

Intimate Tactility and *the tender place where the world breaks*

By

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A thesis submitted to the

Faculty of the Graduate School of the

University of Colorado in partial fulfillment

of the requirement for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

Department of Art & Art History

2021

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Abstract

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Thesis directed by Associate Professor Jeanne Liotta

My thesis project, *the tender place where the world breaks*, is a filmic exploration of my own mental breakdown, utilizing strategies such as hand-made cinema, performative film, diary film, and poetic cinema. I discuss why and how these various strategies are employed in *the tender place where the world breaks*, as well as my previous works that have led to this practice. I also discuss filmmakers and works that have been influential in my use of the strategies employed in *the tender place where the world breaks* including Carolee Schneemann's *Fuses* (1967), Valie Export's *...Remote...Remote...* (1973), and Nazli Dinçel's *Solitary Acts* (2015) series.

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Introduction

I am interested in the experience of cinema in which the viewer feels connected to the artist, as if they have just made a new friend, though they have never met. When I first saw Nazli Dinçel's *Solitary Acts* (2015) series, Dinçel's self-disclosure around masturbation, abortion, and conflict made me feel like I knew her. As Dinçel's composed voice, devoid of any embarrassment or self-consciousness, told of her early sexual experiences, I felt as though I was a confidant. I was aware of the intimate nature of both the content and the form, as Dinçel's hand could be sensed in the film, with her hand-processed images and manipulation of the celluloid. This is the type of cinematic experience that I intend to create: cinema as a tool for connection.

I believe that it is vulnerability that fosters connection, and our connections with other people are the reason we exist. I create experimental films about my personal experiences in order to cultivate my own vulnerability and present it to an audience of strangers, to inspire vulnerability in their own lives. My films are autobiographical, diaristic. I have made works drawing on my journal entries (*Who Wants to Fall in Love* (2019)), my traumatic experiences (*Fool(ed)* (2017) and *Fool(ed) (reprise)* (2019)), and my understanding of my sexuality (*compulsory heterosexuality* (2020)). In my films, I maintain an intimate tactile relationship with the work. I work on celluloid almost exclusively, and my hand is involved in the entirety of the process: from loading the camera and hand-processing the images, to manipulation of the celluloid both physical and chemical. In this written thesis, I discuss filmmakers whose approach to tactile filmmaking and personal content have inspired the way that I work. I discuss my thesis

film, *the tender place where the world breaks*, in which I explore my own mental breakdown and hospitalization using strategies of intimate tactility.

I have coined the term Intimate Tactility to describe the way in which I work. “intimate tactility” is a phrase that has been used to describe artwork that is engaged with touch in essential ways, but it has yet to be used to define, delineate, and categorize filmmaking in the way that I define it here. Intimate Tactility refers to a filmmaking mode that exists when two things are true: the content of the work is intensely personal, and there is the development of a physical relationship between the filmmaker and their celluloid medium. In my work, this physical relationship with the celluloid manifests itself both in the hand-processing of images, and the hand-manipulation of the medium.

the tender place where the world breaks is a super 8mm and regular 8mm film exploration of my own mental illness and hospitalization amidst a global pandemic. It is divided into chapters including performative film (a restorative practice of putting band-aids all over my body), diary film (testing the side effects of neuroleptic medications, documenting the works I make as part of Art Therapy, re-imagining self-harm as a fractured image-self), and film poems (derived from self-help worksheets and poetry journals I was exposed to while hospitalized). I shoot, hand-process, and hand-manipulate (scratch, burn, laser-etch) the film as to maintain an intimate relationship with the work. I optically print the regular 8mm, unsplit, onto 16mm to emphasize the multiple frame quality, referencing repetition of actions such as self-harm, and mask-wearing while hospitalized. I create sound recordings (of medical information, poems,

and mantras), and mix them. *the tender place where the world breaks*, with its tactile process and intimate personal content, is the embodiment of a healing ritual.

Intimate Tactility

I am not the only artist, either historically or contemporarily, whose work has engaged with Intimate Tactility. For example, work by Carolee Schneemann as well as Nazli Dinçel can also be categorized as Intimate Tactility.

In Carolee Schneemann's seminal work *Fuses* (1967) she engages in Intimate Tactility. The film centers on the sexual experiences between Schneemann and her then-husband James Tenney. Though Intimate Tactility does not necessitate the



relating or representation of sexual experiences, this a poignant example of intimate personal content. In *Fuses*, Schneemann displays her relationship, particularly the moments that are shared normally only between her and Tenney. These moments

are full of vulnerability, as they are typically private or only shared in stories with close friends. By allowing us to see these moments, Schneemann is treating her audience as an intimate partner or a close friend. All the while, Schneemann's film is mediated by painting multiple layers onto the film itself. The relationship in the images is of an intimate physical nature, and at the same time, we are aware that Schneemann has developed an intimate physical relationship with the film strip itself in her hours upon

hours of painting, scratching, and stamping. While Schneemann's *Fuses* is perhaps one of the first films to have engaged with Intimate Tactility, it is certainly not the last.

