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SOMEONE, STOP HER!
THE MUSICAL (THE GALLERY SHOW):
THE THESIS DOCUMENT

By

Hannah DeWitt
B.F.A., Spalding University, 2020

A Thesis
Submitted to the Faculty of the
College of Arts and Sciences of the University of Louisville
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Fine Arts
In Studio Art and Design

Fine Arts
University of Louisville
Louisville, Kentucky

May 2023

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A Thesis Approved on

March 10, 2023

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First and foremost I would like to thank my mother, Martha Anderson DeWitt, for supporting me through my graduate education and taking care of me.

Additionally, I would like to thank my faculty mentor and thesis committee chair, Professor Tiffany Calvert, as well as the rest of my thesis committee: Professor Scott Massey, Professor Marybeth Orton, and Dr. Chris Reitz, as well as an honorary member of my thesis committee who has taken part in the thesis review process but for technical reasons is unable to attend the oral defense, Dr. Anne Caldwell. Thank you all for the feedback, resources, and time you have spent on me. I would also like to thank research librarian Courtney Stine for her extensive help in my research process, as well as Professor Ying Kit Chan for encouraging me regarding my graduate teaching assistantship. I also thank Professor Rachel Singel for lending me her typewriter, Professor Kat Cox for lending me her alphabet stamps, and Professor Mary Carothers for giving me a “pocket audience” machine. I would like to thank my former professor and friend Dr. Sarah Sik and her husband Dr. Mark Harrison for supporting me academically, emotionally, and spiritually. Additionally, I thank Allie Fireel for acting in my musical, Z Zhou for tattooing my back, and Clarity Hagan for all of the references I might not have come across had they not been by my side for some time. I thank my brother, sister, cohorts, and friends. Finally, I would like to thank everyone who tried to stop me.

ABSTRACT

SOMEONE, STOP HER! THE MUSICAL (THE GALLERY SHOW): THE THESIS DOCUMENT

Hannah DeWitt

March 10, 2023

This thesis document accompanies a body of work that is radically vulnerable, personally political, and emotionally complex. Through my work, I challenge myself and my audience to sit with discomfort and create an environment suitable to generate a nuanced appreciation of pain that approaches its acceptance through humor, confessionality, and the subversion of tropes against themselves as an act of counter-mimicry. This document situates my work within art-historical context with a primary focus on performance art and applies insight from each artwork referenced to further analyze and defend my own work. Additionally, I use texts relating to Camp sensibility, binary terror, affect theory, and trauma studies to make arguments about my work that both recognize the discomfort I create and honor the potential for said discomfort to be productive and transformative.

Content warning:

Potentially upsetting subject matter such as sexual abuse, rape, suicide, mental health, and grief.

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INTRODUCTION

So I did a performance called “A Hundred Blow Jobs,” because out of the two or three thousand blow jobs I’d given, a hundred had been really lousy— really horrible experiences where I’d cry afterwards. I made a tape of all these abusive remarks I’d heard, like, “Suck it, you bitch!” or “Yeah, I bought you dinner— you should suck my cock!” or “You’re going to hell for this!” or a woman saying “I hope she gets AIDS!” or “She’s such a slut!” I filled a cassette with angry, judgmental, or exploitative remarks like, “Come on, Annie, we’ll pay you an extra ten dollars if you do that anal sex scene!”

Then I did a performance where I played the tape, gagged on this huge dildo, and just got in touch with the pain of those hundred blow jobs. I really cried and it came from my gut; it was very visceral. All the sexual abuse I’d ever suffered came out of my throat; I gagged— really gagged. After I did that for a while and the tape stopped, I did a healing ceremony for myself. I’d been having gum problems and my feeling was: it was from those lousy hundred blow jobs. So I put ground-up carrot on my gums and teeth, burned some herbs, and healed myself. And that was my performance— I felt really good afterwards.

This got worked into more performances, and Emilio Cubeiro (who was my director) came up with a good idea: make a board with lots of dildoes attached, so that I could suck all these different dildoes of all sizes and colors. I did that; I’d cry and gag and really get in touch with the pain each time, and people in the audience would cry because they could relate to this— especially women; this was a scene primarily for women who’d been in the sex industry. And after a dozen times I would no longer cry or gag— because I’d transformed and exorcised that demon. Now I feel free— free from all that abuse I suffered.

-Annie Sprinkle for Angry Women¹



Figure 1. Annie Sprinkle, *A Hundred Blow Jobs*, performance, 1989.²

¹ Andrea Juno and V. Vale, *Angry Women* (San Francisco, CA: Re/Search Publications, 1991), 32.

² Annie Sprinkle, “The Sprinkle Salon Annie Sprinkle Leslie Barany,” accessed February 10, 2023, <https://jstor.org/stable/community.13742184>.

In *A Hundred Blow Jobs*, performance artist and sex worker Annie Sprinkle embodies her abuse and performatively purges it through a ritual concerned with both pain and healing. The healing came through re-embodiment of the pain, or re-traumatization within a controlled environment of the performer's power to design. I open my thesis by quoting Sprinkle at length because the sentiment of *A Hundred Blow Jobs* is one I carry through the majority of my thesis work and will return to within its analysis. This sentiment is one of willful re-traumatization that does not sacrifice the agency of the performer, but instead allows the performer to work through pain on their terms in order to transform and exorcize it. The seed for this performance was planted in Sprinkle at one of her many summer trips to fellow performance artist Linda Montano's home in upstate New York as part of her Art/Life Counseling workshops, in which Montano encourages performers to "dredge up hidden emotions and channel them into theatrical artifice."³ This practice is effective not only in emotional and spiritual healing for the performers but also in creating wrenching and meaningful experiences for the spectators, demonstrating that therapeutic artworks are valuable to viewers in a way that surpasses the value they hold for the creators of said artworks alone. Annie Sprinkle proves this through the emotional reactions of her audience and how her work resonated with so many others. Her work is not *completed* by the audience reaction, but rather *validated* by it, and my audience plays a similar role in validating my work in its emotional utility for spectators beyond my personal development.

³ Vale and Juno, *Angry Women*, 21.

CHAPTER I: SOMEONE, STOP HER!

The work that I present as my thesis is as follows: several monotype prints on paper collectively referred to as *The Typewriter Series*; documentation from a live, digital performance artwork titled *Semiotics Of My Bedroom*; documentation from a live performative tattoo titled *An Exercise In Unconditional Trust And Solidarity*; and a series of live performances to be performed during the thesis show's opening reception, collectively titled *Someone, Stop Her! The Musical*. The full exhibition is titled *Someone, Stop Her! The Musical (The Gallery Show)* and is accompanied by a cheeky merchandise stall named *Someone, Stop Her! The Musical (The Gallery Show) The Gift Shop*. Each work warrants further explanation, which I provide below.

In *The Typewriter Series*, I use a typewriter to create a textured base for monotype printmaking which generally takes the form of abstract squeegee-scraping effects, with some exceptions. The content of the text is personal; I use the typewriter as a mode of expression, often "telling" it things that I would tell a therapist if I currently had one. I am drawn to the typewriter because it makes me write more impulsively and openly than I usually write on a computer. On the computer, I can edit and rearrange my words indefinitely. On the typewriter, my words are more final. This way of writing is more cathartic to me, and like words spoken to a therapist, once I express something I cannot take it back. That is not to say that I do not cover or conceal my words after writing them;

that's a crucial part of my process for these prints. Knowing that I am going to cover up these words later further frees me to write in the impulsive, open style I am striving for.

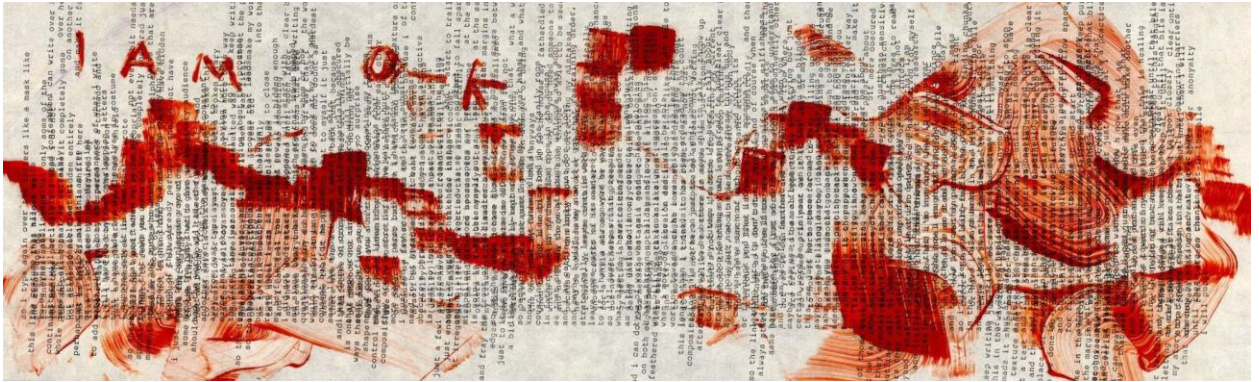


Figure 2. Hannah DeWitt, *I AM O-K*, monotype with water-based ink on typewriter on asian paper, 2022.

At the beginning of this series, I started typing directly over text I had just written, effectively rendering the words illegible, besides occasional exceptions and moments of lucidity. I am interested in the palimpsest and how it creates an adversarial relationship between layers of information. As I continued this series, I noticed that I felt less of a need to completely obscure my writings, and chronologically you can see a shift toward legibility over time. The more I wrote in this style, the less I felt a need to hide what I was writing. Newer pieces in this typewriter series have more and more accessible information for the viewer to read if they choose to, and I am becoming more adjusted to seeing my private thoughts and feelings on paper without completely obliterating them soon after.

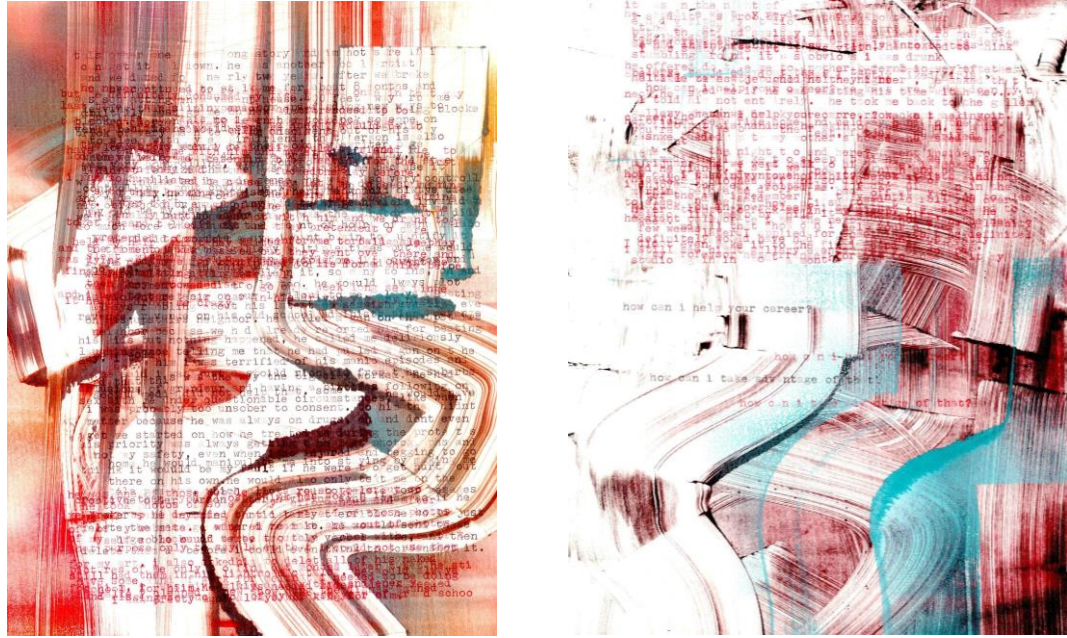


Figure 3. Hannah DeWitt, *Stalker Part 1*, monotype with water-based ink on typewriter on paper, 2022.

Figure 4. Hannah DeWitt, *How Can I Take Advantage of That*, monotype with water-based ink on typewriter on paper, 2022.

