

# It Could Be Worse.

by

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Can I ask you a favor?  
Are you finished with that?

Do you know where I left it?  
Will you remind me again?

How long will this take?  
What is the time?

Everything is just fine.

## Chapter I.

### Don't be so dramatic.

I am 5 years old and I have my first dance recital. My mother tugs at my hair to put in a bow and I yelp. *Please stop*. She rolls up the stockings and asks me to step into them. I whine from the discomfort of them tugging against my legs. She is focused on putting my outfit together. I look up and around at the other girls who are unfazed by this ritual. *I love to tap dance, but not like this*. I cannot focus or remember what happens next.

*Don't be so dramatic.*

I am 9 years old and I ask if I may cut my hair short. I pull it back in a ponytail out of my face most days. I am no fuss and no frills. I would be happy to spend my days rolling around in the dirt outside. My mother draws the line. I don't want people to think you are a boy. *I don't care*, I retort. I do, she replies.

*End of conversation.*

I am 14 years old and I have a crush on a boy in my homeroom. He knows about it, we chat online sometimes. At a group outing to the bowling alley he covers my eyes and kisses me in a secluded corner near the lockers. I didn't expect my first kiss to be so forced, wet, and underwhelming. I don't hear from him for a while and ask a friend what's going on. She says he's getting blow jobs from another girl. I'm not sure what to think.

*It's not a big deal.*

I am 23 years old and I live in Brooklyn. I work as a caretaker for a family of three children during the day. I ride the subway twice a day, five days a week. Listless after work, I hop on the A train home. It is standing room only. I park my body off to the side. Away from the action. A man approaches and stands gripping the pole next to me. I do not feel good about this man. I do not make eye contact. He moves closer. Closer again. Almost touching me now. I glance up from my phone. He is rubbing his crotch. He looks me square in the eyes. I look around. People are staring quietly at me and him. The train doors open. He steps closer. I step out of the train and watch the doors close, separating us. The train rolls away. He never breaks eye contact.

*It could be worse.*

I am 24 years old. It is November 2016. The presidential election has just happened. I cycle between disappointment and hot tears. I have grown up in an area plastered with the Trump Real Estate branding. Its bankrupt casinos laid off thousands of working and middle class people in my hometown around the Recession. The unions would protest, things got better momentarily, but then subsequently got worse. Brand name towels and memorabilia fill my family's home, the free swag never nearly enough to make up

for all the lost money. Money extracted out of people who never had any to begin with. Money built on junk bonds. Money that disappeared.

I protest every night after work. About two weeks into this ritual, the mother of the family I work for chats with me. Things are going to be ok, she says to me. You are a white woman and you are safe from danger. This will pass just as Bush/Reagan/Nixon did.

*Everything is not going to be ok though.*

*I am not interested in pretending nothing is wrong just to protect myself from feeling bad.*

*Things are really bad right now.*

*I will be as dramatic as I fucking want.*

## **Chapter II**

### **How to be an artist.**

8:00 am: First alarm rings

8:30 am: Second alarm rings

9:00 am: Third alarm rings

9:15 am: Check the news headlines in bed

9:20 am: Get up

9:25 am: Eat breakfast

9:30 am: Chat with roommates

9:50 am: Shower and get dressed

10:00 am: Answer e-mails

10:30 am: Head to studio

11:00 am: Pace around/warm-up

11:15 am: Make coffee or tea

11:30 am: Zone out

12:00 pm: Chat with studio mate

12:30 pm: Have a snack

12:50 pm: Focus

1:00 pm: Meditate on concrete floor

1:15 pm: Start writing and drawing on large paper

2:15 pm: Pace around or go for short walk

2:30 pm: Start playing with found materials

3:00 pm: Get frustrated

3:15 pm: Set camera on tripod and begin moving around

4:00 pm: Become fully immersed in actions

4:45 pm: Check messages

5:00 pm: Pull footage off of memory card

5:20 pm: Hate everything

5:50 pm: Plan dinner with a friend

6:15 pm: Meet for dinner to talk about day

7:00 pm: Have a glass (or three) of wine

8:00 pm: Chat about art amongst other things

9:00 pm: Head home

9:15 pm: Try to read

9:45 pm: Remember to watch new episode of favorite show

10:45 pm: Brush teeth

11:00 pm: Check social media

12:00 am: Sit in dark room

1:30 am: Have idea for next project

Individual results may vary.