Throughout Nazli Dinçel's *Solitary Acts #4* (2015) and *Solitary Acts #6* (2015), she scratches text into her films about the personal subjects of masturbation, abortion, and friendship conflict. In

Solitary Acts #4, Dinçel

recounts early

experiences with sexuality

in the form of

masturbation. She tells the

story in the third person,



but we read the film as autobiographical. The images that comprise the film are of Dinçel touching herself. These explicit images of a vulva in pleasure are incredibly intimate, and compositionally beautiful. Dinçel's use of hand-processing techniques make it so that the image is obscured for much of the film, which allows the viewer to inhabit a voyeuristic desire to see her pleasure. We are not repulsed by this vulnerability, instead we are drawn to it. At times throughout the film, we hear Dinçel reading the text that is scratched into the film emulsion, at other times we read it in our own voices. This choice allows the viewer to relate Dinçel's experiences to our own. But we know these experiences come from Dinçel because the first time we see the text that recounts a story of early sexuality, we also hear Dinçel's voice reading the text to us.

In *Solitary Acts #6*, scratched text tells us a story of abortion. This film mirrors *Solitary Acts #4* in that the image consists of a penis in pleasure. In this film, Dinçel's voice appears reading text about a friendship gone sour, a narrative that seems to reference the film we are watching in this moment. A man's voice reads what we understand as Dinçel's side of the argument, as his masturbation gains speed and depicts a climax. In *Solitary Acts #6*, we experience the intimate personal content of Dinçel's tumultuous friendship. Again, this film is hand-processed so that the images of masturbation are partially obscured, and text is scratched into the film emulsion to tell us what roles Dinçel and her film partner inhabit in relation to the introductory story of an abortion. Dinçel's role is as the mother, and her partner in the film is the child. There is an inherent conflict between mother who does not want to give birth, and gestating child, just as there is a conflict between Dinçel and her film partner. It is a show of vulnerability to bring light to this conflict, as well as to the intimate content of masturbation.

In my film *the tender place where the world breaks*, I represent the intensely personal experience of a mental breakdown. Though there have been strides in the way we talk about mental health in our society, it is still a taboo subject. In telling of my experiences in the film, I am treating the film as a confidant. I recount stories from inside a mental hospital, stories that in my normal life, I might only tell a close friend. I impose my experience of a PTSD diagnosis onto the viewer, attempting to provoke a feeling of overwhelm. I mimic my experiences with self-harm, a practice I hid from even my closest friends. To the end of developing a physical relationship with the film, I burn, laser-etch, and tape objects to the film. I also hand-process all of my images.

In addition to *the tender place where the world breaks*, several of my other films can be discussed in terms of their engagement with Intimate Tactility. My film *Fool(ed) (reprise)* (2019) is an optically printed scene from my 2017 film *Fool(ed)*, that recounts my experience of sexual assault. In *Fool(ed) (reprise)*, I replay a scene from *Fool(ed)*



and revisit my experience with new understandings. I include text relating some of my darkest negative self-talk and include audio of a recording I made of my perpetrator apologizing for what he did. In the service of my physical

relationship with the film, I destroyed the image with mordénçage bleach. In this process, the bleach affects the dense blacks in the image, causing the emulsion in those areas to lift and replace themselves into what some call veils. The bleach destroys the image taken from *Fool(ed)*, as time and trauma have destroyed my understanding of the events related in *Fool(ed)*.

In his comprehensive book concerned with handmade cinema, Gregory Zinman discusses how handmade cinema is used to convey emotion and trauma:

Disrupting the normative photochemical processes of the film—stripping away the emulsion by hand, or letting chemical elements wreak havoc on the filmstrip, thereby purposefully obscuring or damaging the photographic image—initiated a tradition of a specific kind of handmade filmmaking, one that conflated any real-life trauma experienced by the

filmmakers with a disruption of the film's fundamental materiality.
(Zinman, 2020, p. 104)

This is the endeavor I undertake in *Fool(ed) (reprise)*, connecting the destruction of the photographic image of my body with the trauma of sexual assault that I experienced.

My film *compulsory heterosexuality* (2020) is another that engages with Intimate Tactility. With *compulsory heterosexuality*, I ask the question: How can we queer a body in solitude?

For this film, I employed a technique called reticulation, which involves boiling the film with soda ash (also known as washing soda or sodium carbonate). I boiled a pot of water (an action I link with sexuality in my film *A Watched Cunt Never Cums* (2019)) and add an amount of soda ash (the more you add, the faster and less controlled the reticulation becomes). I then placed my images (of my body in solo pleasure) into the pot and stir. After a time of continuous stirring and closely watching so as not to overdo it, I removed the film to see my results. After the film was hung to dry, I scanned it to digital to preserve the fragile film.



In the highly reticulated images, the emulsion has lifted and replaced itself in veils that abstract the imagery. In the less reticulated images, fractal-looking bubbles have appeared

to create patterns within the image. In abstracting these images of my body in pleasure, I add the nuance of identity and sexuality. It is not allowed to be simple, easily

understood. It takes a close look to see what is hidden, a queer, historically victimized body reclaiming itself for its own pleasure.

