Incipient Intensity:
Public Address and Affective Reception

> What I hope for the work is to illuminate, to bear witness, and to provide some pause in terms of reflection on the complexity of a given site, or given idea, or a given set of conditions… I like to construct situations that allow for others to feel. [I am] less interested in activating change than in activating feelings, which, who knows, may in fact lead to change, but from within…[1] —Susan Silton

In this quote, Susan Silton describes her aspirations for the public's reception of her work. Alluding to light, she articulates her aim to "illuminate" the audience by taking time to contemplate and "reflect" on the complexities of a given site, idea, or set of conditions. While Silton wants people to think deeply about her work, she states that she "likes to construct situations that allow for others to feel" and is "less interested in activating change than in activating feelings." This is not a case of "either/or" but "and/both": she wants to elicit intellectual *and* emotional responses from her audiences.

To achieve this, Silton employs specific strategies for public address, beginning with compelling visuals, sounds, and texts that attract audiences and capture their attention. She utilizes various voices, perspectives, and physical viewpoints in projects that may unfold across different spaces and temporalities. The audience's reception can be a 1:1 scale—close reading or deep listening—in which viewers feel as if the artist is speaking directly to them. Occasionally, she invites specific individuals to participate in collective projects; at other times, anonymous spectators view her site-specific work in public settings or online. Regardless of the form, context, or modality, Silton's provocative ideas and insightful inquiries aim to stimulate the public's mind, body, senses, and emotions to foster affective engagement and emotional response in her work.

To better understand the affective aspects of Silton's work, it is worth briefly tracing a few proponents of affect theory. Psychologist Silvan Tomkins first coined the term "affect theory" in his groundbreaking work, *Affect Imagery Consciousness (*1962).[2] Tomkins codified nine specific affects—positive, neutral, and negative—that are initially biological triggers (neuro-firing) that then become behavioral reactions (emotions) when they are combined with felt experiences, personal memories, and social contexts.[3] Philosopher Brian Massumi, in his *The Autonomy of Affect* (1995), elaborates on Tomkins' idea that affect precedes emotion: "Affects are like forces before intentions, pre-subjective, visceral intensities that move us…the strength and duration of an image is its 'intensity,' and intensity is incipience: incipient action, and expression."[4] This description of affect relates directly to how Silton's work is received: the public pauses to reflect upon potent images and experiences a visceral, "incipient intensity" that leads to affect and then activates the viewer's emotions.

By the early 2000s, literary critics, feminist scholars, and queer theorists expanded the existing discourse on affect, which some referred to as "the affective turn," to describe the integral role it plays in art, literature, and criticism.[5] Eve Sedgwick, in her introduction to *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (2003), stated the essays in the book are intended to address "aspects of experience and reality that do not present themselves in propositional or even in verbal form alongside others that do."[6] She infers here, like Massumi, that affect is fundamentally experiential and non-linguistic, so it cannot be understood solely through language and texts—it must be felt.

In Sedgwick's chapter in the book, she articulates her influential ideas about the positive potential of "reparative reading," a position that undertakes a range of different affects to counteract the suspicious, negative aspects of "paranoid reading."[7] Critic and literary scholar Rita Felski expands upon Sedgwick's theories in The *Limits of Critique* (2015) with her own concept of "post-critical reading," which aims to move beyond the emotional detachment found in much contemporary criticism and instead engage readers in both feelings and thought. [8] She asserts that texts are not just meant to be deciphered and dissected; rather, they "might emphasize affect or describe various aesthetic dimensions of the reader's experience."[9] Both Sedgwick and Felski advocate for readers/viewers to engage with works of art critically and with agency, making their own interpretations and having affective responses that lead to emotion, which is exactly what Silton aspires to in her own artistic practice.

Silton's diverse interdisciplinary works vary considerably, but her methodology is consistently conceptual: she begins with a specific idea or inquiry, then selects the precise materials, media, and texts to communicate her subject and draw in the viewer. With an academic background in English literature and creative writing, plus years of graphic design experience, she deploys language as a material, juxtaposing images and texts that she writes or appropriates. This is why she was drawn to first-generation conceptualists who critique representation with their ironic senses of humor and/or use of texts, such as Vija Celmins, Joseph Kosuth, Adrian Piper, and Ed Ruscha .[10] Silton also admired Jenny Holzer, Barbara Kruger, and other 1980s second-generation feminists whose conceptual work,

like her own, employs different points of view and bold forms of public address with messages about identity, gender, capitalism, and consumption.

