BEWILDERING NARRATIVE

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DECLARATION

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT

"Bewildering Narrative" outlines three videos, *Denouement*, *Happy Endings (2021)*, and *Drowning the Muse*. These works critique the climactic narrative form using formal breaks in digital media to push viewers' perceptions of storytelling into a place of bewilderment. To do so, I treat narrative conventions of continuity, character, and climax as mechanisms that articulate heterosexual desires and expectations. The videos visually, textually, and auditorily rupture this phallocentric organization of narrative storytelling. These interventions take the form of poetic fragmentation, repetition, and displaced exposition where the narrative disorients the viewers' attention rather than determining and regulating it. Editing plays a key role in my practice, as a methodology by which cinematic styles of jump cuts, on-screen text, and still images can refuse the arc structure of traditional cinema. These editing conventions in conjunction with surrealist texts generate a sense of bewilderment for the viewer, which theorist Jack Halberstam defines as "an immersive sense of being lost or standing outside of a system of knowing" (Halberstam 66). Each video uses distancing techniques that resist formal character development, rising/falling actions, or an inciting incident that would traditionally lead to a denouement. By reorienting how Western culture unconsciously espouses and engenders heteropatriarchal norms, the videos gesture toward alternative encounters with cinema that somatically and affectively queer desire. I draw on the writing of queer theorists Jack Halberstam and Sara Ahmed and of the speculative fiction authors Ursula K. Le Guin and Anne Bogart to situate my practice. I consider these works through a framework of gender studies, narrative theory, and postmodern literature. These writers, along with several artists, contextualize the formal aspects of the videos and my practice generally in the larger landscape of visual media. By queering the site/sight of our socialization–language exchange, literature, and cinema–these videos bewilder the stability of

Western semiotics, exposing the constructed nature of narrative rigidity and contemporary social formulations alike.

NARRATIVE

Narrative, William Cronon writes in *A Place for Stories: Nature, History, and Narrative*, is the "configur[ation of] the events of the past into causal sequences–stories–that order and simplify those events to…find meaning in an overwhelmingly crowded and disordered chronological reality" (*A Place for Stories* 1349). Narrative actively and passively sifts through information to reduce an abundance of data to a unified, legible story, one that will always omit events and subjects as it condenses into a single viewpoint or collection of viewpoints. Just as a photographer frames an image, apprehending the scene to delimit the intelligible, a story likewise evaluates information to structure a singular narrative. This framing feigns the real, but is merely a representation, or signifier, of logics constructed as real by Western society–heteropatriarchal norms, hegemonic whiteness, and other hierarchies. Images and language, taken as self-determining entities that in fact overdetermine their subjects, have become another taxonomic tool to order a world the West deems disordered. Cronon, an environmental historian, describes how "discontinuities, ellipses, and contradictory experiences would undermine the intended meaning" of a story in the naturalized narrative structure, subverting the inevitability of hegemonic logics (*A Place for Stories* 1349).

The virile nature of narrative structures, articulated in writer Ursula K. Le Guin's influential essay *The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction*, theorizes the genesis of the climax as originating from the prehistoric hunt. She fabulates "the killer story" of hunters that came back to their clan, and told an account of "bashing, thrusting, raping, [and] killing," a mammoth. This

adrenaline-filled encounter initiates an investment in seeking a climactic end (Le Guin 152).

According to Le Guin, this tantalizing story was told and retold, in vivid detail, revolving around

a heroic male figure dominating a non-human entity and the drama of the hunt. Although Le

Guin's conjecture about the climax is at times outlandish and satirical, it underscores the

consistency in Western literature and cinema around patriarchal storytelling and the

contemporary willingness to render the vast majority of texts in its image. This default story

structure in Western culture marginalizes other, potentially liberatory storytelling modes.

BEWILDERMENT

Cronon identifies the irony of the term 'wilderness" as, "far from being the one place on

earth that stands apart from humanity, it is quite profoundly a human creation" (*The Trouble with

Wilderness* 7). Cronon charts the trajectory of the term in Western culture, beginning with its

colonial roots as a tactic of European colonizers to claim power over the 'unknown' and

'untamed' Americas. By the 19th-century, white 'Americans' propagated the gospel of the

foundational frontier myth to justify Western expansion under a doctrine of rugged individualism

(Cronon 16). This government-sanctioned violence continued the mass genocide of Indigenous

peoples and demolished ecosystems that colonizers considered to be of a "raw state" that "had

little or nothing to offer civilized men and women" (Cronon 9). Cronon's etymological history of

the term wild reveals the accumulated layers of patriarchal coloniality and locates the word

outside the modern idealized "civil" order. Writer Fanny Howe and queer theorist Jack

Halberstam have utilizes the term "bewilderment" to acknowledge the colonial underpinnings of

'wild' while offering a radical claiming of coloniality's outside.

