

The Monster Seminar explores questions of art making by focusing on the processes we undertake to “arrive” at final work. What methods do we develop or follow in the studio, and how do these define our artistic work and understanding of art in general? How do we cultivate our process, and what relation does process have to presenting final work? The Seminar draws out these questions in a speculative manner, exploring process as a deeply complex form of “infra-consciousness” – the madness behind every artwork. The Seminar will work through a range of theoretical frameworks, from psychoanalytic theories of desire and depression, fantasy and sublimation, love and guilt, to feminist notions of gestation and labor, in order to engage the artwork as a form of monster: the radical uncanny, or the absolute intruder. This will allow us to question the relation between process and presentation, and in what sense art is never fully what we expect. Considering how we may deepen an approach to process, and the “birthing” of the artwork, we will map out four key methods, including: The Incomplete, The Thing, The Gift, and The Joke. These will be put into play as poetic vocabularies and paths toward collaborating with the monster. The Seminar is organized as four lectures including group discussion and examining particular artistic works.

*

Seminar 1 (Sept. 23, 2020): The Incomplete /

I want to start by saying something about my interest in organizing these seminars. There is maybe two sides to this, one being more about my own practice as an artist, and the other about my experience teaching at the academy.

*in my own practice I have always been interested in “being outside”: whether that is about working in public spaces, in peripheries, in informal spaces, or about looking towards the edges: the edges of thinking, the edges of society. I think this has something to do with “the emergent”: if we think of the emergent as something that is never fixed, never already settled, but is always “in process”: things emerge on the peripheries, on the edges, in the margins – to “be outside” I think is to stay close to the emergent, to what is either pushed outside, the marginal, or what leaks outside of fixed categories. Or, even more: what we may discover by staying close to process.

*at the same time, as a teacher at the academy, I have been in the position of having to respond to student’s work: to think with students about their process, about their work: what are you working on? And where is your working going? There is always this feeling that “the work is going somewhere”, and that it is our task, together, to figure out where it is going: where is the work leading you? Within the context of education, there is always the obligation to “finish” – as a student, you have to present a final work: you have to arrive somewhere, and that somewhere is shaped by how we understand finishing: to say: look, I have arrived, I have completed the work.

Now, I would say, that in that arrival, there is also something that may get lost: I think as artists, when confronting that moment of presentation, we are often cleaning things up: this may not be a bad thing – in cleaning, we also may see things more clearly; and that is necessary in many ways. At the same time, I think there is a danger, and it is this danger that I want to explore with these seminars. I would call it: the danger of the monster.

What is the monster? For now, let’s say: the monster is “the unrecognizable” or, “the unnamable”. It is the very thing that interrupts categories: that is why it is so terrifying, and so exciting – the monster is fear and desire together: it destabilizes the social order, offering routes toward other imaginaries, other identities.

I want to think about the process of working as an artist, the process of creation we might call it, which is also about the tension between the emergent and the fixed, the marginal and the central, the studio and the gallery.

Today's seminar is then focused on the topic of The Incomplete, or the Unfinished: I want to consider the incomplete, the unfinished as a form of monster, or a feature of the monster: we may think about specific monster examples, maybe some horror films we have seen? Where the monster is sort of incomplete: a body, a form, a weird shape that is kind of falling apart, that is unsteady, unstable – maybe we can think of it as a “fragment”. And where this incompleteness, this unstable form, becomes horrific. As we see: the interruption of categorization is also an interruption onto the stability of things and the idea of the whole: the monster is never to be trusted.

The monster, in a way, is always a process: it interrupts static form, it destabilizes categories, it upsets identity, the name; it pushes things, it moves things beyond their definitions: what is this thing I see? I cannot really name it. So the monster, we might say, is a friend to process: we are close to the monster when we are in the studio – in the studio, we are always searching for new form, something we do not recognize, something that surprises us: what is this thing I see, that I have made? This might be understood as the risk one takes in being an artist: Do we ever truly finish?

I can say, from the beginning, that the artist is very close to monsters.

Split /

To explore the question of the incomplete, I want to refer us to the work of Sigmund Freud, and the field of psychoanalysis (we will stay with psychoanalysis throughout these seminars, since it helps us work with the monster, as something we are very close to and yet, remains also rather indescribable: we shouldn't try and capture the monster, but rather, open a space for being with our monsters: this might be what psychoanalysis has done for us – to recognize the degree to which we are haunted by our own monsters, that there is the unconscious, and that it is not so much overcoming that fact, but of finding ways of living with our own symptoms, our own fears and desires).

To start, I turn to Freud's *Beyond the pleasure principle* (1920). In the essay, he offers some reflections on the experience of being incomplete:

*The case of his grandson: throwing toys, “gone” (fort), and pulling them back, “here!” (da) Fort – Da (absence / presence): the presence and absence of the mother (love, a sense of completion, wholeness)

*the construction of a device: stick, string: the grandson develops a system for “controlling” the feelings of vulnerability, of the coming and going of the mother

We might identify Fort – Da as a rhythm shaping subjectivity, as being always already defined by an external presence (the parent, society, a friend); subjectivity takes shape by way of others: as we see, we are dependent upon others, to the rhythms of presence (the presence of love) and absence (its withdrawal); so while we may strive for self-possession, a sense of self-determination, it is clear that this is always vulnerable to the movements of others: to what they give, and what they take from us.

