



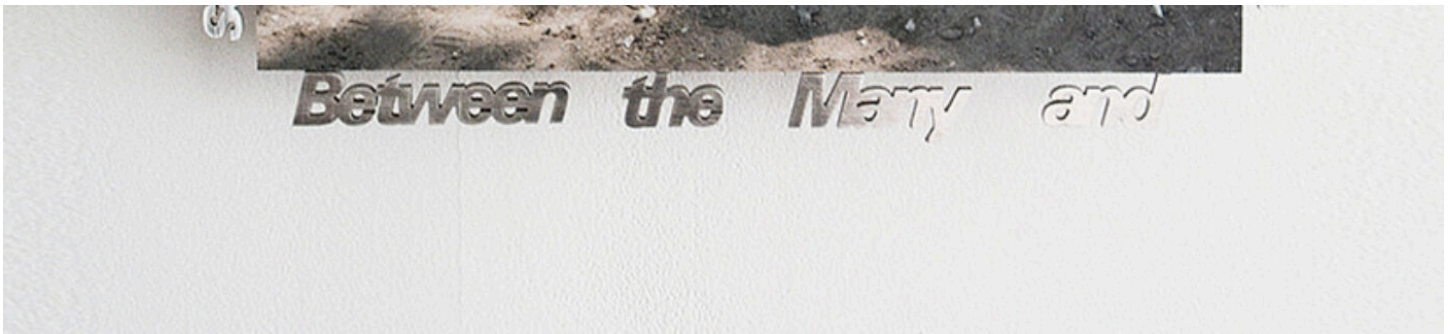
INTERVIEW

Dena Yago

Care and control of the social and self.

MAY 18, 2015





About the Eternities Between the Many and the Few, 2014. Digital c-print mounted to aluminum, aluminum lettering, 17 x 21 in. Courtesy of White Flag Projects, St Louis.

Yago began working primarily in writing, suggesting poetry as a place where relationships between objects and images could be easily mapped without sacrificing the richness and precision of language. In 2011, she debuted a book of poems alongside an exhibition at Tomorrow Gallery (then in Toronto, now in New York). The exhibition, titled *ESPRIT*, consisted of high-resolution scanned images of products associated with self-care, such as fruits, tea, and fish oil capsules, while a poem from the book, also titled *ESPRIT*, describes a body caught within a cycle of self-care and resignation, starting with:

Aporia in love

Aporia in a bouquet of flowers that smell
Do these smell correctly or am I the one that
stinks?

And ending with:

What am I? Dead meat?
As aside—I am so dead meat

Yago continues to tether language to objects and images, grounding explicit everyday encounters while thinking through cohabitation and survivalism in contemporary urban environments. This past fall I had the pleasure of working with her on a presentation of new works at White Flag Projects. This interview revolves around the process and evolution of that body of work.

Marie Heilich

Poetry and language are so intrinsic to your practice. It's surprising to me that the two series discussed above were the first time you merged text and image. What was gained through isolating text and image previously, and what about this new series was conducive to having text and image in the same work?

Dena Yago

I'm exploring the relationship between the two, which I see as being inflective rather than representative of one another. In the works using a scanner, where I scan a specific object and correlate that to text, it can be seen as illustrative or metaphorical, which are two things I'm working against and why I have kept them separate. With my photography there is more complexity to the images. They are un-constructed scenes photographed in the world, which can exist within the same space as my writing without falling into being understood as metaphor.

MH

I like this use of the word "inflective," and I believe it describes or reveals a crux in your practice. Inflections of speech are modifications made to the spoken word to guide meaning. So, rather than text and image being illustrative of one another, new information guides rather than determines meaning. The disparate sources of the dog park images and found text allow for a similar guiding of meaning without ever landing on a fixed materialization of the topic at hand. Can you talk about how you came to this source material?

DY

The text in these works is not my own. It's taken from episode titles of Rainer Werner Fassbinder's 1980 television miniseries *Berlin Alexanderplatz*. In the first episode, "The Punishment Begins," Franz Biberkopf, the protagonist, is released from prison. Throughout the series he falls under many different systems of control, whether it be love, employment, addiction, or the political forces struggling for power

in 1920s Germany. I'm interested in how these relationships of control, care, domination, and submission bleed into one another, and how these are acted out in spaces that are clearly delimited as free. The imagery is taken from a series of photo shoots in dog parks around Los Angeles, depicting dogs at rest in a fenced-in (fence not depicted) space otherwise meant for exercise and recreation. While the relationship between the text and image is intended to stress non-equivalences, both point to the experience of the submissive.