The term "bewilderment," similar to words like "confounded," first appeared in the 17th-century, characterizing losing your bearings in the wilderness, or in the case of "amazement," a literal maze. The Oxford English Dictionary defines bewilderment as "confusion arising from losing one's way; mental confusion from inability to grasp or see one's way through a maze or tangle of impressions or ideas." (Oxford English Dictionary). Bewilderment is a place of disorientation, which is important as relates to sexual orientation, described in the next section. For author Fanny Howe in her essay titled, "Bewilderment" she states "what I have been thinking about, lately, is bewilderment as a way of entering the day as much as the work. Bewilderment as poetics and politics." (Howe, 5). Howe turns the term bewilderment into a lens for looking at our daily realities as "dizzying and repetitive" events rather than the sequential and conclusive narrative events we've become accustomed to in storytelling (Howe 18). Her essay describes this bewildering approach to poetry and fiction as more akin to a dream-like structure, where the weirdness undermines the linearity and becomes the plot itself (Howe, 7). Howe's approach to her literary work with the term bewilderment in mind as a political and poetic disorganizing principal has been crucial to the critiques and queering produced in my three video works *Drowning the Muse*, *Happy Endings (2021)*, and *Denouement*.

In his book *Wild Things: The Disorder of Desire* (2020), queer theorist Jack Halbertam applies the term bewilderment to queer bodies by linking wildness and queerness, as disorienting "other" spaces in relation to normative hegemonic culture. For Halberstam, wildness is an absence of the taxonomic order of things, that allows for desire and disorder to flow independent of organizing principles. Halberstam uses the word bewilderment as a way of constituting precolonial notions of space, orientation, and navigation; and refers to an immersive sense of being lost or of standing outside of a system of knowing or of merging with other systems of

space and time that linger is the background to those we have selected as meaningful in the contemporary world (Halberstam, 66, Wild Things).

Queer theorist Sara Ahmed draws on the Indo-European etymology of the term queer in her text *Queer Phenomenology* (2006) to define it as "a spatial term, which then gets translated into a sexual term" for a twisted sexuality that does not follow a 'straight line.' (Ahmed 67). Queerness as being a twist in a straight line describes the deviation from the broader hegemonic aspirations and desires. Defining our orientation in space and the word queer as they relate to phenomenology is cententral to how my work functions in relation to normative or 'straight' structures. Phenomenology studies how we experience our body in space and how that informs our consciousness, desires, perception, and social activity (Smith). The basis for much of phenomenological thinking comes from German philosopher Edmund Husserl who described the idea of "intentionality" as our experiences resulting from how bodies are directed towards things (Smith). The focus of Ahmed's text shows "how bodies become oriented by how they take up space" and in doing so are gendered, sexualized, and raced (Ahmed 5). Ahmed expands on the queer theorist Judith Butler's essay *Sexual Ideology and Phenomenological Description* by looking at the body is a locus of existential themes, and a site of expressing the structures of oppression. As I extend my body in space and direct it towards certain objects, "sexuality becomes a scene of cultural struggle, improvisation, and innovation" as Butler notes. Previously, the feminist critiques of theorists like Merleau-Ponty have largely viewed phenomenology as an erasure of the apparatuses of oppression, and a favoring of perceptional experience that is embedded in embodied actions, but Butler reframes this to seeing the body concentrating those exercises of power in how we face the world.

Butler locates the body at the center of her argument, seeing it as the site where the "intimate and the political converge and a dramatic opportunity for expression, analysis, and change" (Butler, 98). As self-identifying lesbians, Ahmed, Butler, and myself have been positioned in all of our experiences whether politically, romantically, or sexually that manifests in conscious and subconscious delineations from straightness. These deviations are bound up in the body, and how we engage with normative structures in queer ways. Ahmed she draws on Butler and Foucault's thinking of heterosexuality, and Husserl's understanding of "the field" of objects as queer way of looking. Phenomenologically speaking, "the field" are certain objects that are available to us as people moving through the world. Some of these things are more easily accessed than others, as Ahmed indicates that heterosexuality forecloses on certain objects and "functions as a background, as that which is behind action that are repeated over time and with force, and that insofar as it is behind does not come into view" (Ahmed 87). My work extends the misalignment of my sexuality from straightness into a critique of how I experience the world as a lesbian woman. I understand this as the "queer lens" through which I approach all of my work.