The second part of this process is monotype printing, in which I further obscure my writing and incorporate the visual elements (especially color⁴ and shape) to consider the composition of each piece, and transform the text alone into a visual artwork. This layer of ink is the access point to most viewers, as it doesn't require strain and effort to understand in the same way that my partially-obscured text does. The monotype print over each field of text answers the simple question: "What does it look like?" Through this, I can play with the visual and emotional effects of design and elevate my text from a mere relic of therapeutic practice to an art object (something generally considered more worthy of public display). The process of scraping ink over the plexiglass also serves to randomize the redactions I make to my text, because even if I look through the plexiglass

⁴ My use of color is very much linked to the redness of blood in this series, whether it be fresh or old blood, wet or dried... I have also put in a deliberate effort to include other colors, as if to incorporate the thoughts I consider to be "red" or blood-related into an environment with other moods and thoughts represented by other colors.

to what words would be covered below, the image will be reversed during the printmaking process, meaning that I cannot choose which words are redacted (although I can attempt to “aim” my mark-making to cover certain words once the image is reversed, this is not an exact science and I don’t want it to be). I prefer my redactions to be somewhat randomized because it makes my relationship to the text more vulnerable and less precious. I do not pick and choose which parts of my writing will be obscured because I do not want to merely hide my embarrassments away from the viewer. I do not wish to present a curated version of my personal thoughts because that would make it too easy to remain invulnerable; instead, I write as openly as possible and challenge myself to let go of control over how those personal thoughts are presented in the final product.

The next work I present as part of my thesis is *Semiotics Of My Bedroom*, which is titled in reference to Martha Rosler⁵ and takes its form as a video installation drawing from footage of a live, digital performance with spectators joining in varied levels of participation over Zoom. The performance itself took place over 25 hours, separated into 5-hour sequences repeated daily. The footage has been edited down into a feature-length film of about 2 hours to condense the experience into a more palatable viewing length. In this performance, I introduce every item I own to the camera and sort my belongings, cleaning my “hoarder” bedroom as I go. My hoarding issues are hereditary, and with each new item revealed to the camera, I share more of myself and the underlying issues that led me to keep so many unnecessary items, including grief and overwhelm, amongst

⁵ Martha Rosler, “Semiotics of the Kitchen,” accessed February 10, 2023, <https://jstor.org/stable/community.13875334>. In *Semiotics of the Kitchen*, Martha Rosler performatively introduces common household items normally found in a kitchen to the camera, doing a short motion with each one that represents its use. The similarity to my work and reasoning behind naming my work in reference to this piece is that in *Semiotics of My Bedroom*, I also performatively introduce items to the camera, with an admittedly different affect (Rosler comes across as sarcastic and detached while I am striving for a genuine and vulnerable approach) but very similar format.

other factors. In this process, I read many of my old diaries and songbooks, divulging the “cringeworthy⁶” and “unnecessarily emo⁷” musings of my younger self. I share personal details with my audience when I come across items that have sentimental value or embarrassing stories linked to them, try on my clothing items, and capture moments of frustration in which I struggle to continue. All the while, my audience comes and goes sporadically, sometimes interacting with me and sometimes spectating in silence. Audience members are encouraged to work from home on an overwhelming task of their own, and together, we push through those moments of near-resign to find what fruitful rewards hide just behind the moment in which we want to stop, but go on.



Figure 5. Martha Rosler, *Semiotics of the Kitchen*, performative video, 1975.⁸

Figure 6. Hannah DeWitt, *Semiotics of My Bedroom*, photographic still from video, 2021-2022.

In this performance, I embody a form of vulnerability that does not hurt me but instead has a positive outcome for me (a decently clean bedroom) and my viewers

⁶ Cringe is a term in internet culture often used to shame others for behavior considered to be embarrassing, and has become widespread in the form of “cringe compilation” videos that have a specific focus on internet subcultures that are considered unusual or different, such as “furries” or fans of anthropomorphic animals, “weebs” or overly enthusiastic fans of anime, and so on. The term has grown to be associated with online bullying.

⁷ I refer to my own writings, songs, and drawings as “unnecessarily emo” many times throughout the piece, and by that I mean that there is an overwhelming and gratuitous amount of references to self-harm, depression, suicide, and eating disorders. I felt a need to self-censor by not including every upsetting detail from past diaries in order to not overwhelm the audience to an unhelpful extent, especially when it came to graphic descriptions of self-harm.

⁸ Martha Rosler, “Semiotics of the Kitchen,” accessed February 10, 2023, <https://jstor.org/stable/community.13875334>.

(completion of their own chosen tasks). In doing this, I also connect with viewers on an emotional and spiritual level, taking time to discuss religious influences on my attitude towards material items⁹, the grief I carry for my late father that manifests in objects I have been unwilling to let go of, and feelings of shame and disgust that had prevented me from letting close friends and partners see my bedroom before the performance. Like Sprinkle in *A Hundred Blow Jobs*, I transform and exorcise my “demons” when I cease hiding them away and make my struggle public, simultaneously freeing myself from shame and sharing that transformative energy with my audience.

The third work I present for my thesis is the performative tattoo *An Exercise In Unconditional Trust And Solidarity*, in which I collaborate with tattoo artist Z Zhou to permanently witness the testimonies of fifty-one survivors of rape that chose to participate by submitting their names to be tattooed on my skin. Participating survivors are documented in varied levels of privacy, ranging from full names to complete anonymity, according to their preference. Some participants chose to disclose confidential messages to me, in which many revealed their motivations for joining the project, personal details of their abuse, or other commentaries which remain private to me. By checking the public submission form on my website, the audience can see how participants are invited to share this information privately.¹⁰ For me, the most important aspect of this project has always been my relationship with the participants, and we share a life-long bond whether they choose to remain strangers to me or not. As a survivor of

⁹ To be more specific, I reference my Christian upbringing and how that has manifested a guilt complex in me, especially regarding guilt from having too many material belongings and my interpretation of some biblical parables at a young age (i.e. “it is harder for a rich man to get to heaven than it is for a camel to pass through the eye of a needle”).

¹⁰ This submission form can be viewed at hannahdewitt.com/call-for-names after acknowledging a content warning.

rape, I feel protected by the network of solidarity that I carry on my back, like an armor that any future assailant would have to face in order to harm me in that way again. The message is on my back so that I don't always have to see it, but I know it's there and that others who see my bare skin from behind will know that I am not one woman, but part of a collective with strength in numbers. The piece is titled *An Exercise In Unconditional Trust and Solidarity* because I refuse to question the validity or truth of each testimony as if to say "I believe your story, and I commit to that belief forever." It takes great courage to share a testimony of this nature, and too often we are met with distrust or disbelief. This is an act of rebellion against the victim-blaming and victim-distrusting culture that promotes an "innocent until proven guilty" attitude towards crimes that are often impossible to provide evidence for, or when evidence is provided, that evidence is ignored.¹¹



Figure 7. Hannah DeWitt and Z Zhou, *An Exercise In Unconditional Trust And Solidarity*, tattoo and performance, 2022.

Figure 8. Hannah DeWitt and Z Zhou, *An Exercise In Unconditional Trust And Solidarity*, photographic still from video documentation of performance, 2022.

¹¹ It is estimated that over 100,000 rape kits in the USA remain unprocessed. For scholarly evidence of this, please reference this article: Molly Curington, "The Injustice of America's Rape Kit Backlog - the Arkansas Journal of Social Change and Public Service - Ua Little Rock," *The Arkansas Journal of Social Change and Public Service*, March 31, 2021, <https://ualr.edu/socialchange/2021/03/31/the-injustice-of-americas-rape-kit-backlog/#:~:text=It%20is%20estimated%20that%20there,untested%20rape%20kits%20in%20America.>

The live, performative element of this tattoo is essential because there is an inherently public aspect to testimony. While this could have been kept a private project between myself and the participants, that was never the intention and participants knew this from the beginning. The pressure to make this a private, therapeutic event rather than a public political statement is in alignment with the wall of silence that has been imposed on sexual assault survivors for centuries. This pressure is broad and societal but has been demonstrated in a more specific way by a member of my thesis committee suggesting that the work should have been a private, therapeutic event in one of my mid-curriculum reviews. In making this a public performance, the project has the potential to further break down this wall of silence. By participating in this project, survivors are speaking out and making their testimonies known. The audience of this performance bears witness, which is a necessary component of testimony. Additionally, there are further criticisms of this work that I will discuss at length later in the document.

The series of live performances I am presenting at the opening reception of *Someone, Stop Her! The Musical (The Gallery Show)* consists of two songs and two acts. The name of this performance refers to a handful of instances in which someone tried to stop me. First, the name references my experience of mentors and peers trying to prevent me from completing *An Exercise In Unconditional Trust And Solidarity*, whether it be out of concern for my well-being, concern for the well-being of those submitting their names, self-preservation in not wanting to be professionally associated with the performance, or concern about the legality of tattooing outside of a tattoo studio. These are valid criticisms which I do not mean to dismiss, however, I hope to provide an alternative reading in which the emotional impact many participants have expressed to me is

recognized as valuable enough to potentially outweigh these concerns, and each concern can be addressed as a problem that has a solution. I discuss this at greater length later. Additionally, the name references how others have tried to prevent me from speaking my truth about instances of abuse and assault I have endured. Finally, there is an alternative way of reading the title in which I reference my own suicidal ideation, and the necessary moments in which someone has prevented me from taking my own life. One potential interpretation of this title that I find problematic is that it reenacts male power by suggesting that I desire to do whatever I want without prohibition in the same way that sexual predators victimize others without consent. I think this is an unfair comparison to make, as the act that others are attempting to stop me from completing (given that we are not referencing the alternative interpretation regarding suicide) is speaking my truth and completing an act of public witness and testimony. The desire to make art about the trauma of sexual assault without being censored is not equivalent to the desire to sexually assault.

I open the show with the first song, *Apocalypse Buddy*, performed on the ukulele.

This is an original song, and I include the lyrics below:

*You say it's best to not get your hopes up about a single thing/
Well, optimistic nihilism never really worked for me/
So won't you join me in a little exercise of the willful suspension of our disbeliefs/
And we could be happy/
For a night/
And it's cool/
Everything's fine/
You're my apocalypse buddy and we're gonna build a pool/
And live in a castle and finish art school/
And no one that we know is going to die/
Yeah, my mom will live forever and my dog will too/
And they're gonna have a private show of just me and you/
At the Guggenheim/
So won't you humor me and my wishful thinking/
Cause I can't breathe unless I'm singing/
I'm fine/
You're my apocalypse buddy and we don't read the news/*

*And the President is funny cause he buys us new shoes/
And no one that I love is going to die/
Cause the sickness won't get 'em cause it never ever does/
Cause it never ever happens cause it never ever was/
And nothing in the world can make me cry/
So won't you humor me and my wishful thinking/
Cause I can't breathe when the whole world's screaming/
I'm fine/
You're my apocalypse buddy so quarantine is fun/
And nobody can get us cause I got a water gun/
And it's full of Lysol so they better stay away/
So I'll make a cup of coffee and I'll sing a little song/
And I'll play a video game and maybe you'll play along/
And we'll pretend that everything's okay/
So won't you humor me and my wishful thinking/
Or at least hold my hand in the quicksand sinking/
I'm fine*

This song serves a valuable purpose of warming up the crowd to an emotional experience by reminding them of our shared trauma regarding the ongoing pandemic.

The song comes from a genuine place of fear and uncertainty, denial as a coping mechanism, and affection for the person I shared my quarantine with. It's the only trauma I have that is likely to be shared with every audience member in the room, and I open with it because I hope the relatability will set a precedent of emotional connection with my audience before I discuss traumas that are less likely to be relatable to them.

After *Apocalypse Buddy*, I present my first theatrical act: *Stand-Up Comedy About My Trauma*. In this act, I attempt to reconcile with my own trauma in the one way I haven't tried in an artwork yet, which is through humor. Black humor has been so crucial to traumatized and oppressed populations that it is often banned under Fascism¹², and it has a powerful way of sublimating realities that are difficult to accept. In *Stand-Up Comedy About My Trauma*, I use black humor to share stories of my father's struggle

¹² Perhaps the best example of this is the censorship of black humor in Nazi Germany, which is explored in greater detail regarding the successes and failures of attempted satire as political resistance in this article: Patrick Merziger, "Humour in Nazi Germany: Resistance and Propaganda? The Popular Desire for an All-Embracing Laughter," *International Review of Social History* 52 (2007): pp. 275-290, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/26405494>.

with pancreatic cancer, my mental health issues and experiences with psychiatric hospitalization, my history with self-harm and suicidal ideation, my experience as a survivor of sexual abuse and my trauma responses, and my four major psychiatric diagnoses, which I represent using sock puppets. The goal of this act is to challenge me and my audience to step outside of the more comfortable position of pity or sympathy, and instead sit with the discomfort of being compelled to laugh by a situation that is, under most circumstances, not funny. This mode of relating with the audience, while less comfortable and considerably more challenging to achieve, is more genuine and creates a unique bond in which we can laugh at my misfortune together, effectively involving my audience in my coping. If my audience and I can laugh together at my father's last words, that is a more complex and intimate form of relationship than a simple "I'm sorry for your loss" could ever achieve.



