

Autotheory as Feminist Practice in Art, Writing, and Criticism

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made possible by the Sony Portapak and its capacity for transmitting the moving image on a monitor, simultaneously, as the artist records. She describes how self-reflection was a big concern for artists like herself, which the video camera made space to delve into: "I was very involved with self-examination and looking at myself and my relationships with friends. How women relate to each other. And men were also going through these same changes, and they were very concerned with these questions as well. So politically it was a very exciting time."¹⁰⁹

The rich history of "self-imaging" practices in feminist art has been extensively written about by scholars of performance, visual culture, and art history, among them Amelia Jones, who offers a reading that reclaims narcissism as a self-aware stance with the potential for art world subversion. Looking to the history of 1960s–1970s feminist body art, Jones considers Hannah Wilke's "embodied narcissistic subjectivity"; she proposes that, as a self-reflexive feminist approach, narcissism can destabilize the terms and valuations of a patriarchal, mid-century modernist art world—specifically the high modernist approach to aesthetic "disinterest" espoused by Greenberg via Kant.¹¹⁰ Jones's feminist reclamation of narcissism through her art historical readings of feminist body artworks informs my thinking about autotheory: I extend her research as I consider how artists and writers transmute the self through imaging and other modes of representation and inscription.

Those working autotheoretically seem to share certain critical and aesthetic investments and fixations. Like Jones, Kraus repeatedly turns to Wilke as exemplary of a feminist artist who used her body in her own work in ways that were perceived as too transgressive—unintelligible in their supposedly uncritical narcissism—by both male critics and feminists. Kraus proclaims, "Hannah Wilke is a model for everything that I hope to do," positioning *I Love Dick* as an extension of the theoretically informed work begun by feminist conceptual artists and body artists before her.¹¹¹ Here the turn to "the canon" is more a turn to those marginalized in the canon—the paracanonical artists who slip through the cracks of history, or who deserve more consideration in light of emergent notions of practice that might adequately describe how they were working.

As discussed earlier, under the logics of philosophy as historically understood, which include Descartes's dualism and Aristotle's chain of

being, women's bodies have been irreconcilable with the rational mind. Jones argues that feminist body art and performance art of the 1960s on is a condition of possibility for the female artist to be "both body and mind, subverting the Cartesian separation of *cogito* and *corpus* that sustains the masculinist myth of male transcendence," which becomes the basis for her argument for the "radical" possibilities of so-called "narcissistic" feminist practices in the 1970s.¹¹² As Schneemann writes, "To deal with actual lived experience—that's a heroic position for a male and a trivial exposure for a woman. ... A woman exploring lived experience occupies an area that men want to denigrate as domestic, to encapsulate as erotic, arousing, or supporting their own position."¹¹³

In the San Francisco-based American artist Christine Tien Wang's *I'm Too Self-Aware to Be a Narcissist* (2019), the titular words are written in all caps in red paint on a gold-speckled, white-glazed ceramic vase, the text wrapping around the front side of the bulbous, hourglass-shaped container. The work establishes a distinction between "narcissism," on the one hand, and "self-awareness" on the other, the two being, by the logic of this statement, mutually exclusive. In contrast to the uncritical narcissist, lacking in cognizant self-reflexivity (narcissism as a literal reflection: Narcissus dumbly gazing at his own image in the pool), is the self-aware person. By being conscious of what they are doing, the person who is self-aware is a different animal from the person who is not aware of their self-looking—namely, the narcissist. Wang's work is decisive and youthful, its bubble letters seemingly belying its critical insight. The work might *look* narcissistic, it says, but it isn't: it is taking up the very long history of women's and POC artists' work being written off as narcissistic, and doing so with self-awareness of its method. Such belying of the work's criticality is, of course, the point.

Wang made this work as a protracted response to a 2014 *Los Angeles Times* review of her solo debut at Night Gallery, which art critic David Pagel eviscerated, calling it narcissistic. The review stuck with the artist, who continued to process it through her studio work. Pagel describes Wang's 2014 exhibition as a "heavy-handed confessional," hailing the work into a long history of confessional writings and art while adding "heavy-handed" to distance it from any kind of redeeming nuance. Pagel writes that "narcissism and social responsibility do not collide or even

commingle in 'I Want That Bag.' ... They simply sit, side by side, in the young artist's half-baked paintings and undeveloped sculptures," thus reinscribing the Freudian narrative of narcissism as a failure to develop. Pagel distinguishes narcissism from self-reflectivity by marking the latter as ethical: with considered self-reflection comes the possibility for personal transformation through that very self-awareness. Instead, "Wang's works are too quick to the punch to be self-reflective or to inspire such self-awareness in others." The critique of narcissism becomes not only an aesthetic critique but an ethical one: the narcissistic artist is a socially irresponsible artist.

