



Sensitivity



With Artists:

Alina Ahmadi

Savannah Faith Jackson

Maia Liebeskind

Chloe Rees

Shori Sims

Lucia Tezza

Liev Sibilla

Curated by Beth Gebresilasie



A Note of Thanks

I would like to thank first and foremost Gallatin Student Resource Fund, for the grant provided in order to produce this publication. Additionally, I would like to thank the artists for the works they created, for taking time out of their life to present their skills and capacity in an act of creation. I would like to finally thank the Gallatin Gallery staff, and Keith Miller for approving and advocating for this show.

An Introductory Note, *or*

‘What’s the Point of an Exhibition on Sensitivity?’

This is my second show I’m curating, and I’m troubled by the question of purpose. What is the point of this exhibition? What is the point of writing a booklet extrapolating on a single theme that bears no relation to matters of weight, such as, any of your personal problems. In other words, ‘What am I giving of value, and what do I want you, as a viewer, to do with this sensory and cognitive experience of reading and seeing art?’

First, I will begin by lineating my interest in sensitivity. Sensitive is better reserved as an insult, than a comment of aptitude. Completing these readings, especially with ***Sorrows of Young Werther***, I felt a dilated nerve of annoyance with the ruminative range of emotions, with the wallowing, the crying, and the ultimate suicide. What annoyed me, more than his sensitivity, is his pride in sensitivity. He could not understand what was incomprehensible about his impassioned pleas, his romantic attachment to hills and trees, his adoring commitment to Homer and poetry. In many ways, Werther is a composite of sensitivity with no self-consciousness, a prideful inferiority. Sensitivity, as an opening of the senses to art and novelty developed as an additional interpretation of the term. Through readings on Stendhal Syndrome, I located the sensory shock that works of art produce. This shock can yield tears, psychological disturbance, and cognitive confusion.

It seems the experience of sensitivity, as provoked through art, and as a state of being, resides on the border of negation, and positivity. On the one hand, such an embrace and welcoming of every caress of the wind, and every detail of a work of art, cracks one's chest open to welcome the intrusion of the world. That's the positive aspect. On the other hand, it negates, by producing loss of one's state of stability and homeostasis. It tips the balance, and shreds one's grounded stature into a flight.

So, returning to the initial question, 'What's the Point of an Exhibition on Sensitivity?' Sensitivity is an orientation to the world. How many of your senses are sharpened to the point of striking tears from paintings? How many of your sensory faculties have become over-used to the point where sensing evokes pain? This exhibition will likely not change your life, instead, it might assert new questions to consider, to answer through your choices, and through minor alterations of your attitude. For you are responsible for this body that senses, that tireless stimuli relentlessly pricks. How do you want to react?

I choose the decision to not instruct you on what to do with this information. I neither recommend nor disgrace sensitivity. Exhibitions allow the option of presenting answers without selecting the "right" one, neither approving or disapproving, rather diversifying the possibility of answers. The point is to offer the expanse of sensitivity, not to offer the ultimatum of choosing or rejecting sensitivity.



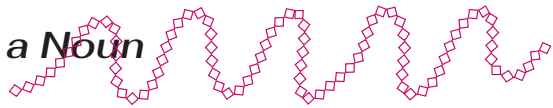
A person with a capacity to sense, evolves the ability to perceive and equate to emotion the external

information inputed. When a piece of art is sensitive, it overwhelms through perception either visually and/or conceptually. Colors and themes can relay and spark sensitivity within the viewer, or encase themselves within the piece.

Sensitive is rooted in the french word *sensitif*. Breaking down the word to its main ingredient, ‘sens(e)’, it can be defined as utilizing the (generally agreed upon) five senses of touch, taste, smell, hearing, and seeing. It can also be defined as a type of perception, producing and extracting meaning through one’s senses. Sensitivity is an action and a noun—a palpitant reckoning with the stimuli of one’s respective environment, and a state of being.

