

“The Pleasures in Being Seen”: An Interview with Dani Lessnau, Led by Drs. Stéfy McKnight and Julia Chan

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Volume 22, Number 1, 2024

Pleasures of Surveillance

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1109788ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.24908/ss.v22i1.16548>

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Publisher(s)

Surveillance Studies Network

ISSN

1477-7487 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this document

Lessnau, D., McKnight, S. & Chan, J. (2024). “The Pleasures in Being Seen”: An Interview with Dani Lessnau, Led by Drs. Stéfy McKnight and Julia Chan. *Surveillance & Society*, 22(1), 57–62. <https://doi.org/10.24908/ss.v22i1.16548>

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Interview

“The Pleasures in Being Seen”: An Interview with Dani Lessnau, Led by Drs. Stéfy McKnight and Julia Chan

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Abstract

When conceptualizing the call for this special issue, one artist came to our (Julia and Stéfy’s) minds: Dani Lessnau. Her work straddles complexities of surveillance, voyeurism, desire, and female pleasure. In particular, we want to highlight Lessnau’s provocative performance photography series *extimité* created in 2017. Using a pinhole camera inserted into her vagina, she photographs the sexual intimacies and relationships with her partners. We ask more broadly, what does it mean to use surveillance as a method of pleasure? And, how can artists subvert or appropriate the surveillant gaze in ways that disrupt heteropatriarchy? We are grateful to have had the opportunity to explore these tensions and questions with the artist herself in this interview. Thank you, Dani, for engaging with us in this topic.

Stéfy & Julia: Dani, can you describe your work, *extimité*, and your process of creating it?

Dani: *extimité* is a performance recorded with the photographic medium where the lines are blurred between the feeling, performing, and surveilling body.

I have been contending for most of my life with extreme bodily pain that affected all of my relationships, which oftentimes remained unseen, unacknowledged, or demonized. I had been called a liar so many times I was afraid to speak. I had been met with the words “well you look good” so many times that I began to believe if I could keep that act up—that was all that mattered. And I was deeply afraid of failing the people I loved, or my body becoming a burden to them.

I felt like I was constantly trying to convince those around me I was well while pleading with the medical establishment to acknowledge my pain. The performance never stopped. And through it all, my body fragmented, and I would choose which body mask to put on each day. My energy was consumed tending to these masks and the pain beneath them. It was a sobering moment when I saw clearly how this pain conditioned me as a performer in relationships and isolated me from the intimacy I craved more than anything.

This project came about as an attempt to restore a certain agency of sight to this unruly performing, living, feeling, invisible body of mine.

Sexual intercourse was incredibly painful for me, yet I craved that form of connection and intimacy so deeply that I feigned pleasure and endured the pain. But what I really loved was simply being in that

Lessnau, Dani, Stéfy McKnight, and Julia Chan. 2024. “The Pleasures in Being Seen”: An Interview with Dani Lessnau, Led by Drs. Stéfy McKnight and Julia Chan. *Surveillance & Society* 22 (1): 57-62.

<https://ojs.library.queensu.ca/index.php/surveillance-and-society/index> | ISSN: 1477-7487

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heightened space of sensing and desire with another. So, it was these relationships that I turned to for this performance practice.



Figure 1: Dani Lessnau, *untitled, extimité*, 2017, photograph using pinhole camera in vagina (photo provided by the artist).

Using my body, and the bodies of past and present lovers, I explored the capacity of a body to be simultaneously familiar and unfamiliar, erotic, physiological and ethereal, while navigating an uncanny space between surveillance and intimacy.

The performance, occurring in a private space between two people, involves inserting pinhole cameras made of discarded film canisters, into my vagina directed outward. The long exposures subject the film to the movement of breath and viscera, and subtle tremors of my body struggling to hold still. The receptivity of the film as material is in direct conversation with the position of the camera in a receptive orifice of my body. It was a collaborative process of becoming vulnerable and surrendering control; of being seen and taking up space.

As the light reflected from my collaborators' bodies entered mine, it was distorted by my internal movements. The resulting image is an exploration of the inter-penetration of interior and exterior; in terms of physical energy, form, and psychological relationship. For the first time, I was letting them in.



Figure 2: Danielle Lessnau, *untitled, extimité*, 2017, photograph using pinhole camera in vagina (photo provided by the artist).

Stéfy & Julia: Can you further elaborate on the importance of pleasure in this piece, and in your work more generally?

Dani: Much of the pleasure in creating *extimité* involved letting go of my inhibitions and giving myself over to my impulses. My creative process is driven by impulse and improvisation.

