

*Understanding Systems Around You (the body as one) Through the Devices of Post-Minimalism
and Contemporary Abstraction at the Laundromat*

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Preface

I met the love of my life at the laundromat today.

(12:15) Washer 53, my perennial, is currently out of order. Alas, I had to shift my Sunday routine to the parallel left-hand side of Laundry Palace. While I was writing that sentence, a woman in fitted camo leggings and a neon orange long sleeve shirt slid nearest me and touched her hand on my shoulder.

“Shit, 53’s out?”

Without missing a beat, I responded with a regrettably millennial “IKR” and returned to my journal. An important detail about 53 is that it is the largest washer at Laundry Palace; it is a “Speed Queen Commercial Washer Big Load” and there is only one other like it, Washer 54. Twenty-eight minutes left on 54. I was fortunate enough to snag 54 near minutes prior to her entrance. She came back shortly after and directly behind my ear processed about 90 coins. With the coin haul in hand, she divided her belongings into 46, 47, and 48 all bordering the right side of the mat and 39, which sits at the center. She uses a combination of “Arm & Hammer,” “Snuggles” (the blue one with the teddy bear on it), and Tide Bleach - all liquid.

I have my studio clothing in 38 and my sheets and standard clothing in 54. Next to my 38 clothes spins her smaller haul – a combination of tan pants, red Nike tennis shoes, lots of black clothing, and a teal sock or undergarment. Next to that in 40, are the canvas drop cloths of the man sitting right next to me. They are all beige heavy-weight cotton with white and blue paint stains on them. One has a sewn blue teal banner that matches the teal pair of underwear in 39. He is either chewing on gum or on the flesh of his inner cheek – he is wearing all red true-blue Carhartt Double Knee Heavyweight Carpenter Work Denim and a pair of beige leather construction boots. I am wearing work boots as well but with bright white canvas coveralls and a black hoodie. Today the laundry machine is filtering out weeks of studio debris, sweat, spit up from my niece, and a stale scent of perfume from hugging my friend who wears a riff of something Palo Santo; the filtration system will take it all away.

(12:29): Fifteen minutes left on 54 and eight minutes left on 38. I receive a text from my mother.

“Morning kiddos. Just got off the phone with Robin. Dialysis yesterday yielded no results, so they are trying again today. It takes 10 hours because his blood is so full of toxins that it keeps clogging the system. Everything has to get shut down, cleaned out and restarted. He apparently went into cardiac arrest when he arrived at the hospital. Steve is on full-on life support. His organs are shutting down. She said he has 60 tubes, bells and whistles attached to him. They need to wait a few more days to figure out if he has any chance of improvement.”

The woman with 46, 47, 48, and 39 is now sitting next to a man I presume to be a loved one of hers. He has sat next to her for the last 18 minutes, his heavily tattooed arms crossed, I like the way he keeps looking at her. He only looks at her for a brief moment, once she meets his gaze, he looks down at his hands with that remanent smile. I speculate that they have not known one another exceptionally long, or perhaps are just feeling particularly light today; soft touches of the arm, held eye contact, and more smiling than I have seen yet here at Laundry Palace.

(1:48): It’s been a moment since I wrote, I was distracted listening to those around me. Sixteen minutes to go on the second cycle of Dryer 55 (studio clothes and standard ware are combined to press dry). A friend texted me:

“Sad today.
Hard to pinpoint crying and trying to parse thru
Maybe just filtering through things”

Sparingly there is a quiet sense of calm that washes over this environment; it happens when the washing and drying machines synchronize to be in tandem with one another and spin at once. It is a chorus and what is left after an orchestral hum is only the pitch reverberated in the walls of the faint memory (likely off-key) of what it meant in that moment. I wonder again if they (46/47/48/39 and her other half) have known one another for a long time and are just synching up again.

(2:02): Two minutes left on Dryer 55. There are fourteen people in here now—it has become quite busy.

The energy is climbing, the chairs are being taken, there are not as many tables available for folding. He (46/47/48/39’s other) still has his arms crossed and she (46/47/48/39) is more generous with her eye contact. She is still looking at him as I type, smiling. Someone new with three suitcases full of laundry (white sheets and wet towels) puts a full load of laundry into Washer 53. As a reminder, Washer 53 is the largest washer at Laundry Palace; it is a “Speed Queen Commercial Washer Big Load” and it has only one other like it, Washer 54. We have been through this before. 46/47/48/39 looked directly at me; we understood what was happening. The new girl was not in on the joke 53 was playing on today’s Laundry Palace cohort. We both got up at the same time and, together, helped her transfer the white sheets and wet towels into the open and functioning Washer 54. She was appreciative of our gesture of collectivity. We look out for one another here at the Laundry Palace.