Sensitivity as a Noun

To be sensitive



Sorrows of Young Werther by Goethe

tracks the fated suicide of an emotional and sensitive Werther. Werther writes letters to Wilhelm, while an external unnamed narrator places these letters in a leading story. He resides in a town, Walheim, which he describes in language bursting with enchantment. The following quote accomplishes in visualizing his temperament, “A vast dawning entirety lies before the soul, our senses lose themselves in it, as do our eyes and oh! We long to make the oblation of all of our being and to be filled utterly with the bliss of a single large and glorious feeling” (Goethe, 25). He has wedded himself to loss of the senses in this dawning, yet is simultaneously brimming with bliss. He longs for a sensing, a feeling of being present, that deletes the self, and offers itself as a gift. He proffers his body to the sensational, not only to augment, but to replace entirely.

Lotte, Albert's wife, is his source of exhilaration and depression, activating his senses into total obliteration. He pines, he yearns, he wants, wants, and wants. He averts criticism of his sensitive positioning towards the world, "Don't scold me if I tell you that the thought of this fidelity and tenderness pursues me wherever I go, and that, as though I were on fire, I thirst and pine" (Goethe, 15). In other terms, he can't help but disappear in obedience to his senses. He thirsts and pines. This aversion returns when Albert, Lotte's husband, and Werther discuss suicide. While assessing Albert's guns, Werther points one of the guns to his temple, which Albert admonishes as stupid. What follows is a discussion on the validity of suicide as a choice. Werther's rebuttal is as such, "For I have understood in my own capacity that all extraordinary people who ever achieved anything great, anything impossible, were always certain to be vilified as drunk and lunatics"(41). To Werther, sensitivity, allowing the expansion of your emotions to squeeze you out of your body, is not only a virtue, it's a path to nobility. Eventually, recognizing the impossibility of being with Lotte, Werther commits suicide with one of Albert's guns, which Lotte incidentally polishes.

In modern lexicon, Werther would likely be described as a Highly Sensitive Person, a term coined by Elaine and Arthur Aron around the mid-1990s. HSPs, which are said to make up 20% of the human population, have Sensory Processing Sensitivity, in which they, "are believed to be easily overstimulated by external stimuli because they have a lower perceptual threshold and process stimuli cognitively deeper than most other people" (Boterberg and Warreyn, 80). It is a trait found in animals as well. It is noted that, "for neuroticism, the correlation is generally higher" (Aron, 5). According to *Psychotherapy and the Highly Sen-*

sitive Person by Elaine Aron the distinguishing characteristics are as follows (6):

- Exploring, observing, reflecting before acting
- Awareness to subtleties and changes
- Considering every detail and outcome before acting
- Perfectionism
- Consideration for others
- Easily overstimulated
- Emotional reactions are more overwhelming in comparison to others
- Vivid dreams
- More physically reactive— easily startled

These descriptions of a category of sensitivity above the average capacity seem within the scope of learning. Yet, it is as though most have deft management systems to stimuli. The impressions of pain or happiness are waned, and most respond with indifference, perhaps a pang. What do we lose in treating our past emotions as layers of protection from responses of novel and deep emotion? What do we gain? Werther, whose fanatic attachment to the tides of his feelings drove him to suicide is obvious evidence of an avoidance to such vicissitudes. However, to what extent does a blunted sensitivity defend against sensory experiences worth eviscerating the self in ecstatic sensation for, such as those provoked by pieces of art?

Sensitivity in Action

To sense



The active pose of sensing, is an opening of oneself, through taste, tactile, optical, auditory, and olfactory faculties. Pores of the skin swallow sunlight, brave the wind, and our eyes capture the expanse of

our locale, from periphery to center. Our noses confront scents against our will, same for our ears. With minimal proximity to an object, we can smell or hear it, for these are senses without enclosures. Uniting all these possibilities of interacting with our environment, these senses create the world as we perceive it.

In this section, the faculty of vision tinted with sensitivity in relation to works of art is the primary topic. Such a task, of seeing with sensitivity, risks tears, and destabilization.

