



TEXTILE

Cloth and Culture

ISSN: (Print) (Online) Journal homepage: www.tandfonline.com/journals/rftx20

Performing Reparative Craft: Oreet Ashery's *Passing through Metal*

Natasha Eves

To cite this article: Natasha Eves (20 Feb 2024): Performing Reparative Craft: Oreet Ashery's *Passing through Metal*, TEXTILE, DOI: [10.1080/14759756.2023.2272103](https://doi.org/10.1080/14759756.2023.2272103)

To link to this article: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14759756.2023.2272103>



© 2024 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group.



Published online: 20 Feb 2024.



Submit your article to this journal [↗](#)



Article views: 182



View related articles [↗](#)



View Crossmark data [↗](#)

Performing Reparative
Craft: Oreet Ashery's
Passing through Metal

Abstract

Passing through Metal (2017–18), a performance by queer interdisciplinary artist Oreet Ashery, is the focus of this paper. Featuring the enigmatic intervention of a death metal band into a collective of knitters, the performance follows this basic structure: first, forty knitters, each seated with contact microphones attached to the metal needles; second, a band bursts into the acoustics of the space. Commissioned in 2017 by Lilith Performance Studio in Malmö, Sweden, Ashery's bringing together of death metal and knitting queers Sweden's industrious cottage industry history and disrupts the predominantly white male metal scenes. Taking care not to be disparaging, writer

David Keenan describes the paranoid, destructive energy behind such musics as adolescent, whereas knitting is an ostensibly quieter reparative practice. The apparent conflicts between the performative elements in the piece will be explored through the prism of Melanie Klein's and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's theories on the depressive-reparative position and its oscillatory relationship to the paranoid. With this framing, it is argued that Ashery's body of work frequently characterizes a culture at odds with itself, and through this framework the generative possibilities and pathetic inadequacies of both reparative work and adolescent destruction will be addressed.

Keywords: Oreet ashery; queer performance art; eve kosofsky sedgwick; reparative positioning; death metal music; knitting; relational practices

NATASHA EVES

Natasha Eves is a textile artist and a publican. Her art practice uses processes of knitting and weaving to explore relations of care, invisible labor, digital hoarding and popular culture. Currently, she teaches constructed textiles to undergraduates and postgraduates at Goldsmiths, University of London (UK), and runs a traditional community-oriented pub in South-East London. In 2019, she completed her Masters in Contemporary Art Theory at Goldsmiths and the California Institute of the Arts (USA), going on to participate in the School of the Damned (2020–22), a free, self-organized alternative art school.
www.natashaeves.co.uk;
natasha.eves@hotmail.co.uk

Textile, Volume 0, Issue 0, pp. 1–15
DOI: 10.1080/14759756.2023.2272103



© 2024 The Author(s). Published by Informa UK Limited, trading as Taylor & Francis Group. This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License (<http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original work is properly cited. The terms on which this article has been published allow the posting of the Accepted Manuscript in a repository by the author(s) or with their consent.

Performing Reparative Craft: Oreet Ashery's *Passing through Metal*

Introduction

The work of queer interdisciplinary artist Oreet Ashery (b. 1966, West Jerusalem) has a profound and provocative focus on care. It is often a care that is at odds with itself or its surroundings, confronting the limitations of our political contexts and imaginings. In 2017, Ashery won the Derek Jarman Award for her open-access web-based video work *Revisiting Genesis*, which explicitly focuses on healthcare, end of life care, and the thoughts and griefs surrounding death under increasingly commodified conditions (Ashery 2019). Ashery's performative work often presents one act in intervention with another, or a performance that intervenes in the public. Obscure clashes of different notions of liberatory activity—what it means to care for oneself, the world, and others—run throughout Ashery's work. Ashery explores how one vision of freedom may threaten or impede another—demonstrating freedom to be a relational and deeply conflicted practice.

Featuring the enigmatic intervention of a death metal band into a collective of knitters—two performative elements which appear to be at odds with one another—Ashery's performance work *Passing through Metal* (2017–18) will be the focus of this paper. This article begins by outlining the theoretical basis for a reparative craft, exploring the apparent conflicts between the performative elements through the framework of Melanie Klein's and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's

theories on the depressive-reparative position and how it relates to the paranoid, alongside other theorists on care and craft. Next, the article goes on to analyze the three iterations of the performance through their documentation and correspondence with Ashery herself. First, considering the musical aspect of each performance, guided by the work of David Keenan on the generative adolescence of such musics. Then, the work is drawn directly back to the framework of reparative craft through the practice of knitting and the depressive-reparative lens of Anne Cvetkovich's writings. Throughout, the generative possibilities as well as the pathetic inadequacies of adolescent destruction and reparative craft will intervene with each other in order to interlock new creative relations, practices and discourses within queer performance studies.

Reparative craft

The apparent conflicts between the performative elements (the death metal band and the knitters) will be explored through the prism of Melanie Klein's and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick's theories on the depressive-reparative position and how it relates to the paranoid. Kleinian thought puts the reparative impulse at the root of creative activity, as it works to move beyond despair and guilt through its promotion of hope and concern (or care) for the other. Sedgwick's interest in how Klein sees "the paranoid position always in the

oscillatory context of a very different possible one: the depressive position” (Sedgwick 2003, 128) can be related to Ashery’s explorations of a culture at odds with itself.

In “Paranoid Reading and Reparative Reading, or, You’re So Paranoid You Probably Think This Essay is About You” (1997), Sedgwick defines the positions as follows.