When Silton began her career in 1990, neo-conceptual practices and identity politics dominated contemporary art, and she found an affinity with her queer peers who made conceptual, political, and aesthetic work. She felt kinship to Felix Gonzalez-Torres's exquisite minimal objects, interactive installations, and public art projects, which are emotive evocations regarding life, love, and loss. His Doubles series of paired objects, such as identical clocks, mirrors, or a photograph of an unmade bed with two head impressions in the pillows from his Billboards, are metaphors for his partnership with his lover, Ross Laycock, who died of AIDS-related causes. Similarly, Gonzalez-Torres's "Candy Works," sculptures consist of hard candies piled into the corner, sometimes totaling an "ideal weight" of Gonzalez-Torres and/or Laycock before their illness. As viewers take the candies, they are reminded of the two men's dissipating bodies and eventual death.

Around the same time, Silton also recalls the impact of seeing Millie Wilson's installation *Fauves Semblant: Peter (A Young English Girl*) (1991), a pseudo-retrospective of a fictional lesbian artist installed at LACE with faux art and artifacts, and photographs of Millie-as-Peter by Catherine Opie.[11] Wilson's work demonstrates both formal elegance and conceptual rigor, particularly her Dada and Surrealist-inspired objects such as her exquisite *Lace Curtain Window* (1991), a French window with black lace curtains, a feminist send-up of Duchamp's *Fresh Widow* (1920). Much like Silton's work, the art of Gonzalez-Torres and Wilson yields a conceptual and formal symbiosis that is social, political, and critical, but also personal and affective.

While generosity, participation, and collectivity are integral to Silton's work, she rejects the labels "relational aesthetics" and "social practice" art-making. In Claire Bishop's critique of these practices, "The Social Turn", she argued that a "work's conceptual significance *is* both an aesthetic and a social form," while rebuking artists who sacrificed criticality for "good intentions, ethics, and educational concerns." [12] Silton meets Bishop's rigorous criteria in her practice, which is relentlessly aesthetic, and critical; however, her work is also ethical, pedagogical, and affective.

* * * *

In the early 1990s, Silton's art focused on her own subjectivity and queer identity, including her *Self-Portraits* (1995), which she created by scanning her face and body. For *i feel what I want, I want what i feel* (1990) (fig. 1), she used white letters to superimpose this text over a photocopy of successive, slightly distorted images of her hands. Here, she used a rhetorical device, an antimetabole, that repeats a phrase with the order of the words reversed. Silton emphasizes verbs of emotion and desire (*feel* and *want*) in an italic cursive type. The top and bottom "i"s are rendered in lowercase, but in the center, the "I"s are capitalized to reiterate the first-person point of view. In this work, a haptic, *physical* reality is conveyed through the images of her hands, while the text expresses an *emotional* feeling, a presence of sense, and affect. Both a bold assertion and an intimate confession, the artist shares this text to activate the viewer's own emotions.

At this time, Silton participated in *All But The Obvious* (1990) at Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions (LACE), an exhibition that examined constructions of lesbian

identity.[13] For the show, Silton commissioned a scenic painter to replicate *i feel what I want I want what i feel* on a huge canvas draped over LACE's building façade. While the small-scale original felt private, almost like a diary entry, the larger presentation read like a billboard. As Silton's first outdoor, site-specific public work, this project demonstrated how specific control of scale and perspective could amplify the message to elicit a more direct, affective response.

This knowledge was utilized by Silton in the early 2000s, when the artist received commissions for large-scale billboards as part of Los Angeles's public art programs. One of these was for *How Many Billboards? Art in Stead*, organized by the MAK Center for Architecture.[14] At first glance, Silton's billboard, *If I Say So* (2010), sited on La Cienega Boulevard, recalls a 1960s minimalist painting with its thin, multi-hued stripes. However, here the all-caps white letters reverberate through the color striping. The text was appropriated from Robert Rauschenberg's work, *This Is a portrait of Iris Clert, if I Say So* (1961). Consisting of an actual telegram sent to Clert for the opening exhibition of her gallery, Rauschenberg's Duchampian gesture proclaimed the everyday object as art, and the artist as ultimate arbiter what is considered as art.[15] By appropriating a prominent male artist's title and authoritative voice, Silton performs a type of drag she has utilized in other works.[16] She responds to the wordplay in the program's subtitle, *Art in Stead,* as she appropriates Rauschenberg's wording in *stead*, claiming it as her own. She also played off the broader exhibition title, by producing a work of art *instead* of a commercial billboard. Silton harnessed the power of an everyday visual form—often used to unambiguously advertise products and services—to realign the viewing audience's expectations and

compel them to contemplate this first person, emotional exclamation. Yet, unlike an advertisement, the "I" is left ambiguous and multiple: *If I Say So* could be the artist, or Rauschenberg—or, perhaps, an affective message to encourage the public to assert its own voice.

