

By Becky Beasley & Anna Gritz

What person? I need an outline.

Some years ago, someone came up to me at an opening and said that they had thought I was a man, by my work. I didn't know what they meant, but I liked that there was some confusion. Hello, person. As a child they called me sweet, shy, creative, smart, sensitive, too sensitive, a tomboy sometimes, a smarty-pants, a know-it-all. They said I'd need to toughen up, to thicken up my skin, not to take things so personally, to relax, to cheer up, to pray, to meditate, to take more drugs, to drink less, to be more grateful, to speak up, to shut up. As a teen and in my twenties, they said I was an odd ball, a bit weird, unusual. I was also called unstable, needy, obsessive, demanding, intense, scheming, a monster, a witch. I learnt about the terms weathering, tone policing and gas lighting in 2020 when I was studying structural racism so I could be a better person. Oh, I thought, that's what that is.

The severity of some consequences can take us by surprise, as Rita Valencia's protagonist learns the hard way in her short story, "*Indecency*" (1992). She knew right away that something irreversible had occurred when she accidentally uses the word "bag" in place of the word "back," an error that she calls "a leak of rotten soul juice," a carelessness that condemns her to live her slip of the tongue. "Bag—back—back—bag. It was impossible to escape the unbearable significance of the transposition. My back would henceforth be a bag." A hollow container, with no shape of its own, but easily malleable by the contours of its load. A back bag cluttered by the disarray that is caused by the lack of a spine. Left with a weak, thin, malleable, leaking receptacle in place of what had provided her with strength and support – burden had become her backbone.¹

¹ Valencia, Rita: "Indecency," in Helter Skelter: *L.A. Art in the 1990s*, Catherine Gudis, ed. (Los Angeles, CA: The Museum of Contemporary Art, 1992), p. 153.

after I had just given birth, carrying a heavy shapeless and stretched out void that had once contained you. Dutifully, I immediately started to pencil in G.'s sweater, copying every detail, even the letters on it that zealously spell out "WORK OUT". G. went about it quite differently; she taped a bunch of playing cards and leaves that we had just collected to where the outline had left her face and her hands blank. Like a bizarre mask, the leaves and cards completely obscured her face and grew like a feather dress out of her sleeves. I was both enamoured and disturbed by her leafy, monstrous disguise. Was this how she saw herself or what she might want to be?

When I enter the room, I know I am invisible. I am over here, I murmur. I'm back here! I know it's easy not to speak to me because you don't experience me as a person. You don't know what I am. *What person?*, you say, *I need an outline*. I smile, and say *'Yes, of course, I know, it's hard. Just try harder.'*

Adrian Piper's early 1970's *Catalysis* performances - *in which (she) saturated a set of clothing in a mixture of vinegar, eggs, milk and cod liver oil for a week, then wore them on the D train during evening rush hour, then while browsing in the Marlboro bookstore on Saturday night* - presented a play of claiming space by testing out the boundaries of her own person, and what was socially acceptable, by establishing presences that made the tension and awkwardness that is often felt in social interactions in public space (foremost for people that do not belong to the dominant demographic) tangible. Unannounced as art events even to herself, they took on the shape of something in between a performance, a social experiment, and an ongoing practice. Simply holding someone's gaze while occupying space in this manner triggered some severe personality changes in Piper. Violating her body, turning it monstrous, odd, and abject in public allowed her to render herself an object.

At Opening nights over all the years, as people approached one after the other, I thought, *'I'm going to die'*. I kept smiling and said, *'Thank you for coming'*. I really meant it.

You can't cut that, it's not yours. It is mine. I bought it. Who made it? Christopher Williams. Why do you want to cut it up? It's too big. I couldn't afford to frame it in one piece. Then I couldn't afford to frame it in four pieces. Now it is part of the show. I like it best like this, not mine, in four pieces, inside a table, under my small sculptures, in a room, with other people around it, people I don't know. This is ideal now.