Zinman says this of the body in feminist handmade cinema:

The centrality of the body to handmade filmmaking is one of the reasons feminist filmmakers continue to gravitate toward craft-based cinema, but another is the continued dominance of men in both the art and the film worlds. The opportunities provided by handmade techniques to disrupt, obscure, or erase the presentation of the female body allow for the creation of films in which women exercise control over how their bodies are shown and seen. Refusing to conform to filmic conventions that privilege male looking and male power, these films open up new avenues for the content and significance of the handmade. (Zinman, 2020, p. 143-5)

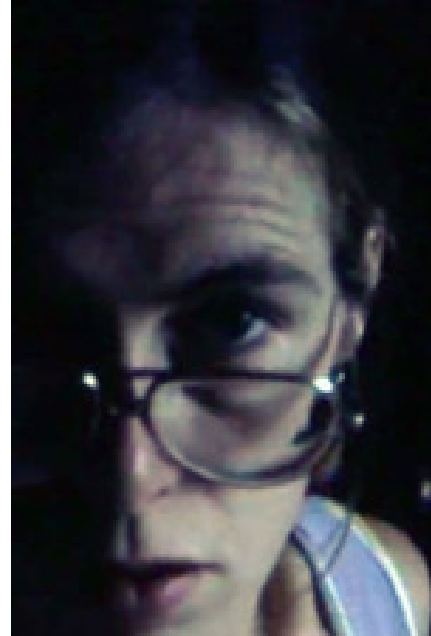
With the destruction of the image of my body in pleasure, I attempt to reclaim the representation of a body like mine, as well as disrupt the heterosexual gaze, just as my queerness disrupts the phenomenon of compulsory heterosexuality (Rich, 1980).

Mental Breakdowns in Experimental Film

There are two films that have inspired my endeavor into the subject matter that comprises *the tender place where the world breaks*: Nina Fonoroff's *The Accursed Mazurka* (1994) and Anne Charlotte Robertson's *Reel 23: A Breakdown and After the Mental Hospital* (1991). Both artists represent their experiences of a mental breakdown in quite disparate ways. Robertson relies on a stream of consciousness in both image and sound, as well as a layering of voiceover to emphasize her experience of disorganized thought. Fonoroff's film we might say is more highly structured, using found footage as well as artist-created images to represent her experience. Both women include recorded audio of personal medical information, either directly from their therapy sessions as in Robertson's work, or as reports from mental health professionals in the case of Fonoroff. I have been incredibly inspired by the vulnerability of Robertson and Fonoroff's work and am interested in the experience of the audience to find that vulnerability concerning and brave, respectively.

Anne Charlotte Robertson's *Reel 23: A Breakdown and After the Mental Hospital* is a part of her 36-hour magnum opus, *Five Year Diary*. As the title suggests, Robertson is engaged in a mode of filmmaking referred to as diary filmmaking. Film historian and pioneering scholar on women's experimental filmmaking Robin Blaetz describes this mode of filmmaking as such: "these films employ a full range of formal devices to document private lives and experiences, political issues in relation to private lives, and the filmmakers' interpretation of broader cultural phenomena" (Blaetz, 2000). In Robertson's case, she is documenting her own life experiences, is speaking about

political issues including mental health and poverty, and documents her interpretation of the world's events, though that perception is often skewed. A huge part of Robertson's work is her mental illness. She documents her life with mental illness, and in the making of her films, imposes her experience of disorganized thought and confusion onto the viewer. It is a political act for Robertson to make her films. As a woman with mental illness, she is often told about her life by people who are deemed "more qualified" to speak on it. Most accounts of women's mental illness have historically been penned by male doctors. We might also suggest that the mere making of a diary film is political, if we subscribe to the second-wave feminist mantra, "the personal is political".



Robertson's *Reel 23: A Breakdown and After the Mental Hospital* is shot on color super 8mm sound stock, allowing her to record a soundtrack in synchrony with her images. There is then a second voiceover that overlaps with the first. The first soundtrack is in the moment of the film, Robertson speaks with her mother, her therapist, and herself. The second voiceover, which is louder and seems to drown out the first at times, is a remembering and re-understanding of the images. In this voiceover, Robertson confidently speaks about her delusions, explaining her obsession with the actor who played Dr. Who, and her hallucination of seeing him in her hometown. In this recounting of events, Robertson seems very aware of her illness and the delusions that ruled her life at that time. The double voiceover soundtrack is what

conveys this feeling of disorganized thought. We as viewers are overwhelmed by sounds and ideas, unsure of what is important, what to give our attention to.

The imagery in Robertson's film is often shaky, handheld, out of focus, or overexposed. The images seem to be made in a frenzy of importance. Robertson acknowledges this in her voiceover. She says that the root vegetables she had been eating would be of the utmost importance at some point in time and so she was compelled to make images of them. Upon her death in 2012, Anne Charlotte Robertson's work was bequeathed to the Harvard Film Archive, where they have undertaken the task of preserving her entire oeuvre. Robertson's diary filmmaking is a testament to the value of personal filmmaking, of self-disclosure, of vulnerability. Her work cements the power of amateur-style personal filmmaking.

In the case of Nina Fonoroff's *The Accursed Mazurka*, the scenes do not seem to be that of documentary imagery. Each image seems to have been especially composed for the camera. Fonoroff employs techniques like superimposition and shooting projections and television monitors. These techniques all serve to create a feeling of multiplicity and unreality, of repetition and mediation. *The Accursed Mazurka* begins with a voiceover telling a story of a woman who is "possessed" by the tune of a mazurka, a lively musical piece with Polish roots. The first three images are ones that reoccur: a bouquet of flowers placed next to a hand-made watercolor-painted card that



has the letter “A” written in the corner. This image dissolves to an identically composed image with a card that reads “B”, and this dissolving sequence continues until the card reads “G”. The lighting in this shot is caused by an out of

frame source and flickers as it casts shadows of the flowers and card. We then see a wobbly double exposure of a room at twilight, light coming in from a window and radiating from a lamp. The motion in this image suggests a disorientation of the image-maker. Next, we see an image of a woman standing next to a window with blinds drawn, she opens and closes the blinds, letting in and shutting out the light of the natural world. Throughout this sequence we hear dramatic music, and then a voice commands us to close our eyes, as they are about to tell a story that necessitates “engulfing darkness”.

