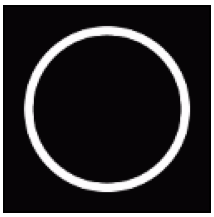


In Between I and Other(s):

The ɹəənQ Functions of Art-Making for the Ashamed

Media Arts MFA Thesis Paper

Jake Frisbie

Shaka McGlotten
Brooke Singer
May 2021

Acknowledgements
I am incredibly grateful for the support of *Others* that have made the production of my thesis work possible - I couldn't be me without *them*.

I would like to thank foremost, my Thesis Advisor, mentor and friend, Shaka McGlotten. You always encouraged me to improve. Your investment in my studies, practice and knowledge of Queer Theory has helped me to contextualize my arts practice - you've affirmed and inspired me. I cannot imagine graduate school without you.

I would like to thank Brooke Singer, my professor and Second Reader of my thesis paper. Her dedication to her students, her dedication to pedagogy and thoughtful, constructive critique has enspirited, guided and challenged my learning within the Media Arts MFA program.

My family, through thick and thin, has believed in me - I want the best for y'all as you do for me, always. I love you.

Nina Veljovic, my best friend. You're a firecracker. You've taught me so much pride, love and life. You remind me to look at the moon.

Bob Civil, "you're my heart, you're my soul." I wouldn't be me without you.

I would like to thank my "team," the SoMad collective; Sara Arno, Carla Maldonado, Serichai Traipoom and Kyle Hendersen, who have shown me the pains and joys of collaboration, community-building and world making. Here's looking forward to all we will accomplish together.

Special thanks to Serichai, I'm crazy for you. You have taught me so much about commitment, generosity and true love, thank you again. You're a stud.

I would like to thank collaborators Damariz Damken and Sintra Martins who lended their amazing talents to help me to realize my thesis work.

Finally, I'd like to acknowledge Emma Podolsky. My best friend, my roommate. We're living the fucking dream, creating spaces of safety, affirmation and pleasure for us and Others.

CONTENT WARNING:
Suicide
Sexual violence
Eating disorders
Alcohol/drug abuse

Abstract
For the repressed, autobiographical art-making is more than a tool of catharsis, but a way of cataloging life experience, (re)constructing identity and understanding Others. The opportunity to produce socially engaged works of art may not always be available for the ashamed, they may not yet have the ability to produce works beyond the self-expressive. Through collaboration, in academic, creative and cultural spaces, through exchange within community founded in care and non-abusive pedagogical support, self-concerned artists may begin to produce artwork that creates *actual* social change, reifies the *symbolic* and - they may even retire artistic applications concerned namely with their character. A self-conscious arts practice is a practice of self-preservation. When these defenses are no longer needed, the artist becomes available for abounding creative possibilities.

In this thesis paper, I detail the conceptual underpinnings, performative processes and presentation of my thesis work through autobiography.

It is highly encouraged to interact with the thesis paper as a Google Doc, it includes links to supportive media, gifs and may also be helpful in annotating the work. Here is a link to this document:

https://docs.google.com/document/d/1nWj3-I5KrgMFpj4_trwh40rQ6P5qfqU5Axoi6Flz30k/edit?usp=sharing

Introduction

> "EVERY HUMAN BEING IS AN ARTIST who - from his state of freedom - the position of freedom that he experiences at first hand - learns to determine the *other* positions in the TOTAL ARTWORK OF THE FUTURE SOCIAL ORDER. Self-determination and participation in the cultural sphere (freedom); in the structuring of laws (democracy); and in the sphere of economics (socialism). *Self-administration and decentralization* (threefold structure) occurs: FREE DEMOCRATIC SOCIALISM." - Joseph Beuys, I Am Searching for Field Character (1973) (Italicizes added for emphasis)

I don't know if it's typical to start a thesis paper by dis/qualifying personal tragedies, but at this moment I think it's crucial to preface that mine have been few. My life is not impeded by prejudice because of my white skin, masculine presentation and class. My circumstances are privileged, comparatively. I have more freedom than most, I have access and ease that many do not. Though I ask you, reader, ((floridly,) respectfully,) for compassion. No life has been without pain - even if that pain is self-inflicted.

Born and raised a device, a by-product, of the American Dream, I had internalized dehumanizing, heteropatriarchal values prescribed to me - that is, I subscribed to my own denigration. A straight white boy was all I believed I could be. Western (gender and sexual, good and evil, black and white, etc.) binaries are all I knew there to be. I was precisely what I was bred for, but felt profoundly wrong.

A reflexive arts practice affords self-determination and then, decentralization. In *Education for Socially Engaged Art: A Materials and Techniques Handbook*, Pablo Helguera writes that the self is "the construct of a vast collectivity of people who have influenced one's thoughts and one's values," furthermore, "to speak to one's self is more than a solipsistic exercise - is, rather, a silent way of speaking to the portion of civilization that is summarized in our minds." (25) A self-conscious arts practice allows an artist to organize social experiences, antagonize sources of injury and reconstruct meaning.

Art-making was once an emotional outlet only, a cathartic tool, a method to express, process and make sense of feelings - this function of art-making is essential to this paper. In *Poetry is Not a Luxury*, Audre Lorde writes about poetry as the architecture of our identities. "Our poems formulate the implications of ourselves, what we feel within and dare make real (or bring into action in accordance with), our fears, our hopes, our most cherished terrors." (39) Through my creative practice, I was able to accept my queerness.

Now, having been introduced to dialogical, socially engaged artworks in graduate school and amongst interdependent creative communities in New York City, I have realized, and feel more equipped to employ, arts' transformative potential to affect social change.

⁂

In *Education for Socially Engaged Art*, Pablo Helguera creates a distinction between a *symbolic*, and an *actual* socially engaged arts practice. A symbolic practice is solely metaphorical, a representation of a social experience. An actual practice notably affects social construction and/or cultural spheres. While representation and visibility for the queer communitiy has always been an objective of my work, I've realized, engaged in queer culture moreso now than ever before, that visibility is not the most pressing issue facing queer peoples. I ask myself, and Others how can I understand and meet the needs of my community now? How do representations of my experience contribute to our futures? This paper outlines how my practice has long been a self-conscious, symbolic one, and now, in spaces where actual social engagement is possible, my practice can progress, concerned with the afflictions, ethics and legacies of marginalized peoples. I do not believe a desire to have an *actual* socially engaged arts practice stems from my guilt or is an extension of my shame - until very recently, I was not involved in community arts as I am now, such opportunities were not always available to me. This paper does not disqualify self-conscious, confessional art-making but rather demonstrates its importance - a symbolic arts practice has informed the actual.

In this autobiographical text, I detail the genesis of my shame and in doing so, contextualize my arts practice, next I discuss the conceptual and technical production of my thesis artwork and finally, I conclude (somewhat resolvedly,) that a collaborative socially engaged arts practice is now achievable - within a collective that accepts my identity, supports my creative inquiries and believes in arts potential. I can retire learned methods of self-preservation and center my creative efforts around the wellbeing of Others.

