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Look With Your Hands

Angus Connell Brown

I began writing this essay in what used to be a child's bedroom. Perched at the small desk by the doll's house, I looked away to my right and saw how the enormous sash window smoothly held my reflection among the lights and the trees outside. This uncanny framing, this return to the fascination of reflection among the tactile technologies of childhood imagination feels like a fitting place to begin thinking about one of the first poems Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick ever published: 'An Essay on the Picture Plane'.

According to *Fat Art, Thin Art*, Sedgwick composed the poem in 1973 but the tiny discrepancies — a missing line here, an extra comma there — between the publication of the poem in *The Poetry Miscellany* in 1975 and the collection of the poem in 1994 hint that the latter text is the product of a slight return to a younger muse, a muse still theorizing the world around her. My own return to 'An Essay on the Picture Plane' oscillates between a question and an instruction that Sedgwick's poem scratched up from my own childhood. The question: "What are you looking at?" The instruction: "Look with your eyes, not with your hands". I learnt both at school. And both, like 'An Essay on the Picture Plane', left me tongue-tied.

In her memoir — her 'texture-book' — *A Dialogue on Love* (1999), Sedgwick described a way in which she would gently break this kind of fraught silence, the kind of silence that often

followed poems and stories in her creative writing class.¹ As the tension reached breaking point she would murmur:

“What’s this piece doing?”
or even, “What does it know?”²

‘An Essay on the Picture Plane’ asks “What are you looking at?” It’s there in the title, “What are you looking at? A poem? An essay? A picture?”

We learnt the power of this question on the playground. “What are *you* looking at?” It took your silence from you. You were no longer just quiet; you weren’t allowed to talk. The paranoid aggression of this question turned the boy or girl asking it from a “who” into a “what”. An inanimate menace: subject to, impervious from, and terrified of, the possibility of desire. The obscene magic of that question “What are *you* looking at?” shamed *you* with the queer connotations *it* generated, *it* publicized, and still, entirely without conscience, blamed you for.³

Now, when ‘An Essay on the Picture Plane’ asks that question, any belligerence softens into the same throaty murmur of, “What’s this piece doing?” It is curious and only a little stung by the nervousness of becoming an object so subject to desire or scorn. Reading this poem, my confused tongue only began to loosen when I realized that when ‘An Essay on the Picture Plane’ asked, “What are you looking at?” it was talking directly to me. *I* was the *you* the poem addressed. ‘An Essay on the Picture Plane’ is a letter to the reader.

Take the poem’s second stanza:

The vertical plane makes the absence present
to you, who are absent both from the horizon

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- 1 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *A Dialogue on Love* (Boston: Beacon Press, 1999), 207.
 - 2 Sedgwick, *A Dialogue on Love*, 42.
 - 3 Sedgwick treats playground performativity in her writing on wussiness in *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2003), 69–70.

and from the fabric itself before you
which is too articulate.⁴

In reading this poem, *you* — by which I mean *I*, so let's call it *we* — render the vertical plane, the page itself, absent. The fibers of the fabric in front of us are “too articulate” for us to see. Reading instead of looking, we blur the page into the poem. But even if we do look, even if we shift our focus past the words on the page and onto the grain of the recto and verso we are still, surely, separate from the poem itself. Safe in the extraordinary privileges of looking and reading, wrapped in their strange and yielding silences, we once again excuse ourselves from the poem's tableau. Or we would if the poem would let us. ‘An Essay on the Picture Plane’ continues:

My project, really, is a street at 8 or 9
in cold weather — after all, there is a point
in late dark evening when the formalism leaves you.
Are you wrapped warmly?

I want big houses of two kinds:
in the first kind no one's visible and that's ok
where nothing belongs to it but its windows that are dark
which just reflect the night, and its windows
that are lit, which make a small transparent space, the room
that while distant is both visible and perspicuous.
For you on the street, hot and chilly:
there are bright places free entirely of you
and there at the same time, of course, for you.⁵

Here, in my reading, Sedgwick presses us firmly into the poem as both reader and character. As character we are tickled warm and cold, looking into a house that now accepts, now reflects,

4 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Fat Art, Thin Art* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1994), 72.

5 Sedgwick, *Fat Art, Thin Art*, 72.

our gaze from window to window. As reader, we are presented with a bright, white space — the page — free of us and yet for us. We are invited to look through it, to test its resistances. In the final paragraphs of her essay, or the final two stanzas of her poem, Sedgwick describes the second house and, in doing so, juxtaposes the window and the page, mapping the poem's second person onto *you*:

you with your confusing purchase on the space
of fears, inflections, and ambitions (for who
might not now walk in, putting on all the glamor
of the lit stage, perfectly irresistible,
and you out here dark, with no means
at all of yielding), I'm saying,

for you, there is no free or distant space.
Across the dark around you, the bright window is
only as transparent and no more
than this designed and speckled page.⁶

As you struggle to maintain your confusing purchase on its pages, the poem plucks at your fingers. Gently rethreading the needle of its playground logic, 'An Essay on the Picture Plane' calls you out for staring. It lights you up and looks back, inscrutable among the glinting windows of the poem's surface. In this final stanza, the reader finally becomes the poem's second person, rendered inanimate within the text, subject to desire and scorn.

