

SKIP-DRAG-FALL

AMBER HELENE MÜLLER ST. THOMAS

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Abstract

This paper examines work from my *Unsettled Attachments* series, sculptural explorations, and the participatory experiences connected to their making. The *Unsettled Attachments* series involves ongoing enactments. Household items are moved in public spaces and then photographed as a gesture of inquiry into spatial recognitions and various peculiarities. Through a method of practice-based research that involves performative collaboration (joint authorship) and interactive public performance, my research-creation work grapples with queerness, failure, desire, and the entanglements of participatory engagement.

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I acknowledge that the public performance work I refer to in this paper in the places now named Peterborough, London, and Toronto, Ontario, is land which is the traditional territory of the Anishinaabe Mississauga, Anishinaabeg, Haudenosaunee, Métis, Attawandaron (Neutral), Wendat peoples, and most recently, the territory of the Mississaugas of the Credit River. These territories are covered by the Williams Treaty and the Upper Canada Treaties. Specifically, Toronto (from the Haudenosaunee word Tkaronto) was the subject of the *Dish With One Spoon Wampum Belt Covenant*. I am grateful for the opportunity to work and live within these territories.¹

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1. CAUT, *CAUT Guide to Acknowledging Traditional Territory* (Canada: CAUT, 2016), accessed June 6, 2016. <https://www.caut.ca/news/2016/05/27/territorial-acknowledgement-guide>.

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Introduction: Furniture and Orientations

...queer is not available as a line that we can follow, and if we took such a line we would perform a certain injustice to those queers whose lives are lived for different points. For me, the question is not so much finding a queer line but rather asking what our orientation toward queer moments of deviation will be. If the object slips away, if its face becomes inverted, if it looks odd, strange, or out of place, what will we do?²

My interest in items, things, and objects has manifested itself throughout my life in various ways—consumerism, hoarding, deprivation, attachments. These repetitive instances form the roots of my preoccupation with fixtures—particularly with ones I may press my body next to, hold or share. It was this attraction that oriented my arrival in various places of business in London, Ontario, wielding a camera, tripod and several household items within a wheelbarrow. The locations have since been expanded to include Peterborough, and Toronto, Ontario. They are places in which I have lived. Through a method of moving objects in space I aim to invite impulsive engagement, and question our relationship to the things that surround us.

Initially I made rules for the project. The items could be only my own. They had to create a sense of queer aesthetic juxtaposition within the frame. The journey must start on foot. I have since reconfigured some of these restrictions. Sister Corita Kent, an American nun, artist, educator, and activist, who was active in the 1960's, was author to a well-known list of art making rules which stipulated that the rules must change weekly. I adopted a similar method of creating by happenstance before my awareness of Kent's list, and was animated to learn of it. To allow my practice to develop, I find it necessary to merge intention with chance, and to be prepared for the ways in which what was thought to be known will shift.

Active engagement with others while I move the items remains central to my interest in working within public spaces. I have been interrogated, occasionally accosted, stared at, photographed, recorded, and subject to many unusual and pleasing statements, questions, and

2. Sara Ahmed, "Disorientation and Queer Objects," in *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2006), 179.

queries. These interactions are performative and spontaneous. While at times discordant, they help inform me as to what signs are viewed as acceptable by whom and where. These enactments also stem from my desire to collaborate with others and incite discussion.

The following essay serves to complement and expand upon a series of works within my MFA thesis exhibition, entitled *SKIP-DRAG-FALL*, in the Gales Gallery at York University, in Toronto, Ontario. This work seeks to engage viewer participation and prompt diverse reactions. It also asks, *what possibilities could emerge if we would all orient our beings in reciprocal relation to the objects that surround us? Can we imagine their past and future with certainty and principled confidence?*



Image 1. *Hat Lamp*, 2016. Archival pigment print on premium luster photo paper, dibond mounted, 27 by 40 inches.



Image 2. *Pillows*, 2016. Archival pigment print on premium luster photo paper, dibond mounted, 27 by 40 inches.



Image 3. *Packing Day*, 2016. Performance documentation.



Image 4. *Drag-Pull*, 2016. Performance documentation.

Failure and Practice-Based Research

Questions surrounding method and failure incite a compulsion within myself to be in a state of continuous making. How may one incessantly create objects ethically, and acknowledge that the unsuccessful or wasted things made are essential for development? What to do with ineffective work? My upbringing has influenced my desire to keep these failures (they may be of use later) and I let objects go with a certain ambivalence. In particular, odd, outcast objects rouse sympathy and endear themselves to me. Things that do not function as promised, and items that contain histories I will never wholly know, stir my curiosity.

SKIP-DRAG-FALL, is an accumulation of remnants of queer experience and objects from varied pasts. Certain items shown are ones that I use and interact with daily, while others have been sought out from other sources and have no personal connection to me, other than their use within my work. The exhibition features photography, sculpture, interactive textile, and text multiples that are tied to desire, enactment, and absurdity. I aim to embody fluidity, which is a dominant principle within my practice-led research. The exhibition title references this movement and the failure intrinsic to it.

The following will outline my core interests and how they have formed, in terms of making, ritual, and practice-based research. My method of making values the connection between life and art as one that is uncertain, in flux. This has resulted in my asking, *what constitutes performance?* Everyday interactions are versions of performance that shift depending upon context (place, person, time). These interactions are invested in the failures of communication, and are dependent upon it for their continuation. By failures of communication I mean the ways in which trying to convey an idea to another being which is not yourself will inevitably, on some level fail. There will be misinterpretation, and the need for clarification. Even moments where understanding is thought to have been reached, the interpretation may be based upon an error. How may one possibly communicate a *precise* meaning to another? Even within sameness there is always difference. It is the failure or difficulty of communication that prompts the continuation of dialogue, be it performative, academic, or colloquial. It is the lack felt when one was not understood that motivates one to seek understanding, and alternative modes of communication. I am seeking a clarity or understanding that will ultimately fail within

my work and practice-led research. Yet the action of seeking is no less important, and remains central to my artistic development. Failed enactments, underdeveloped objects in transition, and things that hold little sway preoccupy my thoughts. They urge me to present things that do not perform as intended.

