Negative Capability

Gabriela Vainsencher
CUNY Hunter College

How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!

Follow this and additional works at: http://academicworks.cuny.edu/hc_sas_etds

Part of the Fine Arts Commons

Recommended Citation
Vainsencher, Gabriela, "Negative Capability" (2016). CUNY Academic Works.
http://academicworks.cuny.edu/hc_sas_etds/132

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Hunter College at CUNY Academic Works. It has been accepted for inclusion in School of Arts & Sciences Theses by an authorized administrator of CUNY Academic Works. For more information, please contact AcademicWorks@cuny.edu.
Negative Capability

by

Gabriela Vainsencher

Submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts Studio Art Hunter College
The City University of New York

2016

Thesis Sponsor:

December 11, 2016 Constance DeJong
Date First Reader

December 11, 2016 Reiner Leist
Date Second Reader
DEDICATIONS

This thesis is dedicated to my parents: Ima the psychoanalyst, and Aba the translator. Their two professions have resulted in the combined fountain from which this work flows. Ima has also been my lead actress and muse throughout this project, and without her being game, over and over again, to aimlessly chat with me about her strange and magical profession, it simply could have not existed. Aba and I had wonderful arguments over the many translation issues that arose in composing all the titles for the videos. Most memorable was our hour-long discussion of which “to be” I should use in my Spanish translation of a distorted Lydia Davis quote: is that center empty in a temporary way or a permanent one? Spanish offers two kinds of “is”, but English does not. I decided on both, for which I never did get approval.

This paper is also dedicated to my big brother, whose friendship, love, and integrity serve as guide and support. In learning to see each other through all our differences we have found a deep common ground.

Finally, this paper is dedicated to Daniel, my partner in life and sometimes in art, who has been making my life better since the day we met.
## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>List of illustrations</td>
<td>ii</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Thesis</td>
<td>p. 1 - 19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I. On Interpretations</td>
<td>p. 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>II. An Inter-duction</td>
<td>p. 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>III. El Objeto Que Se Acuerda</td>
<td>p. 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IV. About Being Trilingual</td>
<td>p. 9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>V. The Center</td>
<td>p. 11</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VI. The Importance Of “Ehhh...”</td>
<td>p. 12</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VII. The Masks</td>
<td>p. 14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VIII. “What’s All This About, Gabriela?”</td>
<td>p. 15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IX. Postscript: Video in The Gallery</td>
<td>p. 18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Works cited</td>
<td>p. 20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Image list for thesis installation images</td>
<td>p.21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Installation images</td>
<td>p.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Link to video online</td>
<td>p. 24</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

*Three Poems*, 2016, HD video with sound, 3:20 min. (video still) p.1

*Three Poems*, 2016, HD video with sound, 3:20 min. (video still) p.4

*El Objeto Que Se Acuerda*, 2016, glazed porcelain, 2 x 2 x 5 inches p.7

*El Objeto Que Se Acuerda*, 2016, unglazed porcelain, 4 x 6 x 24 inches p.7

*El Objeto Que Se Acuerda*, 2016, unglazed porcelain, 4 x 6 x 14 inches p.8

*Three Poems*, 2016, HD video with sound, 3:20 min. (video still) p.11

*Three Poems*, 2016, HD video with sound, 3:20 min. (video still) p.15

*Negative Capability*, 2016, HD video with sound, 06:00 min. (video still) p.17
ON INTERPRETATIONS

The interpretations, I don’t feel like I make them, 
you happen to me. 
It’s something that suddenly sorts itself out in my head. 
Suddenly, I am not doing ‘thinking’ or ‘theories’, although I know many theories. 
But in that moment 
I hear, I hear, I hear, 
and suddenly I know. 
Something. 
Or I think I know.

The above lines are subtitles from my 2016 video Three Poems. Like most of the text in this work, their origin is a series of interviews with my mother. The words are hers, but I have
rearranged them to create new meanings.