### **Chapter III**

#### **Say more.**

If I close my eyes I can effortlessly remember every detail of the first home we lived in. It was a few doors away from my grandparents' and it was a 2-story home with green siding and a three season porch as the main entryway. I can clearly take a tour through the home as if it hasn't changed in the 20 years since we moved away from it. I can recall the details of the wood bannister next to the main staircase I once slipped down and split my lip open on. In the wood paneled dining room I can see where my first tooth fell out. I walk next door to the kitchen with its faux brick backsplash and bright orange countertops. I climb up the tiny hidden attic staircase where I can make out the textures of the brown shag carpeting that was in what was my own separate playroom space. I spent a lot of time alone up there, figuring out the world and watching from the front window the quiet bustling of our suburban neighborhood. I wasn't doing well in school at that age; I had trouble focusing and staying on task, but in the moments of recalling that space everything is perfectly clear. I feel like I am in my own body for a moment before I drift away again. I do not know exactly why around this time everything starts to feel like I'm swimming through thick fog, but something tells me that this is about the age I began to realize that I had to move through the world and behave a certain way because of my body. Only later do I start to understand how gender and socio-economic class play into this cloudy feeling, but for the time being, in the space of the green house, I understand only that something isn't quite right.

When I first thought about applying to graduate school I fully intended to keep making work in the mode I was already operating in, and was hoping to develop a

sharper language for discussing it. I had been amassing recordings of performances, vignettes of 5 or so minutes of my body performing an action. Sometimes this action was simple, sometimes it was more complicated or abstracted, usually it was in relationship to an object or the environment around me. I made all these videos because I felt like I had no other choice. A light flashed and my body followed suit. I was working primarily in a mode where the unconscious was doing all the driving. When I look back at these works, everything makes a lot of sense. My personal experiences and what I was absorbing around me all start to melt together. The physical attributes of the work are always the same, one body, one movement, one continuous shot. The obsessive repetition signature to my work was a reflection of how I approached the making of it. The most exciting part was taking the single shoots and experimenting with how they would live in a physical space. Having a space to give these small expressions a home is where I started to tap the surface of the psychology of them. Are they one channel or are they multiple channels and what does that mean? Are they on a television in space or are they projected on a wall? How big are they? How often do they loop? Formal decisions helped me amplify what felt like was only a tiny file on my computer into an entire body experience. I was finding an outlet for my own frustrations a lot of the time. At the same time I was also realizing other people weren't completely alien to those frustrations themselves.

I view the years before the 2016 election sort of as the pre-enlightenment. I was moving intuitively and videos were materializing. It was enough to just make something because it felt like the right thing to do at that given moment. Not everything was a success, but I had the ability to try things out with relatively low stakes. I looked to



other well-known performance and video artists for inspiration: VALIE EXPORT, Joan Jonas, Patty Chang, Pipilotti Rist, Sarah Lucas, and Bruce Nauman, just to name a shortlist. Sometimes it was the most helpful to look at artists who were doing something completely different than I was, which is what started my interest in Adrian Piper. She uses theory heavily in her work, something I'm less confident in doing, but I became interested in how she used visual language to process theoretical information and subsequently defy or amplify assumptions of identity in her work.

It was safe to live in the intuitive making space, but after moving to Brooklyn, I knew it was time to embrace the uncomfortable. Around this time I also saw the film *HyperNormalisation* (2016) by Adam Curtis, a British video essayist and documentary filmmaker. The nearly 3 hour film tracks a timeline of globalization and capitalism from 1970s early Neoliberalism to the nomination of Donald Trump in 2016. Curtis delivers a theory of the hypernormal, an idea first proposed by the Anthropologist Alexei Yurchak in a remark about the collapse of the Soviet Union. As Curtis says in the film:

“Yurchak argues that everyone knew the system was failing, but as no one could imagine any alternative to the status quo, politicians and citizens were resigned to maintaining a pretense of a functioning society. Over time, this delusion became a self-fulfilling prophecy and the “fakeness” was accepted by everyone as real, an effect that Yurchak termed HyperNormalisation,”

I wanted my work to have a more precise language, and, also, I now wanted to participate in and take responsibility for the discussions mapping out the story of how we landed at this moment in our history. This began the first of my nearly two years making work in response to the place I grew up in, Atlantic City, New Jersey. I used this place and my memories of it as a way to access the core problem of the story Americans tell themselves to feel better about where we are. I think I needed to

understand where I came from in order to return to the present, and the last piece I will talk about in this writing, but I will address this more precisely in the following section.

