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## Existence Stories

Althea Keaton

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# **EXISTENCE STORIES**

A Thesis Presented

by

ALTHEA KEATON

Submitted to the Graduate School of the  
University of Massachusetts Amherst in partial fulfillment  
of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF FINE ARTS

May 2019

Department of Studio Arts



# EXISTENCE STORIES

A Thesis Presented

by

ALTHEA KEATON

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## **DEDICATION**

For Amanda, as always.

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This thesis project was not created in a vacuum. I would like to thank the faculty, staff, lab technicians, and my fellow graduate students at UMass Amherst for all of their support and guidance over the past three years. Thanks also to my students: education is not a one-way street.

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**ABSTRACT**  
**EXISTENCE STORIES**

MAY 2019

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Directed by: Professor Shona MacDonald

*Existence Stories* is an interactive activist art project that gathers personal narratives from people about the ways in which their lives have been impacted by the current political climate in the United States, particularly surrounding the 2016 Presidential election and its aftermath. The project harnesses first-person narrative and audience participation as tools for humanizing the “Other” and building connections between people through the act of sharing stories. As the project has progressed over time, it has evolved in multiple directions and come to incorporate a variety of media, primarily comics, animation, printmaking, and zines. The roles that reproduction, distribution, and communication play in all of these media are also explored within this body of work.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS.....	iv
ABSTRACT .....	v
LIST OF FIGURES.....	vii
 CHAPTER	
1. ORIGIN STORY .....	1
2. ACTIVIST ART.....	5
Defining Activist Art.....	5
Activism As Humanization of the “Other” .....	10
Printmaking, Comics, Animation and Zines as Activist Media.....	13
Printmaking .....	13
Comics.....	14
Animation.....	16
Zines.....	19
3. COMICS AS A TOOL FOR REPRESENTATION .....	22
Queer Reflections.....	22
Queer Comics .....	24
Existence Stories Comics .....	29
In Front of the Camera .....	34
4. MAKING CONTACT.....	37
Reaching Out.....	37
Original Reproductions .....	39
Direct Contact .....	43
5. THE AUDIENCE THAT TOUCHES BACK .....	45
6. CONCLUSION .....	51
BIBLIOGRAPHY .....	53
PHOTO OF THE ARTIST AT WORK .....	56

## LIST OF FIGURES

Figure	Page
Figure 1. Gallery-goers read <i>Existence Stories</i> zines .....	21
Figure 2. Detail from <i>Althea, 2017: Nightmare</i> (2017) .....	32
Figure 3. Detail from " <i>Diane</i> ," 2017: <i>Grandmother</i> (2017) .....	33
Figure 4. Detail from <i>Lijia, 2018: The Day of the Election</i> (2018) .....	33
Figure 5. Detail from <i>Anonymous, 2019: Accepting That Fear as Normal</i> (2019) .....	35
Figure 6. From left to right: <i>I Knew</i> (2018), <i>Get Out of His Country</i> (2019), <i>Cry in Secret</i> (2018), <i>You Are (Probably) Already on a List</i> (2018), <i>Being Allowed</i> (2019), installation view .....	41
Figure 7. Left: <i>Get Out of His Country</i> (2019) exterior; Right: Detail from an interior page.....	41
Figure 8. Stills from <i>Althea, 2017: The Marriage Question</i> (2017) .....	43
Figure 9. Gallery-goers interact with artist's books .....	47
Figure 10. Left: <i>Every Vote Counts</i> (2018), installation view from the exhibition <i>We Grow Accustomed to the Dark</i> ; Right: Excerpts from the interior .....	48
Figure 11. Left: <i>You Are (Probably) Already on a List</i> (2018); Right: <i>Cry in</i> <i>Secret</i> (2018) .....	49
Figure 12. Left: <i>You Are (Probably) Already on a List</i> (2018), front page detail; Right: <i>Cry in Secret</i> (2018), front page detail .....	50
Figure 13. <i>Existence Stories Vol. 2</i> (2019) and <i>In Your Hands</i> (2017), installation view .....	51

## CHAPTER 1

### ORIGIN STORY

"My brain is still spinning its wheels trying to process what's going on and it can't even get the information to my hands. [...] How do we, as artists, respond to these events in a way that is meaningful? Can art change people's hearts and minds, or can it only preach to the choir?" – excerpt from a forum post by the author, 1/28/2017

"Where do we go from here?" – Anonymous, from *Every Vote Counts*

"I believe we could paint a better world if we learned how to see it from all perspectives, as many perspectives as we possibly could. Because diversity is strength. Difference is a teacher. Fear difference, you learn nothing." - Hannah Gadsby, *Nanette*<sup>1</sup>

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The *Existence Stories* project began with the idea to collect personal narratives and turn them into documentary-style comics. The project was born out of the profound feeling of disconnect I experienced during the ramp up to the 2016 U.S. Presidential election and in its aftermath. As a queer and non-binary trans person, I felt disconnected from people in my life who I love and who voted for a man who supports and instigates policies that are hostile to LGBT+ people. As an artist, I felt disconnected from my own work.

For many years, my work was created more or less in isolation. I made drawings for and of myself with little consideration of an audience. Although I made comics that were (and are) publicly available, I made little effort to promote them and mainly used the idea of an imaginary audience to attempt to keep myself on a regular schedule with producing them.

During the election season and especially after it, it felt like the country was unraveling around me. My own life felt like trivial subject matter in this context. The way I lived and publicly projected my personal life also changed: my Facebook feed became almost exclusively news, because to post cat pictures or promotions of my commercial art or basically anything in-

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<sup>1</sup> Jon Olb and Madeleine Perry, dirs. *Nanette*. Guesswork Television, 2018. <https://www.netflix.com/title/80233611>; "Hannah Gadsby: Nanette (2018) - Full Transcript." Scraps from the Loft. July 27, 2018. Accessed April 25, 2019. <https://scrapsfromtheloft.com/2018/07/21/hannah-gadsby-nanette-transcript>

between posts about the constant horrors being perpetuated - policy changes harmful to myself and those I love, peaceful counter-protestors being publicly beaten or deliberately hit by cars, a seemingly unending litany of mass-shootings and hate crimes - felt at best in poor taste.

In the wake of the 2016 U.S. Presidential election, “resist” became something of a buzzword. It popped up not only on protest signs, but on t-shirts, bumper stickers, and all kinds of consumer goods until it began to feel less like a meaningful call to action and more like a catchphrase. Resist is an active verb. It seems to imply a constant state of action. To live in this way - constantly resisting, constantly in opposition - is exhausting. I wanted to resist. I also wanted to connect. I knew that I was not alone in my experiences or my fears, nor was I experiencing the worst of what was and is happening. I wanted to connect with others by making art that felt relevant and useful in this historical moment.

This desire for connection sparked the *Existence Stories* project. It began first with documentary-style comics transcribing recorded conversations or monologues with myself and other people in my life. As the project progressed over time, it began to evolve in multiple directions and incorporate other media. The media primarily used in the project are comics, animations, printmaking, and zines. These media are often entangled: comics published and distributed as zines, printmaking techniques used as the raw materials for animation, and so forth. Regardless of medium, personal narrative and story-sharing are at the heart of every aspect of this project. For those negatively impacted by the election and its cultural and political aftermath, simply continuing to exist is a form of resistance. In this project, I focus on these stories of existence. The stories gathered in this exhibition are not in most cases stories of people actively fighting or protesting, but rather those of people continuing to exist in a society increasingly hostile to their existence.

Every human being is a collection of stories. These stories are as mundane as the last time you stubbed your toe, as personal as your first kiss, and as heartbreaking as the loss of a loved one. Sharing these stories with each other is a large part of how humans communicate and



form connections with one another. When you ask someone, “How have you been?” or, “How was your day?” or, “What’ve you been up to lately?” you’re asking them to share one of their stories with you. Sometimes the request may be made simply out of social politeness and no serious exchange of stories is expected or desired, but if there’s a connection between people (or a desired connection between people), there tends to be a stronger desire to share stories with each other. In other words: when we care about each other, we care about each other’s stories. Connecting with another person through these stories opens the door to all kinds of possibilities.

This doesn’t happen only on an interpersonal level. It also happens in the media<sup>2</sup> we consume, much of which is story-based. On the interpersonal level, we are limited in the kinds of stories we are exposed to by the people we come into contact with and communicate with. The media we choose to consume can also limit or expand the diversity of stories we open ourselves up to. In many ways, it’s easier now than ever to consume diverse media: most types of stories one might wish to seek out are now readily available through a wide variety of media platforms and are usually just a few taps or clicks away. At the same time, it’s also still very easy to limit the kinds of stories we come into contact with. With such a wide array of news outlets, it’s easy enough to find one that fits with our particular worldview and stick with it. With so many shows to stream, if someone only wants to watch shows about people just like them they can easily do so.

When there are people whose stories we don’t hear, these people can easily become perceived as “the Other.” In *The Politics of the Headscarf in the United States*, “othering” is described as involving “the development and affirmation of social difference in relation to oneself

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<sup>2</sup> Media here is being defined broadly, including: books, movies, television, comics, music, radio, magazines, and so forth. At times in this paper I will refer specifically to news media, but when I refer to “media” in general, news media should also be considered. News media is not here confined to traditional outlets like newspapers, but also to digital news feeds viewed through social media, online articles, websites, blogs, podcasts, political radio and television programming, etc.

and treating the other as if they are intrinsically different or alien.”<sup>3</sup> This distancing of oneself from those perceived as being unlike oneself can lead not only to the placing of people into categories of “us” (those who are like me) and “them” (those who are unlike me and therefore intrinsically alien to me), but can lead into the mindset of “us vs them.”<sup>4</sup> We feel less of a connection with someone we see as Other because the “us vs them” mentality of othering positions people as being in opposition to each other. It paints difference as something negative and fearsome rather than as something positive and necessary.

Othering can be further exacerbated when we hear stories not *from* people but *about* them. Depending on the media one consumes, this can have a positive, negative, or neutral effect on how we view people who differ from ourselves. For instance, if your only exposure to Muslims is through what your carefully curated news feed tells you in order to push a change in policy, you’re likely going to have a very different perspective than if you actually know people who are Muslim or at least have positive media exposure to Muslim people. Interacting with other people - whether directly or through media - can be potentially more effective than overt propaganda for moving people to care about each other and embrace not only similarities but also differences, removing the mental divisions between “us” and “them.”

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<sup>3</sup> Bozena C. Welborne, Aubrey L. Westfall, Özge Çelik Russell, and Sarah A. Tobin. "Visibly Different." In *The Politics of the Headscarf in the United States*. (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018), 76.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., 78.

## CHAPTER 2

### ACTIVIST ART

“Poets are the unacknowledged legislators of the world” – Percy Shelley, *In Defense of Poetry*<sup>5</sup>

"I don't tell you this... so you think of me as a victim. I am not a victim. I tell you this because my story has value. My story has value. I tell you this 'cause I want you to know, I need you to know, what I know. To be rendered powerless does not destroy your humanity. Your resilience is your humanity." - Hannah Gadsby, *Nanette*<sup>6</sup>

“The day after the election I ushered at a theater show. ‘This is political art now,’ the director told us stricken techies and actors. This remains true. Now it is always political.” – Anonymous, from *Every Vote Counts*

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#### Defining Activist Art

I recently gave a presentation on this project to a class of undergraduate students. Before I started discussing the particulars of my own project, I posed a question to the group: “What do you think of when you think of ‘activist art’?”

