

## ***Fragile***

Marta Dell'Angelo and Summer Mei Ling Lee  
Italian Cultural Institute  
February 18, 2016

You have likely seen an image of Michelangelo's *Pietà* (1499) or experienced the sculpture in situ within St. Peter's Basilica. An idealized and youthful Mary endures the weight of her son's lifeless body, her left hand lithely gesturing to the viewer, signifying Jesus's forthcoming resurrection. The intricately chiseled folds of her garment rhythmically undulate and writhe, the implication being that they, like Christ, are of the living and of the dead, their exteriority and interiority marking the known and unknown, belief and disbelief. These folds are complications, their intricacies and hidden depths both disguise Mary's underlying frame and cradle Jesus's body. We will never know these folds beyond what we see on their surface, but we can imagine their embodiment of the ecstatic abyss within.

Marta Dell'Angelo and Summer Mei Ling Lee adopt the form and the symbolic implications of the *pietà* within their collaborative and solo works. Historically, the *pietà* is most often a sculptural group consisting of the Virgin Mary cradling Jesus's dead body. Dell'Angelo and Lee translate this form into other mediums where their bodies or the bodies of people they know enact a similar composition that becomes a stand-in for the collaborative process, the opening up that must take place between two artists for generative work to occur. The supine figure, within their re-workings of the *pietà*, represents the expansion of the self, vulnerable and receptive. To paraphrase Dell'Angelo, the convex chest wall of the figure in repose in Lee's *Into the Nearness of Distance IV* implicates the domed sky surrounding it, its expansion reverberating into the universe. Within their collaborative video *Pietas*, the poetics of the body become intensified when their two bodies interact in a reimagined time-based *pietà* in which they engage in an act of letting go, of supporting the other, of necessity, and of inevitability. Bodies are never completely isolated though the interiority of the mind has us often believe otherwise.

Here again I turn to the folds of Mary's garment as symbolically comparable to the expanding chest wall in the ways they complicate understanding of interior and exterior spaces. At what point does the folded cloth end and the body begin? Within the fabric's intricately baroque surface, we can never locate where the interior and exterior are demarcated or meet. Michelangelo's depiction of this garment is mesmerizing and we can't help but to caress its surface with our eyes, moving in and out of comprehension. Within Dell'Angelo and Lee's works, we also find ourselves aware of our bodies and the act of looking, and their work too embodies this sense of imagining, of the image falling apart and coming together again. Like the intimate relationship between the fabric and the body, their work accounts for the ways that actions of the individual body and mind influence the other, especially between those in close proximity. In today's world, however, this proximity often exists through the mediation of the screen that offers a different sense of spatial and bodily understanding.

I mention the mediation of the screen in relation to proximity because it was through this medium that Dell'Angelo and Lee met and conjured ways of knowing the other. They were introduced by Marina Pugliese and Abby Chen, the curators of this exhibition, who wished to pair an artist from San Francisco with an artist from Milan to encourage cross-influence and to challenge notions of collaboration. The artists embraced the process of getting to know each other from a distanced positioning through Skype, email, and the sharing of digital files and resources. Sometimes the Skype sessions were voyeuristic and non-verbal, the computer's camera acting as a peephole to glimpse the other's daily habits within the home and studio. They gave themselves generative assignments such as sending an image to each other of the view out their individual windows every morning. Another assignment during this time of

distanced collaboration was for one person to make a video of a performed action to which the other would respond via a replicated action also captured on video. This back and forth occurred until Dell'Angelo traveled to San Francisco at which point the two began collaborating on several works that employ the use of the screen and performative actions in complex ways. Lee describes this moment of encounter after exchanging ritualized documents of knowing as their "wedding night." She is referencing the arranged marriages within her Chinese heritage in which an odd sort of intimacy is experienced by the bride and groom through ritualized preparation.

