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The ART of Infertility: Finding Friendship & Healing After Reproductive Loss

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The ART of Infertility: Finding Friendship & Healing After Reproductive Loss

Cover Page Footnote

I want to express my deep gratitude to Elizabeth Walker, my co-founder, co-curator, and dearest friend. Infertility sucks. But meeting you has been one of the rare highlights to come out of this experience. Barren besties, forever.

The ART of Infertility: Finding Friendship & Healing After Reproductive Loss

An Origin Story

When I first met Elizabeth Walker in 2014, I had just completed my first year in a Rhetoric and Writing PhD program. Like others who have gone on to receive their doctorate, completing and (honestly) surviving the first year was a milestone achievement. Nonetheless, for me, this sense of making it through that year weighed more heavily on my shoulders. My initial decision to even go to graduate school was informed directly from a personal crisis: an infertility diagnosis.

For two years, as I worked at getting my MA degree, my partner and I quietly hoped that a pregnancy would magically occur. Each month, our answer came in the form of one solid pink line. Young and very much confused about what we should do and, frankly, what we wanted, we decided to take a pause with pregnancy. This is how I ended up in a doctoral program, out of an explicit need to recalibrate.

At this time, Elizabeth was at a similar felt moment. Reluctant to undergo in vitro fertilization (IVF), she agreed to do one cycle per her partner's request. Her egg retrieval prior to embryo transfer was particularly traumatic, resulting in ovarian torsion and internal bleeding. Emergency surgery was required to remove 1300ml of blood and additional large blood clots. After allowing for a couple months of recovery, the reproductive endocrinologist transferred two of the three resulting embryos. Shortly after, Elizabeth learned she was pregnant, with twins. But the pregnancy would not last. She miscarried both embryos. Needing to heal, Elizabeth and her partner decided to take some time off from treatment in order to re-evaluate next steps. They took nearly a year off before transferring the final embryo which did not result in a pregnancy.

It was a few months after discontinuing treatment and a few weeks after finishing the end of my semester that we ended up meeting in Washington, D.C. at a national infertility advocacy event. As residents of Michigan and infertility peer-led support leaders, the two of us spent much of our time together walking the halls of the U.S. Senate and House buildings. In between our meetings with our representatives, we began sharing our infertility stories. As the day came to a close, we both noted the irony in where we were in our infertility journeys. While many of the other infertility advocates were either in the process of trying to get pregnant or were advocates who had children at home, our stories and our need to take a break seemed largely

invisible at this advocacy event. Yet, the two of us paired together, emphasized a real need to support each other even as we both wait.

Connecting over this shared place in our infertility journey, we decided to meet more regularly. Elizabeth mentioned that she had recently begun creating pieces of art to help her cope and simply “do something” while she in treatment. I mentioned that I, too, was using creative writing to document moments in my infertility journey that felt silenced and invisible to others. Interest emerged in seeing each other’s work, and we exchanged emails to send each other our pieces and schedule coffee and dinner dates.

Infertility, Rhetorical Studies, and the Medical Humanities

The stories above illustrate the origin of The ART of Infertility, a traveling arts and reproductive loss exhibit. To be clear, neither of us, co-founders of the organization, had a clear idea or vision for creating a community art space to represent experiences of reproductive loss. Rather, we tacked-in, as Royster and Kirsch (2012) note, to our own embodied experiences to see “something not previously noticed or considered” (p. 72). Recognizing how this organization was formed by listening to each other’s stories, finding shared experiences, and realizing how central artistic practice has been to finding healing are important to understanding the potential of rhetoric studies on the medical humanities field.

Rhetorical studies, particularly cultural rhetorics, allows us to critically interrogate what stories we are told and what stories remain silent and on the margins. Cultural rhetorician, John Gagnon (2017) reminds us of how stories take form and develop meaning. For him, stories are anything but neutral, explaining:

“the decisions we make about which stories to tell and not to tell, the words we use and don’t use, the underlying concepts and theories we convey or suppress, not only have the potential to but in fact do have very real impacts on not just ourselves and our relations, but also to those unseen and unanticipated audience members who come into contact with our tellings” (p. 2).