MH

The planning of your small solo presentation of these works at White Flag Projects in St. Louis coincided with the death of Michael Brown and the antagonistic police response to public protests. In a recent essay, "Material Witness: David Joselit on Visual Evidence and the Case of Eric Garner," Joselit writes, in relation to the death of Eric Garner just a few months prior, "While the life-and-death exigencies of American race politics should not be glibly equated with art's more distanced forms of engagement, proponents of visual politics would do well to learn from the Garner case." Here Joselit is a proponent for examining human rights through visual evidence while asserting art's shortcomings with taking the place of human rights activism. While the merging of art, life, and politics is the primary project of a prevalent art historical narrative, I think your work not only anticipates, but intentionally situates itself within what Joselit calls "distant forms of engagement" by promoting difference, not only between art and politics, but a fundamental dissimilarity that manifests through your seemingly disparate, yet topically specific examples of social phenomenon.

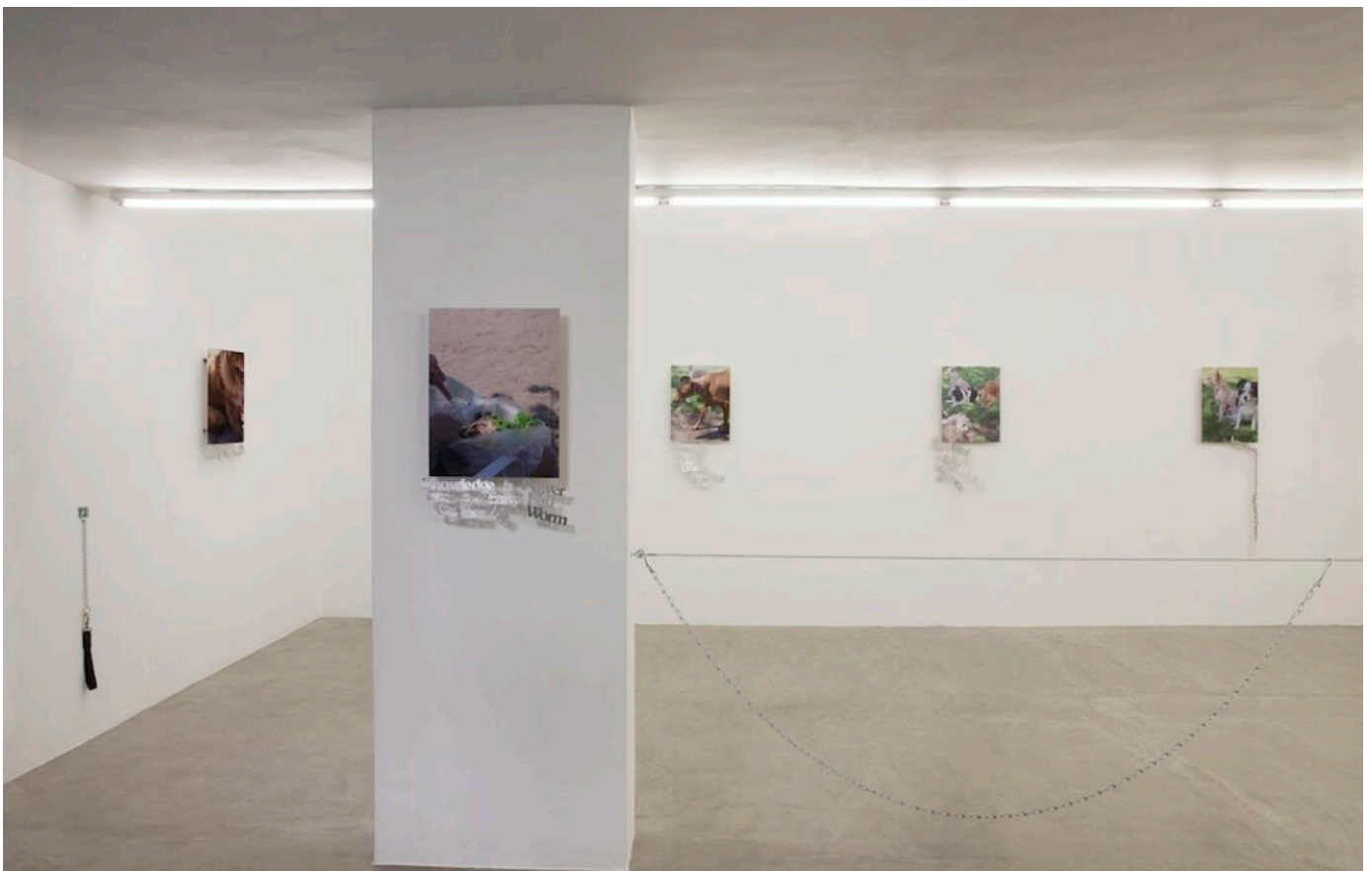
DY

I didn't make the work with Ferguson in mind, but the way it dealt with dominance and control was heightened in the wake of Mike Brown's death and the subsequent protests. The way that corroborative evidence has failed to result in indictments indicates a systemic failure of representation and a silencing of visual evidence. As a contemporary

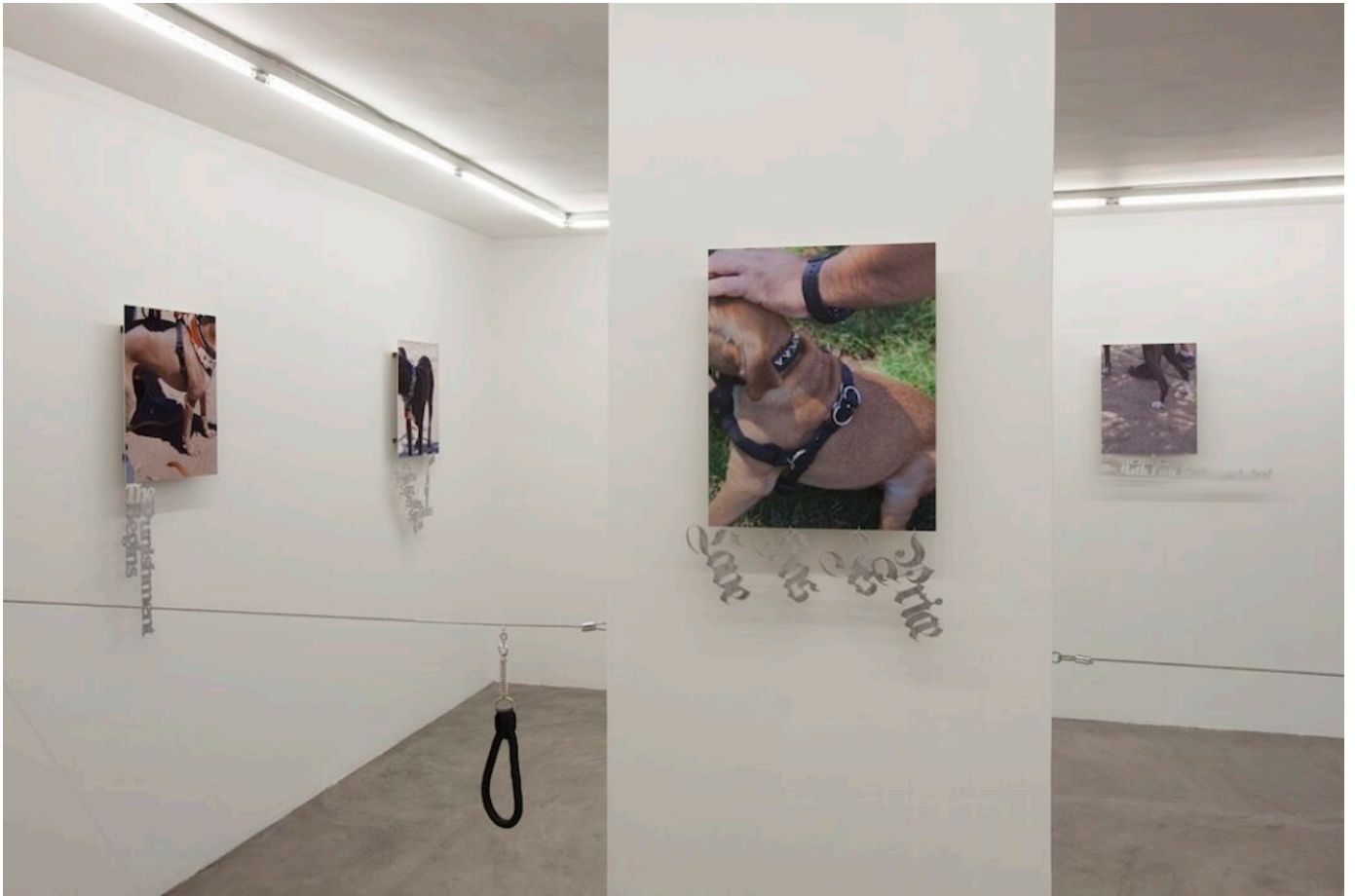
photographer, this should come as no surprise, though, as a citizen, this elicits a far more enraging response. Visual forensics' failure as veritable proof throws everything into the realm of abstraction. So, in my work, I find myself using representational forms to work against the creation of false equivalencies. My images are not to be used as evidence, and I am not a representative. I am interested in the question explored in Jean-Luc Godard and Jean-Pierre Gorin's *Letter to Jane*—what part can artists and intellectuals take in political action (their direct question was “what part can cinema play in the development in revolutionary struggles?” or “how should intellectuals take part in the revolution?”)