## **Chapter IV**

### **Three works**

#### 1. *Vessel (Portrait of the American Dream)*, 2017

Walking into the space there are two waiting room chairs and a small table. On the table is a Keurig coffeemaker and some brochures. There is a beige rug beneath. A single silver lamp lights the area. Behind this waiting space are large windows facing out to the public. In those windows are real estate listings on display. Empty lots, low resolution images, and unkempt yards populate the listings. Admissions of the derelict conditions and at times dangerous local energies are stated in a matter-of-fact manner. Sweeping generalizations border on offensive, but the name of the business contact, Millburn Pennybags (aka the Monopoly Man) and the business address of 666 Fifth Avenue, New York, New York give it all away.

My first semester I really wanted to push myself, so I began doing research as a way to collect material for my artistic practice. All of these listings are of real properties in Atlantic City, New Jersey. The original Monopoly game is based on actual streets that make up the city's grid. I hunted down places located on those streets that had recently been for sale or in foreclosure, many just abandoned lots. The prices are the listed market values. What motivated this piece was reading a story about how the Kushner company owned a vacant lot on the back bay side of the city that they had been sitting on for years. The city offered to buy the lot back, knowing that real estate in the area is not in high demand and with the idea in mind for a proposed community

green space. Due to a clause in the contract, however, the Kushners are under no obligation to sell the property back and have not acknowledged any negotiations. It sits empty, a littered dirt lot and bulkhead where fishermen gather to catch clams. I wondered what it would feel like to be in the position of someone who is a real estate mogul, the opposite experience I myself (as an artist) would ever have. The harsh factual quips—“Has most sex offenders on block per capita” or “Only two recent shootings nearby”—are an attempt to push forward the way outsiders Other the local community. Assumptions of poverty and violence take center stage, much like they do for someone looking speculatively at the properties. Although the city is not in its best shape, and although it was built on fantasies of transgression (from its Prohibition era notoriety to the 20<sup>th</sup>-century construction of casinos), the publicity surrounding the residents is almost exclusively negative. It is a city whose shadow is a perfect example of the risks and casualties of Capitalism. I don't know if things will ever get better, but I know a lot of local people who are really trying, opening their own restaurants, distilleries, and shops. Those businesses are not on the casino strip, but instead are in the “dangerous” surrounding neighborhoods, and are spaces of gathering for year-round residents. Businessmen and outsiders like the Kushners cannot continue to get away with preventing the neighborhoods and local communities from reclaiming the spaces that are their everyday realities, and not just speculative dollar signs. This piece was the first of many in grappling with my relationship to my own history.



## 2. *Steel Pier, 2018*

A projection on a large wall opens with archival black-and-white footage. A horse comes into focus climbing a six-story platform. At the top, a female diver waves to the crowd and prepares to hop on the horse. Unsettling music creeps into the room. As the horse approaches the edge the shot switches angles; and it is now wide enough to show the platform at its full height. The horse with the woman on it jumps and the screen cuts to black. A few seconds go by and all that is left is the sound, gaining

volume now. When the footage reappears, the impact of the woman and horse hitting the water is seen momentarily before a figure appears on the screen. The video that makes up this figure is very different from the black-and-white footage because it is in color, only visible from the chest down, and dressed in an oversized denim jacket. The only noticeable movement comes slowly, a tightening and loosening of hand and finger muscles. As time progresses, the grip intensifies and transforms into a fist. The figure is multiplied across the entire screen, now blocking the archival footage entirely. There are many figures. The hands, first becoming a fist, then thrusting into the jacket pockets, and finally releasing back out again are amplified by the sheer number of them. A second projection pops onto the wall to the right; it shows the right side of the hand motions in a closer crop. After a few moments of the two screens running in tandem, a third projection pops onto the left side wall, so that the viewer is enveloped in the hands and fists. Within the same room, a table with sand on top starts to rumble, knocking the sand off the edges. The rumbling creates a wave pattern on the surface of the table. It rolls in and out, shaking the space, amplifying the moment in which all three projections are in view and occupying the room. The rumbling begins to subside, and the figures begin to exit the screen, one at a time. Remaining on the three channels is the archival black-and-white footage alone again, as the woman and the horse emerge from underwater and begin to swim to shore.