Understanding the power of story is important when discussing infertility and reproductive loss stories. These stories often are not heard, or recognized, as there is “a discourse of silence and secrecy around the issue of infertility amid an ideology of motherhood and family” (Allison, 2011, p. 6). Yet, infertile persons hold the power to combat this cultural silence that fails to hear their stories. I admit, sitting across a coffee table and recounting a recent miscarriage or failed fertility cycle to a close friend or colleague, can be difficult. For one, you are unsure how your audience may react. Two, it can require explaining particular medical procedures to others, which can be difficult to describe and also take away from the focus of the grief. Given the

difficulty of using language to express a medical experience, I turn to art and visual representation as a particular coping method that may be able to both communicate the experience to another person and also provide a sense of comfort to the individual seeking to share their story.

As such, below I feature the evolution of Elizabeth and my infertility journey through a series of images that we have created over the last four years since founding this organization. By viewing these images and reading their captions, what becomes clear is that these pieces reveal infertility as an embodied rhetorical identity. For Elizabeth and myself, many of the pieces we share speak back and resist dominant cultural narratives that correlate womanhood with motherhood (Ulrich & Weatherall, 2000). We use artistic representation to make a space for new discourses to circulate and call on the public viewer to critically question cultural assumptions, tangled together, about womanhood, motherhood, and family.

Art, itself, we find is a useful method for engaging in a delinking of these cultural discourses. While artists and feminists have represented constructions of motherhood and pregnancy in artistic work, art education scholar and infertility advocate Marissa McClure (2014) argues that “bodies rendered infertile through either biological or sociocultural exclusion from parenting and the loss(es) associated with infertility remain largely invisible in both artistic practice and academic discourse. This absence is *s/m/othering*” (p. 253). We collect, curate, and exhibit an assemblage of visual narratives representing reproductive loss to intervene in the perpetuation of a *s/m/othering* culture that reifies motherhood through female bodies unable or undesiring to conceive.

Public exhibitions of these visual stories act as counternarratives to the predominant, cultural narrative that a female body is a fertile body. Art becomes a method to pull apart such a gendered cultural construct, unraveling the strands of such a myth. Yet, the visual narratives portrayed in the exhibit do not replicate a linear counternarrative. Meaning, the representations in the exhibit are singular and contribute to a particular moment of the counternarrative. The individual pieces are thus best understood as assemblages of counternarratives. Such is important especially when understanding what it means to embody infertility.

Infertility is a non-linear, non-static identity. It transforms, revises, and re-emerges through a variety of sociocultural interactions. It lives and is never fully resolved. Such an experiential understanding of what it means to be infertile are further emphasized in the pieces of art shared in the exhibit. Infertility is constantly transforming oneself, requiring individuals to self-process and assess what their diagnosis means in a particular setting, audience, and given purpose. It is, then, best understood as a kairotic identity; rhetorical in its nature. In what follows, a series of

visual representations of infertility are shared and illuminate the evolving identity of infertility.

Portrayals of Embodying Infertility

This showcase contains a series of artistic pieces created by Elizabeth and me. These “series” follow a chronological order in order to document the linear progression in living with infertility. As such, these pieces trace our infertility journeys and illustrate our need to engage in creative activity which “is often heightened at times of mourning” (Malchiodi, 1992, p. 114). Many of the pieces shown represent a liminal relationship to infertility with us still processing: our diagnosis, our definition of family, and, ultimately infertility “success.” Yet, when viewing the images assembled together, a representation of the spectrums of being infertile emerge and emphasize how artistic creation can become a source of comfort when confronted by life’s unpredictability. Such, I see, as illustrating the processing and embodied realities of living with infertility.

Series One: Our First Pieces



Image 1. “Roses” by Elizabeth Walker (circa 2013)

Caption: This is the first piece of artwork I made around my experience with infertility. I was on a 3-week medical leave after having an exploratory laparoscopy to look for endometriosis or other conditions that may be contributing to my inability to get pregnant. I was feeling better, but still on weight restrictions and unable to do much. Feeling the need to create, I gathered some paper, acrylic paints, canvases, and beads, and spent several days creating this piece. Ripping paper apart was helpful in dealing with the frustration I was feeling about my infertility sidelining me, not only for the weeks I was recovering from surgery, but the years I had already spent trying to get pregnant with no success. Brushing the acrylics across the canvas soothed me. I felt stronger with each panel I completed.

The House
Maria Novotny

I sit right now in the room that was to be the baby's. We bought a cozy, two-bedroom two-story house with the intention for the blue room to be ours. The mauve colored room we would repaint and would be for the baby. The blue room was slightly larger than the mauve. We intentionally selected this room with the rationale that a bassinet could comfortably be set up next to our bed. The mauve colored room was smaller but had a walk-in closet able to host the baby's port-a-bed, bouncer and a long lasting diaper supply.