These thoughts of failure and illegitimacy bring me to the following question, *does a performance piece take place if no one knows you are performing?* The Live Art Development Agency (LADA), writes, “Disrupting borders, breaking rules, defying traditions, resisting definitions, asking awkward questions and activating audiences, Live Art breaks the rules about who is making art, how they are making it, and who they are making it for.”³ Modes of performing that are under suspicion are the ones I am most attracted to. Performance as a medium was never meant to be proper. American conceptual artist Allan Kaprow describes the Happenings of the late fifties by stating, “I was certain the goal was to “do” an art that was distinct from any known genre...A new art/life genre therefore came about, reflecting equally the artificial aspects of everyday life and the lifelike qualities of created art.”⁴ Performance art is nestled in-between reality and our perception or repetition of it, it is rooted in experience and experimentation. My interest in enactments largely done outside of institutional walls is not because performance within a gallery space does not provoke my curiosity, but because the potential for a varied type of engagement seems closer when there are fewer restrictions placed upon what you may do in certain spaces. This is not to say that there are spaces free of regulation. Public, private, and in-between spaces all carry expectations and protocols that expect compliance. However, there is also a certain liberty in doing something unusual in a space free of walls. I am attracted to unmonitored interactions with people who may not recognize my gestures and our exchanges as performance.

Practice-Based Research

To discuss my work, I must also explain the method through which it is made. I use the terms *practice-based* and *practice-led* research interchangeably because I view these distinct

3. Deirdre Heddon, “Writing Histories and Practices of Live Art,” in *Histories and Practices of Live Art* (China: Palgrave, 2012), 1.

4. Allan Kaprow, “Performing Life (1979)” in *Essays on the Blurring of Art and Life* (London: University of California Press, 2003), 195.

terms as being representative of threads within the same discourse. My research is both based in and led by the rituals and methodologies I adhere to. What is practice-based research? How are practice-led research methods better suited to the needs and sensibilities of visual artists? Brad Haseman, Adjunct Professor at the Creative Industries Faculty, School of Media, Entertainment and Creative Arts in Brisbane Australia, states, about the performative within practice-based or practice-led research, that

...practice-led research cannot merely be subsumed under the qualitative research framework. Practice-led research employs its own distinctive research approach with its own strategies and methods, drawn from the long-standing and accepted working methods and practices of artists and practitioners across the arts and emerging creative disciplines. These distinctive qualities point us towards an entirely new research paradigm, which elsewhere, I have argued can be best understood as performative research.⁵

Practice-led research is focused on action, on enacting and repeating certain rituals. The notion of action in the context of this paper is discussed in terms of doing or shifting, and is considered a component of fluidity. I seek to examine embodiments of fluid thinking, through a divergent artistic method of making. This method accepts failure as part of a process. It is failure that humbles us, that gives us the desire to move forward, that unites things both queer and out of place. It is failure that can relieve us from the pressures and expectations of success. Jack/Judith Halberstam, writer and Professor of Gender Studies and Comparative Literature at the University of Southern California, states in their book, *The Queer Art of Failure*, “Rather than resisting endings and limits, let us instead revel in and cleave to all of our own inevitable fantastic failures.”⁶ Performance as a medium itself includes elements of uncertainty and spontaneity. The unforeseen or the failure of what was presumed to be known lingers within it. As practice-based research enacts and thus can be understood as performative, this method is crucial to my artistic development. Practice-led research within my own mode of making involves methods that value failure and divergent thinking. Divergent thinking holds the potential to morph a plethora of ideas into a shifting reality; it gives attention to entanglements of thought and is a non-linear process that I incorporate into my rituals of making and being. In my opinion, working across

5. Brad Haseman, “Rupture and Recognition: Identifying the Performative Research Paradigm,” in *Practice as Research: Approaches to Creative Arts Enquiry* (London: GBR: I.B. Tauris, 2010).

6. Jack Halberstam, *The Queer Art of Failure* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011), 187.

various disciplines through action-based practices may be a potential method for embodying fluid manifestations. The potential for experimental communication is reinforced by refusing to bind my work to a specific medium.

How Should a Person Be?

In relation to practice-led research I have more questions, ones I may not be able to answer directly, but ones that are important to ask nevertheless. *How may methods of being-thinking-making promote alternative and diverse understandings of queer realities? Are there unique ways that divergent thinking connects to the practice of artists concerned with ethics?* In other words, *how should a person be?* The latter question is both a book title and open-ended question, one that looms large in Shelia Heti's *How Should a Person Be*, which could be described as a part memoir/part self-help book which fails to comply in meeting the critical evaluative-feedback standards that define many modes of being successful within capitalistic culture. This is done by focusing on the failures inherent to living and making, as Heti states through the character Sheila, "I knew I would always lose what was good. That was the kind of person I would always be."⁷ Shelia, guilt ridden by her betrayal of Margaux, does not live up to her own expectations of being, a required epiphany for development. The question could be repositioned as *how should an artist be/make/think?* To attempt an answer, I will return to Sister Corita Kent's aforementioned list. It in part states, "Consider everything an experiment...Nothing is a mistake. There's no win and no fail, there's only make...Save everything—it might come in handy later. There should be new rules next week."⁸ Altering the rules weekly contests the traditional characterization of *rule*. Rules become guidelines, or lines that guide. Lines that orient but do not predict or direct concisely. It is this type of queer line making that I value. Orientations that become unpredictable. Incorporating a method of rulemaking such as this into an artistic practice creates a system of instability, development, and possibility.

I should mention Karen Barad, Professor of Feminist Studies, at the University of California, Santa Cruz, and her influence on my artistic practice. In *Meeting the Universe*

7. Shelia Heti, *How Should a Person Be?* (Toronto: House of Anansi, 2010), 243.

8. Corita Kent, *Learning by Heart* (New York: Skyhorse Publishing, 1992), 176.

Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning, Barad uses the term *diffractive methodology*,⁹ to underline the importance of fluid thinking in terms of understanding. Barad has stressed her skepticism of intellectual critique, stating that academic obsession with criticism as the only source for legitimate expression has been detrimental to feminist epistemologies and knowledge. This is not to say that critique is unnecessary, but that it should not be the only form of acceptable scholarly communication. Barad sums up this argument in the following statement:

In chapter two of *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*, I discussed in detail what I call a diffractive methodology, a method of diffractively reading insights through one another, building new insights, and attentively and carefully reading for differences that matter in their fine details, together with the recognition that intrinsic to this analysis is an ethics that is not predicated on externality but rather entanglement. Diffractive readings bring inventive provocations; they are good to think with. They are respectful, detailed, ethical engagements.¹⁰

Diffractive methodology is concerned with the entirety of a concept as well as the relationships within. It values the connections between things that may seem to be unrelated. Fluid thinking and making is preoccupied with investigating entanglements, with looking at the sources of sources. Through this method of thinking one may dwell within paradoxical epistemologies, a skill that will undoubtedly aid theoretical and artistic development.

