Annie MacDonell

Modifying the Visible

by Rose Bouthillier

Stoppage and extraction are recurrent themes in Annie MacDonell's practice. Both are integral to the nature of photography itself, the means by which images are taken and distributed. But MacDonell's anxiety—strange, awful, terrible—doesn't stem from the production of images alone. It also lies in interference, in pulling images out from their existing networks of circulation and looking at them in ways they aren't accustomed to (expressively, collaboratively, abstractly). Is this a further betrayal of the subject? Another act of violent remove? Or, in attempting to understand the image's conditions more carefully, might the subject's conditions be understood, more deeply and differently?

"These images" to which MacDonell refers depict a particular act of passive resistance: refusing to move and turning one's body into an inconvenient and fragile weight. Prompted by her interest in recent large-scale protest movements, the artist looked to photographic records as a way to think through collective action. Pouring over images of demonstrations, this subset of protestors "going limp" stood out as both compelling and confusing. As an embodiment of utter refusal, it leads to intimate exchanges where power is yielded and inverted. *Picturing* this act presents an entirely new layer of relations. In her multichannel video installation *Holding Still // Holding Together*, 2016, MacDonell engages performers to respond to and reenact the images, resulting in carefully considered contradictions. Originally produced for a solo exhibition at the Ryerson Image Center in Toronto, MacDonell drew on photographs from RIC's Black Star Collection along with other sources, both archival and digital. In early 2017, a new configuration of three of the videos, along with a series of seven collages, was on view at AKA artist-run in Saskatoon as part of "She is spitting a mouthful of stars," a year-long series surveying multidisciplinary approaches to protest, resistance and activism.[2]

"It is strange and awful to remove these images from their original context. It is terrible to erase from them the extended struggles that preceded the split-second they represent. But that is what I am asking we do."[1]

— Annie MacDonell

The primary setting for the work is a stately wood-paneled room, which instantly calls up institutional power (academy, government, law). The emptiness of the room seems to question this power, rendering it nostalgically symbolic. (Abandoned? Overthrown? Obsolete?) One video opens onto the vacant room, lingering long enough to emphasize its stage-like vacancy. Suddenly, a figure appears, prone on the floor, as if instantly teleported. More performers enter the scene and they take turns moving and being immobile, in pairs and groups, feeling the weight of their own and others' bodies. At times these arrangements are solid and clear, at others they are rendered ghostly and transparent, confusingly layered on top of one another (one man watches his own body being lifted, individuals cohere then split off into in Rorschach-like phantoms). There are moments where so many of the bodies coalesce and overlap that single figures can no longer be traced, only a writhing mass of energy, morphing and cloudlike.

Another video opens onto the group of seven performers, studying protest photographs like instruction manuals. Attempting to recreate each scene, they discuss ("…maybe this arm goes under…" / "…the pelvis is also coming into, it looks like…") and tentatively arranging themselves before setting in formation. Once in place they "hold together" straining and wavering until one of them calls "break" and they begin the process again. Anger, fear and defiance are absent, and force is muted in favor of stopped motion and private contemplation— "we'll also think about the times we've held on to other bodies (friends, lovers, children) in very different situations from the ones depicted in the photographs."[3]

Reenactment also takes place in a black-and-white video focusing on one performer against a blank studio wall, studying off-screen images. As she gazes and glances back, sounds of a street scene play in the background, audible but subdued (I think of the noise of protest and violence streaming on YouTube and emanating weekly from laptop speakers, how this contrasts with the deafening crush on the street, how that decibel gap seems like a measure of remove and insulation). Entering each pose and expression, she closes her eyes and a shift occurs: a melancholic organ tune layers over the street sounds, and it feels like the screen is freezing, slowing. Eyes painted on top of the performer's eyelids emphasize this stillness, and their graphic quality skews the figure towards picture or statue. Her eyes act like a fuse, flipping between states—looker/looked at, active/passive, awake/dreaming. This falling and resurfacing speaks to how a protestor alters their own state through passivity, but also to the image as mask (surface, exterior, veil).