⁂

I am concerned that I may have romanticized trauma. In *Feeling Backwards: Loss and the Politics of Queer History*, Heather Love writes, "I do not think it is clear … what would constitute a "mistaken" way of feeling queer" (23). My writing, at times over zealous and at times aloof, is always honest. I tried to handle sensitive subjects with care. Included in the abstract but repeated again here, is a Content Warning: This text references suicide, sexual violence, eating disorders and alcohol/drug abuse. I do not want to disrespect anyone's experience, but ask that the respect in my recount be given to me. These topics are grim, though beauty - a consolatory beauty - as in an inexplicable, overwhelming sensation and aesthetic value - has been a constant, goading power in my life, a *quality* present in all that is painful, or compromising for it thereafter. This is true and I cannot chronicle these happenings any other way. Lorde wrote about poetry; "It forms the quality of the light in which we predicate our hopes and dreams toward survival and change, first made into language, then into idea, then into more tangible action" (Lorde 37).

Presently, I feel a new level of exhaustion living in New York City, an energetic, transactional beehive, working at a gallery and production studio that is as demanding as it is rewarding,

finishing graduate school, mending and managing my relationship to my family, my partner, my art practice and myself - all during a pandemic, civil and cultural unrest - this paper is set within a contemporary science fiction.

In the Performance chapter of Education for Socially Engaged Art, Pablo Helguera writes about a French medieval tradition called the “Feast of the Ass” where social roles are temporarily reversed; subordinates act as authority, men act as women, a “lowly” donkey is brought into a Church and celebrated. It is my hope that the queerness of this thesis paper, it’s ambiguity, disrupts a reader’s expectations, subverts traditions, and thereby expands and makes more inclusive, what can be considered academic writing. Helguera uses this as an example of how institutional structures (- or *should-be* thesis papers -) can be carnivalized to make new, meaningful statements,

> “‘The product,” in an art market sense - may not be that relevant or even materialize… The boundaries between artwork and experiences are blurred, in the same way that authorship and collectivity are blended, documentation and literature are one, and fiction is turned into real experience and vice versa. All components of a traditional structure of production and interpretation are turned around and resignified. Nonetheless, this resignification rarely is done for its own sake - we could call it a Feast of the Ass with an agenda. Because of the insertion of the pedagogical element, the exchanges that take place in these experiences are constructive, in a direct or indirect fashion.” (70)

⁂

The Function of an Artist’s *Backward* Autobiography

> “We cannot do justice to the difficulties of queer experience unless we develop a politics of the past.” - Heather Love, Feeling Backwards (41)

Heather Love calls the “corporeal and psychic costs of homophobia” (104) *feeling backwards*, “a collective melancholic response to the trauma of [homosexual] historical elision (41). She writes that media that are “internally homophobic, retrograde or too depressing” are significant in that they “[serve] as an index to the ruined state of the social world; they indicate continuities between the bad gay past and the present; and they show up the inadeuqeucy of queer narratives of progress.” (27)

Accounts of queer tragedy are important in understanding queer afflictions. In her book, Love investigates queer literature as archival frameworks of negative feeling. Modern gay liberation movements focuses namely on pride which, though important, eclipses, diminishes or completely excludes queer melancholy. Love writes, “Antihomophobic inquiry depends on sustained attention to the intimate effects of homophobia.” (12) Such sustained attention would

imply no “forgetting” of the subjects were possible, no exclusion. Shame, once thought of as a “poison,” (13) may actually be a basis for an alternative model of politics, sociability and future-making, one considerate of all feelings, not just virtuous ones.

The purpose of my autobiographical artwork was to fathom my own melancholy, reconcile my desire and take accountability for my life.

To be queer is to be an *Other*, outcast, outside of the norm - oppressive heterosexual standards. In *The Invention of Women: Making an African Sense of Western Gender Discourses*, Oyèrónkẹ́ Oyěwùmí writes on the Western, Cartesian separation of the body and mind. The mind is superior and the body is lowly, “Women, primitives, Jews, Africans, the poor, and all those who qualified for the label “different” in varying historical epochs have been considered to be the embodied, dominated therefore by instinct and affect, reason being beyond them, They are Other, and the Other is a body.” I was denied and denied myself my own humanity, believing that I was only what was perceived of me. Through my juvenile arts practice, I began to absolve this body/mind distinction, becoming the author of my own spirit.

I was pushed up against lockers and spit on, humiliated for being effeminate, for the way I walked, spoke, for playing in my sisters’ dresses, for being fat. I have always been othered by men and this is what has made them so irresistible to me, they are unreachable.

I’m not sure where exactly I learned that liking boys was wrong but I was convinced. I know I was supposed to like girls, marry them, make babies with them. I buried my desire deep inside of me and never spoke of it.

I never shared their conservative aspirations of my family though I told them I did. I felt I was a stranger to them.

I became popular in high school when I became thinner. My personality hadn’t changed but my body was suddenly acceptable. Instead of drawing pictures of pretty girls, now I was taking their photographs, making music videos and short films with the theater kids. Though I felt an emptiness in everything I did, it felt purposeless and dissatisfying.

Required reading for AP Literature was *The Stranger* by Albert Calmus. I thought if I were dead then nothing would exist - that killing myself couldn’t be selfish because nothing could be anything anyway. I learned this is called *solipsism* some years later. I planned to kill myself but my parents took me to the psychiatric unit instead, after I had gone fugue one too many times. I spent my 17th birthday there. My beautiful girlfriend, Nina, still my first love, visited me in the unit, she held my hand and tried to make me laugh while she cried. I didn’t feel like I belonged there either, I was passing through, in between, liminal. I just needed a temporary death, a reprieve.

“The ascetic position is one of the highest fear, the gravest immobility. The severe abstinence of the ascetic becomes the ruling obsession. And it is one not self-discipline, but of self-abnegation.” (Lorde 56) My will to live had not improved but I continued, resentfully. Resentful toward friends, family, everything. Joy especially. I felt rage I couldn’t absolve. When everyone threw their caps at graduation on a sunny Spring day in the center of the football field, I was already up in the High School cafeteria getting my diploma. I wanted to get the fuck out of there. I needed to be elsewhere, anywhere.

I went to study Communications at SUNY (fucking) Oneonta. Finally away from my parents and those that thought they knew me, with freedom, anonymity, I felt ready to try boys. I switched the preference on a dating app from “Women” to “Men.” The first boy I kissed was a friend of a friend in the same dorm as me. He moved back to his family’s in Long Island in the Spring semester to transfer to the Fashion Institute of Technology (FIT,) in New York. He encouraged me to go with him, but I thought the reason I didn’t like Oneonta was because of my depression, not because of the school. So I stayed and dated a local bumpkin who sold weed and sexually abused me. He was the first guy I loved. I broke up with him quickly enough.

“Queer history has been an education in absence: the experience of social refusal and of the denigration of homosexual love has taught us the lessons of solitude and heartbreak.” (Love 52) Oneonta was bleak and lonely. Instead of undereating, I’d taken to eating myself sick then spending hours on the elliptical - this happened almost weekly. I found a contractor who held fist fucking parties in the sex dungeon of his basement, he really took to me.

I studied Communications but was disappointed by the program at Oneonta, I didn’t feel challenged. I wasn’t actually learning anything, just regurgitating what they’d bank onto me, there was critical engagement of the material, mentorship or consideration of the students’ interests. I learned quickly that if you made friends with the professor and participated in class discussion, you’d get high marks. Realizing I was a “capable” student was the first time I felt empowered. I thought of the institution of academia as a machine of self-improvement. I decided I’d get another Bachelor's degree in Digital Arts and a concentration in Media Production. The Digital Arts program was disappointing too, it was very traditional and my professors didn’t know how to engage or support my early video work and its subject matter. They didn’t introduce us to artists, art or queer theory or professional opportunities… I’m not sure how it could be true, but I was told by my professors that I was the first person to ever shoot male nudes at the college. I couldn’t wait to get out of there.