On a similar note, Clair Hemmings, a writer and Professor of Feminist Theory at the Gender Institute London School of Economics, in *Why Stories Matter: The Political Grammar of Feminist Theory*, discusses the importance of focusing on the way communication occurs. She suggests a tactic, *recitation*, which she describes as, "...a mode of engagement that values the past by understanding it politically rather than in terms of finality."¹¹ Throughout the book

9. Karen Barad, "Diffractions Differences Contingencies and Entanglements That Matter," in *Meeting the Universe Halfway: Quantum Physics and the Entanglement of Matter and Meaning*, (United States of America: Duke University Press, 2007), 71-97.

10. Karen Barad, "Matter Feels, Converses, Suffers, Desires, Yearns and Remembers: Interview with Karen Barad," 7th European Feminist Research Conference, Graduate Gender Programme of Utrecht University, June 6, 2009, accessed May 6, 2016. <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/o/ohp/11515701.0001.001/1:4.3/--new-materialism-interviews-cartographies?rgn=div2;view=fulltext> (emphasis added).

11. Clare Hemmings, *Why Stories Matter: The Political Grammar of Feminist Theory* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011), 181.

Hemmings cites journal, place, and time, instead of author, as a mode of demonstrating how Western feminist narratives of progress, loss, and return recur and potentially harm feminist progress. As Hemmings asserts, knowledge is cyclical, not linear,¹² and the ways in which the past, present and future have been constructed throughout Western feminist narratives have produced stories that are rarely *reflective*. Reflectivity is presented by Hemmings as a creative alternative to modes of telling that reinforce the displacement of other stories.¹³ I employ a similar technique within my artistic research, by reflecting on what was done and how. As Hemmings articulately states these types of engagements have the potential to be accountable, and amenable.¹⁴ This type of responsiveness is important in encouraging cultural work as a sustained dialogue amongst alternative voices in developing practices that are socially ethical.

A Queer Practice-led Research

Moving forward to another pertinent question about method, I ask myself, *what might queer practice-led research look like?* It could value exploration, failure, confusion, action, and interaction. Fluidity in artistic practice celebrates change and shift. Divergent thought, like diffractive methodology, cannot be discussed in terms of absoluteness—its potential to engage with ethical questions is strengthened from its position as a way of thinking that values non-linear views. Returning to the question of being, I recite a list composed during my undergraduate studies. This list is unfinished, and might change.

Develop forms that do not follow constant criteria.
Multilayer the fragility and instability of the seemingly sound gesture.
Study signs, processes and communication.
Investigate duality and conflict. Listen to interpretations.
Never show the complete structure.
Increase the dynamic relationship that could exist between audience and author.
Erase the notion that you're capable of being the sole author.
Scrutinize and qualify ingredients. Use multiple mediums, mix them until they fuse.
Abstract the truth, abstract reality until it becomes your desired truth.
Acknowledge that you are not in control of the work beyond, or perhaps even during its creation.
Do not cling to past meanings, or disregard conflicting opinions easily.
Do not attempt to incite a specific reaction.
Revel in the closeness and disconnection of your body to the material.

12. Clare Hemmings, *Why Stories Matter: The Political Grammar of Feminist Theory* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2011), 73.

13. *Ibid.*, 83.

14. *Ibid.*, 131.

These ideas outlined are not meant to provide answers but instead possibilities. These considerations are aimed in developing lines oriented towards a practice-led research that considers loose ends and is invested in accountability and failure. The statements are meant to encourage varied readings, and conversations about fluid art making as a methodology. I aim to advocate for modes of divergent thinking within practices of creative process. I mean to propose questions and offer potentials that might become. The potentialities I cling to are steeped in the necessary failures that coincide with development.

On materiality and material particles, Karen Bared states: “Even the smallest bits of matter are an unfathomable multitude.”¹⁵ Small gestures are impactful, they are embedded with meaning and reverberate. To give an example of practice-led research I will describe two performance pieces completed throughout the summer of 2016, in Peterborough, Ontario. *Drag-Pull*, the first performance, was shorter in duration than *Packing Day*. The first enactment took a little over an hour and a half, the second almost five hours. There were no major difficulties with *Drag-Pull* and thus I proceeded with my plan to increase the distance travelled. I had doubts. Would I be able to physically move so many items, would my pulley break or malfunction under unpredictable circumstances? As *Drag-Pull* (a piece enacted between 580 River Road South, and Neal Drive, Peterborough, ON) was completed with ease, I could not have foreseen the future difficulties that would arise. *Packing Day*, an almost five-hour performance piece (enacted between 1885 Sherbrooke Street West to 580 River Road South) was physically exhausting. I was forced twice to take breaks from the movement. During these instances, I would sit on my chair and stare rudely back at the multiple men in trucks who eyed up my being with disdain. I had to ask my photographer to pull for roughly ten minutes. He was hesitant (worried it would compromise the work) but I was afraid I would faint, and we were close to the end destination. These failures were necessary for the continuation of the project, and are ones I would consider repeating within a different context. I believe that practices of artistic research rely on experimentation, and failure to develop modes of making. These methods might seem odd, absurd, or unnecessary to researchers who focus on quantitative results, however these practices remain pertinent to those who seek to gain knowledge by experimenting with the unknown.

15. Karen Bared, “TransMaterialities: Trans*/Matter/Realities and Queer Political Imaginings,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 21, no. 2–3 (2015): 401.



Image 5. *In Bed*, 2016. Archival pigment print on premium luster photo paper, dibond mounted, 8 by 12 inches.

Erasure and Representation

The themes of visibility and erasure arise within my work through a focus on objects that are tied to traces of human enactments and through obscuring the identifiable. The performative act itself is rooted in a desire to make something visible. The work *In Bed* (image 5), features characters that remain elusive within a darkened scene. While many of the photographs shown in *SKIP-DRAG-FALL*, are of household items that have been moved and documented in public spaces, this piece captures an interaction between bodies and objects within an intimate setting, the bedroom. The image is printed small in scale (eight by twelve inches). Small images and objects encourage an altered mode of consumption when compared to large-scale works. In my opinion the illusion of looking is interrupted by scale.

