Absence
If intimacy is a kind of unity, then the absence of the Other leaves a mark, a breaking point that renders its absence a presence. The mark stands as a witness to a shared experience, signifying the fleeting ephemerality of love and life. It is through such marks that what has passed endures.

“Isn’t desire always the same, whether the object is present or absent? Isn’t the object always absent?”
The pain of absence must be endured, manipulated, forgotten.

“Absence can exist only as a consequence of the other: it is the other who leaves, it is I who remain.”

Closeness
Closeness describes a relational proximity; an “intimate space” is a small one that asks occupants to be close together. What is close is near and familiar.

Because affect is often so personal, we typically disclose it to people who feel close. Relational closeness develops as we self-disclose and surrender the walls that protect our vulnerability through reciprocal sharing of that which is personal—affect, stories, secrets—inviting the Other closer to our depths.

When we want to be close to someone (and want that person to be close in return), we want to be known and cared for (and to know and care for another).

Desire
Will, appetite, libido... desire’s ruthlessness consumes thought and perturbs identity. Desire is projected onto an object. In turn, the stable object gains the capacity to destabilize its desirer. And the object is never totally objective. Rather, the desirer projects hopes onto it, reimagining specific objects to fit idealized desires. Desire’s object, then, is not simply the thing itself but what the desirer hopes it to be; our attachment to desired objects is predicated on possibility.

We hope for desire’s fulfillment, but fulfillment is always fleeting, more desire always imminent.

The desirer is creative and optimistic. But desire is also socially regulated, even institutionalized. The individual is encouraged to express and repress desires according to conventions, or what Lauren Berlant calls “hegemonic fantasies,” which often take the form of heteronormative monogamy. We are encouraged to hide or shape fantasies to avoid appearing too eager, to avoid being shamed for desiring what others deem undesirable.

“It is my desire I desire, and the loved being is no more than a tool,” says Barthes. Or perhaps, as Julia Kristeva claims, the object of desire is a metaphor for the subject: the desirer is a narcissist with an object.

Empathy
To empathize is to mirror the emotion of the Other, to share an affective state. It involves feeling into the object through identification—through seeing oneself in the Other, and through the assimilation of the Other’s feelings. Empathy merges the subject and object, prompting the dissolution of individual identity.

And yet, the subject and object always maintain autonomy. I can identify with the Other’s misery though it still occurs without me. Sensations felt through the Other arise in my body, shaping my sense of self.

Empathy is shared emotion that converges over relatible experience; it’s what compels people to weep during movies and to assist strangers in need. Empathy reveals our limited autonomy, our entanglements, and our capacity to affect one another.

Jealousy
Jealousy draws upon our fear of missing out, our competitive nature, and our tendency to imagine the worst. It can range from a nagging doubt to paranoia, grief, and rage. It is often a projection of insecurity, fear of rejection, fear of abandonment, or feelings of inadequacy. Vanity makes the pangs of jealousy particularly sharp.

“In this condition rage is easily roused; you no longer remember that in love possession is nothing, enjoyment is everything. You experience the very worst possible torment, namely, extreme misery still further poisoned by a small remnant of hope.”

The anger that often follows jealousy is frequently followed in turn by guilt, shame, or denial. Anger can make us feel empowered in the face of insecurity, but it does not actually make us stronger or safer.

The Other’s jealousy can inspire feelings of irritation or hatred, of flattery, of possession, or of disappointment in the Other’s lack of trust. Our capacity to evoke jealousy might feel empowering; the Other’s jealousy might serve as proof of love.
Loss

“It is possible that one day I will no longer love you, and this possibility cannot be taken away from love—

it belongs to it. It is against this possibility, but also with it, that the promise is made.”

The possibility, and the fear of loss, of mourning, exists at love’s inception. If love maintains a futurity predicated on individuals’ shared wish to flourish together, the possibility of failing to do that—the possibility of loss—always looms. Sometimes, the fear of loss is worse than the loss itself. Sometimes, “I weep for the loss of love, not for him or her.”

In French, an orgasm is at times called “une petite mort,” which translates literally to “a little death”—the momentary loss or suspension of self when completely entangled with the Other. This sort of self-loss can be frightening but also beautiful. Loss of the Other brings about a different kind of loss of self: “I have projected myself into the other with such power that when I am without the other I cannot recover myself, regain myself: I am lost, forever.”

Love

“Love is double, conflictual, or ambivalent: necessary and impossible, sweet and bitter, free and chained, spiritual and sensual, enlivening and mortal; love is blind, almighty and egoistic.”

The basis of joy in love is that we feel our existence valued, justified.

And so, we tell our loved ones over and over again (and want to hear them say) that we love them (that they love us). For the possibility that the promise of love is fleeting is part of what makes it so passionate. The affective attachments formed with beloved objects fluctuate: intimacy relies heavily on the shifting registers of unspoken ambivalence.

Committed love endures despite this—it sustains desire’s optimism, the shared wish of individuals to flourish together. It is an intimate experience of the sublime; it is “to derive pleasure from seeing, touching, and feeling through all one’s senses and as closely as possible, a lovable person who loves us.”

Love is not merely the total possession of the Other, if that were so, it would be easily attained. Instead, it is the unrealizable ideal of total unity with the Other—the appropriation of the Other’s freedom that still sustains its freedom.

Reciprocity

[Intimacy] consists as much in taking as in giving, as much in requiring as in denouncing.

To love is to want to be loved; loving is the project of making oneself lovable. And yet, love requires self-sacrifice; it is a give and take of support, rendering the subject’s mutual indebtedness creativity for interdependency within intimate entanglements. Indebtedness here should not be thought of as a debt that follows a transaction but rather a debt that is the condition of the possibility of ongoing mutual support.