In analyzing *The Well of Loneliness* by Radclyffe Hall, Love writes about Stephen Gordon’s ability to assimilate to a masculine or feminine gender, she writes; “Of course these feelings are ideological but they are also real… And yet that does not mean that a change in circumstances would render Stephen perfectly happy, perfectly satisfied” (119). I think it’s common, good even, to have expectations of your college experience, of lovers, friends and families. It wasn’t that my expectations were high but they were misplaced. Had I been somewhere else would I have been less miserable, less lonely? There’s no sense asking “what if...”

Sophomore year I was home for Christmas. I had told my mom about my abusive boyfriend in a fit, she was the only one who knew I was seeing boys. Navigating family was even more strange now that I was acting on my desires but keeping them hidden. Their unease around me only intensified. My father couldn't look at me, somehow he knew. I got into a fight with them, the four of them were essentially bullying me, things escalated and in a dramatic fit I tried to stab myself with a kitchen knife. Police and an ambulance were called. They strapped me down to a gurney and I was hospitalized a second time.

> "In life man commits himself and draws his own portrait, outside of which there is nothing. No doubt this thought may seem harsh to someone who has not made a success of his life. But on the other hand, it helps people to understand that reality alone counts, and that dreams, expectations and hopes only serve to define a man as a broken dream, aborted hopes, and futile expectations." - Jean-Paul Sartre, Existentialism is Humanism (1946)

In the Fall prior to this episode I had decided, applied and arranged to spend a semester abroad in Florence, Italy at the Lorenzo di Medici Institute. Two weeks after I left the hospital, I took off.

I lived two blocks from the Duomo and 12 blocks from a Gay club called Fairy Gold. In the states I was still underage and had never been to a Gay club. At the disco, I smoked cigarettes, I drank myself silly and kissed handsome Italian men. I had never felt freedom like this before. I drank wine, ate beautiful food and studied Renaissance art. I was in awe of what human beings were capable of. I went for runs through the Piazza Della Repubblica to the Parco delle Cascine, I sketched in the Galleria di Uffizi and admired the perfect marble bodies, in the night I'd share pizza with friends on the buttresses of bridges over the Fiume d'Arno. There were days I couldn't leave bed. I never did more poorly in school. I spent almost all my weekends crying in the Giardino di Boboli watching it bloom in the Spring. I smiled at the tourists drinking cheap wine as they'd watch the sun sink below the blue horizon at the Piazza di Michelangelo daily, blissed because I understood them; what they saw was beauty, real beauty. I lived for pleasure, I forfeited moderation, I indulged. In this letting go I found real joy.

I felt life underneath my skin again; I was like a child becoming self-aware. There was color, newness everywhere, around me, inside me, I was connected, exchanging. In "The Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power" Audre Lorde writes, "The erotic is a measure between the beginnings of our sense of self and the chaos of our strongest feelings. It is an internal sense of satisfaction to which, once we have experienced it, we know we can aspire" (54).

I came back to the States and into New York City, to Stonewall to mourn the Pulse Orlando Shooting victims. Soon thereafter, I came out to my father, the last person left to tell. There I met Bob Civil. Bob invited me to march with the LGBT Center in the Pride March. I did. I took a photo with some boys I was fucking and came out publicly on Facebook, finally. Bob and I became best friends, they taught me about cyborgs, zines and Karl Marx, they were the first

person I didn't have to explain myself to, the first to truly affirm my gender and sexual identities. I was there for Bob when they realized they were Transgender. Bob and I used to write poetry in Art Bar in the West Village then smoke spliffs on the Hudson River. We'd dance all weekend and dream one day we wouldn't have to stop.

I got into sex work and sugar daddies, I had a power - I could bring forth men's deepest feeling. This was also laborious but great fun too. I hated having to leave New York for school. I'd drive back as often as I could to party with Bob and crash with whatever guy I was seeing at the time.

I didn't even want to go to my Oneonta graduation and this upset my parents for weeks because they had "paid for it." They really didn't understand how difficult it was to be there for me. I was looking at other graduate programs in New York, but fell in love with the new Media Arts and Culture MFA program. It felt perfect, serendipitous. I wanted to redo my undergraduate education, I wanted the rigor that I had been missing, that graduate school pledged.

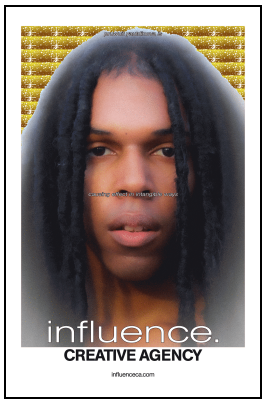
Graduate school has been so fucking rewarding. Finally, I was challenged - by the readings, the theory, the faculty, the subject of artwork that I was being exposed to - there's so much to learn, so there is so much I still don't know. I realized I had fallen so far behind - professors were introducing me to subjects and artists and theory I had never even heard of before. Everyone there's a freak, a geek and/or extremely talented or most often, all three. "Understanding the social process we are engaging in doesn't oblige us to operate in any particular capacity; it only makes us more aware of the context and thus allows us to better influence and orchestrate desired outcomes" (Helguera XV). Graduate school helped me to realize my place, (I had a place!) in artistic and queer histories.

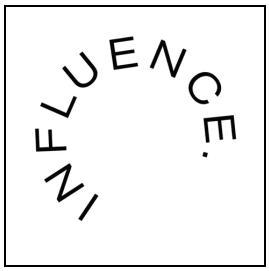
I was glad to be closer to the city, Bob and I's playground. Sadly, I was back living with my parents again to save money. The plan was to move to the city after I graduated. I got a job through a childhood friend at a Fashion Consulting company as an in-house creative creating 'video moodboards' to excite their presentations. I kept my side hustle, feigning love for sad old gay men in exchange for housing, meals and luxury clothes. I depended on them. I realize the harm I may have caused individuals within the community by misleading them - though I was exploited, exploiting too.

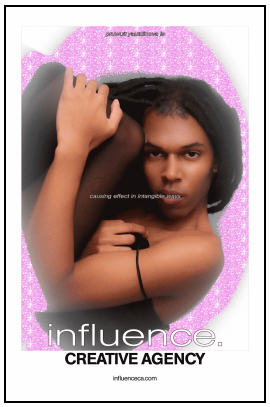
I was learning so much at Purchase, I decided to enroll in the Entrepreneurship in the Arts program not because I wanted to start my own business but because I wanted to be smarter, an *independent* professional. It was another opportunity to *improve*. I was accepted and my time within the Media Arts program was extended.

In New York, I met SoMad, a studio started by a few graduates from the School of Visual Arts (SVA) Photography, Video and Related Media program at their first show, their *AntiThesis* Exhibition. The show included all the work their professors directed them not to present. I met Sara Arno, quirky heart-of-gold, daughter of billionaire Amy Goldman-Fowler, Carla Maldonado,

Brazilian ecofeminist and fellow heathen, and Serichai Traipoom, fashion photographer and my to-be boyfriend.