For Klein’s infant or adult, the paranoid position—understandably marked by hatred, envy, and anxiety—is a position of terrible alertness to the dangers posed by the hateful and envious part-objects that one defensively projects into, carves out of, and ingests from the world around one. By contrast, the depressive position is an anxiety-mitigating achievement that the infant or adult only sometimes, and often only briefly, succeeds in inhabiting: this is the position from which it is possible in turn to use one’s own resources to assemble or “repair” the murderous part-objects into something like a whole—though, I would emphasize, not necessarily like any pre-existing whole. Once assembled to one’s own specifications, the more satisfying object is available both to be identified with and to offer one nourishment and comfort in turn. Among Klein’s names for the reparative process is love. (Sedgwick 2003, 128)

In her 1937 text, “Love, Guilt and Reparation” (Klein 1984), Klein locates the origin of this reparative positioning in childhood, during the baby’s first interactions during breastfeeding. The child is given everything they need by this part-object (the breast), making it the child’s first love, whilst it is also its first hate, when the part-

object is taken away and the child feels hunger. When the breast is not providing for the child, they (the child) may have destructive fantasies in which the breast is destroyed. In other words, the withdrawal of care may be met with a destructive fantasy, desiring both its destruction and its return, a demand antagonistic with itself. Later, when the breast returns and the child is fed, they may have reparative fantasies in response to the guilt they now feel about destroying the breast, in which the good breast is restored and put back together. For Klein, this stage goes on to influence adult human love relations. People typically feel guilt for their destructive (paranoid) fantasies. If the guilt is overwhelming, it can lead to a defensive retreat into further destructive paranoia, whereas an adequate reparative response manifested as remorseful guilt will abate the depressive anxiety, and the love relation is repaired.

In their text “Toward a Feminist Theory of Care” (1990), authors Berenice Fisher and Joan C. Tronto write that

On the most general level we suggest that caring be viewed as a species activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our ‘world’ so that we can live in it as well as possible. That world includes our bodies, our selves, and our environment, all of which we seek to interweave in a complex, life-sustaining web. (Fisher and Tronto 1990, 40)

Ashery’s work is unabashed when it comes to recombining elements in order to engender new ethical possibilities. She has stated that her work is “really

about the idea of potential community” (Ashery 2017). This is in tune with Sedgwick, who argues that separating truth-value from performative-affect generates ethical possibilities beyond true and false, and moves toward reparative pleasure-seeking (things can be different) in tandem with paranoid suspicion (this is how things are). Sedgwick refers to

Klein’s insistence that it is not people but mutable positions—or, I would want to say, practices—that can be divided between the paranoid and the reparative; it is sometimes the most paranoid-tending people who are able to, and need to, develop and disseminate the richest reparative practices. And if the paranoid or the depressive positions operate on a smaller scale than the level of individual typology, they operate also on a larger: that of shared histories, emergent communities, and the weaving of intertextual discourse. (Sedgwick 2003, 150)

In considering Ashery’s work through the framework of care, these acts of reassembly or repair can be understood as a reparative craft. Craft is a material practice, shaped by the knowledges and hands of the collective (Cohen 2014). The reparative is a mode of care sensitive to the preservation, repair or revival of things beyond our selves. To perform reparative craft is to position ourselves within this creative impulse, sparked from an individual’s desire to lovingly repair what appears threatening, broken or harmed. Through this process, in curiosity and care for the other, our relation to it may be altered, and the guilt and anxiety felt may be mitigated through this creative relation.

Passing through Metal (2017–18)

Passing through Metal will be interpreted here as a camp dramatization of the apparent division between reparative (depressive) and destructive (paranoid) fantasies, demonstrating their inexplicable entanglement. Sedgwick describes camp as “the communal, historically dense exploration of a variety of reparative practices” alongside “a glue of surplus beauty, surplus stylistic investment, unexplained upwells of threat, contempt, and longing [that] cements together and animates the amalgam of powerful part-objects” (Sedgwick 2003, 150). This sense of play operates in the mode described by queer affect theorist Ann Cvetkovich, where “the results need not be special to be meaningful, and hence it challenges the perfectionism and hierarchies demanded and fostered by academic work” (Cvetkovich 2012, 189–190). This mutability is a fundamental aspect of creative practice.

Since I share this uncertainty, what I enjoy about *Passing through Metal* is that due to its unconventional combinations, it is strikingly recalcitrant to definitive interpretation on first encounter. As evidenced in documentation of the performance, which is how I—and likely you too—encountered the work, the performance is constructed through the following basic structure. First, we see a squadron of forty knitters, seated in the center of the room, each with contact microphones attached to the metal needles. Second, a band bursts into the acoustics of the space with rolling percussion and swaying

guitars, and the singer’s screamed or grunted vocals break open.

Commissioned in 2017 by Lilith Performance Studio in Malmö, Sweden, the performance was made with a Swedish context in mind. In our email correspondence, when I approached Ashery with questions on the site-specificity of the piece, she explained that she knew people in Sweden knit a great deal. Along the Southwestern province of Halland, knitting was introduced as a cottage industry as early as the seventeenth century. In her article, “Binge: Industrious Knitting in South Sweden,” Carol Huebscher Rhoades describes how “knitters worked at home, while on the go, and at knitting parties (*bingegille*)” (Rhoades 2014, 64). Southern Swedish arts and crafts groups such as Bohus Stickning Cooperative and the Halland Craft Association worked throughout the twentieth century to preserve Swedish knitting traditions that were being lost through industrialization. These were notoriously active knitters, with the success of the Halland knitwear cemented early on through large orders from the military, global exhibitions and sales (including to neighboring royalty), as well as a catalogue first printed in 1910.

