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Lutz Bacher: Glitter and Resign

by Sabrina Tarasoff

Previous Page: Lutz Bacher, *Paradise*, 2016, painted piano with recorded and live tuning, 143.5 × 145 × 162.5 cm
PHOTO: BRICA WILCOX IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST, 356 S. MISSION ROAD, LOS ANGELES AND GREENE NAFTALI, NEW YORK

"I keep forgetting what writing is supposed to be anyway."[1]
— Jane Bowles, writing to Paul Bowles

Leslie Jamison's *The Empathy Exams* opens with an essay about the author's stint as a medical actor, a position that entails re-enacting symptoms for aspiring doctors to diagnose. At one point, Jamison is provided the moniker "Stephanie Phillips," a patient suffering from inexplicable seizures, towards which she seems largely indifferent. "The hardest part about playing Stephanie Phillips," Jamison wrote, "was nailing her affect – *la belle indifférence*, [...]"[2] The term, coined by psychoanalyst Pierre Janet in 1929, describes a nonchalance in patients suffering from latent mental conditions, who, unable to access or acknowledge their own anxieties, instead develop physical symptoms as surrogates. Jamison writes about this as "outsourcing emotional content [...] as an empathy limit case."[3] Without a manifest cause for the physical symptoms, the physician is forced to change register, and approach the patient affectively. The patient's treatment has to address the unconscious – an unasked for invocation of empathy, as Jamison's argument goes – in order to access the murky feelings creating disorder.

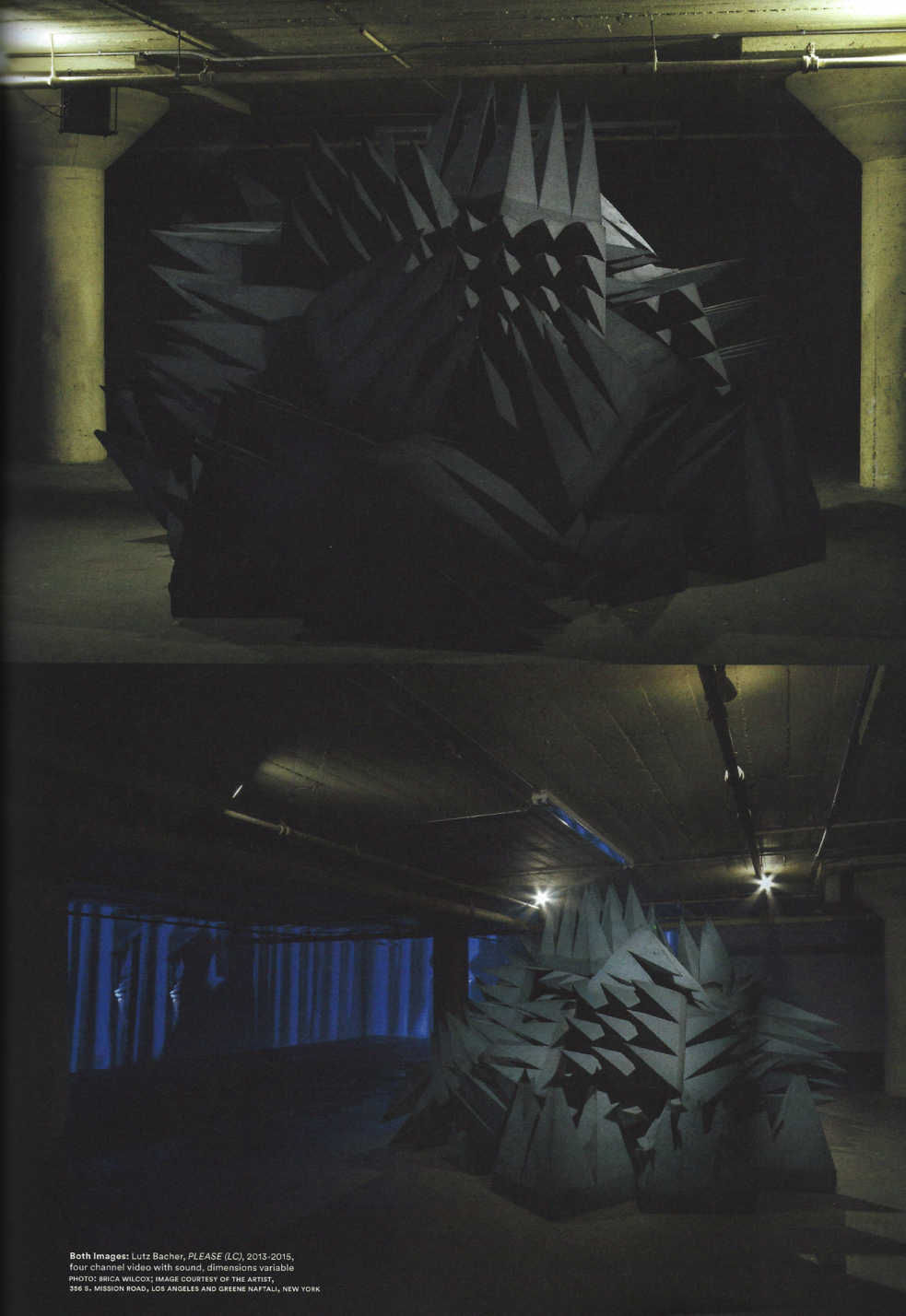
As a parable for Lutz Bacher's practice, Jamison's evaluation of empathy could be ascribed to objects of art that defy conventional interpretation by caching subjectivities under a seemingly indifferent facade. Without direct access to the conditions of their making, viewers (mostly critics) will "clinicize" interpretation by literalizing surface, which places focus on formal characteristics bound to a historical canon, and growing all the more perplexed in the meanwhile. Bacher's objects give little back in this register, par for a dizzying headache; instead, they deflect and act out their place in contemporary art with total indifference, resistant to its idle prattle, yet rather unconcerned by it all the same. The stupoured, blown-out-of-proportion tactility and sensual overload that is Bacher's work is symptomatic to an interiority waiting to be brought to the surface. Material excess is confused with emotional excess; one thing displaced into another. It's not impossible to write about, yet in trying to disentangle what is originary and originarily eddying, one risks missing the point. Affect, as Simon O'Sullivan has proposed, is "a *molecular* beneath [...] [its] intensive quality"[4]; whether seizures or collusions with the Pictures Generation or feminist performances circa 1960–70 (all signification), art is inherently affective and emotionally driven. It carries latent disaffections, elations and questions that cannot find proper answer because they are experiential – not rooted in language. Whether by salvaging, rather than crafting objects, or operating under a sobriquet, Bacher's tactile, affective excess creates a distance from her person (autobiographically, by denomination) for a propositional mood to emerge from personal experience.