Today though, we conceal our hopes for the mauve colored room. A guest bed is setup for our friends and parents to visit. And has often served as an oasis for each of us at different points in our marriage when the pain of conceiving has pushed us apart – pushed us to two separate beds. We don't like admitting this but that is part of the truth, part of our story.

Next to the bed in the mauve colored room is a desk where I sit and write and work. Books are stacked on the desk. Not in any order. Just placed on the desk. Where the desk and bed are is where we planned to put the crib. Now we fill that area with what we think may be our new life. A life filled with professional promise and a life where a guest bedroom will always be needed. We will be the future aunt and uncle that can provide a retreat for a niece, nephew, or even sister or brother.

Coming home to this house I sometimes remember the thoughts I had when we purchased it. The room downstairs that now has bookshelves and dog toys scattered about was to be the baby's playroom. It attached to the kitchen and would have let me prep dinner and play with the baby as we waited for you to come home from work. I imagined hearing you pull into the drive away. I would give the stew in the crockpot a quick stir and then pick up baby Henry or baby Sophia from the play mat in the other room, anchoring the baby to my hip and having my free hand raise the baby's hand as to wave to you from the backdoor.

Now, that image appears more like an illusion than a premonition. The house symbolizes something different now than what it did when we first purchased it. The very terms of making and sharing a home together have changed. We first purchased it as a symbol of family extension and growth. Today we sit in the rooms of our house trying to make sense of the symbol it now represents.

Image 2. "The House" by Maria Novotny (circa 2013)

Caption: This was the first piece that I wrote in an attempt to capture the depression I felt every time I walked into my house. I first started drafting pieces of the vignette for a Queer Rhetorics final course project. While I identify as a cisgender female, I could not help but feel a visceral connection to critiques of heteronormativity. My house seemed like a constant reminder of the hopes my partner and I once had for a biological family. Our house now seemed like a cruel joke, tempting us with our past dreams.

Series Two: Nursery Items



Image 3. “Crib with Medication Boxes” by Elizabeth Walker (circa 2014)

Caption: These are the remnants of approximately \$10,000 worth of medications, needles and syringes I used while undergoing one IVF and two subsequent frozen embryo transfers. What could have resulted in my child, or children, instead resulted in a pile of boxes, bottles and sharps containers that I find hard to discard because they help represent my treatment journey.



Image 4. “Death Branch” by Maria Novotny (circa 2015)

Caption: “Death Branch” is a play on the art workshop from which this piece was created. In April 2015, I attended a “Love Branch” infertility workshop. I remember slightly scoffing at the word, love. Love was an emotion that I have always struggled with. Growing up, I rarely felt comfortable saying, “I love you.” I wanted to be tough and so I hid my emotions. And so, when infertility happened, my feelings about love became even more complicated. My husband and I decided to “try” because we were in love. We were excited to start a family and share the experience of loving our biological child. But after 5 years of trying, it was clear that our love was not going to make a biological baby. Creating the branch, I knew that I wanted it

to be a death branch. I felt that was a more appropriate term for the piece. Society does not do a good job talking about death. It also does not do a good job talking about infertility or loss. The first few years of my infertility felt very much like suffering death after death after death. Even though I have never been pregnant, never had a miscarriage, my inability to get pregnant acted as a death to a part of my marriage. My husband would never see me pregnant. I would never experience childbirth. These are deaths that go unrecognized. There are 13 beads on the branch. At the end of the branch is a bottle filled with sand and heart at the top. I purposefully placed 13 beads and the bottle to represent the 14 years I have known my husband. The bottle is symbolic of a message in a bottle. A private request for our marriage to get through this death. To heal and grow stronger. The 3 wicker balls represent our 3 dogs. These are now our children, now helping us learn to embrace love. The pink and fish-shaped rectangles are symbolic of my husband and me. This is our death branch. It hangs like a mobile above a crib and serves as a reminder that infertility can kill a marriage. I made this as an offering, as a prayer, that it would not kill ours.

Series Three: Blackout Poetry



Image 5. "Working Mother" by Elizabeth Walker (circa 2016)

Caption: The mailbox can be a dangerous place for those dealing with infertility. Receiving a baby shower invitation or a baby announcement can feel like a knife in the heart or a punch in the gut. At least you usually have some idea they are headed your way. It's the other random pieces of baby, child, and mom mail that give me the most trouble. One in particular. My blood pressure rises each time I open the mailbox to find an issue of *Working Mother* magazine. If it weren't for infertility, I would be a working mother now. When I pictured parenthood, I always saw myself balancing my children and my career. Sure, it would be a challenge but I was up for it. I'm not sure how I got on their list. I tried for a while to have my name taken off. An email to the publishing company, a comment on their Facebook Page. When that didn't work, I just started giving them to my working mother friends. Recently, I decided to reframe my relationship with the magazine by using it to make blackout poetry. The piece reads: "Committed, worthy, successful, non-mother / Shouldn't have to win acceptance / My own positive impact."