The Diving Horse Act ran on Steel Pier in Atlantic City from 1928 to 1978. It was one of the more popular local performances, a gravity defying act of female bravery. My parents and grandparents can vividly remember witnessing the dive, a memory more spectacular than watching salt water taffy being made or visiting with a man

dressed as Mr. Peanut. Vintage ad posters hang as decoration in my family's home, and the story is a pervasive part of local identity.

Looking back at photos and videos, something never felt quite settled for me about the heroic legacy of the event. I wondered what the performers were motivated by. Money perhaps? The thrill of the fall? Visibility? Looking for testaments from former divers, I came across an interview with Sonora Webster Carver. Well into her nineties, she discusses her years as a diver and her subsequent blindness from a miscalculated entry. Carver looks back with dreamy nostalgia, recalling how she was persuaded to participate in the event by her mother and the infamous William "Doc" Carver, a sharpshooter known for his performances with Buffalo Bill Cody in Wild West shows. Webster Carver continued diving after her retinal detachment and had an impressive circus career of almost 20 years before retiring in the 1940s. She wrote a children's book about her experiences that was adapted into a movie (the 1991 film, *Wild Hearts Can't be Broken*). It is a true hero's tale of overcoming adversity in pursuit of personal freedom.

In the book Webster Carver explains how she married Doc Carver's son and enlisted her sister to join the performances. She talks about her horse Red Lips and how it never backed away from the edge, displaying the perfect temperament for dives. Even after her accident, she did not question the motivations of her show runner (her husband) or the concerns about herself and the animals' welfare. Perhaps it was simply just a different time. I want to believe Webster Carver's account that she had autonomy over her body and chose to perform, but I am also inclined to think that this decision was complicated by the fantasies of Americana culture and the manifest destiny

narrative this country was built on: that we are the sole heroes of our own (male) stories and can strategically omit the people who are victimized in the process of our passionately fighting and searching for the object of our desire.

The figure in the color footage of *Steel Pier* is myself. With my fists and pockets, the interaction with the black-and-white footage and the performance it portrays is a way to place myself in this history and to acknowledge my own role. I am angry and no longer interested in this fantasy narrative. I consider this work the last of the Atlantic City research series, at least for now. Through the process of making this work I realized I didn't need to lean so heavily on research or archive in order to justify why my performances mattered. I was ready to move forward and this piece was a crucial pivot point.





### 3. *Liminal Spaces*, 2019

*Considering that your most recent work is more closely related to your early work, what do you think you learned from the experience of returning to where you started before grad school?*

My first thought when asked the above question was *I want to throw up*. But my second thought, of my rational mind, was calm and tactful. *I have been thinking about that a lot too*, I began to reply.

Very recently I gave an artist talk at the university where I attended undergrad to a group of BFA students. It was my first time doing anything like that, and I was



nervous but I answered their questions as honestly and generously as I could. I talked about my work trajectory since I left that institution and it felt a little bit like a rollercoaster. I am conscious of how everything I have done has served a purpose in developing my studio practice and sometimes that purpose is learning exactly what not to do again. This particular question of returning to where I began was tough, but the new work I am making feels more natural and in line with where I want to be going.

After *Steel Pier*, I knew I wanted to change how I made work, but I wasn't sure how to begin. I needed to get away from the past and start responding to the present. I have learned a lot over the past two years about myself and the art world at large and I wanted to process that through a work. I thought about transitional spaces, grad school being one of them. I took stock of all the formal moves I had been making—multiplicity, video projection, body in space—and I made a couplet of videos. One video is shot in the daytime and one at night, both of the same location, my bed. My bed is a place of privacy and intimacy where I tend to unpack my day. It is a space where I am temporarily, unconscious for much of the time spent there. It is comfortable, but the process of unpacking can be incredibly uncomfortable. At times it is enraging, as I reflect on the moments in which I wish I could have reacted but ultimately did not want to “cause a scene”. I shouldn't have to feel this way but I have been conditioned to and it can be a very hard pattern to break. I use a green screen and body paint to paint myself into the scene, disguising my entire body until it is almost undetectable, and then I begin wiping away the camouflage until I am visible again. I start with one image of this action and duplicate it so that there are three of me across the scene all performing this at different time intervals. The two videos are

stacked on top of each other and projected very large in a cove of the gallery, another liminal space, where the gallery meets a door to the office and an emergency exit. I am realizing that my use of multiples (which has been likened to Nauman) serves a specific purpose in the work. It is about the intensity of an action, but it is also about the repetition and ritual of something that is performed every single day from when you wake to when you sleep. I bring the audience into a moment of applying and washing off the gesture of wanting to be visible and invisible, sometimes simultaneously. I have felt this experience a lot not only throughout my art career, where I am putting my ideas out into the public eye, but also as a woman, as a young person, and as someone navigating the world in 2019.