In *Pictures and Tears: A History* by James Elkins, he proposed a prompt to strangers and his personal network of sharing an instance in which a painting provoked tears. He compacts these responses as such, “In one, people cry because pictures seem unbearably full, complex, daunting, or somehow too close to be properly seen. In the other, they cry because pictures seem unbearably empty, dark, painfully vast, cold, and somehow too far away to be understood” (Elkins, vii). Once more, the themes of negation and positivity weave through these dual experiences of visual sensitivity, where tears strike from the bloom of completion and richness, and from the emptiness, the lack, and absence expressed. How is it that these opposing forces of absence and presence provoke a sensitized reaction, where the eyes themselves respond in an outpour?

Andrea Fraser, in her essay on Fred Sandback, expresses the tragedy of art, how artists are driven to an innocent crime (creation) as fate. She explains further, “As artists we also commit crimes against art and culture. These crimes are fated and they are ‘innocent’ crimes in that sense: we are driven to them, [...] What makes art tragic, however, is not the “innocence” of its violence but its ambivalence, because that violence is most often violence against what we also are

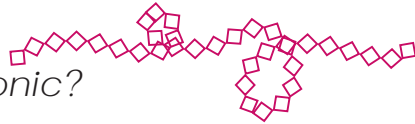
and what we also love. And because art is so often, at the same time, an attempt at reparation” (Fraser, 43–44). What is expressed in this quote is the ability for art to be both an emptying out of our senses and a confrontational affront with our accepted state, negating, and positivizing, in its capacity to create, to close a gap between the artist and the viewer. Rather than being either a violent attack or a light touch, art’s dual element of positivity and negativity eliminate its stance into ambivalence. An apt example, Minimalist works, the branch of which Fred Sandback had made a home, “is also a tragedy. At its most extreme and restrained and purified, minimalism represents, to me, a kind of heroic sacrifice in the face off art’s contradictions” (Fraser, 44). To answer the question of why Fred Sandback’s works make her cry, Fraser emphasizes, “By removing himself to the extent he does, he makes space for me” (Fraser, 44). Visual art works are a presentation of a vision, representational or abstract, that transgress the viewers perception. Whether it be a loss that’s accentuated, or complexity that is accented, art works have the capacity to acuminate our senses through their negotiation with negativity and positivity. Ultimately, the viewer is left standing alone in their perception, sensing and feeling a work attempting to disintegrate them and create a relation at the same time.

Stendhal Syndrome is named after Stendhal, who upon viewing Volterrano’s fresco of the Sibyls, reached a state of bodily exhilaration. He wrote, “I was already in a kind of ecstasy, by the idea of being in Florence, and the proximity of the great men whose tombs I had just seen. Absorbed in contemplating sublime beauty, I saw it close-up — I touched it, so to speak. I had reached that point of emotion where the heavenly sensations of the fine arts meet pas-

sionate feeling. As I emerged from Santa Croce, I had palpitations (what they call an attack of the nerves in Berlin); the life went out of me, and I walked in fear of falling” (Bamforth, 1). The Syndrome was later coined by Dr. Graziella Magherini after treating 106 non-local patients who reported similar symptoms of disorientation, emotional disturbance, shock, and ecstasy (Palacios-Sánchez et al., 1). Similar accounts have been reported in other locations, and have been recognized as Jerusalem Syndrome, Paris Syndrome, etc. Stendhal Syndrome perks itself at the extreme of a sensitized response to art and the novelty of richly historicized cities. To be provoked to the extent that your body lapses its routine process, and collapses into a heap of sensation, is a precise depiction of art’s capacity to eviscerate and create at the same time.

Conclusion

Sensitive or Histrionic?