The term “interpretation” is central to many fields, and means something slightly different in each. In the realm of translating, to interpret is to spontaneously and verbally repeat in one language what someone has just said in another. It’s grueling mental work, and interpreters at the U.N., considered to be at the top of their field, work in twenty-minute shifts before wearing out. In psychoanalysis interpretation is what the analyst offers her patient in response to content brought into the session. In post-Kleinian psychoanalysis, as exemplified in Wilfred Bion’s work, the analyst is meant to arrive at the interpretation via a state of being “… without memory, without desire, without understanding.” In art theory, works and practices can be interpreted through prisms borrowed from other fields. For example, Josh Kline’s work can be read through economic theory, analyzing how it utilizes and critiques labor. Doris Salcedo or Kara Walker’s work can be read through psychoanalytic theory that traces how collective trauma resurfaces in the individual narrative.

In Three Poems the narrator talks about “the interpretations”—which are not identified as belonging to any particular field—as events that “happen to her.” The state she describes can be read as mystical, almost like channeling. It is also a state easily recognizable to artists in the process of figuring something out in the studio, as well as to people who speak several


2 Of Kline’s hyper-realist sculptures Ben Lerner wrote in The New Yorker: “To confront the severed head and fragmented body of a janitor in a museum space is a discomfitting reminder of the undocumented (in more than one sense) material labor from which such discourses can help distract us. Somebody is still making the hardware from which you upload data to the cloud; somebody is still scrubbing the toilets at the museum that hosts your symposium on Internet art.” (Lerner, Ben. The Custodians, The New Yorker Magazine, January 11, 2016. http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2016/01/11/the-custodians-onward-and-upward-with-the-arts-ben-lerner)
languages. It is a mental space between knowing and not knowing, in which understanding seems to come out of the blue, not as a result of a linear process of reason, and then wavers in the air, not sure of its own existence. She says: "I hear, I hear, I hear, and suddenly I know. Something. Or I think I know."

AN INTER-DUCTION\(^3\)

Over the course of a year I recorded many hour-long\(^4\) phone interviews with my mother, a Uruguayan psychoanalyst who has lived in Israel for decades\(^5\). She spoke in her native Spanish and her heavily accented, adopted Hebrew. Our talks revolved around dream interpretation, the inexplicable ways in which meaning arises out of chaos, what to do when one doesn’t know what to do, how to tell when something must end, and also what the heck I was going to do with these recordings.

My thesis project is a video installation comprised of two synchronized video projections with sound which alternate screening in the gallery space. The videos are titled *Negative Capability* and *Three Poems*. The recordings of my mother’s voice—cut, spliced, rearranged, and looped—are the aural armature for the videos, both of which feature a masked female figure who

---


\(^4\) Actually, we usually talked for about fifty minutes. After decades in the profession, my mother naturally gets antsy right around the end of a psychoanalytic hour.

\(^5\) My mother’s only condition to participating in this work is that I not identify her by name. Since we have different last names, her identity is relatively protected in this paper.
manipulates paper and porcelain representations of voids in measured, minimal gestures that respond to the ongoing monolog by the unseen speaker. The soundtrack is translated into English subtitles that dance around the faceless figure⁶.

Made during the same period as the videos and represented in them as props and masks are ceramic sculptures from the series *El Objeto Que se Acuerda*.

---

⁶ One of the biggest influences on my approach to handling the interview format is Kerry Tribe, a West Coast-based American, who I first met when she came to visit my studio at Hunter in 2014. In particular I looked at Tribe’s “H.M.” from 2009 and “The Aphasia Poetry Club” from 2015. In the latter Tribe uses her characters’ way of speaking, all affected in different ways by aphasia, as the rhythmic infrastructure for the editing of the video. Onscreen she uses animation, live action, and still photography to illustrate not only the content of their stories but also the way their disability makes it hard for them to tell those stories.
Sometimes a word or a phrase cannot pass through the portal of translation without losing too much of its meaning, and then its author must either rename it or leave it in its original language. In Spanish, El Objeto Que Se Acuerda has a few possible meanings, all equally correct: “the object that remembers,” or “the object that remembers itself,” or “the object which self-remembers.” Objecto could also equally be gendered male or female. I chose to leave the title in the language in which it originated, because I believe that some ideas can only happen in the languages in which they are grammatically possible.