Ashery’s performative work often presents one act in intervention with another, or a performance that intervenes in the public. In 2015, Ashery had staged a “gender intervention” at the ICA in London, during which performance duo New Noveta intruded—wrestling each other and crashing through the audience holding large bamboo pipes—into a live show by death metal band Anoxide (Ashery 2015). Although originating in the USA, metal as a genre has had strong associations with Scandinavian

countries since the 1990s, during which Swedish metal scenes developed in Gothenburg and Stockholm, as well as the notoriously extreme black metal scenes in neighboring Norway. Described as an apocalyptic metal poetry performance, Ashery’s bringing together of death metal and knitting queers Sweden’s industrious cottage industry history and disrupts the predominantly male metal scenes.

Since 2018, heavy metal knitting competitions have appeared in Finland, which the organizers self-describe as “the promised land of heavy metal,” with “over 50 heavy metal bands per 100,000 Finnish citizens” alongside hundreds of thousands of handcrafters, with contestants flaunting names such as 9” Needles (Heavy Metal Knitting 2019). I cannot comment on their (Ashery’s performance and the contest’s) actual relation, if any, given that the Finnish contest started a year after Ashery’s original commission in Sweden. However this points to a contemporary interest in bringing together seemingly dissonant acts with increasingly diverse communities such as metal music and knitting, amplifying both.

Generative Adolescence: Pyramido, Friends of Gas and Anoxide

Passing through Metal has had three public iterations, with three distinctive ensembles. In each variation of the performance, knitters are sourced from the local area, and bands that engage with destructive, despairing themes and intense, growling sounds are invited to play. These themes are reflected in the band’s lyrics, for example in Pyramido’s song “Line in the Sand,”

death before me

debris behind me

the end is getting closer

*will we manage?*¹

the lyrics evoking simultaneous feelings of both futility and curiosity (Ashery 2018).

In his introduction to *England's Hidden Reverse*, Keenan (2016) writes that what he describes as the nighttime imagery used by such bands operates as a form of psychic self-surgery, which functions as "an esoteric rite of transformation enacted via an ascent that followed a descent; a descent into night, into the subconscious and into the repressed—psychologically and historically—via the interrogation of the possibilities of transgression" (Keenan 2016, vii). Through Keenan, we can understand the doomy quality of the music as an attempt to face reality, diving into destructive unrealities (descent into paranoid positionings—such as the overwhelming perception of "the end" bringing only death) in order to induce a depressive or reparative response (the ascent—such as the desire to collectively manage or survive). Sedgwick writes of the ugliness of such destructive paranoia, with

its cruel and contemptuous assumption that the one thing lacking for global revolution, explosion of gender roles, or whatever, is people's (that is, other people's) having the painful effects of their oppression, poverty, or deludedness sufficiently exacerbated to make the pain conscious (as if otherwise it wouldn't have been) and intolerable (as if intolerable situations were famous for

generating excellent solutions). (Sedgwick 2003, 144)

Sedgwick thereby critiques paranoid positions, which she sees as serving only to generate an echo chamber of paranoia.

Despite Sedgwick's apprehensions regarding the exacerbatory tendency of paranoid positions, both she and Keenan acknowledge that sometimes it is the most paranoid personalities who are the most reparatively positioned. Speaking about the metal genre, Ashery says that the lyrics are full of doom and sludge, yet they indicate hope in human activity that may be quiet, but that can be amplified. The music is a seemingly destructive attempt to grapple with the unspeakable guilt of existence in order to transform it, and therefore Ashery sees both condemnation and hope in this genre.

Keenan describes the energy behind such work as adolescent, taking care not to use this adjective in a disparaging way. In a series of blog posts titled "Cascading Adolescence," Matt Colquhoun writes in response to Keenan that "Black Metal is about destruction, destroying your belief system—it is a cleansing fire that opens up new possibilities for thought and feeling. In many ways, it is a first step, not the alpha and omega" (Colquhoun 2017).

Adolescence is the period in life during which destructive fantasies abound, as the sobering reality of adulthood looms. It is an attempt to simultaneously seek reassurance and escape through and from these terrors during what Colquhoun describes as "a process, a becoming; a period of development, of chance. [Adolescence] is, biologically and creatively speaking, a generative vector

for the production of the new" (2019). Following the developmental framework of Klein's work, this period of adolescence can be generative only as long as the destructive fantasies remain fantasies and don't overwhelm the subject with despair. To be reparatively positioned means hoping to promote virtuous cycles rather than vicious cycles during such depressive states, this being a creative activity central to development—facing the "bad" world and wanting to make "good"—a rerouting from isolated anguish. David Foster Wallace describes such western adolescence as "the single most stressful and frightening period of human development—the stage when the adulthood we crave begins to present itself as a real and narrowing system of responsibilities and limitations" (Wallace 2005, 63). It is a protest of life which struggles in its inability to separate love from hatred, or as Keenan describes it, it is the attempt "to say yes to life, in the face of the ultimate horror of existence" (Keenan 2016, xii).