My interest in visibility, erasure and representation stems specifically from my awareness of bi-visibility and erasure. A prolonged consideration on the subject of bi-erasure is necessary to counter prevalent doctrines of monosexism, which have spread, and which include rampant misinformation. Bisexuality has been attacked as anti-feminist, fake, and as inherently binary. A famous example of this sort of biphobic rhetoric can be found in the essay, *A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century*, written by Donna Haraway, where she states, “The cyborg is a creature in a postgender world; it has no truck with bisexuality, pre-oedipal symbiosis, unalienated labor, or other seductions to organic wholeness through a final appropriation of all the powers of the parts into a higher unity.”¹⁶ By referencing Freud’s Oedipus complex, Haraway reinforces the claim that, “according to Freud the (male) child is born bisexual, desiring both his mother and his father, overcoming and repressing his bisexual desire through the oedipal process...bisexuality, in itself, ceases to be an option for the child.”¹⁷ Here bisexual activist Shiri Eisner outlines how Freud’s writing has impacted the origins of several prevailing beliefs about bisexuality, specifically in terms of bisexuality being viewed as an immature phase, unfinished process, or as something that either exists for all or none.¹⁸

16. Donna J. Haraway, “A Cyborg Manifesto: Science, Technology, and Socialist-Feminism in the Late Twentieth Century,” in *Posthumanities: Manifestly Haraway* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota, 2016), 8.

17. Shiri Eisner, *Bi: Notes for a Bisexual Revolution* (California: Seal Press, 2013), 16.

18. Ibid.

The San Francisco Human Rights Commission LGBT Advisory Committee, in 2011 published the report *Bisexual Invisibility: Impacts and Recommendations*, which reveals the effects of the monosexist sensibilities of which I speak, by detailing statistics on various topics such as: bisexual mental health, the impacts of racism and discrimination pointed towards racialized bisexuals, and the increased rate of domestic violence that bisexual women suffer. The report calls for what is termed a *systemic consideration* of the “notably underrepresented” funding and resources available within community organizations to specifically cater to bisexual programs and initiatives.¹⁹ For these reasons I am preoccupied with visibility and erasure.

Before speaking on bi-erasure, it is necessary to define bisexuality, although to do so concretely is not my intention nor is it possible. My preferred definition of bisexuality comes from the bisexual activist Robyn Ochs, who states, “I call myself bisexual because I acknowledge that I have in myself the potential to be attracted—romantically and/or sexually—to people of more than one sex, and/or gender, not necessarily at the same time, not necessarily in the same way, and not necessarily to the same degree.”²⁰ This definition, while it cannot encompass all bisexual experience, is attractive because of its acceptance of the fact that bisexuality is not inherently binary. To focus on limiting definitions of bisexuality, that imagine it only as an amalgamation of straight and gay/lesbian, is to partake in bisexual erasure. Bisexuality can be a separate entity. Policing meanings of bisexuality stems from a widespread desire to confine and erase it. My desire to make art based about bisexual erasure stems from the hope that it will have an impact on future discussions about bisexuality and erasure.

The question I want to pose is how may one visually communicate bi-erasure? Not in a manner that is universal or concrete, or even recognizable. The intention in exploring this theme was not so that there would be a complete or absolute depiction. It is my intent to nourish visibility—something that has the potential to be done through researching and discussing erasure. On form and representation, Artist Mitchell Kuo states, “...art is no mere mirror or vehicle for identity. Form can never be reduced to biography or some simple expression of a unified self. It is riven by difference.” While classification may be, or appear to be, reductive,

19. San Francisco Human Rights Commission LGBT Advisory Committee, *Bisexual Invisibility: Impacts and Recommendations* (San Francisco: LGBT Advisory Committee, 2011), 1–41.

20. Robyn Ochs, “Robyn Ochs,” *Artist Website*, 2017, accessed February 16, 2017, <https://robynochs.com/bisexual/>.

Kuo further laments that art is also always embedded within the politics of identity even when this is not explicitly indicated, making work that brings attention to a racialized, differently abled, or queer experience politicized while a more privileged thematic is registered as default.²¹

Visibility and erasure interact with each other. If there were no erasure there would be no visibility but instead only being. It is the problem of erasure that creates the need for visibility, and this interaction is further complicated by asking the question of *how* to make something, or someone, visible. Kuo asks in *Collective Consciousness*, a roundtable discussion printed in Artforum's *Art and Identity* issue, "How do visibility, legibility, materiality—the very stuff of art or mediums of art—affect manifestations of identity?"²² Kuo explains that this is a question not easily answered, as concepts of identity are always relational and situated.²³ Irrespective of the difficulty in answering this question, it deserves attention precisely because of the relational and varying ways in which identity is constructed, understood, and valued. As the subjective nature of interpretation further complicates communication, I would respond to these questions by posing further queries oriented along the same line (the last two of which were originally asked by artist Allyson Mitchell). Addressing complex questions through formulating additional inquiries puts diffractive methodology into active practice, as a focus on interacting subjects is considered. These questions are as follows: *How does cultural and regional knowledge play into understandings of identity?* As Allyson Mitchell, has asked, "How may one represent and honour marginalized and non-essentialized bodies? In what ways, may the foundations identities are built on be subverted and challenged?"²⁴ While these inquiries do not outright answer the pertinent question asked by Kuo they nonetheless suggest points of orientation for an artist to consider. The apparent failure to answer these concerns directly recognizes the intricacies of what they ask. In my work, I engage with them so that relational and subjective understandings of my own may be formed and continuously reformed. I am therefore motivated and compelled to maintain a commitment in working with themes of queerness and bi-erasure within my practice as a method of valuing gestures of resistance.

21. Michelle Kuo, "Collective Consciousness: A Roundtable," in *Artforum: Art and Identity* (New York: Artforum, 2016), 267.

21. Ibid.

23. Ibid.

24. Allyson Mitchell, "Practice-Based Research and Feminist/Queer Art" (artist talk, York University, Toronto, November 23, 2016).



Image 6. *Grey Curtain*, 2016. Archival pigment print on premium luster photo paper, dibond mounted, 27 by 40 inches.