El Objeto Que Se Acuerda is a series of monochromatic ceramic sculptures, ranging in size from palm to forearm. They belong to the same period as the videos, and the process for making them is both a separate sculptural practice and a prop-making workshop for the videos. All the sculptures in this series are deformed cylinders: forms made by turning a flattened, rectangular slab of porcelain clay into a tube. Had they been mechanically produced they would have all looked the same: their surfaces would have been smooth and blank, their shape perfectly round. However, they are all wildly different from each other in form, shape, and color.

Tolstoy wrote: “Happy families are all alike; every unhappy family is unhappy in its own way.”

Each “Objeto” carries on its surface the buckling, ripping, and collapsing it endured on the way.

---

7 Although a central part of my practice, these sculptures are not included in the thesis exhibition, and are solely represented there by appearing in the videos. In this exhibition iteration I have chosen to let them remain only as digital representations of themselves, as characters rather than the “real” actors, as props never shown to the audience in any other angle than that intended by the director.
to becoming its final, fired self: its sole function is to tell the story of how it came to be. Going from a flat slab to a standing or lying cylinder transforms horizontality to verticality, fighting gravity. If the walls of the cylinder are too thin, they will crack, fold and collapse under their own weight. If the clay body is folded and then straightened, wrinkle-like creases will remain as the scar from that action, much like an open palm retains on its taut surface the wrinkles where it knows how to make a fist. After firing some of the sculptures I rub black underglaze into the white porcelain, then wipe it away. The black that cannot be wiped away is what has seeped into all the cracks and folds and wrinkles.

*El Objeto Que Se Acuerda*, 2016, glazed porcelain, 2 x 2 x 5 inches

*El Objeto Que Se Acuerda*, 2016, porcelain, 4 x 6 x 24 inches
El Objeto Que Se Acuerda, 2016, porcelain, 4 x 6 x 14 inches
ABOUT BEING TRILINGUAL

My family talks in a mix of three languages: Hebrew, Spanish, and English. It is rare for a sentence to end in the same language in which it began. There is some small amount of order to this lingual chaos: nouns are often in Hebrew while verbs and commands are in Spanish. I know this because of the many noun-shaped holes in my Spanish vocabulary. English is reserved usually for idioms, figures of speech, and specialized professional terms.

In the interviews with my mother, she flows in and out of Hebrew and Spanish. When addressing me directly, mother to daughter, she’ll usually speak Spanish, but when we become interviewer and subject, she goes to Hebrew, the language in which she’s been treating patients for over three decades. Her accent is heavy and it seems to me she has never tried much to cover it up. As long as she gets her meaning across, her accent doesn’t seem to bother her. After more than thirty years of speaking Hebrew, she still uses male and female conjugations of verbs (which do not exist in Spanish) interchangeably, almost defiantly. She is an immigrant, and will always be one, spottable from the first word out of her mouth.

I, on the other hand, have been a very different immigrant here in the US. I have worked so relentlessly on my accent that I have achieved a degree of total vagueness. I do not sound like I am from here but I don’t sound like I’m from anywhere else in particular, either. In my quest for perfect specificity I have only managed to become totally unspecific. Or maybe I have

