

EMOTIONAL AFFECT AND GESTURAL ECONOMIES: IRIS TOULIATOU

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Bodies of work that are serial give way to certain cartographies. For artist Iris Touliatou, her accumulative practice maps the emotional encounters and resonances that make up the contours of our contemporary condition. With each reincarnation of an installation, Touliatou illuminates one very specific instance of labor, privacy, and fantasy becoming intimately contingent upon another. Her episodic approach perceptively attends to collective experiences of dependency and untangles intimate fantasies of capitalism more frequently experienced as conditions of precarity.

Ceiling light fixtures foraged from disused office buildings in Athens constitute Touliatou's series *UNTITLED (STILL NOT OVER YOU)* (2017–ongoing). Once displaced from their original contexts—bankrupt businesses or abandoned shops—the fluorescent lights are taken apart and reassembled, in a meticulous and repetitive process that prioritizes care, proximity, and sentimentality over repair. In their latest installment, as part of the *2021 Triennial: Soft Water Hard Stone* at the New Museum in New York (2021–22), aluminum frames, fluorescents, wires, cables, and transformers fuse to form two approximately four-meter-square sections that frame a white wall. The work's weakening materials create gaps in its electric current, each tube becoming more milky-white and defunct as time passes—only its extremities flush orange with heat. Transcribing a time and place of specific economic and emotional entanglement, Touliatou's series functions as a score for past, present, public, and private precarity. Often too exhausted to glow full beam, the installation exists as a fading relic of a past and present marred by capitalism, a fragile fantasy of intimacy and reciprocity draining before the viewer's eyes.

Touliatou approaches the work's gestural economies and means of circulation as emotional states of inquiry and affect. Once the bulbs have blown or have completely worn out, what remains are the silver metallic frames reflecting the work's surroundings and spectators. At first, the work seems to be contingent on its functional condition, and its lifetime always unknown; however, loss also functions as a space of potential. When unplugged and in between states of exhibition, they operate as neither artworks nor lights but return to a state of latency, and as such, when they are transported, all their (dys)functional parts and states of condition are declared in detail. The work's entangled relationship to time and value is both ephemeral and perpetual—a continuously charged state of synchronous doubt and hope. For the artist, these objects have also come to hold memories of home, those familiar faces one returns to that are imbued with equal measures of reassurance and despair.

Another series, titled *EMOTIONAL INFINITY (THE SOUND OF THEM COMING BACK AMPLIFIED AND LOOPED)* (2021), also constitutes the familiar warmth of the ubiquitous. Made up of a series of electric oscillating fans and house keys copied from strangers, families, friends, and neighbors—which are tied to the external cages of the fans—*EMOTIONAL INFINITY* is the intimate sound of jingling metal that signals when a loved one has returned home. Recently staged as part of the 7th Athens Biennale (2021), the installation continuously reproduces this sound as air moves through densely packed clusters of keys, key rings, and other sentimental keepsakes. These incredibly personal objects are obtained through informal bonds of trust and understanding, a collaborative composition performed by an intimate chorus of safekeeping. The work speaks to what theorist Lauren Berlant articulates as “intimate publics”: “Would it be possible to talk about a biography of gesture, of interruption, of reciprocal coexistences (and not just amongst intimates who know each other)?”¹ *EMOTIONAL INFINITY* is that very gesture. It holds romantic memories of a time when the collective ownership of a set of keys was a sign of trust and a shared experience of belonging. As the series has grown, Touliatou has been consciously using the ribbons her mother collects when receiving or exchanging gifts as visual mementos of her own gratitude for the trust imbued in the work and the solidarities it has established. *EMOTIONAL INFINITY* emerges out of a very honest economy of exchange—a commitment to intimacy as plural experience—the “multiple affective registers of collective life that keep people loosely knotted together.”²

Toward the end of 2021, while in New York, Touliatou was invited to participate in the group show *Lives of an Object* at Andreas Melas and ARCH, in Athens. Using her own physical absence as space to work and think from, an iteration of *CURES FOR KNOWN FEARS, CURES*

FOR UNKNOWN FEARS (II) (2021) was staged alongside a new work titled *UNTITLED (DIVERSION)* (2021). *CURES FOR KNOWN FEARS* is an installation of smart scent diffusers that exhale a concoction of treatments and ointments taken by or given to Touliatou to supplement her body as it encounters various emotional and physical states—once again, the personal confronting the institutional. For *UNTITLED*, Touliatou diverted all phone calls to her landline and mobile phone to a telephone installed on the wall of the gallery for the duration of the exhibition. Daily calls from friends and family were answered by the gallery, as well as those from debt collectors; when asked by a friend if this was her way of hiding, Touliatou responded that it was the opposite. The work could be acquired at a rental price equal to the artist’s own debt, so rather than its being a means by which to disappear, its whole constitution is centered on the institutional and emotional conditions of the artist’s existence—physical or not.

Notes

1 Lauren Berlant and Jay Prosser, “Life Writing and Intimate Publics: A Conversation with Lauren Berlant,” *Biography* 34, no. 1 (2011): 180–87.

2 Berlant and Prosser, 185.

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