

Like many projects set to take place in 2020, *(un)happy objects* has had an unexpected and messy trajectory. Originally conceived of in early 2018 and scheduled to open in June of 2020, the social, cultural, and political contexts surrounding this exhibition have shifted tremendously in both micro and macro ways. In the time since this project was confirmed to go forward, we have been living through constant crises, and it is even clearer now that to stay silent in the face of widespread injustice and discontent is not only unethical, but literally endangers the well-being of the planet.<sup>1</sup> Alongside this, the art world has been grappling with the exclusionary history of institutional art spaces themselves.<sup>2</sup> The summer of 2020 carried a wave of announcements by artist run centres and art institutions reckoning publicly with their stark lack of racial diversity among programmed artists and curators as well as staff and board.<sup>3</sup> Many of these spaces have been historically run by and for white artists and audiences – traditionally privileging those who are able bodied, cis and straight. This context adds an important layer to the exhibition, and what it might mean to be an (un)happy object.

**“So when they say something that makes me start to simmer,  
that fancy wine won't put this fire out  
Kick me under the table all you want, I won't shut up. I won't shut up”  
– Fiona Apple<sup>4</sup>**

Critical scholar and theorist Sara Ahmed defines objects not only as physical and material things, but as “anything that we imagine might lead us to happiness, including objects in the sense of values, practice, and styles, as well as aspirations.”<sup>5</sup> She claims that we value an object to be good or bad based on how it affects us, orienting toward things that make us happy and away from those that don't.<sup>6</sup>

If we are raised to believe that we should avoid political conversations at the dinner table – as they often lead to tension and discomfort – we will likely associate these types of conversation with unhappiness. However, being able to avoid these conversations is often tied to privilege. The instigators, the ones who broach the “unhappy” subject matter, are what Ahmed refers to as “affect aliens”<sup>7</sup> and are often blamed for causing the unhappiness by bringing to light the very real but avoided topics at hand. In other words, if you call attention to the “issue” (racism, misogyny, homophobia, ableism, unkindness), you run the risk of being labeled as the source of that problem – a redirection that inhibits progress and leaves folks stuck to repeatedly engage in cycles of harm and exclusion.

As a trans person with a non-binary gender, I am well acquainted with inhabiting the role of the unhappy object: at the dinner table, in bathrooms, at the grocery store, walking around my neighbourhood in the summer, interacting with a partner's family, going to the doctor. I am

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<sup>1</sup> “Climate Change Widespread, Rapid, and Intensifying.” *IPCC*, 9 Aug. 2021, [www.ipcc.ch/2021/08/09/ar6-wg1-20210809-pr/](http://www.ipcc.ch/2021/08/09/ar6-wg1-20210809-pr/)

<sup>2</sup> Artcite Inc. Instagram post, 18 June 2020, <https://www.instagram.com/p/CBlzzmnVfr/>

<sup>3</sup> O'Neill, Sean, “A Crisis of Whiteness.” *Canadian Art*, 17 Dec. 2020, [canadianart.ca/features/a-crisis-of-whiteness/?fbclid=IwAR2wC8h9MzCbxMriJo6f9m48CW1F-KqLgNDt2i9lvSX5lbnGqM0IzdBily4](http://canadianart.ca/features/a-crisis-of-whiteness/?fbclid=IwAR2wC8h9MzCbxMriJo6f9m48CW1F-KqLgNDt2i9lvSX5lbnGqM0IzdBily4).

<sup>4</sup> From the song “Under the Table” on Apple's 2020 Album *Fetch the Bolt Cutters*.

<sup>5</sup> Ahmed, Sara. “Happy Objects.” *The Affect Theory Reader*, by Melissa Gregg and Gregory J. Seigworth, Duke University Press, 2010, p. 41.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid* p.42

<sup>7</sup> Such as feminist kill-joys, unhappy queers, and melancholic migrants. (p.30)

keenly aware of the ways that my ambiguous presentation and existence alone can break the systems designed to uphold the binary matrix of gender, and I am reminded almost daily of how this disruption causes varying degrees of discomfort.

The idea behind this exhibition was to bring together four artists who I admire deeply for the ways that their work allows us to think through the idea of the unhappy object. I had encountered the work of Madelyne Beckles, Vida Beyer, Kaythi and Shellie Zhang in various venues and contexts over the years, all of which made lasting and formative impressions. It is difficult to distill into language the visceral gut punch of artwork that resonates in such a way that it burrows into your brain and refuses to let go, well after you are out of its proximity. Simply put, their work is sticky.<sup>8</sup>

The objects in this exhibition include physical artworks – the material objects themselves – as well as the ideas, modalities and feelings employed by the artists, the systems and contexts in which the works exist, and the emotions and engagements of the audience. The artists are predominantly BIPOC<sup>9</sup> and queer, and they overtly take on “issues” such as race, queerness, feminism, diaspora, grief and anxiety through their work, leaning into rather than shying away from the potential of discomfort.