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For the next year, Seri and I broke up and got back together a million times over. Love describes an “impossible love” being one characterized by broken intimacy and failed connection. She quotes Leo Bersani from *Homos*, “grounded in the very contradictions, impossibilities, and antagonisms brought to light by any serious genealogy of desire” (24). Seri and I’s love for one another can be defined by its persistent impossibility, all it’s good and all it’s bad, we’re learning. All the while, I volunteered at SoMad in exchange for studio space - it became a second home to me. I had never been in the company of such talent, wit and abundance. I felt like I’d found my pack, I was running with the wolves, finally.

I broke up with Seri (again) while he was visiting me in Westchester the night before my birthday in March 2020 because he was anxious about the Coronavirus and was acting like a dick.

I was furloughed and kept escaping to the city to sleep with Seri and rehash why we didn’t work out. All my Entrepreneurship classes are online at 6:30pm in the dark - we were barely able to speak. I am consumed by the pandemic, in awe of the way it’s disrupted the entire world in an instant. I made artwork that’s only to do with the virus because I think it’s “the responsibility of the artist to engage with the crisis” so that we might find some way to make sense of its imposition and offer a vocabulary around the trauma.

I started working as an Associate in the garden department at my local Home Depot. Nothing felt *right* but still, I felt some psychic assurance that the time in quarantine was valuable somehow. I tell Seri on the roof of his apartment in Williamsburg while we tan in broken lawn chairs, perspiring drinks in one hand, burning cigarettes in the other, that I think I’m realizing what my priorities are.

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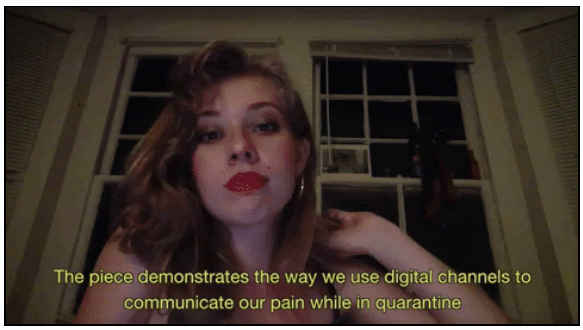
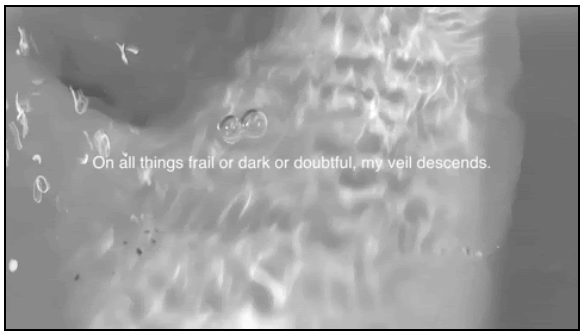
[1] Influence. Creative Agency Promotional material created for my Entrepreneurship in the Arts Senior Capstone (1/2)
[2] Influence. Creative Agency Logo
[3] Influence. Creative Agency Promotional material created for my Entrepreneurship in the Arts Senior Capstone (2/2)





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One night after coming back to my parents' from Nina's in Westchester I got into a terrible fight with my parents that ended with my Dad waving a golf club at me from the top of the stairs to his bedroom. I criticized my parents' weight, their mental health - I basically told them that everything they've worked for and achieved was never enough for me. I expressed all the frustration I was feeling in losing graduate school, work, Serichai - all the freedom I had lost because of the pandemic, the freedom that validated my identity - I let out unto them. My Dad calls me, *a queer* and kicks me out. He tells me, *never to call him father again*.

I packed 6 shopping bags of clothes frantically. Nina's just arrived at her apartment in the Upper East Side with her boyfriend and they turn around to come rescue me. I crashed with her for a week, we drank every night. Then I stayed with my friend Emma in Bushwick who lived with two other lesbians. We eat matcha bread, dance on their rooftop and lay in the grass of Highland Park, they remind me what Queer love is and the care I deserve and aspire to. I found an apartment off the Wilson Avenue L train in Bushwick and started a job as a Host at Cafeteria in Chelsea in a week and three days. I am more afraid than I have ever been in my life though I've never fought harder to survive.

During COVID, SoMad's decided to formalize, become a new gallery and production studio. At the end of the Spring semester, I had organized an internship at SoMad to fulfill my Critical

[4] *dang constant*. Zine about the queer conflict between capitalism and nature during COVID-19
[5] *Coming* (2020) Snippet. A subversion of Virginia Woolf's descriptions of a women's gender in *Orlando*
[6] A test video exploring symbols and divinity
[7] A reinstallation of ANCORA (2018) snippet

Research Methods in the Arts course in the Fall. They needed more hands, and their business model is very aligned to the creative agency I was creating for my Enterprise Creation course then. I could be an asset. Things begin to make some sense again.

We have three exhibitions in the Fall, they are SoMad's reintroduction to its community and the public. I work as their copywriter/editor, social media manager, cameraman and editor and personal assistant. I have never had so much responsibility and have never been more proud of my work. We host *Bathing in Blackness* curated by Kamra Hakim, a Black trans pleasure activist who runs Activation Residency, a retreat for BIPOC to heal. *Bathing in Blackness* is a multi-media show centering Black voices in response to the Black Lives Matter movement. Next is COUNTERWEIGHT curated by the phenomenal photographer and professor at SVA, Patricia Voulgaris. COUNTERWEIGHT features all women photographers and videographers' work about performance and reclaiming ~ the gaze. Finally, Carla curates FOGO!, which translates to *fire* in Portuguese in reference to the destructive criminal fires blazing in the Amazon Rainforest. It exhibits work of all Latin artists found through an open call. I produce their Exhibition Catalogues/Price Sheets, Press Kits/Materials and email blasts and I make the posters, I post to the 'gram. *They* realize I'm an asset and that I've been essential to the collectives' formative events.

It is through my participation in these exhibitions, being kicked out by my parents and the pandemic, that I've outgrown my feelings of disqualification, I am not the person getting pushed against the locker anymore, I'm not in a family that is weary of my identity, I feel that I am a part of something, seen. In the process of producing the exhibitions and engaging artists and communities, I have affected people, individuals with bodies, heartbeats, aspirations, bad habits. I have co-created life-affirming media. This content looks nothing like my own because it isn't *mine* at all.

Having a ""disqualified" identity which at times can mean living with injury — not fixing it" (Love 4). I do not mean to say that I am a complete, resolved, "fixed" person — I have no doubt that I will use art-making to work through pain again. Nevertheless, knowing myself by cataloging my shame, has certainly made me more available to know Others. My symbolic work had served me in that I was able to learn who I was, a person who had experienced the effects of homophobia. Though, learning about Others, from Others, has shifted my focus.

If I want to do right by my community, I must prioritize their voices. In *Negotiations*, Gilles Deleuze writes, "Repressive forces don't stop people expressing themselves but rather force them to express themselves; what a relief to have nothing to say, the right to say nothing, because only then is there a chance of framing the rare, and ever rarer, thing that might be worth saying." Learned from spending time as a child in church basements at Alcoholics Anonymous meetings in support of my Father, I ask myself now, "Does it need to be said? Does it need to be said right now? Does it need to be said by me?"

In the past few months, I've led a Zine-Making Workshop to facilitate artists' creation of their "very own zines." I taught a lesson on zine history and self-publishing in feminist and activist communities, facilitated a critique session and met participants individually to produce their projects. Readings from my Critical Pedagogy course (ie. Paolo Freire, Ivan Illich, bell hooks) and experience as a Teacher's Assistant in graduate school informs my instruction. The joy in seeing another proud of themselves of what they've accomplished, and to have guided and encouraged that pride, cannot be matched.