*subjectivity is therefore centered around a sense of incompleteness, a lack of control, an experience of contingency and interdependence: what can we in fact rely upon?

For Freud, this becomes one more instance for appreciating how subjectivity is defined by lack (“castration”): by being without, by what withdraws from us; there is always a disappointment: we are in a way driven by lack, as Freud would argue; by a crisis of presence: I never find what I am looking for; at the same time, I am captured by what I cannot have.

*so we are in a bind: how to navigate through this? what kinds of practices (games) do we develop, to live within this rather uncertain rhythm defining us?

Fort – Da also brings us to the question of repetition: as the grandson shows, he repeats this gesture, of throwing and pulling the string; what Freud suggests, is that we repeat that which hurts us; there is a complex knot of pleasure and pain defining our drives, our desires, our decisions.

*we might say, that the grandson repeats his pain in a controlled manner: to negotiate the feeling of not being in control, that there are things we are dependent upon (states of vulnerability); he develops a practice – a game.

*in throwing the string, there is always a kind of promise of a greater return: of pleasure: in repeating the pain, maybe one will finally overcome it.

*issue of Noise / Music: noise as “the unmanageable; the uncontrollable: it interrupts”; music as organized noise, and yet, we seek music as something that also moves us, that displaces us; yet in a controlled manner: we repeat the discomfort of noise.

*the joy of listening to sad songs

Fear / Desire:

Fort – Da is therefore also an expression of fear and desire: in throwing the string, we fear that in fact the mother may never reappear; at the same time, we are driven to throw the string, to desire the mother’s return: maybe she will come back if I will it to happen.

*the question of fear and desire is fundamental to the monster: the monster being a projection of our fears, the unconscious, the shadow-self, while also being something we cannot live without: the monster is inside us; it tells us things we cannot say aloud.

*I’m tempted to appreciate the grandson’s “toy” which is a self-made construction, as a type of monster: an object, a thing that allows him to confront and work through this complex knot of fear and desire: he works with the monster.

Sublimation /

Let’s stay then with this question of presence and absence, and how this shapes us; and how this gives way to gestures, games, constructions, practices: can we understand these as creative responses to the coming and going of the world around us? Gestures that intervene within the rhythm of pleasure and pain, love and its withdrawal?

The experiences we have of others might be understood in the game the grandson plays: he in a way gives narrative to this experience, describing it through the gesture of throwing and pulling his toy.

*he builds a device, a system, which expresses his psychic reality: it becomes a staging, a performance: something that externalizes his inner torment.

Freud would further describe this through the notion of sublimation:

*sublimation being a process of substituting a primary drive, an instinctual urge, with something else: a representation, even a ritual.

For Freud, sublimation is directly related to sexual satisfaction (it is a stand in for the sexual instinct); in other words: one must sublimate one's primary sexual instinct, allowing it to be expressed through other means, other gestures or activities.

*sublimation becomes necessary we might say, within the order of the civilized; while Freud keeps sublimation within the space of sexuality, and maybe also repression, Carl Jung for instance, highlights sublimation as an expression of the creative impulse (what he called "alchemical gold", referring to alchemy as the "magical" process of turning coal into gold).

*here, sublimation becomes a generative force, a positive productive activity. We, in a way, give expression to that which we may not usually express, which drives us toward other creations (we might even say: culture): so creativity is based upon lack, on one hand – this love we cannot have, this gold we cannot hold, and which forces me or drives me to replace it with something else: this game, even, this toy; at the same time, in sublimating our desires or instincts we create the world, maybe in a way that can nurture and care for that sense of vulnerability we all share.

*the alchemical gold Jung speaks of therefore appears as a replacement, that also enriches a sense of community even: in recognizing my interdependency, I also nurture ways forms of taking care: I focus on love as a way of building greater support.

To create is therefore built upon the primary sense of being incomplete as a subject: I am driven to create as a way of negotiating that which withdraws from me (the mother, love, security).

*I can refer to the psychotherapist DW Winnicott, and his work on creativity and also play: for Winnicott, play is fundamental to the development of the child, and equally to our experiences of adulthood: play becomes the essential arena or experience by which one leads a creative, fulfilling life; play as an "intermediate area, a resting place"; between interior, psychic life and the external environment: that allows us to "separate" (from the mother), and to fill in that separation in a positive manner (play as "infinite variability" / improvisation):

*leads Winnicott to propose that culture and the arts (as well as religion) are based upon play – where we give expression to life as an arena of creativity (what Winnicott would also call "magic").

Within the scene of sublimation, play and creativity, we should also hang onto something: that is, the sense that playing, and gestures of sublimation, are always haunted: by incompleteness, by disappointment, by withdrawal – by frustration;

*creation is also a type of madness: one rarely creates a perfect world; the alchemical gold Jung speaks of may also turn black, or in fact, may never appear; the process may collapse.

