JULIA BRYAN-WILSON: Maybe we should begin our dialogue with a reflection on the title of this exhibition, since that will likely be where everyone else will start, too. “Trigger” has many meanings; it can be the spark that sets something off, including a revolution, a gun, a wave of nausea, etc. In the current moment it most prominently signifies psychological “trigger warnings.” We are both professors, and conversations about pedagogical safe spaces in classrooms have been polarizing in the academy; we talk together often about how to navigate these debates as we teach. It’s a polemical title. It performs its own warning (regardless of the intentions of the exhibition). At the same time, a lot of the work in the show is decidedly not explicit and might seem far from “triggering”—it is more oblique or tender or elusive.

MEL Y. CHEN: There’s a lot more to say about the concept of trigger, and we won’t spend a lot of time and space on that here. But its role as a point of departure is still interesting. If we were to imagine trigger as the extreme gesture that it has been imagined to be (which is arguably far from the whole story), then what you suggest—obliqueness, tenderness, elusiveness—ends up carving out quite a big space indeed. Similarly, its more recent exposure to regulatory forces from many sides—through the interplay between security and violence—leaves a lot of playing and performative room for the possibilities of intimacy. But do we want to take trigger as that extreme, or do we want to use these works to reimagine its meaning?

JBW: Yes, the exhibition asks us to modulate our response to the word, to rethink not only what the trigger might be, but also what effects and consequences might unfold once it is activated. In some theorizations, if properly deployed, a trigger can lead to therapeutic desensitization and the ultimate integration of a trauma. A person can also have their allergies triggered, but if the offending substances are administered in homeopathic doses, they can promote recovery. The exhibition in part proposes that nonnormative or nonbinary genders might be a kind of trigger or rupture, one that will be always contingently understood. The title wants to shock but also reframe the conversation—it reminds me of how the title of Marcia Tucker’s 1994 show “Bad Girls,” also at the New Museum, was so upsetting for many feminist critics because it seemed belittling, even as much of the artwork in it depicted a stridently rogue or irreverent feminist politics.

MYC: Perhaps the modularity of trigger depends, in some cases at least, on the quality of a suggestion? Your mention of homeopathy as having a countervailing effectivity to triggers at
large — its principled, indeed quantificatory, system of suggestion and response — makes me wonder about the aestheticization of disorder in some forms of queer world-making. By disorder, I'm thinking more of a style of departure, sometimes suggestive, sometimes actually offensive, either of which can be triggering to an observer (and let's be careful not to naively categorize that observer as queerphobic but rather to regard them as trained in a certain order of senses).

JBW: Do you mean a resistance to how the chaos of identity-formation becomes structured and disciplined into the rigid categories of the two-gender binary? Is that the queer world-making you are talking about?

MYC: Yes, perhaps—but does that also throw out the possibilities of quantification or order as a form of healing? And furthermore, is the flat (or flat-achieved) queer disorder just a false fantasy of departure, as some sociopolitical thinkers of homonationalism or pinkwashing might allege?

JBW: I think we are both suspicious of discourses of healing, and probably equally suspicious of claims that queerness—or its representation in the realm of cultural production—is by default liberatory or resistant or threatening to the social order.

MYC: Moving away from the space of political mandate back to the possible spaces of art, could we speak of a less alchemy-type still ordered order, a kind of gendered system that enunciates itself in the exhibition but gets flushed around the edges? I'm thinking of Candice Lin's series of trans-species collages, where an underlying logic of species productivity as reproductive continuity subtends the seeming gesture of departure from human-only gender orders (say, in Animal within the Animal [2015]). Human-only gender may be one viewer's expectation that Lin targets here.