---

9 Currently there are two versions of *Three Poems*: one which provides English titles throughout and another, which I made for an Israeli audience, in which Hebrew and Spanish subtitles replace the English ones at certain moments of the work.
become specifically that unplaceable immigrant: the one that’s definitely not from here, while not being exactly from a specific “there.” Either. My videos are also often located in a generalized, location-less space: a white or a black expanse, an empty room or a generalized piece of nature, like water flowing somewhere out at sea, out of view of a beach. My existence is the product of multiple immigrations over the course of several generations on both sides of my family. As a result of these choices my mother and I speak across time-zones, we do so in two languages, and I live and work in a third language into which this is all translated. These are the wrinkles, cracks and buckles that create a meditation on immigration as legacy, as culture, as the mechanism that creates layered lives and identities otherwise impossible.
There is a center, but the center is empty.
Either because I have not yet found what belongs in it,
or because it is meant to be empty.

The Center is a section in Three Poems title in which the narrator’s voice is heard repeating the above quote four times, alternating between Hebrew and Spanish. It is the only line in the video not spontaneously uttered, but instead recited from a prepared text. It is a modified quote from “The Center of the Story”, a short story from 1989 by Lydia Davis, about a woman who is trying to write a short story. The modified verse is the offset middle of the piece. Onscreen, the camera hovers above a tubular object floating in space (played by one of my ceramic...)

---

10 The original quote is the following fragment: “... there is a center but the center is empty, either because she has not yet found what belongs there or because it is meant to be empty...” (Davis, Lydia. The Center of the Story. Grand Street 9, no. 1, p: 19-22. 1989.)
sculptures), its empty center opening up to the black expanse around it.

An empty center is at the heart of all efforts of interpretation, translation, and explication, since nothing is exactly like something else, only close to it, near to it in meaning or in shape. One can never say in one language exactly what they mean in another; no image can ever be totally replaced by words; one meaning-making system cannot replace another, but it can help to surround the same empty center.

**THE IMPORTANCE OF “EHHH...”**

One of the most mysterious but eventually fruitful stages of my process was when I began to listen back to the interviews I conducted with my mother and to transcribe, then translate her words. It was a tricky part of the process, because I was very hesitant to do it: transcribing a spontaneous interview is a lot of work, and I could find no discernible reason to go through with it: after all, I had her on tape! In order to make my scripts all I needed to do was to manipulate the audio files and pair them with video and text. But I was compelled to go through the arduous process of transcription. It was a way for me to hear her better, to slow down the process of understanding, to listen in a new way.

The process of turning the recordings into usable material for my work involved a lot of “unfaithfulness” to the original material. In order to make my work, I took my mother’s words out of context, changed the order in which things were said, even created new sentences out of
many different ones. In contrast to that attitude of disloyalty, in the transcription it became very important for me to not only get down exactly *what* she said, but also exactly *how* she said it, which meant not editing out all the non-words that came out of her mouth alongside the formal language. These gaps were important. There was extra meaning in the silences between words, in the music she made with her voice while she was not making language.

Every language has sounds that its speakers make between thoughts. In English these sound more or less like this: “uuhhh”, “um”, “like”, sometimes “errr” or even “uhrm”. In Spanish and in Hebrew they are: “ehh”, “ehmmm”, “eee”, and “veh” (the latter two mean “and” in Spanish and Hebrew, respectively).

So now I had a new kind of text. It was a visible (i.e. typed out) text which made visible elements of spoken language that are normally consciously edited out when writing down what someone has said, as well as unconsciously edited out when we listen to someone speaking. I did two things with these non-language sounds: Firstly, I kept many of them in the texts as buffers between ideas, as replacements for silence, as music. Secondly, I gathered them all up and made a song out of them. The song, which is made up entirely of ehhhs, ehhmmms, eees, and vehs, became part of the second video I made for this project, titled *Negative Capability*.

With these all-but-invisible words brought to the fore, my work once again points its flashlight on the traces of becoming. In the ceramic work I rub black into the cracks of the white flesh of objects, making cracks more pronounced and visible. In the videos I draw attention to the cracks between the words, to the non-language sounds and silences that indicate, just as
strongly as words do, the existence of a mind working, of internal gears turning\textsuperscript{11}.