There was pleasure in being seen, and a pleasure in giving a voice to my previously silenced body. There was a pleasure in being a creative vessel, and in exploring new ways of being together with those I love. There was a pleasure in the playful, messy, and irrational nature of the process; of tearing up film blindly and putting condoms on cameras. There was a pleasure in the physicality and disarming awkwardness. There was a pleasure in the surprise, the chance, and the waiting.

Pleasure trespasses and transgresses, it dissolves borders. I find it to be beautifully diffuse and non-linear, and that it can jump around and multiply. Pleasure is elusive. It can be in many places at once, unable to be fixed, skirting identification. Pleasure brings me back to my bodily knowing and educates me on my entanglements. It flexes and nourishes my empathy muscle. I find it also tends to inspire and initiate through its cravings. It sensitizes rather than numbs, and lies down a fertile ground for activism.

I think pleasure has a special relationship to trust and to curiosity, without attachment to expectations. Which allowed me to stretch the capacity of my imagination. This last point has been integral to my own path of

healing and creation. It has left me open to be surprised by new occurrences and convergences while forging new alliances. *extimité* is about the embodied gaze and a craving to unravel together into a new experience of closeness. It is also an activist gesture both for my personal empowerment and for the perception and the agency of wombed-bodies.

Stéfy & Julia: Your work straddles interesting spaces of surveillance. Can you tell us how surveillance practices and technologies impact your work?

Dani: I have come to the observation that much of modern surveillance abuses distance, and boundaries, where its lenses function as dividers and markers of separation. Its function is to cut and categorize. It strives to measure, identify, and quantify. Often trumpeting its close relationship to truth, which is a deeply problematic falsehood. It traffics in the illusion of certainty.

In this project, I am leaning into a hyper-sensitive proximity that implicates all the bodies involved while rendering them inseparable. The function of this type of surveillance is to bridge and weave. In *extimité*, there is no glass separating the imaging body from that which is imaged. There is only a hole or connecting passage. The space the performance takes place is in a small room. The bodies in the space exist in the same atmosphere, where they contaminate and metabolize each other's exhales.

There is also anonymity to the exchange as it isn't seeking to identify a singular form or body. This form of surveillance embraces the blur (as seen in the photos) as one of its allies. It doesn't seek to name. What it is surveilling and striving to image is the invisible space/feeling between bodies. It probes the questions of how bodies receive and digest each other, and how to visualize unstable visceral experiences of relating. While exposing the film nestled inside my vagina, my body was scanning the internal and external environment with an uninhibited curiosity.

Stéfy & Julia: Putting the concepts of pleasure and surveillance together can spark a lot of conflicting ideas. What do they mean for you and your work?

Dani: They can spark a lot of conflicting ideas, but I also think they can be allies. It depends on how we inhabit these ideas and employ them—perhaps by inhabiting them differently, we call attention to the ways we may abuse them. In *extimité*, my body functions as a prosthetic of the camera and magnifies the presence of the surveilling apparatus in the space to relatively gigantic proportions. Rather than concealing itself, it explicitly reveals itself, becoming the nexus of creation for the work. My body exhibits itself through the rendering of its movements as blur. It is not striving to make something legible, but rather to hint at an ineffable space between bodies and points towards their inseparability. In this sense, it traffics in exhibitionism as much as it does in surveillance. The origin of the blur cannot be attached to one body, but rather arises somewhere both between bodies and in their merger. In the performance, there is an acute hyper-sensitization that surfaces. All my senses magnify through this heightening of awareness, through close observation and stark nakedness. Sensations swell to the surface like a wave and then dissipate.

I am interested in proximity and closeness, which is often intimately intertwined with sensations of pleasure. The temperature of the room, the brush of contact in-between exposures, the pressure and lubrication of the camera inside me, the feeling of eyes, the laughter. Most of the experience remains obscured in the realm of the felt. This type of surveillance is more temporal and less quantifiable. It is dynamic and alive, and steeped in pleasure.

Stéfy & Julia: When looking at your work, we saw the documentation of the phallus as a way of engaging surveillance, heteropatriarchy, and "looking back" at the patriarchy as a form of disruption. Does this reading resonate with you?

Dani: It does resonate, but it doesn't just redirect the gaze back at heteropatriarchy, it complicates and multiplies the points of gazing. This is an anti-patriarchal gesture as there is not a single authority or position

of power. The "camera" that is capturing the image is part of a bodily web. It is responding to expansions and contractions of tissue and tremors along its routes. My body inhabited by the camera is imaged in subtle gestures as blur and light distortions on the film. My collaborators are also gazing—a gaze awkwardly suspended by the long exposures. And then, of course, there is the viewer's gaze, whose eyes are positioned to see the body before them as my vagina saw it, or to be gazed upon by that body as a vagina themselves. Or perhaps they are looking at the voyeuristic sonogram of a love affair.