**“Who am I to feel so free?”  
- JD Samson of MEN<sup>10</sup>**

A colourful rug declaring “Dykes Only” greets visitors upon entering. Kaythi’s *Our Lady of Profound Failure* is a hand hooked unwelcome mat originally created as part of a series of workshops led by Toronto based artist and facilitator Lauren Cullen and featured in the 2019 exhibition *Productive Discomfort* at Xpace Cultural Centre.<sup>11</sup> As the first object we encounter, *Our Lady* invites to us reflect not only on who is allowed in, but who is made to feel welcome in a space. With the alarming rise of anti-trans legislation in the United States<sup>12</sup> and the growing discourse surrounding TERFs<sup>13</sup>, this unwelcome mat at once declares the gallery as a queer space while alluding to failed utopic visions founded on exclusion and separatism within queer communities. *Our Lady* sets the tone of *(un)happy objects*, immediately politicizing its environment and inviting discomfort: asking us to inhabit the complexities of queer inner group politics, while drawing a line in the sand – flipping the script on who the space is for and who might feel out of place here.

**“Who, who, who do you talk to? Who do you talk to? Who do you talk to?  
... When your body's in trouble?”  
- Mary Margaret O’Hara<sup>14</sup>**

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<sup>8</sup> Ahmed refers to “affect as ‘sticky,’ saying that “affect is what sticks, or what sustains or preserves the connection between ideas, values, and objects.” (p. 29)

<sup>9</sup> Black, Indigenous and People of Colour

<sup>10</sup> From MEN’s 2011 album *Talk About Body*

<sup>11</sup> “Productive Discomfort Curated by Lauren Cullen.” *Xpace Cultural Centre*, Mar. 2019, [www.xpace.info/exhibition-event/productive-discomfort-curated-by-lauren-cullen/](http://www.xpace.info/exhibition-event/productive-discomfort-curated-by-lauren-cullen/).

<sup>12</sup> Lang, Nico. “More Anti-Trans Bills Have Been Introduced in 2021 than Any Year in History.” *Them.*, *Them.*, 8 Mar. 2021, [www.them.us/story/anti-trans-bills-2021](http://www.them.us/story/anti-trans-bills-2021).

<sup>13</sup> Trans Exclusionary Radical Feminists

<sup>14</sup> From O’Hara’s 1988 album *Miss America*

Growing up online can lead to a uniquely affective association with the web browser, providing a distinct context for community and kinship. Relationships formed over the internet can be warm and intimate while at the same time cold and distant. Connection mediated through digital technology: intimacy via anonymity.

Vida Beyer's *Nightmoves: Too Many Windows Open Feeling (2016-2021)* is an installation spanning over five years of creation and accumulation. Made up of embroidery, weavings, drawings, and paintings, the work is an intimate archive. *Nightmoves* is meant to encompass the feeling of having too many browser windows open – translating the affective overwhelm of digital multitasking and information seeking into an AFK<sup>15</sup> assemblage of tactile objects. Beyer weaves personal ephemera such as letters, photographs and intimate drawings with more widely recognizable imagery referencing movies, pop culture, and online platforms, situating their unique experience through a broader cultural context. The work explores contradictions and polarities: the spectrum of intimacy spanning virtual and physical planes, the feeling of being inside and outside of something at once, the dissolving boundaries between personal and public via the ways in which the imagery of a close friend or family member can become interchangeable with that of a celebrity or a stranger online. Through their installation, Beyer gives a physical body to the feelings associated with desire and overwhelm, making warm and tangible the affective experience of digital relationality.

**“How can you not be problematic?”  
- Madelyne Beckles<sup>16</sup>**

There is a particular kind of vulnerability in having your private browsing history made public. Much like the contents of one's bedside table, such information feels like a mix of the most mundane and anxiously personal objects that inhabit a person's brain. “madonna armpit hair,” “bell hooks bill cosby comment,” “brittany murphy age at death,” “prison industrial complex,” “lose weight inner thigh,” “worst cultural appropriation” are some of the subject lines in Madelyne Beckles' *Search Herstory* series, in which the artist has immortalized her search engine browsing [her]story through framed prints hung on the wall. Like Beyer, Beckles evaluates media objects such as memes and theory through a non-hierarchical lens. There's an earnestness in positioning niche artifacts found online alongside canonical theory texts and painfully 2000s pop culture references such as playboy, Paris Hilton, and Laguna Beach. Beckles is interested in the ways that all objects hold racialized, gendered, and classed connotations and in what it is that leads to these social and cultural contexts.

**“The young girl originates in the failure of feminism”  
“The young girl is obsessed with authenticity because it is a lie”<sup>17</sup>**

90's television PSA meets DIY cam girl aesthetics; *Theory of the Young Girl* is a single channel performance for video that responds to Tiqqun's<sup>18</sup> text of the same name. Beckles pulls quotes from the text's theoretical exploration of capitalism's construction of the figure of the young

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<sup>15</sup> Away from Keyboard

<sup>16</sup> Schulli, Leah. “Healthy, Complicated Relationships: An Interview with Madelyne Beckles.” *C Magazine*, 1 July 2020, [cmagazine.com/issues/146/healthy-complicated-relationships-an-interview-with-madelyne-bec](http://cmagazine.com/issues/146/healthy-complicated-relationships-an-interview-with-madelyne-bec).