What *do* you think of when you think of “activist art”?

Some students were very specific, citing artist collectives like the Guerrilla Girls that take their art directly to the streets to make overt political statements with a clear goal of inciting political change or, at the very least, opening the door to a conversation. Other students were more broad, stating that any art that seeks to upset the status quo is activist art.

This is a question I’ve found myself returning to over and over again throughout the development of this project: what do I consider to be “activist art,” and do I consider this project to fall into that category? The question of whether or not it’s “political art” is, to me, a non-question: I’ve always considered my art to be political to some degree, as being a queer person making art in a society where queerness is often devalued has always felt political. Even when the

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<sup>5</sup> Percy Bysshe Shelley. "A Defence of Poetry" Poetry Foundation. Accessed April 26, 2019. <https://www.poetryfoundation.org/articles/69388/a-defence-of-poetry>.

<sup>6</sup> Jon Olb and Medleine Perry, dirs.. *Nanette*; “Hannah Gadsby.” *Scraps from the Loft*.

art I was making was primarily fictional, slice-of-life comics about queer characters with no other overtly political content, the simple act of having queer characters centered in these narratives was a significant enough break from the heteronormative media that surrounded me that it felt like a political act.

But although I've always considered my art to be political, I have not generally considered the question of whether it is activist.

After the election, I wanted to make work that was not only political but explicitly activist. But I was unsure how to do so in a manner that was consistent with both who I am as an artist and who I am as a person. This uncertainty stemmed from the way I was thinking about both activism and activist art.

When I think of activism in art, two main things come to my mind: propaganda and social issue-oriented artist collectives. Propaganda is a somewhat slippery thing to define, as people tend to carry their own definitions for it in their heads. Labeling something as propaganda tends to come from the gut, a sort of "I know it when I see it" thing, but no two people draw the line between "propaganda" and "not-propaganda" in the exact same place. Merriam-Webster defines propaganda as "ideas, facts, or allegations spread deliberately to further one's cause or to damage an opposing cause."<sup>7</sup> Even in this dictionary definition, there is clearly still a lot left open for interpretation: propaganda can be to support a cause or to attack one, and it can be based in facts or in lies or simply in ideas which may be true or false or somewhere in-between. No particular medium or method of disseminating this information is specified. No particular aesthetic is specified.

Similar to propaganda, there's no one universal definition for activist art. When I think of activist art, I usually think of artist collectives centering on LGBT+ issues, feminist issues, and/or social justice issues more generally, because these are issues with which I align my own politics

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<sup>7</sup> "Propaganda." Merriam-Webster. Accessed April 25, 2019. <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/propaganda>.

and my own artwork. Guerrilla Girls were one of the first activist art organizations I became aware of<sup>8</sup>. They are therefore usually the first image that comes to mind when I think of activist art, and this image has long colored my perception of what activist art is and can be. The anonymous collective formed in New York in the late '80s to address inequities of sex and race in the art world, and they continue to be active today. Their style is very bold and direct, often combining striking images with declarative statements and statistics to draw attention to inequalities within the art world and beyond. They also frequently use parody and satire as well as graphic design to grab as much attention with their posters as possible.<sup>9</sup>

The early '90s collaborative duo DAM! (Dyke Action Machine)<sup>10</sup> use many similar tactics to achieve their goals as artist-activists: "dispelling cultural myths about lesbians, questioning their invisibility in mass media, and refuting inane questions about them by appropriating mainstream advertising strategies and then subverting them."<sup>11</sup> Like Guerrilla Girls, they use a mix of bold graphics and humor to grab the attention of their target audience; in their own words, "Humor has always been the best delivery method for aggression and transgression."<sup>12</sup> They started off by doing paste-ups on public property, but as they became more recognized and began to receive funding, they began moving through less illicit channels to publicly post their work. Both members, Carrie Moyer and Sue Schaffner, come from professional fields that aided them in creating strong graphic design and an understanding of the advertising materials they were subverting, Sue being a commercial photographer and Carrie a graphic designer.

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<sup>8</sup> In undergrad, several of my instructors were rumored to be former Guerrilla Girls, which is how I first heard of this organization. I didn't know it at the time when I took her class, but one of those instructors has spoken publicly about her former involvement with the organization

<sup>9</sup> Kristen Raizada. "An Interview with the Guerrilla Girls, Dyke Action Machine (DAM!), and the Toxic Titties." *NWSA Journal* 19, no. 1 (2007): 39.

<sup>10</sup> This group is ostensibly still active, as I have found no evidence of them having formally disbanded, but the most recent project on their website is from 2008

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 42.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*, 49.

The roots of DAM! are explicitly political. They began as the lesbian working group for Queer Nation<sup>13</sup>, making graphics for the group and then continuing to work under the name after the group itself disbanded. Similar to this is the earlier AIDS activist art collective of Gran Fury, which began as an ACT UP<sup>14</sup> committee. By 1988, Gran Fury transformed from being a committee under ACT UP to being a closed collective. Satire was not a key tactic of theirs as it was with Guerrilla Girls and DAM!, but graphic design and posterizing certainly were, and for some of their campaigns (notably *Read My Lips*) they appropriated aesthetics and visibility tactics from the world of advertising.<sup>15</sup> Gran Fury presented works within art world contexts such as gallery exhibitions and museums, but they also used posterizing and other public displays to reach out to the general public beyond the art world and specifically to communities impacted by AIDS to disseminate information about ways to curtail the transmission of HIV.<sup>16</sup>

I have a huge amount of respect for this kind of artistic activism. But I don't feel that this is a type of activism that is suited to every artist, and I don't believe that it's the only effective way to be an activist as an artist.

My first thoughts of what is activist art mirror my first thoughts of what is activism in general: boots-on-the-ground direct action, overt propaganda, organizations and collectives taking their message to the streets. This is something that I've struggled with, since I have long (well before the election) felt a need to make a political impact and take a political stance. I have participated in a number of rallies and protests, but my participation has always been limited to some degree by my struggles with anxiety. Some days (most days), I can't be in a large crowd with a lot of noise and bodies around me without having a panic attack. This has often led to me feeling inadequate as an activist. If I can't participate in every rally or protest, if I can't call my

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<sup>13</sup> An LGBT+ activist organization formed in 1990 known for being provocative and confrontational

<sup>14</sup> AIDS Coalition to Unleash Power (ACT UP) was formed in 1987 as a direct action advocacy group for people living with AIDS

<sup>15</sup> Avram Finkelstein. "Kissing Doesn't Kill." In *After Silence: A History of AIDS through Its Images* (Oakland, California: University of California Press, 2018), 114.

<sup>16</sup> Adair Rounthwaite. "Art, Affect, Crisis." In *Asking the Audience: Participatory Art in 1980s New York* (Minneapolis, MN: University of Minnesota Press, 2017), 175.

representatives because I literally can't make myself dial the phone without being seized by panic, then I feel like I'm not a "real" activist. One of the things that I've had to come to terms with is that there is a limit to the directness of my action. Although I still struggle with this, I have come to understand that there are many different, valid types of political engagement and activism and that being on the front lines of rallies and protests is not the only way to effect social change. Signing petitions, disseminating information, supporting businesses owned by marginalized peoples, and, yes, creating art and other media are among these different ways of approaching activism and political engagement.

As activism can take many forms, so too can activist art. For the purposes of this project, we will work with a broad definition of "activist art" that includes not only organized collectives, propaganda artists, and the like, but includes any art that is created with the express purpose of instigating political change. The notion of art effecting change is key to this definition, as there is much art that is political without necessarily being activist. The distinction here lies in whether the art is acknowledging political topics, or if it is actively seeking to change them. Whether activist art is successful in effecting the change it seeks to is irrelevant to the definition; it is the intention that matters.

By this metric, I do consider this project to be not only political but also activist. In sharing these stories, I am encouraging people - especially those people whose lives and stories are frequently pushed to the margins and ignored if not actively silenced - to come forward and share their truths. I am encouraging people to speak out and advocate for themselves and the value of their lives. I am also encouraging people to internalize these stories, let them become part of how they perceive the people around them, and to take this understanding of those around them with them into the voting booth.

## **Activism As Humanization of the “Other”**

I grew up in a house in the middle of the woods. New York as a whole tends to be read as very liberal - a “blue” state through and through. But, like any state, there’s more to it than simple “red” or “blue” dynamics. The town I grew up in is only an hour or so north of New York City, but it has less in common with the City than proximity would lead you to believe. It’s a rural area, houses hidden by trees rather than buildings hidden by other buildings. Its population is very low, roughly 4,500 people.<sup>17</sup> I would describe it as a “one-horse town,” but when driving through the town it would be easier to believe that there are more horses than there are people. The town is isolated (there are no sidewalks and no public transportation apart from the train station) and homogenized, white, Christian, straight, cis, and Conservative<sup>18</sup>. Being Jewish, Liberal, and (unknowingly but obviously) queer, I was “the Other” in my hometown, and this was made clear to me in no uncertain terms. Even when I was not actively being ostracized or bullied, I was subject to frequent microaggressions around my Jewish culture, my inadequate performances of femininity, and my general failure to adhere to the prevailing culture of heteronormativity.

The racial makeup of my hometown is overwhelmingly white. I didn’t have a black classmate until 8th grade. A couple of the surrounding towns and small cities were and are more racially diverse, but in a town with no public transportation or sidewalks they might as well have been on the other end of the world. The bulk of my exposure to people of color and other marginalized peoples during my childhood and early adolescence, therefore, came not through direct interaction with people but through the media I consumed. Only through recordings of TV programs like Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood and Sesame Street were POC my neighbors.

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<sup>17</sup> "Putnam, Hudson Valley, Towns, Demographics, New York, NY." Hudson River Valley New York Directory. Accessed April 25, 2019. <http://www.hudson-river-valley.com/php/Demographics/Demographics.php?area=10524>.

<sup>18</sup> I don’t have statistics for all of the mentioned categories but according to the 2010 census, out of a population of 4,421 people, 4,100 identified themselves as white. Out of 1,536 households, 1,001 were reported as “husband-wife family” households.



I consider shows like these to be activist art. Theirs is a gentler, more subtle activism. Rather than declaring a viewpoint loudly and putting it right in people's faces, these shows used narrative to persuade. They brought people into your living room who you might otherwise never have any exposure to, and they made you care about them. In 1968, not long after the assassination of Martin Luther King Jr. and the subsequent rioting, Mister Rogers introduced Officer Clemmons as a regular character in his neighborhood, the image of a peaceful black policeman acting as a counterpoint to the violent images of black people and police being projected through the news media.<sup>19</sup> Although there were limits to the amount of racial integration on the show<sup>20</sup>, by having characters like Officer Clemmons and, in the 1970s, Mayor Maggie as recurring characters in his neighborhood and by casting them as friends, role models, and peaceful authority figures, Rogers used children's entertainment to subversively paint a media portrayal of people of color that was very different from what white TV viewers - child and adult alike - were otherwise being exposed to. He recast the Other as Neighbor. And he did this not by protesting or putting up posters, but through using narrative to show the humanity of the otherwise alienated Other.