Halberstam's situates "bewilderment" in his discourse as a bodily feeling of confusion as it relates to queerness and how it alludes to the term "wild," but still avoids using the term citing Michael Taussig's similar contentions with the word. Like Halberstam, I have also deliberately circumvented "wild" or "wilderness" in an effort to not misconstrue the intention of the work as striving for a return to nature or Eden. The "natural world" as it appears in my work is not separate from the "civilized world," but instead is where I find inspiration for several of my works as the larger landscape where humanity exists. Halberstam uses the word bewilderment as a way of constituting tensions and disruptions that produce aberrations in the hierarchical orders

that I create through a variety of emotional registers in my video work. By shifting the perceived stability of accepted hegemonic inclinations through my work, I propose bewilderment as a queering of space and time throughout my video practice. Losing oneself to a surreal-dreamlike state, the camera and editing become the primary modes of communicating a queering of the gaze, turning the banal into an uncanny subject. The somatic bodily experience with my work acts as shifting between spaces and losing a grasp on accepted normative realities.

COUNTERING THE NARRATIVE

If we understand narrative as a reinforced normative structure of the West that operates to organize objects and socialized outcomes within the structures of racial, heteropatriarchal capitalism, then a postmodern literary form might offer an undermining alternative. In this formulation, metanarrative, fragmentation, and poetic prose serve as tools of critique that are disinterested in the formal conventions of plot structure, character development, and chronologically sequenced events. As Ursula K. Le Guin proposes in the "carrier bag" as an alternative method of fiction that focuses on stories that are collected, gathered, and held, like picking oats into a bag (Le Guin 152). In my video practice I utilize gathering and assembling as a way of searching for "the nature, subject, words of the other story, the untold one" by drawing attention to its gaps, inadequacies, and frictions (Le Guin 152). This deviation of patriarchal ordering of events Le Guin describes as "the story that hid my humanity from me" (Le Guin 152). The rigidity of language has been codified and "defined by profit, by linear power, by institutional dehumanization" which Audre Lorde explains in her conical text *Poetry is Not a Luxury* (Lorde 39). As Lorde succinctly says, stories at their core come from a model aligned with Cartesian and capitalistic ideas of success. Even poetry, when written in prose, can work as

an undoing of the modern systems and social hierarchies that have been formulated in the past and held together in the present. Both Le Guin, and Lorde legitimize how narrative, and language, were never intended with women in mind. Language and visual description to weave together the ruinous structures that control our lives.

There are tools that disrupt and undermine the status quo of storytelling, like paratactic reasoning, to create relationships between independent events by inferring subtle threads of continuity between them. In the fall of 1976 at the Edinburgh Film Festival, choreographer and filmmaker Yvonne Rainer spoke on an avant-garde film panel, where she questioned the rigidity of narrative and the potentiality of non-narrative forms of film. Here, Rainer explains how narrative "produces an expectation and effect different from those produced by the distillations, transmutations, and perambulations between meaning and sound that characterize poetry." (*FOCO – A LIKELY STORY, by Yvonne Rainer*). The poetics of cinema loosen narrative structure in the refusal of a continuous sequencing of actions that can be

Ali Newhard, Denouement, 2022, video still

resolved. Rainer's point also explains how the "in revealing or concealing particularities of location and time" in cinema, there is a "potential to produce endless speculation, discourses on the real and the plausible" that produce a distillation of narrative beyond the assumed framework (*FOCO – A LIKELY STORY, by Yvonne Rainer*).

DENOUEMENT

      Throughout my video *Denouement* (9:20min, 2022), where there are no consistent

character arcs, locations, or specific genres between the chapters that are ever articulated in the

voiceover, images, or sequencing. The feeling of each scene exists independently, but the

continuity is found in the proximity and contrast of each of the individual chapters. *Denouement,*

titled ironically for its lack of an ending, also builds

on a rejection of linear time and space by using

chapter based microfictions to deconstruct

expectations of plot and climax. The video illustrates

a rejection of normative story conventions, and forces

the viewer to consciously or subconsciously resolve

the information based on their own observations.

      This relationship can be seen in how each

chapter varies and contrasts the mood or subject that

preceded it. This immersive one-channel video,

projected on a wall, consists of still video clips over

narrated chapters with on-screen text and ambient

sound effects. The scenes range from the exhaustion

and eeriness of arriving at a motel in the middle of

Ali Newhard, Denouement, 2022, video still

the winter, to explosive frustration about birds stalking the narrator, to a woman eating

clementines with her daughter after having a miscarriage. The series of narrations and captions

fluctuate between straightforward prose, poetic description, and emotional outbursts sequenced

in a non-chronological order (e.g. chapter six follows chapter four) and at points the chapter

numbers inexplicably repeat. Like a sequenced photobook, the vignettes are stand-alone

fragments that build on recurring motifs of gender, sex, relationships, nature, and modern life.