Pyramido at Lilith Performance Studio, Malmö, Sweden

The first commissioned performance of *Passing through Metal* in 2017 featured doom sludge metal band Pyramido in Malmö, Sweden, which Ashery describes as "a city of immigrants." Malmö sits across from Denmark's capital, Copenhagen, over the Øresund. In their search for knitters, Lilith Performance Studio advertised across the region for knitters—seeking them via knitting groups, as well as craft and wool shops. Due to this outreach, and given the migrant population of Malmö, not all the knitters were white Swedes. This commissioned Ashery's politically

progressive preferences for unregulated assemblages. As part of Lilith Performance Studio's public program, Ashery ran extensive workshops with the knitters, which included local band Pyramido; an all-white, all-male ensemble, with an existing relationship to the space. Workshops were held together with both the band and the knitters, leading into rehearsals to prepare them for the two night's performances.

Throughout each of the performances, each knitter knits what could be either a black cord or a scarf, snaking on to the floor like the cables during a live set. This group appears to be predominantly women, sat facing forwards on chairs in evenly spaced rows. These knitters become the grid around which audience members stand, lining the walls. Delivered from the contact microphones attached to their needles are eighty channels of

the sounds of clacking, amplifying the sonic element of something instantly recognizable but rarely focused on, described by Ashery as a "digital rain symphony" (Ashery 2017). Ashery speaks of how each knitter has their own rhythm, which you can hear either as part of the collective noise, or as an isolated, individual knitting rhythm. Interrupting the soft metallic patter of the knitters is the second star of this performance, Pyramido, who insert themselves amongst the knitters, practically screaming in their (the knitters') passively focused faces (see Figure 1).

A feature of the Malmö performance that was unseen and invisible in documentation, which Ashery informed me of, was that the floor of the space was built on an upwards slant, the drummer of the band set at the lowest point. So as the audience enters the space, they walk upwards,

heavenwards, before arranging themselves as an audience. This alludes to a certain type of spirituality, an ascent into the space, an uplifting, that crafts in the space a physical notion of redemption. Although as Keenan says, if the ascent is meant to follow the descent, then this feels the wrong way round, as the audience returns to earth at the close of the performance. The white walls reflect some of the aggressive "neutrality" of whiteness, yet green lights reflect a vitality, a healing color linked to growth, renewal and prosperity. A display that is redemptive and yet somewhat unflinching in its oddity.

When I've shown documentation of Ashery's performance, the appearance of the metal band usually elicits some laughter from the viewers, due to its unexpectedness. This reaction, laughter being an affect that can deal with either amusement or discomfort,



Figure 1

Performance with Pyramido at Lilith Performance Studio, Malmö, 2017. Source: Ashery [2018]. Reproduced with the permission of the artist Oreet Ashery.

is one way in which Ashery's performance demonstrates how it elicits both pleasure and unease. One review of the performance in Sweden reflects this confusion, as it attempts to account for the sound of the micro-phoned knitting needles in the context of metal music, struggling to glue it together. Blogger and metal reviewer Bara Metal first expresses this through describing the audience and their clothing: "The audience consists mostly of women sitting along the walls. None of them have a black t-shirt with a metal logo. It's a completely different audience than what *Pyramido* is used to" (2017). This emphasizes Ashery's collision of two seemingly distinct performative elements into a previously unseen encounter. Bara Metal goes on to conclude:

*I have a hard time saying that the sticks [knitting needles] reinforce the feeling of metal, or metal, any death metal gig at Pumpehuset [a music venue in Copenhagen] is more metallic, but their existence in a *Pyramido* concert, or *Pyramido*'s existence in a knitting party, makes this so absurdly unique that you have to see it to believe it. (Bara Metal 2017)*

Being familiar with the metal music genre, and because *Pyramido* features in the performance, Bara Metal struggles to understand how the knitters fit in, their presence an unexplainable surplus. The review says little more than that to see it is to believe it, as the presence of the knitters is too incongruous to be fully assimilated. For my part, when I first encountered the performance, it was

rather the role of the metal band that I struggled to understand, despite a youth spent in the company of such music in dark, sweaty venues. Being familiar with textiles, I could grasp the reparative motive of the knitters, and on an affective level I could feel the imposition and upwell of the band as a disruptive intrusion in the performance. Further watching and reading piqued my curiosity about the role of the band as I attempted to organize the fragments, and I asked myself: *what* are they doing and *how*? Not only this, but what possibilities are created?

Friends of Gas at Donaufestival, Krems, Austria

The second iteration of *Passing through Metal* featured post-punk band Friends of Gas, as part of Donaufestival, a music festival in Krems, Austria (2018). Because this was a commercial music festival, the performance was professionally produced—the band had to be sourced from the existing Donaufestival lineup, and the knitters were drawn from two preexisting groups. The outreach was restricted, and in our correspondence Ashery described the experience of being in Krems as "scary": "kind of weird being in this scary city. I mean, white scary." This starkness was reflected in the set-up of the performance space, which was black, lit plainly with white florescent lighting (see Figure 2). With the allusion to fascist acts in their name, Friends of Gas are described by their agency as:

a tough confrontation with the present and great art in the best of all senses: ... a critique of the conditions in which man is a humiliated,

enslaved, abandoned and despised being. Their merciless music shows us certainty that there are other people out there who are exposed to the same madness and contradictions as we are. (dq agency 2016)

Friends of Gas demonstrates what Keenan describes as saying yes to life in the face of existential horror. However, Ashery said she felt she had to compromise with the performance, having been unable to source a metal band at Donaufestival. Friends of Gas, being a post-punk band, lacked the growling and lyrics of death metal, and the whole band is more reserved in their performance. Singer Nina Walser keeps to herself, walking amongst the knitters, microphone held tightly to her chest, vocalizing a hoarse, throaty shout. She does not impose herself physically upon the space in the way *Pyramido* do, where singer Ronnie Källback roars from deep within and head bangs throughout the performance, thrashing his way through the space. My first instinct was to read this as a gendered dynamic, however Ashery argued that the gender dynamics didn't change that much—there were men knitting too—but it was more about the change in the style of music that made the Austrian performance less true to her concept. Post-punk being an arguably more experimental genre in its own right, the performance's subtler assault a mark of the shift in genre rather than gender.