Unlike these television shows, the stories gathered in this project are not fictional. They are first-person narratives that speak of authentic personal experiences. This use of the personal narrative operates differently from more overt activism. In *Art as a Political Witness*, a distinction is drawn between (among other types of witness) a "political witness" and a "moral witness." The "moral witness" is one who directly experiences actual suffering, but the definition can also be extended to include observers if the observer is one who is personally at risk, whether by being of the category of people upon whom the suffering is inflicted and/or by taking on the risk of attempting to document the suffering. The "political witness" focuses more on uncovering the factual truth and speaks from a third-person perspective, whereas the "moral witness" focuses on

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<sup>19</sup> Michael G Long, *Peaceful Neighbor: Discovering the Countercultural Mister Rogers* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2015), 85.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., 90. He reputedly rejected Clemmons' suggestion to depict an interracial couple

describing their experiences in the first-person. It's the distinction between "telling it like it is" and "telling it like it feels."<sup>21</sup> In gathering first-person narratives rather than concrete statistical data, my focus is less on "how it is" in this political moment and more on "how it feels" to exist within it.

Narrative activism operates more slowly but not less powerfully than the immediacy of eye-catching, graphic, overt propaganda. Rather than delivering all of the needed information in a swift, direct punch, narrative art requires the audience to sit with it and pay attention in order to absorb its message. For the viewer who sits with the work, the message delivered can be potent and long-lingering. In the words of Fred Rogers, "Only people who take the time to see our work can begin to understand the depth of it."<sup>22</sup>

With the *Existence Stories* project, it is this form of activism - the humanization of the Other through narrative - with which I am engaging. Within it, I share my own first-person testimony alongside those of other Others. Together, these narratives begin to form a conversation about what it feels like to be Other in this moment. They open up opportunities for points of connection between people.<sup>23</sup> These stories are not confined exclusively to the gallery; the media I use are able to branch out into the wider world through a variety of channels, from comic book shops to social media and beyond. Like the humanizing stories I absorbed in my youth through children's television, these stories can reach places the people sharing them may not be able to.

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<sup>21</sup> Kia Lindroos and Frank Möller. "Witnessing in Contemporary Art and Politics." In *Art as a Political Witness* (Opladen, Germany: Barbara Budrich Publishers, 2017), 36-38.

<sup>22</sup> Michael G Long. *Peaceful Neighbor*, xiii.

<sup>23</sup> When I was gallery-sitting this exhibition, a gallery-goer asked me about my comic *Althea, 2017: Nightmare*, in which I describe a post-election nightmare that was in part fueled by my having grown up in proximity to an aging nuclear facility. She connected to the story intimately because, although she grew up in a different town and otherwise has very different life experiences from my own, she also had grown up within the range of this same facility and felt the same fears

## Printmaking, Comics, Animation, and Zines as Activist Media

### **Printmaking**

All of the media used in this exhibition have been used historically for activist, political, and/or propagandistic purposes. Of these media, printmaking has the longest history. As a medium comprised of the earliest forms of reproduction, printmaking techniques have been used to replicate and disseminate images and ideas since as early as 100 A.D. in China and the 1400s throughout Europe. Since a large part of activism involves the dissemination of information or of a viewpoint, many political and activist artists have been drawn to printmaking throughout its history.

Francisco Goya is cited by Deborah Caplow as a starting point for “socially conscious art [that] actively protests against war, injustice, and corruption,” going on to declare him “the first to depict war without glory or purpose, instead focusing on the terror experienced by the civilian population.”<sup>24</sup> Witnessing plays a prominent role in Goya’s body of work as a printmaker. Spectators, voyeurs, and observers are featured in a number of his prints, especially in his 1797-98 series *Caprichos*. In his series *Disasters of War* (roughly from 1810-1820 and published posthumously in 1863), both the artist himself and the viewer are often implicated as playing the role of observer to the horrors being depicted. This is frequently done through the captions which run under his prints, such phrases as “I saw it,” or “One cannot look,” or “He deserved it.”<sup>25</sup> In Caplow’s words, “Here Goya offers first-hand testimony and, by extension, involves the viewer as a fellow witness in acts of atrocity.”<sup>26</sup>

Many years later, during the time of World War I and the struggles that followed, printmaking was a vital form of expression and political communication in Europe. Otto Dix

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<sup>24</sup> Deborah Caplow. "Political Art and Printmaking: A Brief and Partial History." In *Paper Politics: Socially Engaged Printmaking Today* (Oakland, CA: PM Press, 2009), 13.

<sup>25</sup> Reva Wolf. "Onlooker, Witness and Judge in Goya's Disasters of War" In *Fatal Consequences: Callot, Goya, and the Horrors of War* (Hanover, N.H.: Dartmouth College, 1990), 40-43.

<sup>26</sup> Deborah Caplow. "Political Art," 13.

etched the horrors he witnessed first-hand in WWI. George Grosz used satire, not unlike Goya, to condemn social corruption and injustices. Kathe Kollwitz depicted human suffering in lithographs and woodcuts with moving eloquence. All three of these artists, according to Caplow, were “threatened by the Nazis and prevented from working openly in Germany.”<sup>27</sup>

In the 1920s and 30s, Mexican artist Leopoldo Mendez was inspired by the political prints of Goya, Kollwitz, Grosz, and others, including fellow Mexican artist and highly influential political printmaker Jose Guadalupe Posada<sup>28</sup>. In the 1930s, Mendez and others founded two associations of revolutionary artists: Liga de Artistas y Escritores Revolucionarios (LEAR, League of Revolutionary Artists and Writers) and Taller de Grafica Popular (TGP, Popular Graphic Arts Workshop).<sup>29</sup>

After WWII and the start of the Cold War, political printmaking declined in popularity, but it never completely died out. Activist artists continued making prints and posters in the U.S. during the Civil Rights Movement and to protest the Vietnam War. Even as technologies for reproducing artwork have advanced, there are still activist artists working today with printmaking techniques, such as the artists’ cooperative JustSeeds. This currently active organization describes itself as “a decentralized network of 30 artists committed to social, environmental, and political engagement.”<sup>30</sup>

### Comics

In the early years (1930s-40s) of the U.S. comic book industry, many creators were Jewish immigrants. Well prior to the U.S. entering the fray of WWII, many comics were already acting as interventionist propaganda, aiming to sway the tide of public opinion toward intervention rather than isolation. That Jewish creators were inclined to have a personal stake in whether the U.S. took action against a genocide that targeted Jews disproportionately (especially

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid., 15

<sup>28</sup> Deborah Caplow. *Leopoldo Méndez: Revolutionary Art and the Mexican Print* (Austin, TX: University of Texas Press, 2008), 69.

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., 1.

<sup>30</sup> "About." Justseeds. Accessed April 25, 2019. <https://justseeds.org/about>.

since many of these creators may well have still had family in Europe) is likely why so many comics took a firm interventionist stance before the country itself did. As early as 1937, allegories to Nazism were cropping up in comics as cautionary tales.<sup>31</sup> After the inception of superheroes in 1938 with the introduction of Superman<sup>32</sup>, he and others were depicted fighting Nazis and threatening to “land a strictly non-Aryan sock on [Hitler’s] jaw.”<sup>33</sup> Some heroes were created specifically as pro-American and anti-Nazi propaganda, most famously Captain America, who punched out Hitler on the cover of his very first comic book nearly a year before the U.S. entered the fray. Once the U.S. entered the war, many comics also promoted home-front activities such as buying war bonds and planting victory gardens to support the war effort, activities which average people living in the U.S. could do as easily as superheroes.<sup>34</sup> After being reluctantly drafted into the U.S. military, Will Eisner ended up making comics to train soldiers in preventive maintenance in a way that was more accessible and easily understood than text alone. He continued these comics even beyond the war.<sup>35</sup>

Not all wartime comics were pro-war. In the early 1950s (around the time of the Korean War), Harvey Kurtzman oversaw two lines of war comics for EC<sup>36</sup>: *Two-Fisted Tales* and *Frontline Combat*. Unlike most comics dealing with matters of war, Kurtzman’s series’ overall depicted war in a deliberately unglamorous light, making it appear not exciting, heroic, and fun as many earlier war comics had done but rather focusing on the horror of it.<sup>37</sup> In the 1960s, many

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<sup>31</sup> Trischa Goodnow and James J. Kimble. "Introduction." In *The 10 Cent War: Comic Books, Propaganda, and World War II* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2016), 10.

<sup>32</sup> Created by Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster, both sons of Jewish immigrants

<sup>33</sup> Fredrik Strömberg. *Comic Art Propaganda: A Graphic History* (Lewes, UK: Ilex, 2010), 40-41.

<sup>34</sup> David E. Wilt. "'Everyone Can Help, Young or Old, Large or Small': Novelty Press Mobilizes Its Readers." In *The 10 Cent War: Comic Books, Propaganda, and World War II* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2016), 186.

<sup>35</sup> Cat Yronwode and Will Eisner. "Will Eisner Interview." In *Will Eisner: Conversations* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2011), 58-59.

<sup>36</sup> Entertaining Comics, originally Educational Comics

<sup>37</sup> David Hajdu. *The Ten-cent Plague: The Great Comic-book Scare and How It Changed America* (New York, NY: Picador/Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2009), 197.

underground comix<sup>38</sup> creators made their own anti-war comix. In the lawless realm of the '60s comix underground, many formerly taboo subjects became subject matter for comix creators, allowing for creators to make political stands on everything from drugs to the environment to governmental corruption to abortion rights and beyond.

In the years that followed, comics creators continued to push at boundaries and expand definitions of what comics could be and what territory they could cover. From 1980 to 1991, Art Spiegelman combined biography, autobiography, historical narrative, and a brutally effective subversion of the “funny animal” comics genre to create the award-winning *Maus*. From the late 1980s to the early 2000s, Joe Sacco created comics that used techniques of New Journalism - immersing himself within the situations and political environments that were his subject matter and depicting them from a personal perspective - in books like *Yahoo*, *Palestine*, and *Safe Area Gorazde*. Today, in addition to overtly political works like *March* (John Lewis, Andrew Aydin, and Nate Powell), *Love is Love* (various creators, edited by Marc Andreyko), and *Kindred* (adapted by Damian Duffy and John Jennings from Octavia Butler’s novel), there are also many more subversively political comics series such as *Lumberjanes* (Shannon Watters, Grace Ellis, Brooklyn A. Allen and Noelle Stevenson) and *Steven Universe* (based on the animated series created by Rebecca Sugar, various writers and artists over the years) that use entertaining narratives, engaging characters, and humor to normalize and humanize queer and trans identities and interracial friendships and relationships for a young adult audience.

