

# OBJECTS THAT MATTER

*Bodies, Art, and Big Data*

KATHERINE BEHAR INTERVIEWED BY ANNA MIRZAYAN

*Katherine Behar's videos, performances, interactive installations, and writings explore gender and labor in digital culture. Associate Professor of New Media Arts at Baruch College, CUNY, Behar is the editor of Object-Oriented Feminism (University of Minnesota Press, 2016), author of Bigger than You: Big Data and Obesity (punctum books, 2016), and coeditor (with Emmy Mikelson) of And Another Thing: Nonanthropocentrism and Art (punctum books, 2016). We would like to thank Prof. Behar for her generosity and intellect.*

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Anna Mirzayan: This issue of *Chiasma* is interested in embodiment, so I am wondering what kinds of bodies matter to you, what you see as the matter of bodies, and whether there is something the matter with notions of embodiment?

Katherine Behar: Excellent questions! What kinds of bodies matter? To start, I'm interested in how object-oriented theory and feminist thinking both share in common the idea that *all* bodies matter. Different feminisms have differently stressed the significance of embodiment, but primarily for human subjects. This has led to an understandably vexed relationship with the objectification of human bodies—and yes, I think there is something “the matter” with

that anthropocentric or subject-oriented notion of embodiment. Object-oriented feminism does not mean to shirk the real situation of objectification. Instead, it lets us *also* consider all objects as having bodies already in their thingness, apart from objectification. This opens the question of bodies to matter that moves through all different scales. In this sense, the bodies that matter are just that—matter—although I prefer a slightly less rarified term like “stuff.” Brought together in OOF, new materialist and object-oriented thinking ask that bodies be reconceived to maintain embodiment as a locus of feminist politics, but precisely by engaging the politics around objectification that marks bodies as such. In the same way that we might wish to expand our feminist solidarities, I am interested in expansively reconceiving the body to apply broadly to matter at all scales.

AM: What do you see as the matter of bodies—what makes up bodies? A very difficult question...

KB: That *is* a really hard question. I don't know that I will have a satisfactory answer, in part because I feel as though we're historically at a moment when a shift is underway, and this shifting makes that question an especially slippery one just now.

For example, one way to conceive of bodies is as having a wholeness to them, right? In this way of thinking about a body, it's something that has form, and there comes a point where the form of one thing ends and the next thing begins. You could put it this way: a body is a body that has a continuity with itself. But already that's not as simple as it sounds. For one thing, this continuity also encompasses diversity. For instance, the human body contains zillions of diverse parts (a philosopher might say “we contain multitudes”)—from organs to organisms and from elements to waste—and of course these parts also have bodies of their own. So a single body can contain diverse matter. But, just the same, if we can recognize any body as a body, it's because of its continuity of form.

One thing I've been thinking about lately is that this kind

of continuity—formal continuity—has a reference to the analog. A form, or a shape, or an expanse—whatever you want to call it—has its own wholeness, which we acknowledge in our willingness to recognize its contours, or its material consistency, or even its identity (a big word). That kind of continuity has an analog dimension. If the digital is a technology for dividing, then the wholeness of bodies—exactly their indivisibility—is both what “makes them up,” in answer to your question, and what makes them analog.

But I just mentioned a shift underway, and it’s this: one of the things that I think is happening currently, and that I am trying to engage with in the work I’m doing now, is that the digital may be infiltrating bodies. I mean, in a material sense, we’ve been cyborgs for a long time. Now, I am interested in an abstracted sense of infiltration, an infiltration in intuition. The digital is a way of dividing, of making things separate, discrete, and discontinuous, like the hard cut between one and zero. I think the analog continuity of bodies is becoming divided differently now. Bodies are becoming internally divided. And as a result, bodies are also gaining the potential for becoming externally or transbodily recomposed.

AM: What you were saying about infiltration and multiplicity, as opposed to thinking about the person or the figure as this one bounded thing, reminds me of the talk you gave, “Personalities Without People.” In that talk, you suggested something worrisome: that data profiles used by big companies for targeted advertising and political targeting of voters via their online presence were using the same principles being valorized by a lot of intersectional feminism. Could you talk about that connection as well as some alternative feminisms that might avoid this connection?

