

Jerking off in the hospital”: On aesthetics and violence, an interview with P Staff

Nat Raha
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This interview was conducted via a video call in September 2025, exactly one year since P and Nat had last met – in New York City. P showed Nat around their work, *Afferent Nerves*, 2023; while Nat presented P with a copy of her latest book of poems, *apparitions (nines)* (Nightboat Books, 2024), which is adorned with P’s *To Live A Good Life I*, 2022 on the cover. This time, P was in New York on the eve of opening their show *Possessive*, at David Zwirner Gallery; Nat in her office at Glasgow School of Art, overlooking a motorway. In the conversation that follows, they discuss P’s current work and use of imaging, and their deployment of colour, violence and poetry in *On Venus*, 2019. The dialogue circles around questions of possession, surveillance, theft, post-punk and trans aesthetics.

Possessed and Processed

P Staff

All my current work is about possession, and control and autonomy of a body and surveillance of a body, and it feels pronouncedly made in the context of witnessing, living alongside, and opposing military occupation. How do you begin to understand the way that you are surveilled or possessed or dispossessed, both personally and structurally.

The titles of the current works all connect to each other— a show titled *Possessive*, a video titled *Penetration*, a series of numbered sculptures titled *Distrain*. *Distrain* is the old-fashioned legal word that means seizing property – particularly to pay of a debt. Nowadays, we would say *repossess*. I like to trip out on these linguistic cues, about possession and possessiveness, to be possessed by something, and that tumbling into being penetrated by something, and then being repossessed. This could all be linguistic, or affective, or literal.

Penetration is an 20-minute film, a single take and very little happens. A person is stood there, they’re silhouetted, mostly dark, you can’t tell who they are. And a laser is being shot into their stomach. I worked with a laser specialist, to use a type of laser where I could essentially touch the organs of the performer – I wanted to get inside him with this beam of light.

Nat Raha

There’s this flip of the penetration: a queer desire – especially when you’re talking about *being taken*; but simultaneously the flip of that, the use of that to consider a different kind of receptivity. I’ve been thinking about that relationship between bureaucracy and empire, and these and the different forms surveillance takes – as in, watching, filming, etc.

Glasgow has the same CCTV surveillance technology as they have in Gaza to see where people are going. Then there's the other forms of surveillance – bureaucracy as a form of monitoring, and this sense of how we think about surveillance in our contemporary form (CCTV, data, biodata) as being different to the past.

PS

I'm interested in the dual suggestion of insertion and extraction and the ambiguity of where power is located. I've often used these types of imaging that are both technologies of the clinic and technologies of warfare—the x-ray image, the thermal image, radiographs, lidar. These different types of image processing – even the neon, the luminous, the radiated – are the moment where chemistry meets nature and the body. The laser really feels like that, you get this sense that he is being operated on. Maybe it's totally sci-fi, maybe it's medical, maybe it's like a sniper rifle. The touch of it, this searching beam is of course also incredibly erotic.

Total Saturation

NR

Johanna Hedva describes the yellow of *On Venus* as of radioactive piss, corrosive light, the color of jaundice, and described how the film permeated their dreams – that it was awake, breathing, something that held you. I was thinking about the yellow of *Afferent Nerves*, the deep blue of *In Ekstase* (2023). You just described *Penetration* (2025) and the radiating wavelengths of light – which is, physically, what colour is about, where it is on the spectrum of visible light. Do you think of these washes of colour – on film, in installation, as a material? In regard of what the colour is *doing*?

PS

It's something that's evolved in my practice. It has a couple of origins. One is trying to grasp and alter, and pervert the most fundamental commodity of the arts space: light.

And secondly, is a desire for total saturation. This constant flat, neon light. As Hedva says in their text, it is as much inside of you as outside of you. It colours your skin, irradiates you. And it has an effect that enlivens architecture, seems to fill every crevice. It is incredibly eerie.

NR

In your Paris show, *Love Life*, (Galerie Sultana) in 2022, you had a red wash on the window. You had to cross this colour threshold from the street, enter this space, with the colour bleeding into it. And with *On Venus*, the install with the reflective flooring...

PS

That bounced it all back... I think of yellow as sunlight gone wrong, an apocalyptic horizon, but also bile, piss. It's incredibly physical. It reminds me of these moments in life that you piss neon because of a certain medication; you piss blood because of an infection; you are injected with a contrast agent to enable an MRI scan to work.

I had been working with this logic for a few years before a friend recommended Esther Leslie's *Synthetic Worlds* book to me. It's illuminating on the emergence of synthetic colour as it relates to this history of chemistry, warfare, architecture. I was very taken with the way Leslie describes the greyness of postwar Europe, and the subsequent emergence of neon punk, like *The Day the World Turned Day-Glo*. My show in Basel, *In Ekstase*, takes its title from a Nina Hagen record. I liked that there's this deep poeticism to the title, but it's also this reference to 80s punk and post-punk.