This relative indifference doesn't refuse sentiment for the sake of negation, but assumes it as an ordinary affect. Since the 1970s, the artist's work has tried, failed and tried again to dissect personal experience, be it emotional or physical, social or cultural. It is a continuous foray into the often-sophistic nature of reality when abruptly moved by strong affections. As in Gillian Rose's *Love's Work* – the title referring to subjective mediations between the autobiographical and the universal – there is a "hidden symmetry"[5] in Bacher's practice. It also acknowledges that certain labours cannot be carried out alone. Someone must be on the receiving end of indifference if it is to be met with empathy. Early on in her career, the artist visualized her companions: Lee Harvey Oswald, considering conspiracy and surveillance; or Jackie O in the shaping of female subjectivity; the obscure *Jim & Sylvia* as ciphers for a dualistic American identity;[6] or her own uterus flattened onto a screen for everyone to survey. Fictional or real, emptied or obsolescent, these figures operate outside of Bacher to excavate something on the inside – not an "inner voice," but an "internalised expression of actual social forces."[7] Though affect can be a "brutal, impersonal thing,"[8] Bacher's self slips in and out of this but she keeps a distance to connect us to the world, only entering upon occasion to surface with unexpected intimacy.

Bacher's surrogate objects perform an indispensable role. They magnify the space between Bacher and others, creating a sense of openness necessary for new thoughts, moods and tensions to appear. The objects act as fixed points through which specific meanings of culture can be discussed; the particularities of their shapes, assemblages, tactile and aural manipulations are all interlocutors for affect. Bacher's navigations of the private and public, personal and the non-partisan seem to exist within the same mindspace as Rose's *Bildungsroman*. Though Bacher's motivations differ, the attempt to form an image of self – or, more broadly, of subjectivity – through others clearly resonates. Manifold questions arise: what is the exchange that occurs when emotion or experience is outsourced to a mediator? What is gained by positing a distance between the self and its Droste-ghosts in the world, and, as Liz Kotz wrote in an early essay on Bacher, what happens when we allow another "to carry emotion, to receive it, to analyse its remains?[9]

