

THE MISSING BODY: PERFORMANCE IN THE ABSENCE OF THE ARTIST

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## ABSTRACT

My thesis work explores the concept of performance through an investigation of art in which the artist's body is obscured, hidden, or not present in the final manifestation of the presented work. Through a three-pronged project of creative production, written paper and curated exhibition, I argue for four methodologies behind removing the artist's body from performative work; artists that engage others to enact the performance, work that is activated, created or completed by audience transgressions in the gallery or presentation space, object-based artworks that are stand-ins for the artists' own bodies, and artists whose bodies are hidden within the work. These methodologies can be effective strategies for opening dialogue about concepts and ideas that are otherwise difficult to broach, particularly those topics that address corporeality and identity. I discuss my own work, which deals with the taboo body, particularly as it relates to gender, sexuality, disability and fatness. Alongside this discussion, I examine works by a variety of artists using similar methodological strategies to address topics such as race, nationalism, transgression, symbiosis, the grotesque, and the uncanny in ways that engage their audiences in meaningful and lasting dialogue.

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## 1. INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Definitions and Distinctions

The Missing Body investigates performance art by artists whose bodies are obscured, hidden, or not present in the final manifestation of the work.

Contemporary performance art, in my use of the term, is a distinct art form that has its roots primarily within visual art. It is not to be confused with *the performing arts*, which include theatre, dance, music, and other live art genres. However, performance art can include elements of theatre, dance, music, as well as other performative traditions and the artistic forms of other cultures, such as First Nations storytelling.

Accepted (and extremely contested) definitions of performance art are generally consistent in that at its most basic, performance art requires the presence of a body in space over a period of time.

“Body” implies a physical human presence, and “space” and “time” underscore that yes, the body needs to physically be here, taking up space and existing in time; that it is not just a figurative or conceptual presence. (It may be a virtual presence, however, relative to the context of the performance.) Though that may sound like an extremely basic definition, a brief glance at a broad cross-section of performances over the hundred-year history of the art form demonstrates that the presence of the body is often the only thing they have had in common. More to the point, there have been many performances in which little else has happened besides a body being in a specific place for a certain amount of time. The most recent and most notorious examples that come to mind are Tilda Swinton performing (Cornelia Parker’s) *The Maybe* at the Museum of Modern Art, a performance which existed simply of her sleeping in a plexiglass box, and Marina

Abramovic's *The Artist Is Present*, also at the MOMA, in which viewers lined up for hours for the opportunity to sit at a table across from the artist.

In this paper, I use the word "body" to refer to the corporeal human form, however that body is defined by the artist; I am not particularly interested in dictating what a body can be. I use the word "performance" as shorthand for "performance art" or "work of performance art" except when it is explicitly used to denote specific theories, i.e. Judith Butler's theory of performativity which posits that gender is performance, and that performance "produces that which it names" (Butler, 2). I consider the definitions of performance as outlined in theories contained herein as appropriate modes for creating artworks as any other. I use "work," "art," "artwork," "work of art," and "performance" interchangeably as nouns and "performance" as a verb, when referring to performance art. "Absence of the body" can be assumed to mean that however else I may be defining the performance, the artist's physical body is either hidden, disguised, covered, not present, or otherwise obscured. I use the word "performance" to refer to many actual and potential works of art, which I will theorize or contextualize as performance art even if the artist does not. The four distinct methodologies I will be addressing each come with different challenges in conceptualizing them as performance, and different challenges in conceptualizing the body as being absent; these will be covered as they arise.

The work included in my creative thesis exhibition is all artwork that I would describe as performance, though they are manifested primarily as objects. Some of the work included in the curated exhibition, on the other hand, I would classify as documentation. In other words, it may be art in its own right, but while some of the objects in the exhibition are performative objects, others are documents of performances. In particular, Mami Takahashi's photographs from her *Hiding/Observing* series and Sam Guerrero's video of *Still Trying for a Breakthrough* are works that I would consider documentary in nature, because they reproduce the performance and the

artist themselves; the reasons for making this distinction are made clear in this paper. I have included them because even as documents, they are important in illustrating my arguments, and they help form a cohesive and interesting whole as an exhibition.

This paper is organized into three main sections. The first section is a brief description of the four methodologies of performance that I am theorizing. For each methodology, I include examples of well-known work as well as examples of my own work, discussing concerns and considerations for each and referencing theory where relevant. The second section is an analysis of the theories that have informed my research, broken down into relevant sections of absence, body, performance, and, finally, a brief look at Relational Aesthetics. This section is composed of what might be considered an expanded literature review, along with my own exploration of the theories relative to my artwork and the work of the artists in my curated exhibition, and it forms the bulk of the paper. The final section includes project descriptions of each of my bodies of work from my thesis exhibition. It can be treated somewhat like an appendix to the thesis paper; containing elaborated descriptions of the projects that are enlightening of the work. I would consider these descriptions fundamental to a complete understanding of the artworks, but not necessarily essential to the reading of the thesis paper itself.

In most art forms, at first glance people would generally agree that the art exists within the object. In other words, if someone walked into a gallery filled with paintings and was asked, “where’s the *art*?” they would probably point to those paintings, or the sculptures, or the bodies of the people performing.