JBW: Right, Lin suggests different genderings, different creatureliness. And as you noted, much of the work here traffics in suggestion as opposed to directed propaganda. The abstract paintings of Nancy Brooks Bilyeau, the engulfing textile environments of Liz Collins, the strange dissolving faces in the sculptures of Vagnal Davis: these projects hint at or imply their queerness. They "intimate," as a verb. And they are also intimate—Davis's work is partially made from familiar materials that can be purchased at the grocery store, including household stuff and items of personal adornment, like Jean Naté perfume, nail polish, hairspray. These are the special smells of bathroom-cabinet femininity, made into visceral, decidedly unpretty but definitively fascinating forms.

MYC: Yes. And we can talk about the way that Davis's inclusion of perfume does more than just give us multisensory registers but gestures out from plastic art to performance, simultaneously embodiment the spatial range of one's sensual engagement—much like a scratch-n-smell sticker does. With the inclusion of Pam in the description of the work's materials, which I delightfully take to refer to the branded nonstick cooking spray, Davis's array of ingredients both confirms and again gestures out from an easy compartmentalizing of what you call bathroom-cabinet femininity.

JBW: Well, there is nothing easy about navigating that kind of femininity! It is complicated and nuanced, no matter where the products are bought. And you are right, of course, scent is so interrelational. The performance you describe becomes a kind of choreography between the sculpture's nonstatic objecthood and the viewer's—or rather, the smeller's—body. This dynamic is also in effect in the fragrance-based art of Anicka Yi. Your writing, Mel, has helped me think about this kind of sensory engagement more richly; it can delight but it can also harm—chemical scents are in fact a serious migraine-headache trigger, to return to that word.

MYC: Yes, and yet, certain forms of righteousness aside, simply naming that perfumes can be a trigger can sometimes unleash amazing amounts of reactive hostility, as if such sensitivity must taint and emasculate us all. So it appears that others get triggered, as well.

JBW: You have this great passage in your book Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect (2012): "Standing in front of you, I inhale you. There is nothing fanciful about this." As you note, smell is not only gendered but profoundly implicated in race and class and ableism.

MYC: You are right about smell being relational; it's an effective rejoinder to rituals of independence.

JBW: I quote you back to you in part to signal how many of these theorizations about queer relationality are marked by our own interrelational dynamic, as a couple whose thinking has been
shaped by our conversations over the last seven or so years of living together. Much of the art in “Trigger” charts queer proximities or queer allegiances, or offers new forms of queer collectivity—House of Ladosha, for instance.

MYC: For all the trouble they can sometimes be, I’m thankful for the collectivities we are a part of, including our own. They enable an enriched and alteron approach to multiple presents, in part because of the magic of shared (or shared-enough) reference.

JBW: Those shared-enough references start to assemble into their own archive over time, as they build, shift, change meaning.

MYC: Archives are important; we noted this in our viewings of the two sites of this year’s documenta in Athens and Kassel, where they were richly evinced (one wonders if this became especially true for a show whose theme had to do with the detailed counter-registrations of colonial relationalities). Some of that art simply read as history and was the better for it. Our conversations over the years have accreted into a collectively navigable archive of conviction, but also of insistently ambiguities. What is gender? Sexuality? Hell if we know! That’s the glory and the pain of it. Christina Quarles’s butt piece, with its uncertain orientations, could be a conversation starter on the what-ness of bottoming.

JBW: I’m glad you brought up Quarles’s paintings and her negation of coherent bodily boundaries. Her work tells us something about the ambiguities of gender and sexuality—with all those colliding and intertwining limbs, it is hard to know what belongs to what—and also about the uncertainties of race. She has talked about being a black woman who is frequently mistaken for white, and her paintings are really interesting at the level of color. She grapples with how color works in terms of actual pigmented paints—the canvases are very thoughtful formally—but also how color is an ideological site. Her bodies float in and out of recognition and legibility.

MYC: So, while we are here then, let’s also talk about how the one who wields ambiguity matters. It’s one thing to carelessly pronounce ambiguity as a crass or naive beholder, another thing to profess being genuinely nonplussed as a beholder in the face of a terribly wanting system of racial legibility, and still another to be the very subject—may be resentful, maybe wondrous—of one’s own apparent ambiguity.