### **Animation**

Not unlike the comics industry around the time of WWII, the mainstream animation industry in the U.S. participated in the war effort. Unlike the comics industry, much of the work done for the war effort was government-commissioned. Animated training films were created in large quantities by a number of studios, primarily Disney, Warner Bros., and MGM, as well as

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<sup>38</sup> “Comix” rather than “comics” refers to a specific movement within comics history, which will be explained in more detail later in this paper

independent contractors.<sup>39</sup> In addition to these animations serving as practical training tools, many animated shorts were created for the general public that acted as both entertainment and propaganda. Some of these films promoted home-front activities - war bonds and Victory Gardens - but a major theme was that of satirizing the enemy.<sup>40</sup>

Not all political animations centered on wartime propaganda, even around this time period. Norman McLaren left Britain shortly before the start of WWII and had no interest in creating war-propaganda. Although in his early years McLaren had made political and propagandistic work in animation – strongly anti-war and anti-Capitalist and had been for some time a member of the Scottish Communist Party – when he worked for the National Film Board of Canada (NFB) his animations focused less on social or political commentary and more on experimentation and fantasy. As quoted in a 1947 interview, McLaren described himself as having participated in a radical party in Scotland and having seen a lot wrong in the world and wanting to do something about it, but “as time passed, my passion for creative work grew to a point where it usurped my active political interests. Now, I feel I can be of more value making an artistic rather than a political contribution to society.”<sup>41</sup> It wasn’t until 1949 when he took leave from NFB to do work for United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) in China that a political and social consciousness returned to his creative work. In China, he created propaganda of a very different sort than that of Disney and his peers during wartime: he created educational propaganda in the form of the “Healthy Village Project.” The Project utilized animation and other means to “educate poor people in remote and difficult areas,”<sup>42</sup> focusing on using visuals to educate people who cannot read or write on matters of health, including vaccination and hygiene. The Project also included teaching Chinese artists

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<sup>39</sup> Charles Solomon. "The Disney Studio At War." 1998. In *Animation: Art & Industry* (New Barnet, UK: John Libbey, 2009), 146.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., 149.

<sup>41</sup> Terence Dobson. "Norman McLaren: His UNESCO Work in Asia." 2000. In *Animation: Art & Industry* (New Barnet, UK: John Libbey, 2009), 28.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid., 33.

techniques for making these kinds of audio-visual aids so that they could continue the work on their own.

McLaren was horrified by much of what he saw in China, stating in his diary that, “the landowners take practically all the crops from the farmers, and generally exploit the farmers shockingly by all sorts of practices. [...] The whole situation is filthy and degenerate and evil; and there is no wonder the communists are eagerly welcomed with their program of land redistribution and [abolition] of usury.”<sup>43</sup> The experience re-aroused his sympathies for Communism, especially as he witnessed the change in China under Communist rule by the end of his time there and felt there was a tremendous improvement for the country-dwellers under the new regime. McLaren did not immediately launch back into socially conscious animation upon his return to the West, but in 1952 he created the pixilated animation *Neighbours* as a strong statement against militarism and war.<sup>44</sup>

Animated series on television have been used over the years not only for entertainment but, as with comics, to use their entertaining stories to educate people (usually targeting a young audience but frequently reaching a wide range of age groups) on a variety of topics from how to say words in Spanish to how to resolve conflicts with friends to how the human digestive system works. A number of animated series have operated as overt political propaganda as well as entertainment, notably shows like *G.I. Joe: A Real American Hero* and *Captain Planet and the Planeteers*. Other shows, such as *Steven Universe*, operate more subversively. On the surface *Steven Universe* appears to be a relatively normal show (by the standards of fantastical cartoons for children), centering on a young boy named Steven and his super-powered alien caretakers as they protect the world from more hostile aliens. Just beneath that surface, the show is a deep and nuanced exploration of gender roles, gender identity, same-sex love, consent, and bodily

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<sup>43</sup> Ibid.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid., 35.



transformation. The show's creator, Rebecca Sugar, has spoken about the importance of representing these themes in a G-rated children's cartoon:

We need to let children know that they belong in this world. You can't wait to tell them that until after they grow up or the damage will be done. You have to tell them while they're still children that they deserve love and that they deserve support and that people will be excited to hear their story. When you don't show any children stories about LGBTQIA characters and then they grow up, they're not going to tell their own stories because they're gonna think that they're inappropriate, and they're going to have a very good reason to think that because they've been told that through their entire childhood.<sup>45</sup>

## **Zines**

Zines, from their very beginnings, have had a spirit of taking matters - overtly political or otherwise - into one's own hands. As early as the early 1800s, amateur writers and publishers were already operating in response to the dawning of mass-circulation printed media, forming Amateur Press Associations and reasserting the importance of their own voices that had been displaced by mass culture.<sup>46</sup> The earliest zines to go by that name were the science-fiction fanzines that arose in the 1930s. This may by first appearances have little to do with activism or revolutionary politics, but these themes are by no means absent from science-fiction, which is often about the imagining of new worlds and new systems of living and can often contain critiques of current politics and cultures. In some cases, the connections were more blatant than that; according to Stephen Duncombe's *Notes From Underground*, "[...] the Futurians, an early [1938] fan club which spawned many famous SF authors and editors, shared its first meeting space – and a number of its members – with the Flatbush Young Communist League, publishing its first fanzine on the mimeograph machine used to put out the Young Communist *Flatbush YC Yell*."<sup>47</sup>

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<sup>45</sup> Nick Romano. "'Steven Universe' Creator Is Doing More for LGBTQ Visibility than You Might Know." EW.com. August 13, 2018. Accessed April 25, 2019. <https://ew.com/tv/2018/08/13/steven-universe-rebecca-sugar-lgbtq-cartoons>.

<sup>46</sup> Stephen Duncombe. *Notes from Underground* (Portland, OR: Microcosm Publishing, 2017), 49.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid., 177.

Speaking of zines as they evolved into the zine culture of the 1990s, Duncombe makes a case for the revolutionary attitude of zines: “Espousing anarchism, denouncing capitalism, exhorting others to do-it-yourself, spreading the ideal of an authentic life, the vast majority of zines are critical of mainstream society and mass culture, and at least hint that there might be a different way.”<sup>48</sup> He describes zines as creating a culture that provides an alternative vision of society, though not necessarily creating political and social change themselves.

This alternative vision of society is especially evident in the riot grrrl zine culture of the 1990s. Through their zines, many riot grrrls shared narratives about women that weren’t getting shared in mainstream media or educational systems. Some zines had profiles on female historical figures that the zinesters<sup>49</sup> felt had been left out of the male-centric historical canon to create feminist histories. Others highlighted businesses and companies run by women. They essentially created their own information network to fill the gaps they perceived in the discourses around them.<sup>50</sup> Riot grrrl zines also spoke about rape and defense in a way that was not often discussed in the mainstream public discourse. Zines were used to preserve evidence, to disseminate statistics, and to give warning signs of sexual trauma.<sup>51</sup> They were also used to talk about self-defense, most famously with the self-defense zine: *FREE TO FIGHT! an interactive self-defense project*. *FREE TO FIGHT!* gave readers practical self-defense moves, tips on how to condition for physical strength, and advice for safety planning. The project argued that self-defense for women was revolutionary.<sup>52</sup>

Although the digital age has had an impact on zine culture, as it has had on many forms of print communication, there are still dedicated zinesters and zine communities as well as a number of zine libraries committed to preserving and promoting this artform. Zine culture still

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<sup>48</sup> Ibid., 175.

<sup>49</sup> “Zinester” is the term usually used to refer to a zine creator

<sup>50</sup> Rebekah J. Buchanan. *Writing a Riot: Riot Grrrl Zines and Feminist Rhetorics* (New York, NY: Peter Lang, 2018), 83.

<sup>51</sup> Ibid., 124.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 125.

fosters a spirit of both D.I.Y. and community-building. Zine fests continue to be organized all over the country (and all over the world), including a number of feminist zine fests, queer zine fests, and POC zine fests.



**Figure 1.** Gallery-goers read *Existence Stories* zines

## CHAPTER 3

### COMICS AS A TOOL FOR REPRESENTATION

“I know from experience the surprised thrill of catching a reflection of yourself in the cultural mirror - even if it’s just a cartoon - when you’re used to vampiric invisibility.” - Alison Bechdel, *The Indelible Alison Bechdel*<sup>53</sup>

“I cry in [secret] sitting next to my little brother in the back of a car as my grandmother & father talk about how all gays should be hung... a week after telling my dad I was a lesbian and him saying he accepted me 100%” – Anonymous, from *Cry in Secret*

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#### Queer Reflections

As I grew up and began to understand myself as something other than straight<sup>54</sup> (“queer” wasn’t even part of my vocabulary yet, much less part of my identity), I started looking for reflections of myself. This was an overwhelmingly sad and frustrating journey. I went through cycles: find a story with lesbian characters, go into a spiral of grief because the stories are so horribly sad, swear off reading lesbian stories, long to see myself reflected, find a story with lesbian characters, rinse, and repeat.

One of the reasons why I first started making stories with lesbian characters is because I had such a hard time finding any stories with lesbians in them that weren’t tragedies. I was hungry for stories that would help me understand myself. Being a child of librarians and film buffs was helpful, because I had resources to help me access whatever books or movies or other media I wanted to find. But even so, it felt like my options were very limited. Being a fairly

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<sup>53</sup> Alison Bechdel. *The Indelible Alison Bechdel: Confessions, Comix, & Miscellaneous Dykes to Watch Out For* (Ithaca, NY: Firebrand, 1998), 209.

<sup>54</sup> This would be in my mid-to-late teens

pretentious teenager, I subjected myself to “classics” like *The Well of Loneliness*,<sup>55</sup> seeking out early representations of lesbianism in books and film to find them few and far between and generally incredibly morose. As protagonists (in those rare cases where we existed as protagonists), betrayal and desolation seemed inevitable. And in most cases, both in books and in film, we were more often flickers than protagonists - either brief punchlines or references so heavily coded as to be all but invisible to anyone not looking for them. Of early representations of homosexuality in film, Vito Russo says, “As expressed onscreen, America was a dream that had no room for the existence of homosexuals. Laws were made against depicting such things onscreen. And when the fact of our existence became unavoidable, we were reflected, onscreen and off, as dirty secrets.”<sup>56</sup>

More contemporary films and books of the time were little better. Representations were more plentiful but no more palatable. In the 1990s of my childhood and adolescence, most media representations of LGBT+ people painted us either as victims or as perpetrators. Between the violent representations, the utterly bleak representations, and the blink-and-you’ll-miss-them representations, I struggled to find stories that I could identify with in a meaningful way.

And if I couldn’t find stories that reflected myself, then I would have to make them. Not just for myself. Not just for other queer people to hopefully find reflections of themselves. But also for people who aren’t queer, people who have maybe never even knowingly met a queer person before. Because if these grim reflections of lesbians were the only stories that were out there, then it was no wonder that so many straight people had negative feelings about lesbians.

When I came out to my mother (first as bi, then as gay, then as queer), I had little fear that I would be rejected. She’s had many gay and bi friends in her life, and she and my father both have always been very open about their beliefs in equality for all people, regardless of

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<sup>55</sup> If you haven’t read it, it’s all in the name: if you’re a lesbian, you’re going to live alone and die alone. And this from a lesbian author, Radclyffe Hall.

<sup>56</sup> Vito Russo. *The Celluloid Closet: Homosexuality in the Movies* (New York, NY: Harper & Row, 1985), xii.

orientation. They have both always been very supportive of my obvious gender differences throughout my childhood and raised my brother and me with as little enforcement of traditional gender roles as possible. And although I was certainly not rejected, I was still surprised. She never tried to dissuade me or tell me that it was “just a phase” or any of that. But she did tell me once that she was sorry because my life was going to be so much more difficult.

### Queer Comics

Some of the first media that I found that depicted queerness as something other than tragic was comics. I don’t remember exactly when or how I first came upon Alison Bechdel’s *Dykes to Watch Out For*<sup>57</sup>, but I do remember that it was world-changing. Here was a community of lesbians and other LGBT+ people, and they were *thriving*. This wasn’t some sad-sack story about a tragic lesbian who lives alone and dies alone. This was a living, ongoing story about a community full of people living and loving queerly. It was funny, it was political, it was sad, and it was human. It was diverse. Here, there were queer people of color. Queer disabled people. Queer trans people. Closeted queer people, out and proud queer people. Radicals and homemakers (and sometimes both at the same time). Sometimes (often) their love lives weren’t ideal, but they weren’t tragic. Their queerness was never the problem in their lives. They had lives that didn’t revolve solely around their queerness, but wherein their queerness was still a major component.