We've filmed Activation TV in collaboration with Kamra for Black Futures Month. It's basically like Oprah's "Super Soul Sunday" but juicier. The three shows, "Black Feels", "Black Gaze" and "Show and Tea" feature live performances and intimate conversations with Black artists, organizers and leaders championing equity. It's truly radical content.

We just completed a "digital cabaret" project with Legacy, a Black queer production collective, for Ars Nova that celebrates Black talents, their joy.

There are more projects to come that aren't about me. We're hosting a thesis exhibition for some Fashion Institute of Technology (FIT) students who aren't able to have a show otherwise (*cough* because of the pandemic,) we're shooting a Japanese/American jewelry designer's new collection tomorrow and have been recruited by Nachiket Guttikar, another SVA graduate, to help produce a documentary in India about gender inequality next year.

The word "relevance" comes to mind now — I remember conversations in my Digital Marketing course in the Entrepreneurship program about effective messaging, timeliness and what information affords the most engagement. The hyper-personal, "growth mindset" project, self improvement program that I had intended graduate school to be no longer feels "relevant" when there are so many more urgent causes, creative or otherwise, that I now have the opportunity to be involved in. A large part of this is to do with the pandemic and the way it's changed my *scenery*. Enough with me already!

The Media Arts program, with its focus on media theory, history and social engagement, has situated my experience and practice and has taught me the change art affords. I am incredibly grateful for the way it has supported my development, and glad for the way it has prepared me for what follows graduation.

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Preface to the Thesis Exhibition Artwork
So much has changed since March 2020, (— following my lengthy autobiography and assuming the reader doesn't live under a rock, I don't think this can be argued.)

In the inaugural Media Arts thesis exhibition (— entitled *Activated*, in reference and response to the programs deactivation — also, similar in sound and sentiment to Kamra's Activation

Residency —) I presented an installation named *OUT OF WATER* (2020) and my second zine, *for me, and other heathens II: APOCRYPHA* (2020). As the Coronavirus began to spread in New York, the exhibition was postponed, canceled and reopened with safety guidelines. Friends, family and the Purchase community were meant to be at this reception, but ultimately the attendants were my cohort, myself and a few other students. The gallery felt empty, we all felt anxious, not yet knowing how serious the pandemic could - *would* become. I looked at my piece *OUT OF WATER*, a found fish tank turned on its side refracting a video projection on the gallery walls, housing a small bowl of solemn keys, and feeling that its subject matter, having to do with queer belonging and abuse, felt indulgent and unimportant in the face of the crisis - that I was telling men I loved them for housing in the city was not as egregious as the virus disrupting, spreading, killing. (Find me qualifying tragedies again …) This when the Coronavirus first began to affect the way I view my work.

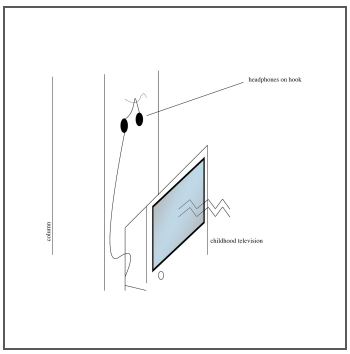
When talking about my plans for this year's thesis exhibition, (— “perhaps the last Media Arts thesis exhibition,” —) Shaka McGlotten, my thesis advisor, mentor (and friend) suggested I look back on past projects and reiterate them for my thesis. I was resistant to this because I wanted my thesis to represent my interests, style and ability *presently*. The way the Coronavirus derailed my academic, work and personal life, the violent rejection of my parents, the talented collective I am now a part of that supports me as much as it challenges me, are happenings that came suddenly and have irrevocably affected my thinking and the ways I approach art-making. My past work does not reflect the ways I have changed in my final year of graduate school, the ways I have been humbled. The opportunity to fill space in the gallery with new work felt more respectful of these life altering events.

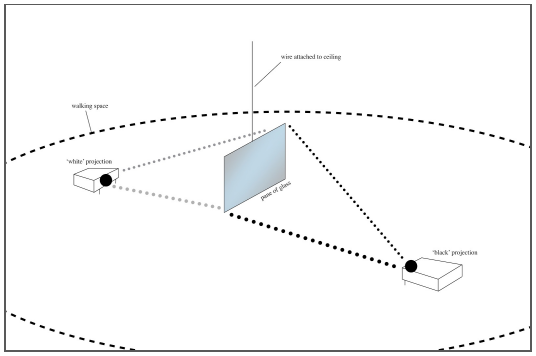
One piece could speak for itself but three could speak together. Professor Michael Bell-Smith told me once in a critique my first year of graduate school that my work was more impactful presented with Others, situated in a context that gave more information. I’ve interpreted this to mean more is more. His feedback reminds me to always make connections between my work so as to make new meanings between it, to ground and strengthen it.

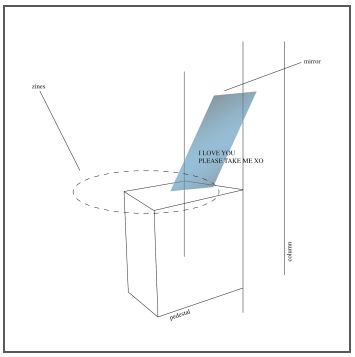
For the artwork in the thesis exhibition, which my cohort and I entitled *dis/entangled*, I intended to present work that was less to do with my experience and more to do with feelings held in common with Others, collectively — this was achieved through all of the work but my confessional, first-person, zine — which arguably, is about my attempts to close the distance between I and an*other;* a conjured masculine ideal, an indecipherable boyfriend, the evasive, *better* self. Body and gender dysphoria, codependency (ie. on sex, boyfriends, binge eating, etc.) and ectastic self acceptance is more common than you’d think, isn’t it?

When I came into graduate school dough eyed and full of idealistic musing, Artist David Brooks told me while visiting for a lecture in 2019 to “give up” on making universal art, art for everyone - that actually, trying to do so was a “red flag” to him. Instead, he advised, humanity is felt through the hyper-specific “minutia.” I still wonder if the hyper-personal can speak to everyone, though nowadays, what is *personal* is less to do with me.

Waterbearer is a meditation on a future, *aMan* is a representation of the present, *for me, and other heathens III: EIDOLON* is a documentation of the past.







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Brooke Singer, our Critique professor this semester, encouraged my cohort to use the gallery how we wanted, she suggested we use it as a “studio space.” This invitation was duly noted but received with some sadness knowing that “friends, families and communities” could not attend the exhibition. Though, this did relieve some pressure to produce something genius - not that I or those around me expect me to do, I have felt for many years that that pursuit is not one I made to bear. So, returning to the Purchase campus for the first time since last March, (and feeling homely,) I could use this gallery space to work out where I’ve been, where I am now and where I’d like to be. The works I exhibited are not ‘final’ versions of the projects, I don’t believe any of my work is ever completed, finished — such a word goes against the mutability I purport to believe in and advocate for. My work invites and affords reinterpretation (— also, less pretentiously,) my projects are accessible editable files in my computer, it is not difficult to affect(/effect) them.