Reciprocity can be negative—we sometimes reciprocate the Other’s unfair behavior in an effort to attain fairness, to settle the debt. Negative or positive reciprocity is cyclical; the debt is never settled.

To be loved or desired is to become an object; even mature love is not such objectification. When we call the Other “cute” or “adorable,” we remark upon and take delight in the Other’s enduring subservience. Reciprocity can never realize constant equality but rather takes turns being up and down.

Seduction

Seduction is deception, artifice, signs, game, ritual, challenge, and charm.

“It is a power of attraction and distraction of absorption and fascination.”

Seduction is both canal and strategic. It is a game “To be seduced is to challenge the other to be seduced in turn.”

Being seduced can be flattering. Yet, simultaneously, it is impersonal—a ritual that turns the seducer into an object. Seduction can frighten, threatening the seducer’s will and self-control. Seducers, likewise, aim to turn themselves into objects of desire in order to act as desiring subjects—for to desire is to want to be desired.

Shame

“Shame is an experience of the self by the self” involves, terrifyingly, an exaggerated awareness of being looked at by others.

We feel shame when we expose something personal and expect acceptance or affirmation but are instead met with indifference or contempt. We are susceptible to shame when confessing love, sharing work, revealing secrets. Shame, then, is a threshold to begin love: intimacy and identity. It occurs when our openness is not reciprocated.

Gradually, we release shyness (the fear of being shared) in intimate relationships in which, over time, we are repeatedly accepted and affirmed.

Looking into another’s eyes, affect becomes contagious. This sharing creates intimacy and vulnerability. But shame prompts a breath to decline, a wish to no longer be vulnerable, a longing both to continue being looked at and also not to be.

“[Adam and Eve] were both naked, and they felt no shame” in Edenic intimacy; they exposed themselves and were met with unconditional acceptance.

Trust

Trust makes exchange possible in the face of uncertainty or unpredictability. It requires an extra-rational dimension that is necessarily optimistic. Trust is to be trusted— we can trust someone or something to a degree.

And to a degree in daily life we must trust strangers and acquaintances who share public spaces with us, prepare our food, operate the heavy machinery that pours through our cities and highways. Systems of interdependency require trust; we rely on one another all the time, and without trust, we would not be able to do much of anything at all. Trust allows us to feel secure with fellow humans.

We tend to believe a stranger’s words to be true until given a reason to believe otherwise. Over time, trust ideally increases with familiarity, unless familiarity provokes the Other untrustworthily.

Vulnerability

“This is what one gives above all in love the condition of possibility for a laying waste.”

To open oneself to intimacy is to open oneself to rejection or loss. To allow the Other to come closer is to permit the breaking of boundaries. Vulnerability “connotes’[s] weakness, softness, permeability, a sense of being affected, imprisoned upon, or entered and shattered.”

Vulnerability is at once the fear of the possibility of an impending affect, and an affect itself. Ulrika Dahl calls it “the affective state of openness.”

We are often inclined to focus attention on the negative rather than the positive; much more theoretical writing considers negative rather than positive affects. And so we fear love because it renders us vulnerable. Ask Kristeva, “Shaky voice, dry throat, starry eyes, flushed or clammy skin, throbbing heart. . . Would the symptoms of love be the symptoms of fear?”

Notes

1. Berlanti, Greed, 393.
2. Ibid., 118.
5. Kristeva, Sand via Eros, 139.
8. Ibid., 87.
10. Ibid., 89.
11. Ibid., 90.
12. Ibid., 91.
15. Berlanti, untitled.
16. Ibid., 109.
17. Ibid., 110.
18. Ibid., 111.
19. Ibid., 112.
20. Ibid., 113.
21. Ibid., 114.
22. Ibid., 115.
23. Ibid., 116.
24. Ibid., 117.
25. Ibid., 118.
26. Ibid., 119.
27. Ibid., 120.
28. Ibid., 121.
29. Ibid., 122.
30. Ibid., 123.
31. Ibid., 124.
32. Ibid., 125.
33. Ibid., 126.
34. Ibid., 127.
35. Ibid., 128.
36. Ibid., 129.
37. Ibid., 130.
38. Ibid., 131.
39. Ibid., 132.
40. Ibid., 133.
41. Ibid., 134.
42. Ibid., 135.
43. Ibid., 136.
44. Ibid., 137.
45. Ibid., 138.
46. Ibid., 139.
47. Ibid., 140.
An Inventory of Shimmers
Objects of Intimacy in Contemporary Art

Henriette Huldisch

With contributions by Eugenie Brinkema,
Johanna Burton, and Emily Watlington

DelMonico Books • Prestel
Munich, London, New York
MIT List Visual Arts Center _ Cambridge, Massachusetts
This catalogue is published on the occasion of the exhibition *An Inventory of Shimmers: Objects of Intimacy in Contemporary Art*, organized for the MIT List Visual Arts Center by Henriette Huldisch and on view from May 19 to July 16, 2017.

Exhibitions at the List Center are made possible with the support of Jane and Neil Pappalardo, Cynthia and John Reed, and Terry and Rick Stone. *An Inventory of Shimmers: Objects of Intimacy in Contemporary Art* is generously supported by the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts.

General operating support is provided by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT), the Council for the Arts at MIT, the Office of the Associate Provost at MIT, the MIT School of Architecture + Planning, the Massachusetts Cultural Council, and many generous individual donors. The Advisory Committee Members of the List Visual Arts Center are gratefully acknowledged.

Editor: Anne Ray
Design: Miko McGinty, Rita Jules, and Claire Bidwell
Typesetting: Tina Henderson
Printed in the United States by Puritan Capital, Hollis, New Hampshire

Published in 2017 by the MIT List Visual Arts Center and DelMonico Books • Prestel

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