

Anti-Ekstasis

In *Come Close* verse fragment 31,¹ Sappho describes the loss of her senses, how one after the other exhausts, until only her self remains, unveiled. Sappho's moment of uncovered self, of being emptied out in front of her self, maybe even of being outside of herself, is described by Anne Carson as a state of *ekstasis* [from Greek: 'to be or stand outside oneself']—a state that the Greek attributed to geniuses, the mentally ill and lovers.² This unveiled, uncovered and somehow freed self is a condition relevant to contact with virtual figures.³ There is a shared consent, a contributing momentum to be discovered. Meeting with virtual figures as practised in *INTRA SPACE* asks you to lay bare and to re-align⁴ together with a technical, engineered Other. This Other is not a single being, but rather a multiplicity of beings. Coming close is a physical practice of reduced senses, yet reduced only in comparison to the way you had learned to know them. The senses are not dismissed, but externalised and therefore actually heightened, unfamiliar to your system of reading and interpreting the world around you. Lost senses are compensated for, becoming external eyes, distant ears, and untouched skins. These externalised visual,

auditive and tactile senses are linked through movement in space. These movements are shared among machines, apparatuses, screens, humans, lenses, others. The diversity of agencies contributing to this shared sensing state develops into a collective 'being outside oneself' or corrupting the previously unveiled, causing an inversion, a kind of *Anti-Ekstasis*.

Preparation for Donning—Skin

Close your eyes and arrive in your body. Let both of your eyes rest heavy in their sockets. Relax your jaw, soften your internal gaze for a moment. Concentrate on your breathing. After a while, start to sense the boundary of your body, your skin. Maybe how with each inhalation and exhalation the fabrics of your clothing move along your skin's surface. Maybe how wrinkles in the textile around curvatures of your body expand and unfold again with each breath. Maybe how in body parts that form a hollow, the weight of the fabrics rests heavier. Maybe how the different textiles in different regions of your body create tensions or pulls. Maybe sense the effect of gravity on the different material surrounding your body. How it is enveloping

some parts according to their shapes more than others. Notice how in regions where there is less air circulation—closeness of skin and textiles—heat is created. Observe whether there are parts of your body that are forced into a particular form or posture even because of the piece of clothing. Can you relax into a piece of clothing, can it become a structural support. Then move to the portions of your skin that are not covered, but are open to the air. Can you sense the transition from clothing to uncovered skin parts. Is the sensation of air or even a breeze, a modest turbulence, perceivable in these unveiled areas.

Donning

This exercise is done in a standing position. The first instant of a second you are alone, standing with your legs hip-width apart and your arms extended to the sides, a little lower than shoulder level, and bent at the elbows to the front. This position is the so-called ‘T-pose’ and recognised as the starting position by the system.⁵ This position is held for a moment, so the

system has time to capture (register?) you. While going step by step through this initial greeting procedure, think about the three-dimensionality of your body, about all the directions your body can extend into in space. Begin. Slowly and accurately bend the large joints of your body, one after the other. The order is irrelevant, you could start by bending your hip joints, as if bowing to the front. Rise up again, then bend at your elbows, straighten again. Lift your arms above your shoulders, like a big wave, and lower again to the starting position. This movement can also involve a rotation, for example. Then, bend both of your knees and straighten again, then lift one leg to the side or back, bent at the knee. Lower again. Shift your weight to the other leg, lift and bend it. Return to standing on both legs. Maybe at the end, nod forward once with your head. By then the registration process should be completed.

After this brief welcome ritual, the virtual figure or the system and you are bound together. Your presence and your gestures initiate a coming closer of your body with



Fig. 1 *Hand camera* (Esther Balfe, Christina Jauernik rehearsing with two virtual figures on one screen, the virtual point of view is placed on Esther's right inner wrist facing away from her body). Still from video by Ludwig Löckinger, April 2017.



Fig. 2 *Venus, Cupid, Folly and Time* (re-enacted: Esther Balfe, Christina Jauernik) Photo: Christian Freude. January 2019. The position of the two intertwined bodies of Esther and Christina lying on the floor in the project space can be read as reference to Agnolo Bronzino's allegoric painting *Venus, Cupid, Folly and Time*, 1546 and re-used on the cover of Michel Feher, Ramona Naddaff, Nadia Tazi *Fragments for a History of the Human Body*, part 2, Zone Books, 1989.

engineered, technical being(s). It is a physical demonstration of your structural constitution that invites the Other in, you share and articulate with your physical abilities, your explicit rhythm, the time you take for each bone to be read, your interpretation of your own bodily three-dimensionality and positionality in space that will be the substrate for further establishing this relationship. What you lay bare, what you share will influence the refinedness and intimacy of your conversations to follow. A *pas-de-deux* with a companion that is yourself, but weightless, set in a world without horizon, sometimes upside-down, with fewer joints, but with higher, even unlimited degrees of freedom in motion in the ones they have, some with a hierarchy among them to prevent accidents. This shared receptiveness is at times distorted from your point of view; only as your eyes need to become accustomed to your new shared eyes, a constraint at first emerges into possibilities of unknown landscapes of yourself, translated by this externalised carrier of shared movements, very close to you, closer, interior, intimate, lost. No, indistinguishable.

What felt like an oscillating border between two or more entities can no longer be drawn, its localisation meaningless. The shared pulse is your exhaustion level and the streaming capacity, the latency of data transmission our most intimate moments. It is a coming close without touch, a distant contact of a quality that is formerly only realised through proximity between bodies. It is intimate because of its cultivation and care for something that is created through a sentient precision of closeness without actual touch or haptic experience.

I would like to end with a passage on ‘mediated intimacy’ in Pamela M. Lee’s

letter to Carolee Schneemann after her passing last March, printed in the June volume of *Texte zur Kunst*:⁶ “... a notion (...) [that] captures the sticky entanglements of mediated bodies, themselves intertwined in acts of mediation. (...) [navigating] the distance between the too-close and the too-far, where animal bodies—both human and other-than-human—breach and fuse with the platforms and technics that communicate, consolidate, and dissolve presence and positionality.”

1 “...
Because my tongue is shattered. Gauzy
Flame runs radiating under
My skin; all that I see is hazy,
My ears all thunder.

Sweat comes quickly, and a shiver
Vibrates my frame. I am more sallow
Than grass and suffer such a fever
As death should follow.

“...”

in: Sappho, ‘Come Close’, transl. by Aaron Poochigian. From, *Stung with Love: Poems and Fragments*. London: Penguin Books, 2009, p. 13.

2 Anne Carson, *Decreation. Gedichte, Oper, Essays*. transl. by Anja Utler Frankfurt am Main: S. Fischer Verlag, 2014, p. 169

3 These virtual figures are part of the artistic research project *INTRA SPACE*, led by Wolfgang Tschapeller from 2015–2017 at the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna, a project funded by the Austrian Science Fund FWF—PEEK (AR299–G21)

4 This initial process of ‘re-aligning’ with a virtual figure is called ‘donning’, from the Late Middle English contraction of *do on*. “To put on clothing” for example, describes the process of appropriation of the present body shape on to the template skeleton as defined in the motion-tracking software. This process which scales the bones and joints of the template skeleton to fit the proportions of the body present in the space takes approximately 3–5 seconds and, once completed, a simplified skeleton is assigned to this person, which will remain with them until they leave the space.

5 “System” refers to the real-time motion-tracking framework built during the research, see description of components in ‘Stillness in the System’.

6 Lee, Pamela M. ‘Carolee Schneemann (1939–2019)’, in *The Sea, Texte zur Kunst* (June 2019) Vol. 114, p. 233.