I had *never* seen anything like this before. Not in books or movies, not in other comics, and definitely not in the real world. Her work gave me a window into a world I wanted for myself, and it also gave me insight into the worlds I wanted to create not only as a person but as an artist.

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<sup>57</sup> Oddly enough, I have it in my head that I found them in a Barnes and Noble when I was in my late teens or possibly early twenties. This may be a completely false recollection.

I was hooked. I sought out and found other queer comics by other queer creators, from Howard Cruse's soft and cuddly (and surprisingly political) *Wendel* to Diane DiMassa's extremely aggressive and over-the-top *Hothead Paisan: Homicidal Lesbian Terrorist* to collections of short comics that each gave a glimpse into yet another slice of queer life. The creators and narratives that most hooked me were Cruse's *Wendel* and Bechdel's *DTWOF*. Both series had casts of recurring characters to become attached to and had ongoing storylines to follow. Both were very politically aware and outspoken about gay rights and queer politics, but both also focused on the more mundane and intimate aspects of queer life and queer communities as well. Both had diverse casts of characters and showed many different ways for queer people to be, well, *people*.

Comics have been used as a means of sharing queer stories since at least the 1970s. Had there not been a tremendous shift in the comic book industry in the '50s and '60s, this would have been inconceivable. In the 1960s, there was a rebellion in the world of comics in the form of the underground comix movement. Prior to this time, there was little to no emphasis on the creators of comics as individuals, many of whom went under-credited (or completely uncredited) and under-compensated for their labor, and for a creator to retain the rights to characters they created was all but unheard of<sup>58</sup>. The industry was seen by most – with some exceptions - as a business rather than as an art form, with most comics being created in studios where comics might pass through many hands throughout their creation<sup>59</sup>. In the '60s, creator identity became truly important for the first time, as people began making comics not to make a living (however meager) but out of passion for the medium itself. Comix weren't made in a workshop by many hands, and they didn't have a "house style." They were made by individual creators to express themselves as individuals. For the first time, autobiographical content emerged in comics, as well as experimental art and all manner of taboo-smashing.

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<sup>58</sup> Dez Skinn and Denis Kitchen. *Comix: The Underground Revolution* (Brighton, UK: Quality Communications, 2004), 8-9.

<sup>59</sup> David Hajdu. *The Ten-cent Plague*, 26.

The underground comix of the 1960s were a reaction against the repressive Comics Code Authority instituted in 1954 by the Comics Magazine Association of America, which prevented any comics not meeting the standards of this Code from being sold on newsstands, the traditional (and, at the time, essentially the only) means of distribution<sup>60</sup>. These comix, obviously, could not obtain the approval of the Code and therefore could not be sold on newsstands, so alternative means of distribution were developed to market these books. Comix were reputedly sold out of car trunks and baby carriages on street corners. They were sold in head shops alongside drug paraphernalia.<sup>61</sup> After the 1973 Supreme Court decision on the case *Miller v California* resulted in a crackdown on “obscenity,” many head shops were raided by police for carrying comix deemed to be obscene.<sup>62</sup> In the late 1960s, comic book shops emerged as their own unique marketplace, and by the mid-1970s the direct market system was established, making that marketplace more competitive with newsstands.<sup>63</sup>

Though the CCA was created to avoid government censorship in the wake of the disastrous U.S. Senate Subcommittee on Juvenile Delinquency hearings on the perceived influence of comic books, it was extremely restrictive. Particularly relevant in the context of gay comix and comics made by gay creators, there were several restrictions in the Comics Code that, though they do not refer to homosexuality as such, implicitly indicate that portrayals of homosexuality are not permitted: “*Illicit sex relations* are neither to be hinted at nor portrayed. Violent love scenes as well as *sexual abnormalities* are unacceptable.” “*Sex perversion* or *any inference to same* is strictly forbidden.” [emphasis added]<sup>64</sup> Considering the prevailing sentiments in the 1950s, these restrictions can be read specifically as condemning, among other

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid., 310.

<sup>61</sup> Dez Skinn and Denis Kitchen. *Comix*, 132.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid., 145.

<sup>63</sup> Charles Hatfield. *Alternative Comics: An Emerging Literature* (Jackson, MS: University Press of Mississippi, 2006), 21-22.

<sup>64</sup> Comics Code Authority (CCA). “Comic Books and Juvenile Delinquency.” *1954 Senate Interim Report - Comic Books and Juvenile Delinquency*, Sec. 36. Accessed April 25, 2019. <http://www.thecomicbooks.com/1955senateinterim.html>.



things, gay content of any kind. Underground comix creators reveled in transgressing many of the social mores laid out in the Code, including these restrictions on gay content, but even those creators who dabbled in gay or queer content were usually straight and approached the subject matter from a different perspective than most gay creators would later do.

In 1979, *Gay Comix* was founded to collect and share the comix of gay and lesbian creators. It was conceived of by Denis Kitchen of Kitchen Sink Press, but he tapped Howard Cruse to be its founding editor. Though Cruse had already created some gay content in his comix, he still did not consider himself to be fully out as a gay artist, as he could still be perceived as a straight artist who sympathized with the Gay Liberation Movement.<sup>65</sup> When Cruse accepted the position as editor he sent out a letter to Kitchen's mailing list of artists - gay, straight, and undisclosed - seeking contributions for the first issue, which was to be published in 1980. In this letter, Cruse for the first time stated unequivocally that he is a gay artist:

Many gay artists have never included the gay facets of their lifestyle in their published work, whether from fear of ostracism on a personal level, possible negative reaction from fans, or the chance that homophobia among editors or publishers could result in long-term career damage. As a gay artist myself, I have shared those fears...<sup>66</sup>

Pre-dated by Ful-horne Productions' (Larry Fuller and Ray Horne) *Gay Heartthrobs* (also known as *Gay Heart Throbs*) in 1976, *Gay Comix* was not the first anthology of gay comix to be produced in the standard comic book format and sold in comic book stores. It is, however, generally known as the first series to focus less on the sex lives of gay people - though such stories were certainly included - and more on the overall lives of gay people.<sup>67</sup> Coinciding with the outbreak of the AIDS epidemic in the US, *Gay Comix* also at times served as a creative outlet for dealing with the devastating impact this had on gay communities. In addition to *Gay*

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<sup>65</sup> Howard Cruse. *From Headrack to Claude: Collected Gay Comix* (North Adams, MA: Nifty Kitsch Press, 2009), 28.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.

<sup>67</sup> Justin Hall, ed. *No Straight Lines Four Decades of Queer Comics* (Seattle, WA: Fantagraphics Books, 2013), "Comics Come Out."

*Heartthrobs*, *Gay Comix* was also pre-dated by Mary Wings' *Come Out Comix* in 1974 and *Dyke Shorts* in 1978, which Cruse has cited as an influence. Of the success of the long-running *Gay Comix*, Cruse has said, "At that point, gay people were so starved to see themselves treated with dignity as human beings by the mainstream media, and here they were visible outside of what was strictly the gay media. There had been some earlier gay comic strips in gay periodicals, but none of them were very ambitious by today's standards."<sup>68</sup> Cruse served as editor for *Gay Comix* for the first four issues, running from 1980 to 1983, at which point he left to focus on his series *Wendel*.<sup>69</sup>

It was through reading the first issue of *Gay Comix* that Bechdel was first moved to make gay comics (initially single-panel cartoons, then moving into a strip format, and eventually - inspired by Cruse's *Wendel* - to a strip with recurring characters).<sup>70</sup> Just as it was her *DTWOF* that helped me to see that there was another way of telling queer stories, *Gay Comix* showed her that not only was this something that could be done, but people were already doing it.

I first started making comics seriously when I was about nineteen years old. I was fortunate enough to fall in with an annual publication (now sadly defunct) called *Yuri Monogatari* and its editor, Erica Friedman, who gave me the trust, support, and guidance that I needed at that time to develop my budding skill-set as a comics creator. *Yuri Monogatari* was formed to publish American-made yuri<sup>71</sup>. For six years, I had a venue to create comics stories about lesbians and for a predominantly but far from exclusively lesbian audience. Although I hit a couple of the "gay fiction" tropes - coming out, gay-bashing - I mostly just focused on telling stories without the

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<sup>68</sup> Stan Wiater and Stephen Bissette. *Comic Book Rebels: Conversations with the Creators of the New Comics* (New York, NY: D.I. Fine, 1993), 76.

<sup>69</sup> *Gay Comix* would continue under editor Robert Triptow until issue #13 in 1988, switching from Kitchen Press to Bob Ross (the publisher of *Bay Area Reporter*, not the painter of happy little trees) after issue #5, and then under editor Andy Mangels for issue #14 in 1991, after which it would change its name to *Gay Comics* and be published on a more regular quarterly basis until 1998. Under Cruse and subsequent editors, *Gay Comix* actively solicited the input of lesbian as well as gay male comix creators. (Justin Hall, ed. *No Straight Lines*, "File Under Queer")

<sup>70</sup> Alison Bechdel. *The Indelible Alison Bechdel*, 9.

<sup>71</sup> "Yuri" is a Japanese term that essentially refers to lesbian content in a variety of media. In this instance, it's referring specifically to manga, or Japanese comics.

orientation of the characters being specifically central to the story. In many of the comics I made, one of the characters could easily have been gender-swapped in order to make it “straight” and the story would have been little impacted. But the fact that these characters were not straight - even if their stories weren’t specifically about being gay - was essential to me. In fact, that the stories could have been straight and specifically chose not to be was and is essential to me.

This continues in the comics I make for the *Existence Stories* project. Since most of the participants who have contributed to this facet of the project thus far are people I know personally and who feel enough of a connection and comfort with me to allow themselves to be recorded speaking vulnerably, the comics made to date primarily feature LGBT+ people. This does not mean that most of the stories deal explicitly or even at all with the participants being LGBT+. Some chose to mention their queerness in passing, some chose to forefront it, and others chose to talk about other topics entirely. This does not negate the importance of their being LGBT+ stories, but rather underscores the point that there are vital narratives in our lives beyond the simple fact of our statuses as being queer and/or trans.

### **Existence Stories Comics**

For me, comics were a natural starting point for this project. I’ve been fascinated with the storytelling potential of this medium since I was a teen, reading *Understanding Comics* for the first time. It’s a language I’m very familiar with after well over a decade of experience (reading, making, and researching): intertwining words and images to make something more than the sum of its parts.

The idea of approaching other people with this project was intimidating, especially while it was still so nebulous in my head and I didn’t have any examples to show, so I began with

myself. Not long after the election, I had had a nightmare about a nuclear holocaust<sup>72</sup> and being unable to get in touch with my parents<sup>73</sup>. I recorded myself talking about this dream, using my phone to record the audio and setting my cheap stop-motion camera (the kind you'd buy for a kid) to take a picture of me once every second as I spoke. I transcribed the audio into a script, trying to preserve as much as possible not only the words spoken but also the pauses, stutters, and silences that made up the rhythm of my speech. I sketched out a rough breakdown<sup>74</sup> to work out the flow of the speech (and silences) through the pages, then combed through the stills recorded by the stop-motion camera and looked for images that seemed to best represent each moment. I digitally arranged the stills and text into a photo-comic to help fine-tune the different pieces then drew the comic free-hand from the selected stills. In the drawings I focused especially on capturing the nuance of facial expressions, hand gestures, and overall body language, just as with the writing I focused on capturing the cadence of natural speech. My goal was to make it feel as "real" as possible, as if the reader were sitting in the room with me and listening to me speak.