Image 7. *Sewing Table*, 2015. Archival pigment print on premium luster photo paper, dibond mounted, 27 by 40 inches.

Joint Authorship

An interest in joint or distributive authorship motivates my compulsion to interact with others. The prevailing myth of the genius or original author perpetuates notions of the sole individual as grandiose. This singular idea flattens complex realities of the self in relation to others. I identify with and am developing an artistic practice that values generosity, collective engagement, inclusivity, consensus and dialogue. Bodies form new bodies, copy other bodies, and are generators of affect (which we may never fully understand). What I refer to as *collective-individuality* is a concept that takes into consideration the relationship between oneself and others. The individual and the collective are relational. In the words of Corita Kent, “We are each other’s sources.”²⁵ The things I write, draw, paint, think, act, photograph, feel, and construct, do not belong to me alone. They are manifestations of collective-individuality. They are mutated things I have borne witness to.

On the subject of collective intellectual work and the prevalence of this practice, Benjamin Kaplan, Professor of Law at the Washington College of Law, states,

Much intellectual work including the distinctively imaginative is now being done by teams, a practice apt to continue and grow. The French have a name for it—*travaux d’équipe*. Such collaboration, I fancy, may diffuse and diminish emotions of original discovery and exclusive ownership.²⁶

This text written in 1967, could have easily been written today. However, in 2017 notions of singular authorship still are dominant within academia and copyright law. Martha Woodmansee, Associate Professor of English, Case Western Reserve University, in her article, *On the Author Effect: Recovering Collectivity*, marks a point in the progression of the author as a singular voice with Edward Young’s *Conjectures on Original Composition*, written in 1759.²⁷ These ideals have not only survived since but have flourished irrespective of the multiple methods used to create, write, and exist that are *collective* by definition. Woodmansee carefully delineates a linear progression of the increasing popularity of the notion of the original author, and proves that this construction was itself facilitated by collective authorship. She states about the present situation

25. Corita Kent, *Learning by Heart* (New York: Allworth Press, 2008), 43.

26. Benjamin Kaplan, *An Unhurried View of Copyright* (New York: Columbia University, 1967), 117.

27. Martha Woodmansee, “On the Author Effect: Recovering Collectivity,” in *The Construction of Authorship: Textual Appropriation in Law and Literature* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1994), 16.

that "...the assumption that writing is inherently and necessarily a solitary, individual act still informs both the theory and practice of the teaching and writing."²⁸ The article concludes with a critique of current copyright laws and their failure to reflect realities of consumption and creation. A specific interest is taken in relation to the digital age, and how hyper-text and forums have increased the visibility of collective authorship.²⁹

The ability to witness lack within the myth of the original author so quickly reveals that the myth's foundation exists through law and imagination, but not through tangible practice. It is in part this myth that exacerbates the panic, fear, and shame, felt amongst artists, who for hundreds of years have striven to be viewed as innovative, original creators. Actively disrupting these assumed ideals through interactive engagement is an intention within my practice-led methodology. I plan to overtly increase disruption by continuing and extending performance based collaborations such as I have been doing within enactments performed as part of the *Unsettled Attachments* series, and through joint work with Toronto-based artist Nedda Baba in public performances focusing on issues of erasure, struggle, and absurdity. I plan to move the *Unsettled Attachments* series forward by inviting others to partake in the movement of the objects and thus engage with group performances.

In considering authorship and authority, Woodmansee chronicles and brings attention to the way that, "From the Middle Ages right down through the Renaissance new writing derived its value and authority from its affiliation with the texts that preceded it, its derivation rather than its deviation from prior texts."³⁰ This statement is still relevant to current understandings of authorship. This paper will not only be evaluated by the words I write, but also by the sources I have derived information from, and the sources of those sources. Writing and making are collaborative acts. Facts to be celebrated.

28. Martha Woodmansee, "On the Author Effect: Recovering Collectivity," in *The Construction of Authorship: Textual Appropriation in Law and Literature* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 1994), 25.

29. Ibid.

30. Ibid., 17.



Image 8. *I Give, You Give, We Give*, textile portion, 2017. Thread, quilt, sleeves and pants legs from worn clothing, dimensions variable.



Image 9. *Xe, Xyr, Xyrs*, textile detail, 2015. Thread, fabric from worn clothing, dimensions variable.



Image 10. *Laura's Necklace*, 1997. Embroidery thread, dimensions variable.