In some respects, this project is a departure for MacDonell, as the human body has never been so present and insistent in her work.[4] At the same time, it continues her long-standing engagement with the nature of photographic images—where and how they are made and manifest, how they hold, gather and escape meaning, and what they can reveal about other forces at work in the world. With certain weight and stickiness—limbs, grip, hair, breath—these bodies inject a corporeal energy to the artist's more typically esoteric approach. And yet the work also places clear limits on expression and emotion, as there is little to connect with in terms of narrative and personality. We are presented with leveled relations, echoes and copies; the performers go somewhere (inside themselves), but it is hard to follow them there. There are moments in watching the videos where I feel pulled, stretched, immobilized; these pangs of somatic recognition also serve to emphasize the detachment of the space and time in between.

Such tension between closeness and distance strikes me as a hallmark of MacDonell's work, the push and pull between wanting to know/feel/identify with something specific, while also striving to comprehend the larger systems of meaning that thing moves within. The difficulty is being able to hold both in your mind simultaneously, the micro and macro. It is through that simultaneity that MacDonell traces the underlying order of images, a scheme of pictorial being-in-the-world that can be approached, but never fully understood, though other modes of representation.

Descriptions of MacDonell's projects do little justice to their complexity and ambiguity. A prolific researcher and writer, she incorporates her own wondering and references into her work and its framing; this is generous, but can also be opaque, especially from any distance. There are through lines in her practice that can be traced toward the particular unease and potential of *Holding Still // Holding Together*.

The Toronto Reference Library's Picture Collection has been a continued source of inspiration for MacDonell. Consisting of over one million images, carefully clipped and sorted by librarians into over 32,000 index headings, the collection feels like a beautiful, archaic folly in a post-Google Images world. For her 2012 exhibition "Originality and the Avant Garde" at Mercer Union in Toronto, MacDonell drew from the "Reflections" and "Mirrors" folders, arranging groups of images on her studio wall to be photographed. These images of images were further duplicated within the exhibition itself, reflected on the mirror-clad exterior of a camera obscura, just as they were inverted and faintly thrown onto its darkened interior, where they made yet another appearance in the background of a projected video. Through this chain of facsimile, and kind of picture echo chamber, MacDonell questions the Avant Garde's originality obsession with an articulation of meaning's utter dependence on repetition. As the artist explains:

> "Appropriation has always seemed to me the most direct way to decenter the subject and enlarge the conversation; the person, or the landscape, or the still life in the image is no longer central to the work. The work becomes about representation itself, which has always seemed to me a more interesting conversation."[5]

Trace the line of each limb to its conclusion

For her 2014 project *Pictures Become Objects, Objects Become Events*, MacDonell undertook a month-long residency at the Library, drawing from the Picture Collection to create a shifting vitrine display, evolving wall mural, and live performance. In one configuration, the vitrine was filled with reproductions of Dorothea Lange's famous photograph *Migrant Mother*, 1936, which became a powerful symbol of poverty and perseverance during the Great Depression. Attempts to connect the picture back to its subject, Florence Owens Thomson, showed how images cleave from their sources, snowballing, through endless iterations and interpretation, into icons and archetypes. In the mural, images were fixed to the wall in accumulating, overlapping layers. Added images created meaning with those below them, which they also obscured. Each constellation of meaning or formal relationship was altered by a new addition. For something to be gained, some things need to be lost.