Figure 9. Hannah DeWitt, *Stand-Up Comedy About My Trauma*, performance, 2023.

After this I perform my second original song, this time on guitar, titled *Am I Your Doll (Fuck You)*. The lyrics are as follows:

*Am I your doll/
Your baby girl/
Am I your girl/
Your precious angel/*

*Am I the only girl/
In the whole world/
You'll ever love/
I'm so lucky you have me/
I'm so lucky to be yours/
Lucky pushed down on all fours/
I'm so lucky/
No one else would ever love me/
I'm so lucky on my knees/
Made me say sorry and please/
Would you love me/
No one will ever love me/
Am I your doll, your fuck/
Am I your fuckdoll/
Am I even able to run away/
Am I even sentient/
Am I even gonna live to see another day/
I'm so lucky to be yours/
Lucky pushed down on all fours/
I'm so lucky/
No one else would ever love me/
I'm so lucky on my knees/
Made me say sorry and please/
Would you love me/
No one will ever love me/
Fuck you/
Fuck all your little games/
Fuck your handcuffs/
Fuck your bloodstains/
Fuck you/
Fuck all your little lies/
Fuck your emotional apathy/
Fuck your sexual appetite/
Fuck you for making me think/
I was just making you seem/
Like the bad guy/
Fuck you, fuck you, fuck you, fuck you, fuck you*

This song is a drastic turn from the lighthearted and campy nature of the rest of the show, but I include it because it is my most direct form of resistance and protest regarding the perpetrator of my first several experiences with rape. The song starts from a place of submission, but shifts towards utter rage and righteous spite, which is a shift I find incredibly empowering and necessary to share in the emotional journey I take my audience on through the duration of the show. To leave out this more serious note would cast an incomplete narrative that does not honor the reality of my lived experience. The

breadth of affectual states I present to my audience is complex and expansive because the personal and political issues I address require a full spectrum of emotion to represent.

After *Am I Your Doll (Fuck You)* I take a brief intermission and costume change, and return for my final theatrical act of the evening: *How Am I Supposed To Make Money Now? The Burlesque Show Story Of An M.F.A.*, in which I use burlesque-inspired dance to comedically satirize the whorishness of my predicament. This whorishness emerges on multiple levels of the M.F.A. experience, in some ways more literally than others. As an artist, my role is to elicit the attention of an audience. As a graduate student, my role is to perform for the approval of a group of spectators, such as the very thesis committee reading this paper, as they must approve of my work in order for me to graduate. As a university employee in an especially low-paying position, my role is to scrape up some extra money on the side where I can. On more than one occasion I have been sexualized by men in roles of power in the local arts community, including one occasion in which I was targeted for my low income by a well-known art collector who offered me money to sleep with him. As a sex-positive queer feminist performance artist that often includes her own body in her works, these advances are not uncommon in my professional networking ventures. The separation between sexuality and professionalism is maintained by secrecy rather than being an accurate portrayal of reality. I also utilize the visual vocabulary of stripping and burlesque in this work because the student-to-stripper pipeline is real and has become a trope in academia.¹³ All of this is to say that the undeniable overlap

¹³ While I struggled to find scholarly writing on this trope, I can provide evidence for it through three news articles: First, this article: Ian Johnston, “Nearly 1 in 3 Women Strippers Are Students Funding Their Education,” *The Independent* (Independent Digital News and Media, February 28, 2014), <https://www.independent.co.uk/student/news/as-many-as-a-third-of-women-strippers-are-students-trying-to-pay-for-their-education-9158808.html>. Additionally, there is this article which I find problematic in its own way due to tone of language, emphasis on public and social shame, and a somewhat disturbing scholarship competition in which college-age women compete for university scholarship funding by pole

between performance art and sex work is a fertile breeding ground for comedic but political farce. I may not change any of the power structures I satirize in this performance, but I will at the very least make fun of them. By this, I mean that I do not expect to end the sexualization of young women in the arts or academia with this work, but I draw attention to it and critique it using humor, sarcasm, and satire.



Figure 10. Hannah DeWitt and Allie Fireel, *How Am I Supposed To Make Money Now? The Burlesque Show Story of an MFA*, performance, 2023.

Figure 11. Hannah DeWitt, *How Am I Supposed To Make Money Now? The Burlesque Show Story of an MFA*, performance, 2023.

This burlesque act features acting from theater M.F.A. candidate Allie Fireel, as well as recorded music from Naomi Elizabeth¹⁴ and Ayesha Erotica¹⁵, following the

dancing: Chang, Juju, and Michael Cappetta. “The G-String Scholarship: College Students Strip to Pay Tuition Costs.” ABC News. ABC News Network, May 19, 2014. <https://abcnews.go.com/Lifestyle/college-students-strip-pay-tuition-costs/story?id=23782754>.

Finally, the University of Louisville has been implicated in their use of strippers and full-service escorts for basketball recruitment of underage teens, resulting in a scandal: John Barr and Jeff Goodman, “Former Louisville Recruit about His Visit: 'It Was like I Was in a Strip Club',” ESPN (ESPN Internet Ventures, October 19, 2015), https://www.espn.com/espn/otl/story/_/id/13927159/former-louisville-cardinals-basketball-players-recruits-acknowledge-stripper-parties-minardi-hall.

¹⁴ Naomi Elizabeth, *The Topic Is A__* (Interstreet Recordings (on behalf of 570043 Records DK), 2022), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=w90qbYhq5cg>.

¹⁵ Ayesha Erotica, *Literal Legend* (Soundcloud, 2017), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZUOCI6iwq_k.

I think it is worth noting that Ayesha Erotica has a complex history of being appropriated and having her songs re-uploaded to the internet, which makes me question if I am contributing to this widespread appropriation by using her song in my performance. While I think this can be easily excused within burlesque communities that perform to copyrighted music near-constantly, it’s still an interesting layer of appropriation that is amplified by the artist’s personal history and would be a non-issue if there was not already a history of people using Ayesha Erotica songs in ways the artist did not consent to. Am I part of the problem? Is properly citing and crediting the artist enough when the only way I can access her music is through a re-upload published without the artist’s consent? In a culture known for lip-syncing and dancing to copyrighted music, where do we draw the line, and can that line shift from artist to artist? These

burlesque, stripping, sideshow, and drag tradition of performing to copyrighted music—something widely accepted in burlesque communities. The costume is a combination of handmade items (nipple pasties crafted by myself and a gladiator-style cheerleading skirt by Ellie Bruner) and readymade costume pieces purchased from local sex stores (such as staggeringly high 8” heels). It is also worth noting that for this performance, I use full-coverage concealer to hide the names tattooed on my back in *An Exercise In Unconditional Trust And Solidarity* in order to respect participants who might not want their names associated with a sexualized performance. I intend to continue concealing these names for performances that are sexually arousing in nature, which is not to say that survivors of sexual abuse can’t have active sexualities, but rather to say that if I’m going to sexualize myself in a performance, I want to only apply that sexualization to myself and not to the survivors that submitted their names to me.

The content of the burlesque performance, like *Am I Your Doll (Fuck You)*, shifts from submission to empowerment over time. The story unfolds through dialogue and dance, beginning with a begging or “sexy groveling” in which I plead for my degree and succumb to the whims of Fuddy Duddy (a straw-man character representing hegemonic, misogynistic authority). While this could be interpreted as “letting the audience off the hook” by giving them a character to offload their feelings of discomfort on, it can also be interpreted as a character that some members of the audience (generally speaking, men in positions of power) can identify with, so the criticism of this strawman character can be internalized by those who identify with him. Through the act, there is a shift and by the

questions, although unresolved, have lead me to prioritize citation and credit regarding the two songs I will be dancing to in *How Am I Supposed To Make Money Now? The Burlesque Show Story Of An M.F.A.* not only in this written document, but in wall text at the performance itself.

final dance number, I am no longer begging and instead exercising my own power over Fuddy Duddy. The liberation of my character is demonstrated through this shift in power dynamics and exemplified by the difference in attitude and affect.

Someone, Stop Her! The Musical (The Gallery Show) is a full experience complete with its own ironic and self-aware gift shop. At *Someone, Stop Her! The Musical (The Gallery Show) The Gift Shop* viewers can purchase screen printed t-shirts bearing the message “PRODUCTS ARE COOL AND SELLABLE” with a smaller tagline on the back: “I survived *Someone, Stop Her! The Musical*”. In the spirit of Claes Oldenburg’s *The Store*¹⁶ and the regular sale of merchandise at art events (especially music events), and in an attempt to further satirize the inextricability of capitalism from public displays of art, spectators are provided memorabilia in exchange for financially supporting the artist. This is especially relevant for a performance artist who rarely produces “sellable” products as I have been asked repeatedly how I intend to profit from my performative practice. Not only does the gift shop offer a means of monetization, but it simultaneously pokes fun at the need to do so.

¹⁶ Claes Oldenburg, *Poster for “The Store”* 1961, Letterpress, 28 1/4 x 22 1/8 inches, <https://jstor.org/stable/community.18145611>.

CHAPTER II. CAMP SENSIBILITY AND BINARY TERROR

One might ask why, for a graduate thesis in Fine Arts, I am engaging in such “low art” as ukulele, stand-up comedy, sock puppetry, and burlesque dance, culminating at the point of the ironic t-shirt. For this, I have a few explanations which require a basic understanding of the sensibility known as Camp. According to Susan Sontag, Camp is a “sensibility of failed seriousness, of the theatricalization of experience” with an emphasis on extravagance and frivolousness¹⁷. My work in three of the four¹⁸ live performances that make *Someone, Stop Her! The Musical* is rooted in this idea of converting the serious into the frivolous¹⁹ by taking emotionally traumatizing content and repositioning it within friendlier and, for lack of a better term, goofier contexts for both me and my audience to relate to it in a way that is not tragic, but honest. This sublimation of my pain is not merely to make it more palatable in a softened or neutered form but instead it allows for a nuanced appreciation of pain that approaches its acceptance.

Another of Sontag’s points that positions several of my works within the broad field of Camp is the characterization and status as “role” that I embody in different personae, including but not limited to the characterization of my diagnoses as sock puppets, the many accented voices I use to put a voice to previously unspeakable phrases in my life, and the caricature of the sexualized student I play at in the final burlesque-

¹⁷ Susan Sontag, "Notes on Camp," *Partisan Review* 31, no. 4 (1964), 7.

¹⁸ I write “three of the four” because *Am I Your Doll (Fuck You)* has a different attitude than the rest, and does not embody a Camp sensibility.

¹⁹ Sontag, *Notes on Camp*, 1.

inspired act. Despite the genuine nature of my confessional content, I play the role of a caricature more often than not in *Someone, Stop Her! The Musical*. According to Sontag,

11. Camp sees everything in quotation marks. It's not a lamp, but a "lamp"; not a woman, but a "woman." To perceive Camp in objects and persons is to understand Being-as-Playing-a-Role. It is the farthest extension, in sensibility, of the metaphor of life as theater.²⁰

This understanding of Being-as-Playing-a-Role is exemplified through the exaggeration and caricaturization of my lived experience, creating a larger-than-life theatricalized version of my reality through which we can find both entertainment and insight.

Some arguments in Sontag's "Notes on Camp" might exclude my work from qualifying as Camp, if it were not for the more forgiving distinction she makes between Camp and pure Camp. Sontag writes, "One must distinguish between naive and deliberate Camp. Pure Camp is always naive. Camp which knows itself to be Camp ("camping") is usually less satisfying."²¹ According to this thought, the act of arguing that my work is Camp precludes it from being pure Camp in that it sacrifices naivety towards its own Campness. It might be more accurate to say that I am "camping" my traumatic narrative. As the essay goes on, Sontag speaks of this limitation less strictly, offering exceptions to the rule²² before entirely dissolving the "rule" to its possibility to evolve over time²³. By the final page, there is a shift away from gatekeeping that makes my "camping" appear to be acceptable after all:

55. Camp is, above all, a mode of enjoyment, of appreciation— not judgement. Camp is generous. It wants to enjoy. It only seems like malice, cynicism. (Or, if it is cynicism, it's not a ruthless but a sweet cynicism.) Camp taste doesn't propose that it is in bad taste to be serious; it doesn't sneer at

²⁰ Sontag, *Notes on Camp*, 4.