JBW: For sure. Illegibility is sometimes a celebrated or vaunted quality, but sometimes it is a brutal way of dismissing the materialities of difference.

MYC: If we sometimes navigate, study, resolve, those ambiguities in partnership, then the art of this exhibition serves, too, as a series of partners for the work and the play of reading, witnessing, asking, convincing. They add to our archive of moments of recognition and affirmation—affirmation that can serve as either tool or weapon, private or public.

JBW: We constantly negotiate the relationalities of gender, race, class, and sexuality. What I mean is that our identities are perpetually being read in very different ways by sometimes sympathetic, sometimes violent collaborators. My identities, for instance, can be transformed when we are together based on how people understand who you are and what you are, and vice versa, of course: you are also situated in relation to your proximity to me. But as you know, I am not hugely invested in the word “identity”—though I get that we are stuck with it and still need it, sometimes urgently.

MYC: Identity continues to be a tough partner—when was it ever not? My own constant relief is that it multiplies or messes up in spite of its continuing deployment for interior or biopolitical regulation.

JBW: No less than identity, we can simultaneously desire and disown the structures of gender, which are constantly enforced and also coming undone. What about the proposition that gender is a tool? What toolings do we want to evoke here?

MYC: My clear plastic Chinese-made ruler, which has a group of (racially indeterminate) friends and the words “Penny and His Partners” on it, sits on my desk in a cup with an assembly of pens and pencils. It is there to offer reprieve in a silent house, an evident logic of possibility. That’s one example of imaginative tooling. But what of the relation between ambiguity and abstraction? Perhaps you, as a textile scholar and the author of the book Fray: Art and Textile Politics (2017), might speak to the evocations and relationalities of Nancy Brooks Boly’s Glory Hole series (2008–13), for instance? Are they presentations of interactivity? I’m thinking in particular of a moment in your book where you write that textiles are “in the fray of debates about the intersections between sexuality,
class, and race; indeed, they cannot be seen apart from the frictions that continue to inhabit these intersections."

JBW: Sure. Brody's works are relational, because they evoke weaving, and weaving is fundamentally an interaction between horizontal and vertical elements. Instead of—or along with—the overdetermined modernist grid, Brody confronts the weave as an untwisting or blemished matrix, referencing lineages of women's work. So the art might be abstract, but it is also embedded in specific material histories. In its explicit surfacing of the fraught and undervalued feminist history of textiles, it is defiant. Brody was a member of the important dyke collective fierce pussy in the early 1990s; this show at the New Museum is notable for how many of its artists toggle between or blend activist and artistic modalities. The graphics of fierce pussy were hard-hitting as they confronted sexism and the HIV/AIDS crisis. They were not afraid to offend or to alarm. Maybe this is where we can talk about the use of the word "weapon" in the title of the show?

MYC: In their increasingly conventional image as presented in institutional cultures (rather than the collaboratively minded subcultures in which they first came to life), triggers animate specific kinds of categories of the asymmetrically vulnerable. They do so for better (as reminders of the constant possibilities of violence, and of vulnerability) and worse (in their frequent failure to recognize ambient forms of extant violence, such as coloniality and racism).

JBW: Exactly, these questions about asymmetry arise for me as well in thought-provoking ways. Weapon pointed toward what? Against whom? Held by what parts? Who is armed here?

MYC: But "trigger fingers" also animate a kind of eagerness and mania, features of irrepressible creativity and sensuous hole-digging that might be said to be characteristic of queers, crips, those subject to racial undermanning, immigrants, and social outlaws, which I'd like to privilege in our reading of this show. With itchy trigger fingers, trembling from metonymy to synecdoche and back again, these artists plumb the generative grammar of gender (which theorists, activists, artists, or other folks do not entirely own); making it real, as it can only be, in the insistent partnering of material realization and archive.

JBW: I love that. Let's use our trigger fingers to dig holes—for graves? for mines? for gardens?—all over this earth.