In Will Eisner's *Graphic Storytelling and Visual Narrative*, he explains the importance of capturing this kind of "acting" - body language and facial expressions and so forth - believably in what he describes as "slice of life" comics storytelling: "The reader's appreciation hinges on the telling of it. It requires that the artist portrays believable acting. Since characters are dealing with internal emotions, subtle postures and gestures must be true-to-life, instantly recognizable."<sup>75</sup>

It should be noted that although my comics art puts a strong emphasis on authenticity and realism, the images themselves are far from photorealistic. Rather than focusing on capturing every nuance of lighting, every background detail, or every eyelash, I simplify the figures to what

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<sup>72</sup> If memory serves, this was around the time when the new U.S. President was making antagonizing comments about North Korea's nuclear aspirations on a fairly regular basis

<sup>73</sup> I grew up near the Indian Point nuclear facility, and they still live near there; whenever there are terrorist threats there's always the potential risk that Indian Point will be a target. We've been feeling the constant shadow of this threat since 9/11; we kept the iodine pills they sent us stuck to our fridge for years, partly as a morbid joke and partly just in case

<sup>74</sup> A rough layout of each page of the comic

<sup>75</sup> Will Eisner. *Graphic Storytelling and Visual Narrative* (New York, NY: W.W. Norton, 2008), 33.

I consider to be the most essential details in order to convey what needs to be conveyed. In *Understanding Comics*, Scott McCloud identifies this technique as a form of “amplification through simplification.” In his words, “When we abstract an image through cartooning, we’re not so much eliminating details as we are focusing on specific details. By stripping down an image to its essential “meaning,” an artist can amplify that meaning in a way that realistic art can’t.”<sup>76</sup> It is a means of ensuring that the reader pays attention to the message, rather than simply the messenger. Since messenger and message are both of importance in this project, there is a limit to the degree of simplification that I employ. Features are simplified and extraneous details are eliminated so that the focus is placed on facial expressions and body language. Enough detail is included that the figure is still identifiable (although in some cases appearances have been altered in order to preserve the anonymity of participants who wish to remain anonymous). They are still a distinct person telling their own story in their own way. But they are simultaneously simplified enough that they are more broadly relatable. McCloud suggests that “when you look at a photo or realistic drawing of a face [...] you see it as the face of another. But when you enter the world of the cartoon [...] you see yourself.”<sup>77</sup> In drawing participants in such a way that they are simultaneously distinct personas while being more universalized than a photograph, the reader will be able to see them both as another person with whom they are in conversation but also someone to whom they can relate and potentially see some reflection of themselves.

My precise approach varies from person to person and from comic to comic. The next person I worked with, my friend “Diane,”<sup>78</sup> has a very different way of speaking than I do. My own audio recording was full of pauses and hesitations and I was working from stills rather than video, and it broke down easily into a fairly straightforward grid of panels with a steady, uniform

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<sup>76</sup> Scott McCloud. *Understanding Comics: The Invisible Art* (New York, NY: HarperCollins Publishers, 1994), 30.

<sup>77</sup> *Ibid.*, 36.

<sup>78</sup> “Diane” wishes to remain anonymous for this project, and so her name and aspects of her appearance have been altered according to her wishes. Her facial expressions, body language, gestures, and speech patterns were preserved as much as possible within these minor limitations

rhythm that allowed each silent panel to have as much impact as one in which I was speaking.



**Figure 2. Detail from *Althea*, 2017: *Nightmare* (2017)**

I realized quickly when I was transcribing “Diane’s” video that this straightforward grid I had used to lay out my own pages would not work for her: she needed a free-flowing format that would allow her to gesture broadly and allow her words to flow freely across each page. I also varied the drawing techniques used: while my own comic was drawn with Micron pens to capture a high level of minute detail with little line variation, for “Diane” I used brush and ink for her body and hair to give her more motion and less rigidity. Her face and hands were drawn with a fine nib pen, giving her slightly more line variation than my drawings of myself while still having a high degree of detail and control.



Figure 3. Detail from "*Diane*," 2017: *Grandmother* (2017)

Each comic is adapted to best represent the authentic speech patterns and body language of the person speaking, as well as the manner with which it was recorded. Lijia's video was recorded on a tablet, which gave me only close-up footage to work with. Her comic therefore sacrifices on body language and gesture but gains much in facial expression, as it is essentially a series of close-up portraits. Her panels are more grid-like than those of "*Diane*'s" but the dimensions are different from those in my own - being shaped more like a horizontal tablet screen - and their pattern is less regular.



Figure 4. Detail from *Lijia*, 2018: *The Day of the Election* (2018)

Although there is variation in the way each comic is structured, there is still a high degree of restraint. There is little action and therefore little need for dramatic flourish in the way the pages are laid out. As Eisner describes of the “slice of life” genre, “powerhouse layouts or excessive rendering technique, which can overwhelm and distract the reader and dominate the story, are counter-productive in this form.”<sup>79</sup> In these comics, I want nothing to distract the reader from the experience they are having with the documented speaker.

### **In Front of the Camera**

Each comic in this project, as discussed above, is based on some form of recording. The camera - be it a smartphone, a tablet, a stop-motion camera, or a clunky camcorder salvaged from a scrap heap - is an indispensable tool for achieving the level of detail and fidelity to the actual conversation that I seek.

Although its goal is to capture the nuances of conversation authentically, the camera can also make the participant’s engagement more performative. There is a self-consciousness involved for most people when they are sitting in front of a camera. One may feel more aware of a potential audience, and therefore the potential for embarrassment. It may make one more careful with their words, as those words are being committed to a level of permanence that casual, everyday speech generally isn’t. Some of this self-consciousness has faded in this moment in time, as many people now carry in their pockets recording devices and casual documentation has become fairly normalized, but the presence of the camera is still an important thing to consider when attempting to create an accurate record of a conversation with someone.

I want participants to own their stories and feel comfortable with sharing them and being vulnerable, but being on-camera is still an uncomfortable thing for many people. Parts of this

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<sup>79</sup> Will Eisner. *Graphic Storytelling*, 33.



project that allow for anonymous, handwritten testimony rather than a recording have received much higher levels of engagement. Several people I approached to participate declined because they felt uncomfortable with being recorded, and several who did agree to be recorded requested anonymity. Despite my efforts to keep recording sessions friendly and welcoming and to make the camera as unobtrusive as possible, there's a self-consciousness visible in most of the recordings that comes perhaps less from what they're saying but from the fact that they're saying it to the camera as well as (or instead of) to me.

The self-consciousness under the gaze of the camera is addressed briefly in *Anonymous, 2019: Accepting That Fear as Normal*, the content of which is all about vulnerability, exposure, and discomfort. Stories are edited somewhat in their transcription from recording to comic (for clarity and to condense them with as little sacrifice as possible to the content), so the moment where the participant addressed their discomfort with being recorded and my response to that comment could easily have been left on the cutting room floor, so to speak.



Figure 5. Detail from *Anonymous, 2019: Accepting That Fear as Normal* (2019)

To make visible that layer of artificiality – this is a comic made from a recording – can ironically make the experience more authentic for the reader. Terry Lindvall and Matthew Melton speak to the power of breaking the fourth wall and addressing the world beyond the cartoon in altering viewer perception of the cartoon world, stating that “The intrusion of an outer reality, even as small as the cartoonist's hand or drawing tools, transforms the cartoon world. The presence of the maker endows the inanimate with a magical ontological concreteness; that is, it somehow makes the imaginary cartoon character [...] more real.”<sup>80</sup> Although the anonymous participant in this comic is not an imaginary character, the fact that they are represented as a series of drawings on paper places them within the realm of the cartoon. The insertion of reality (even if it is still in the form of a drawing on paper) into this drawn reality signals the reader that this comic is based on a recording, and therefore both behind and in front of the camera there must have been real people.

In the other comics included in the exhibition, the presence of the camera is not directly addressed. I frequently do keep intact moments of self-consciousness and hesitation that may result from the process of being recorded, however. In the case of Lijia’s comic, she was in control of her own recording: she recorded herself using the tablet in my 2018 voting booth installation *Every Vote Counts*. The only real moment of self-consciousness is when she feels like she’s run out of things to say but isn’t ready to turn off the camera yet. I chose to include this moment in the comic as she’s caught between trains of thought, as it reveals the spontaneous and unrehearsed nature of her recording (see Figure 4). It makes space for the reader as well as the subject to pause and process what has been said as well as what comes next.

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<sup>80</sup> Terry Lindvall and Matthew Melton. "Toward a Postmodern Animated Discourse: Bakhtin, Intertextuality and the Cartoon Carnival." 1994. In *Animation: Art & Industry* (New Barnet, UK: John Libbey, 2009), 66.

## CHAPTER 4

### MAKING CONTACT

“I called my mom for the first time because I was afraid and not the normal fear I felt as a visibly black, Muslim woman. It was a different kind of fear. And she was afraid too.” – Anonymous, from *I Knew*

“I found someone who really loves me. Now, when I cry, it’s not in secret. I cry in her arms. We hold each other. Our love is an act of rebellion.” – Anonymous, from *Cry in Secret*

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It’s no coincidence that the artforms I’ve chosen to use for this project are ones that allow for mass (re)production, broad distribution, a direct connection with the audience, and little to no barrier to access: comics, zines, printmaking, and animation. They are all tools by which one can communicate with a mass audience, rather than a select one. The barriers to accessing such media are fairly low: the audience doesn’t necessarily have to go to a gallery or a museum to actively seek it out, and one doesn’t necessarily have to be rich in order to own it. With comics and zines especially, the viewer can actually come into direct physical contact with the artwork and have an experience that is not only visual but also tactile, allowing for a different kind of intimacy and engagement with the work than looking at an image on a wall.

These are all key themes in this project: communicating with a broad audience, art that can be reproduced and disseminated, and direct physical contact with the work.

### Reaching Out

I don’t want my art to only find people who are looking for art. I want it to find people who are looking for stories. I want it to find people who are looking for communication and connection. I want it to find people who don’t know that they’re even looking for it.

Although the art I make is meant to be reproduced, it is not reproduced on a mass scale. My comics are reproduced and sold or traded as zines, usually at local zine conventions, or made available in zine libraries. They are not reproduced in large quantities. Although they're printed digitally, each one is assembled by my hands. They pass from my hands to the hands of the person purchasing or trading for them, so it becomes a personal exchange, usually accompanied by conversation. There's a point of contact between creator and consumer that doesn't generally occur with mass media.

Many zinesters feel that there is a loss that occurs when a zine goes "mainstream" and becomes widely available without this point of contact. Within zine communities with a limited audience, there's a more personal connection between creator and consumer. The small scale allows for an exchange that's more communication than financial transaction. Many zines are traded for other zines rather than for money. Even zines that are sold for money are usually sold for little to no profit, and there is usually a point of connection between creator and consumer whether the exchange is happening through a zine convention or through mail-order. Were they mass-produced in the way that a popular paperback is and sold through impersonal means, that interpersonal connection would be lost and the zine would essentially cease to be a zine, as the quality of being handmade in modest quantities is part of what defines a zine as a zine.