This takes form as animal behavior, electronic static, and people moving through the motions of

relationships. As the stories build on top of one another, their lack of consistency rubs up against

the viewer's expectations creating a pull to exist inside the previous story and a push to start

mentally bridging the two stories together. After a point, the video loses a certain veracity with

the viewer, as the hopes of one contiguous plot or culminating ending seems unlikely. The

video's lack of plot also leaves the viewer unresolved without the legible conventions of cinema,

and instead offers an opening for the viewer to construe the threads of the plot through resolving

the opaque nature of the video themselves.

The visuals and language exist independently in *Denouement*, but as Anne Bogart

explains in her book *What's the Story: Essays about Art, Theater and Storytelling* "the human

mind is tuned to detect patterns, the mind attempts to craft

ordered narratives from random input" (Bogart 7). The threads in

the video produce tonal motifs that become their own pattern and

generate a poetic kind of narrative framework. Trying to

articulate specific examples of these types of patterns in the

video feels counterintuitive to the surreal meaning that I want the

viewer to experience. However, an example of this is the text

scrawled across the projection in bright red or blue Helvetica

font that appears three distinctive times and feels jarring and at

odds with the narrations about relationships and loss. One

chapter includes a text element laid on top of a perfectly

Ali Newhard, Denouement, 2022, video stills

manicured lawn, with a single tree at the base of the steep hill, and a cloudy blue sky. There's

very little indication that the image is a video except for the clouds that are sped up to 400

percent in the edit. Still, on this hazy summer day, the clouds are tumbling slowly on top of the

horizon line echoing the narration that's slowed to a low-bass voice that recites the synonyms for

the word guttural. In similar sections to this one, the bewildering senses come from the text color

and narration that engage the text as a way of
triggering somatic response that's in contrast
to the other chapters, but still builds on an
overall expression of story.

Ali Newhard, Denouement, 2022, video still

Like in the mowed lawn section, I
employ a full frame that's in contrast to other
chapters where I incorporate black bars on the

top and bottom of the image to indicate a more cinematic language. For example, the section

about a woman eating clementines with her mother, where the visuals do more priming of an odd

orange space linked with a surreal story bewilders. This chapter has elements of magical realism

in this questionably psychic moment between a mother and daughter. The oddity of the story

does not build into any type of resolution. Each section has varying styles, that I've sketched out

as a fragment of a story where a series of tonal elements, like color and light, or repeated motifs

begin presenting themself in each chapter instead of a character or group of characters moving

through a series of events. Bogart elaborates on her construction of fragments as "interconnected

accumulation of many stories by many other 'righters' in a worldwide web of linked stories"

(Bogart 9). In this way *Denouement* does connect these chaotic events together, rather it builds a

surreal accumulation of feelings.

The style of *Denouement* was influenced by French conceptual artist Laure Prouvost's video works, which conceptually and sensorially bewilders the viewer through the queering of senses. Prouvost's practice explores the suggestive nature of language in video and engages the viewer in sensuousness dream-like spaces both in the gallery space and in the video. She often refers to wanting "people to taste the artwork" by creating hyper sensory experiences with the images, words, and spaces by invoking other senses through demands to the viewer. Prompting the senses enables a rerouting of orientation where sensuality takes primacy over rationality. In her video installation *Swallow (2013)* she collages together sculptures, drawings, paintings, and videos that engulf the viewer in a sensory experience. The video within *Swallow* has a discombobulating style that simultaneously seduces the viewer into the video space, with clips of feet walking on plush grass and figures sucking on strawberries, while also quickly jumping cutting to a close up of someone's prompting you to turn around. Next, the narration will whisper "the fruits are naked" with a close up of a mouth biting on a strawberry or a blurry close up of a mouth breathing and the narrator saying "feel the sun on your face." For Prouvost it's about giving the viewer a bodily experience beyond what the material can provide or what the viewer would expect from a video. This push outside of what videos purportedly confined to produces a bewildering affect on the viewer that I'm generating in my own practice.

Like Prouvost's video, *Denouement* uses the body, nature, text, and narration blended together with quick cuts to produce a work that mashes up a surreal experience. Pacing the video without any central plot creates a bewildering space that pulls the viewer into the video without engaging with characters or plot. Prouvost has described the inspiration for the video as attempting to replicate the pleasure of sun radiating down on her face, which is indicative of Prouvost's approach to video art. Her works go beyond limits of the audio-visual medium where

the tastes, feelings, and smells are images, movements, and sounds that can be extended to the viewer (Searle and Robertson). The video editing style and foregrounding of the sensory are two elements I've used heavily in the *Denouement* video work. Techniques like overwhelming jump cuts in succession and brief establishing shots become the vocabulary of the clips like in *Swallow,* and infer an environment that relates, directly or indirectly with the voiceover. This can be seen in a *Denouement* with three clips of a river from different vantage points, showing a swelling from a heavy evening rain, as the narrator accounts an anti-climactic moment of two people professing their love for one another. These clips set the scene and also indirectly

Laure Prouvost, Swallow, 2013, video still

visualize the relationship between narration and images and then broken up by the following chapter, in which includes the narrator being stalked by robins, and the red text appears on screen with synonyms for the word guttural. I do not ascribe meaning to the different sections, however, the tone of each chapter exists to prime and undermine what precedes and follows it. For example, are the robins a metaphor for how love drives people into some type of psychosis? How does the pristine field and tree contrast with the hot red text on top of it? How does guttural relate to any of this? I don't have answers to these questions, but I do think they underscore how we're constantly inferring relationships between text and images.