By the 2010s, Silton started projects inviting individuals to participate in carefully orchestrated collective performances and interventions. For *In everything there is the trace* (2013), first exhibited at the USC Fisher Art Museum, ten manual typewriters on an equal number of custom-made interlocking tables formed a circle in the center of the gallery.[17] Each table had just three legs; to stabilize the formation, each had to interlock with the next in the circle, a metaphor for the potential strength of communal experience. A metal book holder on each table held a copy of John Steinbeck's iconic novel, *The Grapes of Wrath*, an iconic text Silton selected because of its California setting and probing exploration of issues of labor, racism, class struggle, and migration.

The artist invited the public to type Steinbeck's text in stencil mode (with no ink) in twice-weekly, one-hour typing sessions—a durational, physical, and sonic action.[18] When typing in stencil mode, the letters are barely visible… just a trace. This is why, for the work's title, she appropriated wording from a 2007 interview with the deconstructionist philosopher Jacques Derrida, who stated: "In everything, there is the trace, the experience of a return to something else, of being returned to another past, present, future…"[19] This title aptly evokes how when we read a literary text, we are transported simultaneously to a past we remember, a present we inhabit, or an uncertain, becoming future.

With this performative, collective activity, Silton shifts the point of view from first-person singular to first-person plural of "we." While each participant reads and types the book individually, they perform together. Some of the 200-plus project participants—running the gamut from students unfamiliar with manual typewriters to seniors who lived during the 1930s—shared with the artist their reflections about the individual versus the collective, the translation and slippage of text, and the impact of making a subtle mark.[20] In re-typing the novel, some participants told the artist they felt empathy towards Steinbeck's characters and their plight during the Dust Bowl era. With this performative installation Silton elicited both intellectual and emotional responses to her work, in which audiences shared the affect of historical, literary, and political memory.

Who's in a Name? (2011), another collective project intervened (with permission) into John Baldessari's *Your Name in Lights* (2011), a participatory public project realized for the Sydney Festival at the Australia Museum in conjunction with Kaldor Public Art Projects.[21] Baldessari's riff on Andy Warhol's famous statement, "In the future, everyone will be world-famous for fifteen minutes," consisted of inviting people to submit their names for public display on an LED sign hung on the museum's façade (like a movie marquee); these names were then livestreamed so that anyone, anywhere in the world, could have their very own fifteen *seconds* of fame.[22]

Two years before Baldessari made *Your Name in Lights,* Silton found a Wikipedia site listing artists and others who had ended their lives by suicide and felt moved to invite other artists to register for Baldessari's piece using a name she randomly selected from this list. Like a Situationist détournement, the selected names in Silton's intervention

surreptitiously recontextualized the meaning of Baldessari's work, transforming glorification and self-aggrandizement into tribute and memorialization.

As extension of this collective act, and a documentation of it, Silton designed and produced an artist's book, *Who's in a Name*? (2013). This book included an essay, plates from live screenshots of the registered names in lights, and biographies of both the deceased artists and artists who Silton invited to submit their names.[23] The biographies were written by an altogether different cohort of invited arts writers, critics, and art historians. In support of this effort, Silton organized book launch events and performances at Los Angeles art spaces where participants shared reflections about the artist they had registered or written about, respectively.[24] *Who's in a Name*? as an expansive project encompassing artistic intervention, knowledge production, and performance, provided a space to memorialize these artists and counteract the stigma of suicide while also questioning the significance of fame. Baldessari's *Your Name in Lights* reified the public's insatiable desire to achieve celebrity—even for fifteen seconds— and Silton's intervention exposed it as a Warholian gesture of art-as-entertainment.[25]

MAYDAY! MAYDAY! MAYDAY! (2020), as the title implies, was another kind of memorial: an emergency call to action to honor those who died tragically during the first waves of the COVID-19 pandemic. For this mail art project and website, Silton asked participants to write a letter to someone who had died from the virus and mail it to Donald Trump, then in his first term as President of the United States. They filled out an online form to register their name, the name of the deceased, and the date they mailed the envelope, with an option to leave a comment on this "living memorial."[26] Silton specifically

chose to use the mail in support of the US Postal Service, which at that time was being undermined by Donald Trump's choice of Louis DeJoy—CEO of a private freight and logistics company and Republican donor—as Postmaster General. A few months later, in November 2020, Trump blamed his loss of the election on the USPS for mishandling mail-in ballots, a key component of the "big lie" that fomented the January 2021 insurrection at the Capitol.