In *The Accursed Mazurka*, Fonoroff includes images that are both found and created. She shoots directly off a television screen, scenes from a film about a woman hospitalized against her will. She creates images of bodies being projected upon, romantic scenes from films, and home movies. We see images of written text, at one time proclaiming, “I am tired of myself”. We hear both voiceover, seemingly recorded for the film, that insists, “no therapeutic intervention would help her” and found sound that asserts “people go mad if they think too much!”. Throughout the film, melodramatic music comes in and out, punctuating voiceovers. Some voices that we hear seem to be that of medical professionals, describing the emotional states, medication regimens,

and prognoses for patients. We might assume each medical professional is speaking of the same patient. The inclusion of so many different types of sound and image may overwhelm us, but also serves to define the layered nature of the experience of a mental breakdown.

We can say that this film, as experimental in form as it is, does have a narrative. There seems to be a “before” “during” and “after” a mental breakdown. Before, we see and hear images about emotional turmoil, such as the text that reads, “I am tired of myself”. During, we see images of a hospital in a double exposure with a coloring book (an activity often encouraged in mental hospitals to pass the time). We see images of pill bottles during this sequence, and we hear medical professionals discussing the hopelessness a patient is experiencing. After, we hear those same medical professionals explain that the patient seems to be feeling better, we see an image of a woman cleaning a mirror, as if she is cleansing her tainted image of herself. During this sequence, we see the images of several woman picking up and carrying another, as if they are literally picking her up when she is down. We hear the composed voice announce that “even in this airless, suffocating place, repair has already begun”, as we see a double exposure of a young woman silently speaking and an older woman looking through a microscope; this image could be a miming talk therapy. In the final sequence, our watercolor cards and bouquet of flowers return, this time dissolving through the alphabet from H to P. We hear the composed voiceover talk about attempting to find the cause of the breakdown but realizing the futility of such an effort. We see what seem to be home movies of a family in summer, as the voice insists, “let these people dance in

peace, they have done nothing wrong. There is no culpability to be found among these shadows.”

While Robertson and Fonoroff employ vastly different strategies in their representations of mental breakdowns, they are both engaged in a personal form of filmmaking. Both women speak about their struggles with mental health, Robertson frankly, and Fonoroff poetically. When we watch Fonoroff’s film, we are struck by the bravery, skill, and vision it takes to have made *The Accursed Mazurka*. When we see Robertson’s film, we are struck by the same bravery, if also with a sense of worry about the fate of the maker of *Reel 23: A Breakdown and After the Mental Hospital*. Where the two films intersect is where my interests lie: the representation of a mental breakdown using strategies of personal experimental filmmaking, that expresses a vulnerability of the maker and inspires an artist to create for themselves.

the tender place where the world breaks

the tender place where the world breaks contains six chapters that have the ability to stand alone, but the presentation of the chapters in succession serves to create a narrative of collapse and rebirth. The chapters of the film are discrete, utilizing different strategies and exploring different aspects of the same experience. The structure of *the tender place where the world breaks* is inspired both by episodic experimental filmmaking, as well as structural filmmaking. I am drawn to the episodic nature of the film *You Were an Amazement on the Day You Were Born* (Duke and Battersby, 2019). In Duke and Battersby's film, they follow the life of one woman, and each chapter explores a different period of her life. Each chapter also utilizes different filmic strategies including both live-action and animation.

The structural filmmakers of the 1960s and 1970s were concerned with form first and foremost. I am concerned with form in that this film necessitates the tight formal structure of chapters that allow for the exploration of varying aspects of the same experience. But, as P. Adams Sitney, foremost scholar on experimental film, coins the term structural film, he asserts that there are four characteristics of a structural film: a fixed camera position, flicker effect, loop printing, and re-photography (Sitney, 1974). *the tender place where the world breaks* does contain all four of these strategies.

I have titled each chapter of *the tender place where the world breaks* and provide those titles here in this written thesis. I have made artistic decisions about how each title appears, some with typical capitalization and others in all lowercase. This is both an aesthetic and intellectual decision. The subtitles that appear in lowercase are so because they have a sort of nonchalance to me; they are off-hand or informal

statements. Some lowercase titles are also simply fragments of whole thoughts, or ideas that beg for more explanation, but whose explanation is denied. For me, there is also a soft aesthetic to lowercase titles, they seem to whisper their truth as to not disturb.

I will discuss each chapter individually, as they each make use of different techniques and strategies, with their own aims and focuses.

Chapter 1: *seven years later and it starts to burn*

Richard Schwartz, founder of the internal family systems (IFS) approach to psychotherapy posits that a human is a system made of distinct parts, and that, “a part is not just an emotional state or a habitual thought pattern. Rather, parts are discrete, autonomous mental systems, each with their own idiosyncratic range of emotion, style of expression, abilities, desires, and views of the world.” (Schwartz, 2020, p. 30-31) Under this belief, we can say that self-destructive behavior appears when a part takes hold that lacks a drive for self-preservation. When one engages in self-harm, there exists a part willing to do harm to a self that is experiencing pain, or worse, numbness. At my lowest, I would flick a lighter on, hold the flame lit for 10-15 seconds (I would count this out), until the metal on the top of the lighter was sufficiently heated. I would press this metal to the inside of my right bicep, counting off seconds again. I caused myself blisters that I would caress in between burnings, scabs that I would pick at to draw blood, and now scars that I care for lovingly.