Flanking the cove of the projection are five screens, three on the left and two on the right, with a video playing on them of a hand, becoming a fist, and going into the pocket of a denim jacket. It is the video from *Steel Pier* but this time I have removed any trace of the historical archive. I often like to re-imagine my own work in a new context, it is a challenge that helps me find what I'm after from a work. The action is what is important in this video, and each screen has 3 repetitions of my body performing it. They are synced to activate each other, one video spilling onto the next until there is an army of hands in pockets and then fists. The video to the farthest left begins with one body, and then another appears, and another, the second screen activates a fourth and a fifth until every screen is full of them. Finally there is sound element to the piece; a mix of natural and industrial that weave together sometimes fighting for their own identity but often resolving into a fuzzy blur. I use a whole section of the room in this work to create an immersive installation where people can watch all

these moments come together and also fall apart depending on the timing, but the motions are consistent repetitions.

I am learning that sometimes the most satisfying work I make is initially located in my own experience of the world around me, but remains open enough for others to project their own experiences into it. It is in that space I see a moment where art can be used as a tool for discussion and opens up how we all relate to less tangible moments of tension or transitory spaces.



## Chapter V

### What's at stake here?

Similar to Bouvard and Pécuchet, those eternal copyists, at once sublime and comic and whose profound ridiculousness indicates precisely the truth of writing, the writer can only imitate a gesture that is always anterior, never original. His only power is to mix writings, to counter the ones with the others, in such a way as never to rest on any one of them. Did he wish to *express himself*, he ought at least to know that the inner 'thing' he thinks to 'translate' is itself only a ready-formed dictionary, its words only explainable through other words, and so on indefinitely.

--Roland Barthes, "Death of the Author"

For this last chapter, I have decided to use a quote from the canonical 1967 essay "Death of the Author," by Roland Barthes, to make an attempt to address the value of a highly personal artistic practice in a world that is more globally connected than ever. The reason I (as many others now and before me) love "Death of the Author" is because it represents the moment in theory when writers and artists began deeply considering the audience as the most important material in the production of a work. We can officially do away with the romantic notion of artist as individual creative genius, because there is no such thing as "original" content. Artists today are allowed freedom from the pressures of having to reinvent the wheel—free to mix and meditate on concepts ranging from literature and music to science, politics, stories, and even their own experiences. This can manifest as physical and aesthetic freedom, or even as an artist reinterpreting existing work by other artists. The possibilities of the freedom from "artist as genius" are innumerable, but what I glean from this is that we are not special and someone else has probably had the exact same idea before. How can a person who makes extremely personal work argue that it matters with all of this in mind?

The thing I find so freeing about “Death of the Author” is that by making work about my own experiences, I can be reassured that these ideas are not existing in a vacuum of originality, but are instead directly related to what is happening at a scale and within a system much larger than just myself. By making myself vulnerable and sharing the experiences I know, with the aesthetic language I have learned, there is an opportunity for dialogue. The audience can complete the conversation, and whether they agree or disagree or care or don’t care about the work, they can bring in their own experiences to stand with and next to mine. It is precisely in the holes of artistic language where new ideas can start to expand.

In an essay titled “Woolf’s Darkness: Embracing the Inexplicable” (2014), Rebecca Solnit speaks about the discomforts of the unknown and how Virginia Woolf fearlessly welcomed it in her journal entries. Solnit writes: “Filling in the blanks replaces the truth that we don’t entirely know with the false sense that we do.” She uses this idea as a way to connect a culture of authoritative language to the mess we are currently in socially and politically. In the same vein of thought as Barthes, the artist is not the sole authoritative creator of culture. There are blank spaces in any good artwork. It is there that I find artmaking, in one of the few spaces where we can thoughtfully confront our own shortcomings.

I treat my art practice very similarly to my teaching practice in the sense that these two things are inextricably connected. They are about sharing accounts, both speaking and listening. Through hearing each other’s voices we can create a supportive and inclusive art that pushes against and redefines systems of hierarchy, patriarchy, and other divisions we are being indoctrinated with. By telling the stories

that I know, which are not disconnected from the political, social, and emotional landscapes I traverse, I am hoping to create a timestamp of a specific moment in history when we have almost nothing left to lose.

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