Homing in on Bacher's practice, each of these questions stretches what could be called an emotional carrying capacity of objects. Thinking back to significant exhibitions (for me), wherein baseballs (*I Am Thinking About How Happy I Am*, 2012) or little spheres of make-shift black matter (*Stress Balls*, 2012) feel momentous, one wonders if the intrigue, in fact, stems from the objects' propositional attitude. An inherent affect is blown up to theatrical proportions to explore our relationship with the object. Lady Gaga hit on an unexpected point (related to Bacher only through detouring) in an interview a few years ago. The singer recounts being on a plane, "tossing her dashi," and musing on pearls as tiny baseballs: "[They are] flung into an abyss of enigma and scream so great. There's no crime or conflict surrounding them, they are natural and perfect. They are cyclical in nature and in existence. I wonder who first discovered it." Such enigma attaches to Bacher's baseballs; though as Lia Gangitano noted on Bacher's *Olympiad* (1998), a video record of a walk through Berlin's Olympic stadium, Bacher's father worked in baseball. "This lent a personal significance," she writes, as if to divulge to the public that the artist's work is not just conceptualism tripping over itself. The weight of Bacher's work is that of personal reflection encapsulated in the simplest of objects: cheap tchotchkes ascribed to lost memories; appropriated things that provide psychological shelter not unlike a pseudonym; or craft materials that lend a tactile intimacy where Bacher's hand is absent. Each a leftover from some production faded into a place beyond memory, her objects are all formally unrelated, yet through precarious symmetries they find abstract, unspoken connections.

In instances of loss, the present moment is punctuated by a particular lucidity, or a heightened awareness, wherein one's environment and each of its small details etches into memory. It's a seam that suddenly tears open; an unpreventable, momentary event, which cuts irreparably



Both Images: Lutz Bacher, *PLEASE (LC)*, 2013-2015, four channel video with sound, dimensions variable
PHOTO: BRICA WILCOX; IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST, 356 S. MISSION ROAD, LOS ANGELES AND GREENE NAFTALI, NEW YORK

Lutz Bacher, *Sweet Jesus*, 2016, sound installation
PHOTO: ERICA WILCOX; IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST, 356 S. MISSION ROAD, LOS ANGELES AND GREENE NAFTALI, NEW YORK

Lutz Bacher, *Divine Transportation*, 2016, iridescent glitter, dimensions variable
PHOTO: ERICA WILCOX; IMAGE COURTESY OF THE ARTIST, 356 S. MISSION ROAD, LOS ANGELES AND GREENE NAFTALI, NEW YORK

between what came before and what comes after. Roland Barthes called such abrupt moments of change "decisive folds." Life is made episodic, in that each loss is an end that pre-empts a beginning. As most threshold moments in life – falling in love, or asleep; the instance before death, or before slipping under the surface of water – that space is hard to hold on to, and even harder to materialize. Bacher has done so repeatedly: in one such instance, she assumes the perspective of Ron Gallela, paparazzo-extraordinaire, by appropriating unauthorized photos he took of Jackie O (*Jackie and Me*, 1989) where Jackie's affect is as beautifully indifferent as it gets, and as bewildered and anxious below surface. Screening various videos spanning a decade of her career, each made in task-like, long hours spent in intimate company with her subjects (*Being There – I like To Watch TV*, 2006) is another. Each recounted a close encounter – Jackie's anonymity almost lost; or close observation of a very literal blue moon (*Blue Moon*, 1996) – wherein reality appears exalted. Maybe this is what Steven Spielberg meant with a close encounter with the "third kind:" not reality, not fiction, but something seamy in between. The spaces between images (Jackie running; Jackie's laconic bob obscuring her face; Jackie's bodyguard stepping into the frame) or the spaces between screenings, all of which took place across private residencies in Manhattan, are simplified renditions of thresholds, or ruptures that hold "a potential of associations that overflow all the determinations of its reception and production,"[10] as Jean-François Lyotard noted in his *Critical Reflections*. They acknowledge the impossibility of truly touching loss, yet try to reach its excess in all earnestness.

The provisional quality of Bacher's work, especially considering the found or un-edited videos, enhances the cavalier quality inherent to her work. This isn't an indifference to her subjects but rather a desire to capture them without further ado or embellishment. Like hasty notes jotted in a notebook, her subjects are recorded impulsively, only to later be re-considered upon what Lyotard noted as its "reception" – namely, the input and presence of others. The blankness prompts the viewer to excavate what moods or expressions the arrangements and images project, and what the moment of creation entails for Bacher.[11] The same clarity found in loss is extracted from the present, opening up a reality that seems more perfect, more real than reality itself. This may be why Pierre Janet called his psychoanalytic indifference *beautiful* – an ability to make affect corporeal, tactile and arresting.

