

**MOLECULES, SEX, CHILDREN:  
RSVP TO MEGAN MORMAN'S ART PARTY TODAY**  
/LUCAS CRAWFORD



Allow Megan Morman to take your photograph at your own risk. The resultant digital image will be translated and transmogrified until you are reduced – or, elevated – to your constituent molecules. Whether the shadows, lines, scars, and other traces of your face are turned into needlepoint stitches, or, as they are in *Art Party*, into fusible plastic beads, Morman's work reminds you that your self and body are bricolage. The terrifying and beautiful truth is revealed: you may conceive of yourself as a whole, but you are (in) pieces.

In many of their works, the French philosophers Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari distinguish between what they call the “molar” and the “molecular.” To summarize the notions of these complex and enigmatic thinkers, one might say that the “molar” refers to a body that is (or presents itself as) a unity, a totality, an organized entity, and a fully-conscious human subject. By contrast, the molecular refers to matter and movements that are unconscious, intensive, and involutory – beyond, that is, the control of the conscious human subject. Where the molar traffics in singularity, stability, and individualism, the molecular strives for multiplicity, fragmentation, and movement. Suffice it to say that Morman's work is a visual reminder of the many molecular possibilities that underlie any one person's attempt to fixedly cohere as a molar human individual. In breaking the body of her subjects down into beads and then putting them back together again, Morman does away with ideas of conventional bodily compartmentalization (such as ‘organs’) and instead suggests that we are all “multiplicities composed of particles that do not divide without changing in nature”. This is a hopeful proposition to me because it contains the knowledge that our multiple parts are shifting and changing right this minute, in spite of our best attempts to be fully self-aware and self-controlled.

If that is a less than inspirational idea to you, consider instead the way in which Morman's molecular view demands that you experience her work from multiple distances and angles. While all visual phenomena appear different from different perspectives, Morman's work undoes the usual relationship between proximity and perception. While we usually expect to see things 'better' as we get closer to them, *Art Party* reveals both its artifice and its gaps – literal holes in each bead! – upon closer viewing. Indeed, to best see the person represented, you must engage from a distance. Again, our ability to see pieces as whole coherent persons depends on a constitutive distance. In short: proximity undoes us.

One rather literal way in which a proximal experience of these pieces overwhelms the viewer is with its obvious and extreme labour. Because upwards of fifteen thousand beads make up each portrait, these pieces also invite the viewer to contemplate the physicality of art-making. What set of back, eyes, and fingers could complete this show? In *Art Party*, long hours of rote and individual work underlie each piece; here, the repetitious and embodied labour of craft becomes a partygoer in its own right. While at the *Art Party*, it is impossible not to think of whatever sore bodies are at home not attending the party. These beads, historically used by children, retirees, those living with mental illness, or anyone seeking to improve their fine motor skills, are known as

a therapeutic tool. In addition to showing us ourselves in pieces, therefore, Morman indirectly inserts a history of bodily and mental difficulty into a genre (portraiture) and milieu (gallery) of high art.

What we could call Morman's aesthetics of the molecular is therefore also an ethics of detail and an ethics of the body (though I am sure she would eschew "ethics" in favour of being considered Canada's bad boy of plastic). That I am pulled between describing Morman's practice as 1) a kind of ethics and 2) a kind of roguery, is instructive for the final thesis here: *Art Party* is a highly-coded story about transgressive sex acts. While I'm not one to ruin an inside joke, you deserve to know that the seemingly innocuous diamonds that bracket each portrait have a deeper meaning – indeed, a whole fistful. The diamonds are meant to represent folded handkerchiefs, which queer people have used (and sometimes still use) to indicate their sexual desires without speaking.

In Morman's queer utopia, then, playful craft does not disincite the artist from making audacious statements but in fact enables them: at *Art Party*, anonymous queer sex is imagined to be related to the playthings and the playtime of the child. Allowing desire and kink within squinting distance of a children's medium is downright naughty! To be clear, there is no suggestion of violence here; the beads themselves tell us that *Art Party*-goers inhabit a world of daring and potentially self-transformative fantasy. Echoing Deleuze and Guattari once again, Morman's project does not abide by any innocent or Oedipal myth of the family and childhood. In Morman's hands, a "child" becomes a person who could build queer bodies and desires out of bits and pieces of the tools at their disposal, which, as a grown-up child, Morman has done here.

Keen viewers will notice that Morman does not include a portrait of herself. We are left wondering, therefore, what handkerchiefs would flank Morman if she appeared here. Yet, if you look closely and ask the right questions, you may see that *Art Party* may very well be read as one chapter in Morman's (auto)biography of perversion. What Morman wants someone to tell you (recall that much of her oeuvre is about art world gossip and trysts) is that the people featured and the "hanky codes" chosen are no accident. There may be no better way of bringing *Art Party* to life than by asking the artist herself about the significance of these decisions. Being publicly quizzed about the sexual characters she has staged here (and her own conspicuous absence) might be just the kind of proximal, tenuous, and unbecoming encounter that best typifies *Art Party*. (Take note: the handkerchief for "humiliation" is light green.)

To anyone who doubts that a few thousand plastic beads can move so many mountains, I offer this piece of gothic evidence. I visited Morman at an art residency in Winnipeg while she was, uncannily, creating the portrait of me. As she began, I fell ill with food poisoning. I laid and groaned in her bed as she plucked out and placed tens of thousands of my particles, as if the work sapped my vitality. While this portrait has not kept me from aging, it has made the very concept of 'aging' mean something new. Morman shows we needn't forfeit the materials, craft, or desires of youth, if youth is understood to be fantastical, sexual, grotesque, and confusing. These are not easy ideas, but, as I said: enter into serious engagement with Morman's work at your own risk. You may fall apart. It might feel like a relief.