(2:04): Dryer 55 is done, and I need to fold.

As I fold, I remind myself that the weeks prior to this moment have been washed away, taken from my belongings, and pressed dry. The washer and dryer pair are simply a filtration system. While they are commonplace, they help me to better understand less commonly used ways of filtering out toxins associated with the body. While you cannot wash the blood of your kidneys with a Speed Queen Commercial Washer Big Load, you can imagine the link. If 53 shuts down that is okay because there is Washer 54 next to it. However, if 53 shuts down *with* a broken coin machine (which was out when I was

here last week), and 54 is taken, then she (46/47/48/39) would not have been able to do her laundry. She would not have warmed up to meet her other's gaze throughout the hour and a half she was at Laundry Palace. We would not have been able to help the woman with three suitcases of white sheets and wet towels together. The system would be clogged. Everything would shut down. The bells and whistles would need to be replaced, and she would have to wait a few more days.

I did not meet the love of my life at the laundromat today, but that is not the ultimate romantic encounter. I sit alone at the Laundry Palace each Sunday with my headphones in, assigning my own romantic narrative of the interactions around me as I watch the orchestra of Laundry Palace play through its score. What happened here today is more romantic – the flaws of the system worked to our favor and allowed for a select few quiet, kind, interactions amongst strangers.

A week later I returned to my perennial Washer 53, it had been repaired. Steve did pass away (because his kidney was not the only apparatus that needed repair), my friend was feeling better, and there was an all beige heavy-weight cotton drop cloth with white and blue paint stains left in the Laundry Palace's "Lost and Found."

Cloying

Desperately, longingly, philosophically, or academically, understanding what is around us systemically serves as a coping mechanism. So much of contemporary art and theory center around not only *how* we place ourselves but *what on earth to do with it all*. Cloying, researching, critiquing, and attempting to activate change in the existing structures around us helps to make our place within them palatable, soft, meaningful. It becomes a compulsion at one point akin to a bodily fixation (picking, scraping, touching the surface of skin) to understand and release the blood beneath it all. I believe that the body is our first, closest, most accessible layer to begin interpreting what is around us, an inseparable connection as I try to understand the futility and deterioration of my own body through the extension of exterior, daily structures, like the laundromat or a construction site.

Merleau-Ponty stressed the active role of phenomenology in the human body as a necessary device for perceiving the world. I equate the word "device" as not solely a tool but as a factor of approximation (a ruler, as a removable extension of the arm to reach out to something you are longing for) – we are able to reach more with their employment, our armor.

If I survey what is around me to be potential, kinetic, devices that have been unconsidered for use, I look to the materials around me (including my own body) which present themselves on the day-to-day. Merleau-Ponty points to your own existence as a moment of the world's, one that is both naive and dishonest at the same time, *because* it is often taken for granted.¹ When I consider what is taken for granted around me, I look to the ground beneath me: concrete sidewalks, discarded weeds that stick through the fabric of the street, shallow puddles of rainwater, and detritus of daily life (discarded receipts, beverage caps, and used condoms) and all that hums around it that we take *as is*. The conditions that produce these remnants, the need for efficient transport, the obscene amounts of waste we produce, the desire and privilege to be able to walk on paved sidewalks in a specific afforded neighborhood, all stem

¹ Merleau-Ponty, Preface ix. "Without explicitly mentioning it, the other point of view, namely that of consciousness, through which from the outset a world forms itself around me and begins to exist for me. While this could be some sort of chicken vs egg scenario (with the trust that we are formed from the conditions around us) it reminds me that we both exist for and around our world, so we must consider ourselves as a device of it while we are a device it is employing.

from the systems of preconditions under capitalism that we not only operate within but attempt to find meaning within.²

I believe that it is *sensation* which ties the exterior systems of the world around us to the body—the ways we *feel* the world around us. My physical body is the device that prohibits, drives, houses and enables my ability to interact with the world. It is the tool I can use, and within it is housed its own devices for understanding: the senses. I feel the anxious sweat on my skin when my neighbor in line at TSA stands too close at the same level of intensity that my heart beats deeper when I watch two loved ones say goodbye at Departures from my car (both stories of proximity). If art employs, exploits, or even attempts to reach at others' perception of the senses, then it is a viable, unexpiring, access point to this drive to understand systemic relationships between interiority and exteriority. This pursuit is not rooted in the ability to suss out individual parts of systems for their own individual meaning, but to meet at the convergence point where they all attempt to come together (parts to a whole, skin and blood).³

“To understand these transubstantiations, we must go back to the working, actual body—not the body as a chunk of space or a bundle of functions but that body which is an intertwining of vision and movement.”⁴ It is the body which holds the answers to our futile attempts to understand our surroundings. Our relationship to our own bodies can serve as the key to unlock that which we are not understanding in our day-to-day routes: the ability to touch, understand, and feel seen in our pursuit, oscillating through the world, parallels our perseverance to overcome the continual failure of our bodily systems and the human perseverance to continue. Artists' work that calls for a viewer's acknowledgement of both systems (interior and exterior body) can begin to test doorknobs. Through this writing I will look toward two, Eva Hesse and Mimosa Echard, through a Pontian lens.