²¹ Sontag, *Notes on Camp*, 6.

²² Sontag, *Notes on Camp*, 6. See point 22: "Considered a little less strictly, Camp is either completely naive or else wholly conscious (when one plays at being campy). An example of the latter: Wilde's epigrams themselves."

²³ Sontag, *Notes on Camp*, 8. See point 30: "Of course, the canon of Camp can change. Time has a great deal to do with it."

*someone who succeeds in being seriously dramatic. What it does is to find the success in certain passionate failures.*²⁴

Reading this, I am reminded of the phrase I repeat to myself when I fear the performance will flop, that no one will laugh at my jokes and I will break my ankle in those heels, which is: “If it’s going to be a failure, at least it will be a spectacular one.” I have been operating within a mentality of passionate failure and sweet cynicism since the conception of these works and I carry this mentality through to their realization.

There is another reason as to why I am engaging in mediums often considered “low art” which requires an understanding of a second term, binary terror, which Rebecca Schneider elaborates on in her book *The Explicit Body in Performance* but originates genealogically from *Binary Terror and Feminist Performance: Reading Both Ways* by Vivian M. Patraaka. Patraaka defines binary terror as “the terror released at the prospect of undoing the binaries of those who have the most to gain from their undoing.”²⁵ Patraaka focuses on the false dichotomy of man/woman frightening women for its falseness because if there’s no inherent truth to the power structure, then there’s no explanation for the patterns of abuse in our lives, shattering the justifications women have been making inside their heads for men’s actions and making them confront the reality of their abuse. Lesbian couples with no clear butch or femme may be unsettling to women in unhappy marriages with men, similarly to how victims of patriarchal abuse or incest might find they/them pronouns or the flexibility of gender threatening to the basis on which they justify staying in abusive households. This social phenomenon in which those who have the most to gain by the disruption of binaries fear that very disruption is binary terror.

²⁴ Sontag, *Notes on Camp*, 13.

²⁵ Vivian M. Patraaka, “Binary Terror and Feminist Performance: Reading Both Ways,” *Discourse* 14, no. 2 (1992): pp. 163-185, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/41389223>.

Schneider expands this concept to a different binary, aside from but related to the gender binary: the distinction between art and porn. Schneider writes:

Binary terror is provoked when the word “art” is flashed over the image “porn.” In fact, a host of distinctions is threatened, as if linked to one another in a circle of dominoes making up the Symbolic Order. Most obvious is the distinction between form and content— a distinction questioned throughout Mapplethorpe’s oeuvre... To admit that Mapplethorpe’s content itself is in any way aesthetic would be to admit pornography, lock, stock and barrel, into the art museum.²⁶

In The Explicit Body in Performance, Rebecca Schneider critically examines the way performance artists provoke binary terror using the sexually explicit body, providing a range of examples including but not limited to Carolee Schneeman, Karen Finley, Ana Mendieta, Annie Sprinkle, and Spiderwoman. She praises these performers for

...making a mess across a number of high holy divides— not only the divide between art and porn, reality and fantasy, desiring and desired, but perhaps even more compellingly the divide between theorized and practiced, historian and historicized, materialist and materialized.²⁷

While I may not be using pornography in a Fine Arts space to invoke binary terror, I am certainly using the visual language of the larger sex industry to do so. Even in the artworks I present that are not sexually explicit, I challenge the binaric divides between high and low art, Fine Art and art therapy, political and personal, public and private, tragic and comedic, serious and Camp, genuine and sarcastic, and ultimately, “worthy” and “unworthy” art.²⁸ By worthy, I mean worthy of public display and critical acclaim,

²⁶ Schneider, Rebecca, *The Explicit Body in Performance* (Hoboken, NJ: Taylor and Francis, 2013), 14.

²⁷ Schneider, *The Explicit Body in Performance*, 108.

²⁸ To clarify, here are some examples of how I challenge each of the aforementioned binaries: I challenge the binary between high and low art by bringing ironic t-shirts, sock puppets, and “slutty” dance moves to a Fine Art context; I challenge the binary between Fine Art and art therapy by asserting that my highly personal and confessional works that I make in a therapeutic style (specifically *The Typewriter Series*) are works of Fine Art; I challenge the binary between the political and personal by asserting that these personal confessions have political implications; I challenge the binary between tragedy and comedy by making jokes, or more importantly, *successfully making people laugh* at situations that are traumatic; I challenge the binary between serious and Camp by using the Camp sensibility in presenting my serious issues; I challenge the binary between genuine and sarcastic by being simultaneously “real” to the point of personal vulnerability in my confessions and sarcastic in elements of my delivery; and I challenge the binary between “worthy” and “unworthy” art by asserting that my art is worthwhile despite institutional hesitancy to validate it as such. This institutional hesitancy is hard to quantify, but it is felt in every rejection letter. I do not claim that this struggle is unique to me, as all artists deal with rejection. However, my assertion of

which is a decision made by those privileged to decide which art is displayed, written about, or remembered, and is wrapped up in the aforementioned distinctions between high and low art, Fine Art and art therapy, and more than anything else, the potential for profit. By prioritizing emotional connection and audience experience over commercial value and bringing mediums associated with “low art” to a heightened academic arena, I reject these patterns of exclusion and dismissal. That is not to say that my art is unsellable or that I lose some conceptual purity by selling my work, but instead, I argue that by presenting these artworks as Fine Art and valuing them as such, I break down a number of “high holy divides” not unlike the ones described by Schneider.

this work as valuable challenges the notion of “worthy” and “unworthy” art in that I create and defend my art’s worth despite receiving professional signals of its “unworthiness”.

CHAPTER III. THE ISSUE OF SECONDARY TRAUMA

Besides the threatening status of “low art” in many of my works, there is another argument that often arises when I make work about painful or disturbing subject matter. This issue is one described by Geoffrey Hartman as “tele-suffering” or secondary trauma, which has been an issue for me to grapple with as some viewers have argued that my work inflicts secondary trauma on its viewers. While I respect the reactions viewers have to my work and do not mean to invalidate them, I also desire an opportunity to present a counter-argument or alternative reading of my work in which it is not interpreted as creating or re-inscribing trauma on the viewer. In *Memory.com: Tele-suffering and Testimony in the Dot Com Era*, Hartman explains the careful decision-making behind the scenes of a Yale Video Archive project he helped work on with the intent of documenting testimonies of Holocaust survivors in a way that seeks truth while honoring the agency of those interviewed above all else.²⁹ Further, Hartman describes a phenomenon that occurs among the film’s viewers as well as the general public as both real and fictionalized Holocaust testimonies become part of the public consciousness, which he calls memory-envy.³⁰ To Hartman, memory-envy stems from an overidentification with victims and can lead to, in the most drastic cases, an internalizing of traumatic narratives and reverence for the social recognition and distinctive identity of victimhood that motivates ordinary

²⁹ Geoffrey Hartman and Daniel T. O’Hara, “Memory.com: Tele-Suffering and Testimony in the Dot Com Era” (Edinburgh University Press, 2004), pp. 1-18, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/10.3366/j.ctvxcrbb4.39>. 7-12.

³⁰ Hartman, *Memory.com: Tele-Suffering and Testimony in the Dot Com Era*, 13.

people to falsify testimonies of trauma un-lived by them, such as Binjamin Wilkomirski's book *Fragments* in which he testifies to surviving childhood encampment, which before being debunked as a fictionalized testimony, was publicly regarded as authentic and therefore shaped the collective memory of the Holocaust.³¹

Aside from the most drastic examples of memory-envy resulting in false testimony, Hartman examines the motivations behind memory-envy that affect (almost) everyone when witnessing traumatic narratives. Hartman writes:

The pressure to respond with empathy (not an unlimited resource) is enormous, and it produces what has been called compassion fatigue. But it could also incite anger and hate: first, perhaps, turned inward as a form of self-disgust (and leading to depression should we deem ourselves insufficiently responsive), then turned outward as a sadistic or callous action, and completing this manner in a vicious cycle. This cycle is inevitable if we overidentify, in the very name of morality, with the victims, or do not respect the difference between their suffering and our own.

This is an issue of overidentification and internalization of the trauma of others, leading to compassion fatigue or what some call secondary trauma. The urge to overidentify is moralized, as if we are lacking compassion by not letting these testimonies affect us as painfully as possible. Hartman's solution to this is a lifelong emotional education through artworks that "expand the sympathetic imagination while teaching us about the limits of sympathy."³² Perhaps some of my artworks might be useful in an emotional education like the one described by Hartman in such impalpable terms³³.

Furthermore, the verity of secondary trauma is challenged by Jill Bennett in *Insides, Outsides: Trauma, Affect, and Art* in a convincing argument positioning the viewer's experience as relating to but distinctly outside of trauma.

³¹ Hartman, *Memory.com: Tele-Suffering and Testimony in the Dot Com Era*, 13-14.

³² Hartman, *Memory.com: Tele-Suffering and Testimony in the Dot Com Era*, 17.

³³ By impalpable, I mean that Hartman admits to the ill-defined nature of this education: "There is no formula, however, for aesthetic education of this kind: it must start early and continue beyond the university, perhaps for a lifetime." Hartman, *Memory.com: Tele-Suffering and Testimony in the Dot Com Era*, 17.

The idea that artwork dealing with trauma can act upon a spectator so that one feels or experiences the work before one reads or recognizes its content has led theorists to equate the structure of such imagery with the operations of traumatic memory itself. While I want to suggest that certain work on trauma operates according to an economy of affect, I do, however, want to distinguish this idea from the notion that such work can engender in the viewer what Geoffrey Hartman has called a secondary trauma. Although it is certainly possible that a viewer might be disturbed by the work, the range of affects that it produces do not simply combine to approximate an experience identifiable as trauma or a specific emotional condition. As Ernst van Alphen has emphasized, the spectator is quite clearly not placed within the traumatic encounter— so that even when one views a disturbing image of the Holocaust, one is under no illusion that one is present at the site of that trauma. Similarly, my argument— following a logic of affective imagery that I outline below— is that affect is not pre-coded by a representational system that enables us to read an image as “about trauma,” then to experience it as secondary trauma. Whereas the autonomic responses induced by affective imagery are, in their instantaneity, outside representation, by the same token, they are not inside trauma.³⁴

Bennett’s argument is contingent on an understanding of traumatic memory as something incapable of being a representation of trauma itself, but rather a living connection between traumatic past and ongoing post-traumatic affectual responses of the present. Bennett describes this type of remembering as sense memory, as opposed to ordinary memory³⁵. Recalling sense memory is further described as a momentary connection between the inside self and outside self, meaning that no traumatic memory can be described in a purely past tense³⁶. Affectual artworks that recall sense memory are not representations of trauma that can produce a secondary trauma in viewers, and the experience of disturbed, empathetic, or overidentifying viewers is not equivalent to an experience of trauma.

Bennett’s primary example of an artwork that recalls sense memory is Karen Finley’s *The Constant State of Desire*³⁷, in which the artist embodies multiple personae from a trancelike state, recalling traumatic memory and shifting between perspectives of

³⁴ Jill Bennett, “Insides, Outsides: Trauma, Affect, and Art,” in *The Feminism and Visual Culture Reader*, ed. Amelia Jones (New York: Routledge, 2010), 457.

³⁵ Bennett, “Insides, Outsides: Trauma, Affect, and Art,” 456-7.

³⁶ Bennett, “Insides, Outsides: Trauma, Affect, and Art,” 454-5.

³⁷ Karen Finley, “The Constant State of Desire,” *Tdr* (1988-) 32, no. 1 (1988): pp. 139-151, <https://doi.org/10.2307/1145875>.

the victim and the perpetrator with an unsettling amorality in her delivery. These trance monologues are delivered in a state of non-acting³⁸ where Finley flows between characters as if never fully embodying any one character but instead maintaining a suspended state of continuous flow from one affect to another. It is nearly impossible for the audience to distinguish which scenes represent “real” memories and which are dreams or visions. Perhaps most disturbing is her willingness to embody the role of the perpetrator, describing egregious impulses and acts without moral conflict. It is already disturbing to hear Finley describe post-traumatic responses in recalling a memory of childhood incestuous rape within a refrigerator– “You wonder why I puke when I see condiments...”³⁹ – but even more disturbing are the moments in which she embodies the rapist.



Figure 12. Karen Finley, *The Constant State of Desire*, performance, 1987.⁴⁰



Figure 13. Karen Finley, *The Constant State of Desire*, performance, 1987.⁴¹

³⁸ Karen Finley has stated she “wants it to be different from acting”: Schneider, *Explicit Body in Performance*, 101.

