viewers are encouraged not to interrogate the work's content from afar, but to zoom in, crawl around and occupy the painting's craggy multifarious surface from the small window of a computer screen. Scan to the chair by the side of the bed and what was once empty is now filled by the crude portal of shared quarantine space, a laptop; its screen blank with the textured weave of unprimed canvas. In this, as many of the works in the exhibition, the hand of the artist is at once restored and depleted. Versteeg points out that above all else, modernism remains a belief system predicated on touch.¹

The tactile order of modernism, the ability for the eye to glean and receive "touch" through the gesture of brushstroke is both celebrated and mocked even more in Versteeg's algorithmic "painting" works. *Intercourse* (2020), mimics the sweeping marks of an abstract work, melding what appear to be layers of brightly colored paint. Zoom in close enough and, not unlike Google's high-resolution rendering, the softly pebbled texture of caressed canvas appears. *Haunting the Chapel* (2020), another algorithmic 'painting', reveals itself more immediately as a mirage. From a distance, the work appears as a series of large monochromatic strokes, some thin and washy, others more built up. Scroll into the details and the surface emerges non-existent, as thin as the screen it appears on.

2. Memorial

It is impossible to touch these works. One, because, at least for now, they exist only on your computer, and two, they exist on your computer because it is dangerous to visit art galleries (also three, we usually aren't invited to touch works of art). While this exhibition reaches for a physically embodied experience--we can "zoom" in and see the details of the work as if we were standing close--it is also a constant reminder of our new distance. Thus, we find an almost sentimental homage to viewing art in a gallery among friends. A memorial to the art world we once knew.

Of course, that would assume that we all lived in the same art world, and shared the same experiences. And Versteeg is far from an essentialist. Instead, as in the work *Possible Living People* (2020), he is consumed with the provisional and is deeply skeptical of accepted truths. The "memorial" takes the Wikipedia category of people who may or may not be alive as its content. A viewer reads the list of names, placed on the wall in vinyl. To the right is the Wikipedia definition: "It is not definitively known whether these people are living or not." Versteeg interrogates the limits of the internet via a factual database of uncertainty. Or as he describes it, "The more you know, the more you don't know."²

Other works can be viewed as more abstracted memorials--remembrances of our pre-Covid19 lives or homages to months spent mostly inside. *Curtain* (2020), a video depicting three rows of toilet paper layered on top of one another is inspired by a similar installation of hanging toilet paper rolls in the bathroom at Old Stanley's, a bar in Bushwick. "Whenever I've been there," Versteeg explains, "I unroll them enough so that each roll caresses the one beneath." *Sweepings* (2020) is a photographic diptych, taken from above, of the debris picked up by Versteeg's domestic broom. To the right is the tripod, the left Versteeg's foot, a simultaneous act of looking down. Zoom in and the mess becomes a tangle of the infinitesimal of daily life -- bits of food, dust, small plastic scraps. Look closely enough and find a dead spider.

To touch is to also to be touched, it is a reciprocal physical act. Works of art can also be *touching*, and move us to feeling. In 2004 I showed the live computer work *Being Here* (2003) at the Ulrich Museum of Art. I went into the gallery every day and watched the run up to the re-election of President Bush. It was a devastating time in America. In *Being Here*, Versteeg sits frozen in time, in a waiting room watching a live stream of CNN news in real-time, ad-infinitum. An ominous, generative piano soundtrack plays over the scene which, at random intervals, changes to depict the current date and time, a nod both to On Kawara's daily depiction of the date and to Kubrick's *The Shining*. Versteeg's image is reflected in the TV, appearing continuously slack jawed, a cigarette burning in his hand, at times blinking suspended by the ongoing events of a 24 hour news cycle.

It is no surprise during this fraught political climate that Versteeg has chosen to resurrect and rework this piece which so firmly places the viewer in this excruciating moment, minute by minute. It is also telling that our belief in common truths, of maybe any belief system at all, is so thoroughly eroded in our current mediated environment. Live news is as much a provisional memorial as anything else. Take for instance, the CNN sign in Atlanta, covered with graffiti by Black Lives Matter protesters earlier this summer; one of the most touching works of art I've seen.

3. Boîte-en-valise

Marcel Duchamp created a portable museum in *La Boîte-en-valise*, a miniature exhibition of his most well-known works tightly arranged in a suitcase. He created the replicas while displaced by the Nazi occupation in 1940, just prior to escaping to New York. The box is a kind of inversion of Duchamp's early interventions into the "neutral" gallery space and the deskilling inherent to the readymade. T.J. Demos in his study on the work explains, "The *Boîte*, mimicking the museum, transforms the *readymade* into *sculpture* and then into a *reproduction*, internalizing the institutional fate of the avant-garde."³

Marcel Duchamp, sequestered away from his home, replicated the structure he originally sought to critique (perhaps even he longed for the old ways--museum lighting, pedestals, labels, bad wine). And he did it all by hand, even re-creating scaled down readymades, a tiny upside down urinal. Here, Duchamp not only revels in the function of display, but also the very craftsmanship of making an object. In much the same way, Versteeg, at his computer, in his apartment, labored over these works, creating replicas of touch in a gallery exhibition we can only imagine visiting.

Versteeg's *Memorial (self lighting)* (2020) presents a webcam feed of a tiny handmade NYPD light trailer which sits on the bedroom windowsill in his cabin in Woodstock. Through the re-creation in miniature and then broadcasting of that object's live image over the web, the urban visage is doubly displaced, revealing a fragile and tenuous circumstance of presence. The work was inspired by a similar life-sized installation in Morningside Park that, up until recently, was illuminated each night occupying the site of the tragic December murder of Barnard student, Tessa Majors. Versteeg's interest in depicting this tower of light evolved and transposed over this past summer's

months into a vigil for George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery. A humble, yet foreboding reminder of the continuous violence against Black people that is sanctioned by one of our most insidious institutions.

While entrenched in the acute despair we have endured these past six months, I'd like to offer the seemingly self-help titled *To Do The Work You're Doing With You* (2020) as a hopeful last touchstone. The piece is simple yet perplexing. A scrap piece of wood is held up by two nails and another scrap piece of wood set at an angle. At the top, the wood flattens as if it is morphing into a section of felt, nailed to the gallery wall behind it. It's an impossible image, it doesn't make any perceptual sense. And yet, that small propping up of the wood points to a basic structure, one which we must dismantle and then rebuild.

I asked Versteeg to explain this work in no less than four emails, of which he never responded directly. When asked about the meaning behind his *Boîte*, Duchamp was equally evasive, "I don't really know, as a matter of fact...it was all done without any very clear idea in mind."⁴ Which is to say, we cannot always articulate what we feel.

-- Katie Geha 2020

1. My thinking on modernism and touch is indebted to the work of art historian Richard Shiff. See Richard Shiff, "Constructing Physicality," *Art Journal* no. 1 (Spring, 1991).
2. Email exchange with the artist, January 11, 2019.
3. T.J.. Demos, "Boîte-en-valise: Between Institutional Acculturation and Geopolitical Displacement," *Grey Room*, no. 8 (Summer, 2002), 14. Author's italics.
4. T.J. Demos, "Boîte-en-valise," 31, as quoted from Alain Jouffroy, *Une Révolution du regard: À propos de quelques et sculpture contemporaine* (Paris: Galimard, 1964), 119.