Melodrama

If the world around us responds to the vessels we reside within, then there is flesh, blood, mucus, and hair all around us that makes-up and encases the objects we touch and adds to the debris beneath our feet. The world is made up of the very stuff of the body and something about that to me feels in direct conversation with our interpersonal relationships.⁵ If I can argue that quiet objects and materials of our day-to-day hold a power that pulls us in with an intense gravity, then this can be seen even more drastically in the melodramatic, all-encompassing factors of love, anger, sex, touch, and longing that are impregnated within our intrapersonal relationships.

While she was often described as holding an ambivalent, and admittedly apathetic, position of her body within her work, Eva Hesse straddled this parallel of intrapersonal interpretation effectively. If minimalism employed the industrial materials of our surroundings for form exclusively, the post-minimalist Hesse utilized and understood its devices as a void to *inject* that of the human, sexual, intimate, absurd, back into its stable ground floor – a flake of dry skin stuck to your cheek. To understand her sculptures, viewers must look inside, look down, look deeper within, and importantly distance

² “But the relations between subject and world are not strictly bilateral: if they were, the certainty of the world would, in Descartes, be immediately given with that of the *Cogito*, and Kant would not have talked about his ‘Copernican revolution,’” (Merleau-Ponty, Preface x).

³ “Not Knowing” by Donald Barthelme, pg. 19-20. The argument is made that it is not two interdependent objects or beings are not of intrigue solely because of their interactions with one another, or their relationship to one another, but that their relation both invites and refutes interpretation (they are so complexly intertwined, they are unknown).

⁴ (Merleau-Ponty, *Eye and Mind*, pg. 2)

⁵ “Things are an annex or prolongation of itself; they are incrustated in its flesh; they are part of its full definition; the world is made of the very stuff of the body. These reversals, these antinomies, are different ways of saying that vision is caught off becomes to be in things—in that place where something visible undertakes to see, becomes visible...” (Eye and Mind, Merleau-Ponty, pg. 3).

themselves from their material content to get to the conceptual significance of *why* they are there and how they relate back to the artist herself.⁶ This behavioral navigation from the viewer is as layered as the artist's interpersonal relationships which were widely described to be just as complex.

I see Hesse's work in those equated layers; first as understanding your body through material. Hesse utilized ephemeral materials as a projection of the imminent mortality that romanticizes the same autobiographical read she continuously tried to avoid.⁷ The internal systems of the body present and communicate themselves through devices of transparency and fleshy media that are unavoidably linked. Following this poetic material Hesse is also utilizing the assemblage, absurd installation, and blatant abstraction to work through those intrapersonal relationships. The third phase would then be to utilize the findings of unpacking these intense, complex, relationships to understand the world around her. By omitting excessive detail, relying on abstraction and a nulled palette, she can retain an *alternative* perception of the world that is both vulnerable and rigid all at once, private/exposed, sexual/reserved, thorny/soft-bellied.

There are objects around us that can obtain this double-edged meaning like Bull Thistle – a plant that grows from resilient conditions, pricks you upon initial touch, but yields a sweet, healing, soft center that can only be accessed with controlled patience and undivided attention. The sting of the thistle needle is a repetitive action, a prick creating a scab, a compulsive obsessive tactic no less employed than Hesse's obsessive repetitive tactics. Hesse utilized these compulsive repetitions to subvert the viewer to consider their own repressed obsessive desires – there is a sexually charged energy behind this, lined with protection when the viewer cannot in fact touch the work.