³⁹ Finley, *The Constant State of Desire*, 148.

⁴⁰ “Karen Finley tossing candies at the audience in *The Constant State of Desire* at P.S. 122, New York City, March 1987. (Photo by Dona Ann McAdams)”: Finley, *The Constant State of Desire*, 144.

⁴¹ “Karen Finley takes on “Mr. Yuppie” at the Cat Club, New York City, February 1987: “My sweat, my music, my fashion is just another money-making scheme for you.” (Photo by Dona Ann McAdams)”: Finley, *The Constant State of Desire*, 141.

Bennett writes about a particular line of Finley's delivered from the rapist's point of view: "Then I mount my own mama in the ass... That's right, I fuck my own mama in the ass 'cause I'd never fuck my mama in her snatch! She's my mama."⁴² Bennett interprets this as "mocking the possibility of moral judgment"⁴³ and further argues that the bitter irony of Finley's black humor is the sole device that allows viewers to establish moral distance from the figure of the perpetrator.⁴⁴ Bennett's interpretation of this line is particularly helpful insight for writing my comedy act. Later in the chapter, Bennett writes:

She shows us, in effect, how to crack a joke about abuse. But the affective dynamic of the work does not lie in the joke's capacity to shock us. Finley's work is not concerned purely with testing the limits of bourgeois sensibility; rather, it stages a perceptual experience that threatens to take us outside ourselves.⁴⁵

If I am to fulfill my intention of learning from Finley, Sprinkle, and other artists I reference later, this is an important lesson to take note of. The effectiveness of my humor cannot come from shock value, instead, I must take viewers outside of themselves, or at least threaten to. By this, I mean that the connection to my audience must unsettle their ability to comfortably remain "inside themselves" or separated from the content as a distant spectator. The connective tissue between our insides and outsides that is put on display when a traumatic memory is recalled is one that always already takes one outside of oneself in the present moment. The goal now is to display this connective tissue and reframe it in a way that threatens the viewer's ability to remain comfortably inside of themselves and make new connective tissue in the space between myself and my viewer. The threat to take someone outside of themselves may be interpreted as a form of shock

⁴² Finley, *The Constant State of Desire*, 148.

⁴³ Bennett, "Insides, Outsides: Trauma, Affect, and Art," 455.

⁴⁴ Bennett, "Insides, Outsides: Trauma, Affect, and Art," 455.

⁴⁵ Bennett, "Insides, Outsides: Trauma, Affect, and Art," 456-7.

value, similar to how Finley's monologues are undeniably shocking. However, the care to create a perceptual experience of connection, however uncomfortable, will prevent my comedic work from falling into the trap of mere shock value.

If *An Exercise In Unconditional Trust And Solidarity* creates a secondary trauma in the viewer, then the same would almost certainly be true of Karen Finley's trance monologues. In defense of Finley, Jill Bennett has written:

The memory image in this scheme does not express inner trauma in such a way as to make it available to another to take on; rather, it finds a way to activate and realize connections. The question of the artwork is thus, not "What does it mean?" or "What trauma is depicted?" but "How does it work?" –how does it put insides and outsides into contact in order to establish a basis for empathy?⁴⁶

There is no doubt that Finley's work is disturbing to witness, especially to a survivor of sexual abuse. In my work, I use content warnings to allow viewers a moment of informed decision in which they can opt out of viewership.⁴⁷ This should prevent the scenario in which a survivor of sexual assault is exposed to content that would trigger post-traumatic stress responses, at least without their consent to view such content. With this in mind, the discomfort or so-called secondary trauma that I have been accused of inflicting is not concerned with the well-being of those suffering from post-traumatic stress, but instead, it is concerned with the threat to take one outside of oneself. If I am establishing a basis for empathy, this is exhausting to the viewer. Despite Bennett's convincing argument against Hartman's idea of secondary trauma, the motivations behind memory-envy that

⁴⁶ Bennett, "Insides, Outsides: Trauma, Affect, and Art," 461.

⁴⁷ The only exception to this is the public element of my tattoo in *An Exercise In Unconditional Trust And Solidarity*, because anyone who sees my bare back will see the names, which makes a content warning particularly challenging to put in place. However, the names on my back with no context are not inherently traumatizing to look at, and for instances in which the full artwork is displayed with knowledge that the names are submitted by survivors of sexual abuse, there are content warnings. This includes content warnings for digital reproductions of the work (such as the video excerpt on Youtube) and content warnings before entering physical gallery spaces in which the work is displayed. In the instance of *Someone, Stop Her! The Musical (The Gallery Show)* there was a content warning in the wall text outside the gallery as well as content warnings in the promotional material for the show.

Hartman describes are untouched by this argument. The pressure to respond with empathy is still present, and we still moralize our responses as if a compassionate response is lesser than an empathetic one. This is problematic.

This brings me to an argument made by Paul Bloom in his book *Against Empathy: The Case for Rational Compassion*. In this book, Bloom argues that while empathy does have some positive effects such as encouraging acts of kindness, it is not central to morality nor is it necessary to do good things. It does not take empathy, in the sense of mirroring the emotional state of another, to do any good deed. He cites instances of great altruism motivated by rational thought such as the case of Zell Kravinsky, whose reasoning behind donating his kidney was mathematical rather than emotional.⁴⁸ Bloom also points out several negative aspects of empathy, such as its paralyzing nature to those who are overly empathetic causing nonaction or irrational and even harmful action⁴⁹, its propensity towards bias as it is easier to empathize with others that are closer to or more similar to ourselves⁵⁰, and its spotlight-like nature⁵¹ that can only focus on one hurt at a time, often causing us to make decisions that favor the one hurt we are empathizing with over a larger greater good⁵². Bloom offers an alternative to empathy that avoids these issues: rational compassion. Rational compassion, or kindness coming from a distanced place that does not internalize the pain of others, provides all the positive results of empathy without the significant negatives.

⁴⁸ Paul Bloom, *Against Empathy: The Case for Rational Compassion* (New York, NY: Ecco, an imprint of HarperCollins Publishers, 2018), 26-27.

⁴⁹ For further reading on instances of violence and cruelty motivated by empathy: Bloom, *Against Empathy: The Case for Rational Compassion*, 187-95.

⁵⁰ For further reading on empathy's subjectivity to bias: Bloom, *Against Empathy: The Case for Rational Compassion*, 9, 48-49, 50, 89-101, 109.

⁵¹ For further reading on empathy's spotlight-like nature: Bloom, *Against Empathy: The Case for Rational Compassion*, 9, 30-31, 33-34, 87-88, 89-90, 95, 130, 136-37.

⁵² Bloom, *Against Empathy: The Case for Rational Compassion*, 33-35.

Generally speaking, an empathetic response to my artwork is undesirable. This may not seem like the case as many of my aforementioned motivations have to do with making a certain emotional connection with my audience, but my goal is to foster a connection that is not empathetic. Instead, I aim to threaten to take one outside of oneself, like Finley, and transform and exorcise my demons, like Sprinkle. I don't merely offer an opportunity to witness pain, but to witness its transformation. Ultimately, I have little control over the potential empathetic response of my audience, or if a viewer might overidentify with my pain in a harmful way. What I can do is provide the content warnings necessary to make an informed decision before viewing my work, and offer Bloom's alternative of rational compassion to those who might feel pressure to empathize. If a viewer should overidentify with my pain to a problematic extent, I consider that outside of my control or responsibility. *Someone, Stop Her! The Musical (The Gallery Show)* is an emotional rollercoaster, and like most rollercoasters, there is an amount of personal liability taken on by the rider.

To more thoroughly address the concerns of my mentors and peers regarding *An Exercise In Unconditional Trust And Solidarity*, I'd like to provide a potential solution to the valid problems that have been pointed out in this admittedly fraught artwork. Those who are concerned for my well-being and the potential to later regret this decision might be comforted by my perspective now that the artwork is complete: I find my emotional connection to the participants to be well worth all of the work I now have to do in addressing its fraught nature. For those who are concerned about the legality of tattooing outside of a tattoo studio, I can only assure them that I made the gallerist aware of this and signed a waiver taking all liability on myself should a legal issue arise. For those

concerned about their own reputations should they support the work, I offer the simple solution of not supporting this work.

For those who are concerned about the well-being of participants or the possibility that a survivor might submit their name in a time of vulnerability and come to regret it later, this is what I consider to be the most important reservation some have about the artwork. Although this is not a perfect solution, I am more than willing to have names redacted or covered if any participant should desire that in the future, as well as re-uploading documentation of the work with blurred or otherwise censored names. While I cannot undo the decision participants have made regarding privacy (I cannot make previous viewers “unsee” what they have seen) I can alter the work to reinstate privacy for the participant moving forward. The issue of a potentially negative experience a participant might have with this work is not one I take lightly, and I consider it to be my greatest responsibility now as a steward for these names.

CHAPTER IV. LEARNING FROM OTHER ARTWORKS

In the spirit of learning from other artworks, there are a handful of exceptionally vulnerable artworks I'd like to include as a further reference while analyzing my work. For example, the performances of Linda Montano often involve a revealing of the inner self. As previously stated, Linda Montano's Art/Life Counseling was the catalyst for Annie Sprinkle's performance of *A Hundred Blow Jobs*. Montano writes on art as therapy and why she began her practice as an Art/Life counselor in a chapter of *Letters from Linda M. Montano*⁵³, stating that

*Artists tend to deny the relationship of their work to therapy and subsequently to psychology... Why do artists deny their connection with psychology? Is it because art history refuses to talk about the reasons for creating? ... If the reasons for creating were more readily discussed among artists in art schools or by art historians, then eventually art-making would radically change.*⁵⁴

Montano acknowledges and rejects the hegemonic pressure to deny the therapeutic properties of artworks in the name of achieving Fine Art status. Many of Montano's performance works challenge this status quo in their personal, vulnerable, and therapeutic nature, but for this document, I will reference just two works: *Mitchell's Death*⁵⁵ and *Talking About Sex While Under Hypnosis*⁵⁶.

⁵³ Linda M. Montano, *Letters from Linda M. Montano* (Florence: Taylor and Francis, 2012).

⁵⁴ Montano, *Letters from Linda M. Montano*, 111-112.

⁵⁵ Linda Montano, *Mitchell's Death*, 1978, B/W, stereo, 22 min.

⁵⁶ Linda Montano, *Talking About Sex While Under Hypnosis*, U C Davis, Male/Female Show, 1975, Video, photography, and performance.



Figure 14. Linda Montano, *Mitchell's Death*, performative video, 1978.⁵⁷

In *Mitchell's Death* (1978), Montano publicly mourns the untimely loss of her ex-husband Mitchell Payne by reciting the story of his death from her point of view, from the moment she was notified up to the time she saw him in the mortuary. She sings this testimony at a single, droning note, while her partner and friend accompany her on a Japanese bowl gong and sruti box.⁵⁸ Like the ground carrots and herbs Annie Sprinkle applied to her gums at the end of *A Hundred Blow Jobs*, Montano incorporates her healing practice by inserting acupuncture needles into the pressure points of her face before and throughout the performance⁵⁹. Her personal account of grief is emotionally gripping as she fumbles through stages of shock, denial, and blame. The result is a realistic depiction of grief, which provides both an outlet and ritual for healing to the artist, and an example for viewers experiencing their losses to find insight. Watching the video documentation of this work, a wave of grief for my father washed over me as I remembered what it was like to first find out, and the denial and dissociation that accompanied it. *Mitchell's Death* did more than just trigger my grief, it showed me that

⁵⁷ Linda Montano, "Mitchell's Death," accessed February 10, 2023, <https://jstor.org/stable/community.12249341>.

⁵⁸ Admittedly, it is worth noting that this is a culturally appropriative element to the artwork, but that is less relevant to my analysis of the work as a whole.

⁵⁹ Linda Montano, *Art in Everyday Life* (Los Angeles: Astro Artz, 1981), pages not numbered.

those experiences are shared and that someone else can put into words exactly what I had once felt, validating my experience in relation to another's experience. Considering that death and the loss of a loved one are inevitable in life, this is a connection we all share at some point. Artworks like *Mitchell's Death* are invaluable because they form genuine connections that strengthen us in our weakest or most painful moments.