KB: Yes, in my research into the practices of data platforms like Facebook and Google, and data firms like Cambridge Analytica, I’ve observed what I see as a disturbing technical parallel with intersectionality. There’s a way in which data collection and data mining, which are core operations for the corporate mercenary capitalist tech sector, carry the same logics as intersectional femi-

nism. In both, the main idea is a complete accounting of individuals through as many different data points as possible, with the assumption that more data points, especially from unusual or improbable intersections, will better specify the complexity of an individual and better predict identity. So I posed a question in that talk, and I posed it partly in a tongue-in-cheek manner but also quite seriously—I asked whether intersectionality is “woke data-mining.”

I asked this because I think a founding principle—that we are constituted through many intersections of data points—is the same. Plus, they both presume the total disclosure of those data points. And through that disclosure, both arrive at a technical conception of identity as identifiability. More and more intersections of data points will produce a unique profile of an individual because the specific pattern of intersections is what uniquely defines identity. There are many things we could say about the underlying assumptions in conceiving identity through identifiability—not the least of which is that it takes as given that all individuals must render themselves fully transparent to data harvesting procedures that grow ever more obsessively minute.

Yet my main point in making this observation is not to say that this makes intersectional feminism bad or conversely that data mining could be a good thing because its principles are shared by intersectional feminists whose politics we may admire. I’m not interested in evaluating these things one way or the other. What I am interested in is how the same procedures appear across the board and on both ends of the political spectrum, so my sense is that it’s both and neither. In fact, I would say it’s a symptom of the same shift I was talking about earlier, from a continuous, analog body to a divided, fractured one.

In “Personalities Without People,”<sup>1</sup> I related this divisibility to the independence of secondary qualities in object-oriented theory. This is the idea that attributes of objects, which previously

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1 Behar, Katherine. “Personalities Without People,” Panel Presentation, *Tuning Speculation V: Vibratory (Ex)changes*. The Occulture, Toronto, Ontario, Canada, November 18, 2017.

marked objects' identities, are now objects in their own right. To take the example of human objects, secondary qualities like gender, race, class, nationality, and so on, are now radically detached from that class of objects we call subjects, which these attributes allegedly once defined. This is one way that analog bodies are becoming internally divided. And as their defining characteristics are stripped away, those attributes are reconstituted into transhuman metrics with their own political agency.

As you might guess, what I *would* critique or say is “bad” (in too coarse a term) is how in both contexts—intersectional feminism and corporate data mining—the reliance on the heightened detail and specificity of intersectional data profiles is being applied in ways that tend toward breaking down communication and commonality. Some recent intersectional debates have demanded matching data points as a precondition for the right to speak, resulting in a total breakdown of communication. It’s just like social media filter bubbles. I call this “intersectionality done badly,” though I want to be clear that I am a proponent of intersectional feminisms. While historically feminist, anti-racist, and anti-capitalist movements have all at times benefited from strategic autonomy, what troubles me in certain instances today is something that looks less like autonomy and more like dismissal.

There are many examples of this in art and academia, most often taking the form of calls for censorship that bluntly refuse to hear alternative perspectives on the basis that a person coming from a different background can’t speak to someone’s condition because they don’t have a perfectly symmetrical set of data points. If we dismiss someone’s right to speak about anything other than their own experience, and to anyone other than those who share the same attributes of experience, we will end up with people only talking to themselves or those sufficiently “like” themselves. And let’s not forget that the end point of these data practices is uniquely identified individuals, so in a very real sense, this logical trajectory culminates in people talking only to themselves. Intersectionality done badly is this breakdown of communication. To my thinking intersectionality should motivate us to do the hard work of find-

ing common ground while acknowledging difference; difference should not, in my opinion, be taken as a justification to refuse communication entirely.

In the case of data mining practices, there is another concern. Data mining requires massive data collection—which for me amounts to a kind of pathological hoarding—and in its very presence this overgrowth contributes to the rise of big data as a cultural norm. Nobody was talking about big data ten years ago, but now it’s common practice. But another common practice that is not often remarked upon is the fact that the retention or accumulation of data also requires data reduction. So what I see happening in practices like personality profiling, is hyper-specificity turning into caricature. All of this alleged specificity ends up pushing people’s political views to extremes that are in all senses of the word “reductive.” An algorithm takes somebody who might be moderate, or at least nuanced, and gives them the data feed of somebody who is far more politically extreme. This is marketed as “personalization,” but it actually means lumping people together on the basis of a particular data-mined factor that might connect them.