\section*{THE MASKS}

Masked beings can be divided into two categories: those with human faces for masks, and those masked with other objects: animal heads in ancient Egypt; bullhorns in William Kentridge’s work; abstracted machine-like parts in Suprematist and Dadaist theater. While the person wearing a human-like mask is transformed by it into another person, the non-human mask wearer ceases \textit{being a person}. The masked performer is transformed into an idea, an animated object, a personified machine. My masks belong in this latter category. Their goal is to evacuate the performer’s identity and turn her into a living version of El Objeto Que Se Acuerda.

In order to create a mask, first I must make an Objeto Que Se Acuerda. I then photograph it, usually from an angle in which the camera looks down into the shaft of the cylindrical shape. The photograph is then enlarged, printed, cropped, and adhered to a rigid backing, turning it into an object once more. This photographic sculpture is then used as a mask, which I wear during the shooting of the video. The object, by way of the camera, is again transformed from a three-dimensional thing into a two-dimensional representation of a thing. It is a process of translation and interpretation, a back-and-forth between dimensions. The resulting figures are female but otherwise unidentifiable as specific persons. In the place we normally look at in order to identify, understand, and communicate with a person is a black void. They are bodies

\textsuperscript{11} One result of this process has taken the form of a karaoke performance work, meant to be performed, with minimal direction, by inexperienced performers in front of a live audience titled THE WHALE. The text appears on a screen or projection line by line, like a karaoke song, thus controlling the tempo of the performance, while dramatic and emotive interpretation will be up to the individual performers. Click here for a performance sketch: \url{https://vimeo.com/170585663/2d586474f0}
with empty centers for heads.

*Three Poems*, 2016, HD video with sound (video still)

**“WHAT’S ALL THIS ABOUT, GABRIELA?”**

In the last chapter of *Three Poems* the camera leaves the black void of the set and the water of the Hudson River is shown flowing backwards and upside down, bobbing from the top of the video frame down. The timbre of the voiceover changes here, and it is immediately clear that whomever was speaking before is now out of character, and moreover, is related to me in some way, especially when she suggests that perhaps I am trying to find commonalities between myself and my parents (but also that she doesn’t get why an artist would need to do that). In this chapter the air is let in not only with the image of the outside world, but also with the character’s voice breaking the fourth wall, exposing our relationship, exposing my process.
“What is all this about, Gabriela?” she asks, outing me as the author of the work, as the interlocutor whose voice has been edited out. “I don’t get it.” And later: “I thought: Maybe this was all made up and she is doing it so she could talk to us about something? Maybe this has no other intention other than asking the questions?”

In a way, this accusation, that I am just making this whole thing up in order to ask the questions, could not be more true. One could argue that all art makes things up in order to ask questions. But more specifically to this project, what she is actually saying to me is that maybe I have an ulterior motive to asking the questions. Maybe I am trying to talk to her about something in particular? In a way, the answer is yes. In the past year I have turned the projects of making physical work and creating meaning into my subject matter. In the process I have turned my relationships with the people in my life and objects in my studio into the mines from which I extract meaning. More and more, I have come to believe in this process. When I don’t know what to do in the studio, I ask the work. When I am not sure about a particular sculpture, I take its picture, print it out, turn it into a mask, trying to understand what it can become. When I listen back to an hour-long meandering conversation I look for the words and sentence fragments that together tell me something I need to know.

In the last section of the *Negative Capability* the masked figure returns to the screen, this time sporting a cylindrical photograph for a head, which she turns slowly, keeping the same rhythm as the speaker. In a double play on the cylinder, the curved photograph shows a gaping Objeto Que
Se Acuerda, laying on its side on a white surface, allowing the viewer to look through it to the black background.

The following text is spoken and translated while the figure turns its double cylinder around and around:

There was this, Keats, the poet. Keats. Who talked about this thing called Negative Capability. The ability to be suspended in not knowing, in not having closure, in not doing, as an important ability, not as some problem.