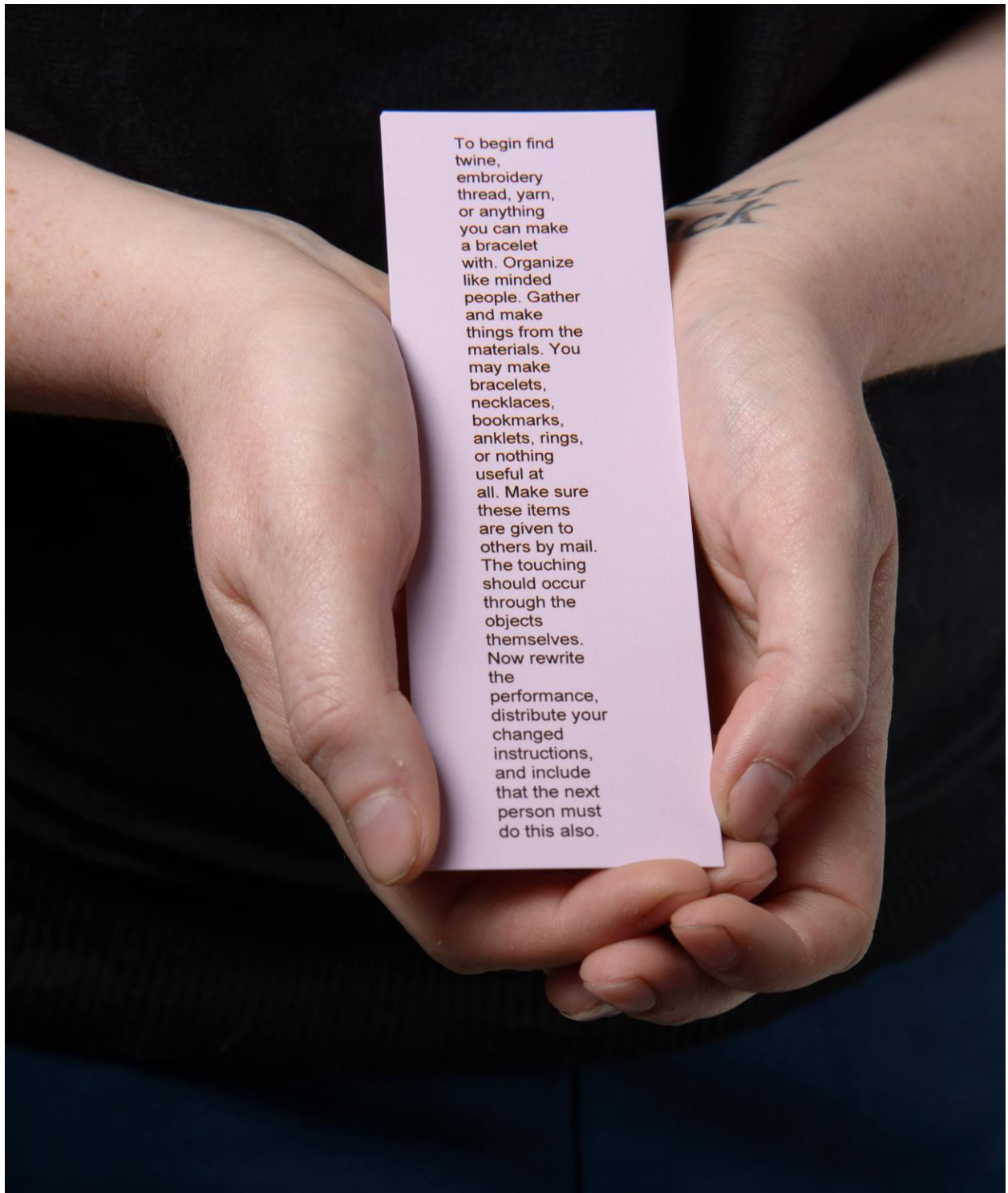


Image 11. *Take Home 1*, 2017. Text on card paper, 5 by 1 inches.



Image 12. *Take Home 2*, 2017. Text on card paper, 5 by 3 inches.

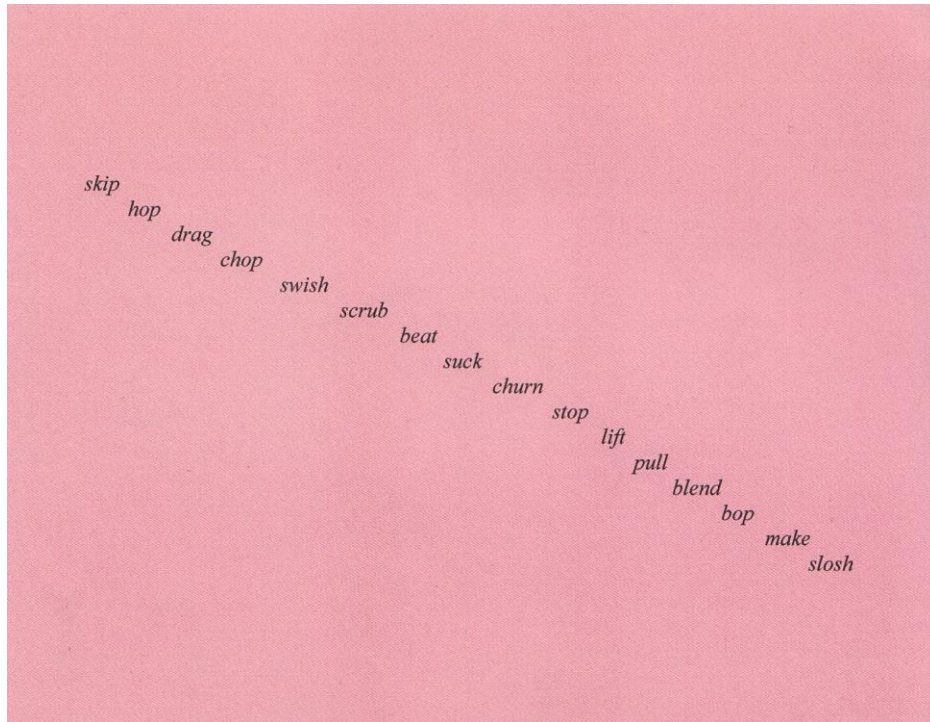


Image 13. *Take Home 3*, 2017. Text on card paper, 5 by 3 inches.

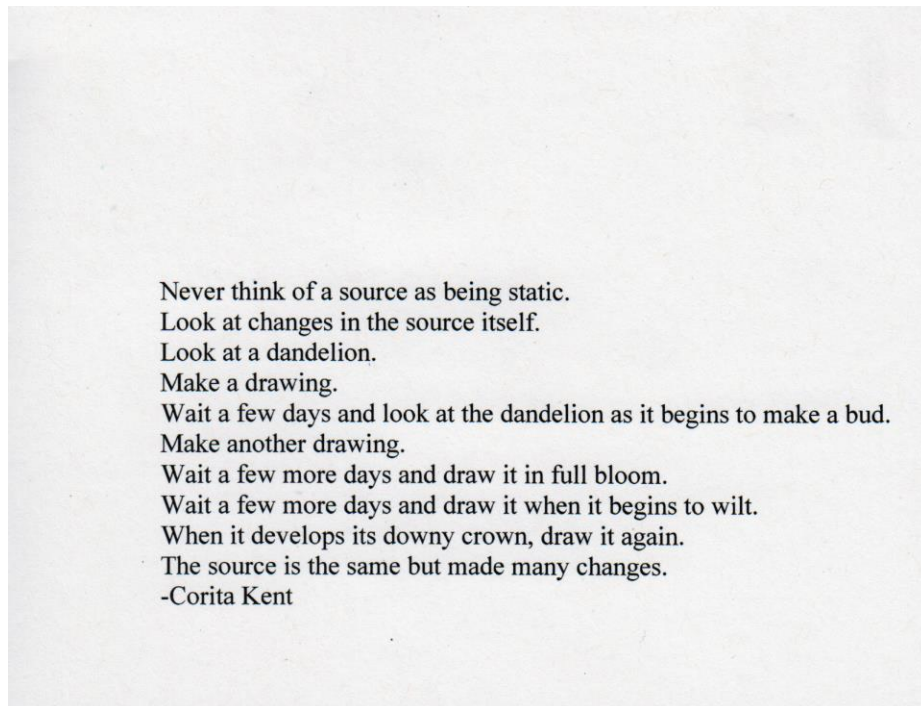


Image 14. *Take Home 3*, reverse side, 2017. Text on card paper, 5 by 3 inches.