AM: *Feeding* them data?

KB: If you think of something like *Newsfeed*, it is, right?

AM: I was literally just reading your piece on obesity and big data!

KB: Right. That’s exactly the overgrowth that I am talking about.

AM: I was really interested in what you were just saying about hyper-specificity and profiling. In this piece you talk about that, alongside becoming so large that one becomes vague or imperceptible, and about Lauren Berlant’s slow death and lateral agency in *Cruel Optimism*. I am wondering if you could speak more to that as a strategy. I immediately was thinking about Alex Galloway’s in-formatic opacity, or the way it’s taken up by Zach Blas who queers this idea of opacity, and finds a really interesting art practice with it.

But I also see pitfalls to this strategy. So I am just wondering what you think about imperceptibility and vagueness.

KB: Well, I'm in favor! [laughs] There are pitfalls to all of our strategies, and while I don't want to romanticize failure, I am okay with going down a wrong path, or adopting a faulty strategy, in the sense that object-oriented feminism is ready to be wrong. But in all seriousness, I do think that we need strategies to become more imperceptible now, and these strategies will also rail against the notions of identity *and* identifiability. Blas's work is interesting in this respect. Whether we adopt opacity following Glissant or imperceptibility following Grosz, I think this is extremely important right now, when we risk becoming over-identified through the surveillance state.

AM: In this long essay, fatness becomes a technique of embodied vagueness, and you refer to it as abstraction that draws on the plasticity both of bodies and of data. This process is framed as "getting over oneself" and then becoming imperceptible. But it could also be said that abstraction is the change from use value to generic exchange value, and it is thus the founding move of capitalism. Do you see any sort of tension between that kind of embodied abstraction and capitalist abstraction?

KB: That is so interesting. I was invoking abstraction from the perspective of art and the abstracted image, but you're correct. As you say, it is "embodied abstraction" that provides the connection between abstraction in imagery and abstraction in capitalism. For example, "getting over oneself" allows the devaluation of self that comes with generic exchangeability. Rather than self-commodification or selling oneself in the neoliberal sense, it's about becoming off-brand, generic, and featureless. It's like cutting out your label. This devaluation sounds grim, and it is, but it seems to me that we are in a race to the bottom whether we volunteer to cut out our own "self" labels or not. So to speak of strategies again, it's worth considering whether there may be benefits to doing so,

whether there's something to be gained from self-effacement. And I always go back to that saying that it's always easier to envision the end of the world than the end of capitalism.

But this is also where object-oriented feminism has a stake. In a very real, not abstract, not metaphoric sense, humans are objects and are objects of exchange in this capitalist moment. And although I am talking about a contemporary phenomenon when I am discussing abstraction in data, we should remember that capitalism (not to mention the entire modernist enterprise!) was founded on racist objectification in slavery. We don't get to contemporary capitalism without humans' being objects and commodities first. Human objecthood is part and parcel of capitalism's founding gestures, if you will. Nevertheless, part of why I think the object-oriented theories of the last ten years struck a chord was because in this late capitalist moment, we see plainly that we are living in networks that make our exchangeability a lived experience. It's not a haunting notion, or a fear, or a paranoia that we *might* be exchangeable. We *are* exchangeable, and we are living that experience and are reminded of it constantly by the infrastructures of everyday life. Maybe that's what lent it a sense of the ontological—that feeling that this is the nature of being. But I think that's wrong. Object-orientation is *not* ontological because it's historical—it's specific to the world that we're living in now, which is a capitalist world permeated by data and networks.

Part of what I am interested in, coming from *Bigger than You*,<sup>2</sup> is that our marketplace exchangeability with other humans also logically permits exchangeability between humans and non-human machines. We see this in the automation of labor; we see this in the automation of cognitive processes; we see this in our social networks. Most often this exchangeability is framed negatively, positioning nonhumans as a competitive threat to humans. But I am interested in reframing exchangeability as evidence of human/nonhuman closeness—and I am interested in what may come out of that closeness. Going back to your earlier question, “what is the

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2 Behar, Katherine. *Bigger than You: Big Data and Obesity: An Inquiry towards Decelerationist Aesthetics*. Earth, Milky Way: punctum books, 2016.