In my film-representation of this time, I employ the quadrupled image of unsplit regular 8, creating a fractured body/self. I was first introduced to this type of image through Lynne Sachs' work, *Drawn and Quartered* (1987) in which the bodies of a man and a woman are explored with the camera and divided by the regular 8mm frames. In this chapter of the film, which I

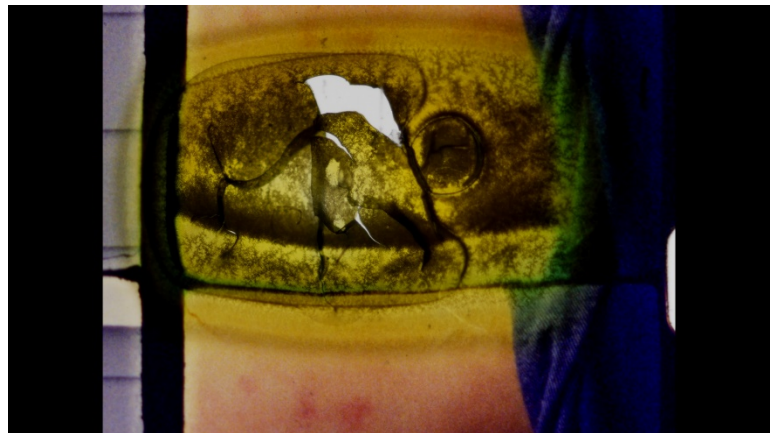


call *seven years later and it starts to burn*, a hand on the left side of the screen, doubled vertically, flicks on a lighter, keeping the flame lit for 10-15 seconds, or however long the Bolex wind allows. On the opposite side of the image, scars are visible on my inner bicep. We know we are past this self-destructive phase because they are scars, and because of one particular moment that occurs on the left side of the image. The wind blows out the flame, and I try to re-light it. But the metal is as hot as it ever was, and I reflexively pull my finger back from it. This was a reflex that I suspended for a time, but it has returned. This image disappears and a short time later is replaced with a double exposure, in which the left and right are overlaid atop the other. The flame is



overlaid on the arm to which it causes no harm but seems to pose a risk. In this scene, the self-harm is mimed, displaying the motions of the action, but not actually causing the harm. This shot disappears to

reveal the final scene of the chapter. The same four frame grid image is shown. But this time there is a hole encased in yellow-green bubbles and fractals. The film has been burnt, in the part of the image that contains the burn scars. The yellow-green color of the burns to the film emulsion hearken back to the blisters that once littered my skin. In this scene, the camera seems to investigate the burns. As each frame advances, the camera shifts to center the burn in the emulsion, following the scene of the pain. The burns on this film have been made by a projector whose belt has snapped. The projector no longer advances the film through its rollers and sprockets, but it does shine light (too much light) through the film. I placed the film in the gate of a super 8 projector and turned the bulb on and waited until the projection showed bubbles. I used this projector so that I could control where the burns would be located and could isolate them



to one of the grid images if so desired. This scene was created intuitively in a 16mm to digital JK optical printer. I placed the film in the gate of the printer and used the printer's vertical and horizontal controls to investigate the burns on each frame of the film. In this scene, the camera follows, focuses, and tracks the burns on the skin of the film, as I did with my wounds when they were present.

The sound in this scene is inspired by the work of minimalist composer Steve Reich, specifically the sound work he did for the film *My Name is Oona* (1969) by Gunvor Nelson. Reich's work takes spoken phrases and cuts them down into small

sections that are looped and repeated. The sound in *seven years later and it starts to burn* consists of phonetic phrases pulled from the statement, “seven years later and it starts to burn”. The phonetic phrases are looped, repeated, and layered to create an atmosphere of sonic confusion. The loops then begin to take on their own meaning, a new sound that our brains interpret as “shit hurts” or “run”. It is not until the end of the segment that the viewer hears the entire phrase, “seven years later and it starts to burn”. The sound is meant to impart the experience of dissociation, place the viewer in an unreal or trance-like state. The viewer may get lost in the simulated image of self-harm or feel that they are hallucinating the sound of a recognizable word.

Chapter 2: *Extremely*

In 2016, I was enrolled in a behavioral neuroscience course at Binghamton University. I was assigned an independent project to propose and simulate an experiment. I chose to research the documented brain differences of people with Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). My simulated study would look at four groups of people: people with PTSD related to sexual assault, people with PTSD not related to sexual assault, people who have experienced sexual assault and do not have PTSD, and people who have never experienced sexual assault and do not have PTSD. In my research I found that there is a documented increase in activity in the frontal and parietal lobes as well as the limbic structures of people with PTSD regardless of the type of traumatic event (Boccia, 2016). I found that in people with PTSD related to sexual assault, there is an increase in activity in the Medial Cingulate Cortex compared to people with combat-related PTSD (Boccia, 2016). The Medial Cingulate Cortex is involved in pain processing and motor control.