Like a film set left to its own devices, Bacher's recent exhibition *Magic Mountain* at 356 S. Mission in Los Angeles is an array of stilled and salvaged objects, such as a movie backdrop found in a film surplus store, craft glitter and soft peaks of audio-foam. Walking about, the body recognizes almost instantly the futility of approaching such a landscape in any other way than affectively. ("Sitting / staring blankly," writes James Schuyler, "Watching TV."). You're torn between feeling puzzled and anxious, feeling quixotic, lulled and seamy; each emotion a point of intersection between seemingly unrelated items. By enhancing scale, contrasts between the material and the immaterial, and the cheap and its ability give way to lavish fantasy, Bacher outsources "emotional content" to material effect. It would be easy to coin this emotional surplus, considering that these objects, as now-obsolete leftovers from commercial enterprises, are by another name surplus products. This equivocation, however loose, adds a humorously economic sentiment to the work – as though she were staging her own Lifetime-film, a low-budget re-enactment imbued with as much guilty-pleasure sentiment as possible.

This tone is set with *Divine Transportation* (2016), where pools of silver glitter are scattered across the main floor of the gallery. The mercurial spills lay down an atmosphere of fiction, wherein everything is literally stardusted with a sense of the preternatural. But, like most fiction, the glitter can be bought: not only at a Michael's near you, but in the Ooga Booga bookstore as a limited edition of 100 containers, all signed by Bacher. This reminder of commerce snaps the viewer into a grounded reality, wherein provisional materials can be projected with all of the illusory values of high-end production. Though film functions as a frivolous reference, this could equally relate to high-end conceptualism, wherein Bacher's cheap tricks carry more propositions (emotions in a subjunctive mood) than, say, Donald Judd's fetishy boxes. Hers is a glow-in-the-dark star kind of conceptualism, wherein the glitter-box edition is a souvenir that carries home the essence – rather humorously – of Bacher's labour. Consider it DIY from an improbable source. In the gallery, the viewer drags foot and hand through the spectral dust as though impelled to test its materiality; it convinces as a prop and creates the desired effect. As an artist interested in slight-of-hand magic once told me, the effect is more interesting, more surprising and exciting than its making.

The softly fabulated *mise-en-scene* is playfully beguiling, as it immerses the viewer into a series of unanswerable questions. Like Lewis Carroll's riddles, Bacher tests the viewer's ingenuity by asking them to follow a series of seeming non-sequiturs: why *are* pools of glitter like a self-tuning piano? Or, what is Leonard Cohen to James Earl Jones? Answers are always elusive; the moment one begins to form tangible thoughts or find a common constellation, perspectives shift, objects are replaced and characters reconsidered. As a viewer, you're chasing after meaning through a landscape as familiar as it is alienating; you emerge on the other side to find everything intact – if not entirely in reverse. Walking through the exhibition spaces, works appear as unrelated sequences, following what film director Jonathan Miller has called the "Kafkaesque illogicality of dreams,"[12] in reference to his rendition of Carroll's *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1966). Each item magnifies, in scale and material, a "minimally factual"[13] surface in order to access the more surreal qualities of the real. Bacher directs with the same measured pace and dizzying language of Miller's *Alice,* whose expressionless figure motions through Wonderland by virtue of sudden, convulsive twists, like matted hair stiffly flicked or hands folded together with a wooden quality odd for a young girl. Bacher's elliptical staging disorients the viewer in similar manner by enhancing characteristics and forms that seem out-of-place, ungraspable or ever-so-slightly altered from its original form. Her strangeness is minimalistic: the rather simple twists, and plays with light and orientation creating new meaning in objects or new ways of looking at them. *The Alps* (2016) is another flat, empty surface imbued with a new material presence simply by being hung sideways. The twist exacerbates its three-dimensionality and transports the mind to far-off places like Neuschwanstein Castle, the crystalline landscapes of *Downhill Racer* (1969), or Kristen Stewart's snowy expressions in *Clouds of Sils Maria* (2013). Behind this, a horizontal line is drawn across the gallery, *Blue Infinite (Horizon)* (2016) – a topsy-turvy refusal to stay within the limits of the literal, when the world itself functions on elliptical and inconsistent terms. (That the line seems to have been erased and redrawn a welcome emphasis on the art of imprecision.)