In performance art, as in much contemporary art, and, one might even be inclined to argue, in most art throughout history, the artist’s *meaning* or *intention* is more important than their aesthetics. In other words, the art doesn’t always exist in the object, but in the idea or the concept. In the case of traditional art forms such as painting or sculpture, that distinction is

generally irrelevant, because the object is a container for those ideas or concepts—basically, the object is still the art. However, my research challenges the basic definition of performance art, arguing that it must not be taken for granted that the art of a performance is located within the artist's body.

Intention is a foundational concept for me. In a theoretical framework where definitions of the body are non-specific, concepts of space and time are relative, and the idea of performance is tied as much to theories of affect and embodiment as physical activities, the intention of the artist that something be considered a work of art is one of the anchors I rely on to ground the work. If, as I theorize, a body might be just about anything, space and time have little meaning, and audiences and objects can perform just as well as artists, then performance art could basically be any thing, or action, or feeling. The idea that what makes something art is that the artist says so is not only a frame that contains the work, but is an ethical structure that holds me as an artist responsible for my ideas and actions.

Removing the artist's body from the performance creates opportunities for those on the outside of the performance to step inside the work – physically, conceptually, or symbolically. By de-emphasizing their own bodies, performance artists refocus attention away from themselves, privilege others' experiences, dismantle boundaries between performer and audience, and disrupt unequal power dynamics in the presentation space. Artists can use these strategies to, among other things, make work about sociocultural issues and give voice to people within marginalized groups, including those whose race, class, gender, ability, bodies, or sexuality differ from the dominant culture and who are systematically silenced. They can also use these strategies to resist the dominant narrative, resist their own victimization or re-traumatization, or challenge the role of the institution and those within it.

Re-centering where the art resides takes the spotlight off of the object or the body and shines a light on the margins. Denying the artist's centrality as the locus of the performance rejects the rarified position of the artist, hiding one body in order to substitute others' bodies, knowledge and expertise in their place. My research proposes to broaden the ways institutions, artists and audiences think about performance art, fostering opportunities for deeper connections and meaningful dialogue.

## **1.2 Background**

### **1.2.1 Synopsis**

This thesis paper undertakes a critical exploration of performance art in which the artist's body is absent, concentrating on methodology, and using significant texts to support my arguments.

### **1.2.2 Area of research**

The theoretical background for my research originates in queer theory, fat studies, disability theory, critical race theory, feminist theory, and art theory (in no particular order). Many of these theories follow and borrow from one another, and several trace their roots to psychoanalysis. I would like to especially recognize critical race theory and disability theory, which have informed my work, and from which feminist theory has long borrowed without adequate acknowledgment.

My focus on methodology—specifically that of performance in the absence of the artist's body—allows me to address a broad range of theoretical approaches to problems arising from artists' subjectivity. These theories sometimes support one another and sometimes contradict each

other, but together are illustrative of how all of the methodologies I propose can effectively function. This paper explores four specific approaches to the absent body:

1. Work/artists that engage others to enact the performance.
2. Work that is activated, created or completed by audience transgressions in the gallery or presentation space.
3. Object-based artworks that are stand-ins for the artists' own bodies.
4. Artists whose bodies are hidden within the work.

I approach my thesis work through an established artistic practice that has focused on performance and object-making, heavily implicating the audience, gallery and others in the work, as well as queer, gender, disability, fat, and art theory discourses.

My thesis project has 3 major components: my creative artistic/studio production from which is derived my thesis exhibition, a survey exhibition that I have curated of notable works that illustrate and support my thesis, and a supporting paper. The original artwork that constitutes my thesis exhibition forms the foundation of my research project. The curated exhibition contains concrete works that further illustrate my thesis, providing opportunities for audience engagement with the art that is necessary for a comprehensive understanding of the work. The thesis paper supports the exhibitions by elaborating and expanding on my creative research and providing critical support in the form of a theoretical and rhetorical framework.

### **1.3 Methodology**

My research project relies heavily on an ability to integrate theories of the “other” (fat, queer, feminist, disability, gender and race theories in particular) with a strong popular culture vocabulary. Key methods I employ include intervention and collaboration, allowing me to work

simultaneously from without and within the cultures and subcultures that form my communities of interest, of which I am also a member. Building this cross-disciplinary framework into a strong studio practice facilitates destabilizing the centre that I am intervening into, making room for the other.

Rejecting the notion of society's arbitrary beauty standard, I question the rarified body, and I question the rarified position of the artist through denying my centrality as the locus of the performance, hiding my body and substituting others' bodies, knowledge and expertise in place of my own. Implicating others in my performance is a way of reflecting upon not just the notion of performance but the artist as well, creating a distinct environment in which myself (the artist), the performer (an audience member or contracted outsider), and the audience are compelled to contemplate our relationships to one another. This uneasy environment has the potential to open a space for paradigmatic shifts in understanding. By considering the audience to be the performers of the work, artist and audience are situated as equals within the gallery. This level playing field forces me to approach the very notion of audience in a respectful and egalitarian way that translates to the comfort level people have in engaging the work and the concepts therein.