Wanda the wanderer. She is often lost in the frame, hard to keep track of, not the personality, not the material that can easily be captured by the frame or hold the attention of the lens. We tend to find her only after the shot has been established, almost part of the backdrop, the context. A woman drifting, abandoning her parental and marital duties, and doing so is no longer legible to society. Doomed to become an outlaw, living aside from society, not transparent, but described by negative space, handing herself over to the will of others.²

What did we need, to be called needy? What did we ask for, to be called demanding? What did we know, to be called witches? What was so enormous in us, to be called monstrous? How do we fall so fast? How is there no credit? I tried to not ask too many questions. What did you do to this sweet, shy, kind, sensitive child? You told her to drink like a lad and fuck like a man, to have no needs and to make no demands. So, she complied. When she died in pain of breast cancer at 48, she was crying, "Shit, shit, shit."³

Her limited grasp on the space that shapes Wanda's surrounding becomes a physical challenge that leaves her consistently threatened to escape the margins of the frame and the camera makes a show of the struggle to keep her in view. How do we establish ourselves against the background or alongside it?

² Wanda, Barbara Lodon (1970) film; see also Anna Backman Rogers, *Still Life: Notes on Barbara Loden's "Wanda" (1970)*, Punctum Books (Imprint: Dead Letter Office), 2021

³ Kazan, Elia, *A Life*, Alfred Knopf, New York, 1988, pp793

As Piper recollected in an interview with Lucy Lippard, "*Initially, it was really hard to look people in the eye. I simply couldn't overcome the sense that if I was going to keep my own composure and maintain my own identity, it was just impossible. I would have to pretend that they weren't there, even though I needed them. Then something really weird happened; it doesn't happen all the time. Something I really like. It is almost as if I manage to make contact in spite of how I look, in spite of what I'm doing.*"

I have always been quite quirky, queer, quer is the Germanic root. I am odd, oblique, off-centre. As I said, quirky. It turns out - could you even believe it? - I am actually autistic. Oh, and progesterone intolerant.

A Slight Nausea is what you called it. I thought I knew what you meant back then, identified that sensation as an internal...well, a physical reaction to a space, the authority of a construct in which to work, with which to work, while not being able to play according to the rules. Rules that appear to stem from another game. Yet it was so much more. It was Mollino, it was you. When you told me about your plan you quote Joseph Joubert's diaries, "*When?*, you say. *I answer: When I Have Circumscribed My Sphere.*" Quer. Neither vertical, nor horizontal, both aerial and panoramic. Demanding two perspectives to be inhabited simultaneously, maybe also two biographies.

On the opening night of *Opening Night* in 1977, Gena Rowlands went mad with joy. They said, *What a performance! Look at her. She's crazy.* She thought, *'Yes, you're all right. I have known joy and we are all of this. Everything is so tender now'*. She smiled and said, *'Thank you all for coming. We are all so sensitive, aren't we'*.

Christopher Williams just replied to my letter. He's into it and wants to send me a different print so I don't have to cut mine up. It's not the print from the edition. It's another image. I had already cut mine by the time he replied. My gallerist texted me to let me know. Did you cut yours already? she wrote. Yes, I replied, I cut mine already.

Film director, Barbara Lodon came across Alma Malone's story in a newspaper article that described her as an accomplice to a bank robbery, who upon sentencing thanked the judge for sending her away for 20 years. In his autobiography Elia Kazan reported that Lodon died in a lot of pain - from breast cancer at the age of 48 - crying "shit, shit, shit!"⁴

I did my best for the art labour pay movement and asked several times during 'negotiations' for a five grand fee but he kept saying, *'No, Becky, you can maybe have four.'* So, in the end I said, *'Thank you.'*

Chantal Akerman, *La Chambre* (1970): A loop, once around the room, she is lying in her bed looking at the camera, the act of filming becomes the act of holding the gaze while resting. Lazy artist, lazy woman. *Portrait d'une Paresseuse* (1986), the portrait of a lazy woman. Again, the artist is in bed. "I'll get up in a minute" she lets us know. "Get up, lazy one. Get up, get dressed." The time is both 12:12 and 5 pm. "I will have a cigarette, then I will make the bed." Or not.