MH

The series of the dog park images further developed in your solo exhibition with Boatos Fine Art in Sao Paulo, *You and You're People*. Using wildly different fonts (imbued with their own meanings) and chain-link joints connecting the words gave the texts a sense of unwieldiness as the words sort of drip off the images. How did you come to this, after only using the perimeter of the image in the works shown in St. Louis?



You and You're People, 2014. Installation view at Boatos Fine Arts, Sao Paulo. Courtesy of Boatos Fine Arts.



You and You're People, 2014. Installation view at Boatos Fine Arts, Sao Paulo. Courtesy of Boatos Fine Arts.

DY

The library is a small space and the viewers have a close and more isolated experience with the works than they did in Sao Paulo. With the works in St. Louis the words constituted incomplete frames for the photographs. Those two works are to be read as a diptych, tied together with incomplete frames, plain fonts, and with two titles I wanted to be read as clearly dealing with relations of dominance, care, and control.

MH

As you mentioned, the complexity of the photographed images—expounded by the way they're cropped, so as to deny any hierarchy of subject—is key to resisting an illustrative or metaphorical relationship

with the titles from *Berlin Alexanderplatz*. Similarly, as neither text nor image are privileged, and therefore exist on their own terms, a metonymic relationship is allowed to form. This continues with the use of the dog leash to control the movement of the viewer in *You and You're People*, as another metonymic example of control, this time within the context of the exhibition experience.

DY

In *You and You're People*, thirteen photos and titles were installed in a much larger space. I chained off half of the gallery so that the works would either have to be seen at a distance, or there would be the inconvenience of having to walk around the perimeter of the space to get to the other side. All of this created a rhythm in viewing the works. The way that the text hangs from the photos creates another layer of that; creating different tempos in reading the titles depending on how they're hung from the photos, while the different fonts create different intonations.

MH

In the exhibition *Distaff* at Eli Ping Francis Perkins in New York, ASPCA (American Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals) signage and pamphlet information regarding The Coalition to Ban Horse-Drawn Carriages was provided alongside your sculptures of rugs and horse tacks. How would you describe your work's relationship to activism?

DY

I wouldn't call myself an activist, but with *Distaff* I used the exhibition as a point of access for advocacy groups to speak with an audience that sees themselves as being sympathetic subjects and could potentially be called to action. In working with the Coalition through the exhibition, and the London Wildlife Protection at *a caelo usque ad centrum* (an exhibition with Laurie Spiegel at Cubitt), I was moving toward giving both the advocacy groups and the art audience access to different publics and seeing how they would engage each other. The form of engagement that I'm hoping to instigate is one that requires time and

the formation of relationships between individuals under the directives of a specific issue, whether it is to work on a more grassroots level or change public policy.

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Marie Heilich is assistant director at White Flag Projects.

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