     Swallow, and in her other work *Vegetables* (2014), Prouvost conceives of fantastical stories that verge on magical realism, but are also dependent on everyday physical objects and

spaces as a way of using the quotidian to ground the storytelling elements in reality. *Vegetables* is

a video installation and sculpture where Prouvost recounts a spiritual experience she had,

displayed on a celluloid television sitting behind a plinth with a carrot, onion, lemon, and tomato

on top. On screen is a close up of Prouvost's hand pointing at the physical vegetables in the room

and explaining how these exact vegetables fell on her bed as she slept. When she woke up she

saw holes in the ceiling that were shaped as perfect outlines of the vegetables themselves and

interpreted this incident as a sign from god. The dream-like tale plays with what informs our

understanding of fictions that inform our reality, and what makes something a truth versus a

fabrication, particularly as it relates to media.

In two chapters of *Denouement* I mess with this

dream-like form of storytelling, one that replicates an

earnest, almost schizophrenic reaction to birds, and

another that uses the second person to suggest the viewer

had an experience walking at night with the narrator. The

Laure Prouvost, Vegetables, 2014, installation view

quick-cut of images of robins narrated in the first person

brings the viewer into the psychosis of someone claiming to be being followed by a species of

bird. Like Prouvost's vegetables sitting on a plinth, the phone images of dozens of robins

flashing on screen corroborates the narrator's bird conspiracy. The narration and visuals in this

section are in stark contrast to the more inviting storylines describing relationships like Chapter

12 that starts with the statement "Every year was the last year until it was actually the last year."

The narrator talks in second person, asking the viewer if "you remember" the bizarre story of the

narrator getting their hands sucked into a strip of grass next to the sidewalk. Again, like in

Vegetables, this chapter of the video employs objects like mud, worms, and televisions, in a

matter-of-fact way, making an outlandish story appear grounded. It's through these video

techniques that bewildering is folded into the content by the juxtaposition of the realities as

surreal.

The video thwarts any conclusion, and instead asks you to see the metacognitive,

sensorial states as the plot that works to stimulate the viewer to see how bizarre constructs like

narrative are when they are avoided or reinforced from scene to scene. This queer oriented lens

mediated with the camera inspects the architectures that surround us physically and socially. In

my current practice these architectures are presenting themselves as narratives and characters,

that exist in these small episodic clips, that are then expounded upon sensorially using audio. The

images that depict some type of "signified" objects and the images/video that lack an object

provide a space or figure to contextualize or emote the constructed moment described in the text.

HAPPY ENDINGS (2021)

The video *Happy Endings (2021)* (7min, 2021) uses this idea of a "queer lens" through

the adaptation of Margaret Atwood's metafiction short story, titled "Happy Endings" (1983). The

alphabetically outlined video work, comments and critiques narrative and culture in modern

literature by reducing plots to successes and failures based around socialized ideals of Western

culture. Drawing on Ahmed's description of how straightness exists as a backdrop, I use the

Happy Ending's (2021) video as a way of showing how both narrative and straightness are

recurring. The video looks to extrapolate from Atwood's metanarratives to further critique the

relationships, gender, and desires of late capitalism through a lesbian perspective. Queering of

the viewer's perception and the delineations between the senses and finding the relationship

between the body and queer sight, and queer subject relies on the audience's somatic responses

to the video work as a way of finding a place of bewilderment.

Ali Newhard, Happy Endings 2021, 2021, video stills

    Happy Endings (2021) is a single-channel video projection on an eight foot screen that does not incorporate a single image. Instead, unexposed or overexposed 16mm film is overlaid with color mattes that correspond with the transitions in the narrated text, which are then accompanied with captions. The 16mm film is sourced from the ends of my grandfather's 1960s film reels, which contain grain, light leaks, and scratches. These are the parts of the film reels that are ignored for their lack of intelligible information. In *Happy Endings* (2021) the material texture of the film is what the viewer engages with and relies on along with their own projections onto the film. The narration of the text is performed by me, a queer person, and accentuates Atwood's already diminishing descriptions of heterosexual relationships found in narrative through a game theory model. The tonal elements I produce through audio and visuals generate a meditative space to queer the gendered desires and tropes found in formal narratives through a video. The monotone narration of the text includes a subtle sardonic tone that speaks over ambient instrumental music that fades in accordance with the delineated sections of the text. The video attempts to mimic the simplistic nature of the narrative, while also creating tonal shifts without images.