Queer Objects and Participation

The final work for my research creation project includes the series of photographs embedded within this essay, a hanging potted dandelion, and an interactive sculpture that invites audience participation. This sculpture (as shown in the appendix), titled *I Give, You Give, We Give*, is composed of a bed, which has been structurally altered to include potted dandelions within the frame. My interest in representing queerness through dandelions stems from several facts. Dandelions, although of great medicinal and cultural value for over 1,000 years to many, are outcast.³¹ They are widely considered weeds, that despite the best efforts of many, continue to spread and grow. Writer Pamela Jones states, "...probably no other plant is so well known, so easily recognized, so much hated, so systematically singled out for extermination—and so little understood—as the dandelion."³² Dandelions reproduce by apomixis, an asexual form of reproduction that is completed by seed, eliminating the need for ideas of reproduction to be centered around the procreation of two sexes.³³ The flowers are shown in different stages of development to embody queer becoming. In addition to the dandelions, the bed facilitates the viewer to interact with a quilt that has been altered by attaching sleeves and pant legs (image 8). This makes the piece performative, as it calls for interaction. Whether the viewer touches the piece by hand or lies with it surrounding their body, they are participating in a history of touch that was enacted before my possession of the fabrics and throughout the making of the work. The quilt itself has been used in various performances, and specifically for this project passed to loved ones and friends of friends who identify as queer. This touching introduces the idea of surrogacy, of feeling something or someone through an object. While it is important to retain this queer history, the unknown history and future of the objects remain significant to the work as the interactions both known and unknown represent the paradox of collective-individuality.

My interest in amalgamating textile pieces with differing histories began in 2013, when I began a collective-performative project titled *Bending*. This piece asked a wide variety of

31. Pamela Jones, *Just Weeds: History, Myths, and Uses* (Canada: Chapter Publishing Ltd, 1994), 193.

32. Ibid.

33. T.M. Mc Peek and X. Wang, "Reproduction of Dandelion (*Taraxacum Officinale*) in a Higher CO₂ Environment," *Weed Science* 55, no. 4 (2007): 334–340, accessed February 16, 2017, DOI: 10.1614/WS-07-021.

participants to take the clothing provided and either try on or hold the items, while discussing their thoughts on the relationship between clothing and gender expression. In certain instances, the interactions were captured through photographic or audio documentation. The textile material left over from these interactions was then used to create a series of nine cloaks in a separate but related project titled *or(between)not* (as shown in image 9); these cloaks are currently being used in several upcoming short films and public performance projects. The point of relating the previous work to the current is to highlight the way that my practice-led methodology, which values fluidity and change (reusing the old to make the new), is manifested within the tangible objects.

A performance piece, *Half-Hitch Knots*, will be enacted inside Gales gallery, in conjunction with, and as part of, the *SKIP-DRAG-FALL* exhibition. This work, performed with Nedda Baba as part of the *I2* project (a collaborative performance venture comprised of twelve public performances aimed at increasing visibility around bi and genderfluid issues), will function as a bracelet-making workshop that asks participants to make something from the textiles provided and mail it to a loved one. The act of making a friendship bracelet might be disregarded as childish and playful. However, items kept from childhood become precious, even revered objects because of our attachment to the memories associated with juvenile activities. Through the act of making an object and sending it by mail, affect is continued through the object. As Ann Cvetkovich, Professor of English and Women's Studies at the University of Texas, states in her essay *Photographing Objects as Queer Archival Practice*, while discussing the work of artist Tammy Rae Carland, “even idiosyncratic objects are meaningful as expressions of desire, mourning, and other feelings. To dismiss the queer collection as merely personal rather than historical, or as a collection and not an archive, is to imply that queer sexual desires are insignificant or perverse.”³⁴ The gesture of the making relates to a personal queer experience from my childhood (image 10), in which objects, such as the friendship bracelet, covertly signaled queer desire in a manner that would not be detected by the heteronormative policing of overseeing adults. In addition to supplying the items needed for the actions to occur (stamps, envelopes, yarn, embroidery thread etc.), a bookmark will be handed to each participant (image 11). The bookmarks include imprinted instructions. If the instructions are followed, then

34. Anne Cvetkovich, “Photographing Objects as Queer Archival Practice,” in *Feeling Photography* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2014), 275.

the collaborator will enact a modified version of the performance. These directions are meant to promote and continue alternative methods of collective authorship and making. They question and challenge ownership while valuing the kind of fluidity I seek in my practice-based research. The bookmarks will be displayed, as part of the *I Give, You Give, We Give* sculpture, on a bedside table, along with two other text based works (images 12-14). These two additional text pieces include excerpts from the writings of Sister Corita Kent and Sheila Heti. The excerpt from Corita Kent details a dandelion drawing exercise, while the Shelia Heti excerpt (written in conjunction with writer Misha Glouberman) discusses failure. These additions to the work are necessary to acknowledge collective authorship, to provide further context for viewers that seek it, and to make the act of giving an object part of the experience. Objects lost and held rouse our yearning; objects will comfort our loved ones when we have gone.

Concerning participation, it is involvement that is central to collective authorship, and this has been a motivating factor in my decision to encourage viewers to physically interact with the work. While touch is certainly important, I regard viewing as a comparable tactile activity. As Cvetkovich examines in her essay, *Photographing Objects as Queer Archival Practice*, seeing is also a tactile sensation, and a photograph is no less tangible than a quilt. She states, “Photographs often function like iconic or sacred objects when they hold memories and feelings—the materiality of the paper is as important as the indexicality of the image in providing a tangible connection to a lost place, person, or object.”³⁵ The things we see enter and consume us. Offering opportunities for more than one type of physical engagement is important in terms of accessibility, and to broaden room for experience and thus subjective associations. Participation also directly connects to queer community building, which may begin when gestures of inclusion open possibilities for enactments and discussion.