*and yet, we keep going: we throw the string again; we return to the studio, we keep producing, we persist:

*we might say that the monster is there, in the arena of incompleteness, play, sublimation: in creativity, in the alchemical process, in the crafting of toys, we are always close to monsters.

Monsters, pathways of collaboration /

So, there are few pathways I want to open up, in order to think about monsters, precisely as a productive force, a language or vocabulary which we might carry with us as artists. To in a way position ourselves in relation to "incompleteness": how might we work with incompleteness? What might incompleteness suggest or provide in terms of enriching our processes, our understanding of the crafting of art works? What in fact do we desire from our own art work – what are we seeking? Or in what ways are we driven to produce over and over again certain

forms or actions? If art is “serious play”, forcing us to confront desire and fear, what kinds of responsibilities does it carry, if any? If art is “the practice of freedom” as Judy Chicago states, what in fact is freedom? Are we ever free from our own monsters?

The monster in this sense is a cultural form or expression that also works against culture: it may in fact be an act of play gone wrong; or gone too far? As I mentioned at the beginning, the monster is always a representation of “the outside” – it is precisely what upsets categories, what evades capture, what is unnamable: what I cannot recognize and yet, which takes form. The monster is always troubling sublimation: it wants to interrupt representation, to force desire and fear forward, in the open. It is absolutely uncivilized: dirt.
(for more on “dirt” and taboo, see Mary Douglas, Purity and Danger)

Here, the question of “the abject” is important to consider: the abject as that which is “cast off”, that is deemed unclean; the monster being an expression of the abject – we can think how certain persons, social groups, are made abject by a given social or political order:

*the monsterring of others: to cast out.

*there is a great ambivalence to the abject; to that which repulses us; what is kept off-limits, for instance, what is deemed “taboo” in society is often those things which contaminate the body: dirt, menstrual blood, excrement – the body is prone to leakage (repressed).

*Julia Kristeva: on the abject as the loss of distinction (between subject / object – what crosses the line between purity and danger, the normal and the abnormal)

It is my feeling, that the monster is central to artistic practice, if we are to understand artistic practice as what works in and around categories; what seeks to continually interrupt and supplement representation; what introduces the unnamable onto the field of meaning and experience.

*artistic practice as what often works at desublimation: to intervene within the order of the civilized (language, behavior, identity); to find out what the body really is (our psychic life).

Is this not what we labor at there in the studio: to craft the unrecognizable?

I want to finish here, by following certain artistic practices, which may open up pathways of monster-creativity:

*

Artistic examples:

Anti-Form

Robert Morris, Continuous Project Altered Daily (1969) / 20 days, Leo Castelli warehouse
“anti-form” or “process-art” / the life of matter (gravity); construction-site aesthetic: earth, shovels, clay, etc.;

*entropy

Question of “the warehouse”

Morris: struggle against “style” (recognizability; meaning): to work at “unmaking” (improvisation); he also claimed the work as a “fragmentation of the self: to get away from myself” (anti-humanist)

(Dis)possessed:

Vito Acconci, Following Piece, 1969 / my body is not my own:

“I am almost not an ‘I’ anymore; I put myself in the service of this scheme.”

I need a scheme (follow the scheme, follow a person)

I add myself to another person (I give up control/I don’t have to control myself)

A way to get around. (A way to get myself out of the house.) Get into the middle of things.

Out of space. Out of time. (My time and space are taken up, out of myself, into a larger system).

Nora Turato, *Speaking Other: the Hysteric*

*captures the world of textuality and language: to become a channel

Verbal vomit; textual hysteria (digital monster)

Mary Kelly

*women and domestic labor; son, Kelly, from birth to age of 5; child-mother relation: co-transformative: pseudo-scientific analysis; the question of dependency, intersubjectivity: the mother-child bond and the experience of separation.

*set of “documents” (around 140 items): Part 1, diapers; Part 2, language; Part 3, starting school, Part 4, transitional objects (diary), Part 5, gifts (plants, animals), Part 6, beginning of writing (rosetta stone).

*the turbulent process of “separation”

Kelly intricately charts her relationship with her son, and her changing role as a mother by writing on artefacts associated with child care: baby clothes, his drawings, items he collects, and his first efforts at writing. In addition, there are detailed analytical texts that exist in parallel to the objects.

Dissatisfaction / a general sense of being unfulfilled (as an artist)

Dieter Roth

Diaries: including everything

Trash:

*where to begin, where to stop (never slept); the compulsion to do: a “miserable man, a miserable life” – to capture himself (life is not beautiful) / filming himself dying

The Fragment (to be in pieces):

Emily Dickinson, “gorgeous nothings”

Jen Bervin honored Dickinson’s original manuscripts by carefully stitching each erased punctuation mark in red thread. (Jen Bervin, *The Composite Marks of Fascicle 28*)

Kiki Smith

Sculptures of bodies; body parts; the fragment, the leak;

Something beautiful and disgusting at the same time;