Proposing methodological approaches that provoke risk, transgression, distance, and intimacy via tactics designed to de-emphasize the artist's body, I hope to enable a shift in focus from my body to others' bodies, the othered body, embodiment as a concept, and subject matter unrelated to the body altogether. So doing, the work can effectively build empathetic and understanding relationships within the gallery while simultaneously creating space for a careful examination of audience response to the work, an essential element of the overarching research project.

In my artistic production during my MFA program, I have primarily worked with performative gestures that result in object-based works that reference the artist's body but do not

directly reveal it, and the direct creation of objects meant to function as stand-ins for the artist's body. However, I am interested in all those categories of work as defined above – the body hidden within performative work, objects that stand in for the artist's body, implicating others' bodies via audience transgression or literally contracting others to perform – which I have employed in the past and which other artists use to similar ends. In this paper I discuss the theoretical underpinnings of my work, lay out my research, and then discuss the artwork in the context of this research and attendant theory. One of the reasons I am creating methodologies for removing the artist's body from the readings of their work is that I am interested in making art that does not focus on the body; therefore, much of the work in my thesis exhibition does not focus directly on the body (or *my* body) itself. These projects are discussed within this paper in whole, relating their subject matter to the performance methodologies that make up this body of research.

Within my creative thesis work I explore representation of the taboo (primarily fat, queer female) body in popular culture via an interdisciplinary practice with a strong focus on performance as a medium of the underrepresented for reclaiming the objectified body. Removing the artist from the performance creates opportunities for others (those on the outside of the performance/witnesses/audience members) to step inside the work, physically, conceptually or symbolically. In this paper, as in my curatorial project, I expand my field of vision to include representations of many different kinds of “othered” bodies, demonstrating how my research is applicable across a broad range of artists, disciplines and concerns.

The work in my thesis exhibition takes the form primarily of photographs and objects which exist as the only document of private performative gestures, sculptural objects created as stand-ins for the body, and objects designed to be activated by the transgressive acts of others.



By applying a researched theoretical approach and creative studio practice to a carefully considered juxtaposition of images and actions (butting up popular culture with critical texts, my body, collaborators' bodies, and audiences' bodies) I have discovered new ways of working, honed my voice and my practice, and developed new languages for evolving the discourse regarding making room for the taboo body.

I intend to encourage a critical dismantling of the arbitrary boundaries that continue to enact violence upon those marked as different, particularly for bodies that fall outside of our society's definitions of "normal". There is much theory to support this research, and a need for the ideas to be made visible and accessible to a broader public via creative production.

Joan Sangster states that "if bodies are recognized only within an abstract circle of discourse, ...we lose our connection to a politics of social transformation that understands that the oppression, maiming, and utilization of bodies is facilitated by a particular set of social relations, economic structures and forms of injustice." (394) If I am therefore making work about the body, I need to not only read, research and write about the body, I need to privilege the body, not only in performance, but in all of my work.

## 2. PERFORMANCE IN THE ABSENCE OF THE ARTIST

Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, in their book *What is Philosophy*, define art as a group of sensations that combines affects and percepts (163), suggesting that art is the meaning that is produced in the tension between the perceived and the felt. It is this definition of art that is closest to my own; art exists not in actions or objects but in the minds and bodies of the artist and the audience.

### 2.1 Artistic Background

Trained in painting, printmaking and industrial design, I had no formal background in performance art. When I started performing, it was simply the best way to express the ideas I had. My first major performance project was borne out of frustration with what I saw as a disconnect between artists and the public at large and disillusionment with the educational system. *The Plexiglas Box* was a personal-sized Plexiglas box on wheels that I got inside and took out into the world. The project was, most simply, a way for me to let the public see a real artist at work (there was no denying that moving the heavy, hot, poorly-ventilated box around was hard work) while giving me the opportunity to watch and study the public from within a protective environment.

It was during this time, after countless conversations with the public, the media, and the art community that I realized that because of my extra-large body, and the fact that it will always be the first thing people's brains process when they look at me – before race, even before gender – that my performance work will always be read as a statement about the fat body. I have come to understand that no matter the subject of my art or how it is manifested, as a performance artist with a body that society labels taboo, my work must address my body, since it is read into the

content of my work whether I intend it to be or not. I came to this knowledge experientially, but in my subsequent research, discovered that it is a common experience. Not only is it relatively universal in discovering one's position as "Other" and the fact that our bodies are marked indelibly, but fat women in particular face a very distinct form of complete silencing, as Petra Kuppers discusses in "Performing Fatness." (277) In order to take an active critical role in the consumption and dissemination of my own image, I began actively addressing the body throughout my work, (both performative and object-based, through research and practice) - my body, women's bodies, queer bodies, fat bodies and other taboo bodies.