On January 6, 2022, the first anniversary of the attempted coup by-election deniers, Silton opened *Bursting in the Air* (2022) in a vacant ground-floor commercial space in downtown L.A. When entering, one heard contralto Gwendolyn Brown singing "The Star-Spangled Banner," a haunting sound that resonated throughout the cavernous space.[27] The visual centerpiece—a large projection of a video shot by the artist of the metal scrap yard across from her downtown studio—is a demolition-in-progress with an American flag waving in the background. On small tables around the perimeter, Silton placed printed testimonies from four Capitol Police officers at the House Select Committee Hearing, which was tasked with investigating the insurrection. The officer's firsthand accounts—adding a crucial layer of documentation—could be read on-site or the viewer could take away the print, a strategy that Silton, like Felix Gonzalez-Torres, has used in her practice.

In viewing the scrapyard destruction-in-process, hearing Brown's sorrowful song, reading the texts, and feeling the chill of the concrete building, this immersive, multi-sensory installation became a space to mourn the tragic events of January 6th and the unfolding illiberalism's that have followed. When *Bursting in Air* was on view, the public was still reeling from the physical and emotional repercussions of the COVID pandemic. The

installation was thus a beautiful elegy, an emotional experience, and a critical civics lesson, providing people with much-needed time and space to remember, reflect, or have a long-awaited social interaction.

Returning to Silton's quote at the beginning of this essay, she notes that activating her audience's feelings, "may in fact, lead to change, but from within." This demonstrates how the affective reception of her work can prompt activism based on an individual's own terms. Silton recognizes the power of affect to evoke emotions, including rage, which has fueled activism in liberatory movements from abolition and feminism to LGBTQI+ rights.

As a young artist, Silton focused her work on queer identity, but as a more mature artist, she is increasingly concerned with the larger body politic as she noted: "The queer body is always present in my work, but now I'm more directly interested in bodies in relationship to one another, vis-a-vis power, vis-à-vis politics."[28] She has shifted perspective from first person singular "I" in her early works, moving gradually towards the plural "we" in her collective, participatory installations. Since 2016 she has addressed "us" (and the U.S.!) to learn from repressed or re-written truths, creating reminders that history can, and does, repeat and rhyme.

Whether tackling personal identity and subjectivity, shared historical memories, or the myriad of imminent global crises, Silton has the uncanny ability to produce works that allow audiences to reflect and think deeply about the impact of these issues as they endure from the past and into the present and future. She addresses her public directly with equal parts criticality and emotional intelligence, eliciting the same from viewers of her work. In that process, we may *feel* our humanity most acutely. At this moment of political instability,

rising fascism, threats to democracy, increasing hate speech, pervasive disinformation, and "executive capture" of the U.S. government's system of checks and balances, Susan Silton's affective art is more prescient, necessary, and prophetic than ever before.

---

[1]Susan Silton as quoted in Susanna Newbury, , "Artists at Work: Susan Silton," https://eastofborneo.org/articles/artists-at-work-susan-silton.

[2]Silvan Tomkins, Affect, Imagery and Consciousness, (New York: Springer Publishing, 1962).

[3] According to Tomkins, the nine affects are: interest-excitement and enjoyment-joy (positive) surprise-startle; (neutral) distress-anguish, anger-rage, fear-terror; disgust, dissmell, shame-humiliation (negative).

[4] Brian Massumi, "The Autonomy of Affect," *Cultural Critique*, No. 31, The Politics of Systems and Environments, Part II (Autumn, 1995): 83-109. https://www.jstor.org/stable/i258531

[5] *The Affective Turn: Theorizing the Social*, Partricia Ticiento Clough and Jean Halley, eds. (Durham: Duke University Press), 2007, use this term as the title of their anthology of essays, but it refers to the turn towards affect that started in the 1990s.

[6] Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Touching, Feeling*: *Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2003.

[7] Ibid. See Chapter 4, "Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You're so Paranoid You Probably Think This Essay is About You," 123-151. Here Sedgwick cites Paul Ricoeur who called Marx, Nietzsche, and Freud "the "masters of suspicion" for their critical, "paranoid" analyses. She observes how negative"paranoid reading" had dominated contemporary critical theory in the U.S. and argues for more positive, affective "reparative reading."