The photographs in the *Waterbearer* and *for me, and other heathens III: EIDOLON* installations are meant to show how the work would have been presented if not for COVID guidelines that prohibited objects those present in the gallery could touch. For *Waterbearer* I could not use headphones as I intended. I could not present my zine, a chapbook I intended gallery goers to read and leave with them. Instead I taped photos of the zines installed on a mirror, leaving those that encountered it with these images and their reflection only - reflection, the unreachable figure in the mirror, being central to the work.

My work existed temporarily as resolved artifacts in the Richard and Dolly Maass gallery to fulfill the first part of my thesis requirement. I was proud to meet this requirement, so marking the conclusion of my Media Arts MFA degree.

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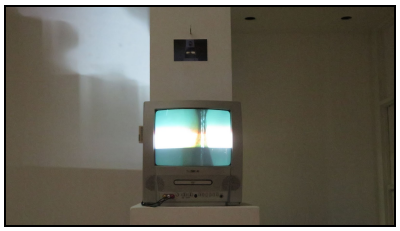
[8] Digitally drawn plans for the thesis exhibition installation; *Waterbearer*
[9] Digitally drawn plans for the thesis exhibition installation; *aMan*
[10] Digitally drawn plans for the thesis exhibition installation; *for me, and other heathens III: EIDOLON*

Waterbearer (2021)
5:33min loop, digital video, Magnavox CRT 13” television, metal hanging hook, photograph

In the *Waterbearer* project, there are three elements to discuss, the video itself, the way the video was installed and the actual socially engaged performative acts that were required to create it. The project is a practice of future-making.

In the video, water moves over pink fabric draped over a human figure. There is a ringing sound that skips and scratches. The fabric, water and light are very abstracted, the image is pixelated. The ringing sound is suddenly clearer and rhythmic breathing and drumbeat begins. The fabric is a slip dress, the figure begins to touch their body, moving as if dancing to music. It is obvious that they are in a shower, the walls are green tile. The pace of the breath and drums slows. The figure has tattoos, their nails are painted, they caress their breasts. The sound changes again, now it sounds like sighing. The figure lifts their dress and urinates. The ringing sound has returned, it is chime-like now, the figure’s skirt is lowered.

The video is installed on a four by five (ratio) television on loop. There is a hook mounted on the column above it. There is a photo of the hook with headphones hung on it, the headphones are attached to the television.



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According to astrologers, the Great Conjunction occurred on December 21st, 2020, when Jupiter and Saturn aligned (— nearly, within .1 degree.) This cosmic event was meant to mark The Age of Aquarius, a time characterized by collective progress, intellectualism, innovation and eccentricity. It signified the end of The Age of Taurus, the end of time defined by lethargy, stubbornness and indulgence. The *Waterbearer* project is an Aquarius ceremony, it was an exercise of collective imagination, a communion. I and those involved envisioned a future characterized by Aquarian characteristics.

In Tina Campt’s “Listening to Images” she proposes the “tense” of a Black feminist future,

[11] *Waterbearer* Installation View 1
[12] *Waterbearer* Video Snippet
[13] Photograph of *Waterbear* installation wall hook missing headphones intended for it

> “The grammar of [B]lack feminist futurity that I propose here is a grammar of possibility that moves beyond a simple definition of the future tense of that which will have happened prior to a reference point in the future. It strives for the tense of possibility that grammarians refer to as the future real conditional or that *which will have* ***had to*** *happen.* The grammar of black feministy futurity is a performance of a future that hasn’t yet happened but must. It is the power to imagine beyond current fact and to envision that which is not, but must be. It's a politics of prefiguration that involves living the future now - as imperative rather than subjunctive — as a striving for the future you want to see, right now, in the present. (Campt 17)

What “must be” must first be imagined, actions required to reify these aspirations are at first speculated. For any change to occur, it must first be envisioned. Community activist, musician and mind behind Somewhere Good, a social platform designed for People of Color to “connect around the things [they] love”, Van Newman, was interviewed for an episode of “Black Feels” with Kamra for Activation TV. Van said wisely that “imagination is labor” and it is - not passive, unhelpful or lolly-gagging, it requires energetic exertion, it is not always pleasant. But it “must be” done.

Socially Engaged Art, as defined by Helguera, features “the experience of their own creation as a central element” (1) of the artwork. While the experience, methods and processes creating my work are usually hidden from final presentations of the artwork, they are crucial to their essentia. The collaborative experience of making *Waterbearer*, that is not represented in the installation, I will say, is perhaps more meaningful than the final video work.

I thought, whether an astrological change were really to occur, I could *act* as if it was, immediately. I could prepare myself and others for it, and revel in the feelings we were sharing and feelings to come. I met with several friends and collaborators and explained the purpose of the project, to beckon the age in. My collaborators were; Sintra Martins of Saint Sintra, a talented emerging fashion designer, Damariz Damken, a performance artist whose works address fronterizx landscapes, identity and imaginaries, Carla and Nina. I proposed the concept to Sintra and asked for a simple ceremonial garb which they interpreted as a pink slip dress. Damariz and I recorded the audio after spending the day meditating on what the future we needed now and how the qualities of air and water could lead us to it, what would it sound like in this future? Carla is an Aquarius, she already embodies the feelings I wanted to convey in the video. Nina produced the audio, reworking what Damariz and I had tried to create with our limited music knowledge.

Carla and I were meant to film the video on a trip but because of her Extraordinary Ability visa status, she ultimately wasn’t able to come. Carla felt trapped, scorning “the man” (— emphasis on *man*) — arbitrary borders and our government which does provide her with freedoms that I have as a citizen. I believe this energy of being confined, by earthly constructs, by the shower in

my apartment, is conveyed through her movement. Her effort to transcend her circumstance by ritualizing the body's movements, and attain something more, make the piece more honest, colloquial and relatable - than if we would have filmed in the ocean between pina coladas.

I presented the project on the television in reference to SciFi network television shows concerning the supernatural. I would watch when I was home sick from school as a boy. The photograph of the hook without the headphones is a documentation of how I would have presented the work if it weren't for the pandemic.

Inspirations for this piece were Derek Jarman's *Blue*, specifically for the piece's soundscape and assuredness — his work is one thing inarguably, the color blue. I wanted my video piece to be repetitive, rhythmic like a meditation — it would also be so *sure* that if you became distracted or lost your place this video continues, inviting you. The performative work entailed in the production of the video stem from readings on Queer Ecology, such as Timothy Morton's idea of interelatedness and Anne Pollock's sentiment on "fucked up" queer futures. *Waterbearer* was an attempt to exist within a future but as evidenced by Heather Love, was impossibly bound by past and present circumstances.

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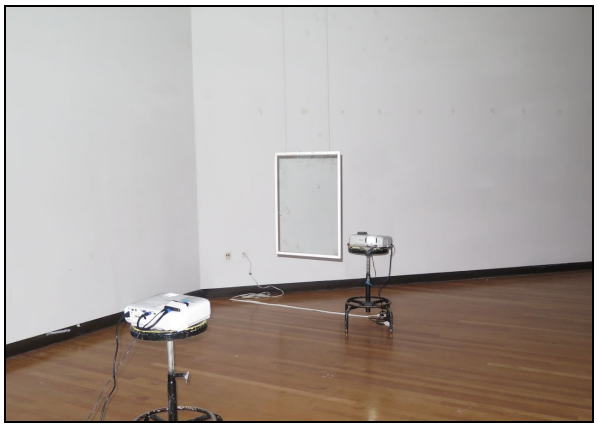
aMan (2021)
3:35min loop, digital video, found window pane, fishing line, two stools, two projectors, three single work person's gloves

For *aMan*, a window pane is suspended by fishing line from the ceiling of the gallery. Two projectors perched on top of stools, on top of workers' gloves illuminate each side of the glass, they *face* each other. A sparkling figure that seems to be made of water appears and disappears randomly. They move without any indication that they are in control of their movement, across the pane. They exist on one side of the window white in a dark background made of water, and on the other side black in an inverted background.