Confessions of a Mask by Yukio Mishima, an allegedly autobiographical novel, is a series of remembrances by the main character Kochan of pivotal moments of eroticism, violence and power. Kochan’s self is in misalignment with the traditional expectations for Japanese men, which strikes an itching need to conform and a sense of inferiority. However, what is specifically relational about this novel to sensitivity is the scene recounted of Kochan’s discovery of Guido Reni’s ***St. Sebastian***. In describing the piece, Kochan identifies that it, “shows none of the traces of missionary hardship or decrepitude that are to be found in the depictions of other saints; instead, there is only the springtime of youth, only light and beauty and pleasure,” (Mishima, 39). After proceeding to describe the tautness of the arrows piercing St. Sebastian’s

flesh, and a lustful account of the contortions of his flesh, Kochan orgasms at the sight of the picture.

Kochan's orgasmic elicitation to **St. Sebastian** exhibits the capacity for art to summon a response against one's will. What is brokered between the viewer and the art is often a spontaneous reaction, cultivating an answer that your senses conduct. Another view of Kochan and Werther's sensitivity is that instead of sensitivity, they are beacons of histrionic inferiority. Those who betray a sensitive predilection are often viewed as dramatic and their antics as theatrical. Often, sensitive people oscillate between a sensing that lack self-consciousness (Werther) and one that brims with it (Kochan). Either way, both Werther and Kochan share an inferiority that pushes both towards violence that is either self-inflicted (Werther) or externalized (Kochan).

There is no conclusive answer. Perhaps sensitivity is perceived as melodramatic to those with higher thresholds of stimuli processing. On the other hand, perhaps sensitive people have a proclivity for hysteria. What is worth wondering more than the distinction of histrionicism and sensitivity, is how to harvest the utmost potential of our senses without physically or psychically annihilating. What draws my curiosity is to bear the acute wave of sensations that wash over our bodies without a barrier, and instead of self-consciousness (or lack thereof), accepting with self-awareness.

With the context of sensitivity, as a noun, and to sense, as an action, this show commences with the works of the following artists: Nina Ahmadi, Savannah Faith Jackson, Maia Liebeskind, Chloe Rees, Liev Sibilla, Shori Sims, and Lucia Zezza. The artists have also produced playlists so the viewers can listen to each respective piece

Raining

Nina Ahmadi

Opening through an arch, in this piece the figure tilts themselves to the left while holding on to their own shoulders. Around them, abstracted representations of water rain upon them. Describing their art, Nina relays, “I attempt to transform the body into an abstract landscape and visualize the emotional depths and weights our bodies hold, and to explore how this



manifests physically.” Precisely, this piece intones the sheltering of the body. The figure’s back is turned away from the viewer. In fact, with the face beyond vision, the viewer has no insight into whether the rain is a nuisance or a relief. In relation to sensitivity, this piece recalls the way our bodies hold our emotions, beyond what we express through our faces. Our bodies are conductors of our senses, however, what is felt may remain lodged in our bodies without the relief of expression, hidden in a face beyond vision.

Savannah Faith Jackson

Offering

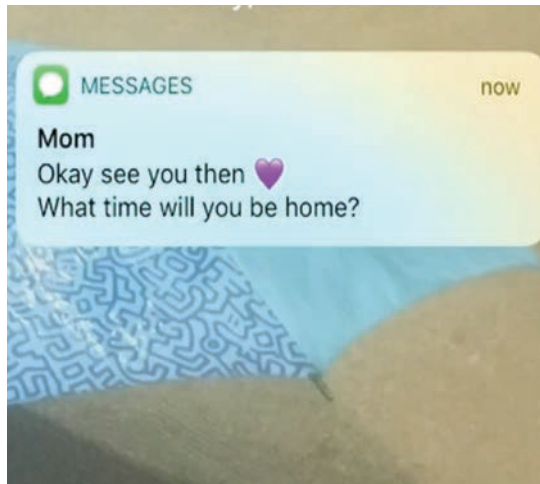
Savannah produced this photograph by drawing connections to the Yoruba Orisha Yemaya, a water deity, for whom white flowers are offered in oblation. The fig-

ure is willingly pressed into a state of worship and giving. Similar, to Nina's piece, the figure is sheltered from vision. The viewer has no ability to garner the emotional state, whether it be religious ecstasy, or a seeking gaze for a deity of water. What is available to our speculation, is the holy sancitivity this moment encapsulates. Spiritual gift giving is an attempt at objectifying one' gratitude for a deity, which recalls the self-negating aspect of art, and dually, the positivity of adding yourself into a spiritual framework that preexists your "self".