Figure 15. Linda Montano, *Talking About Sex While Under Hypnosis*, performance, 1975.⁶⁰

Additionally, Linda Montano's work *Talking About Sex While Under Hypnosis* has taught me about the role of vulnerability in artwork and why it can be transformative. In this performance, Montano uses personae to regulate her relationship with her audience while divulging personal information uncovered through a therapeutic hypnosis session. Surrounded by twelve photographs of herself in various costumes depicting personae, Montano sits in the corner of the gallery and applies makeup to participating audience members. During this, Montano is dressed in a costume representing her sister, further separating her from herself as a video plays in the next room where she lays bare

⁶⁰ The only photograph I can find of this performance is this page spread featuring *Talking About Sex While Under Hypnosis* found in *Art in Everyday Life* which was then photographed in the online catalog database of Printed Matter: "Linda Montano - Art in Everyday Life (a Linda Montano Chicken Book)," Printed Matter, accessed February 8, 2023, <https://www.printedmatter.org/catalog/56797/>.

her fears and suppressions regarding sex⁶¹. In an interview with Lester Ingber featured in Montano's book *Art in Everyday Life*, Montano says:

*I was trying to expose and uncover as much of myself to myself as I could and as a result I was vulnerable to the audience. These experiments were sometimes too upsetting for me and I had to reexamine my motives for revealing so much personal material publicly. (I couldn't remain in the room while the audience watched the video, Talking About Sex While Under Hypnosis). This desire to use art as a place to experiment with truth and intensity was extremely helpful because I could carry over the process of discovery into my life, since I was more willing to be open in my work than in my life. That's probably because I felt more secure in my work and was in control of these experiments on myself. This was psychically liberating. So emotionally, I would experiment with all kinds of things during the art making process but I was able to take responsibility for feelings because I had deliberately made the initial choice to do the experiments.*⁶²

This practice creates a platform of agency and self-determination on which Montano can process personal traumas with a heightened willingness to experiment, activate her subconscious, and be genuine in her attempt to describe herself. This form of public therapeutic processing preserves the artist's agency far more than any private but coerced therapeutic revelation discovered during inpatient psychiatric treatment.⁶³ The power to dig inside yourself *on your own terms* is hard to appreciate until it is revoked. Our current standard procedure for mental health emergencies is one that strips patients of any semblance of agency, often retraumatizing and financially devastating already vulnerable persons. While I respect the desire some have for privacy and the professional level of care provided at these institutions, the privatized mental healthcare system works tirelessly to hide the realities of healing from public view, and in the process, degrades and isolates patients. My therapeutic alternative to repeated hospitalizations is public and

⁶¹ Montano, *Art in Everyday Life*, pages not numbered.

⁶² Montano, *Art in Everyday Life*, pages not numbered.

⁶³ I cite my own experience of being held inpatient against my will at local psychiatric care units, which denied me agency in an exceeding and traumatic amount of ways such as mandatory full-body skin checks, constant supervision even while showering or sleeping, and revoking "privileges" like fresh air or exercise should I not sign a waiver "consenting" to being there. I also witnessed the forcible restraint and sedation of other patients considered less cooperative than myself. This is what I am referencing in the phrase "private but coerced".

performative art, which preserves my agency as I experiment within myself to find healing *on my own terms* and share my process with others who might be looking for an alternative of their own.

Another artist that I have taken inspiration from is comedian and actress Maria Bamford. In her comedy specials, specifically “Maria Bamford: The Special Special Special!”⁶⁴ and “Maria Bamford: Weakness Is The Brand”⁶⁵ Bamford makes edgy yet personable humor out of her own mental health struggles, especially regarding her experiences with psychiatric hospitalization. It was through watching her comedy specials that I realized just how funny an “unfunny” situation can be, and how when handled with care, heavy content can be made light in a cathartic and relatable way. From Bamford, I learned the delicate balance with which distressing topics can be addressed in a way that simultaneously respects the hurt they cause and provides relief through laughter, all while maintaining a sense of down-to-earth amiability that presents Bamford as a character that is likable enough for us to trust. It is through this sense of trust that Bamford’s audience feels safe to laugh with her.

To orient my work in the hyper-recent contemporary, TikTok is another venue for conversations about the politically personal in which many have been sharing deeply personal confessions to broad audiences across the internet. There is a hashtag on TikTok known as “traumatok” that thousands of TikTok users have included in the captions of posts in which they share traumatic anecdotes from their lived experiences. These “traumatoks” range from discussions of gun violence, domestic and child abuse, medical

⁶⁴*Maria Bamford: The Special Special Special!*, Dir. Jordan Brady (Netflix, Brady Oil Company, Chill, Comedy Dynamics, New Wave Entertainment, 2012).

⁶⁵*Maria Bamford: Weakness Is The Brand*, Dir. Robert Cohen (Comedy Dynamics, 2020).

gaslighting, and more. Some #traumatok posts center around relatively mundane daily experiences and how they are affected by psychiatric disorders, everything from Dissociative Identity Disorder to Trichotillomania (hair-pulling disorder), while other posts act as a means of venting about the traumatic experiences that are thought to be at the root of said disorders.⁶⁶ While these TikToks don't take the form of performance art in a Fine Art setting, the sheer amount of people engaging with the hashtag makes #traumatok a social phenomenon from which several observations can be made. First, these short videos range drastically in affect, from mournful to downright silly.⁶⁷ Through these more humorous posts, it becomes all the more clear that black humor is still a widely popular coping mechanism for traumatic experiences. Additionally, the "wall of silence" that manifests in victim-blaming, invalidation, and disbelief is sometimes present in the comments of these TikToks, leading some #traumatok accounts to make posts addressing the harm caused by such invalidation.⁶⁸

⁶⁶ Several Tiktok videos that come to mind here: Mothermoon (@covermama). 2023. "Writing this helped me. I hope it can help someone else." TikTok, March 3, 2023. <https://www.tiktok.com/t/ZTR39W8F5/>. Haden (@abilifymomma). 2023. "This is so rough to post and even harder for me to watch. Pls be nice I'm really goin through it #mentalhealthmatters #trichotillomania #trichotillomaniaawareness #MentalHealthAwareness #wlw #fyp" TikTok, February 18, 2023. <https://www.tiktok.com/t/ZTR39tSFG/>. PIXIELOCKS (@pixieelocks). 2023. "Thank you Jerrick for holding our strongest negative emotions so other parts can function- and thank you Flora for being the warm, soothing caretaker we all need and treasuring the small joys in life #did #dissociativeidentitydisorder #didsystem #realdidsystem #actualdidsystem #traumatok #switch #switchcaughtoncamera but not" TikTok, February 25, 2023. <https://www.tiktok.com/t/ZTR39cTMk/>.

⁶⁷ One particularly "silly" traumatok about horrific subject matter comes to mind here: sam (taylor's version) (@ouruniverse222). 2023. "But now I'm funny #trauma #traumatized #traumatok #sa #abused #foryoupage #foryou #fyp #ft #fy" TikTok, February 3, 2023. <https://www.tiktok.com/t/ZTR3xeMP8/>.

⁶⁸ A few more TikToks that come to mind here are: E (@e.denton). 2023. "#DID #traumatok #dissociation #osdd #dpdr #system #dissociativeidentitydisorder #derealization #depersonalization" TikTok, March 20, 2023. https://www.tiktok.com/@e.denton/video/7212725546910747947?_r=1&_t=8bUleqxeV06. and PIXIELOCKS (@pixieelocks). 2023. "Love this audio trend so so so much. Don't forget to use your brain when you interact with others online today! #dissociativeidentitydisorder #did #didsystem #realdidsystem #actualdidsystem #MentalHealth #fakeclaiming #systok #multiplepersonalities #pixielocks #syscourse #plural #multiple" TikTok, February 18, 2023. <https://www.tiktok.com/t/ZTR3vNg4b/>.

It might be impossible to discuss vulnerable performance art without also discussing several famous artworks in which performers make themselves literally vulnerable to harm, often inflicted by their audiences. In the edgier and often deliberately untherapeutic tradition of endurance-based performance art⁶⁹ there are a few power players that immediately come to mind. Marina Abramović and Chris Burden have been known to bear physical harm as a result of their performances. Rather than listing the extensive catalog of artworks in which Abramović and Burden have been injured, let's focus briefly on just one: *Rhythm 0* by Marina Abramović⁷⁰. In this performance, Abramović endures six hours of complete vulnerability to the whims of her audience, which had been provided 72 items that can cause either pleasure or pain, and a reassurance that the artist takes full responsibility for the outcome of any action. With these 72 items including several lethal weapons (such as a loaded gun), Abramović puts her life on the line to discover the limits of the body and the lengths an audience will go to when allowed to completely objectify the artist.

⁶⁹ A tradition that I have admittedly indulged in when I gave myself whiplash from a performance in which I give a silicone replica of myself CPR chest compressions with all my might until I fell unconscious. This work is not part of the body of work featured in my thesis, but it's worth mentioning that I'm not immune to this trend. However, this is not the intended direction of my artwork moving forward.

⁷⁰ Marina Abramovic, *Rhythm 0*, 1974, duration 6 hrs:8-2am.



Figure 16. Marina Abramovic, *Rhythm 0*, performance, 1974.⁷¹

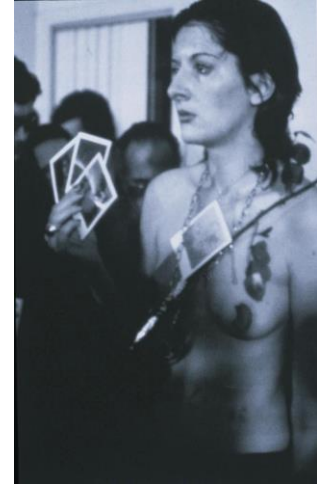


Figure 17. Marina Abramovic, *Rhythm 0*, performance, 1974.⁷²

This performance of extremely high stakes took place 10 years after a less dangerous but conceptually similar performance artwork by Yoko Ono titled *Cut Piece*⁷³. In this performance, Ono provides her audience a pair of scissors and sits motionlessly as her audience cuts away her clothing at their discretion. This is a clear predecessor to Abramović's *Rhythm 0*, as both work within the social framework of the performer's vulnerability to their audience. While participants might incriminate themselves based on how they choose to interact, they are ultimately given a scenario of zero repercussions should they choose cruelty. This type of vulnerability, while historically significant to the field of performance art, is not something I intend to replicate. I do not wish to show the world its capacity to harm me; I'm already aware of it and feel no need to prove it in a performative social experiment. Instead, allow me to provide another example that aligns

⁷¹ Marina Abramovic, "Rhythm 0: Det.: Crowd at Table," accessed February 10, 2023, <https://jstor.org/stable/community.13755739>.

⁷² Marina Abramovic, "Rhythm 0: Det.: Artist Holding Object," accessed February 10, 2023, <https://jstor.org/stable/community.13736117>.

⁷³ Yoko Ono, *Cut Piece* (Yamaichi Concert Hall), 1964, performance.

with the type of performative vulnerability I am interested in for my work, and explain how it differs from the vulnerability exemplified in *Cut Piece* and *Rhythm 0*.



Figure 18. Yoko Ono, *Cut Piece*, performance, 1964.⁷⁴

Take, for instance, Nan Goldin’s photograph *Nan After Being Battered*⁷⁵, which is part of her larger project *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency*. The larger project compiled hundreds of photographs into a slide show set to music, and in it, viewers are invited to witness the private lives of Goldin and several of her loved ones as they are depicted as honestly as possible— including personal details of domestic violence, drug use, and the effects of AIDS⁷⁶. The particular photograph I focus on here, *Nan After Being Battered*, is a Cibachrome print showing Goldin partially recovered but still seriously injured from an instance of domestic violence by her intimate partner that had taken place one month prior to the photograph. In the photograph, Goldin holds an unapologetic gaze of direct eye contact with the camera. She is made-up in red lipstick and jewelry as if to show that she is still capable of beauty and deliberate self-presentation despite her injuries. Her facial expression and aesthetic choices speak multitudes, showing a duality of hurt and

⁷⁴ Yoko Ono, “Cut Piece Yamaichi Concert Hall,” accessed February 10, 2023, <https://jstor.org/stable/community.13869483>.

⁷⁵ Nan Goldin, “Ballad of Sexual Dependency: Nan After Being Battered,” accessed February 10, 2023, <https://jstor.org/stable/community.13717215>.

⁷⁶ Phaidon Editors, *Body of Art* (London: Phaidon, 2015), 118.

resilience, and firmly positioning her as more than just a victim. Goldin makes herself vulnerable by publicly showing this private reality, yes, but in this instance of vulnerability the harm to Goldin has already been dealt. Her publicization of the abuse she endured is an act of reclaiming her agency. Goldin has written, “*The Ballad of Sexual Dependency* is the diary I let people read. The diary is my form of control over my life. It allows me to obsessively record every detail. It enables me to remember.”⁷⁷ Unlike *Rhythm 0* and *Cut Piece*, Goldin’s act of vulnerability is rooted in exercising and extending personal agency, not the sacrifice of that agency.