matter of bodies?”), this is an opportunity to rethink. Maybe the matter of bodies has the consistency of data? Maybe there’s something porous about that? That porosity, that diffuseness, could open up a kind of resistance, in terms of passively cloaking or infusing ourselves with the diffuseness of otherness, and in terms of active solidarities between humans and nonhumans. To have solidarity with nonhumans—in fact, to have solidarity at all right now—is an act of resistance. It’s also a way to obfuscate identity and loosen neoliberal capitalism’s requisite fetishization of individualism (that is only further operationalized when identity becomes identifiability). Redrawing the contours of our profiles is an important practice of resistance now. It is an opportunity to be more generous in what we include as mattering *to* us and in what we incorporate in the mattering *of* us.

AM: I really like the way you seem to be expanding or bloating the idea of species.

KB: I love that. “Bloating” the notion of species—yes!

AM: Well in the OOF book (I like saying OOF) you talk about the danger of requiring all these connections—connected vitalism. It’s really interesting to think about what sort of connections or solidarities you *are* advocating for that are not these networked, web-like notions. Instead there are all those little drawings in *Bigger than You* around data points. It’s as though the blob is somehow a better visualization than the net. But it also seems like it’s really difficult to navigate the kinds of connections you want to advocate for and the kinds you see as problematic. How did you make that distinction?

KB: I’m an artist, so it’s my prerogative—and in fact my job—to make and remake and unmake. So for me those distinctions must constantly be redrawn. It’s about changing one’s mind or making up one’s mind afresh, as much as it’s about art practice. I am sure you’re familiar with the famous illustrations in Paul Baran’s

proposal for distributed packet switching networks. The drawings depict centralized, decentralized, and distributed networks as dots with lines connecting them. This is the way network topologies are usually visualized: with nodes and edges as dots and lines. One of the things that in principle underlies the operationality of those kinds of networks is that you can swap the dots and the lines around, and the idea of the distributed network is that you can get rid of one dot and replace it with another dot. This is what Baran calls “redundancy.” It’s what makes a network robust, and it’s exactly the exchangeability that I’m talking about. But to enable exchangeability between dots or nodes requires lines or edges. And what I am trying to get at in those drawings in *Bigger than You* is to visualize what would happen if we get rid of the lines and think of those dots as having materiality and substance? What is a network that is all nodes and no edges? It would be an information network at near standstill, and would be an instance of what I call “decelerationist aesthetics.” In the drawings, I am sketching this question: What aesthetic form would that take and how would that form *perform*? While I was writing *Bigger than You*, I was also working on a video series, *Modeling Big Data*. In those videos I perform as the obese body of big data. The form or the whole extent of my body physically circumscribes my performative capacities and those capacities will differ as concerns my obese data body, versus my flexible worker body, versus my body at rest, and so on.

In terms of navigating what kinds of connections are beneficial or harmful, I think it is also important ongoing work to keep making and remaking our value statements. For example, the rhizomatic distributed network looked radically emancipatory in recent memory, but now when I look at those network drawings from Baran, I no longer think so. They show that from the perspective of the network, a dot doesn’t exist unless it’s plugged in. A node isn’t a node unless it has at least one edge. That kind of compulsory connectivity is something I want to question. I am not interested in advocating for or against one form or another, but rather in conceptualizing what kinds of affordances and constraints these different material forms may present. So what happens if we erase

those compulsory edges?

AM: You say, I think very correctly, that the dot doesn't exist unless it's plugged in, in this schema. You have the idea of geometry in that part of that *Bigger than You* essay. The very first axiom of Euclid's *Elements* is "a point is that which has no part." So it doesn't exist, but it also *has* to exist because points connect lines, right? I was trying to read shifts in the sorts of geometries and maths and spaces that you're making available via rethinking connectivity as the opening up of new political spaces. Maybe non-Euclidean space is a new political space that we just haven't mined yet because we don't think of our bodies as anything but three or four dimensional.

KB: I think you're absolutely right.

AM: I am really happy that you brought up decelerationist aesthetics because I am so interested in the connection between OOF and the sort of joking sound of "OOF" and exhaustion and spreading out—how do you mobilize exhaustion? How do you see that happening?

