

— curatorial incubator v.15 —

What the F**k?!

Video in the Age of Sublime Uncertainty

Guest Mentors:
Jennifer Fisher and Jim Drobnick

Artificial Tears

Curated by Isabelle Lynch and Sophie Lynch

1. Oliver Husain, *Item Number*, 2012, 16:00

Opening backstage in a dressing room, the video's lead, played by Kirtana Kumar, prepares for an imminent performance and repeatedly reminds her viewers that the performance they are about to witness will begin in two minutes. Reality and fiction intermingle as monologues, dance numbers, and personal confessions unfold onstage and offstage.

2. Nao Bustamante, *Neapolitan*, (excerpt, without installation), 2003, 3:19

In an endless loop of melodramatic spectatorship, the artist sits on a couch and sobs while watching and re-watching the final scene of the 1993 Cuban film *Fresca y Chocolate*. The glow of the television screen illuminates the tears streaming down her cheeks as she weeps, blows her nose, and reaches for the remote to replay the tearful finale.

3. Kent Monkman, *Mary*, 2011, 3:18

The artist's alter ego, the dazzling Miss Chief Eagle Testickle, revisits the Prince of Wales's 1860 trip to Montreal. Referencing the biblical allegory of Mary Magdalene's washing of Christ's feet, Miss Chief seductively bathes the Prince's feet with mascara-tinted tears and dries them with her glossy locks, challenging the meaning of "surrendering" within Aboriginal treaties.

4. The Holiday Movie Initiative, *The Natural Life of Mermaids*, 2004, 10:26

A voice-over adopting the convention of the wildlife documentary narrates the life and habits of sirens swimming in Arizona's Lake Havasu. A park ranger describes recent sightings as the filmmakers cast themselves as mermaids who playfully swim, whisper maliciously, and paint each other's nails along the banks of the lake.

5. Tova Mozard, *The Big Scene*, 2011, 32:00

In the dressing room of Stockholm's Royal Dramatic Theatre, three generations of women – artist, mother and grandmother – apply makeup in front of a mirror. Once onstage, they sit with their backs turned to the empty theatre hall. Draped in layers of silk and lace, they share dreams, family traumas and anxieties in front of a therapist.

Artificial Tears

Isabelle Lynch and Sophie Lynch

Artificial tears are specially formulated to lubricate dry and irritated eyes with the same hydrating qualities as natural tears. Refreshing and long-lasting, they can be used to cry on cue, weep at will, or sob spontaneously. If crying for the camera is often conceived as an actor's greatest achievement and if video is a site for both the transfer of affect and the commodification of emotional life, how do audience members allow themselves to be moved by the secretions that are shed on screen? Bringing together works by Oliver Husain, Nao Bustamante, Kent Monkman, Isabell Spengler and Tova Mozard, this program presents scenarios, expressions, and emotions that muddy the waters between felt feelings and artificial tears. The salty bodily fluids that fill the history of video art cloud visions and distinctions as they seep through the surfaces of moving images, affectively addressing audiences and softening the line between performance and non-performance. Often conceived as bodily drops of water that bring a subject's intimate emotional depths to the surface or that mark a relation between the mind and the body, the tears spilled in this program leak through attempts to separate inner emotions and outer expressions, or the events that take place onstage from what is experienced offstage.

Writing during a period when audiences shed tears of joy or pity while watching tragic or comedic theater, eighteenth-century philosopher Denis Diderot proposed a new theatrical genre – the *genre sérieux* – that strived to bring audiences to new emotional heights. An advocate for indulging in the pleasures of weeping and a proponent of the social function of shedding tears together, Diderot brought the emotional responses of spectators to centre stage by suggesting that tears had the capacity to flood the boundaries separating actors and audience members by allowing spectators to sympathetically take part in a scene.¹

Today, a secretion of tears permeates contemporary culture, trickling down from the cheeks of reality TV stars into the palms of hands, where crying faces and teardrop emojis share sentiments across networks. The media theorist Anna McCarthy describes the reality genre as “a realm of excess, not simply a set of techniques and procedure but also, very correctly, a neoliberal theatre of suffering.”² In an era when the camera often invades private moments of suffering, which can be read as familiar celebrations of distress, how do beliefs and assumptions of sincerity and authenticity reframe crying for the camera?³ The works included in this program stage performances of excessive emotion and fantastical fictions, foregrounding how notions of artifice, sincerity, and theatricality are often themselves gendered and racialized, and proposing exaggerations and fabulations as possible means of resistance.



Item Number (2012)

Two minutes before the curtain rises, the actress in Oliver Husain's *Item Number*, played by Kirtana Kumar, waits for a performance to begin. Reflecting on pasts forgotten and the parts or blanks in between narratives, she makes melodramatic proclamations in front of a bulb-lined vanity mirror. Contemplating her genuine embodiment and often followed by other versions of herself wearing identical mint-green dresses, the performance walks the thin line between what is scripted and what is improvised. "My body is not involved in this situation. This tear in my eye does not represent an investment," she recites, her eyelids heavy with eye shadow and anticipation. The performance will begin in two minutes. Is the signal stuck? The actress's multiplicities mirror a seemingly rehearsed Bollywood-inspired dance choreography. When the curtain rises only to reveal a backstage exit, Kumar leaves the theatre, walking in a straight line

between parked cars and palm trees as the multitude of lookalikes follow. As what lies behind the scenes becomes the stage, reversing expectations and chronologies, Husain's film ends with an opened curtain and a rehearsal of forgetting.