The artists will continue to work together on a series of actions throughout San Francisco in conjunction with a larger project curated by Marine Pugliese titled *Mapping the City*. Documentation of their ritualized exchanges can be found within the digital/ephemeral catalogue at [www.mappingthecity.org/fragile-blog.html](http://www.mappingthecity.org/fragile-blog.html), a site where their actions and artistic investigations in the city will also be archived.

We will never completely know the other and yet Lee and Dell'Angelo, through their artistic attempts at knowing, embrace the struggles, the joys and our constant desire to cross the distance in-between. For me, *Fragile*, the title of this exhibition, is this in-between, that space that always exists between our self and another. It is a fragile space whose borders can be pierced or penetrated and at the same time shrouded in mystery and often fortified.

Collaboration is therefore an extremely complex artistic undertaking that challenges those trying to navigate its unsteady ground and attempting to cross over or into the liminal zone between two or more bodies in space and time. This unsteadiness of positioning challenges the ego and the artist's particular inclinations, and through the back and forth dialogue that is almost always a trait of collaboration, a truly dynamic encounter can become manifest. The encounter is personified within the *pietà* that implicates the give and take in our lives and within those most challenging of moments when we have to turn control over to someone or something else. Though we might not be prepared to grasp productive meaning within these instances, the work of Dell'Angelo and Lee asks us to fathom understanding through an embodied giving over.

Within the collaborative and individual practices of these two artists, the body acts as a catalyst for understanding. For Dell'Angelo, it is the body's pulsing and positioning within interstitial spaces that reflects our being-ness and the complicated relationship between the mind and body. Inspired by a repetitive hiccup and the holding of one's breath in moments of anticipation or intense feeling, Dell'Angelo's paintings and installations isolate or sever the body from their settings, sometimes even severing parts of the body from the whole. These bodies are then massed or placed in proximity to another or others. Within *A4, 3003 Caryatid*, the materiality of the work allows the bodies, depicted through a mash-up of scanned and printed drawings, paintings, photographs, and digitally pixelated images, to fall apart and to come back together again. This happens when the viewers' movements and the subsequent displacement of air cause the hundreds of standardized A4 sized papers nailed to the wall to flutter and act as shifting pixels, each bearing bits of information that sometimes deliver understanding and at other moments deliver the falling apart of that understanding. Are these bodies caught in a moment of falling apart or are they in a moment of generation? Is there a moment when they are one and the same? And how are we as a viewing audience meant to understand the state of the individual within the mass of humanity composed of unstable parts that insist on holding themselves together even if for a fleeting moment? These massed bodies, female or dominantly female, act as support for one another, unlike the sculpted Greek caryatids, referenced in the work's title, who served the function of architectural support, symbolically holding up the structures of the state. Dell'Angelo's energetic figures have their

own architectural structure, massed in a pyramid-like form, but they burst through any sense of containment with active engagement.

The images within Lee's installation *Into the Nearness of Distance IV* are also in a constant shifting state of there-ness. Here too, the work shifts as the viewer walks around and through the installation, where evidence of a narrative is revealed only to dissolve in the next moment. However, they are even more ethereal in their materiality and embody a state of understanding just out of our reach. The ten scrim-like cyanotypes on gauze depict the two figures of the *pietà*, each printed on its own panel at an approximate life-size scale. The other eight panels contain parts of these bodies, dissected in ways that reference Dell'Angelo's severed parts within *A4, 3003 Caryatid*. Also like Dell'Angelo, the body is often placed in relation to another, but here Lee uses images of her own body to take the position of Mary and of Jesus. This split between the caretaker and the person cared for is mended as Lee embodies both positions simultaneously. At the same time, the images are printed on separate panels that maintain their individual positioning, though they are allowed through their materiality and installation to shift their relationship to the other. The figures are presented to the viewer from the back or rear view, an intriguing choice suggesting a release of the ego, a denial of certain identifiable characteristics that we associate with recognition. However, I might claim that this splitting within the self is just as imperative to the meaning of the work. It speaks to the predicament of the female within our society, who constantly battles to lay claim to her ego within her split positioning as mother, as daughter, as caretaker, as worker, and as wife or partner.