    Kelli Connell's photographs also deconstruct and examine relationships as performances of gender and desire. *Double Life*, Connell's twenty plus year project with her model Kiba Jacobson, are a series of intimate medium format photographs depicting two figures as a couple,

despite being the same person photoshopped together. Connell photographs with a Pentax 67 and

a self-timer that allows her to play opposite Jacobson in the couple when photographing the

scene. Once they have one side of the image, they switch clothes, and shoot the same scene

again, after which Connell photoshops herself out and Jacobson into each of the images. The

photographs are made mostly in the midwest, where Connell is based, and influenced by

personal experiences that range from flirty and sexual to nostalgic and aching. Each tableau

relies heavily on Jacobson's physical performance of gender, as she figures herself on both sides

Kelli Connell, "Sweet Water," 2008, Print

Kelli Connell, "Eden," 2008, Print

of these relationships, and in doing so acts out romantic tropes in cinematic photographs. The

reading of these scenes varies, as they open up to a variety of questions about the connection

between gender in queer relationships contrasting heterosexual couples, butch-femme lesbian

relationships, and our personal relationships with our own gender performance. This can be seen

in an image like *Sweet Water* (2008) where two figures are sitting at a bar in the evening at

separate tables. The figure in the background's body faces away from the camera, wearing white

tank-top and jeans, as she looks over her shoulder at the other figure in the foreground. The

foregrounded figure is half turned to the camera wearing a brown sweater vest and a pink

patterned skirt looking off in the distance. Her elbow is propped on the table and a cigarette

casually hangs between the fingers in her left hand. *Sweet Water's* ambiguity between what is happening between the two figures creates a lemniscate of questions. Is the background figure attracted to the figure in the foreground? If the figure imaged is the same person, are these two sides of this woman's psyche? What is the foreground figure looking at? Remember how you could smoke indoors?

The tone of the narration in *Happy Endings (2021)* and in *Denouement* resembles some of the stylistic choices Connell makes in *Double Life,* as she fluctuates between playful,

Barbara Hammer, "Women I Love," 1976, film still

Barbara Hammer, "Women I Love," 1976, film still

dramatic, sweet, and flirty, but stays within a certain sardonic tenor. In section B of *Happy Endings (2021),* where "Mary falls in love with John but John doesn't fall in love with Mary," the film turns from yellow in A, to a tired red in section B. The narrator's voice comes in and out, moving between pitying Mary, then getting annoyed with her complicity in their dynamic, as the omniscient voice summarizes their relationship. John treats Mary terribly and Mary is complicit in letting the behavior continue as she submissively strives for the perfect relationship with him. Atwood's writing already introduces these sentiments and the narration expounds on them making these shifts more apparent by accentuating the background of hegemonic ideas around relationships and coupling.

In contrast to the heterosexual relationships in Atwood's writing, filmmaker Barbara Hammer's practice sought to film queer moments by foregrounding lesbian emotions and desires. Two of Hammer's notable early works, *Menses* (1974), and *Women I Love* (1976),

feature Hammer with her friends and lovers, in the spaces they lived filmed on her 16mm camera. Hammer's work makes nature and queer women the subject instead of one-dimensional femme characters dominant in cinema and video art in the 1970s directed by men . Queer film scholar Krystyna Mazur describes how this approach to filmmaking disrupted the "long history of cinematic misrepresentations, where our bodies and movements were put to the service heteropatriarchal norms" (Hammer, 50). Hammer's film *Women I Love* begins with clips of flowering lettuce, cauliflower, artichokes, and broccoli being zoomed in and out followed by distorted images of women in the woods, and close-ups of bodies pressing up against each other.
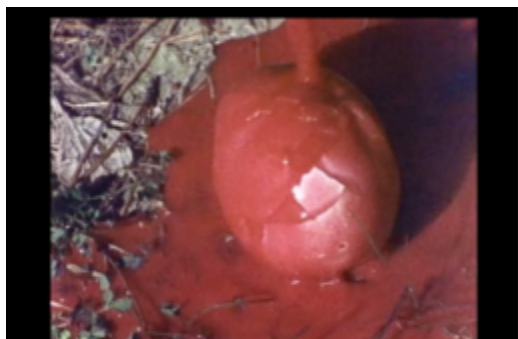
Barbara Hammer, Menses, 1974, video still   Ali Newhard, Denouement, 2022, video still

Hammer incorporates her domestic spaces overlaying video of the kitchen and the bedroom cut together, with clips of the outside to produce a non-linear, spatial, depiction of herself and her lovers. For the purposes of this essay Hammer's work represents not only experiments in non-linearity, but also shows the possibilities of queer film outside of the bounds of traditional cinema. The work seeks not only bewilderment, but also contrasts the homogeneity of phallocentric cinema that focus on alternative backdrops of objects as discussed with texts Ahmed and Butler.