Passing through Metal opens up a gendered reading in different ways, undoing the idea that women are silent—silently knitting—by amplifying the sounds they make. Ashery explained to me that although it was mainly women who signed up for the



Figure 2

Performance with Friends of Gas at Donaufestival, Austria, 2018. Source: Ashery [2018]. Reproduced with the permission of the artist Oreet Ashery.

knitting workshops, that doesn't mean men don't knit, it just means that they didn't come (although who is not in the room can be as significant as who is when it comes to outreach projects). She also said, regarding the diversity of the performers, that there were a few nonwhite people who happened to be first-generation immigrants that came to the knitting groups, but only one of them came for the performance (there is an open question here around access to be considered by artists, venues and commissioning bodies, but perhaps one beyond the remit of this present paper). However, between the less imposing presence of Friends of Gas as a whole and the sparse starkness of the space, this version exhibits the effects of its production limitations, compared to the brazen and dramatically lit performances in Malmö and

Cambridge (see below) with their roaring, moshing vocalists.

Anoxide at Kettle's Yard, Cambridge, UK

Finally, a performance at Kettle's Yard, Cambridge in 2018 featured death metal band Anoxide, with whom Ashery had previously worked with in 2015 (Kettle's Yard 2018). In an interview, Anoxide compared this experience to their previous performance, and emphasized how "abnormal" it was.

There were 50 or so knitters spread out throughout a large room, we stood in between them and did our thing with the audience watching, confused around the outside. What made this piece even more abnormal was that in-between each song we

had to leave 10 minutes of silence, because of this the entire performance went on for a couple of hours. What was quite cool with this though was that due to the 10 minutes of silence we would stand around having conversations with members of the crowd which made for a very difference experience as to normal. (Cinn 2019)

The band recognized their own discomfort and that of the audiences', acutely felt in the pauses, which through conversation they took steps to mitigate—an emergent creative relation within and without the parameters of the work.

Since the ICA show, Anoxide's original black lead had left the band. As an intervention into the present whiteness of Anoxide and death metal

more widely, Ashery invited Omar Swaby, a singer from the band Dygora who Anoxide occasionally worked with. She speaks about the profound impact of a black man growling and screaming incredible lyrics about death and doom; the whiteness of the space and the weird atmosphere this context creates, which is out of joint with how audible his voice is—he is heard by all. Much like Bara Metal's shock at the incongruity of the gendered crowd (mostly women not wearing death metal shirts) with the death metal band (all men mostly wearing the aforementioned shirts), Ashery finds the intervention of the black singer in the Kettle's Yard performance profound, because of the

cultural or perceived tension it creates—a conceptual dissonance—juxtaposed with the whiteness of death metal.

Again, she produces a contrast between the typical relational aspects of a death metal concert. Through introducing considerations of race, as well as interrupting and slowing the usual temporal progression, the mid-performance space for conversation between the band and the usually separate audience is candidly opened up. In the midst of collective insecurity, solidarity takes shape, and different, creative dynamics are founded. The smaller space and deep red lighting give the performance the intensity of an intimate gig: unfortunately, this

limits the opportunity to move amongst the knitters, who continue their work (see [Figure 3](#)).

In our correspondence, Ashery said she sees the performances in Malmö with Pyramido and at Kettle's Yard with Anoxide as the truest to her concept. To return to Keenan's statements about adolescence, the two metal bands are more typically adolescent in the fantasies they express, although Friends of Gas do share an explicit focus on the darker aspects of existence, with their *nom de guerre* referring to collective trauma. Keenan writes that “we have certain societal taboos to keep this energy under control. But



Figure 3
Performance with Anoxide at Kettle's Yard, Cambridge, 2018. Source: Ashery [2018]. Reproduced with the permission of the artist Oreet Ashery.

its power is overwhelming and it continues to erupt and break out no matter what controls we set in place” (Keenan 2016). Demonstrating this adolescent energy, in another interview Anoxide say they started their band “[t]o be rock stars. And by that we mean the lifestyle, couldn’t give a shit about the music, we just want sex, drugs and money” (Hollywood Music Magazine 2019). Anoxide somewhat destructively dismiss their own investment in the music as a form of depressive hedonia.² Moreover, at the time of writing, Pyramido’s own Instagram page (@pyramido_doom) displays a profile photo of what appears to be a sketch of a Klan member hanging from a tree with a heart carved into its trunk. Pyramido upturns the hate of the past through self-described “uplifting sludge,” whilst using visual forms such as tree carved graffiti (Keenan proposes that cave paintings are the original adolescent art, doodles with sex and violence as their motor) that are part of a virulent adolescence. As Keenan concludes, “perhaps we, ourselves, as humans, can rescue that spark of beauty and hope and fearlessness from our own dark places.” (Keenan 2016, xvi)

The Kettle’s Yard performance also threw up a different challenge, as the space had developed excellent relationships with the residents of Cambridge through outreach work. However, although they reached out to residents, many of them were not knitters, and so the workshops organized through the public program focused much more on teaching the residents how to knit. This was a contrast with the two previous performances, where

participants were typically familiar with knitting. This creates a proliferation of reparative craft, opening new socialities in these existing communities.