Image 6. “Beating the Clock” by Maria Novotny (circa 2017)

Caption: “Beating the Clock” is a retrospection of the six years I devoted to receiving my doctorate rather than obtaining a child. I share this piece not out of regret, but instead, to document how infertility forces one to make a series of choices frequently not visible nor well understood by others. “Beating the Clock” memorializes my infertility journey. To be frank, it documents the years I have spent not dealing with or wanting to make fertility-related decisions. Now, with the dissertation written and graduate school completely, I embark on a series of new beginnings. Will I beat the clock? The blackout poetry reads: “Beating the clock / unpredictable and inflexible / PhD / female/time / is physically grueling.”

Series Four: Reflections of Our Past



Image 7. “Inhospitable Nest” by Elizabeth Walker (circa 2016)

Caption: I made this piece, my “Inhospitable Nest,” around the memory of a dream of recurrent house flooding I had several years ago. Water seeped in through the roughly textured walls and pooled on the hardwood floors. I was in the upstairs hall and trying to keep the water at bay when I heard a chorus of whispers. A chorus I soon realized was the voices of my house itself, resentful of us and acting out because we weren’t filling the house with children. Maria and I had a conversation about how our homes have taken on a different purpose and meaning due to our infertility and living in them as families of two. It got us thinking about nesting, which inspired me to create some artwork around that theme. Choosing the materials for this piece and setting aside time to create it was very calming. Weaving the wire in and out was a meditative process.

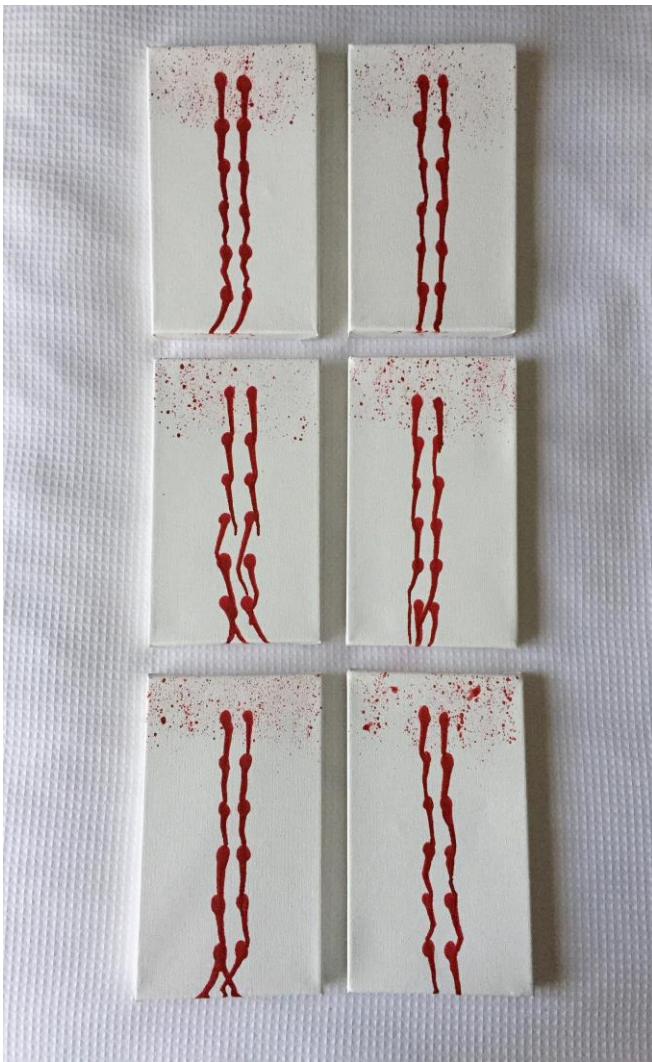


Image 8. “72 Red Tears: Undeniable Proof” by Maria Novotny (circa 2016)