okay, see you then
Maia Liebeskind

In this piece, Maia attempts to connect with their mother, which continues to be interrupted with first their mother's plans with a coworker, leading to a change of plans. Afterwards, there's multiple interruptions, from a nap,



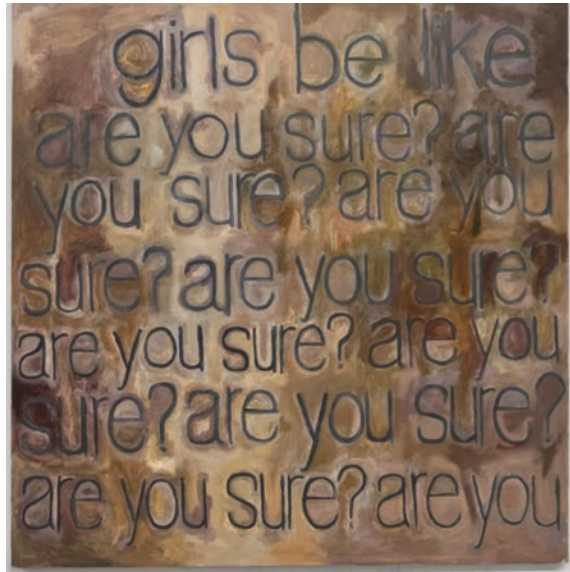
to a concert, and finally their mother's sleep. As they attempt to reconnect and align their schedules, it's hard to miss the consideration with which they interact with each other. Despite the distance, there's a sense of longing to be within each other's proximity. The theme of sensitivity is not an obvious motif, rather it exists in the subtleties of this piece. The recycling of 'See you then' depicts the connection in efforts. Relating to previous points on sensitivity, this piece orients itself towards sensitivity as an action with delays. Connecting with others requires us to hone our senses in order to foster bonds of high quality. The distance between Maia and their mother blunts their ability to be in each other's physical presence, yet they try over and over again. It seems like an homage to their mother; they endeavour to clasp at each other, despite the persistent blocks.

Say What You Really Mean

Chloe Rees

This piece embeds itself in a narrative familiar but unknown. In describing the piece, Chloe extends, "**Say what you really mean** is about living with the uncertainty that all relationships carry. The linguistic reference of you implies the presence of another, then, you and I can become interchangeable. Are you mad at me indicates the wrongdoing of I, as well as the judgement from you. When you are you, and i am i, we will never fully understand each other, but we can try." The bond to sensitivity is expressed in this piece in its fragility. Repeating over and over, "Are you sure?", expresses a frailty sensed but unacknowledged which reveals a vulnerability to strengthen through probing. Akin to the way sensitivity poses a self-deteriorous possibility, the subject 'girls', defends against

this perceived possibility with a repetitive beckoning, “Are you sure?” The repetition attempts to appease an impending loss, that denies its own possibility.



Denver's Dream (Exterior)

Shori Sims

Shori forges the background of this piece as such, “In the video, Denver, Sethe, and Beloved of Toni Morrison’s ***Beloved*** exist as three personas donned by the artist. In each body Shori enacts their inaction: sleeping, sitting, and pacing incessantly for the duration of the loop. Small glitches — digital and visual anomalies — appear occasionally.” The video shows Shori staring at the viewer, reticent, with the background transforming, from a shed to a fire that licks around Shori’s form. What remains unmoving is an oval halo of light. The selection of this piece within this show is spurred by foundational information. The book ***Beloved*** itself delves into a sensitivity from the past, a sharpening of senses so spiky that trauma cracks through the material world. Trauma frequently accentuates one’s senses, recreating events forgone into an inescapable present despite the attempts to defray the memories that mystify the bearer. Despite the lack of physical move-

ment or verbalization, so much is trapped in the gazes that Shori transmits. It is a sensitivity that flipped inward, silences with paralysis.