I also found that bias against women who have experienced sexual assault is present even in science. In one 2015 study, despite data that suggests otherwise, a team of scientists led by a man concluded that women who have experienced sexual assault put themselves in danger of re-victimization, suggesting that it is the victim's fault if they experience sexual assault again (Cisler, 2015).

It was not until 2020 that I myself was diagnosed with PTSD related to sexual assault, on the same day that I was to be admitted to the psychiatric ward of the nearest hospital. The following chapter of my film *the tender place where the world breaks* takes this as its subject.

This chapter of *the tender place where the world breaks*, which I call *Extremely*, sonically poses the questions that comprise a PTSD diagnostic questionnaire. No answers to the questions are provided. This chapter bombards you with questions, the answers to which have an immense bearing on the way you see yourself, as well as your prognosis for how you will move through the world for the rest of your life. When I was finally diagnosed with PTSD it was both daunting and relieving. I felt as though I now had an explanation for the strange behaviors I had been engaging in for years. But at the same time, I understood that this condition has no definitive cure, and that I would experience symptoms of this disorder, often described as debilitating, to varying degrees for the rest of my life. Of course, when the possibility of this diagnosis was even suggested by my doctor, I began vigorously researching it. I felt disconnected from the "normal" PTSD patient, as I had never seen combat. There were startlingly fewer resources for people who developed PTSD from experiences such as mine.

The image in this chapter is composed of photograms of “brain slides” made on 16mm film. The images do not necessarily resemble brain slices, so they act as abstract fodder for projection. The photograms were made using a set of coasters that one of my sisters gifted me one Christmas, when my family (myself included) thought I would become a neuroscientist. The coasters are meant to resemble horizontal slices of a human brain (not to scale). Each individual coaster contains an image of one slice. To make the photograms

that were to comprise the image in

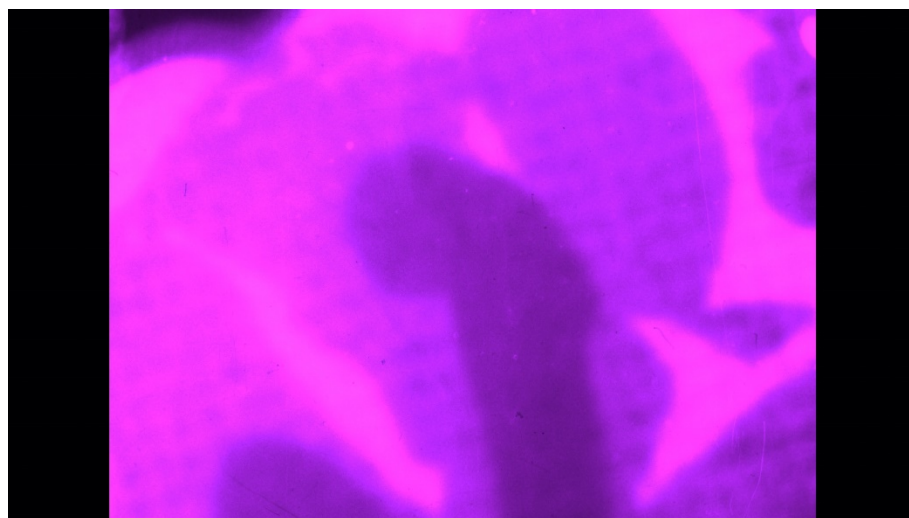
Extremely, I placed

several coasters

across three strips of

16mm black and

white print stock in



the dark. I turned on the light for 3-4 seconds (a long exposure was needed for the slow speed of print stock), and promptly hand-processed the images. After the photograms on film were scanned, I color balanced the image so that the white space would appear a pink-purple hue. This hue is one that is used to stain rat brain slices in the practice of histology, the study of microscopic anatomy of tissues.

Chapter 3: keep this list with you in case you need to use it

You would think that when you are getting the highest level of care, your caretakers might tell you something more profound than “just be yourself!”. When I was hospitalized for suicidal ideation, I felt myself coming alive again, I could tell the around-the-clock care was helping because I thought some of the self-help phrases on the worksheet the nurse gave me were so condescending that they were hilarious. I felt myself coming back into my inspiration, I sketched the laminated diptych poster plastered all over the walls showing the correct way to wear a mask. I imagined this poster as a moving image, a diptych image of a woman putting on a mask, from the front and from the side. Text would interrupt the imagery, with the most unhelpful of the self-help phrases from the worksheet. This would become the chapter within *the tender place where the world breaks* that I call *keep this list with you in case you need to use it*. I made the images by shooting on regular 8mm film, being sure to shoot the second half of the roll upside down so that when it was to be projected unsplit, both sides of the



image would be right side up. The text would be etched into the skin of the film with a laser, branding the woman wearing a mask with its cursory understanding of mental health.

The chapter begins suddenly. A disembodied voice stutters, “keep this list with you in case you need to use it”, as a black screen appears with unreadable text laser-etched into the film. A photographic image appears as the text continues to flutter and shake. The image is this regular 8 unsplit grid. On the left, a side view of a woman

wearing a blue surgical mask and pink shirt. On the right, the same woman from a head-on view. The woman takes off and puts on the blue surgical mask over and over again, referencing the repetition of this action; Taking off the mask when you enter your private hospital room, replacing the mask again to join the common spaces. This re-creation of the hospital poster also marks the time period of this film, for a time in the future when mask-wearing is no longer compulsory. The sound continues, stuttering through unhelpful commands and reminders, “take time to make time”, “thinking is a skill that can be developed”, “know what your needs are and respect them”. There is another layer to the sound, the unmanipulated version of the stuttering list of phrases. In response to the tone-deaf command, “just be yourself”, the text proclaims, “I am the tender place where the world breaks”. This phrase, which contains the title of the film, comes from a poem by Sally Jane Smith published in the Denver based literary magazine Gesture in 2013.