Hammer, preceding someone like Provoust, uses a style that emphasizes sensuousness in her films. In the video *Menses* (1974) that begins with tracking shots of women's pubic hair,

overlaid with eggs falling out of their vaginas, as a voiceover repeats the word "menses" over film. The group of women, eggs, white sheet, and ground are covered in a red liquid that is not only bewildering in its disorder, but also ignores norms like public versus private spaces, and viewing the human as separate from the nonhuman in the imaging of the eggs. *Menses* is a political film in its matter factness about the often discrete subject of periods, while also integrating a comedic tone of the experience of periods. This is cut with inserts of women carrying tampon boxes out of a store and blood dripping on on a white sheet from a woman's body. Layered film, marked up positive prints, and scratched negatives were all methods of intervening with the material nature of the film, Hammer's already disorienting editing process.

The approach Hammer takes in these works provides a contrast in its subject matter and content to my video *Happy Endings,* and a comparison to the queer lens we both embody. In both videos, Hammer shows extremely fun and tender moments with friends and partners, creating a new visual language with which visualizes female pleasure as a subject and as a space. Although *Happy Endings* doesn't assert the same kind of imaging of queerness, I look to Hammer's work as a model of lesbian video art that produces around assertion of orientation.

DROWNING THE MUSE

The video *Drowning the Muse* reveals and rejects how women are cast in sexist tropes, like muse to aid phallocentric storylines. To analyze *Drowning the Muse*, I draw on video artists Omer Fast and Bandi Abdibi, who bypass conventional style cinema in their narrative video art to complicate the arc structure. These artists provide an episodic collection of images and language that imbue the viewer with agency to resolve the works. Along the line of accumulating stories, *Drowning the Muse* is a video I produced after searching for the *true* story behind how a death mask became the face on all resusci Anne CPR dummies. The work began as I amassed

videos, photographs, films, paintings, and podcasts recounting the mask's story of a woman who

arrives in Paris and falls madly

in love with a man, only to be

heartbroken, and discover she's

pregnant. In her destitution, she

jumps off a bridge into the Seine

and drowns. When they pulled
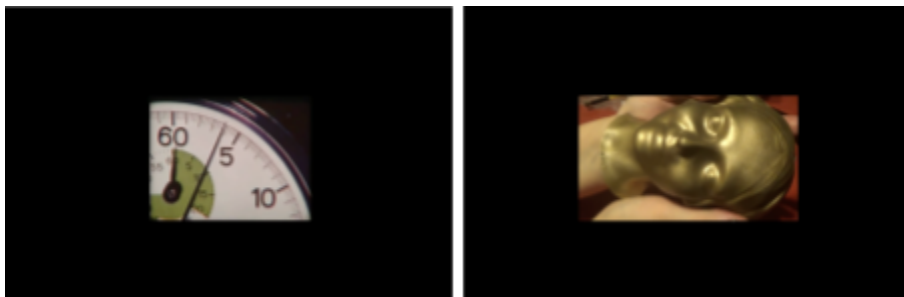
Ali Newhard, Drowning the Muse, 2021, video stills

her body from the river, she's brought to the morgue, where the attendants were so taken by her

beauty and posthumous smile, that they made a death mask of her face. At the beginning of the

20th-century, reproductions of her death mask appeared in Parisian vendor stalls, and soon

spread into the homes of European tourists, after which, artists like René Migrette and Man Ray,

incorporated the mask in their work. Presently, versions of the mask are available for purchase

online, and the story has been retold in all corners of the internet. The conflicting versions of the

lore document the contemporary oral traditions as postmodern texts, and implicates its use of

language to reproduce patriarchal paragons of the gendered body through the construct of the

muse. Omer Fast's *CNN Concatenated* (18min, 2002) and *The Casting* (30min, 2007) heavily

influenced my approach to the *Drowning the Muse* video in his narrative assembling using other

people's video clips and editing that embellishes surrealness. Fast employs repetition, pauses,

and cuts as humorous critiques of media culture and the role of memory in the formation of

stories. Fast recorded hundreds of hours of post-9/11 broadcasts on the Cable News Network

(CNN) to produce *CNN Concatenated* as a monologue by cutting segment clips together of

dozens of reporters. The construction of the video comments on how language is conveyed

through the repetition of vocabulary, cadence, and syntax in the preliminary stages of the United States "War on Terror" and the rise of 24 hour news media.