Caption: I was young, 24-years-old when I first encountered difficulties conceiving. Not ready to face the facts that I may need to undergo fertility treatments if I ever wanted to carry a child on my own, I decided to go to graduate school. It was my escape where I quietly hoped and prayed that by some magical power I would naturally become pregnant. Yet, as time passed on, I had to slowly face the fact that magic nor graduate school would make me become pregnant. “72 Red Tears: Undeniable Proof” is a data visualization of the six years, twelve months and 72 periods that serve as undeniable proof of my infertility. During the first few years, when I began my period, tears would trickle down my face. I mourned the sadness that yet another month had passed without conception. However, as time passed and as I heard the stories of others who had to live with infertility, my own strength increased. No longer did every period begin with tears running down my face. I made this piece shortly after I turned in my dissertation to my committee. It serves as an homage to the journey I have taken both professionally and personally as I work to make experiences of infertility better understood.

Series Five: Works-In-Progress



Image 9. Elizabeth’s work-in-progress. (circa 2018)

Caption: I'm working on a piece using the bark from fallen birch trees on my family's property in northern Michigan. I collected it in the fall of 2016 during an early morning hike with my mother. We went out specifically so I could collect items to incorporate into my artwork. The property has been in my family for generations, at least as far back as my paternal great-grandparents, possibly further. Before it belonged to my parents exclusively, it was co-owned by my father and his brother and parents. Before them, it was owned by my paternal grandmother's only brother (out of a large family of girls) who never married or had children. I knew I wanted to do something with it but wasn't sure what. It was important for me to create something out of this dead piece that had come from a piece of property that was so significant in the upbringing of not only me but generations of family members. It's a place my sisters now share with their children, while I do not. There's also a family tie with alcoholism that is significant both for the previous generations and for me now, along with the place being significant to a turning point in my marriage. I'm working through this piece as I work through this stage in making decisions about building my family. I was further inspired to create this piece by an exhibit of Aboriginal art we saw at the Chazen Art Museum while presenting at the 4W Summit on Women, Gender, and Well-Being at the University of Wisconsin Madison. I was intrigued by the way they used stretched tree bark as a canvas for their works and how they also used it to encase and memorialize the bones of the deceased. After returning from the trip, I bought some oil pastels and began coloring the outside of the birch bark. I plan to assemble the individual pieces using staples and/or sutures for a nod to the medicalized experience of infertility.

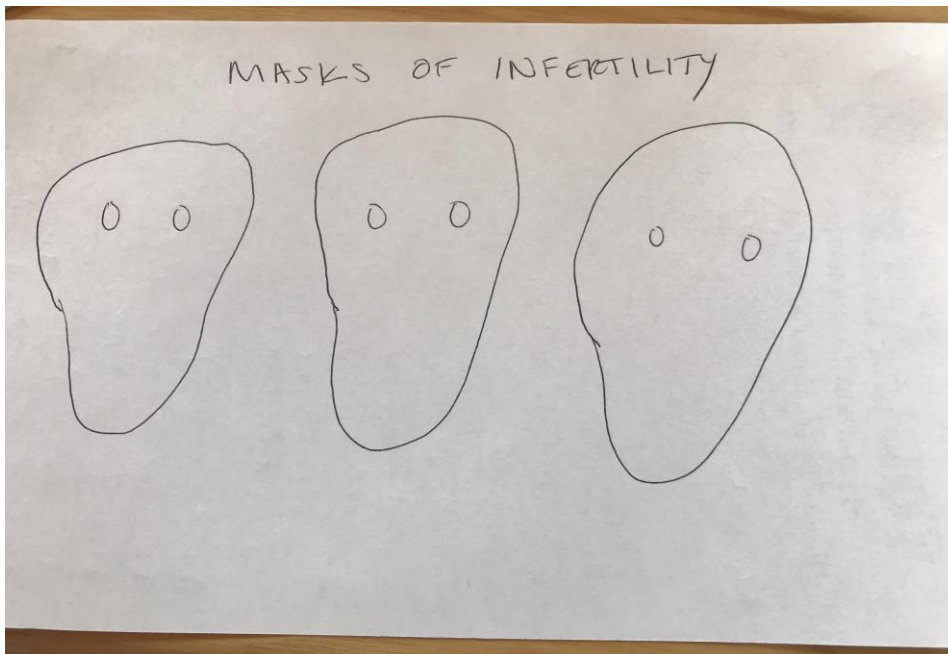


Image 10. Maria Novotny's work in-progress piece (circa 2018)