Making Time: Knitting as Reparative Craft

In *Depression: A Public Feeling*, Ann Cvetkovich writes at length on the reparative qualities of handiwork such as knitting, writing that “crafting has long been a mode of socializing” and that “while a more self-conscious sense of the relation between crafting and politics has created new formations, crafting’s basis in collectivity and its connections to working-class culture have long been part of its social power” (Cvetkovich 2012, 176). Ashery herself describes knitting as something you can do for someone else—“knitting someone a hat for example” (Up This Way 2018). Ashery attends to people’s experiences of knitting as a methodical activity that can pull people out of depression, as something that offers hope. One way in which this can be done is through making time for something or someone as a resistant act of care—because this takes place in stolen and fugitive times, in queer time, prognosis time and craft time. Through reparative practices of hand-making, more convivial relations can be crafted, to give texture to the social and to allow us to make time.

Much can happen in the time that is taken to knit, and via Lisa Anne Auerbach’s *Body Count Mittens*, Cvetkovich points to how “[t]he time-based practice of knitting gets connected to the time of mortality, and the sustained process of knitting the number becomes an act of mourning that gives the knitter a chance to contemplate the dead” (Cvetkovich 2012, 174). The material practice of craft

becomes engaged in a psycho-political drama, through its relation to time, mortality and place. Echoing Ashery’s push for weird convivialities, Elizabeth Freeman writes in *Beside You in Time* (2019) that

biological reproduction need not be the telos of the life drive: its point is to mix substances, to coalesce with others, to self-extend and thus retroactively transform the self, to renew living on different terms and in ways that need not culminate in the schemes of personhood we know today but may pass through styles of affiliation that we can learn from. (Freeman 2019, 13–14).

This involves working reparatively, in Sedgwick’s words, to “assemble and confer plenitude on an object that will then have resources to offer to an inchoate self” (Sedgwick 2003, 3).

This social space which exists when making time for one another, as well as for crafting, can be both meditative and transformative. Knitting circles have a radical history of developing social power for those involved; yet such collectives can embody a tension within textiles. They can occupy what Julia Bryan-Wilson describes in *Fray: Art and Textile Politics* as “a central place in traditionalist histories” while at the same time they “erupt as potential sites of resistance to that very traditionalism, claimed by competing factions at once as hegemonic and counter-hegemonic” (Bryan-Wilson 2017, 3).

In terms of hegemonic histories, having once been a refined craft in predominantly male crafting guilds—which spread across Europe in the fourteenth century—knitting was later feminized as women’s work (Vaccaro 2014). Further to this, throughout the

eighteenth century, due to the development of knitting machines, hand knitting became an acceptable leisure pursuit for affluent women to provide passive income or promote social causes (V&A 2017). In Sweden, hand-knitting was encouraged at the end of the nineteenth century, as Carol Huebscher Rhoades describes: "the recently emerged middle classes in Scandinavia and elsewhere realized that industrialization also meant a loss of many cultural traditions" (Rhoades 2014, 65). At this time, affluent women who advocated for social reform sought ways to assist those left behind or not served well by industrialization, hoping to "help women in need and preserve local knitting traditions" (Rhoades 2014, 65). The impoverished, disabled and disenfranchised learnt knitting skills to provide themselves with clothing as well as wares to be sold for survival. These cottage industries initiated "knitting parties" for women, which in turn influenced the modern leisurely activity of social knitting. Contemporary social uses of knitting continue these traditions: to counter social isolation, build local knowledges, provide sustenance, as well as drawing attention to political issues through what is now termed craftivism (George 2020).

Ashery's performances challenge the social ideal of knitting circles by organizing the knitters in an asocial manner, yet the gaps in the music still open that space for conversation. The knitters' communication comes only through the cover of noise, in which their social power becomes a democratized yet differentiated sound, and each singular knitter becomes merged with the next. Cvetkovich says that a craft such as knitting "requires modes of attention that resemble those of

meditation: having something to do with your hands keeps the attention both focused and free, and you can remain on task in the midst of other distractions" (Cvetkovich 2012, 189–190). Ashery's shyly convivial collective of knitters doesn't respond to the band in their midst—having been told to ignore everything and just knit—even as the singer was screaming in their faces. They (the knitters) stonewall the group, performing an affective hardening in the face of noisy, overwhelming interventions. Many of the knitters have sensibly wedged foam earplugs in their ears to defend against the blare.

Considering the placid self-sufficiency of the knitters, and the adolescent demands of the music, the entry for Ashery's performance in the *Film London* online library concludes that "[t]hese noises [the knitters and the band] simply don't belong together" (Film London 2018). Keenan writes that noise "short-circuits any sort of easy response" (Keenan 2016, xiii) and "provides the cover of night that facilitates transgressive activities, liberating suppressed personas and jamming the wavelengths that consensual reality broadcasts on" (Keenan 2016, vii). Ashery seeks to amplify the resistant potential in reparative human activity, even those seemingly at odds with each other.

This performative work perhaps responds to a fear described by Sedgwick that "the culture surrounding it is inadequate or inimical to its nurture" (Sedgwick 2003, 150–151), and what we can take from these mutable positions taken up by both the band and the knitters is an understanding of Sedgwick's conclusions, that these are some of "the many ways selves and communities succeed in extracting sustenance from

the objects of a culture—even of a culture whose avowed desire has often been not to sustain them" (Sedgwick 2003, 150–151). This is reparative craft in its relational mode, rather than the explicit repair of a particular object.