It’s knowing how to say: alright, here something happened, I, I don’t get it yet. I don’t know what it is exactly. To stay with the doubt, to stay with the not knowing, to stay with it open, without doing.

And the capability to not think, not close, not solve, not do, in order for it to stay open and then, to let things happen in that openness is extremely hard. It is very hard work, to not work.
POSTSCRIPT: VIDEO IN THE GALLERY

The working assumption of the white cube, historically designed to exhibit two- and three-dimensional artwork, is that the viewer enters the gallery and can see the work in its entirety, then choose how long to spend with it, how deeply to engage with it. With video that contains a linear structure (as opposed to video that functions more like a sculpture or painting) this assumption fails: this kind of work is only fully and correctly experienced when viewed from start to finish. Unlike the screening of a movie in a theater which has clear start and end times, video in galleries is often turned on at the beginning of the day, put on loop, and is available for promiscuous viewing starting at any point in which a visitor happens to walk in.

There are as many solutions to this problem as there are people trying to solve it. Three Poems and Negative Capability were made to be equally viewable in the screening and exhibition contexts. This meant creating a structure that could function both as a linear beginning-middle-end as well as a loop into which one can enter at any point. My solution flowed naturally from the way I made these works, and is also reflected in the structure of this paper: Both videos are episodic, made up of self-contained sections that also function in relation to one another. Each section contains its own narrative and together they form a context for each other.

12 Many video-making artists ignore this issue: They create linear works and then present them on a loop in a gallery, accepting that the work will be sub-optimally viewed.

13 Omer Fast is an Israeli-American Berlin-based artist working primarily in video and film from whom I learned a lot about narrative building. One of the most fascinating aspects of his latest work is his relationship to the loop. Two of his recent videos, “Continuity” (2012) and “Spring” (2016) incorporate the formalistic structure of a loop as a camouflage for stories that seem to repeat but are in fact different iterations of the same narrative. A visitor to the gallery who walks into the space in the middle of the work might wait until she recognizes the scene in which she came in, and then continue to the next room. But if she stays a little longer, she will realize that instead of looping, the story has actually continued, with its characters stuck in a loop of their own behavior. In these works, trauma operates as a looping mechanism that compels the characters to repeat their neurotic actions and destructive patterns.
In the exhibition the videos are shown on separate screens, synchronized so that when one work is playing on a particular screen, the other screen is showing an image that would appear to be still to anyone but the most attentive viewers: an empty space or a figure standing without hardly moving. A viewer would only know that a particular section is the official beginning or end of a video if she was present when one screen switched from its almost idle state to the active narrative. This version is specific to this particular exhibition setting, in which I had to use one room to display multiple works. When viewed in a screening context, the videos would be shown from beginning to end, without the almost-still character or the empty room. Instead of ignoring the physical and temporal realities of the exhibition space, I decided to incorporate the unpredictable fashion in which viewers would see my work into its structure.

The exhibition space at the Hunter MFA galleries is a large open gallery in which I have constructed an enclosed darkened room for my exhibition. The room is entered through a thick black felt curtain that closes behind the viewer. Two of the walls are covered in the same black felt, and the other two are where the videos are projected. A set of two speakers is mounted on shelves on either side of the projections. Entering the room is a temporarily disorienting: the room is so dark that the video projections seem to float in an emptiness, inviting the viewer to immerse herself in the work.
WORKS CITED


IMAGE LIST: THESIS SHOW INSTALLATION IMAGES

Thesis exhibition installation view (left wall- *Negative Capability*)  p.22
Thesis exhibition installation view (left wall- *Negative Capability*)  p.23
Thesis exhibition installation view (right wall- *Three Poems*)  p.24
Thesis exhibition (installation view)
Thesis exhibition (installation view)
To view the videos in the exhibition please go to the following link:

https://vimeo.com/195225533/4917c8d657