On the topic of subjectivity, the *Unsettled Attachments* work, while pointed, has also been intentionally left open. By this I mean the objects themselves have not been assigned one specific narrative. This was an important gesture to honour my interest in collective-individuality. While some of the objects used contain a personal history that involves myself, other objects have been acquired through third parties and have no association to me personally

35. Anne Cvetkovich, “Photographing Objects as Queer Archival Practice,” in *Feeling Photography* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2014), 281.

other than their participation in the project. While they may not contain a known queer history, the project utilizes them for queer purposes. Varied subjectivity is inevitable regardless of intent, however these parameters are meant to function as a way of releasing the work from one fixed intention, to instead focus on multiple aims, making the methodology of my practice embedded within the objects. It is our participation in queer activities, rituals, and modes of being which has the potential to make the objects we hold and desire subjectively queer.

Conclusion

The title, *SKIP-DRAG-FALL*, was chosen for this exhibition to allude to movement and failure. This idea of movement and shift relates to the methods of research creation used (which consider diffractive methodology) and references the physical moving of the objects themselves. This movement began before my interactions with the items, due to their commodity status. Within these repositionings, as with all things contingent upon matter and being, there will be failures. This project was not undertaken with the goal that failure would be inherent within it, but rather was realized through an analysis of failure that recognizes it as intrinsic to growth and queer becoming. I do not embrace the concept of failure as a melancholic or dramatic finality to struggle, nor do I defend the idea that it is through failure that success comes to all. *SKIP-DRAG-FALL* instead presents failure as a necessary and at best uncomfortable component to becoming that reminds us, through objects, of our connections to other bodies, spaces, and places where being may have the potential to develop.

By embracing failure, we are united by our aberrations. We refuse to play by the established rules. Throughout the course of my studies at York University, I have had the opportunity to reflect upon my core values as an educator (who has been formally trained in the discipline and dissatisfied with the parameters given). I have realized, throughout the writing of this paper and the making of my artistic work, that failure should be acknowledged as an intrinsic part of not only my artistic methodology but also as part of my teaching philosophy. Although at times inconceivably horrible to think of, without the acknowledgement of failure (which is an inevitable and certain factor in life) we might forget past transgressions and thus repeat them. Without accepting failure, we may forget the limitations of our own knowledge and fallibility.

Failure and desire are of course linked, for it is desire itself that keeps us unsatisfied. It is our desires which signal the lack felt within us. To desire an object can be a queer desire indeed, and it is through the objects made and the photographs printed that I seek to examine the ways that failure and desire coincide through tactility. Ann Cvetkovich, in her article, *Photographing Objects as Queer Archival Practice*, states that, “Although embodied performance has been the exemplary case in theories of the ephemeral,” material objects photographed are also as

ephemeral as the act of photographing itself is performative and can be a method of, “seeing and holding objects.”³⁶ Throughout my practice based research I have learned that the tactility present within the still image is equal to the tactility found within the objects touched. The things we see and desire haunt our recollections, they enter us. These objects are not only present within the still frame, but also in the moments lost between frames, and in our fleeting and changing interpretations of instances gone.

What possibilities could emerge if we would all orient our beings in reciprocal relation to the objects that surround us? Can we imagine their past and future with certainty and principled confidence? I return to the questions posed in the introduction of this paper. While I can give no definitive answers, I argue that to be concerned with the things around us is to be concerned with our own condition. I currently think of these questions from an intersectional and ecological feminist perspective, for the objects we own are themselves representative of and tied to our own intersecting privileges and oppression. The objects we hold, and the manner in which we care for them, could be symbolic of our relationships to the places we have inhabited and the bodies we have loved. These endless things remind us of our social, and ecological responsibility to care for the things we house, and for one another. Throughout this paper, I have discussed the need for collaboration, engagement, and reflection. It is not only through my research that I have realized the extent to which collective engagement is needed within the production of cultural work. Personal experiences and collective conversations have also contributed to this realization. Through community building exercises, performances, absurd enactments and workshops, it is possible to produce a sense of belonging. Even though I value failure and of course expect it, this does not mean I am without hope for future queer lines to be oriented towards responsible and reflective destinations.

36. Anne Cvetkovich, “Photographing Objects as Queer Archival Practice,” in *Feeling Photography* (Durham and London: Duke University Press, 2014), 290.

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Appendix



Image 15. *I Give, You Give, We Give*, 2017. Bed, quilt, worn clothing, dandelions, table, stool, multiples, dimensions variable.



Image 16. *SKIP-DRAG-FALL*, installation shot, 2017. Gales Gallery, York University, Toronto.



Image 17. *I Give, You Give, We Give* (detail), 2017. Bed, quilt, worn clothing, dandelions, table, stool, multiples, dimensions variable.



Image 18. *I Give, You Give, We Give* (detail), 2017. Bed, quilt, worn clothing, dandelions, table, stool, multiples, dimensions variable.



Image 19. *I Give, You Give, We Give* (detail), 2017. Bed, quilt, worn clothing, dandelions, table, stool, multiples, dimensions variable.



Image 20. *I Give, You Give, We Give* (detail), 2017. Bed, quilt, worn clothing, dandelions, table, stool, multiples, dimensions variable.



Image 21. *I Give, You Give, We Give* (detail), 2017. Bed, quilt, worn clothing, dandelions, table, stool, multiples, dimensions variable.



Image 22. *SKIP-DRAG-FALL*, installation shot, 2017. Gales Gallery, York University, Toronto.



Image 23. *Reach*, 2017. Oak branch, worn sleeves, paint, thread, dimensions variable.



Image 24. *SKIP-DRAG-FALL*, installation shot, 2017. Gales Gallery, York University, Toronto.



Image 25. *SKIP-DRAG-FALL*, installation shot, 2017. Gales Gallery, York University, Toronto.



Image 26. *Half-Hitch Knots*, performance documentation, 2017. Gales Gallery, York University, Toronto.



Image 27. *I Give, You Give, We Give* (detail), 2017. Bed, quilt, worn clothing, dandelions, table, stool, multiples, dimensions variable.



Image 28. *I Give, You Give, We Give* (detail), 2017. Bed, quilt, worn clothing, dandelions, table, stool, multiples, dimensions variable.



Image 29. *Reach* (detail), 2017. Oak branch, worn sleeves, paint, thread, dimensions variable.



Image 30. *Reach* (detail), 2017. Oak branch, worn sleeves, paint, thread, dimensions variable.