... a modelling of cultural co-existence that acknowledges both strangeness within all (rejecting the very opposition between self and other), and the ever-potential manifestations of social antagonisms between subjects. ... the project defines spaces where the inevitable differences between people and social groups are negotiated in informal, spontaneous, and collectivist ways, reliant on a shared commitment to creativity. (Demos 2013)

Although T.J. Demos is writing on Ashery's previous *Party for Freedom* performances from 2013 (Ashery 2013a, 2013b), he covers the reparative motivation that permeates much of Ashery's practice. Resonant with this is Cvetkovich's outline of the importance of processes of reparative craft:

These disparate sources of wisdom have helped me see how the combined forces of the ordinary and the spiritual can be an antidote to despair, alienation, and depression. The labor of habit or practice—gathering palm leaves, performing rituals from diasporic and indigenous traditions, knitting and crocheting, writing—forges new understandings of the political. It also generates a reparative relation to depression and alternatives to the medical model of depression as something to be diagnosed and known. The experience

of depression or being stuck can be an invitation to that which we don't yet know and a way of reminding us why cultural studies matters. Like spiritual practice, creative practice—and scholarship as creative practice—involves not knowing, trusting to process and to a holistic intelligence that encompasses body, mind, and senses in order to see what happens, rather than having an answer to writing a dissertation, transforming depression, or planning a life. (Cvetkovich 2012, 202, my emphasis)

An undulating relationship is created between that which is at odds with itself, from outward social antagonisms, to internalizations of worldly troubles. Together, each of us can tenderly and creatively repair our love relations amid the impacts of violence and destruction. Knitting being one example of this type of shareable practice.

Conclusion

Passing through Metal is a purposefully curated intervention. Within it, the inexplicable yet compelling entanglement between reparative (depressive) and destructive (paranoid) positionings and fantasies play out. It is a camp dramatization of the play-off between the quieter, more introverted forms of collective resistance and reparation such as knitting, and the adolescent defiance of the bands, raucously vocalizing their resistance. Operating across performance space and music concert, it transgresses the typical settings of both (as elucidated by *Bara Metal*, the reviewer mentioned above).

There is a sense of sitelessness in the photographic documentation (which has been my point of access

for these performances), as each iteration happens within a visually featureless performance space, the only sense of situatedness coming from the relational locations of the knitters, bands, and potential audiences. These shared histories are held together by the overt campness of the performative elements, pulling together elements of contempt and longing in an oscillatory manner. The performance becomes a space of experimentation that largely elicits a sense of the weird rather than illicit transgression. That each performance is not a cookie-cutter of the previous one further demonstrates Ashery's readiness to allow shifts within the work according to its situatedness. This is a space of tangled relations, formalized in the performance space.

The reparative positioning of Ashery's work is at once in the small (deemed feminine) resistance—acts for others—as well as in the protests of the insolent music. Whilst the noise of the music may not honor life, the world of the knitting circle can be about survival, maintenance, and beauty, as well as being a relaxing pastime that enables pleasure of life in the now. These noises and practices may not typically be found together in everyday life, but by bringing metal music and knitting together, intervening in their typical settings, Ashery queers the reparative positioning of both. In the work surrounding the performance, Ashery shares social knitting skills and opens the setting for a mutual commitment to creativity for both performers and audience.

Metal music can seem irrational and adolescent in its destructive fantasies, seeking transgression through them. Colquhoun writes that these musics don't "romanticise or

aestheticise their subject matter but try to traumatically reflect the darkest corners of reality as they actually exist. They don't want to function as an affective dam for libidinal desires but as a virulent amplifier" (2017). In some ways metal represents the way things are, whilst being esthetically challenging through its amplification and noise. Knitting is an ostensibly quieter generative practice, which Ashery amplifies again. Tied into long traditions of handicraft, the social function of knitting has stood the test of time: sustaining cultures, livelihoods and leisure, but also creating spaces of contemplation and activism. However, the bands engage their craft too, grouped in unquiet resistance to the demands of life.

Ashery's performance explores the pathetic inadequacy of both reparative work and adolescent destruction, whilst simultaneously amplifying the resistant potential of joy, community and solidarity in the face of self-preservationist, individuated culture. The apparent dichotomy of paranoid and depressive positionings raises an urgent question (and for Sedgwick, highlights the increasing prominence of paranoid positions), for which we must make time to ask: *how* did things get this way? And *what* could we do with the situation, in order to maintain the texture of our lives as social beings—as we, each as pathetic oddities, exist in our difference, precarity and reparation. *Passing through Metal* audibly knits together the incongruity of both knitting and metal communities, trusting in their generative collision.

Through Ashery's work, we are collectively left with a proposition and a challenge: to bring together the part-objects we are perhaps fearful of, and

to reparatively combine them in a creative and unknowing encounter. Though we may be impelled to lovingly craft antidotes to despair on our own terms, ultimately, the results will only become known to us through relational work and the communities and conflicts that form from that. Although care is the act of sustaining something, imaginative and collective modes of care will likely be contradictory—as seen throughout Ashery’s body of work—confronting both our personal and political limitations. The anxiety-mitigating achievements of reparative work can be brief. However, to move from suspicion to pleasure-seeking, or in other words, to move from the way things are, to how things *could* be, demands a shared commitment to creativity: a practice of reparative craft, interweaving relations, practices and discourses anew.