This also marked the beginning of my fascination with implicating others in the performance of my work. The professional aesthetician I contracted to remove my hair, and whose business became the performance venue, became as much if not more of a performer in the project than me in *Aesthetics*, for example. I may have been faced with some physical discomfort for the 3-hour performance's duration, but it was she who did most of the talking, most of the working, most of the *performing*. As a natural extension of my interest in what is acceptable in the gallery and within the art itself, I became quite fascinated with what happened when I took a person carrying out their job or role and placed them within an artistic context. Just as when I perform, I am never "acting," I simply am myself doing whatever the performance requires of me, I have never asked or employed people to do something outside of their job description or daily routine. Most often, I have hired a professional to do that which it is their profession to do, though I have often simply required assistance in my performances from gallery staff or volunteers. It is the artistic context which turns the carrying out of this work into a "performative act," offering them a stage upon which their work is given cultural value that it is not otherwise seen to have.

In these cases, the art is not only in what happens between performer and audience, but performer and artist as well, in the act and in the complicated relationship between them. I feel that my art is successful when I am learning or experiencing at least as much as the audience.

Because of my focus on the experience and the relationship between artist, art and audience, I consider my object-based artworks primarily artifacts of performative acts, props for connecting me and the art to the audience, or performative objects in themselves. Objects that in the past contained memories of the act which resulted in their creation (performance ephemera) have slowly given way to objects created in expectation of the acts which they will exist in the service of, either by me or by others. Rather than classify my sculptural work as ‘interactive,’ (a word that connotes specific media, subject matter, and modes of engaging which privilege the knowledge of the artist), I think of this work as performative; and it is the audience’s performance of the work that creates the moment or “thing” of art.

As a context-driven artist, I consider my art to exist in its experience, process, and dissemination more than its objects. The content of each work is of primary importance rather than its form, so the labour involved in creating the artwork is at least as much about thinking, writing, researching, and talking as it is about performing, sewing, painting or sculpting. Because the art exists in its experience, the performance or presentation of the work is key to its full realization, and the audience a main component of the work.

I try to fashion my work to be humourous or visually seductive, or able to be easily read at a surface level, while always having a complex series of questions buried within. I want the viewers to be just as curious to find out the answers as I am, and therefore invest the time to try to learn or take some enjoyment from it without feeling preached to. Once an audience has opened themselves up to an artwork through its humour, comfort, or familiarity, they are more likely to

invest in the challenges the work presents. Rather than asking the audience to participate in my work, I would like to make work that the audience decides they want to know better.

Common subjects of my work include the performance of persona and more specifically gender roles. In my work I also address the gallery and the roles people play within it; the performance of expected viewership behaviour and the pushing of those rigid boundaries. Coming from the ‘outsider’ position of a queer woman with a fat body, I make work that challenges normative standards of the body, beauty ideals, gender and sexuality. Coming from the ‘insider’ position of an artist who’s worked for 15 years within the gallery system, my work addresses the performative/presentation context and the roles people play within it, including the performance of expected viewership behaviour. In my thesis work I employ a synthesis of both of these impulses. I also recognize my position as a white cisgender woman with relative class and educational privilege, and want to use that privilege to make space for those who do not. My curatorial exhibition is, in part, a function of that interest; by choosing to curate an exhibition as part of my thesis project, I am taking another opportunity to centre others’ voices and experiences within my research so that I might observe and learn.

After performing, thinking about, reading about, writing about, and making work about the body, and having already implicated other people in the performance of my work for several years (including both while I was present in the work and while I wasn’t), I started explicitly thinking about how performance might be defined if the artist’s body was not present in the work, or if there was no body in the work at all. I want to note that it started with a personal impulse based on my experience in my own artistic practice; it started out as a need to examine the body because of *my* body. Though it has been important for me to be able to address the issues raised by readings of my work that tie my particular embodiment to it, and to make work that addresses that embodiment, I also want to be able to make work—even performance—that has nothing at

all to do with it, and I wanted to learn how to do that too. Understanding my subjectivity will always create more complex layers to the work and a level of understanding of who I am as a person, but who I am and how I came to make my work is not always a feature of the *content* of my work as much as the *context*, though it always must be part of the content of my work when I use my body. In this paper, as in my artistic practice, there are times when my body is central to the conversation—works like *Self Portraits*, elements of *Lipsticks and Bullets*, discussions of Jose Esteban Muñoz' *Disidentifications* and Peggy Phelan's *Unmarked*, where readings of my body might contribute to a desire to resist visibility or to resist identification with the dominant culture—and there are times when (except insofar as it is absent from the performance) it is not.

As an artist with disabilities, I have another unique set of concerns regarding my body's use in performance. Besides an interest in visibility/resisting visibility, and the content that is read onto my body when it is visibly dis-functional, pragmatically I have to deal with my body's limitations, which often don't meet up with my expectations of it. Now, I don't expect that this fact makes me different from anyone else (it doesn't). However, even knowing my body as well as I do, and in part *because* I know the unpredictable nature of my body as well as I do, I can't always foresee how my body will react to doing something, and I can't know for sure that I will be able to do something during a performance tomorrow that I practiced with no problem today. Sometimes, I can use that unpredictability as part of the work. Sometimes I can negotiate around it, and ensure that I only plan to do things I am confident that I will be able to do. But sometimes, I can decide to take my body out of the equation entirely, and still make work that is about the body, or still make work that is performance art.