MacDonell's video work *The Fortune Teller*, 2015, opens with a slow, silent pan over images of hands—gripping, caressing, gesturing—from

Bone, muscle and flesh are conspiring here

a variety of times, places, and contexts. An impassive voiceover begins to read out an art conservator's "object assessment" of a cast resin hand from an antique fortune-telling machine, detailing the effects of age, injury and decay. Cut to a scene of hands covering another hand in white paint, creating a living copy of the object, which is soon obscured by footage from the conservator's studio. Through her treatment, the resin hand transforms from shattered relic to gleaming oracle, but at a certain point the film flips and plays in reverse, superimposed, with time moving both forwards and back. Next, rapid flashes of clips intersperse and chaotically mash together, a dizzying flow of actions and stages (the sound at this point is like channel scanning static). In the surreal final scene, the painted flesh-and-blood double, its natural counterpart, and the resin original caress one another, gliding across a wooden surface. In this movement an odd slippage occurs, blurring distinctions of real and fake, present and past, animate and inanimate. That the object itself signifies prescience, *knowing* the future, lends a heightened sense of temporal instability to this undoing and remaking.

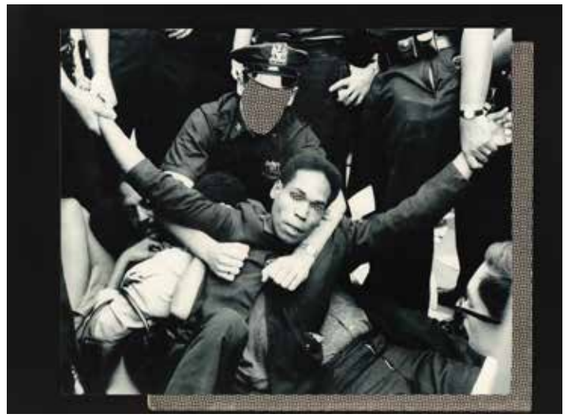
Collapsing time and space was also the explored in MacDonell's series of photographs "Flatness, Light, Black & White," 2013. An afternoon spent photographing in a barbershop becomes a meditation on images in the digital age. Interiors become testing grounds for a variety of digital effects: fractured perspectives, compression, flatness, and transparency. Moments of recognition, of subject and genre, are nearly drowning in contrast and patterned spatial confusion. In relation to this series, MacDonell wrote: "Everything is accessible, potentially navigable in every direction, at any time, simultaneously and forever. The actual horizon is a mirage, just as discrete images are an illusion wrenched by force from the continuous stream that floods our lives from multiple sources at all moments."[6] Any stillness—particles on a piece of paper, a frame on a wall, a book in a vitrine—is a form of artifice and deception. MacDonell's apprehension with the passage of time is intimately wound with the futility of fixing and controlling images; she offers that in trying to slow them down we can learn something of their cadence and force.

In a talk titled, "How Can an Authentic Response to the Imposed Disaster of Contemporary Life be Constructed?" MacDonell unpacked some of the ethical quandaries the protest-inspired work holds for her.[7] The title of the talk refers to a question asked in a variety of ways by the American artist Doug Ashford, and MacDonell draws in particular from his text "Empathy and Abstraction." In it, Ashford considers the binary of abstraction and naturalism/literalism in art and their attendant associations of removal/indifference and empathy/love. MacDonell explains, "Ashford then goes on to validate abstraction as an equally essential mode, one that allows us to, in his words, 'experience ourselves in concert with the world, unstable, experimental and provisional.'"[8] If *Holding Still // Holding Together* formalizes its subject matter, which is itself an abstraction, can it likewise reveal larger truths about humanity? MacDonell proposes that something can be discovered in the geometry of these bodies: "Trace the line of each limb to its conclusion. […] Bone, muscle and flesh are conspiring here. They are describing the complex conditions under which we are bound up together."[9]

Even as she first began gathering the protest images, MacDonell had many reservations about using them for a project. There's a gulf between the relative peace of the images and the chaotic situations they spring from. They are misleading in their collective representation of protestor/authority interactions (which are often extremely violent). The presence of the camera itself shapes that misrepresentation—people are less likely to abuse their power if they're being watched. Other questions arose for me, too: What of the photographers and their bodies? How do they so easily disappear? What motives and technologies control how these images are circulated and seen? It is counterintuitive to think about these images in terms of neutrality, but that is what their studied remove seems to coat them in.