<sup>17</sup> Beckles, Madelyne. “Theory of the Young Girl.” 2017.

<sup>18</sup> Tiqqun is a French collective of authors and activists formed in 1999.

girl in order to critique the ways in which feminism was presented to her when she was coming of age. By alluding to theory as an object to accessorize with, in this case an empty pink binder adorned with bubble letters, Beckles draws a direct link between the false empowerment sold to women through commodified beauty ideals and the hyper (suffocating) whiteness and cisness that upholds much of foundational feminist literature.

**“Is processing through humour not part of processing through these histories?”  
- Shellie Zhang<sup>19</sup>**

Shellie Zhang is interested in cultivating a space where laughter and grief co-exist.

“I AM TERRIFIED THAT MY MOTHER WILL SEEM FOREIGN TO MY CHILDREN” reads in bright red neon on opposite sides of the gallery’s dividing wall. One side written in Mandarin, the other in English, *I am Terrified* / *我担心* pinpoints a visceral anxiety about the disruption in transmission of intergenerational knowledge, language, and culture shaped by diaspora and migration. A second piece by Zhang, *It’s Complicated*, reads “DIASPORAHAHA” in large holographic text spanning almost the entire length of the West wall. Originally created as a site-specific installation for an event put on by the Toronto based queer Asian art collective New Ho Queen, *It’s Complicated* refuses an easy reading.

Zhang is focused on the ways that text can play a more nuanced role instead of re-traumatizing its subjects, and in how its form influences the ways the message is read. The sentiment in *I am Terrified* / *我担心* is hyper vulnerable, yet it takes the form of signage commonly found in that of a store front window. What does it mean to share such an intimate concern through a visual language associated with advertising goods for consumption? Zhang creates a tension via content and form between intimacy and universality, proximity and distance. *It’s Complicated* literally avoids the flattening of traumatic discourse related to diaspora and loss through its material rendering in holographic vinyl. The medium defies singular understandings, as it shifts visually depending on the viewer’s position, giving motion to the text, defying a static reading.

Zhang is critical of the idea that grief and hardship are only legitimized through trauma. By finding humour within struggle and focusing on more expansive alternatives, she orients toward a more livable reality.

**“How are we going to archive ourselves? To document our own histories?”  
- Kaythi<sup>20</sup>**

Many queer histories, and more specifically queer histories of colour are largely inaccessible, even when one knows where to look. By the time Kaythi arrived in Toronto in the 2010s, queer spaces in the city oriented toward women had all been closing. Like Zhang, Kaythi is concerned about cultural erasure and the lack of intergenerational knowledge, especially among Asian immigrant communities. *Personal Connection* is a video documenting a long

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<sup>19</sup> In conversation with the artist

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form performance in which the artist uses Lex, a queer mobile dating app, to share a series of “missed connections” memorializing disappeared spaces for queer women of colour in Toronto. The poetic posts serve as invitations to connect both literally with other users as well as symbolically with the now closed spaces and their histories, fostering connection across temporal distance.

The internet has played a notably important role in finding community for marginalized folks. Lex is modeled after queer personal ads for sex and dating, but is a platform used to help form queer connections of all kinds – from starting a band to advertising local events. The app has notably been criticized for the ways that many users employ the written ad format in order to share their genital preference in searching for a mate, stating that they are looking for those who are AFAB (assigned female at birth), leading to the exclusion of trans women and non-binary folks. Spaces orientated towards queer women have often struggled with internal conflicts caused by racism, transphobia, and biphobia, issues that live on in the digital space of community personal ads, issues similarly touched on by the artist’s hooked rug that reads “Dykes only”.

**The joke is that it’s on all of us, but some of us are in on it.**

By employing techniques such as humour, sex appeal, references to popular culture, and the use of seductive materials, the artists in *(un)happy objects* are able to bypass some of the barriers that may alienate audiences who are uncomfortable with “unhappy” topics. These techniques act as invitations to the party – the party being space and time to sit with the discomfort caused by systems such as colonialism, white supremacy, homophobia, sexism, and racism. The exhibition acts as a container to hold space for complex feelings, to initiate and nurture these dialogues that hopefully continue well after visitors depart.

There is joy found in histories of trauma alongside pain. When naming the problem makes you the problem, humour can be used as a tool of survival. The works in *(un)happy objects* have the ability to simultaneously make us laugh and ask us to think. Humour acts not only as an access point for audiences, but allows us affect aliens to diffuse tension, to invite rather than shut out, to refuse to be scapegoated.

These works ask us to shift our perspective on what makes an object or topic pleasant or happy – redirecting the question altogether. Maybe it’s less about pathologizing and searching out the root cause of happiness or discomfort – but rather asking ourselves why we are so quick to turn away from difficult feelings. These works and the conversations they may lead to ask us to look inward rather than out – to investigate the sticky feelings, to turn toward rather than away from that which stirs us up – as it is often in looking toward what we fear that allows us to heal.

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