Page 105 of In Wonderland: The Surrealist Adventures of Women Artists in Mexico and the United States

Lucia Zezza

Lucia eloquently relays the passage of this piece, from the page 105 to her life as such, “On page 105 there is a delicate, color pencil drawing by Gerrie Gutmann titled Torso Interior. (...) I’ve returned to page 105 many times; each time Torso Interior deepens and expands as if coming into relief.” Gutmann’s drawing has made an indelible mark on the artist that demands a ritualistic return. The



piece itself, in the frail curls of the frame, prompts the viewer’s senses. It is similar to a wound, inviting the

viewer to peek inside where an angel resides. Sensitivity shines in this piece through the artist's bond with the piece, and through the frame's flagellated opening to the viewer.

Untitled/World War Two *Liev Sibilla*

Liev imparts regarding this piece, "There's some unconscious code that, again, I can't and won't talk about. Make a story about it for yourself. Whatever that story is, you aren't wrong." Visual art has the capacity to optically connect with the viewer. You can look away, but you lose a sensory encounter that draws out associations, narratives, questions, and shifts in thinking that you may have not considered.

In the inclusion of *Untitled/World War Two* in this show, similar to Chloe's piece, fragility presents itself without self-consciousness. A stuffed form can be easily ripped to shreds, but here, it resides as an art work attached to a sewn clock and a hanger. It is a monochromatic piece, save for the red thread the punctuates among the



terrain of beige and brown. A grenade tucks itself in obscurity, as though waiting, aiming to blow without a moment's notice. Returning back to sensitivity as a noun, to be sensitive, and an action, to sense the world, this piece demands the latter condition of sensitivity. Liev coded this piece beyond direct comprehension, save for the effect it produces upon the viewer, thereby provoking a flick against the viewer's senses

Playlists

The artists' curated playlist for their respective piece

Nina Ahmadi

Raining

Gimme All Your Love - Alabama Shakes

In The Early Morning - Jacob Collier

It's Okay To Cry - SOPHIE

Time - Arca

Thank You Song- FKA Twigs

Short and Sweet - Brittany Howard

He Won't Hold You - Jacob Collier

Just Like Water - Lauryn Hill

Which Way - FKA Twigs

This is a Life - Son Lux

Quarrel - Moses Sumney



Savannah Faith Jackson

Offering

LSD - Jamila Woods

Everything You Needed - Doechii

Benzo - Blood Orange



I Gotta Find Peace of Mind - Lauryn Hill
Here Comes the Sun - Nina Simone

Maia Liebeskind

okay, see you then

Frozen - 800 Cherries
There is Only you in the Light & Nothing
Else - Ricky Eat Acid
Miss You - STRFKR
To Be Close to You - Julia Brown



Chloe Rees

Say what you really mean

Cherry-coloured Funk - Cocteau Twins
Sextape - Deftones
striptease - carwash
Ava Adore - The Smashin Pumpkins
My Heart Belongs to Daddy - Eartha Kitt
I Wanna Be Loved by You - Marilyn Monroe
Somehow - Pamphlets
Ordinary Day - Vanessa Carlton
Dreams - The Cranberries
Tomorrow - Avril Lavigne
I Me Mine - The Beatles
Oh! Sweet Nuthin' - The Velvet Underground
I Bet on Losing Dogs - Mitski
Religion - Lana Del Rey
Machine Gun - Slowdive
Just - Radio Head
I Don't want to know - Fleetwood Mac



Liev Sibilla

Untitled/World War Two

The Opening - Saltillo

Dorma - Corpo-Mente

O Descanso - SANGRE DE MUERDAGO

I Revenge - mxm

I'm Numbers - Emily Wells

Equus - Corpo-Mente

Giving In - Saltillo

Familiar - Agnes Obel



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