MacDonell is conscious of how this subset of images rests on socio political factors, which should not go unacknowledged. The settings are predominantly in North America and Europe; non-violent protest is less of a mortal risk in societies with human rights protections. While the protestors are diverse in age, gender and race, the authorities are predominantly (though not exclusively) young, white and male. *Holding Still // Holding Together* intentionally erases these distinctions: the performers are all dressed in neutral, non-descript athletic clothing, they're all about the same age and not overly disparate in physical size and strength. This allows them to seamlessly cycle through iterations and roles, amplifying the confusion that creeps into the original acts and images (Who, truly, has the power and control? Does the mutual dependency of each position amount to something like trust and tenderness, underneath all the conflict?).

In the current political climate, spectatorship has become an increasingly uncomfortable proposition. After the US election, and in the continually deepening sense of chaos, many artists expressed feelings of futility—the irrelevance of aesthetic contemplation in the face of so much upheaval and injustice. Others felt their work in the studio was all the more urgent and necessary. MacDonell admits that she questioned "what it meant to pull these scenes off the streets and into the safety and seclusion of the gallery."[10] I tripped over this misgiving at first, as it seemed to characterize galleries as dispassionate and protectionist spaces. Thinking about it more, I couldn't recall a time that I'd really felt *unsafe* in one, but I also don't see them as somehow separate from the violent systems



of power and control that shape our reality. Writing on the efficacy of art, philosopher Jacques Rancière stated:

"We no longer think of art as one independent sphere and politics as another, necessitating a privileged mediation between the two—a "critical awakening" or "raised consciousness." Instead, an artistic intervention can be political by modifying the visible, the ways of perceiving it and expressing it, of experiencing it as tolerable and intolerable."[11]

This strikes me as an apt description of Annie MacDonell's larger undertaking. There is something inherently violent about the formation of images. They separate, flatten, mutate, and lie. They enforce power differentials between photographer, subject and viewer. We are constantly recognizing and forgetting all of this, which is why we need their visibility to be constantly modified. By stilling, mirroring, exposing and reversing, MacDonell reveals the ways in which images' own power and precariousness are tightly bound together.

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Notes:

1. "Notes for Performers," text written as preparatory notes for the performers who collaborated on the project *Holding Still // Holding Together* (2016).

2. *She is spitting a mouthful of stars* is co-curated by Lori Blondeau, Executive Director of Tribe Inc., and Tarin Hughes, Executive Director of AKA artist-run, and is a collaboration between the two organizations. Artists featured in the project are Amy Malbeuf, Annie MacDonell, Goth Shakira, Gregory Scofield, and Adrian Stimson.

3. MacDonell, "Notes for Performers." Performers featured in the project were Emma-Kate Guimond, Luke Garwood, Benjamin Kamino, Kate Holden, Simon Portigal, and Danah Rosales.

4. Emma-Kate Guimond, Luke Garwood, Benjamin Kamino, Kate Holden, Simon Portigal, Danah Rosales, and to Ame Henderson

5. Annie MacDonell in "Originality and the Avant Garde (On Art and Repetition): Interview with Annie MacDonell," by Joan Lillian Wilson. www.mercerunion.org.

6. Annie MacDonell, www.anniemacdonell.ca.

7. Annie MacDonell, ""How Can an Authentic Response to the Imposed Disaster of Contemporary Life be Constructed?," artist talk delivered on January 19, 2017 at the University of Saskatchewan.

8. Ibid.

9. MacDonell, "Notes for Performers."

10. Ibid.

1**1.** Quoted by Ben Davis in "How Political Are Aesthetic Politics?," *9.5 Theses on Art and Class* (Chicago: Haymarket Books, 2013), 69. Original source: Jacques Rancière, interviewed by Fulvia Carnevale and John Kelsey, "Art of the Possible," Artforum, March 2007, 258-259.