Performance is taxing on my body; sometimes cumulatively, sometimes catastrophically. It is also energizing, galvanizing, fortifying. It gives me energy, power, strength. Performing makes me want to keep being a performance artist, but it also, often, makes me need to stay in

bed afterwards, sometimes for days. The development of these strategies, techniques and methodologies in *The Missing Body* allow me to continue making performance, thinking about performance, and learning about performance even when I don't want to put my body in the performance.

## **2.2 Four Methodologies**

### **2.2.1 Work/artists that engage others to enact the performance.**

This methodology covers all people who volunteer, are hired, coerced, contracted, or are otherwise obligated through some kind of agreement to perform in a work of art. The defining characteristic is that the artist intends for it to be considered a performance work, though the performers may be actors, musicians, painters, construction workers, or anyone else.

Examples of this type of work include: virtually all of Vanessa Beecroft's performance, such as her ongoing "vb#" series, in which she hires throngs of people (groups of models, groups of police officers, etc) to stand in galleries; Santiago Sierra's artworks in which he hires undocumented immigrants to do things such as sit quietly in cardboard boxes (so as not to reveal the fact that they are there, thereby being "caught" working illegally), both commenting on the plight of and simultaneously exploiting the workers; he hires them for the wage they would normally make as undocumented workers, always well below the minimum wage; and my own work, including *Aesthetics*, in which I hired an aesthetician to remove all of my body hair, *LOVECINDYBAKERSTOP*, in which I hired a telegram company to hand-deliver telegrams to events I was unable to attend, and *Gimmick*, in which I hired a magician to try to make magic with and around useless props I had built. In these examples (and others) from my own practice, I hire people to do things that are part of their skill-set; I only ever ask people to do what they normally would do, though often with a twist, sometimes taking them slightly outside their comfort zone, and always changing the context of what they are doing so that it is considered art.

I do this because allowing people to come into the work with their own expertise helps ensure that we are on equal ground; they are experts in their field, just as I am an expert in mine. The exchange, in my mind, should be fair, and neither of us should ever feel exploited (even if the context of the work makes it appear that this is the case).

I don't always *hire* people to perform in my work; in a lot of the work I do, I build into the structure of it the need for help, and that help often comes in the form of a volunteer furnished by the gallery or festival that I am working with. In this instance, I feel a bit like I am cheating my own system; the volunteer's job is to do whatever I need help doing, and therefore, whatever I want them to do truly *is* squarely within their job description. Still, I try to ensure that the help they are giving me is equivalent to "assistance," and not "doing my job for me" or "doing much more than can be expected of a volunteer." Usually it entails things such as accompanying me on an outing in a performance such as *Personal Appearance*, (which involves dressing up in a mascot costume of myself and going out in public) since when I am in costume I can't see, hear or sense anything very well, I need help getting in and out, and just in case something goes wrong, it is good to have someone nearby. That volunteer's job is also to act as a filter between me and the outside world; I don't talk when in costume, so part of that volunteer's job is to describe who I am and what I do to people who have questions. This is one of the really performative parts of that job, in my mind; the space between volunteering and acting where that person has to decide how to talk about my project, while I am standing right there, to people who likely have no idea what's going on. In this project, and in many other performances involving contracted performers, the assistant is, in every way, an extension of my body (see Helen De Preester's expanded definition of the body in the following section for a discussion of this phenomenon). They are my eyes, my ears, my voice; they are my sense of smell, touch,



exteroception; without them I could not function. My assistants are not just performing my art, they are performing my *body*.

Clearly, there are ethical concerns to be addressed when considering this methodology of performance. I would say that any performance in which people are contracted to perform the work needs to be thought of in terms of antagonism (as defined by Claire Bishop in *Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics*), (65-67) and designed such that all parties are given true agency. While for the most part I agree with Bishop's requirement that the relationship between the artist and audience not form the content of the work, merely the context, I think that the relationship between the artist and the contracted performer, (one of the audiences of the work, if the work is in fact ethical and successful) can indeed be, and very often *should* be part of the content of the work.

Risk-taking is an important factor of this approach. A central element of performance art is that the artist assumes risk; that risk could be anything from putting themselves in a life-threatening situation, to handling dangerous substances, objects, or animals, to telling an embarrassing story, to the risk involved in simply being witnessed. In works where artists hire others to perform the work, the risk is transferred to the volunteer, audience member or contracted performer (i.e. not the artist). In this paper, I primarily discuss the kind of risk that an artist faces through being witnessed or through re-experiencing trauma, and in those cases the strategies for mitigating those risks relate to resisting visibility altogether, not transferring that visibility onto another, which seems of questionable ethics. In theory, one might contract a performer who does not carry that risk (e.g. someone from the dominant culture). Other kinds of physical risk can be mediated through thorough contracts, insurance, rehearsals, rules, and establishment of a clear understanding of expectations of both artist and performer. The risk attached to being/becoming visible and revisiting trauma, however, is not one that is easily

mediated, predicted, or explained to someone who has not experienced it. To remove the risk entirely would be to kill the art; it is the tension created by a genuine moment; the “shock,” the “squirm,” the “wonder” uniquely affected by performance via the space that risk opens up, which creates the art (see discussions of Muñoz, Thrift, and Oliver, below, for descriptions of these performative affects). Determining how to ensure that the risk taken by the contracted performer is one that they fully understand and are fairly compensated for is the fundamental challenge.