Dazed, one moves through Bacher's exhibition guided by perplexing and unaccountable visual and aural cues;

subtle shifts in scale, pace and perspective destabilize the way we perceive objects, but moreover alter the way we affix meaning to them. The exhibition's titular sculpture, *Magic Mountain*, was first shown at MoMA PS1 in 2015, presented under bright lights, leaving little about its materiality to the imagination. At 356, the softness of the same audio-foam peaks are made ambiguous under heavy spotlights and the Lynchian blue hues of a video cast into the corner of the wall. The blue-grey shapes are also stacked to such heights that they almost hit the ceiling, placing emphasis on a looming quality that distracts from its surface. The peaks draw the eye into foamy ravines that lead to nowhere but dark pores; they add sharpness to the soft material, like the sudden recognition of fiction in what was previously identifiable as real. The viewer is continuously led astray, not by Bacher's wily ways, but because each crevice seems to demand its own attention. In contrast to the gloss of *The Alps*, or the spills of glitter upstairs, the folds of the mountain and its faux peaks absorb focus. Whether Bacher intends to evoke loss in Barthes' terms is beside the point. What this concerns is a loss of reality and grounding, and re-enforces the fact that art's effect is only truly experienced in situ.

Leonard Cohen's presence in the whole ensemble, seen in a video peering out from behind a velvet curtain, would be equally eddying were it not for an easily missed excerpt from Bacher's book *Shit For Brains*. On said page, Lutz writes in sprawling letters of Cohen's Canadian Buddhism and his cult following; this thought is pre-empted by the artist's desire to find an American balance to Cohen's dharma, which she does in "the Nirvana boy" ("+ I needed to / not be interrupted / or with other / people except / Kurt Cobain's voice / the Nirvana / boy delivered the goods for / sure + [...]").[14] The pages of *Shit For Brains*, as most of Bacher's books, are filled with a manic stream of emotional, intellectual and cultural excess. The writing may be to sculpture what Leonard Cohen is to Nirvana: it needs distance from the dharma of the mind (self-contained; cult-like only if thoughts can adulate themselves) to take on the overload of thoughts Bacher needs to "get away from." Anecdotally, a friend once said that each time he visualized his anxious thoughts floating away, they would loop around and come straight back to him: such is the effect of Lutz's process. Sculpture moves even when stagnant; just as writing runs away with you.

Each name Bacher herself "begets" – and not only those men of Gospel incanted by James Earl Jones in the courtyard behind 356 – becomes a surrogate through which personal experience can be reconsidered in all of its shifting nuances. Though this pushes the idea of leveraging emotions through physical "symptoms," which is to say the objects we accumulate to demarcate experience, it also speaks to the importance of including non-economic aspects of life into a broader context of social exchange. As Jamison pointed out, the indifference of conversion patients prompts a shift in register, wherein a certain protocol must be abandoned. The art world is similarly alienated from its own conditions; it presumes exchange without connection, participation without sharing. There's a sadness inherent to this, which Bacher touches upon. Yet more significantly, her work is not a commentary on systemic failure but a disregard to prescriptions in general. She gives moods and emotions social value and power. They overlap – making the art into a game that seeks connection, play and careful arrangement to find its more unexpected results. She doesn't have to explain because her work does it for her – it visualizes "symptoms" of the contemporary that are slanted, sideways, erasable, stretched out.

Endnotes

1 Jane Bowles. *Out in the World: Selected Letters of Jane Bowles 1935-1970*, ed. and intro. Millicent Dillon. (Santa Barbara: Black Sparrow Press, 1985), 39.
2 Leslie Jamison. "The Empathy Exams." *The Empathy Exams* (Minneapolis: Graywold, 2014).
3 Ibid.
4 Simon O'Sullivan. "The Aesthetics of Affect." *Angelaki: Journal of The Theoretical Humanities* 6.3 (2001): 126.
5 Gillian Rose. *Love's Work: A Reckoning With Life* (New York: Schocken, 1995).
6 Following an observation in "Lutz Bacher's Excruciating Intimacy" by Liz Kotz, *Atlantico* 7, 1994.157-162.
7 Mark Fisher. "Good For Nothing.", *The Occupied Times*, March 19, 2014; https://theoccupiedtimes.org/?p=12841
8 Ibid.
9 Liz Kotz. "Lutz Bacher's Excruciating Intimacy," *Atlantico* 7, 1994.
10 Jean-François Lyotard. "Critical Reflections." Trans. W.G.J. Niesluchawski. *Artforum* 24.8 (1991): 92–93.
11 Notably, Bacher dates her work according to the moment an idea appears.
12 Scott Thill. "Jonathan Miller's *Alice in Wonderland* (1966) on DVD." *Bright Lights Film Journal*. N.p., 19 Dec. 2014. Web. 18 Jan. 2017.
13 From the Whitney Biennial audio guide on Bacher's *The Celestial Handbook* (2011): "Sometimes these are poetic, sometimes they're minimally factual."
14 Lutz Bacher. *Shit for Brains* (Berlin: Galerie Buchholz, 2015).