I came across this poem in my perusal of the hospital ward’s library. That is to say, the two bookshelves in the dining room that held such classics as Alcoholics Anonymous. Smith’s words struck a chord with me, I wrote the line down in the hospital-provided journal that I spent most of my days writing in, knowing it would lead me somewhere fruitful. Here, I provide the entirety of Smith’s poem:

SEDIMENT

*I tried for two years not to breathe or touch my body numb the bones
settling crooked.*

*I locked the door, clicking golden. I locked the door and the tile
dropped, the sink a curved a seashell the way shells crack sand crusted
the mountain shells, the freshwater mussels in higher streams.*

A voice breaks like leather cracking.

*The sinking of everything inside, turning sour, the way the syllables
twist makes me sick. Blood black, like the mercury rivers we swim.*

*The way the creek ran over the horse's hooves and we walked on the
crumbling edge of the road and in ditches when cars drove by.*

*The point to prove it didn't happen because I'm not the no one's the
woman who would let this happen, bruises blooming and, dishes
feathers and bones in the sink and the sky stretched taut black tarp,
bloodroot shining and the creeks clotted with trash and it all my fault:
my fault, I am the tender place where the world breaks.*

Chapter 4: *Things I Made in Art Therapy*

There is an understanding in the art world that art therapy does not count as art. I push back against this idea, as I see that notion as a gatekeeping mechanism, reserving the designation for only those making art in an academic or professional setting. I believe that art can be made by anyone, even those with very little formal training. In the service of challenging the rejection of art therapy as art, this chapter of my film, which I call *Things I Made in Art Therapy*, showcases the therapeutic art that I have made under the guidance of my therapist. When I was in the hospital, there was time set aside daily for Art Therapy. I was drawn to this form of therapy, as an artist who



has made work that has been profoundly emotionally cathartic. The therapeutic artworks that comprise *Things I Made in Art Therapy* are drawings and paintings that are mainly 9x12in, made on

watercolor paper. The work usually contains text, tonally anything from “who is? are? she? they?” to “who actually has a W.A.P? must be nice...”. I made these artworks over a period of months. They often employ media that is difficult to control such as watercolor or chalk pastel. But most of the works also employ an element of control that comes in the form of stenciled letters. I trace each letter with a pen, and haphazardly shade the letters, creating a sense of control over an otherwise uncontrollable work.

The sound in this chapter contains a voicemail that I left my sister when I began my three-day hospitalization. The beleaguered voice seems to beg for someone to care, and the image proves that someone does, even if that someone is just me.

Chapter 5: *Tardive Tests*

The medication that saved my life also has the potential to ruin it. Medications like Abilify (antipsychotics) have the potential side effect of something called Tardive Dyskinesia. Tardive Dyskinesia is a condition that mimics Parkinson’s Disease; it is a neurological condition that causes uncontrollable movements such as grimacing, eye blinking, and jerking of the limbs. The diagnostic test for Tardive Dyskinesia is called the Abnormal Involuntary Movement Scale (AIMS) (Guy, 1976). AIMS consists of a series of movements which when seen out of context seem quite strange. In this series of movements, the patient is asked to stick out their tongue, then outstretch their arms with

palms up, then touch each finger to their thumb in rapid succession. It is this series of movements that is the basis of the chapter of *the tender place where the world breaks*



that I call *Tardive Tests*.

As the image displays my

self-tests for this

potentially debilitating

condition, the viewer

hears a jerky voiceover

explaining the condition

and AIMS. The quality of the voiceover mirrors the jerking movement that one might experience if they have Tardive Dyskinesia. The repetition of the movements in this chapter at first puzzle the viewer, causes them to wonder about the movements' origins. When the movements are finally explained and described, the screen has gone black, and the viewer no longer has a reference, but they do have an answer as to what they had been watching. At this point in the film, the commands from the AIMS scale are heard, allowing the viewer space to mime the movements if they feel compelled by the commands. The voiceover is simple in construction and was made by manipulating a normal voiceover in Ableton Live, by warping the clip using the Beats function, and increasing the BPM to 200. This manipulation creates a repetition of phonetic sounds and phrases within the sound clip that serves to elicit an experience of jerking sound.

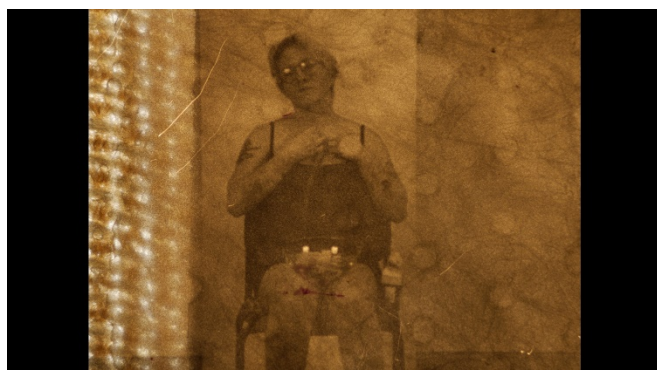
The images that comprise this chapter of the film were made throughout a period of months. This was so I could track my progress, to gauge if my movements were in

fact becoming abnormal. We see a change in the weather, in the length of my hair, but (hopefully) not in the abnormality of my movements.