Sedgwick's other essay on a picture plane, 'A Poem is Being Written' (1987), notoriously ties the optics of form to spanking. In doing so, it quietly gives the source of her window trick. In a parenthetical aside, Sedgwick admits, "I planned for each poem in a booklet I made at eight to be closely framed by a golden proscenium hung with curtains, carefully labelled 'The Magic

6 Sedgwick, *Fat Art, Thin Art*, 73.

Window”⁷. In ‘An Essay on the Picture Plane,’ this precocious fantasy of the poem, the window, and the handmade comes together, and again it is framed by fabric. While the poem is astrigent in its optical interrogation of what “are often blandly called” reader-relations, its insistence on materiality invites us to look, not with our eyes but with our hands.⁸

Sedgwick makes her most tangible invitations to look with our hands in her textile art. In the part-published paper ‘Come As You Are,’ she writes about this art, describing “the rub of reality” and “tactile interrogation.”⁹ Still, Sedgwick’s most sensational work might be *Touching Feeling*. Since the book’s publication in 2003, theorists like Sianne Ngai and Heather Love have generated an illuminating critical friction from the feeling of Sedgwick’s title. Both critics extend Sedgwick’s treatment of affect to a certain degree. In *Ugly Feelings* (2005), Ngai briefly draws on Sedgwick’s work with Adam Frank in her discussion of Silvan Tomkins.¹⁰ In *Feeling Backward* (2007), Love engages much more explicitly with Sedgwick’s work on shame.¹¹ Love and Ngai’s titles both borrow some of the poetry of Sedgwick’s. As *Ugly Feelings* and *Feeling Backward* echo the twin trochees of *Touching Feeling*, they show the extent to which subsequent theories of affect have numbed the physical connotations of Sedgwick’s *Feeling*. The ambiguous gerunds of Sedgwick’s title do not let us forget that affect and embodiment make for inseparable bedfellows in her work. The insistence of ‘An Essay

7 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 183. In *Touching Feeling*, Sedgwick returns at length to the figure of the proscenium in order to explore the spatiality of performativity and, in particular, “marriage itself as theater” (72), an idea she also explores in her poem ‘Our’.

8 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Epistemology of the Closet* (Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1990), 3.

9 Sedgwick, ‘Come As You Are’ unpublished ms, 4. Parts of this paper were published in various chapters of *The Weather in Proust*. My thanks to Jonathan Goldberg for sharing the manuscript with me.

10 Sianne Ngai, *Ugly Feelings* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007).

11 Heather Love, *Feeling Backward: Loss and the Politics of Queer History* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007).

on the Picture Plane' on materiality massages some blood back into Sedgwick's *Feeling* and allows us to consider her neglected *Touching*. *Touching*: her work so often is. It trembles with affect's weight but still clasps to cutaneous and digital connotations. Perhaps this is what the manicules, the small pointing fingers that begin each chapter of *Touching Feeling* are pointing towards so elegantly: touch is a heuristic.

Fat Art, *Thin Art* is full of the touching that might shape this heuristic. As Sedgwick's work changes, the meaning of skin on skin began to change. In the later poems, the muse of masturbation becomes the touch of teaching. Lines like:

The
actual, slightly numb, and wakeful touch
of bodies in the dream ('Sexual Hum')¹²

Last night, fingers beating ('Sestina Lente')¹³

and,

the touch of dead cat ('Sestina Lente')¹⁴

turn to lines like:

The touching made us feel absurdly vital ('Performative (Toronto)')¹⁵

and, my utter favourite — from 'The Use of Being Fat' —

no one I loved could come to harm
enfolded in my touch.¹⁶

¹² Sedgwick, *Fat Art*, *Thin Art*, 76.

¹³ Sedgwick, *Fat Art*, *Thin Art*, 84.

¹⁴ Sedgwick, *Fat Art*, *Thin Art*, 84.

¹⁵ Sedgwick, *Fat Art*, *Thin Art*, 17.

¹⁶ Sedgwick, *Fat Art*, *Thin Art*, 15.

This kind of enfolding touch is a different version of “a steady touch in an inky room” (‘Everything Always Distracts’),¹⁷ though one we’re all equally, adolescently, and adultly familiar with. It is the touch of reading.

We know this touch already, and we have come to know it intimately, by imagining its impossibility. The language of close reading provides the impossibility of touch with its most insistent and enduring aesthetic: the image of edging closer and closer towards an object that we’d dearly love to put our hands on but daren’t. In this way, ‘An Essay on the Picture Plane’ holds up a mirror to the close reader. When I look at my reflection, I see myself where, I think, I’ve always been as a reader: quietly blurred between the impossibility of touch and the imaginative worlds that belong to that impossibility, wavering on the edge of fantasy. But, when I look again, I can see something else. I am already touching ‘An Essay on the Picture Plane’. I am holding the poem by the pages’ curves. I can feel their grain, light on my thumbs. I am learning to look with my hands.

17 Sedgwick, *Fat Art, Thin Art*, 74.