I hope these avenues complicate the idea of the gaze, and rather than reversing it, subvert its origins and pull it down into a more embodied and riddled affair that wields proximity in interesting ways.



Figure 3: Danielle Lessnau, *untitled, extimité*, 2017, photograph using pinhole camera in vagina (photo provided by the artist).

Stéfy and Julia: Would you say that voyeurism and/or exhibitionism play roles in your work or process of creation?

Dani: Yes, and important ones. Getting comfortable with one's own individual patterns of arousal is liberating, as well as urgent in its provocative nature from an activist perspective. I wanted to explore where these concepts sat in my body. As a private person, I have a very tenuous relationship with exhibitionism. I found engaging with it in this body of work helped me heal parts of myself that had previously been silenced, or that I had initially repressed out of shame. I was able to take pleasure in the exquisite sensation of being a body taking up space.

All the participants within this performance were asked to inhabit these roles of exhibitionist and voyeur simultaneously. The roles and bodies all bled into one another, which diffused any central power.

Stéfy and Julia: In the context of your work and process of creation, how does pleasure relate to healing and care? Could it be a corrective or antidote to surveillance and coercion?

Dani: I love the word antidote. It conjures the image of distilling a healing agent from the poison itself. Pleasure can function as an antidote. It offers a particular way of inhabiting our bodies that can sensitize us to new ways of existing in relationships. Though admittedly, I feel this potential is often censored or exploited. There is a resistance pleasure can foster through its unique understanding of proximity, empathy, love, blur, and movement. It can embrace complexity where surveillance is limited by its system. Pleasure can be a revolutionary healing agent both personally and collectively. One that we need to explore with the frenzy and fever of a desirous urgency.

A term I use in another body of work I am currently birthing is *pleasure-gathering*. I use it to reference the deviant act of acquainting ourselves unabashedly with pleasure and then taking the risk of encountering our relationships from this place. I wonder about what revolutionary potential may arise on the collective scale if we did the brave work of attuning ourselves to our pleasure and empathy centers, and living this out in the relationships in our communities.

The bodies in my work resist identification and can't be mapped. They vibrate and circulate. They have no clear borders or edges and resist being quantified. All the participating bodies are implicated in my work, yet they subvert documentation and can't be categorized or indexed.

Pleasure, proximity, and the messiness of being embodied render the body indistinguishable. Proximity is a crucial part of this resistance—it is a place where the body can resist focus. Think about how when you pull something extremely close to your eyes they can't pull focus anymore. I think this space of proximity is really interesting in its ability to obfuscate identification while exposing one to such things as the intimacy of the breath of another body. We are confronted with the sharing of molecules through our inhaled and exhaled and thus implicated in each others' existences. This proximity extends to more-than-human bodies as well; fungal bodies, animal bodies, plant bodies, land bodies, ocean bodies, etc. As I mentioned previously, this space is fertile ground for empathy and love. In proximity you are in earshot of the memories of these bodies, they can whisper to your skin through vibration. And your skin can whisper back. You can absorb their stories through osmosis. There is communication that happens in these spaces that isn't verbal or visual, and that complicates things in beautiful ways. When I think of healing and pleasure, I ask myself this question: how do I wield proximity and pleasure well?

Stéfy and Julia: Thank you, Dani, for your thoughtful responses and your work in pleasure more broadly. It is a breath of fresh air to hear about pleasure, as we are currently living in a world where there is very little of it. We look forward to keeping in touch and learning more about your work in the future.

About the Artist

Dani Lessnau is an artist whose artworks evolve out of her own hyper-sensitization practice, embracing her body as a medium in constant relationship. By prioritizing iterations of somatic play and pleasure-gathering in her photographic and object-based work, she opens a conduit for collaboration with both the material and the immaterial, solid and unseen.

Interested in complicating habits of conventional perception surrounding pleasure, healing, and creatorship, Lessnau leans into spaces where what seem to be paradoxes enfold and re-shape one another. The alien and the familiar; the tender and the erotic; the specific and the abstract; the strong and the vulnerable, all translate and mutate.

Lessnau is currently based in Brooklyn, New York. She studied at the International Center of Photography, received her MFA from Bard College and is currently pursuing a Master of Science in Acupuncture and Chinese herbal medicine from Pacific College of Health and Science.