Although this audience is obviously more limited than that of a mass-market book, there is still a surprising breadth and depth to it. Most people go to zine conventions without looking for something specific: they're open to finding something unexpected. I personally have returned from these conventions with zines ranging from personal stories about gender identity, short comics about people with superpowers looking for jobs, maps to where every cat in a particular neighborhood (which I have never been to) can usually be found, and an informational zine about vegan camping cookouts.<sup>81</sup>

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<sup>81</sup> I am neither vegan, nor do I camp

My comics are also reproduced digitally and posted online, increasing possibilities for them to be encountered by others outside of zine communities. Throughout the project, I have distributed small, free zines around western Massachusetts, seeking participants and people who wish to learn more about this project. These mini-zines further increase the likelihood of the chance encounter, as they can be found in places as diverse as library bookshelves, bathroom stalls, cafeteria tables, and community bulletin boards. They serve as an introduction to the project, an access point for learning more (as they contain a link to the site where the project lives online as well as my contact information), and a call for participation.

### **Original Reproductions**

With the media that I'm using - comics, zines, animations, prints - the reproduction of the art is the art. Being reproduced is arguably a necessary part of the artform itself, part of what defines it, part of its essence. A copper plate is not a print. The raw materials of an animation are not the animation itself. Reproduction and distribution or at least the potential for reproduction and distribution are embedded into the identities of these artforms.

Walter Benjamin describes the benefits of the technological reproduction of art as its being able to:

place the copy of the original in situations which the original itself cannot attain. Above all, it enables the original to meet the recipient halfway, whether in the form of a photograph or in that gramophone record. The cathedral leaves its site to be received in the studio of an art lover; the choral work performed in an auditorium or in the open air is enjoyed in a private room.<sup>82</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> Walter Benjamin, Michael W. Jennings, Brigid Doherty, and Thomas Y. Levin. *The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility, and Other Writings on Media* (London, UK: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2008), 21-22.

Benjamin claims that this “devalues the here and now of the artwork” and destroys what he describes as the “aura” of the original artwork.<sup>83</sup> It should be noted that this devaluation and destruction of the aura of the original is a positive in his eyes, not a negative. Regardless, I don’t necessarily agree that the “aura of the original” is destroyed when an artwork is reproduced. I believe that the reproduction can have its own kind of aura, perhaps not identical to that of the original, but an aura nonetheless. As someone who has stood in front of many a print in awe, I can attest to the power of a reproduction.

For artforms for which the distinction between reproduction and original is blurred, this is especially true. Consider something like Action Comics #1 (the first appearance of Superman). Copies of this issue from its original run are highly sought after and have a great value<sup>84</sup>, but are they originals, reproductions, or something in-between?

The books that I’ve created for this project walk a strange line between original and reproduction. Technically, they are reproductions: the covers are intaglio prints which could conceivably be printed many times over (and each of which I have printed multiple times). The facsimile text on the front page is also a reproduction and reproducible. The books would perhaps not be perfect copies of each other, but they could be reproduced. Where they become original works is when the audience interacts with them. When the viewers interact with the books by writing in them by hand and becoming participants in the artwork, the books are transformed into unique objects. That handwriting is not a reproduction. It could be reproduced, but it would not be the same.

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<sup>83</sup> Ibid., 22.

<sup>84</sup> Financial, historical, and sentimental



Figure 6. From left to right: *I Knew* (2018), *Get Out of His Country* (2019), *Cry in Secret* (2018), *You Are (Probably) Already on a List* (2018), *Being Allowed* (2019), installation view

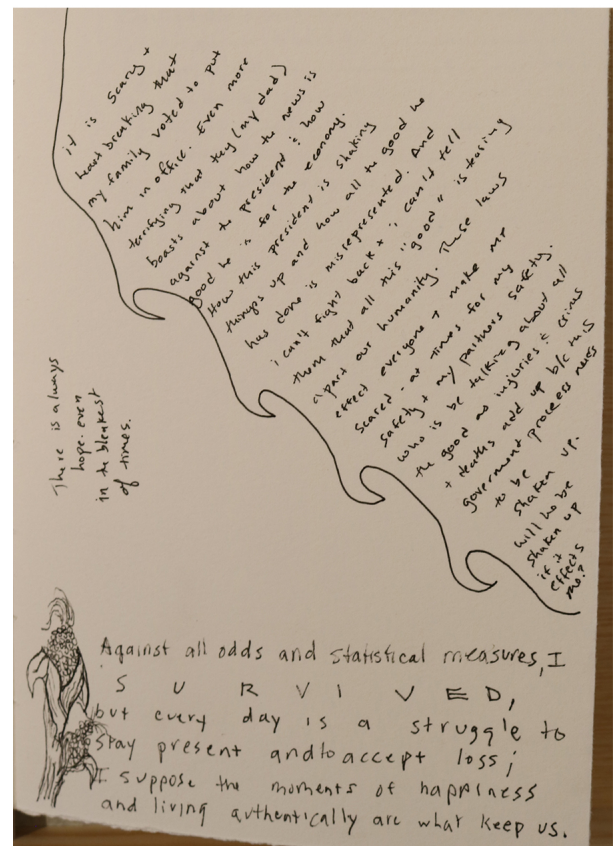


Figure 7. Left: *Get Out of His Country* (2019) exterior; Right: Detail from an interior page

One of the themes I explore through my art is that of the imperfect and therefore unique reproduction, the reproduction that is also in a sense an original. The animations *Althea*, 2017: *The Marriage Question* and *Anonymous*, 2018: *I Knew* are prime examples of this. Repetition with variation is key to the process of animation itself: within a shot, each frame is similar enough to the one preceding it to allow for a feeling of continuity but is altered enough to create the illusion of movement. Both *The Marriage Question* and *I Knew* were created using printmaking techniques. Repetition is a natural and expected part of most printmaking processes, but it is generally performed with the goal of creating an edition of perfectly replicated images. In order to make animations using printmaking techniques, I need to deliberately subvert this expectation of the perfect reproduction. Rather than aiming to make perfect reproductions of a single image, I deliberately make imperfect reproductions so that the images are similar enough to maintain a kind of constancy when viewed as an animation but dissimilar enough that they do not read as a static image.

The primary technique in both animations is acetone transfer, which allows for a lot of flexibility in its reproduction. An image is printed with toner, placed on another piece of paper, and then the back of the printed image is rubbed with acetone to release the toner onto the second sheet of paper. The way the acetone is rubbed into the first paper alters the way the toner releases onto the second paper, allowing these otherwise identical images to be transferred with a wide variety of visual effects: certain areas can be highlighted while others are not transferred at all, the image can be made dark or light, complete or incomplete, and if an implement is used to transfer the toner you can create very expressive marks not unlike drawing.





**Figure 8. Stills from *Althea, 2017: The Marriage Question* (2017)**

*The Marriage Question* also incorporates plate lithography for some of its imagery. With plate lithography, the image itself remains the same and the variation is created from the way the ink is applied. The shapes of the engagement rings remain static, but their colors shift and change as well as their lightness or darkness. *I Knew* incorporates offset printing. The image is painted in ink onto a piece of plexiglass and transferred onto a large roller, which then transfers the image onto a piece of paper. The same image can be reproduced, but it becomes fainter with each pass. Keeping the original drawing under the plexiglass, it serves as a guide for me to repaint fading parts of the image, introducing small elements of change. Each print, though technically a reproduction, is unique. They are therefore both reproductions and original artworks simultaneously.

### **Direct Contact**

Throughout this project, there is a blurring of the line between reproduction and original. There is a misconception that reproduced artwork is necessarily divorced from the hand of the artist, but intimacy and the personal touch are essential in this exhibition. Most of the “original” (unreproduced) work in the exhibition consists of handwriting. Handwriting is very personal and very intimate, and it requires direct physical contact. This applies not only to the handwriting of

participants in the artist's books, but also to the wall text, the majority of which I have handwritten.

Almost everything reproduced is done by hand as well, at least in part. The prints are made with older technologies (intaglio, lithography, offset) that require me to physically handle the materials, rather than digital prints which pass through computers and printers and never need to touch my hands. The artist's books for which the intaglio prints serve as covers are hand-bound. My comics are hand-drawn and hand-lettered. The zines made from these comics are printed digitally but are assembled individually by hand. Anything the audience's hand comes into contact with has been touched by my hands as well, whether it's a reproduction or an original or something in-between. The most intangible works are the animations, but the act of placing headphones on and listening to the audio directly in one's ears adds a kind of intimacy akin to physical touch, especially when the human voice is involved. And although the animations are recorded, edited, and displayed digitally, each one was still very much created by hand, either by cutting out and manipulating pieces of paper or by making prints by hand and photographing them.

## CHAPTER 5

### THE AUDIENCE THAT TOUCHES BACK

“I used to say I would draw “DTWOF” even if no one else were reading it. Not because I had such an overwhelming need to create it, but because I had an overwhelming need to see it - to see my particular queer progressive slice of life reflected back to me. But now I’m not so sure I could keep drawing without an audience. The peculiar reciprocity that has developed between the strip and its readers provides me with an essential fuel.” – Alison Bechdel, *The Indelible Alison Bechdel*<sup>85</sup>

“As usual, I made my walk from home toward a proposed future. Coffee. The person behind the counter, the tears in [their] eyes. We nodded and said in unison, “I know.” – Anonymous, from *I Knew*

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Audience participation has a long and still-growing history with the kinds of mass produced media I employ, especially comics and zines. Well before online comments sections, many mainstream comics featured a “letters” page where fans could weigh in. The relationship between creator and reader can easily become blurred in the comics world, as a number of fans have gone on to join the industry in one way or another, including a strong fanzine culture<sup>86</sup>. Comics have often been created as collaborative efforts, and even single-creator comics can be shaped by the input of the reading public. Alison Bechdel, for example, has cited how feedback from readers inspired certain character traits and storylines when she was working on her long-running series *Dykes to Watch Out For*:

A guy at my gym kept bugging me to put a gay man in the strip, so I introduced Carlos. A bisexual reader thought I should make Naomi bisexual, so I did. After a review illustrated how unnaturally well my characters got along by remarking that none of them were even allergic to each others’ pets, I obligingly had Sydney develop a sudden sensitivity to cat dander.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>85</sup> Alison Bechdel. *The Indelible Alison Bechdel*, 207.

<sup>86</sup> The “fan” in Fantagraphics - perhaps the most respected publisher of alternative comics in the U.S. - is no coincidence: it started life as a fanzine.

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*, 208.

As previously mentioned, modern zines evolved out of the fanzine culture of the 1930s. Fans (usually of science-fiction) created zines through which they could express their passion for their chosen subject matter and share it with the world. Fanzine creators often created original content as well. Even now, a major component of zine culture is the blurring of the distinction between creator and consumer of culture. Zinesters create the content they wish to consume. Although some zines are relatively insular, other zines interact actively with their audience. Some zines are even comprised entirely of guest content, and others are comprised partly or even entirely of letters. Many zinesters solicit feedback from their readers and will sometimes reproduce and comment upon that which they receive. Encouraging zine readers to become zinesters themselves (sometimes even providing instructions and advice for how to easily do so within their zines) is a common part of zine culture. The culture of trading zines between zinesters also speaks to this blurred distinction between creator and audience.