Some of Wang's painted collages take the form of aggressive confessionals. Today, publicizing one's shortcomings has become an end in itself—not a step toward self-transformation, as it was 17 centuries ago when St. Augustine got the genre started, but a self-serving defense of the way things are. That's the tone of Wang's works, particularly *Upper Middle Class*, a slapdash double portrait of her dad and herself.¹¹⁴

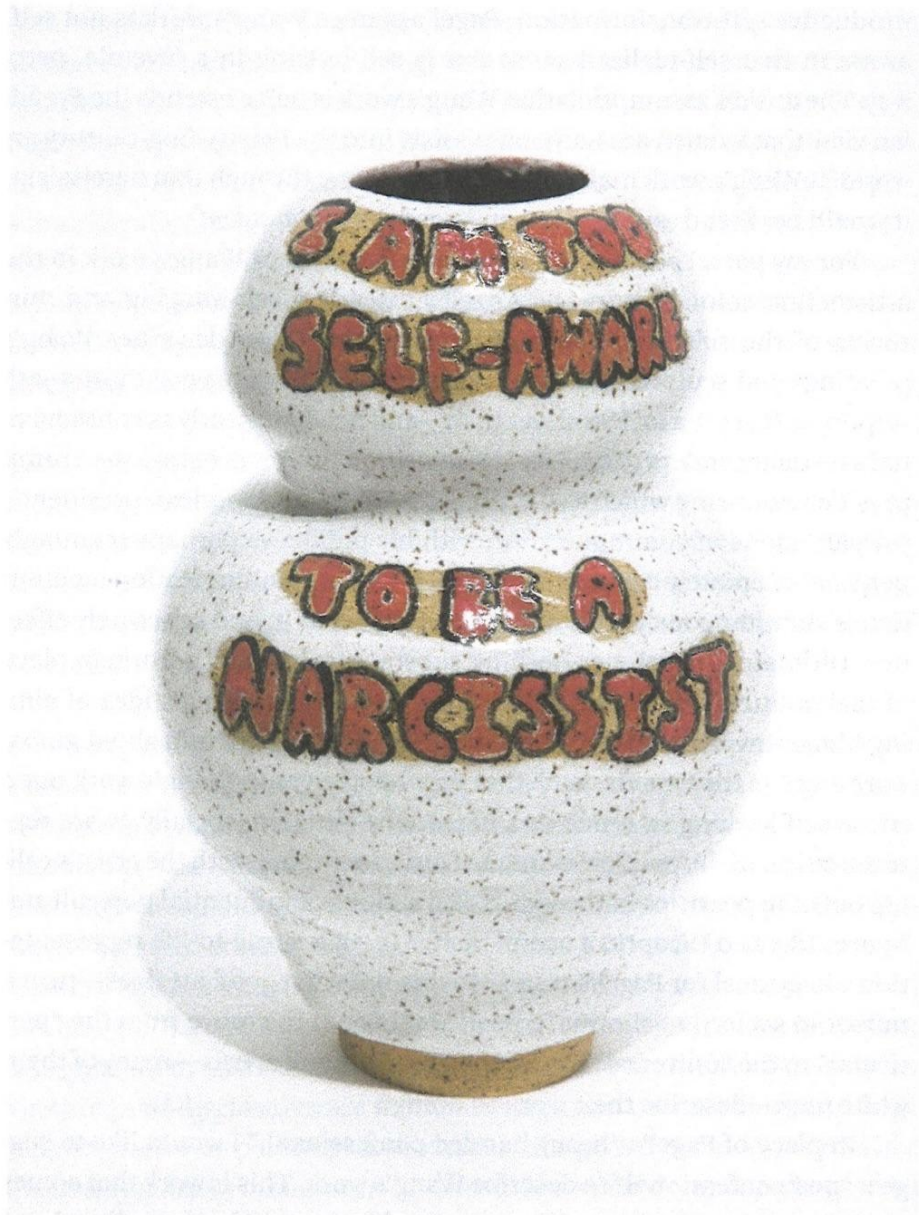
Wang takes what has been projected onto her by the art critic and makes new work with it. During a studio visit over Skype, Wang shared with me sketches of her work in development: line drawings of shapely, undulating vase outlines with words written inside, dated like journal entries. Some read like affirmations, wrestling with this distinction between narcissism and ethical self-awareness: "I AM TOO GOOD TO BE A NARCISSIST." Others are confessionals, twisted and darkly comic in their metaformalism: "I went to a pottery class instead of my friend's funeral." Wang has gone on to make confessional paintings and sculptures in which her scathing self-disclosures are written in large font over medium and large acrylic-on-canvas paintings and smaller kiln-glazed ceramics. Works like *I married for health insurance*, *I just want to be a white girl*, and, perhaps most contentiously, *I love rape porn* (all from 2017) continue her practice of publicly disclosing loaded "truths"—wrapped up in the personal politics of gender, race, sex, class, and political economy.