Obviously, not all artists work the same way I do; in Beecroft and Sierra’s work as in many others, there have been accusations of exploitation and cruelty made against them in the media and in the court of public opinion. Performers are not always either fairly compensated or made aware of the risks. An artist may intend for exploitation to be part of the work, because they claim to be making work that shows how complicated the issues are, or they may be unaware of what they are doing. I think whenever any artist hires people (especially people from an oppressed group) to perform, they need to be extremely conscious of the power differential that exists between artist and performer, they need to recognize the risk being taken by the performer, and they need to understand how that risk changes from when the artist takes it to when the performer takes it (the straight white male artist performing a piece faces relatively fewer risks than most others, including the straight white male contracted performer).

In my curated exhibition, Cheli Nightraveller has engaged two student interns to assist with her performance. Not only are they building her cigar store Indian, with her (and my) close collaboration/supervision, in exchange for payment, university credit, and artistic credit as creators of the sculptural object and collaborators within the project as a whole, but they are assisting her in the performance of the work as well. Because she will (sometimes) be inside the sculpture when it gets wheeled out into public and put on display, she needs someone to be in charge of wheeling it/her around. Having the opportunity to watch the artist and her assistants

develop their relationship and negotiate the terms of their collaboration has been enlightening. Nightraveller draws heavily on her First Nations culture's systems of ethics, respect and responsibility in determining how she moves forward with every element of the project. As an artist who has stopped, for the most part, using her own body in performances because the risks associated with it outweigh the benefits, Nightraveller has been careful to try to explicate these risks to her collaborators; I am anxious to talk with them about their experience once they have had a chance to perform on her behalf.

### **2.2.2 Work that is activated, created or completed by audience transgressions in the gallery or presentation space.**

Transgression is the key element of this work, as it creates the element of risk that enables the performative moment. In this context, I use the word "transgression" to mean any act, action, or response to an artwork which results in a performance, even as slight as an embodied affect (such as the shock, squirm and wonder proposed by the theorists discussed herein). Intentionality of the artist is important in this methodology; any audience member of any artwork may transgress any number of boundaries within a presentation space, and that may result in what they do being something considered performative (by them, the artist, or anyone else), but I am solely interested in those works where part of the *artist's intention* is that they be transgressed upon. I am not necessarily concerned with whether the artist would explicitly use the word "performance" in relation to this kind of work, as I know that the definition of performance art is extremely contested, but that the artist has built into the art a desire that the audience would activate the work in some way (a way that distinguishes the work from "interactive art," as I will explain in this paper) is the defining characteristic of this methodology.

An example of a well-known work within this genre is *Portrait of Ross*, by Félix González-Torres, a pile of candy that weighs the same amount as his lover when he was first diagnosed with HIV, and as the pile dwindles when people take candy away, it represents Ross' wasting body. The work is not presented in such a way that the audience is either instructed to take candy, or even invited to; it is left to be self-evident that when one is confronted by a pile of candy, one might decide to take a piece. That a person might not want to be seen taking the candy, may be unsure if it is permitted, could be tempted to take a pocketful even believing it to be wrong, take one and save it as "art," or pop it in one's mouth are all potentially valid ways to interact with the work, because the artist has built the agency of the audience into the concept of the work. Torres is touted by Nicolas Bourriaud as one of the key artists of Relational Aesthetics (38); relative to my difficulties with Bourriaud's theory and Relational Aesthetics (as detailed within this paper), Torres' ethical approach to his relationship to the audience makes his work more suited to Bishop's relational antagonism and my own theory of performance.

Much of the art in my thesis exhibition falls within this category of performance. *Safety First*, a bronze cast of an electrical outlet safety cap, is explicitly designed to evoke a powerfully affective performative moment; there is little else of real content in the work aside from the joke of the unsafe safety cap, and a demonstration of the concept that sculptural objects can induce a feeling so strong just through a *consideration* of interacting with it, that it can only be described as an *event* within the body. *The Mighty Men and Mistress Maker* falls on the opposite end of the spectrum; not only are viewers encouraged to interact with the piece in a very physical way, but in that interaction they become the performer-on-stage for other audience members to watch.

Transgressive acts performed by the audience also implicate the gallery/presenter within the work, forcing the people responsible for those venues into the performative arena where they must necessarily participate in the work. Implicating the gallery in the work is a key interest of

mine, not only as an artistic goal but as a function of ensuring that the whole system operates ethically, not just the artist/audience relationship. I argue that Claire Bishop's "relational antagonism" as I talk about in this paper is a concept that can and should be applied to considerations of the relationship an artist has with the institution within which their work is presented.

The fact that the audience is the performer creates crucial opportunities for connection between artist and audience, audience and artwork, and perhaps most importantly, audience and the concepts and issues foundational to the work. The potential for opening dialogue, for creating moments of empathy (via techniques that will be described in greater detail in following sections) is what make these methodologies particularly relevant in today's disconnected world. The discussions of "liveness" versus "presence" as defined by Paul Couillard and David Cross make clear that globalization and virtual connectedness have not made us closer but in fact contribute to a general disengagement between people that art may be able to help mediate.