Chapter 6: *I...am...safe*

“I am safe” is a mantra that I repeat aloud to myself when my body reacts as if I were in danger. This is implemented more often than I care to admit, and in situations that I would rather it not. In this chapter of the film, I perform a restorative practice of placing band aids all over my body, as the soundtrack repeats this phrase. My body is one that has sustained harm both from others and from self, and so this chapter of the film acts as an apology to my body, a way of taking care of the one thing that is always fighting to keep me alive.

With the composition of this chapter, I am thinking about the self-destructive performance in Valie Export's *...Remote...Remote...* (1973). In *...Remote...Remote...* Valie Export sits in a chair in the middle of the frame with a bowl of milk in her lap. She cuts at her cuticles with a box cutter, continuing even after she starts to bleed. She dips her fingertips in the bowl of milk periodically, washing her hands of the blood she has drawn. In the chapter of *the tender place where the world breaks* that I call *I...am...safe*, I am turning her performance around to a self-care exercise. As Valie Export does in her film, I sit in a chair in the middle of the frame with a bowl of liquid in my lap. My bowl is



filled with water, and I place the band aid wrappers in the bowl once I am done with them. Another element of the imagery in this film that is in conversation with canonical

experimental film is that of the physical band aid. Throughout this chapter, band aids can be seen moving through the frame. I have stuck band aids directly onto the film. With this technique, I consider a film like Stan Brakhage's *Mothlight* (1963). In his film, Brakhage adheres pieces of grass, bugs, and leaves to the film. The nature of projection makes it so those objects are seen magnified, illuminating the textures and colors of the objects. In *I...am...safe*, I am doing something similar with band aids and band aid wrappers. I am bringing attention to the textures and fibers of the band aids and paper wrappers, considering the detail of the object. This physical manipulation also brings to the viewer's attention the hand of the artist, it reminds us that this is a careful, tedious endeavor. Care is the focus of this chapter. There is care in the process of making the film, in the placing of band aids onto my skin in the performance, and in the placing of band aids onto the skin of the film.

The sound in this chapter is inspired by yet another film, *T,O,U,C,H,I,N,G* (1968) by Paul Sharits. In the soundtrack of his film, Sharits repeats the word "destroy" over and over again. "Destroy" seems to take on new meaning, sounding like "distraught" or some unintelligible phonetic sounds. This repetition of words or phrases reinforces the meaning of the sounds, but also has the potential to dissolve all meaning and transform the phrase or word into simple phonetics. In *I...am...safe* the repetition of this phrase seems like a compulsion, a desperate attempt at internalizing the idea.

Conclusion

Throughout the course of my relationship with my current therapist, I have learned of two types of therapeutic art: chaotic discharge and sublimation. Chaotic discharge denotes a type of therapeutic artmaking that is expressive of emotions, but that is formless and leads to a loss of control; it discharges the emotions but does not allow them to subside. Sublimation on the other hand is a transformative process. The completion of an artwork through sublimation transforms destructive impulses into acceptable behaviors.

I believe that *the tender place where the world breaks* is an example of the sublimation type of therapeutic art. Edith Kramer, pioneering theorist and practitioner of art therapy, says, "In sublimation we expect a change in the *object* upon which the interest is centered, of the *goal*, and of the *kind of energy* through which the goal is achieved." (Kramer, 1972, p. 70-71). In making *the tender place where the world breaks*, I transferred my object of interest from my own skin to the skin of the film, transformed my goal of self-destruction to a goal of self-healing, and transformed my anger and hopeless energy to that of creative flow.

Apart from being a therapeutic endeavor, *the tender place where the world breaks* has also been the logical next step in my development as a filmmaker. Throughout my graduate degree I have re-understood my work; I have come to embrace the designation of my filmmaking as diary filmmaking. I have come to believe there is an inherent value in personal work, and that the sharing of personal work is not only beneficial to the artist but has potential to change the minds of viewers.

the tender place where the world breaks exists in conversation with a history of experimental filmmaking. With it, I am entering my own experiences into the conversation, joining a discourse on personal filmmaking and the avant-garde.

The performative nature of chapters of the film such as *Tardive Tests* and *I...am...safe* is connected to the Intimate Tactility of the film as a whole. According to Zinman, “there is a close relationship between performance and the handmade moving image—both practices highlight the centrality of the body of the maker, the living presence of the artist, and are concerned with the idea of conveying the authenticity of lived experience.” (Zinman, 2020, p. 138) The “living presence of the artist” is crucial here, as the impetus for the creation of the film was the intended destruction of this living presence. In my performances within the film, my living presence is required. The same is true when we consider the living presence necessary to perform the tedious manipulation of the film medium. It is also true that both the performative and handmade aspects of the film are concerned with “conveying the authenticity of lived experience”. These elements within the film are meant to create an embodiment of my experience.

Gunvor Nelson said of her personal filmmaking, “I want to go as much into myself as possible and hopefully it will be universal” (Gill, 1977, p. 29). I take this same approach. In *the tender place where the world breaks*, I unveil one of my most tightly held secrets. The experience that I share in the film is not one that I readily disclose. With *the tender place where the world breaks* I am truly treating the film, and my audience, as a confidant.

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