

## *Pockmarks, Pits, and Pores*

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“There is something impossible about opening my mouth,” Kerry Downey narrates in the opening frame of their recent video piece “Nothing but net.” Yet even while there might be something impossible about speaking, Downey keeps speaking. They are not forsaking language, but needling it. They are speaking a language we know but in a different cadence, with different rules.

This nearly 15 minute-long work is a plunge into indeterminacy; it makes us step outside of prevailing modes of understanding selfhood and language. As is typical of Downey’s entire practice, “Nothing but net” tangles with representing marginalized bodies, specifically through exploring problems of language and the complexity of subject formation in a binary world.

Downey’s recent videos employ a particular strategy, in which the artist uses water, pigment, and other materials to create and manipulate abstract forms on the glass plate of an overhead projector. In filming the image cast on the wall, they create a moving picture in real time. Also, for the entirety of the piece, the moving image is accompanied by a poetic voiceover narration spoken by the artist.

### **Inventing Languages**

As Susan Stryker has elucidated, language can be a tool of domination. Gendered subject positions are forcibly assigned and announced via language at our birth, i.e. “It’s a girl.” Stryker writes, “Phallogocentric language ... is the scalpel that defines our flesh.”<sup>[i]</sup> Moreover, language fails; language is an imperfect medium for reaching other people.

In “Nothing but net,” Downey examines the difficulties of language. Simultaneously, the audio narration and the images expand and contract, taking us from “pores” to “landscape, vastness.” Confusion is key; language is used to unseat us.

Yet even while it muddles, the spoken text stretches toward connection. Seven and a half minutes in, the narrator introduces themselves as the subject of a series of sentences (“Kerry opened the gate and let them enter. ... Kerry likes to give and take equally.”) then speaks a list of prepositions: above, on, in, between, through, to. Grammatically speaking, a preposition is a word that expresses a relation to another word. Downey struggles to reach for connection amongst dislocation. Visually, too, this move toward intimacy is present near the end of the video when yellow and black speckled transparencies move away and against each other like quivering tectonic plates, somehow monumental and tiny; creating and destroying through their shaky touch. While it might feel impossible to open their mouth, Downey is still trying.

In addition to a spoken language, Downey employs their own invented lexicon of shapes and symbols that are proxies for the body and are perpetually changing and dissolving. These

unstable signs exist concurrently in Downey's printmaking practice and they jump from the video to the prints (some of the plexiglas from the print process was placed on the overhead projector to make animations). Landscapes morph into pock marks. A lotus root becomes an organ. One signature shape contains both cavities and protuberances. They are an indefinable medley of shapes that refuse any single signification; their meaning is in the eye of the beholder.

In thinking about 'the sign' as it relates to language, we must acknowledge gender as the ultimate sign. Stryker writes, "Authority seizes upon specific material qualities of the flesh, particularly the genitals, as outward indication of future reproductive potential, constructs this flesh as a sign, and reads it to enculturate the body. Gender attribution is compulsory; it codes and deploys our bodies in ways that materially affect us, yet we choose neither our marks nor the meanings they carry. ... A gendering violence is the founding condition of human subjectivity; having a gender is the tribal tattoo that makes one's personhood cognizable."<sup>[ii]</sup>

In a gesture of self-portraiture, Downey also inserts their own body in front of the projection; in an almost slapstick manner, matching their arm up with the shapes, sizing themselves up in relation to this symbology. At one point, the author gets tangled in their own shapes — even a language of one's own invention isn't perfect. Forming your own subjectivity and body means losing your bearings even while trying to create your own map, your own landscape, your own language. The inclusion of self-representational imagery, which is also present in Downey, also disallows abstraction from becoming a reified term. They are an abstractionist who uses elements of representation.

## **Boring Holes**

"Nothing but net" also addresses the complexity of subject formation, the ways in which it is indeterminate and unsteady. In Adrienne Harris's "Psychic Envelopes and Sonorous Baths," the author makes an argument for the formation of a body ego in opposition to the Enlightenment formulation of mind-body separation. A relational body is formed out of its social environment: the body forms the mind; the mind forms the body. "The body is a contested surface in which inner and outer demands get inextricably tangled," she writes.<sup>[iii]</sup>

Downey mirrors this entanglement in the form of their video: moving image is overlaid with spoken text. It is hard to pinpoint where one starts and the other stops; it is hard to listen and watch at the same time. The narrator says what we're thinking: "Certain simultaneities are hard." The viewer is placed in a position of not being able to see or know fully.

At times, watching Downey's wet, changing images is like looking through a microscope. A petri dish as we know it is an instrument of science, where visual observations are categorized as claims of knowledge. Yet here the visual field is unfixed; it is a stream of transformation, one thing morphs into the next and meanings are multivalent. Amoebas become mountains. There is no steady ground.

The work's title, "nothing but net," references a passage from British psychoanalyst W.R. Bion's "Brazilian Lectures":

...Suppose we are watching a game of tennis, looking at it with increasing darkness. We dim the intellectual illumination and the light, forgetting imagination or phantasy or any once-conscious activities; first we lose sight of the players, and then we gradually increase the darkness until only the net itself is visible. If we can do this, it is possible to see that the only important thing visible to us is a lot of holes which are collected together in a net. Similarly, we might look at a pair of socks and be able to see a mass of holes which have been knitted together.[iv]

Downey begins and ends the film with a pulsing dark circle, an invitation to dim the lights. Their slippery images are moving toward that mass of holes: Landscapes are full of pockmarks, a square is full of pits, shapes come into focus through the removal of pigment. Samuel Beckett, who happens to have been Bion's analysand, said he was trying "To bore one hole after another in it [language], until what lurks behind it — be it something or nothing — begins to seep through" [v] Downey does this with images. They push us, the viewers, into an indeterminate space. Make us take a closer look, see if we can apprehend the holes.

***This text has been amended from an essay originally written for the catalog of "Read My Lips," an exhibition of the work of Kerry Downey and Loren Britton mounted at the Knockdown Center in November 2017.***

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[i] Susan Stryker, "My Words to Victor Frankenstein above the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage," *KVINDER, KØN & FORSKNING* NR. 3-4 (2011): 93.

[ii] *Ibid*, 92-93.

[iii] Adrienne Harris, "Psychic Envelopes and Sonorous Baths: Sitting the Body in Relational Theory and Clinical Practice," in *Relational Perspectives on the Body*, ed. Lewis Aron and Frances Sommer Anderson (Hillsdale, NJ: Analytic Press, 1998), 44.

[iv] W.R. Bion, *Brazilian Lectures: 1973, Sao Paulo; 1974, Rio de Janeiro/Sao Paulo*, (Karnac Books, 1990), 21.

[v] Samuel Beckett, "German Letter of 1937," *Disjecta: Miscellaneous Writings and a Dramatic Fragment*, edited by Ruby Cohn (New York: Grove Press, 1984), 171-172.