

h a u n t

*Studied Sentiments: A Look at Jennifer Doyle's Hold it Against Me:
Difficulty and Emotion in Contemporary Art*
by Kellie Lanham

As an art writer and curator, I am aware I have personal biases, art historical inclinations, and uncritical limitations. These limitations are undisclosed burdens; keeping them to myself, I often try to avoid writing about work that triggers uncomfortable feelings beyond my comprehension. Hoping to avoid cracks in my professional art academic façade, I have never publically announced my complete perplexity when it comes to art forms like poetry and other sentiment-driven narratives. While I have always suspected these sorts of disconnections might be common in my field, I was relieved to pick up Jennifer Doyle's *Hold it Against Me: Difficulty and Emotion in Contemporary Art* and find this occurrence validated on the first page:

Critic can be tone death; we can miss the pleasures others take, ignore the irritation that others feel. We can be willful and stubborn, blind to the dwindling relevance of those artists we love and indifferent to the emergence of new practices we don't understand. We all have limits that look pretty uncritical from most angles and we rarely know these limits until we encounter them.¹

Doyle makes this declaration not as an attack on critics, but in order to reveal the humanity behind the criticism. In a landscape where art criticism is ruled by dry, theoretical criticality, she asks us to reconsider our approach as sentimental, emotional beings. What follows are acute examinations of overtly emotion-driven works – including Ron Athey, Frank B, Carrie Mea Weems, and David Wojnaro-

¹ Jennifer Doyle, *Hold it Against Me: Difficulty and Emotion in Contemporary Art* (Durham & London: Duke University Press, 2013), 1. 1.

wicz – that ask us to consider their political and historical significance not in spite of their sentimentality, but because of it.

She sets off challenging this climate of cold analysis by introducing her own subjectivity as a critic, academic and avid art viewer; a tactic she uses throughout the book to demonstrate the truly difficult position of trying to maintain criticality in the face of explicit displays of emotion. Doyle recalls her anxiety and emotional response to scheduling and then eventually missing (perhaps intentionally) an appointment to take part in an intimate performance by the late English artist Adrian Howell. The performance was *Held* (2006-2007), a series of short intimate interactions (chatting over tea, holding hands, spooning) supposed to be shared by the artist and one participant. Doyle explains that, although she is an experienced performance spectator and participant, this work felt different. She could watch violent and sexual acts being done to the body, but the simplistic intimacy of *Held* proved an unanticipated challenge. The anxiety leading up to the work, and her eventual failure to partake in the actions, was an experience genuinely unique to her, exposing the unreality of unfeeling analysis. A work like *Held* calls us to enter into it through our emotional aptitude, making “the practice of criticism itself feel like trying to stand on shifting sands, for how we feel about a work of art changes, and our own experiences never match perfectly with those of other people.”²

With this fact of our fleeting subjectivity in the foreground, I continued to analyze my position within this genre of work (those that expose the “watery nature of emotion,”³ as Doyle describes it). As a way of illuminating the difficult space explicit emotional works occupy, Doyle deconstructs how three works – Aliza Shvarts’ *Untitled* (2008), Thomas Eakins’s *The Gross Clinic*, and Ron Athey’s *Incorruptible Flesh: Dissociative Sparkle* (2006) – operate historically, politically, and socially. When reading one of these case studies, I, too, began to struggle with managing my emotions in the face of criticality. The work is an unfinished (perhaps hypothetical) performance piece by Yale graduate student artist Aliza Shvarts, *Untitled*

² Ibid., 69.

³ Ibid.

(2008), in which she projected to perform artificial inseminations and then induce miscarriages/abortions continuously for a cycle of a year. The work would culminate in an installation documenting these events as her final thesis project.