Pagel's review entrenches a mutually exclusive opposition between Wang, the millennial feminist artist who is uncritically narcissistic, and figures like Augustine, whose autoreflective work is one of intellectually

productive self-transformation. Pagel assumes Wang's work is not self-aware in that self-realized sense but is self-looking in a juvenile, petty way. The critic's assumption that Wang's work is naïve extends the Freudian view that women are naive narcissists into the twenty-first-century art world. If Wang's work makes an incisive critique through that narcissism, it would be, Freud and Pagel seem to assume, *by accident*.

For my part, I wonder whether the narcissism of Wang's work in the artist's first solo show in Los Angeles extends a self-imaging and mirroring of the self into a mirroring of society. Pagel describes Wang's paintings and sculptures as the "visual equivalent of tweets: thumb-jerk responses that are a lot less clever than—and nowhere nearly as consequential as—their senders think." This was written two years before the Trump presidency, during which Twitter has served as the American president's primary mode of communication with his public—a perhaps seemingly petty but ultimately consequential and populist communication medium that is simultaneously "thumb-jerk," as Pagel put it, and soberingly effective. Ultimately, Pagel sees nothing substantive in Wang's work: in place of real politics, there is a self-defeating posturing: "Wang's idea of aiming higher involves littering her pictures with tidbits of info about global warming." Is the "narcissism" that Pagel perceives in Wang's work not a trivial self-looking so much as a personally situated, socially aware representation of the political climate of America in 2014, with the artist's calling out of hypocrisies in the words and actions of influential pop cultural figures like Leo Dicaprio a useful tactic? Is such a true-to-life representation too cynical for Pagel's tastes? Is this not what good art does—turn a mirror to society, to show it to itself? Is this not the move from the "particular" to the "universal" that so many writers and artists—many of them white men—describe their work as doing?

In place of Pagel's "heavy-handed confessional," I would like to suggest "postconfessional" to describe Wang's work. This is work that comes after the confessionalism of the 1950s, and is changed by the political and aesthetic waves ushered in by postmodernism. Contemporary autotheory by Wang and many others engages strategies such as postconfessional confession and a self-aware, critical narcissism as a way of subverting longstanding histories that posit women's turns toward the "self" as something other than critical or smart. Reviews like Pagel's explain in part the



Christine Tien Wang, *Narcissist*, 2019,
ceramic, glazed. Courtesy of the artist.

tendency in the autotheoretical impulse for artists and writers to resist straightforwardly “self-turning” genre descriptors like memoir and autobiography in favor of terms that foreground their work’s concomitant criticality—as autotheory does.

CONCLUSION

This book on autotheory as artistic practice pays keen attention to the vital points of connection between and among contemporary art, film and video, visual culture and theory, feminism and gender studies, and literary studies. As a writer, a researcher, a self-taught curator, and an artist, as well as a working-class, first-generation student from a settler-colonial, white family context in the Canadian prairies of Treaty 4 lands, I write with an investment both in the many objects of study taken up in this book and in the methodology these texts embrace vis-à-vis autotheory as a feminist mode that is still being defined. The works of art and writing that I spend time thinking through and with in these chapters are works that *mean* something to me, personally and intellectually, politically and affectively—and whose resonance with autotheory vibrated somewhere inside my curious, theorizing body and stuck, for a time, in ways that required their own processing, along with the texts they took up.

In my theorizing of autotheory as an artist’s practice that bubbles up in earlier eras but takes shape more coherently from the 1960s onward, I am interested in works of art and writing that directly engage the discourses of philosophy and theory in ways that are often nuanced and ambivalent, providing critique and affirming criticism without simply writing something off (and so distinguishable from “cancel culture”—that thing is “OVER”) or finding a smug sense of self-satisfaction in the act of a well-executed critique (the smugness that always strikes me as particularly bourgeois). As the poet Danielle LaFrance put it in her potent autotheoretical script, “On Aftermaths”: “The point is never to find satisfaction in critique—that’s for eating ice-cream.”¹¹⁵

The work is never done, and no critique is all-encompassing or infallible, even if it were to resemble the most perfectly intersectional, feminist, decolonial way of critiquing things. Every standard is an ideal point, an