The 'man' character exists within a binary, caught in between it. His environment is absolute while he is amorphous. As an Other, he cannot affect his surroundings: the waterscape he exists within does not consider him. He attempts a courageous posture but cannot maintain it, it pains him, he recoils. He is imprisoned by the frame of the pane, by his fruitless longing. He is a manifestation of queer shame.

The idea for this project came from Michel Foucault's essay "The Lives of Infamous Men" written during his study at the Hôpital général de Paris and the Bastille. Foucault writes that the men in these institutions only exist in criminal records and the words he writes about them, "This purely verbal existence, which makes these forlorn or villainous individuals into quas-fictional beings, is due to their nearly complete *disappearance* … they *instead of others*, with their lives and their sorrows." (Foucault/Love 46) These invisible beings, of "no importance" having "no

necessary connection” astounded me. I wanted to visualize their pain and make “legible ... their misery” as Love had expressed.



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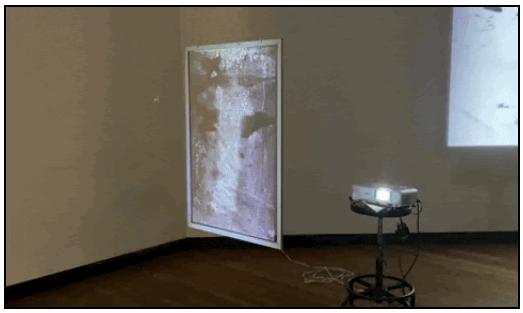
I had found two window panes to use that were abandoned on sidewalks in New York City but ultimately used one that I had rediscovered in a shed at my parents when I returned to prepare the exhibition. Using found or unlikely materials is important to me because these materials are undesirable (others.) In “The Gleaners and I” (2000) Agnes Varda documents the lives of gleaners, collectors of food, knickknacks and thrown away items in the French countryside. These gleaners live in poverty, marginalized, on the outskirts of well-to-doers, they are Others, ridiculed. Varda’s film studies the appreciation they have for what is disregarded. I had used this window pane as a tabletop to display my first *for me, and other heathens* zine in my first year of graduate school in our show at the Passage Gallery, entitled *Frenzy*. It was sentimentally satisfying.

I was unsure if it were possible to hang the mirror from the ceiling of the gallery though Sonja Ng, the gallery manager, said I could “try.” When I returned to Westchester from The City to prepare for the exhibition, I asked my Father to help me build a structure to hang the mirror. Since being kicked out, we’ve made amends. Funny that he has been a source of my shame, and that I asked for him to help me in presenting it. He had worked as a carpenter in his younger days (before selling his soul to a home healthcare company run by egotistical greedy schmuck.) I sketched up a drawing based on images of gongs, then we went to work. Within an hour, we built a wooden structure from two by fours to hang the mirror. The mirror hung in the center of the structure from old fishing line borrowed from my Father — when I asked if it was meaningful to him, he replied, “no, but I caught some big fish with it.” I was proud of what we built together, my Dad, too.

[14] aMan Video Snippet (1/2)
[15] aMan Installation View (1/2)
[16] aMan Video Snippet (2/2)



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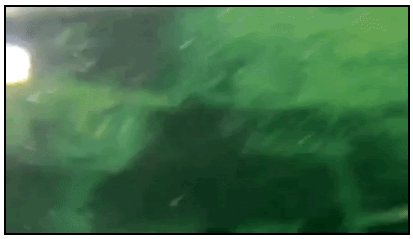
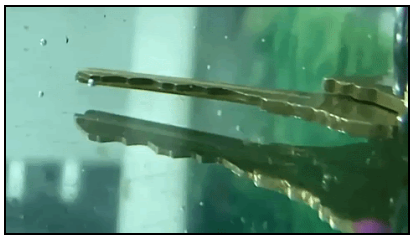
Finally in the gallery, I rushed to rebuild the wooden structure so that I could present my plans for the exhibition in a critique with Brooke. She said it reminded her of the gallows which was not at all what I was going for, it references histories I had not intended to engage. The wooden structure distracted from the simplicity of the window pane - the glass was meant to be the focus, not the object holding it. I took apart the structure and brought it back home with me. I found the largest ladder available and hung the mirror myself. I found the movement from the weighted bulky wooden structure to the nearly invisible fishing line, which made the pane of glass appear to float magically, deeply satisfying.

This piece is an iteration of other works that began with ANCORA (2018), a videowork about queer longing and despair, then *Liquid Self* (2018) and *Liquid Self II* (2019) about gender and sexually fluid identities and *Out of Water* (2020) about water's potential to suffocate — all of these projects use water to represent life's inconstants (— "dang"!)

It's a sad feeling when you accept that whatever you think is certain; your career, your relationship with a lover, your health and body, is very likely to change - when you remember everything, since it began, is dissolving. You can wake up with the same eyes tomorrow and see everything differently, a child knows this. Leaning into this, in "turning backward," a perverse joy can be found, a non-attached attachment, a "here" knowing you've already gone "there." This is what water reminds us, the waves, moving, still.

Bill Viola's *The Reflecting Pool* (197/79) and *Ascension* (2000) video works are always a reference for handling water's reflexive, meditative nature. Pipilotti Rist's *4th Floor To Mildness* (2016) installation is an inspiration in its invitation to dream.





[17] *for me, and other heathens* installed at Frenzy in 2019
[18] aMan Installation View (2/2). To represent the way the window pane was repurposed and suspended

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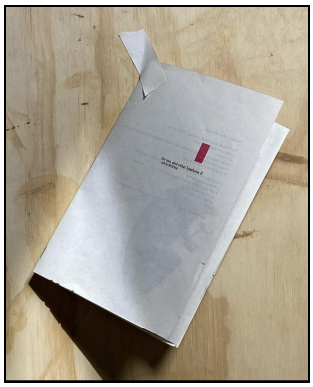
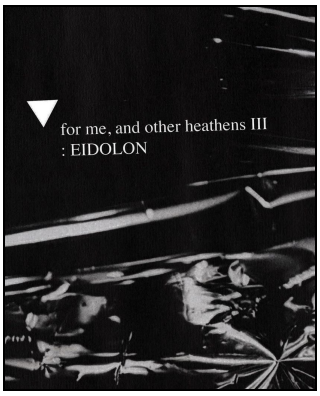
for me, and other heathens: EIDOLON (2020)
5.5”x11” archival laser jet print on speciality papers, binded by staples

My *for me, and other heathens* series are like sad scrapbooks, capsules of ephemera that ought to have been thrown away. Love wrote, “Over the last century, queers have embraced backwardness in many forms: in celebration of perversion, in defiant refusals to grow up, in exploration of haunting and memory, and in stubborn attachment to lost objects” (7).





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The zine is soft to touch. It is binded by staples. It includes images of a body, scanned objects and refracted light. The prose on the page are small and unthreatening, quiet, so inviting a reader’s attention. The text describes the function of the mirror to surveil the author’s body.

