

## FrameWork 9/23/1

### Anna Daliza on Jeremy Laing

In the first known version of an unreleased song called *My Forever* by SOPHIE, the lyric, “Everybody’s got to own their body” repeats endlessly on top of a pulsing bass and ethereal synth rising with momentum, until the words lose their meaning, or transcend it. This phenomenon, when a word or phrase is repeated so many times its sound is divorced from its meaning, is called semantic satiation. Quite literally, the *uncreation* of meaning.

The first time I heard the lyric, “Everybody’s got to own their body,” reverberating from giant speakers into a cavernous warehouse, filled with dancing bodies, I sensed celebration behind the words. The song was beckoning us to live, to be expressive and present in our bodies, to experience all the possible pleasures of the human form. As the song went on, the initial ecstasy drained from the lyric, and the meaning became ambiguous. What does it mean to own one’s body? How and why are we meant to own it? And what or who dictates that we’ve “got to?” As the lyric persisted, even these questions faded, the meaning of the words was lost, but their sound still animated the dancing shadows around me.

Another song by SOPHIE called *Reduce Me To Nothingness*, is about the disintegration of the physical self. These songs and others in her small but affecting discography, respond to the problem of the external-self as a physical representation of the internal-self.

I was confronted by the problem upon viewing Jeremy Laing’s *Mirror-vase.jpg*, an installation of sculptures, weavings, and infrastructural modifications, using original wheel-thrown ceramic vases, and reflective surfaces, including, but not limited to mirrors. The mirror and vase, repeated across sculptures varying in complexity, materiality, and scale, create an immediate sense of opposition between the object and its reflection. The artist uses these symbols, mirror and vase, to postulate the role of the self and *l’autrui*, a French word meaning everyone else, the others not including ourselves. The titles of the sculptures hold clues to the artist’s research, referencing different questions of personification and perception.



One work, titled *Centering*, a glazed wheel-thrown ceramic vessel, an upholstery piping cord woven through it, sitting atop a sculptor’s wheel, in both form and title refers to a concept developed by M. C. Richards in her book *Centering: in Poetry, Pottery and the Person*. The concept illustrates a parallel between the making of wheel-thrown vessels and the social processes that transform us into the beings that we are. The creation of a vase from a piece of clay involves opposing forces of internal and external pressures. The artist’s hands, gestures, apply pressure in combination with the wheel, a centrifugal force, pushing out from the inside, to create shape. In this process of creation, the exterior form and interior

volume are related as cause and effect; this part is tapered, and as a result, this part bulges out, this part is hollowed, so this part thickens. The finished vessel holds within it a void which the artist describes as “a content that is the shaping of itself.”



Jeremy Laing alludes to other processes of transformation via external adornment. In *Good/Bad Boy/Girl (For the Lovers)* a wheel-spun ceramic vase appears warped, having been cinched using the artist’s spiked leather choker. The part of the title in parentheses refers to the eponymous queer rave organized by Jeremy Laing in collaboration with DJs and other party-organizers. *For the Lovers* creates a singular ambiance, where varying extremes of self-expression in the form of spiked leather chokers, *et cetera*, are not only accepted but encouraged. Whereas, the first part of the title refers to the shift from dog collar to fetish accessory, from restraint to abandon in restraint; Good boy, bad girl, and vice

versa are ways one might refer to either one’s dog or one’s lover. A spiked collar worn together with a frilly pink negligée to a party like *For the Lovers*, is as far removed from its original context as imagination allows. In the gallery, it’s once more removed from its context. This work evokes the endless reinterpretations of objects, thus the slipperiness of meaning.



Other works in *Mirror-vase.jpg* point to the artist’s application of Charles S. Peirce’s semiotic theories, which speak to the lack of absolute meaning or value. *Contained (container)*, possibly refers to semiotic terms Signified and Signifier. As defined by Peirce, the signifier refers to any material thing that *signifies*, like a word, a facial expression, an image. The signified is the concept that the signifier *refers-to*. This sculpture playfully combines two vastly different devices of containment, a vase and a belt, showing that words and images are flimsy signifiers, arbitrarily translating meaning. Further to this point, isn’t “contained container” another way of describing the self, a person, a vessel for vessels, and

so on?

