

SWEAT STUDIES
COMMISSIONED TEXT BY GEORGE VASEY
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'Sweat' brings together images of sweat forms taken by Alex Farrar and collated from Instagram, celebrity websites and photo libraries. Stock and staged imagery are displayed alongside paparazzi shots and documentary images. The suggestion of a figure builds accumulatively as we flick through the pages, our eyes grow accustomed to seeing a body that is never fully explicated. Why sweat? When looking at the images my mind races in different directions. Sweat is materially and metaphorically liquid, evaporating from the page as it does from the skin. As both form and symbol it resists easy articulation. It's not thick enough to elicit disgust and its liquidity conjures oppositional themes of labour, sex, exercise, heat, and nervousness among others.

Eminem's song Lose Yourself pops into my head: "His palms are sweaty, knees weak, arms are heavy. There's vomit on his sweater already, mom's spaghetti." I put the book down and type; the cultural significance of sweating. Not much comes up. I search; famous stories about sweat; a few things. Here is one; in 1960, just before the famous presidential debate between Richard Nixon and Robert F Kennedy, the producer Don Hewitt offered Nixon some make up. Pale and sweaty after a recent illness, Nixon refused, and — under the heat of the spotlights — looked frail. To many commentators his perspiration made him appear un-presidential next to the dapper and more robust looking Kennedy. While sweat didn't make Nixon lose the presidential campaign, it is said that it added to a sense of distrust around him.

The average body has around 2.5 million eccrine glands that secrete liquid to cool our skin during physical exertion. Our armpits and groin are home to apocrine glands, of which there are far fewer, and these produce sweat when we are nervous and anxious. The meaning of sweat depends on the situation in which you encounter it. Sweat, depicted over glistening and toned muscles, can be read as heroic and erotic. Seen soaked into clothing at an inopportune moment it suggests ill-health, apprehension and agitation. There are hundreds of websites that you can browse — if you so wish — that sweat shame celebrities with close up photographs of armpits and crotches. Any sight of misplaced sweat reminds us of the inconvenient limitations of our own body and, as such, is culturally policed.

I scroll the internet thinking about the history of painting. Nothing. How do you depict sweat? I think about sculpture and sweating. Not much. Crying seems to be a big thing. Snot, cum, shit, piss, hair, and skin. Yes and loads of it. From Piero Manzoni to Andres Serrano, Dieter Roth to Alina Szapocznikow artists have variously used and invoked messy and leaky bodies, dealing with the body and its secretions. More recently, artists such as Mika Rottenberg and Torbjørn Rødland have mined the aesthetics of slime and skin to conjure corporeal (dis)pleasures.

In language sweat is often used pejoratively. To be made to sweat is to be made to wait nervously. No sweat, an idiom that has seemingly fallen from popular usage, suggests that something is not a problem. A sweatshop is a factory where precarious labourers make garments for little pay. The etymology of the word sweat can be traced back to the old English term swat. Its meaning hasn't changed much and the word described the process of moisture exuding from the skin. As a verb, sweating was originally linked to working hard and labouring. From the 17th century there was a distinction made between "sensible" sweating and "insensible" perspiration. From the outset, sweat has often symptomised endurance.

More recently sweat has become commoditised with companies marketing expensive drinks that promise to replace 'electrolytes' lost through our sweat. Athletic wear or "athleisure" has become increasingly fashionable and breathable fabrics have been invented to reduce sweat. Sweatpants, invented in the Twenties and popularised by the film Rocky in the Seventies, now outsell jeans. While athleisure has become a staple of high street fashion, the uptake of sport and exercise is still quite low. The nascent imagery of endurance and fitness has met the era of the couch potato, where the wish for a rippling six pack is often met with the reality of the beer belly.

Farrar's work has often explored ideas of endurance and anxiety through paintings, books, sculpture and installation. Sweating and flooding — depictions of water and actual water flooded into galleries — are motifs that have appeared in his recent work. The typical elegance of Farrar's work counters the catastrophic subject, conflating a formal economy with a sense of bodily and ecological duress. There is often a curious elision in the work that furnishes it with a particular tension. There is a certain thinness to the practice that puts difficulty out of sight. I'm reminded of the stress of public speaking, nervousness hidden under deep breaths — the calmness before and after a storm. Farrar first became interested in the subject of sweat after delivering a lecture. Taking his jacket off, he noticed perfectly formed circular sweat forms where his apocrine glands had been secreting nutritionally rich, stress related sweat.

Farrar's forensic eye hones on in these moments, elevating the accidental, the residual, and the commonplace to aesthetic consideration. Individually, the images in 'Sweat' recall accidental spills and stains. I'm reminded of Marcel Duchamp's formation of the infra-mince or infra-thin as a way of articulating his interest in the barely perceptible spaces of lived life. The warmth of a seat recently vacated, the weight of a shirt before and after it has been worn. This is an art of accretions and secretions that situates its tenor in the poetics of the the everyday.

Artists have often played with the idea that the same material can produce desire and disgust depending on its context. This book expands on a series of sweat paintings by Farrar that combine the subject of endurance and the body in the form of elegant abstractions. Formally these works invoke the history of poured paintings with artists such as Lynda Benglis, Sam Gilliam, Morris Louis and Herman Nitsch utilising paint for its sublime and scatological qualities. Like sweat, paint can attend to many contradictory effects. It can be abject and pleasurable depending on its consistency, colour and location.

Unlike Benglis and Gilliam et al, Farrar's stains are marks masquerading as residues of absent bodies and, as such, more readily recall Yves Klein's Anthropometry paintings made by the imprint of naked female "paint brushes" minus Klein's outmoded misogyny. Klein's paintings were partially inspired by his interest in judo and the imprints of wrestlers left on mats after a fight. Like Duchamp and Klein, Farrar is interested in the infra-thin space between ourselves and our environment. Our bodies intentionally and unintentionally imprinting themselves on the world, reforming it accumulatively.

Primarily, 'Sweat' — alongside Farrar's sweat paintings — address the anxiety of public address. From people making their bodies beach ready in the gym to celebrities under the glare of the paparazzi many of these images are about bodies that are being looked at, and offered up for other people's consumption with various levels of consent. An artist, at some point, has to go public and open themselves up to other people's scrutiny. It's a risky business and, in my experience, one wrapped in layers of doubt and self belief. To publish is to make public, and in doing so — open yourself to the glare of other people's attention. It's a fraught situation loaded with feelings of exhilaration, desire,

shame and fear. Farrar's interest in the iconography of sweat situates the subject as a nexus for these competing and complex emotions. The book reminds us that while we occasionally sweat for pleasure, we typically sweat for others.