One of the primary reasons why I started this project was a desire to connect with a broader community of individuals, to make work that wasn't only about and for myself. Inviting the audience to interact with the work directly and share their own stories on their own terms feels like a logical extension of this desire. As the project has evolved, the kinds of participation and interaction it encourages have changed with it. It started relatively closed off: I would solicit stories from participants, make art from these stories, then present that art. Now it's more part of a cycle of collecting and sharing stories: audience members come into direct physical contact with the work and share their own stories, which in turn may generate other works of art for other audience members to contribute to. Stories written in an installation in response to one of my animations inspired prints which were turned into books into which audience members now write more stories.

When people are able to respond to the art directly and to read each other's responses, it becomes evident that this work of art is not just representative of one person's experience. It demonstrates that this is not a lone artist's experience or opinion, but part of a collective

experience. It creates a sense of community, whether the viewer is part of that community or simply witnessing that community. It creates a physical, tactile point of contact between the individual viewer, the collective viewers, the work, and the artist. The audience is invited not only to engage with the art as a spectator, but to become part of the art itself.

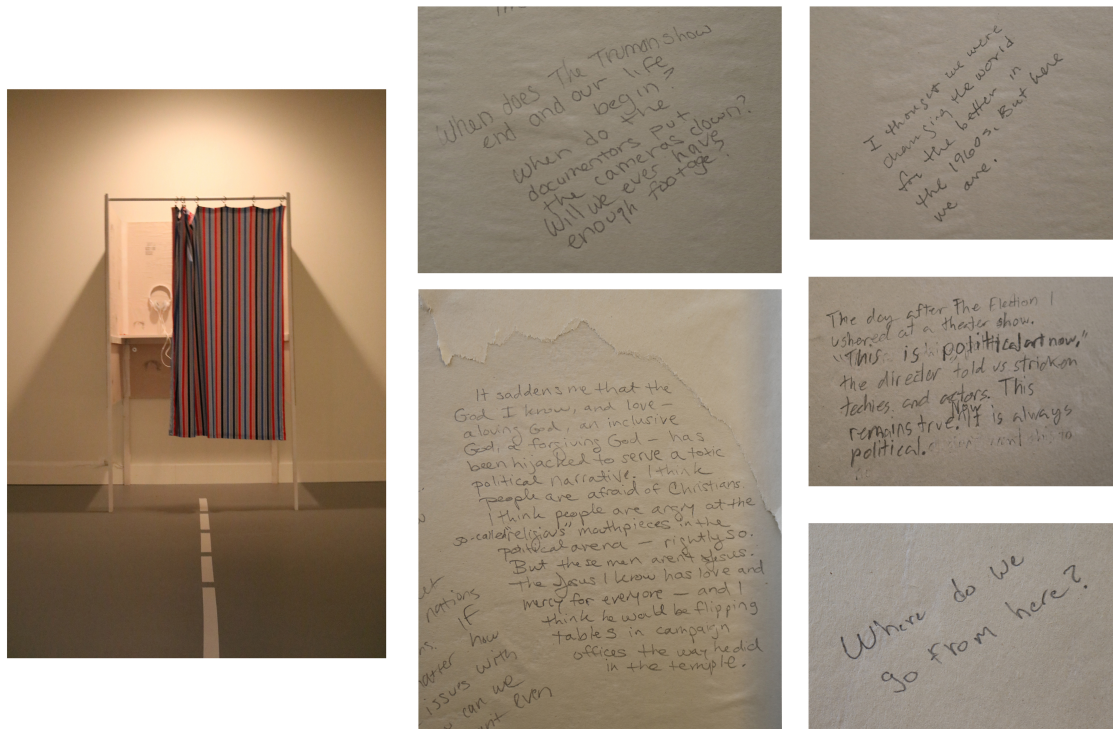
This is especially so in the case of the artist's books in this exhibition, which were themselves born out of audience participation in another facet of this project and now invite further audience participation. If the pages of the books remain blank, the artwork is incomplete. They need the audience to engage with them in order to fulfill their purpose as an artwork.



**Figure 9. Gallery-goers interact with artist's books**

In 2018, I created an interactive voting booth installation entitled *Every Vote Counts*. The walls were papered with newsprint, which was marked in places by acetone transfers of excerpts from some of the comics and animations that are part of the *Existence Stories* project, and it contained a tablet on which people could watch one of these animations (*Althea, 2017: The Marriage Question*). People interacting with the booth were encouraged to write their own stories of life in the current political climate directly onto the walls of the booth and were provided with

pencils<sup>88</sup>. The booth provided people with an enclosed space (three walls and a curtain which could be drawn for privacy) in which many people felt free to be honest and vulnerable. Many moving stories were written onto the walls and left in the ballot box. Some were direct responses to the animation, which focuses on my personal fears as a queer person in a time where LGBT+ causes are both making progress and receiving serious political and social backlash. Others focus on topics as diverse as how they feel their religions are being used to push agendas they disagree with, being presumed to be an immigrant and being assaulted for being a person of color, how they feel their humanity is being erased, and a general sense of existential dread.



**Figure 10. Left: *Every Vote Counts* (2018), installation view from the exhibition *We Grow Accustomed to the Dark*; Right: Excerpts from the interior**

At the time when I created this voting booth, I had primarily been working with video or at least audio for my source material. Now I had stories that didn't have names, faces, or voices

<sup>88</sup> Alternatively, participants could write their stories onto slips of paper and put them into a provided "ballot box" if they preferred not to write directly onto the walls



attached to them. I couldn't transcribe facial expressions and body language into comics. But I still wanted these stories to have a life beyond this voting booth.

I selected a handful of stories from the booth that I found to be particularly moving. I kept in mind with my selection that each book created from them would most likely gather stories of a similar subject matter, so I made an effort to choose stories that covered a spectrum of different issues: gay rights, trans rights, disability rights, racial inequality and anti-immigrant sentiment, and women's rights. Using these stories as a jumping off point, I created images that captured the essence of the story without attempting to directly illustrate it. I turned each image into an intaglio print and used these prints to create book covers. The story that inspired each image is reproduced as an acetone transfer on the front page of each book and part of the story is used as the title of the book.



**Figure 11. Left: *You Are (Probably) Already on a List* (2018); Right: *Cry in Secret* (2018)**

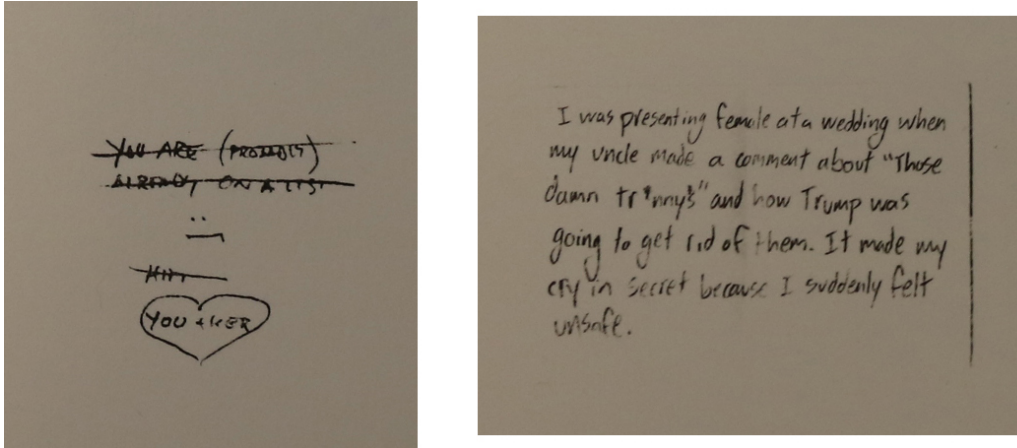


Figure 12. Left: *You Are (Probably) Already on a List* (2018), front page detail; Right: *Cry in Secret* (2018), front page detail

These stories and the images inspired by them in turn serve to move others to share their own stories. The books create a space not unlike the voting booth, where people can be anonymous and vulnerable even in a public space. They have not the protection of walls, but the protection of book covers. Unlike a voting booth, where one typically goes with their mind already made up about what they want to say and they try to get it over with as quickly as possible, people tend to linger with books. We're conditioned to read books; the most natural response when holding a book in one's hands is to read it. Many of us also grow up writing journals and diaries, or at least taking notes in notebooks, so writing in books is also a fairly natural activity. These books therefore have a comforting familiarity to them: these are places where we know it is safe to read and perhaps to write.

The stories written so far in these books show a remarkable depth of vulnerability. They share stories of pain, of resilience, of resignation, of hope, of fear, and of love. Some are confessions. Some are declarations. Some are protestations.

Together, these stories - along with those in the other artworks in this exhibition - speak of experiences and existences at once individual and collective. Although each is personal and distinct, there are points of connection between them, and some respond directly to another. They build upon each other to construct a larger image and tell a larger story.



## CHAPTER 6

### CONCLUSION

“When you write vulnerably, others respond vulnerably. A different set of problems and predicaments arise which would never surface in response to more detached writing.” - Ruth Behar, *The Vulnerable Observer*<sup>89</sup>

“Confusion. Escape. Misdirection. Fear. Unconsciousness. Frustration. Misunderstanding. Disbelief. Uncertainty. Doubt. Confidence. Belief. Thought. Courage. Encounter. LOVE. FREEDOM.” – Anonymous, from *I Knew*

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The *Existence Stories* project does not end with this exhibition. One of the strengths of this project is its versatility and flexibility. It can adapt to different environments, continuing to grow and evolve. Even within the exhibition, works appear in multiple configurations and iterations: comics are present reproduced as zines but several are also present as the original drawings in their non-reproduced form; a story from *Every Vote Counts* is transcribed as the animation *Anonymous, 2018: I Knew* as well as a bound book; stills from *The Marriage Question* were repurposed for a new narrative in the zine *In Your Hands*.



Figure 13. *Existence Stories Vol. 2* (2019) and *In Your Hands* (2017), installation view

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<sup>89</sup> Ruth, Behar. *The Vulnerable Observer: Anthropology That Breaks Your Heart* (Boston, MA: Beacon Press, 2012), 16.

Once I leave the graduate school environment, my access to resources such as printmaking and animation facilities will likely be reduced, so the roles of printmaking and animation as this project continues may need to shift. Comics and zines are highly adaptable and can be made under most circumstances and with limited resources, so their roles are unlikely to diminish. The books included in this exhibition still have some blank pages and more can be added<sup>90</sup>. These can be brought into many locations - gallery shows, pop-up shows, book events, zine fests, etc. - to continue collecting stories from a multitude of different audiences in different environments. This project can also continue to grow and evolve through an expanded online presence<sup>91</sup>, as well as potentially branching out into other media. As more stories become visible and accessible in more places, the more people are likely to engage with the project and participate in it or at least to be reached by it.

Though this project was born out of a specific historical moment, this moment did not occur in a vacuum. The themes discussed by participants will continue to be relevant, as they did not begin with the election and will not end with a new administration. The project will adapt as circumstances evolve, but there will still be a need for it. There is always a need for more connection and communication.

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<sup>90</sup> Due to the way the books are bound, the spine can be removed from the covers to make room for expansion

<sup>91</sup> <https://existencestories.tumblr.com/>

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## PHOTO OF THE ARTIST AT WORK