Notes

1. Song lyrics reproduced with permission from Ronnie Källback.
2. “Depression is usually characterized as a state of anhedonia, but the condition I’m referring to is constituted not by an inability to get pleasure so much as it is by an inability to do anything else except pursue pleasure” (Fisher 2009, 21–22).

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

References

- Ashery, Oreet. 2013a. *Party for Freedom | An Audiovisual Album*. <http://oreetashery.net/site/work/party-for-freedom-an-audiovisual-album/>
- Ashery, Oreet. 2013b. *Party for Freedom | The Space for Freedom is Getting Smaller and Less Transparent*. <http://oreetashery.net/site/work/party-for-freedom-the-space-for-freedom-is-getting-smaller-and-less-transparent/>
- Ashery, Oreet. 2015. *Death Metal Gender Intervention Anoxide and New Noveta at fig-2, ICA, London, 2015, ongoing*. <http://oreetashery.net/site/work/death-metal-intervention-anoxide-and-new-noveta-at-fig-2-ica-london/>.
- Ashery, Oreet. 2017. *Film London profile*. <https://filmlondon.org.uk/profile/oreet-ashery>
- Ashery, Oreet. 2018. *Passing through Metal, 2017-18*. <http://oreetashery.net/work/passing-through-metal-2017/>
- Ashery, Oreet. 2019. *Revisiting Genesis Web Series and a Single-Screen Film*. <http://oreetashery.net/site/work/revisiting-genesis-web-series-and-film/>
- Bara Metal. 2017. “Pyramido mitt i ett hav av garn.” *Bara Metal*, April 20. <https://barametal.wordpress.com/2017/04/20/pyramido-mitt-i-ett-hav-av-garn/>
- Bryan-Wilson, Julia. 2017. *Fray: Art and Textile Politics*. Chicago & London: University of Chicago Press.
- Cinn. 2019. “Anoxide Discuss Death Metal, Knitting, the London Scene and Three Days of Death.” *SkullsnBones*, August 5. <https://skullsnbones.com/anoxide-discuss-death-metal-knitting-interview/>
- Cohen, Margaret. 2014. “Fluid States.” *Cabinet Magazine* 16: 75–82.
- Colquhoun, Matt. 2017. “Cascading Adolescence (Part 1): Adolescent Outsideness.” *Xenogothic*, June 17. <https://xenogothic.com/2019/06/17/cascading-adolescence-part-1-adolescent-outsideness/>
- Cvetkovich, Ann. 2012. *Depression: A Public Feeling*. Durham & London: Duke University Press.
- Demos, T. J. 2013. “The Unfinished Revolution: Oreet Ashery’s Party for Freedom.” *Artangel*, May. <https://www.artangel.org.uk/party-for-freedom/the-unfinished-revolution/>.
- Film London. 2018. “Passing through Metal.” *Talent Showcase*. <https://filmlondon.org.uk/film-library/passing-through-metal>.
- Fisher, Bernice, and Joan C. Tronto. 1990. “Toward a Feminist Theory of Care.” In *Circles of Care: Work and Identity in Women’s Lives*, edited by Emily K. Abel and Margaret K. Nelson, 36–54. New York: State University of New York Press.
- Fisher, Mark. 2009. *Capitalist Realism: Is There No Alternative?* Winchester: Zero Books.
- Freeman, Elizabeth. 2019. *Beside You in Time: Sense Methods & Queer Sociabilities in the American 19th Century*. Durham & London: Duke University Press.
- dq agency 2016. *Friends of Gas*. http://dq-agency.com/dq_artists/friends-of-gas/
- George, Cassidy. 2020. “How knitting became cool.” *BBC*, July 1. <https://www.bbc.com/culture/article/20200630-how-knitting-became-cool>

- Heavy Metal Knitting. 2019. <https://heavymetalknitting.fi/en/>
- Hollywood Music Magazine. 2019. "Anoxide Interview." *Hollywood Music Magazine*, July 1. <https://hollywood-musicmagazine.com/featured/anoxide-interview/>
- Keenan, David. 2016. *England's Hidden Reverse*. London: Strange Attractor Press.
- Kettle's Yard. 2018. "fig-futures at Kettle's Yard, WEEK 2/OREET ASHERY." *YouTube*, September 19. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4lQWcmGCHxg&t=2s>
- Klein, Melanie. 1984. *Love, Guilt and Reparation and Other Works 1921-1945*. New York: The Free Press.
- Rhoades, Carol Huebscher. 2014. "Binge: Industrious Knitting in Sweden." *Knitting Traditions (Spring 2014)*, 64-67.
- Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky. 2003. *Touching Feeling: Affect, Pedagogy, Performativity*. Durham & London: Duke University Press.
- Up This Way. 2018. "Oreet Ashery - Death in the Now." *Radio New Zealand*, January 7. <https://www.mz.co.nz/national/programmes/up-this-way/audio/2018628065/oreet-ashery-death-in-the-now>.
- Vaccaro, Jeanne. 2014. "Handmade." *TSQ: Transgender Studies Quarterly* 1 (1-2): 96-97. doi:10.1215/23289252-2399713.
- V&A. 2017. *The History of Hand-Knitting*. <https://www.vam.ac.uk/articles/the-history-of-hand-knitting>.
- Wallace, David Foster. 2005. "Some Remarks on Kafka's Funniness from Which Probably Not Enough Has Been Removed." In *Consider the Lobster and Other Essays*, 60-65. London: Abacus.