Caption: I have been thinking a lot about the different faces of infertility. Specifically, the different masks that I have had to put on throughout the eight years of seeing friends and family members announce their pregnancies. Now that I'm in my thirties, I find myself needing to wear these masks more frequently as more of my friends think about trying to get pregnant before the "clock is up". This sketch is a rough mock-up of the three masks I have had to put on. The first mask I want to depict is the face when everyone around you is pregnant while you are not. I plan to show this as a fractured mask. You try to put on a strong and happy face while feeling broken into pieces. You want to be happy for others but it is so hard. The second mask is when you realize and accept that you are infertile. It's a face you start to wear when you tell others and "come out" that you are infertile. You start to claim and wear your infertility. I plan on painting this mask in bold and bright colors because it takes guts and courage to wear this mask. The last mask represents the fatigue of embodying infertility. While it can be freeing to wear the second mask, it can also be exhausting. When you wear infertility, it can be risky and there can be backlash. You can lose friends and relationships can change. To create the last mask, I plan to use an adhesive to adhere sand onto the mask. I want to give the mask texture to portray the literal wear infertility has on the body and one's relationship with others. It can be gritty but it does not destroy you.

Making Space for Infertility Counternarratives via Art

The pieces above function as an assemblage of counternarratives — contrasting and contesting popularized infertility stories that venerate success. As counternarratives, they challenge beliefs that infertility can be fixed and resolved, as if it was a disease that can be cured. Yet, the art and narratives attached make clear that infertility always lives in the body, it is embodied. As the years progressed and the art changed, different expressions of what it means to live with infertility emerge. For example, Elizabeth Walker's crib with medication boxes is particularly powerful and well-received when we exhibit it. Yet that piece, for Elizabeth, is no longer as personally poignant and powerful. She is beyond defining her infertility within a medical paradigm. Today, she is more often triggered by the mailings from *Working Mother* magazine and the assumption that at her age, forty, she is most likely that — a working mother. As such, her piece of blackout poetry holds more personal resonance today.

For myself, I still am touched when I read *The House*. Many emotions and dreams were built and hoped for in that space. Yet, like Elizabeth's crib, it also seems distant and in the past. I no longer live there; I said my goodbyes. I have become a different

person. I am no longer in graduate school. I have become an assistant professor. While I still do not have children, my initial desire to become a parent continues to live in my academic and personal work. The pieces shown above illustrate the progression and navigation of both coming to be infertile and also coming to be an academic. The two, for me, have always been interictally woven together. How to unravel, I am no longer sure.

Understanding the “always becoming” nature of infertility, Elizabeth and I use *The ART of Infertility* to collect, represent, and make space for these narratives. While McClure has recognized the *s/m/othering* emphasis of mothering representations in art, there are also tendencies to replicate these narratives within infertility-inspired art. Examples include pieces that illustrate the prayers and tears offered in an attempt to have a child. Several pieces in our collection emphasize the need to maintain hopeful that a treatment or adoption will work. Taken alone, these pieces, I argue are dangerous as they realign with a *s/m/othering* narrative. Yet, when included in exhibits that feature a variety of infertility counternarratives, like the ones included in this essay, viewers assumptions of understanding infertility are complicated, contested. Such illustrates the importance of art — it is viewed, consumed, and digested by publics. Some viewers may have experience with infertility and forms of reproductive loss. Some may be individuals simply trolling into the exhibit off of the street. This is the point and the power behind *The ART of Infertility*. Art extends beyond the reproductive loss community and disrupts the cultural silence of infertility. Above all else, the assemblage of narratives contests a dominant narrative about infertility and offers spaces for viewers to come to their own conclusions about what it means to live with such a diagnosis. As curators of this exhibit, we view it as our ethical task to ensure that a variety of narratives of included and presented in order to allow viewers multiple portrayals of the reproductive loss experience.

Today, Elizabeth Walker and I continue to hold exhibits in cities around the U.S. When we travel to new communities, we frequently are asked where we are in our family-building journeys. To date, neither of us have children and we are still in many ways taking a pause. Most of this pause, however, is no longer a result of needing to assess what next family-building action or fertility treatment we should embark. Rather, this pause is an embodied recognition of whom we have now become as a result of this exhibit. The two of us are different people. Meeting each other, sharing our art, telling our stories, meeting others, collecting a series of infertility narratives, we have become have begun to embrace our infertility. No longer do we find shame in it, but understand it has a reorientation from a pronatalist culture. At times this came reorientation can be tiresome, but it is no longer lonesome. Our friendship helps us get through the good and the bad. It has given us happiness, purpose, and most of all a connection to each other through art. Art has helped us heal.

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