Figure 19. Nan Goldin, *Nan After Being Battered*, photograph, 1982.⁷⁸

⁷⁷ Nan Goldin, *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency* (New York: Aperture, 1982), 6.

⁷⁸ Nan Goldin, “Ballad of Sexual Dependency: Nan After Being Battered,” accessed February 10, 2023, <https://jstor.org/stable/community.13717215>.

CHAPTER V. CUNTINESS AND COUNTER-MIMICRY

As another point, several of the artists discussed in Schneider's *The Explicit Body in Performance* have a certain quality that I aim to embody. This quality is initially described in reference to Carolee Schneemann when Schneider describes the early motivations Schneemann had for including her explicit body in her work:

...she felt she had partial status, and was personally troubled by the suspicion that she was included only as a "cunt mascot" in the heavily male cliques of Fluxus and Happenings. Her response to this feeling— covering her naked body in paint, grease, chalk, ropes, and plastic, and incorporating it directly into her work— was to address her mascot-dom directly... as if to declare: If I am a token, then I'll be a token to reckon with.⁷⁹

The role of the "cunt mascot" that addresses tokenism with a straightforward cynicism is inspirational to me because it uses tropes against themselves to subvert once-disempowering imagery and ideas and turn them into political and ideological weaponry, like satire. Aside from Schneemann, Schneider also identifies Annie Sprinkle as somewhat of a "cunt mascot" in her performance *Post-Porn Modernist*⁸⁰ in which her "too much" does not transcend sexuality but instead exposes it as indivisible from social issues of vulnerability and power, especially regarding imagehood and the male gaze.⁸¹ It is this "too muchness" that makes Sprinkle a "cunt mascot" in her own right.

⁷⁹ Schneider, *Explicit Body in Performance*, 34-35.

⁸⁰ *Post-Porn Modernist* is a performance that climaxes when Sprinkle uses a speculum to allow viewers to look directly at her cervix. The performance is described as a "One woman play/performance written and performed by Annie Sprinkle, first directed by Emilio Cuberio, later by Willem De Ridder. Performed at the Kitchen, LaMaMa, Joseph Papp Theatre (NYC); LeKliene Comedie Theater (Amsterdam); Schmidt Theater (Hamburg); COCA (Seattle)." Vale and Juno, *Angry Women*, 40.

⁸¹ Schneider, *Explicit Body in Performance*, 76-77.



Figure 20. Annie Sprinkle, *Post-Porn Modernist*, performance, 1991.⁸²

There is, of course, the question of whether these highly sexualized performances further degrade the women that perform them, which Schneider addresses:

The question of whether such work simply recapitulates the delimitation of the body marked female to the realm of sexuality is an important one. It is possible to argue that work which employs overt sexuality buttresses rather than shatters the patriarchal delimitation of women to the realm of sex. It is also possible to argue, however, that this work, rather than positioning itself against the sexualization of the female body, attempts to wield the master's tools against the master's house, to force a second look at the terms and terrain of that sexualization.⁸³

To further quote Schneider rejecting the potential interpretation of self-degradation when using the explicit body in feminist performance:

If anything, these performers mimic their mimesis, mimic the ways they have been mimed by patriarchal representation— doubling back over the historical mimesis of their sex in a kind of counter-mimicry.⁸⁴

This counter-mimicry is what makes the “cunt mascot” so effective. Similar to how Karen Finley embodies abuse to observe and expose it, artists like Annie Sprinkle and Carolee Schneemann embody their sexualization to observe and expose it— or as Schneider writes, they “force a second look at the terms and terrain of that sexualization.” This second look requires a visual reference to the first one; without embodying the sexualization itself, how could they directly address it? While there might be ways to

⁸² Annie Sprinkle, “The Sprinkle Salon Annie Sprinkle Leslie Barany: Det.: Body Viewing,” accessed February 10, 2023, <https://jstor.org/stable/community.13739617>.

⁸³ Schneider, *The Explicit Body in Performance*, 105.

⁸⁴ Schneider, *The Explicit Body in Performance*, 134.

address sexualization without using sexually explicit imagery, those methods are not direct nor are they effective, and that is why there are not any notable examples to cite using this approach. The closest I can muster is that of Georgia O’Keeffe’s vagino-floral imagery, but those works do not protest or subvert much of anything. What political power does a yonic but nondescript bunching of petals hold compared to Schneemann’s *Interior Scroll*, or the untitled Artforum advertisements of Lynda Benglis?



Figure 21. Georgia O’Keeffe, *Grey Lines with Black, Blue and Yellow*, oil on canvas, 1923.⁸⁵

Figure 22. Carolee Schneemann, *Interior Scroll*, performance, 1975.⁸⁶

Figure 23. Lynda Benglis, *Untitled*, photograph, 1974.⁸⁷

Even in instances of artworks like Faith Ringgold’s *Slave Rape Story Quilt*⁸⁸ that protest rape culture yet contains no explicitly sexual imagery (usually for a valid purpose of respecting the needs of an audience likely to be survivors of rape), there is explicit storytelling and even graphic detail in the form of written text. Some antirape artworks avoid sexually explicit imagery but they generally replace it with some other form of

⁸⁵ Georgia O’Keeffe, “Grey Lines with Black, Blue and Yellow,” accessed February 10, 2023, <https://jstor.org/stable/community.12052012>.

⁸⁶ Carolee Schneemann, “Interior Scroll,” accessed February 10, 2023, <https://jstor.org/stable/community.13737022>.

⁸⁷ Lynda Benglis, “Ref.: Artforum, Nov. 1974,” accessed February 10, 2023, <https://jstor.org/stable/community.13735297>.

⁸⁸ Faith Ringgold, “Slave Rape Story Quilt,” Tie-dyed and printed cotton fabrics and ink on cotton fabric sewn over polyester batting, 86 x 74 in. Newark, New Jersey. Newark Museum.

viscera, such as the lamb carcasses used in Suzanne Lacy's *There Are Voices In The Desert*⁸⁹, or the egg yolks, beef kidneys, and animal blood used in Judy Chicago, Suzanne Lacy, and Aviva Rahmani's *Ablutions*⁹⁰. As a more recent example, Emma Sulkowicz's *Mattress Performance (Carry That Weight)*⁹¹ uses the cumbersome weight of a mattress to represent the burden of rape. There are some reasons to avoid sexually explicit imagery, especially if an artwork is focused on rape as subject matter, but in artworks that intend to interrogate the delimitation of women to the realm of sex *without* a specific focus on rape, there is no reason to censor sexually explicit imagery that outweighs its potential for subversive power.



Figure 24. Faith Ringgold, *Slave Rape Story Quilt*, tie-dyed and printed cotton fabrics and ink on cotton fabric, 1985.⁹²



Figure 25. Suzanne Lacy, *There Are Voices in the Desert*, installation, 1978.⁹³

⁸⁹ Suzanne Lacy, "There Are Voices in the Desert," 22 Apr. 1978, Las Vegas, University of Nevada Gallery.

⁹⁰ Suzanne Lacy, Aviva Rahmani, Sandra Orgel, and Judy Chicago, *Ablutions: Performance: Det.* 1972. <https://jstor.org/stable/community.13906939>.

⁹¹ In 2014, Emma Sulkowicz carried the mattress that they were raped on across their campus for every day that they attended the same school as their rapist. This continued for their entire time at Columbia University as they carried the mattress during graduation. For more information about Emma Sulkowicz's *Mattress Performance (Carry That Weight)* please reference this interview video: Columbia Daily Spectator, *Emma Sulkowicz: "Carry That Weight"*, YouTube (YouTube, 2014), <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I9hHZbuYVnU>.

⁹² Faith Ringgold, "Slave Rape Story Quilt," accessed February 10, 2023, <https://jstor.org/stable/community.13747450>.

⁹³ Suzanne Lacy, "Voices in the Desert," accessed February 10, 2023, <https://jstor.org/stable/community.13905565>.



Figure 26. Suzanne Lacy, Aviva Rahmani, Sandra Orgel, and Judy Chicago, *Ablutions*, performance, 1972.⁹⁴



Figure 27. Emma Sulkowicz, *Carry That Weight (Mattress Performance)*, performance, 2014.⁹⁵

That being said, *How Am I Supposed To Make Money Now? The Burlesque Show Story Of An M.F.A.* is my attempt at wielding the master's tools against the master's house. In satirizing the whorishness of my predicament, I become my own cunt mascot. I use the visual vocabulary of stripping and burlesque dance to “double back over the historical mimicry” that created the student-to-stripper pipeline in the first place. I use the caricature of the naughty schoolgirl to mock my own experiences of being sexualized as a student in an act of counter-mimesis. With the help of my strawman character representing those judging me from places of hegemonic power, I expose the process of presenting a Fine Arts thesis for what it is: an act of performance for spectator approval with a number of conceptual similarities to the work of dancing in a strip club.

⁹⁴ Judy Chicago, “Ablutions: Performance: Det.,” accessed February 10, 2023, <https://jstor.org/stable/community.13906939>.

⁹⁵ Andrew Burton, *Mattress Performance (Carry That Weight)*, January 18, 2017, photograph, *The Cut*, January 18, 2017, Getty Images, <https://www.thecut.com/2017/01/emma-sulkowicz-mattress-performance-healing-philadelphia.html>.

CHAPTER VI. SECRECY AND THE PRESSURE TO REMAIN PRIVATE

Finally, there is one more topic I'd like to address regarding my thesis work, and that is secrecy and the pressure to remain private. The body of work I present is confessional of many instances that I've been encouraged to keep to myself. To be more specific, those who have taken advantage of me sexually do not want me to speak or make art about it, those who have abused me in past relationships do not want me to speak or make art about it, and perhaps most importantly as it broadens this "wall of silence" to recognize bystanders that do not commit acts of abuse themselves, those witnesses that I have come forward to only to be met with silence or hostility do not want me to speak or make art about it. Although the movement of recognizing the personal as political has bloomed to widespread recognition, there is still an overarching wall of silence imposed on certain subject matter deemed "private" especially when it comes to instances of abuse or sexual misconduct. This binaric divide between public and private space only serves to further hegemonic power imbalances, because certain injustices thrive on silence. In what has been dubbed the "#metoo⁹⁶ era" there is still a burden perceived as "cancel culture" that rests on the shoulders of survivors rather than perpetrators.

⁹⁶ It is especially worth noting that the #metoo movement was originally intended for solidarity between sexual assault survivors that are women of color, specifically. The movement was founded by survivor and activist Tarana Burke, and was later popularized by white actress and activist Alyssa Milano. The movement became widespread across women of all races, but this problematically elides the original focus on racially-based sexual violence. For more information, please reference: "Get to Know Us: History & Inception," me too. Movement, July 16, 2020, <https://metoomvmt.org/get-to-know-us/history-inception/>.

This wall of silence is challenged by the many works referenced in Vivien Green Fryd's *Against Our Will: Sexual Trauma in American Art Since 1970*⁹⁷, which chronicles antirape movements first in a detailed introduction that reports the recent dialogue regarding rape in the public consciousness (from the Task Force to Protect Students from Sexual Assault formed during the Obama administration, to the Vatican's "code of silence" regarding clerical pedophilia, to famous instances of sexual harassment and rape with widespread media coverage such as the cases of Bill Cosby, Harvey Weinstein, and more⁹⁸), and through close visual analysis of antirape artworks throughout the rest of the book (including aforementioned works by Ringgold, Lacy, Chicago, and Sulkowicz). The overall sentiment of this book is that crimes like rape rely on and thrive on silence, and it is the act of silence-breaking and consciousness-raising that makes antirape artworks effective. In the final paragraph of the conclusion, Fryd writes:

*Like the visual, auditory, and written voices in the works I examine here, I acknowledge, condemn, and hopefully have contributed to ending our culture that mutually reinforces silence about and acceptance of sexual violence.*⁹⁹

While sexual violence is not the only subject in my thesis work I have been pressured to remain quiet about, it is a sort of poster child for hushed topics. Through understanding the forces that pressure survivors of sexual violence to remain silent, I also understand why so many viewers are made uncomfortable by my testimonies regarding the mental healthcare system, self-harm and suicidal ideation, grief, and anything else deemed "too personal" to be Fine Art. The argument that *An Exercise In Unconditional Trust And Solidarity* would be more acceptable if it was a private, therapeutic practice rather than a

⁹⁷ Vivien Green Fryd, *Against Our Will: Sexual Trauma in American Art since 1970* (University Park, PA, PA: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 2019).