[8] Rita Felski, *The Limits of Critique* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2015), 151.

[9] _____,"Postcritical Reading," *American Book Review*, Vol. 38: No. 5 (July/August 2017):4-5.

[10] This and further references to other artists derive from my various conversations with the artist during late 2024 and 2025.

[11] *Fauves Semblant (Peter A Young English Girl)* premiered at Los Angeles Contemporary Exhibitions (LACE) in 1989 and was re-installed for *Millie Wilson: The Museum of Lesbian Dreams* at the Krannert Art Museum, August 29, 2024 - March 1, 2025, curated by David Evans Frantz.

[12] Claire Bishop, "The Social Turn: Collaborations and its Discontents," *Artforum*, Vol. 44: No. 6 (February 2006): 179-185.

[13] Curated by Pam Gregg and on view at LACE November 2 – December 23, 1990, the *All But the Obvious* catalogue was designed by Silton and edited by Catherine Lord. See the LACE Archives at: https://welcometolace.org/lace/all-but-the-obvious/. It should be noted *The Great American Lesbian Art Show*, organized a decade earlier in 1980 by The Woman's Building with "sister" exhibitions held in multiple cities across the United States, was one of the first to focus on lesbian artists and identity.

[14] *How Many Billboards? Art in Stead*, organized by Kimberli Meyer of the MAK Center for Art and Architecture with curators Lisa Henry, Nizan Shaked, and Glora Sutton.

[15] Rauschenberg was supposed to make a portrait of the art dealer for the opening of her gallery and at the last minute sent the telegram for inclusion in the exhibition.

[16] In performances with The Crowing Hens, Silton and the and all-women group she formed, whistle theme songs from class male-oriented films continuing her exploration of the gendered aspect of voice. See Natilee Harren's essay in this book for further discussion of the projects.

[17] Commissioned by, and first presented at USC Fisher Museum, Los Angeles, September 3 to December 7, 2013. Silton hired Justin Rice and Kagan Taylor of LA-based Knowhow Shop, to design and fabricate the table.

[18] Silton developed the concept for this project in 2007 when she re-read Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* and retyped the book in stencil mode as a response to the War in Iraq. This effort was also exhibited in the 2013 installation.

[19]This interview is from the documentary *Derrida*, directed by Kirby Dick and Amy Ziering Kofman (Jane Doe Films, 2002).

[20] These reflections came from a conversation that the author had with the author in October, 2024. She also noted for each participant's time and hour of labor, she gave them a typed (inkless) and signed certificate of participation with specific day and session time.

[21] The title is derived from William Shakespeare's well-known lines from Romeo and Juliet: "What's in a name? That which we call a rose by any other name would smell just as sweet."

[22] The quote, commonly attributed to Warhol, may have dubious, or at the very least, contested provenance. For more see: Blake Gopnik, *Warhol: A Life as Art* (New York: HarperCollins, 2020), 50. Baldessari's project premiered at the museum for the 2011 Sydney Festival and was subsequently installed that same year at the Museumplein in front of the new annex of the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, and on the façade of the Monnaie de Paris in 2014.

[23] Liz Kotz wrote the primary essay, "A Name of a Name," while Cole Akers, Andrew Berardini, Bridget R. Cooks, Jason E. Hill, Sarah Lehrer-Graiwer, Yael Lipschutz, Stacie Martinez, Kavior Moon, Susanna Newbury, Corrina Peipon, and Virginia Solomon wrote biographies of submitted and deceased artists.

[24]Events included: Museum of Contemporary Art, May 18, 2013, where twenty-six artists did presentations, and LAXART, where five art historians/writers presented ten-minute papers and read biographical entries. For *Ours is a City of Writers* (2017) an exhibition at the Los Angeles Municipal Art Gallery, Silton invited the original biographers and other L.A.-based writers to present works related to *Who's in a Name?*

[25]Caroline Baum in conversation with John Baldessari at Sydney Opera House, January 9, 2011, posted April 6, 2011, by Kaldor Public Arts Projects, Vimeo, https://vimeo.com/22062064.

[26] *May Day! May Day! May Day!* accessed at: https://www.maydaymaydaymaydayproject.com.

[27] *Bursting in Air* was presented at 1035 S. Broadway Avenue in partnership with LAND (Los Angeles Nomadic Division),and was on view January 6–January 27, 2022.

[28] Silton as quoted in Newbury, "Artists at Work: Susan Silton," https://eastofborneo.org/articles/artists-at-work-susan-silton.