Through kinder eyes, repetition is a passionate pursuit – to turn something over again and again to attempt to understand it, or to end up understanding it better after the Nth try. What is repeated will be learned differently and better each time. There is always the next go, of course, and we can never give enough attempts (futile, yes, sincere, yes). If interpreting the world around us through making can help to uncover our external world just a little, and if the dangling carrot of purpose, place, and understanding is being held at our neck, we will continue try and try again.⁸

A Pit in Your Stomach Will Grow a Cherry Tree

Translucency, spores, decay, and sexuality, in the multiple, hone in as one device through the practice of Mimosa Echard. If I can reference Merleau-Ponty's link to the body as a proxy for understanding systems around you, Echard communicates this through the attempt to understand biological systems (natural phenomena). In opposition, or perhaps building from post-minimalist abstraction, her contemporary anthropomorphic abstraction hones in on the memory of materials, making them human-like. Her materials list ranges from humble found media that she comes across in her studio or daily routes (found objects ranging from suction cups to fake pistils) to obscure plant and specimen remains that also typically go unnoticed (mosquito nets, egg balls, seed beads). This selected media that accumulates to become her material palette all feels quite *of the body*, at least the *intimate body*. The intimate body being what is reminiscent of internal systems, sex organs, holes, and the blood that lies beneath the shell of surface skin.

⁶ Pg 7, "Accession II: Eva Hesse's Response to Minimalism," by Anne Swartz, Bulletin of the Detroit Institute of Arts, 1997, Vol. 71, No ½ (1997), pp 36-47

⁷ Pg 8, "Eva Hesse and Mira Schendel: Voiding the Body — Embodying the Void," Denise Birkhofer, Woman's Art Journal Fall/Winter Vol. 31, no. 2, pp. 3-11.

⁸ Pg 4, Eye and Mind. "What interests me in all paintings is likeness—that is, what likeness is for me: something that makes me uncover the external world a little," (Giacometti).

On intimacy, when asked the question of whether there is some sort of autobiographical dimensionality to the work, she avoids the inquiry (as I believe Hesse would have if asked today). In Echard's words, "I wouldn't say it is especially autobiographical, but there are always traces of 'me' in my work, more or less explicit, for example the photo glued to the surface, or various objects attached to the beaded sculptures...from my time in Japan or just everyday objects found in the studio."⁹ She notices moments and signifiers of a personal lived experience and attaches them to her installations in a way that feels nearly monolithic, distant, or a stand-in for any(body), just as her natural materials (seed pods, cherry pits) reach nearly banal proportions. She takes a strong stance of ambiguity in her materials, stating in a later interview that there is *no* harmonic presence between the living and non-living but instead a rolling state of moments within an ambiguous state (a small window into the reality of something).¹⁰

If I consider Hesse's work in three Pontian layers (understanding your body through material, utilizing absurd materials to emulate intense interpersonal relationships, and using those intrapersonal relationships to stand-in for the systems around her), I'd argue that Echard's work exists already within these three phases but looks more gleamingly toward a fourth: blending them all together at once to imagine hybrid-ecosystem where our human and non-human systems blend and agitate one another. It is critical here to note that Echard's work began from a perspective of eco-consciousness. In Lefebvre's *Critique of Everyday Life*, he argues that we are unable to 'seize human facts' because we fail to see where they exist in their humble, familiar, everyday objects - sometimes the search for 'the human' takes us too far, too deep, we seek them out in the clouds or in the mysteries, whereas it is waiting for us (in the everyday) besieging us on all sides.¹¹ In this immensely accumulative, nearly scientifically geared, collection of gooey media, Echard attempts to take the daily (natural and synthetic) from all sides.

Back Inward at the Barrel

I wonder with what approach, hesitantly, Hesse would have handled the 'synthetic,' in the way that I cannot reckon with approaching the technological layer in my own studio practice. I question if ephemeral media is a stand-in for what would have been the synthetic, plastic, and pseudo-natural technologically fabricated media in contemporary abstraction. If I turn the lens back inward, I see myself palatably in both artists as I collect, obsess, and attempt to pry open the relationship to why my own body is inherently linked (or perhaps the missing link) to understanding my being, besieging me on all sides. It is the personal, intimate, sexual, protective, bloody, and scabbed over intrapersonal interactions that have produced me. That is the link between the interest of unpacking systems as banal as the infrastructure of a sidewalk panel. Is this where I lose you?

Similarly to the employment of organic media in both Hesse & Echard's work, I am currently attempting to violently and curiously dissect precious plant life (extracting seeds and breaking down *Craspedia* bulbs) to adorn solid-cast concrete sculptures. The *Craspedia* plants were grown by my mother over three years. They are self-fertile plants that are intolerant to only very fertile and acidic soils (tumultuous relationships, perhaps). The plant cannot be ingested and offers no medical qualities but are generally

⁹ CoBo Social, Herbert Wright, "On the Axis of the Natural and the Artificial: In Conversation with Mimosa Echard," July 25, 2022.