NR

I'm thinking about that with *apparitions (nines)*. The poet Mendoza – who invented the niner, the nine-line poem as form – and I think through the form as post-punk. I was deep in Scottish Post Punk when working on that book, also listening to loads of Gang of Four. Nine lines, nine syllables per line feels contained, masochistic, compared to punk's fuck you. And as you're talking, I'm thinking about how there's no history of colour without the history of the military industrial complex, and there's no history of medicine either without the history of the military industrial complex or its emergence. Sometimes that's obvious and at others it's not. But that sense of its *permeation* or its *saturation* in your practice – it's the thing that is revealed.

There's also the relation between trans and crip. The medicalisation of trans is something that we're both *contesting* and *contained by*. Even with our strategies that exceed psychiatric power – mutual aid, self-medicine, liberatory harm reduction. We're still get stuck in thinking of one's body through medicine. If that's something we're blowing up – enlarging – artistically, then we can get caught back into it.

PS

Sometimes I think the works I'm making exist in a self-contained mode, that despite my best efforts the work has its own logic, its own internal mechanisms of desire. Something comes out of me in the work that is intuitive or emotional or habitual – and there is a particular mode that I kind of think of having the energy of like, jerking off in the hospital. *On Venus* has this punk revelry— *doesn't it feel good to be bad? Doesn't pain feel good sometimes? Aren't we having an ecstatic experience when the doctor is searching the inside of our body?* An essay on my work once said 'Staff's poems read like [...] the horny stupor of sexting from one's own sick bed', which I really loved. Maybe a less dramatic way to frame it is feverishness, when you are hallucinating from a fever.

the air hostile"

NR

Could you speak about your deployment of representations of state or institutional violence. On the one hand, you're suggesting that, *On Venus*, say, has these masturbatory elements to the images; but next to that is the way you use images of violence to invoke a deeply visceral response. You're creatively drawn to presenting or representing images of violence – bringing it to the surface of your work. You've described *On Venus* as 'about how to live with the continual ambience of violence all around us' – the forms of violence experienced differentially under racial, ableist,

extractivist capitalism. There s differences between the violence non-consensually enacted upon bodies, eg. in the case of industrial farmers; and the toxicity we may willingly engage with – such as, subject of *Weed Killer*, chemotherapy treatment for cancer. The visceral response that your work invokes in a viewer – is activating. You could say its triggering. You re forcing your viewer to face their discomfort, or to feel outright repulsion about the work.

On Venus opens with these incredible sub-bass sounds, but my cat, Claude, lost his mind two times when I put on the film. He was like [AHHH!] and ran off, from the bass. And with the images of the bodies being torn apart, I m like I can t f-ing watching this , even though I remember, in Venice, deciding to sit with the film and watch it go round again.

PS

On Venus was originally commissioned by the Serpentine Gallery, London. In the making of the show, I was thinking about this prominent institution in the centre of London, an incredibly wealthy neighbourhood, in the middle of Hyde Park, royal property. I had felt in some ways pushed out of London. Living through the austerity politics, through the Olympics, student riots, all these things. I felt really sensitive to coming to mount a major exhibition in this deeply hostile context. I wanted to mirror that back to the institution.

There is a part of me, perhaps a juvenile part, that wants to say *don't we all feel constantly assailed by violent images?* Everything is so upsetting. I often make work from this place of a raw nerve. *On Venus*, as you say, has these almost unwatchable images, but I wanted to find a way to work with them. I made the work in 2019 and was so angry at the time, so angry at the world. And I wanted to understand how we are constituted by this violence, as subjects in the world.

What s interesting is that the figure of the animal – this is very well trodden territory – is the easy substitute for the subject stripped of its humanity, the non-human, the non-sovereign. The institution, the art museum, will let me show you an image of an animal being ripped apart in way that it wouldn t let me show you an image of a person being ripped apart. And yet you rip these bodies apart and you end up with the same viscera. Skin is skin, guts are guts, blood is blood.

In the same way that we might all be cast in the same neon light in the museum, I like to think that as we watch these same images, I m forcing a communal experience. We are all tainted by what we ve just seen. Like, we re gonna hold hands – I ve described it as tolerance, a physical tolerance. If you can hang, if we can hang, if Claude the cat can stick it out, then maybe there s something on the other side of this.

NR

There s also what the work does for a queer or trans viewer, in revealing the violence back to us, in that sense of an identification – its horrible, but you re also that creature who is being ripped apart.

PS

Yeah, completely.

NR

There s something useful in that, in how we find our friends and get out of there.

PS

Yes, this sense of a parallel world, Venus as an inhospitable place, violence being deployed unequally across other types of flesh, and the flesh made real through violence, all of that came from a really, really trans place. The nucleus of the work is super trans.

NR

...the Trans Atom... down at the atomic level [both laugh]

PS

Yes, at the sub-atomic level, its trans.

NR

Let s not get into nuclear fission.

Feverish Choreographies

NR

Could you speak about your research and process for *On Venus*? I m curious about how you select and film these images.