KB: How do we mobilize exhaustion... that's all we've got, right? That could be our most pressing question, because we're at a point of fatigue and collapse and even exhausted outrage where it's always "the final straw." This is another place where I depart from accelerationist thinkers. There's simply too much collapse all around us right now, so I am definitely not seeking to push capitalism further to collapse more. There is a toll for this collapse and I think it's really irresponsible to disregard that harm. What I would prefer is to find a way to mobilize from within this sensibility and experience of collapse and exhaustion in order to try to extend care. If there is a new non-Euclidean political space coming out of this, I hope it's a space of care.

AM: Is part of the appeal of turning to human and non-human

connectivities learning new modes of care?

KB: Yes.

AM: I wonder about trying to figure out decelerationist aesthetics in the political landscape where something like nostalgia and slowing-down has been so mobilized by the right or by neo-conservatism. It seems tricky to talk about speeds. I am wondering whether it was tricky for you.

KB: Um... Nope! [laughs] I mean, that's become an accelerationist term, like localism, in the argument that nostalgic, slow localism has been coopted. But for me honestly no, I don't have a hard time making a distinction with speed. And I believe firmly in the localism of Donna Haraway's situated knowledges. I am willing to go out on a limb and say this quite flatly: I think that we need to slow down. I see too many examples of negative effects and negative affects associated with acceleration. And it's unquestionably the dominant pace, so it deserves rethinking, if only to challenge its hegemony.

AM: I am pretty much on board with that. I've read some people speaking about some of your artworks, *E-Waste*<sup>3</sup> specifically, and it being referred to as a bit archeological, and also a bit paternalistic because of the way care was being read like a parent cares for the child. And to me your work was really playful and goofy—I mean in a project like *Roomba Rumba*, Roombas are so goofy and I don't think you can ever escape that; and even perverse, like sticking together the organic and the inorganic. And I was thinking about that while reading your Botox article in the *Object-Oriented Feminism*<sup>4</sup> collection. Of course then you started talking about necrophilia vs. vivophilia, and you can't not intend the inevitably grotesque as-

3 Behar, Katherine. *E-Waste*, 2014. Solo exhibition with catalogue. Tuska Center for Contemporary Art at the University of Kentucky.

4 Behar, Katherine. "Facing Necrophilia, or 'Botox Ethics,'" in *Objected-Oriented Feminism*, edited by Katherine Behar. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2016.

sociations with that, right? And then you discuss ORLAN's plastic surgery art practice, blurring the lines between death and playfulness and beauty... It all seems so perverse.

KB: Why, thank you!

AM: Yeah! I am wondering if perversion plays into decelerationist aesthetics at all.

KB: It's a really great association.

AM: Obese bodies are so often thought of as perverse, right?

KB: That's exactly right. Yes! I had not made that connection. I think a lot about perversion. (Does that makes me sound like a pervert?) I think perversion and perversity are important resources to draw from. Perversity was mobilized by avant-gardist traditions (mostly Western white male) insofar as art's irrationality offers some kind of perverse alternative to rationalist society. But I am most interested in the very important work of feminist body artists who took on perversion in a directly embodied way. This brings us back to your original question about embodiment, because in feminist body art, perversion is an embodied practice of making, remaking, and unmaking. The female body was (and is) already a socially perverse object, so in feminist body art, artists took up perversion by way of their own actual bodies as always already perverse. For me, this work is so important because that perversion becomes inseparable from the perversity of feminist authorship to begin with.

In making, remaking, and unmaking, it also gets into Catherine Malabou's notion of plasticity, which I talk about in "Facing Necrophilia, or 'Botox Ethics'" regarding ORLAN's work. I wrote this essay before coming up with the term, so I did not explicitly connect "Facing Necrophilia" with decelerationist aesthetics, but I absolutely agree with you. Decelerationist aesthetics is very much there in the double role Botox plays as an inhibitor of communica-

tion and as an aesthetic or cosmetic body practice. There's something disruptive about perversion, and one might leverage that disruptive power of the perverse to gum up the machine and the acceleration of capital. That said, I also want to move against the avant-garde model that uses the perverse as shock value to shock the bourgeois sensibility. Because we've had enough [laughs]. Just like we have enough collapse, we have enough shock. Shock value is just Twitter. It is completely in tune with acceleration. But there's something about a slower experience of embodied perversion, which is much more in line with what I want to draw out—as a decelerationist time frame—and draw forth—as decelerationist politics. There are aesthetic forms we can adopt that I think can give us that direction.