Having encountered this work before, it still prompts an intuitive emotional response, leaving me to dismiss it as blatantly problematic. I can't exactly pinpoint the logic or reason behind this visceral reaction – I am Pro-Choice, favor leftist politics, and freedom of expressionism, particularly when it comes gender and feminism – but my response was, and for the most part remains, an uncritical and instinctive, “Gross!” Doyle expects this reaction and induces it to make a strategic point: when we dismiss the work because of its emotional difficulty we are completely conflating what Shvarts did with how our society has conditioned us to perceive abortion, perhaps missing the art altogether. The work at its core brings to light “the complexity of the reproductive body as an object of judicial, medical, and political discourse.”⁴ And, yes, there are extreme moments of naiveté on part of the artist (Doyle suggests Shvarts greatest error was overlooking her own entitlement as a woman with unlimited access to women's health care), but to completely dismiss this performance because of its difficult subject matter would be a misstep taken by an uncritical viewer, complicit to the socio-political milieu. Although my position on this piece is still unclear at best, Doyle's treatment of it began my investigation into the cultural climate that engendered these feelings of aversion, and question how they might be important to the work itself. The strength of Shvarts *Untitled* is in the cultural noise that surrounds it.

The artwork Doyle examines in *Hold it Against Me*, for the most, are performative acts that take place outside of large institutions, with little to do with avant-garde or art world critique. Mostly focused on the body, gender, queerness, and other similar socio-political issues, Doyle's citations are outside of the institution not just because of the subculture communities that created them, but also because of their blatant politics. The dismissal of these works by critics and their count-

⁴ Ibid., 33.



er-art historical position is due in large part to their concentration on personal issues. They evoke emotion, calls to action, and sometimes trouble; all of which government–run institutions hope to avoid. This book is at its most revealing when it demonstrates that maintaining the polemics of analytics versus emotions/ institution versus outsider means reducing and misrepresenting works based on their most essential part.

Doyle uses David Wojnarowicz’s *Untitled (Hujar Dead)* (1988-1989) as an example. The photographs in this nine-panel post–mortem portrait of Wojnarowicz’s friend and lover Peter Hujar were taken moments after he died of AIDS. With a long scroll of sentiment-filled text and images of red blood cells and sperm laid atop the photographs, this piece is both highly emotive and aesthetically noteworthy. Yet, trying to engage this work outside of the emotionally charged backdrop of the AIDS crisis or without considering his expressionist/quasi-punk aesthetic would be dire. For Doyle, “approaching this work as a critic, one is confronted immediately by a hesitation: to treat this work formally would seem to do it a kind of violence, to reduce its urgency to a question of style rather than a question of history or crisis.”⁵ To evaluate this work based purely on its sentimental value or its position with an aesthetic and theoretic history would be to completely misunderstand the multitude of viewpoints which it reaches out to.

⁵ Ibid., 129.

Coming away from this text, I may not have completely released my anxieties and trepidations around the emotional works that evade me, but I have begun reconsider *why* they evade me: social conditioning, personal experience, political inclinations, these may all be at play. At the core of this book is the notion that art writing and criticism doesn't need to be *either* critical *or* emotional. And, ultimately, the two do not have to be polemics, but, in fact, when we can learn to combine our critical and emotional faculties, we can become well-rounded viewers and thinkers:

There is a tendency in art criticism to feel that one must choose: style *or* politics, form *or* content.⁶

yet

'Serious, complex, and rigorous' criticism can be passionate and personal. Art can be hard and difficult and also saturated with feeling; this is true with writing about art as well. The rhetorical deployment of the personal and the emotional should not be assumed to be a retreat into an ahistorical, apolitical self; such explicit turns to emotion may in fact signal the politicization, the historicization of self and of the feelings through which that self takes shape in relation to others.⁷

Objective analysis and personal inclinations do not have to be mutually exclusive, and both are necessary for art criticism. What *Hold it Against Me* is calling for is a more studied viewership, in which we attempt to reconcile the formal with the informal, the critical with the visceral, and the didactic with the abstract. When this happens, we might be able to see past the difficulty of emotion in art.

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⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Ibid., 72.

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