PS

It s a mixture of found footage and footage I shot myself. A lot of the images are stolen—in the sense of I m recording my screen, or I m downloading footage from different website. A couple of the scenes, I asked people send me their own recordings from inside an abattoir or farm. The tamer images of markets, wildlife and other animals I shot myself.

I made *On Venus* in a feverish haze. There are images in that film that I do not remember where they came from. I was really stressed and angry, and I was just surfing some wavelength. I don t even remember where I went, you know? I was going through all of these images of animal abuse and different types of markets and factories, one thing leading to another. In that process, anything that made me feel something, I would shove it in a folder, I would steal it, I would download it, or whatever.

NR

Can I include that you stole the images in the film?

PS

Completely. I think it's a little delusional to think we live in a world where images are proprietary anymore. Most of us are willingly giving away our images every day on social media.

NR

It's kind of interesting, cause we started this conversation about repossession. We should steal some of them back.

PS

I really feel like a child of creative commons, anti-copyright and punk filmmaking in this regards.

NR

So you're following an affective response, working through an affinity with the images, pulling your material. It makes so much sense in relation to your practice, and in relation to these questions around punk and post-punk, and that *you're going on your nerve*, and your nerve is exposed.

PS

And it's rhythmic. You know, a lot of it is driven by movement, by a dynamism of the choreography of the image, and then stitching these all together. The film opens with me going in an elevator. It's the lift at (film archivist and curator) Charlotte Proctor's apartment building. There are images in that film that aren't related at all, but they are culled from my life, these other things get woven in. Often the desire is to make it smoothed out and contiguous, like there's a methodology to these things. Actually, it's random and haphazard, or a mistake, but like you say you're riffing, you're riding a wave of affect to get this energy.

Infectious Poetics

NR

Could you speak about the use of poetry in your films?

PS

On Venus was the first time I let myself put a poem in a work. The poem was written separately to making the film. Even though the poem is the second half of the film, my awareness was always that it would be a film that looped. So you would always arrive either into language or into pure image, and that the two would inevitably infect one another – that meaning of the poem and your idea of what this other worldliness of Venus would be changed by the images of the animals being killed. And that your reading of the animals being killed would be changed by your reading of the poem. It's similar to *Weed Killer (2017)* – putting things into dialogue with each other that we never meant to be. And yet they undo each other in some form.

NR

The combination is really direct about the question of the atmospheric violence. And that you're leaving us with text on a screen, next to this scratchy black screen and the rumbling sound. It prioritises reading –

PS

Which puts you physically in a different disposition – watching and reading is different and it changes your physical composition on a base level, you know? The end section is like a song, it's rhythmic and the bass starts to hit at these particular points. All the poetry that I do attempts to mirror how I speak – the cadence and the rhythm and the grammar, it kind of tumbles out – it has a particular pace to it.

Exorcising Dysphoria

NR

Your work so far has made exciting, challenging, provoking, and upsetting (tiny violin) contributions to trans aesthetics. Striking a raw nerve. Trans aesthetics here permeates your practice – its *not* just about the explicit works such as *Hormonal Fog* (with Candice Lin), 2020. You've spoken about dysphoria as an intrinsic condition; in Francis Whorral Campbell's interview with you in *e-flux*, you speak of dysphoria as a consistent sense of grief; this got me thinking about dysphoria itself being grief – that it consists of a form of embodied grief, that may be activated. I was also thinking about incoherency, opacity, and the work having to be explainable in terms that assume an audience is isn't trans and doesn't understand.

PS

It feels like this juvenile desire I mentioned before – *don't we all feel like this? Can I somehow connect with someone like this? Doesn't it just all feel like too much?*

NR

I think, *there are surely people who are normal and they just go along like everything's ok. Like, do you guys ever think about death?*

PS

Completely. I do feel like the work I make is a product of a certain trans aesthetics, that is a product of dysphoria as a totalising system. And that my personal experience has been that I've had to do gender as harm reduction. Transness as necessity, I suppose. It's really hard for me to go to a place of euphoria or joy. I feel that the work is trying to synthesise this constant grief, this constant friction, this constant excess of feeling.

NR

It's the leaning into, embracing and exorcising of the feeling. There's something also constitutive of cisness, in the refusal to acknowledge the transness within – be that around forms of bodily dysphoria, or around other things of discomfort, distress and

disfunction of gender norms. And that's not to say it's just about gender, as gender norms are embedded in all these different things – in kind of everything.

PS

You're ballasting yourself by the refusal you're describing— whether it's the refusal of fluidity that is embedded in the idea of cis-, or the refusal of stability that is inherent to a certain type of trans- thinking. You either jump in the water, or you don't; remove the veil, or you don't. We're back *The Matrix* but –

NR

Trans aesthetics is a means of trying to reverse the polarity of the atmospheric of violence.

PS

Yes perhaps. And perhaps you reverse totalisation with a totally different kind of totalisation.