⁹⁸ Fryd, *Against Our Will: Sexual Trauma in American Art since 1970*, 9-16.

⁹⁹ Fryd, *Against Our Will: Sexual Trauma in American Art since 1970*, 286.

public artwork further clarifies that this wall of silence is apparent in reactions to my artwork.

Regarding the binaric divide between public and private space, I'd like to reference one final quote, this time from Andrea Juno's interview with bell hooks in *Angry Women*:

bh: And privacy becomes a way of saying "I don't want to have to attend to something outside of myself." So really it becomes a screen for a profound narcissism... I think about how privacy is so connected to a politics of domination. I think that's why there's such an emphasis in my work on the confessional, because I know that in a way we're never going to end the forms of domination if we're not willing to challenge the notion of public and private... if we're not willing to break down the walls that say, "There should always be this separation between domestic space/intimate space and the world outside." Because in fact, why shouldn't we have intimacy in the outside world as well?

AJ: I really believe in the idea that people break down the power structure through the confessional... that just telling the truth in a society that's based on lies, is a radical act—

bh: Yes— a culture of lies.¹⁰⁰

If telling the truth in a culture of lies is a radical act, then the vulnerability I present within my thesis work is inherently radical. In defense of my work, I recognize secrecy and the urge to remain private as an unwillingness to attend to something outside of oneself, just as bell hooks describes here. Perhaps this is why Karen Finley's work has been met with hostility, exemplified by the National Endowment for the Arts revoking funding for her work in the name of obscenity¹⁰¹— it is the threat to take one outside of

¹⁰⁰ Vale and Juno, *Angry Women*, 86.

¹⁰¹ Being rejected by the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) situates Finley amongst a cohort of other provocative artists to lose NEA funding such as Robert Mapplethorpe and Andres Serrano. This is a historical moment in discussions of censorship in the arts, deeply related to criticisms of Jesse Helms and concerns of artists making work regarding the AIDS crisis. Finley and three other performance artists, John Fleck, Holly Hughes, and Tim Miller, as well as the National Association of Artists' Organizations (NAOO) joined together in a court case known as National Endowment for the Arts v. Finley (1998) in an attempt to regain the funding, but the court ruled in the favor of the NEA. For scholarly evidence of this, please reference: Lackland H. Bloom Jr., "NEA v. Finley: A Decision in Search of a Rationale," *Washington University Law Quarterly* 77, no. 1 (Spring 1999): 1-52.

oneself that disrupts hegemonic walls of privacy and disturbs the foundations of our victim-blaming rape culture. In a culture of lies, the truth is threatening and unruly.

CONCLUSION

I do not intend to minimize or invalidate the discomfort some have with viewing my work, nor do I intend to shame viewers for having that discomfort. Instead, I argue that this discomfort is productive and valuable, and viewers should rise to the challenge of sitting with that discomfort and seeing what good can come of it, rather than avoiding or discrediting my work altogether. After all, most growth requires challenge, and most good things come from some amount of strain or effort to achieve them. What I do condemn is when my work is disregarded, censored, or otherwise kept hidden from public view because of said discomfort manifesting in an unwillingness to bear witness and reluctance to attend to something outside of oneself that bell hooks describes as a screen for profound narcissism.

In conclusion, I present a body of work for my thesis that is radically vulnerable, personally political, and emotionally complex. This body of work challenges the viewer in a multitude of ways, such as threatening to take one outside of oneself, putting insides and outsides into contact, and generating distressing yet fruitful experiences of discomfort. I use Camp sensibilities to bring “low art” to a heightened academic arena to invoke binary terror and challenge false dichotomies such as high and low art, Fine Art and art therapy, personal and political, and ultimately challenge the hegemonic systems we use to judge the worthiness of art. I defend my work from the issue of secondary trauma or tele-suffering by recognizing the discomfort provoked by my works yet

defining that discomfort as something distinctly separate from trauma itself. I recognize the potential for memory-envy and compassion fatigue and avoid the pitfalls of overidentifying empathetic responses by offering rational compassion as an alternative. I learn from other vulnerable artworks and aim to create instances of vulnerability that exercise rather than revoke my agency as an artist. I am inspired by the role of the “cunt mascot” that uses counter-mimicry to subvert once-disempowering tropes and use the master’s tools against the master’s house. I defend my work from the potential claim of self-degradation by recognizing the political power of subverting these tropes against themselves, and I recognize secrecy and the pressure to remain private as an extension of hegemony that aims to maintain the wall of silence that I break down through my works. I situate my work within a historical narrative of other personal and performative artworks, and I learn from each artist I reference as I implement their methods in my process. I recognize that I am not pleasant to witness, but I insist that there is much to be gained by pushing through discomfort and forming new connective tissue between myself and my audience. All of that to say... my artwork is valid and worthwhile.

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APPENDIX: A LIST OF IMAGES FROM
SOMEONE, STOP HER! THE MUSICAL (THE GALLERY SHOW)

1. Installation view of *The Typewriter Series*, water-based ink on typewriter on paper, 2022-2023.
2. Installation view of *An Exercise In Unconditional Trust And Solidarity*, tattoo and performance, featuring ink and blood on napkin, 2022.
3. Installation view of *Semiotics Of My Bedroom*, performance and digital livestream, 2021-2022.
4. Installation view of *Someone, Stop Her! The Musical (The Gallery Show) The Gift Shop*, featuring piggy bank, disco ball, acrylic on foam core, tee shirts reading “PRODUCTS ARE COOL AND SELLABLE,” one-of-a-kind tee shirts reading “HANNAH DEWITT MADE ME UNCOMFORTABLE,” “HANNAH DEWITT HURT MY FEELINGS,” “HANNAH DEWITT GAVE ME A BONER,” “HANNAH DEWITT OFFENDED ME TERRIBLY,” and “HANNAH DEWITT UNLOCKED A REPRESSED MEMORY FROM MY SUBCONSCIOUS AND I WISH SHE WOULD UNDO IT,” screenprint on cotton, 2023.
5. Hannah DeWitt performing original song “Apocalypse Buddy” on ukulele, 2023.
6. Hannah DeWitt performing *Stand-Up Comedy About My Trauma*, 2023.
7. Hannah DeWitt with Generalized Anxiety Disorder sock puppet, *Stand-Up Comedy About My Trauma*, 2023.
8. Hannah DeWitt with Major Depressive Disorder sock puppet kissing Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder sock puppet, *Stand-Up Comedy About My Trauma*, 2023.
9. Hannah DeWitt with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder sock puppet carrying Generalized Anxiety Disorder sock puppet in mouth, *Stand-Up Comedy About My Trauma*, 2023.
10. Hannah DeWitt with Attention-Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder sock puppet and Childhood Tourettes baby sock puppet, *Stand-Up Comedy About My Trauma*, 2023.
11. Hannah DeWitt with The Human Sockpede sock puppet(s), *Stand-Up Comedy About My Trauma*, 2023.
12. Hannah DeWitt performing original song “Am I Your Doll (Fuck You)” on guitar, 2023.
13. Hannah DeWitt presents her thesis document to Fuddy Duddy, *How Am I Supposed To Make Money Now? The Burlesque Show Story Of An MFA*, 2023.
14. Hannah DeWitt dancing in *How Am I Supposed To Make Money Now? The Burlesque Show Story Of An MFA*, 2023.
15. Hannah DeWitt dancing in *How Am I Supposed To Make Money Now? The Burlesque Show Story Of An MFA*, 2023.
16. Hannah DeWitt begging for her degree in *How Am I Supposed To Make Money Now? The Burlesque Show Story Of An MFA*, 2023.
17. Hannah DeWitt dancing in *How Am I Supposed To Make Money Now? The Burlesque Show Story Of An MFA*, 2023.
18. Hannah DeWitt verbally attacking Fuddy Duddy in *How Am I Supposed To Make Money Now? The Burlesque Show Story Of An MFA*, 2023.
19. Hannah DeWitt works the crowd after revealing graduation cap pasties, *How Am I Supposed To Make Money Now? The Burlesque Show Story Of An MFA*, 2023.
20. Hannah DeWitt dancing in *How Am I Supposed To Make Money Now? The Burlesque Show Story Of An MFA*, 2023.
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20. Hannah DeWitt dancing in *How Am I Supposed To Make Money Now? The Burlesque Show Story Of An MFA*, 2023.



21. Hannah DeWitt dancing in *How Am I Supposed To Make Money Now? The Burlesque Show Story Of An MFA*, 2023.

CURRICULUM VITA

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EDUCATION:

Pending MFA, Hite Institute of Art and Design, University of Louisville

2020 BFA, Summa Cumme Laude, Spalding Creative Arts, Spalding University

2015 Governor's School for the Arts, Danville, KY

EXHIBITION RECORD:

2023 Someone, Stop Her! The Musical (The Gallery Show), Hite Institute of Art and Design @ Grow West, Louisville, KY

2022 Black & White Show, Juried Group Exhibition, KORE Gallery, Louisville, KY

2022 An Exercise In Dominance And Violation, Louisville Fringe Fest, The Whirling Tiger, Louisville, KY

2022 Ekphrasis, The University Writing Center, University of Louisville, Louisville, KY

2022 An Exercise In Unconditional Trust And Solidarity, Solo Performative Exhibition, Carbon Copy Gallery, Louisville, KY

2022 The Big Sleep: Meditations on Death & Grieving, Group Exhibition, Snide Hotel, Louisville, KY

- 2022 Figures, Juried Digital Group Exhibition, Art Fluent, art-fluent.com/figures
- 2021 Pharmacopeia, Juried Group Exhibition, Chateau Gallery, Louisville, KY
- 2020 Beating A Dead Horse, Solo Performative Exhibition, Prophecy Ink, Louisville, KY
- 2020 Cherchez La Femme, Juried Group Exhibition, Prophecy Ink, Louisville, KY
- 2020 Push Comes To Shove, Group Exhibition, Hite Art Institute @ Grow West, Louisville, KY
- 2020 Error 404 Gallery Not Found, Senior Thesis Exhibition, Spalding Creative Arts, Louisville, KY
- 2019 SHAME, National Juried Group Exhibition, Hera Gallery, Wakefield, RI
- 2019 Junior Focus, Student Exhibition, Spalding Creative Arts, Louisville, KY

AWARDS:

- 2022 Reserach and Materials Grant, Graduate Network in Arts & Sciences, University of Louisville
- 2021 Research Grant, Graduate Student Council, University of Louisville
- 2021 Research and Materials Grant, Graduate Network in Arts & Sciences, University of Louisville
- 2021 Research and Materials Grant, Graduate Network in Arts & Sciences, University of Louisville
- 2021 Professional Development Grant, FATE 2021: Infrastructure Conference, Hite Art Institute, University of Louisville
- 2020 Research and Materials Grant, Graduate Network in Arts & Sciences, University of Louisville
- 2020 Full-tuition Scholarship, Hite Art Institute, University of Louisville
- 2019 Artist Enrichment Grant, Kentucky Foundation for Women, Louisville, KY

2019 Summer Residency Program, Hopscotch House, Kentucky Foundation for Women, Louisville, KY

2016 Portfolio Scholarship, Kentucky College of Art and Design, Spalding University, Louisville, KY

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Graduate Teaching Assistant, Instructor for Studio Art and Visual Culture (ART 200), University of Louisville, 2021 - 2023

Studio Attendant, Painting Studios and Classrooms, Hite Art Institute, University of Louisville, 2021 - 2023

In-House Graphic Designer, Chateau Gallery, Louisville, KY, 2020 - 2021

Guest Curator, Chateau Gallery, Louisville, KY, 2020 - 2021

Studio Assistant, Lama Braaksma Illustration Studio, Louisville, KY, 2018

Curator, Emerging Young Artists, Kentucky Fine Art Gallery, Louisville, KY, 2016

Assistant Framer, Spetz Custom Framing, Louisville, KY, 2014 - 2016

LEADERSHIP ROLES:

Graduate Student Council, MFA Program Representative, University of Louisville, 2021 - 2022

Residential Assistant, Spalding University Residence Life, Louisville, KY, 2017 - 2019

President, KyCAD Student Ambassadors, Kentucky College of Art and Design, Spalding University, 2017 - 2018

Program Founder and Developer, Sculptural Art Therapy for the Blind, McDowell Center for the Blind, Louisville, KY, 2015 - 2016