When I entered the room, I felt dizzy, disoriented, nauseous, already exhausted. Then someone asked me a question and I thought, *I'm going to collapse*. I smiled and said *'Yes, thank you. Of course, that's fine.'*

Yesterday, G. and I played this game where you lay down on a large piece of paper and draw around the outer border of the other's body. We then hung G.'s lumpy and empty body outline up on the wall to fill it in with markers. The silhouette reminded me of how I felt

⁴ Ibid.

"*H. S. P. (or Promising Mid-Career Woman)*" is a coming-out exhibition by mid-career British artist Becky Beasley. *H. S. P.* expresses the joys and complexities of an entirely autistic life understood only in retrospect. Through the sensitivities of photographic, ceramic, and linen surfaces, the three centrepieces of *H. S. P.* are installations through which the paradoxes of the human need for intimacy manifest in alternatives that have become Beasley's trademark minimal approach to art making. How to live, how to speak, how to be together, how to be alone.

H. S. P. is a lyric to sensitive surfaces and to the highly individual process of being a person in the world. The insistence of being is expressed in the repetitively reverse-printed negative - something often previously present in Beasley's practice - but here expressed clearly and insistently across the exhibition. BACK!, she insists. BACK! BACK! BACK! BACK! BACK! BACK!

Becky Beasley (b. 1975, UK) is a mid-career artist who has participated in numerous international exhibitions, among them 80WSE Gallery (NYU, New York; Townner Gallery, Eastbourne; South London Gallery, London; Leeds City Gallery, Leeds; Spike Island, Bristol; Serpentine Gallery Pavilion, London; Tate Britain, London; Stanley Picker Gallery, London; Whitworth, Manchester; Bluecoat, Liverpool; Walker Art Gallery, Liverpool; Whitechapel Gallery, London; Kunstverein Freiburg; Kunstverein Munich; Kunsthalle Bern. She received a Paul Hamlyn Award in 2018.

Anna Gritz is a curator at KW Institute for Contemporary Art in Berlin, where she has realized solo exhibitions by Judith Hopf, Lynn Hershman Leeson, Steve Bishop, Amelie von Wulffen, and Michael Stevenson, as well as group exhibitions including *The Making of Husbands: Christina Ramberg in Dialogue and Zeros and Ones* (co-curated with Kathrin Bentele and Ghislaine Leung). Previously she held curatorial positions at the South London Gallery (SLG), the Institute of Contemporary Arts (ICA) and the Hayward Gallery, both in London. Gritz writes for catalogues and regularly contributes to art publications. She served as a curatorial attaché for the 20th Biennale of Sydney in 2016, and since 2019, she has been a member of the acquisitions committee at the FRAC Lorraine in Metz.

Becky Beasley

H. S. P.

(or Promising Mid-Career Woman)

Opening 27 November, 12 – 19 h

November 27, 2021 – February 5, 2022
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1796 Models, there are no more models.

1797 We do not write our books in advance, we do them as we write them. What is best about our work is hidden by scaffoldings: our texts are filled with what must be kept and what must be left behind.

1797 'Yes, please cut up the pieces for me,' he said, 'but don't chew them.'

1798 To be in one's place, to be at one's post, to be part of the order, to be content.

1800 When? you say. I answer you: -
When I have circumscribed my sphere.

1800 In our writings thought seems to move like a man who is walking straight ahead. On the other hand, in the writings of the ancients, thought seems to move like a bird that glides and advances by turning round and round.

1798 When children ask for an explanation, and we give it to them and they do not understand, they are still satisfied, and their minds have been put at rest. And yet what have they learned? They have learned that what they no longer wish not to know is very difficult to know, and in itself this is a kind of knowledge. They wait, they are patient, and with reason.

1798 Every body is no more than a film (I speak of bodies that move and that have a soul in them). All depth is only a point. All weight is the weight of a straw, a particle of feather...even less.