As an aside, this is a very different approach from Michelangelo's first *Pietà* where the viewing audience engages the sculpture from a strictly frontal viewpoint where they are enabled to empathize with the grieving Mary. There is no unstable understanding here. To further associate the grappling with the ego in these very different works, the story goes that Michelangelo regretted the carving of his name on the band across Mary's chest and would never sign his work again (this first of his many sculptural *pietàs* was completed when he was just 24 years of age). Lee's work challenges the ego, our constructions of self and of others. It is not that we will ever rid ourselves of the ego and in fact, the ego is an important part of how we imagine ourselves. However, we can challenge persona and the ways we are socialized to embody certain restrictive belief systems. She alludes to the fact that it is often our unwillingness to release the ego that keeps us from getting closer to understanding. The doubling of her own body suggests that path to understanding, a quest to know the unknowable even within our self. In speaking about her work, she often refers to Søren Kierkegaard's description of a resignation to faith, an understanding that we can't choose to be faithful but that through our movement towards resignation, faith will enter. As we are emptying out, we become open to an entering of faith in understanding.

This movement towards resignation and understanding brings us back to Dell'Angelo and Lee's collaborative work *Pietas* mentioned previously in this essay and also to Michelangelo's last sculptural *pietà*, now known as the *Rondanini Pietà*, that was never completed and on which he was working at his death in 1564, some 65 years after his first *pietà* group. This *pietà* resides at the Castello Sforzesco, the Sforza Castle, in Milan where Dell'Angelo and Pugliese are from. This work can be witnessed infinitely in the round, its emotional weight and confrontation with the viewer are palpable. Its felt-ness is less easy to pin down with a singular meaning in comparison with his 1499 version. It is not about a frontal, one-dimensional understanding, about idealization or refined beauty, but instead it speaks to the resignation to faith mentioned above. The surface is smooth and rough, again referencing the dynamism of life rather than speaking to a constant. The work also feels personal to an artist who is confronting his own mortality as the work is coming into being. In fact, the sculpture is coming into being just as it is falling apart. Jesus' severed arm from a previous incarnation of the

sculpture was chiseled away from the body in Michelangelo's last working days. Upon his death, this arm was left connected to Jesus' body through merely a tenuous piece of marble.

Dell'Angelo and Lee's *Pietas*, like Michelangelo's last work, offers a dynamic and imaginative understanding of this form, allowing for an opening up instead of a closing down of meaning. The artists employ the use of the screen, also referenced previously, as a means to turn meaning on its head. Within this video installation, we see a piece of white cloth suspended in the middle of a darkened room. A light is turned on, projecting the shadow of a seated Lee, at which point the shadow of Dell'Angelo approaches from a near distance to take her position in repose within Lee's arms. The duration of time and of struggle is implied as the two figures enact slight shifts in their bodies to accommodate the other. After some time, the two figures stand up, Dell'Angelo takes a seat, and Lee walks towards the light to reset the performance. At times her enlarged shadow obscures that of her collaborative partner's, and then she walks back to Dell'Angelo's waiting lap. At this point the two struggle as their bodies have been drained of physical strength through this process of straining to support the other. When the piece is finished and the bodies can no longer endure this positioning, Lee rises, walks towards the light, and extinguishes its illumination.

The viewer's understanding is disoriented throughout the process as we try to decipher the position of the two bodies in relation to our viewing selves. Are they facing towards us or facing away? As we watch this performance for the camera within the darkened space of the Opera Plaza Cinema, we start to hear hiccups overlaid with the phrase "I don't know" uttered with a sigh. The fragility and reverberation of our positioning with the other echoes:

Hiccup, sigh, space, hiccup, sigh, space in an infinite loop.

Laura Boles Faw  
2.17.2016

Laura Boles Faw is an artist, educator, and writer who is invested in the ideology of collaboration. She maintains a solo practice and since 2009 has collaborated with Cathy Fairbanks on a discursive set of projects. Boles Faw teaches in the sculpture department at the San Francisco Art Institute.