In *Neapolitan*, Nao Bustamante's tear-stained eyes are fixated on a screen as she watches, rewinds, and re-watches the last scene of *Fresa y Chocolate* ("Strawberries and Chocolate"), a 1993 love story set in revolutionary Cuba. Describing the film's final scene as "an emotional vibrator of sorts," Bustamante sits in front of a television and wallows with pleasure in her tears, an emotional response seemingly produced spontaneously by the film's final scene.⁴ As feminist theorist Amber Jamilla Musser suggests, the automaticity of Bustamante's emotional state creates a cleavage between authenticity and acting, and between emotionality and theatricality.⁵

By looping her emotional state in a way that evokes the sensational loop of the melodrama as a genre, Bustamante indulges in an evening of melodramatic spectatorship and participates in the manufacture and trafficking of her own feelings. When the credits roll, she dries her eyes, reaches for the remote, rewinds the film, and tears up once again. Putting her feelings on display, Bustamante plays a part in the romantic drama unfolding on screen as the glow of the television casts shadows and illuminates the glistening tears that stream down her face, shedding light on the affective power of the on-screen drama and illuminating tears asking to be witnessed.

Kent Monkman's *Mary* alludes to the story of Mary Magdalene who washed Christ's feet with her tears and dried them with her undone locks. Performed by Monkman's alter-ego Miss Chief Eagle Testickle, Mary emerges in slow-motion, her abound-

ing wind-machine blown hair fluttering as she kneels down in thigh-high red stiletto boots. With satin-gloved hands, Mary gracefully removes the Prince of Wales's socks and polished shoes to caress his feet to the climatic crescendos of the final scene of Richard Wagner's 1859 opera *Tristan und Isolde*. The mascara-tinted tears that stream down her face stain as they drip on the Prince's foot, blurring visions that uphold rigid power relations. Monkman's sequin-clad performance unsettles complicated pasts and relationalities of betrayal, such as the stealing of land from Indigenous peoples – forcing surrender without compromise. Rather than privileging a private interior realm in contrast to a knowable exterior, Mary sheds dark tears of resilience and loss.

When confronted with the dark depths of the ocean or the murky waters of a lake, one might be lured into hearing the enchanting voices of mystical



Mary (2011)



The Natural Life of Mermaids (2004)

sea creatures. Seducing viewers into believing in mermaids, The Holiday Movie Initiative's *The Natural Life of Mermaids* opens with the kitschy glare of a lit-up moving waterfall picture and the calming sounds of trickling water, positioning the work as an assertively artificial fabulation. A choir of mermaids chant "The river turns red in their tears will swim" as the camera explores Arizona's desert landscape and a narrator describes recent mermaid sightings along the banks of Lake Havasu. The wildlife documentary morphs into an otherworldly fantasy as the filmmakers cast themselves as the mermaids who languish along the shore, partaking in quiet frivolities and whispering malevolently. The river turns red and one of the mermaids dramatically dies, the gravity of the scene puncturing and disrupting the film's dreamy world. No longer immune to the reality of death by virtue of her fictional existence,

death becomes part of the mermaid's natural life.

The curtains of Tova Mozárd's *The Big Scene* open backstage, in the dressing room of the Royal Dramatic Theatre in Stockholm, as three generations of women robed in undergarments in various shades of pink and beige apply thick layers of makeup and converse with their reflections in front of a mirror. Applying waterproof mascara, good for "when you cry," to her mother's eyelashes, the artist contemplates blushed-cheeked familiar faces. "But you haven't cried in ten years," the mother remarks to her own mother. "Twenty," she replies. Covered in pancake makeup, face powder, and rose-coloured lipstick and blush, they gather on the stage of the empty theatre, arranged like a group therapy session. A counselor facilitates their interactions, and buried stories and memories emerge from pasty

masked faces, revealing layers of sorrow beneath shared and haunting pasts. Stories, memories, and emotions are revealed and mediated by the transformative encounter that occurs between the camera, the counselor, and the three women as rambling improvised exchanges become revealing waterproofed acts of disclosure.

The moving-image works included in *Artificial Tears* reveal the effects and affects of collective uncertainty or disbelief, where the inconceivable is dampened with credibility and where the lines separating fictions and actualities are blurred like glasses foggy with tears. Rather than pointing to a privileged depth or interior, the

excesses that transpire through this program puncture and leak through moments of sincere sentimentality and overt theatricality. Excessive displays of personal pain can be contagious, moving between bodies and intensities and transforming spectators and their capacities to be more or less affected. Holding back tears at the movie theater, or wiping them away as credits roll on screen, the spectatorial tears one sheds while watching a video or a film can potentially re-configure relationships between the bodies that share affective intensities, forging new modes of sympathetic engagement. Please, hand me a tissue.

Notes

¹ Diderot, Denis, *Oeuvres Esthétiques*, Paris: Garnier, 1965, pp. 93-94.

² McCarthy, Anna, "Reality Television: A Neoliberal Theater of Suffering," *Social Text* 25: 4 (2007): 93.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Bustamante, Nao, "Neapolitan," naobustamante.com, http://www.naobustamante.com/art_neapolitan.html (accessed July 1, 2018).

⁵ Musser, Amber Jamilla, *Sensual Excess: Queer Femininity and Brown Jouissance*, New York: NYU Press, 2018, pp. 119-43.