If choker, belt, string, and rope, adorn the vases, net and synthetic hair accessories, unfurled, covering vases like sleeves, disguise them. Adornment, seeking attention, and disguise, repelling it, are opposing strategies that are both materially engaged, and while opposites, produce the unifying effect of rendering each vase dissimilar despite their common genesis, a piece of clay. These processes are also alike in their emphasis of the role of the interpreter in meaning creation.

Disguise is further explored in *Razzle-dazzle sarcophagot (the urge to be illegible under conditions of mandatory visibility)*. A vessel, wrapped in swaths of fabric resembling the embalming technique of mummification, lays on top of a salvaged insulation pad used as a pillow, on a mirrored platform. The geometric pattern sandblasted on the mirror references a military technique of ship camouflage called “Razzle Dazzle” where warships were painted with geometric shapes, not in order to conceal, but as a means of rendering their direction, speed and features illegible to the enemy. This calls to mind a concept known amongst trans women as “boymoding,” where baggy t-shirts, loose fitting jeans, baseball hats are used to make our physiognomy illegible, serving as protection from being perceived as trans, opting instead to be perceived as a “boy,” or at least ambiguous, perhaps not perceived at all.



In this sculpture, as in others, mirrors are sandblasted, stacked, layered, off-set, effectively breaking-up perception, altering the process of translation by which the image of the subject is reflected. In *Learning how not to know the other*, a ceramic vessel, bound with macramé cord, sits on top and in front of stacks of mirrors. The title's phrasing suggests an unwritten question, how do we know each other?

To that end, Aristotle developed the art of physiognomics which took an assessment of physical characteristics as an effective method of inferring character. That is to say, inferring character from the physique of body and face, like bone-structure, stature, voice, and other unalterable features. Aristotle's physiognomics goes so far as using logical syllogisms to draw comparison between animal traits and human characteristics, like large limbs and bravery. Like other pseudo-sciences like phrenology, and more generally, profiling, it places too much importance on the object (not subject) and says nothing of the interpreter.

More modern understandings of meaning creation acknowledge the subjectivity of the interpreter. The altered and obscured reflection the mirrors present highlights the ineffectiveness of image based inference as a process of translation. A trio of jacquard tapestries titled *Mirror-vase.jpg (Translation 1-3)* further underscores the variabilities emerging from processes of translation. Here, three vastly different results are achieved by feeding an identical source image through various digital loom warp and weft presets.

The works Jeremy Laing presents in *Mirror-vase.jpg* reflect a rich study of the processes of transmutation and subject formation, meaning creation and translation. At the heart of this work is a question central to our human existence: Who are we? Are we the vessel in the mirror, or the void within it?

A nihilist poet, Fernando Pessoa, wrote this about the invention of the mirror:

*Man shouldn't be able to see his own face – there's nothing more sinister. Nature gave him the gift of not being able to see it, and of not being able to stare into his own eyes. Only in the water of rivers and ponds could he look at his face. And the very posture he had to assume was symbolic. He had to bend over, stoop down, to commit the ignominy of beholding himself. The inventor of the mirror poisoned the human heart.*

I remember when I first endeavoured to narrow the fissure between my physiognomy and my internal self, I had certain doubts. Those doubts, at times, even resulted in altering or stopping the already-underway course of transformation. I would ask myself, what's it all for? If I know who I am on the inside, why do other people need to see me as I am? Now, I've spent the last 7 years of my life, a small fortune, and several surgical operations to look as I do today. The transmutation of my object, my vessel, in order for others to more easily infer, through processes of translation, not without bias, that I am a woman.

And I still sometimes ask myself, what's it all for?

I can attest to the joy of being recognized as a woman, for my external self to represent a sign which is more similar to the unseeable self inside. It's not a perfect solution, nor will my body ever be a perfect image, reflection, no matter the transmutation it undergoes, and no matter the clarity of the process of translation. What other option do we have?

*Everybody's got to own their body*

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*Everybody's got to own their body*

*Everybody's got to own their body...*

END NOTES

Alao, L. C. (18 September 2023) We were never supposed to see our own faces this much. *Dazed Digital*. [www.dazeddigital.com/beauty/article/60840/1/why-the-peckham-beauty-shop-protests-matter](http://www.dazeddigital.com/beauty/article/60840/1/why-the-peckham-beauty-shop-protests-matter)

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