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[19] *OUT OF WATER* Video Snippet 1
[20] *OUT OF WATER* Video Snippet 2
[21] *OUT OF WATER* Video Snippet 3
[22] *Liquid Self Digital* Video Snippet
[23] *Liquid Self II* Installation View
[24] for me, and other heathens Front Cover
[25] for me, and other heathens II: APOCRYPHA
[26] for me, and other heathens III: EIDOLON

Their obsession with their own image, plagued by a masculine ideal they project into the mirror. They are unable to achieve that which they desire. The heathens confesses their experience with gender and body dysphoria, their relationship with their haughty partner whom they idolize, the use of drugs, food and sex to affect their body, emotions and psyche, the shame they feel for being effeminate and finally, at the zine's end, the freedom they find in accepting their ugliness and celebrating their erotic power.

The *for me, and other heathens* series was started because Jaleel Campbell, a member of my Media Arts cohort, encouraged me to collect writings shared in class and put them in a poetry book. The series was a way for me to catalogue and index my experience, and notice (poor) behavioral patterns.

The 'heathen' *character* is me. I became interested in confessing my wrongdoings, in making public what I once would have been ashamed to admit. I had hoped that through my vulnerability, other heathens may feel affirmed. This is for us.

"The challenge is to engage with the past without being destroyed by it" Love (1). Writing, poetry, is a cathartic practice for me. When asked in graduate school, "what is your art about?" and, "who is your audience?" I did not have a clear answer. These zines gave language to my feelings and also showed me which community I wanted to address; the ashamed, the trouble-makers, the disregarded.

I am grateful to have sold my zines at the Bureau of General Services: Queer Division at the LGBT Center in Manhattan — down the hall from Keith Harring's Bathroom Mural. The day I learned that the first edition in the series had sold out from the shelves there, was an enouraging moment to remind me that my practice *belonged* - that I ought to continue, my narrative had engaged, been appreciated by and possibled affirmed other queer persons.

The last year of graduate school in the throws of The Coronavirus Pandemic, I am confined to my bedroom, a wild animal circling its mirrored cage. I feel that I've lost my life, New York City, Serichai, all prospects shot. I joked that in my third and final zine of the series must have a satisfying ending, my heathen character has had to have had a breakthrough, to have evolved, this storyline must conclude satisfyingly. Once again, my heathen character is an embellishment of myself. To achieve satisfaction, I'd have to tackle the source of my shame, my body — or rather, my body image, the eidolon.

Keeping in tradition, borrowing melodrama from Greek tragedies as I had in the two previous installments, I entitled the third and final Zine of the series, *for me, and other heathens III: EIDOLON.* An EIDOLON is a phantom, an image-copy of a real life being that can exist within a mirror (Academus). An eidolon is the source of my shame, the haunting, inescapable masculine ideal. We are separated by the mirror's glass, there is *I* and there is an*other*, we can never reach one another, it is an "impossible love." Serichai, who's thinness I resented, denies my

earthly “ugliness.” It is not until my Father denies me, when I am kicked out of his home and ejected into the world, that I finally feel freedom from this shadow’s oppression.

This zine was different from the others in that instead of being composed of photographs I had taken and scanned images of ephemera I had collected, it is mostly composed of images taken by Carla of my nude body. I thought that it was time to finally expose the heathen character who had remained anonymous in the volumes prior — a true act of facing my own image. My disconnection to the images, in that I did not produce them, adds to their Otherworldliness, they’re eeriness.

Because of the Coronavirus, we were not able to have paper materials that the public could touch at our thesis exhibition. So I took photographs of the Zine installed and left them in their place along with a note that said, “LOOK, BUT YOU CAN’T TOUCH … SORRY :/// XOXO”. I hoped that those that walked within the mirror’s frame would feel the absence of what was meant to be there, similar to how one feels unsettled by their body image, when they feel it is lacking.

Punk zines from the 1980s and 90s are an inspiration for my zine’s dark aesthetic - Bob’s photo zines too. Robert Mapplethorpe’s photos of Patti Smith in fabric (c.1978) were also an inspiration for Carla and I’s photographs.

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Conclusion (dis/entangled)

Now, I find myself more able to participate in “social *inter*course” (Helguera 2) more than ever before. (Not to gloat, but now my “cup runneth over” with social intercourse.)

I am very proud of my thesis cohort for coming together to write our exhibition statement which I will quote here in its entirety:

> If a tree falls and no one's around, does it make a sound? Does it even exist? **While our reflexive practices have been cultivated during isolation, they have always been in consideration of *[O]thers*, existing in the *in-between* of the personal and public, within dis/entangled "natural" and digital worlds.** Last Spring, the inaugural Media Arts MFA Thesis Exhibition was abruptly canceled due to COVID-19, following the program's (surprise!) deactivation. This is perhaps the last Media Arts MFA Thesis Exhibition, it represents our studies, practices and shared estrangement. We are the final three graduate students remaining: Samie, Chris and Jake. Our artwork is characterized by *connectivity* in/consequential of *artificial* circumstances. Samie's practice engages with the smallness of perspective. Chris's practice is technochimeric. Jake's practice is concerned with mutuality. We share, glitch, bewitch, infect and fuck the present and are uprooting possibilities.

Our words are true. From where I write this sentence in my bedroom in East Harlem, (— I've since moved in with the wonderful Emma who housed me in my crisis —) if not evidenced by the sheer density of New York City and the collective I find myself within, I am more deeply *entangled* with Others than I have ever been — capable of "deep participation … the forerunner for joint concerted actions not possible before." (Lorde 59)

I am interested in supporting those who ask for my support, in using my knowledge of the arts and creative abilities to actualize queer dreams. Heather Love writes about community,

> "So many of us long for communities in which there is systematic affirmation, valuing and nurturing of difference, and in which conformity to a narrowing and restricting vision is never demanded as the price for admission to caring civil society. Our vision is the creation of communities in which we are encouraged to explore the widest range of non-exploitative, non-abusive possibilities in love, gender, desire and sex — and in the creation of new forms of constructed famillies without fear that this searching will forfeit for us our right to be honored and valued within our communities and in the wider world … Yet the same **history may allows us to think about queer ways of life and forms of intimacy that include trouble, and even make it central.**" (Love 80–81)

Knowing my troubles (and taking accountability for my trouble-making,) will allow me to cocreate a community not based solely in our aspirations, but considerate of our *backward* feelings too. Art-making was once a method of exonerating myself from shame, but now, prioritizing collectivism, collective conscious, it is my intention to contribute to "a network for the participation of Others, that the effects of [a] project may outlive its ephemeral presentation" (Helguera 12). I want to create work that goes beyond ephemerality, that affects Others the way

an entangled “network” of Others have affected me. Through the experiences outlined in this paper, I hope it is clear that the process of making my thesis works has been more important to my arts practice than the works themselves could ever communicate.

The process of writing this thesis paper has allowed me to dis*entangle* — to organize and reorganize - my experiences and create a record of the way my practice has matured. Love writes, “Hope that is achieved at the expense of the past cannot serve the future” (29). Indexing my past, charting my growth and realizing the function art-making has served me, has allowed me to recognize greater creative potentials in myself and in Others. *Together*, “We share, glitch, bewitch, infect and [most urgently] fuck the present ... uprooting possibilities.”

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