### **2.2.3 Object-based artworks that are stand-ins for the artists' own bodies.**

These objects may be the result of performative actions (performance ephemera or documents), or works that are meant to allow the artist to be present ("performing") in the space while providing the relative safety and detachment of physical distance. They may be literal analogues for the artist, as in Rachel Herrick's *Obeasts*, which are exact replicas of her body, or they may be symbolic, as in my own *Trucker Bombs* and *Lipsticks and Bullets*.

Intentionality plays a key role in this methodology as well (as "methodologies," intentionality is unsurprisingly an important element of each). Rather than thinking of their works as sculptures or interactive artworks, wherein the audience is a piece of the puzzle, or an element of the artwork which acts as a trigger, the artists who adopt this approach to their work consider

the presentation space a performative space, placing the audience within a sphere of vision that Oliver claims allows them an ontological gaze rather than an epistemological one, an ethically sound position that sets up the potential for an empathetic response by the audience. (125)

This category of performance is less about inventing new ways to talk about what is essentially sculpture/installation and more about learning, as artists, to conceptualize art in ways which give the audience agency, allowing for their development of new ways of knowing and avenues to deeper connection with the artists, the work, and the ideas within. The theories discussed in this paper outline reasons why artists might want to remove themselves from the work, from resisting visibility within a dominant culture that oppresses them, to avoiding re-traumatization, to needing to find ways to be angry and confrontational without alienating the audience, to looking for ways to evoke empathy from people who might be resistant to that response because of the artist's embodiment. Muñoz, Phelan, Eng, Sedgwick, Cross, Koppers, Gurrieri, Hart, Halberstam, Thrift and Oliver all discuss the advantages of removing the artist's body from their work, as I discuss within this paper. Many of these theories take as their premise that performance, while it *represents*, does not *reproduce*, and therefore the genre of performance inherently resists visibility. Thinking about this definition of "invisibility" compared against my project of removing the artist's body from the work creates interesting conceptual opportunities for opening up those theories, which, basically, advocate for a turning away from image-based and object-based art in favour of performance. Further, looking at innovative theories of what a body can be (virtual bodies, conceptual and implied bodies, others' bodies, objects that are extensions of the body, for instance), and what constitutes performance (an embodied affect, for example) and inserting all those extended definitions into a new theory of performance will allow for the creation of new kinds of performance, in which artists can perform through objects,

objects can perform, audiences can perform through objects, and that audience responses to objects constitute performances in themselves.

#### **2.2.4 Artists whose bodies are hidden within the work.**

There are many different ways for bodies to be hidden within performance. Costumes, obstructive props, and employment of separate performance and viewing spaces are but a few of the ways that artists can be physically present yet also absent from the performance. Artists may even be hidden by virtue of the fact that the audience is unsure of which person in a roomful of people is the artist.

Phelan discusses how, considering the spectator as the person in the dominant position, an inability to have one's gaze returned constructs the other's body as lost. The dominant figure cannot control that which cannot return its gaze; in the absence of eye contact, the observed body does not exist. Via this reading of the surveilled body, even those artists whose bodies are physically visible, if their vision is obscured, can be considered hidden. Sam Guerrero harnesses this approach in his piece *Still Trying for a Breakthrough* by encasing his head in a piñata; he resists the controlling power of the gaze, and performs in his own world. Mami Takahashi is farcically visible in her *Hiding/Observing* project, yet she, too, avoids becoming owned by the spectatorial gaze. She, however, can see through the non-mirrored side of her protective mylar shell; her gaze may not be returned, but while her body is lost to the watcher, she makes of them the watched.

Risk, transgression, and a false illusion of distance are all potential factors in this approach that are taken on by both artist and audience member, facilitating a capacity for intimacy between artist/art and audience that few artworks can. However, it also demands that judicious attention and care be paid by both sides to ensure the physical safety of each: the safety

of the artist who may not be able to see the performance space well, if at all, the safety of the artist from the audience member who may not realize where the artist is in relation to them as they move about the space (I once witnessed an audience member accidentally kick the artist square in the head, not knowing he was there), the safety of the audience member who isn't seen by an artist in costume, etc. The amount of communication that happens through the gaze, even a simple glance, should not be underestimated; in its absence, much is lost to the viewer or audience member not accustomed to being without sight.

In terms of risk, transgression and a false illusion of distance, care must be taken to create an antagonistic space (as per Bishop's definition), one with awkward tension that has the capacity for viewers to use an ontological gaze and therefore an empathetic one. Designing the project so that the audience is treated with respect, as an equal player in the exchange of knowledge that is the performance can help mitigate the potential risks of the audience transgressing the performance space in unsafe and unacceptable ways, because of the lack of the human connection that can foster that empathetic response.



### 3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

#### 3.1 On Disappearance

I am investigating the possibility that something substantial can be made from the outline left after my body has disappeared. My hunch is that the affective outline of what we've lost might bring us closer to the bodies we want still to touch than the restored illustration can.