¹⁰ DSCENE, Katarina Doric, "Exclusive Interview with Artist Mimosa Echard," July 4, 2022. When asked the question, 'In your hybrid eco-systems, the living and the non-living organisms coexist in some sort of harmony, which is not always the case IRL, what is the message you want to convey?' 'She recoiled and noted that you cannot pinpoint harmony in such a viscous system, she is trying to escape the simplicity of binaries and exist between them (the natural/synthetic, the clean/dirty).

¹¹ Henri Lefebvre, *Critique of Everyday Life*, p. xxiv. This quote is Lefebvre's commentary on a passage from a book by Marc Bloch.

non-toxic to humans. The seeds themselves will be injected, placed, into drilled holes in solid-cast concrete disks and pillars. This process is a direct act of (somewhat violently) destroying something beautiful to inject sincerity into another, rigid being. I am considering if it is an act of losing oneself, of losing the sweetness, only to find it popping up in other places. – It feels akin to a weed popping up through the repaired sidewalk crack and equally reminiscent of closing the door of a relationship to find a connection opening elsewhere. When a weed penetrates and causes cracks through a sidewalk — something that was built to support our bodies in the industrial landscape—it is simultaneously the natural landscape beneath it that is healing itself. The relationship of covering up what is natural with something of utility, nature then reasserting itself, and the subsequent cycles of constructive repair which will follow, is a never-ending loop.

To queer use can be to linger on the material qualities of that which you are supposed to pass over; it is to recover a potential from materials that have been left behind, all the things you can do with paper if you do not follow the instructions (Ahmed, Queer Use, 208)

If it is longing, lingering, waiting, and drawing from the everyday that will continue to tether me, then it will be these same devices which I will use in my own personal relationships. Seminally, Bran Kuan Wood's *Is It Love?*, reminds me that drawing from our romantic and intimate relationships, as I look to Hesse's, is not an option. It is instead one of the only ways we can sustain meaning, freely, within capitalism. There is no option but to look at our friendships, crushes, intimate/sexual encounters as they are the only things that are free and bountiful. It is not to equate meaning in an economic sense, but to discuss how necessary it is to sustain meaning in this life from a purely ontological, semantic sense (for support, for solidarity, for affective bliss), "kisses and compliments cost nothing and mean everything."¹²

I will draw back to the beginning of this writing: desperately, longingly understanding that what is around us serves as a coping mechanism. I am defining coping mechanisms as the necessary compulsions required to navigate tumultuous emotive conditions. Bodily compulsions as coping mechanisms can manifest when you are not paying attention to self-soothe (a squeeze of your own arm to emulate warmth or caress) or become harmful addictive tendencies that still come from the same place of needing to grab whatever is in front of you to bring you back into your body (like pinching yourself out of a bad dream). If I apply this logic to navigating day-to-day exterior systems, it will start like this: these exterior compulsions can manifest when you are not paying attention to soothe the perspective your environment like painting strangers at the laundromat to be lovers to make the required task meaningful, and I am not sure yet where it would end. With this, I question if understanding and romanticizing do, in fact, already exist on the same parallel track. Waiting for the dryer cycles to synchronize, scratching at a scar on your wrist, slamming the brakes in your car, feeling the soft spot on your ear, putting coins into the parking meter, quickly grazing the hand of a crush, swallowing water, checking the weather, putting on chapstick, folding laundry.

Hesse needed to understand her failing, expiring body to make sense of her world reflective of it. Echard must understand the next phase, a new option, or a fourth layer of our current blended world to persevere onward. I am currently utilizing my body as a latchkey to understand structure, systems of rigidity, protection, and what is overlooked or attributed to surface scaring. If there is a way to challenge or *reach an understanding* that the allowance of multiple layers existing *all at once* (cold/warm, sweet/harsh, intimate/grand), then I will turn back again to Wood. He claims that, through the lens of love, the final form ("phase" for the purpose of this writing) can be accessed not in the infrastructural bonds around us

¹² Brian Kuan Wood, "Is It Love?," *What Has Love Got to Do With It?*, Eflux Publications, p. 18-20). Wood quotes "All that is capital melts into love. Love is the most recently introduced member in the family of inflation and bloat...we are all in debt, love abounds!"

but in the melting and reforming of the personal and loving bonds.¹³ I want to argue that it can be both, but I am still working toward it. There is a resistance, rebuttal, and queering in the refusal to accept the conditions around us *as is* but to force upon them (violently and cloyingly) a perspective of sincerity as akin to forcing a future narrative fastened in a lab.¹⁴

¹³ Ibid., pg. 22.

¹⁴ CoBo Social, Herbert Wright, “On the Axis of the Natural and the Artificial: In Conversation with Mimosa Echard,” July 25, 2022.