       ...so he starts singing (2000) is a three- minute and eighteen second video by artist Bani Abdibi featuring a teenager sitting in front of a drab green seamless wearing a taupe cardigan. This is one of Abdibi's first films, where she edits down an hour of footage of the teen film buff Mashia Sharma, summarizing 26 Bollywood films that were released between 1975-2001. The process of cutting up these stories produces a nonsensical narrative revealing the patterns and tropes in Bollywood cinema around death, marriage, and love. Sharam's description is mostly in English, but occasionally she performs impressions or songs in Hindi. These moments of inflections or laughter tie together these clips to provide little context to the films being described. The video constructs a non-linear narrative using canonical Bollywood films that produces no climax, and instead, rehashes the same narratives, texts, and literature into a postmodern, gooey-mush of confusing snippets of the recounteed films.

Omer Fast, CNN Concatenated, 2002, video still

Omer Fast, The Casting 2007, video still

       In *Drowning the Muse* (4:25min, 2021), I reproduce online media from Youtube videos to play with narratives as told through the video-blog or vlog. The video work sets out to critique the language and images that replicate the gendered and misogynistic modern myth of L'Inconnue de la Seine (or the drowned woman of the Seine) as it's produced in digital video form. Videos or the vlogs, are posted to public websites to uncritically retell the fictional story of the mask in all its iterations. These videos are reproducing the gendered fiction of the muse who
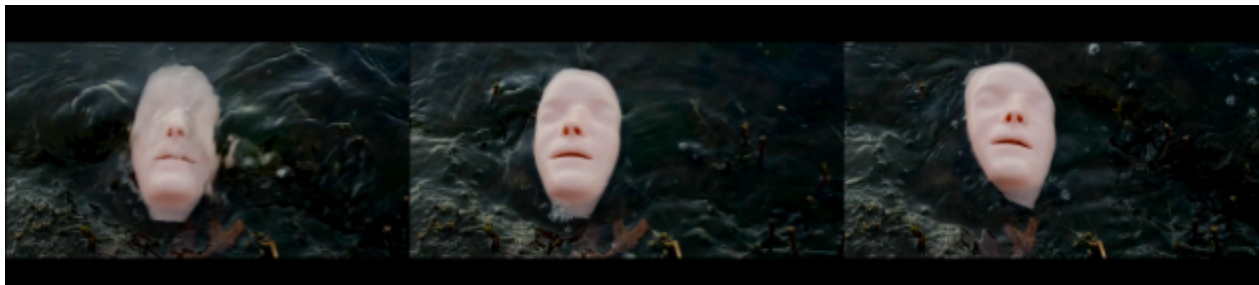
is a young, silent, smiling, disembodied, white woman. *Drowning the Muse* is a two-channel video that starts with one small black monitor on the ground close to the viewer, and one large projection on the wall. Audio of water lapping on a shore fades in, and the projector follows by revealing a close-up shot of a CPR mask, animated in the water, as it undulates between waves

Ali Newhard, "Drowning the Muse," 2021, video stills

and rocks. The projection fades to black, and the monitor populates with a stopwatch animation on the monitor, as a narrator of the CPR training film states, "Never stop cardiopulmonary resuscitation for longer than five seconds for any reason." After which the video jolts the viewer through a A series of jump cuts, splicing together cutting Youtube videos, films, radio video works, and instructional CPR films follows, jolting the viewer. In Accordance with the durational frame provided by the dialogue in the sampled video, all of the clips in the montage are under five seconds long, so as to maintain the "life" of the story. The video plays up these tropes through the edits as the story devolves when the clips begin to contradict each other. until At that point I shift the narrative into a meta commentary on their own retelling. The final 11-seconds on the monitor channel depicts an ASMR video, where the mask appears as a gold bust, and I metaphorically drown the story of the muse before fading to black. After this, the projection channel fades on again and the flaccid CPR mask is still floating in water and being slapped by the tide.

CONCLUSION

My video practice proposes a cinematic methodology of bewilderment as a queering subversion of the perceived stability of accepted hegemonic inclinations around relationships, desire, and narratives. The three videos, *Denouement*, *Happy Endings (2021)*, and *Drowning the Muse*, destabilize and expose as constructed and constrictive the colonial, heteropatriarchal climactic arc narrative structure which orients and delimits the viewer's consciousness and the field of perceptibility. The ruptures of sequential video editing in my practice critiques the consistency of the arc so that it is not dependent on events that trigger each other, but act as a disordering aggregate to offer a queer lens. The works question the normative orientation of the viewer's gaze and challenge the totalizing acceptance of narrative as inevitable. The act of queering, bewildering, and disordering narrative and the hegemonic structures that determine its centrality points to their inherent fabrication. As my practice moves forward, I seek to explore and route beyond narrative and racial/gendered scripts to a liberatory space otherwise.

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