(Phelan: *Mourning Sex*, 3)

Peggy Phelan's theory of the unmarked posits new strategies for use by those who are rendered invisible in the dominant narrative. More explicitly, she claims the visible is indelibly marked by a colonial ideology and those who find themselves devalued under this ideology would be better served recuperating their identities in new ways. Phelan believes strategies designed to increase groups' social and political power through improving visibility are misguided and ineffective, and she suggests developing new ways of knowing that do not focus on the ocular, whether the subject is visible or invisible. Arguing systems of knowledge which are based in the visual are inherently oppressive because of the way they seem to uphold "truth" (but in fact merely reinforce established narratives,) she says resistance involves denying representation and its systems altogether. (*Unmarked 2*)

The concept of the 'unmarked' comes from a Lacanian and Derridean understanding of Western binaries where one figure is marked with value and meaning and the other is left unmarked; 'self' and 'other,' male and female. (*Unmarked 5*)

Performance art, according to Phelan, is fertile ground for this search for new systems of knowledge, since, though it represents, it does not reproduce. Reproduction, in the terms of the Lacanian/Derridean framework above, is something that can only happen to the Other; reproduction is the process by which that which is unmarked becomes marked by the self/the "normal." She is marked by He, and the two are merged as one, the whole marked as the Self and

obscuring the difference of the Other half. According to Phelan, performance art is the only art form that does not reproduce. Through the process of representation without reproduction, “performance marks the body itself as loss;” (*Unmarked*, 152) the body becomes the unmarked.

The theory of the unmarked, then, is not so much a manifesto of the invisible as it is a call to separate the One from the Other and in so doing deconstruct current paradigms of “difference.”

Reproduction, as a constant process of absorbing Other into Same, exponentially cements the dominant *as* dominant. Performance creates Other; the question I must answer is: Can performance that is replaced by objects, others, and ephemera resist reproduction? In the case of performance in which the artist contracts others to perform the work and therefore the work happens via the body of the performer, whether the performer is the artist or not, I think the answer is easily (but not simply) yes. What complicates these works is that the artist has the opportunity to become a witness to the work and so be simultaneously artist and audience. The artist/audience member also has the opportunity to be witness to the audience and to focus on their reception in the moment.

In the case of performance in which the artist’s body is hidden, it still resists reproduction. Phelan writes:

Performance’s only life is in the present. Performance cannot be saved, recorded, documented, or otherwise participate in the circulation of representations *of* representations: once it does so, it becomes something other than performance. To the degree that performance attempts to enter the economy of reproduction it betrays and lessens the promise of its own ontology. Performance’s being, like the ontology of subjectivity proposed here, becomes itself through disappearance (*Unmarked* 146).

Performances in which the artist is hidden, such as Vito Acconci’s *Seedbed* (1972) where the artist is laying hidden under the floor of the gallery, masturbating, or Cheli Nighttraveller’s

work for *The Missing Body*, in which a hollow cigar-store Indian may or may not contain the artist at any given time, happen in the present and then disappear, though they were not *visibly* present to begin with. They must be imagined *as* disappearing.

The artist who hides their body within the performance does not have the opportunity to be a witness to the work, but neither does the audience have an opportunity to witness the performance in a traditional way. Phelan describes how the desire for mastery over that which is represented, which is created in the viewer through the process of looking, can best be resisted by denying the gaze.

Representation fosters a desire for mastery/ownership; Phelan quotes Foucault's *The History of Sexuality*: "the agency of domination does not reside in the one who speaks (for it is he who is constrained), but in the one who listens and says nothing; not in the one who knows and answers, but in the one who questions and is not supposed to know" (Foucault 62). As a description of the performer/viewer relationship, power belongs to the audience; the performer is put in a position of providing a service to another who controls the decision to accept or reject the offer.

So by removing their body from the performance altogether and disallowing the viewer to confront their gaze, the artist resists not only objectification, but resists the propagation of the dominance of the viewer, and of the self as other.

Even work in which a body appears to be present but the viewer's gaze is denied, this resistance can be harnessed. In encasing his head in a piñata in *Still Trying for a Breakthrough*, Sam Guerrero is not only cutting himself off from the outside world, he is refusing the viewer's access to his gaze. According to Phelan, "The spectator's inability to meet the eye *defines* the other's body as lost; the pain of this loss is underlined by the corollary recognition that the represented body is so manifestly and painfully there." (*Unmarked* 156)

Cheli Nightraveller's work in this regard is slippery; her body is certainly lost, but as the strategy she employs relies on the viewer's belief that the body is present, the presence of the Indian/box itself is designed to make audiences uncomfortably aware of her presence as witness to their performance of dominance. In this way, Cheli is a metaphorical correlative for the conundrum of Schroedinger's cat; she is simultaneously both in the box and not in the box. The fact that she is *sometimes* in the box and *sometimes not* is her way of not just resisting that dominance but asserting her own.

The Guerrilla Girls have been hiding their bodies in their performances since the 1980s.

As Phelan notes,:

By refusing to participate in the visibility-is-currency economy which determines value in "the art world," the members of the group resist the fetishization of their argument that many are, at the moment, quite ready to undertake. By resisting visible identities, the Guerrilla Girls mark the failure of the gaze to possess, and arrest, their work." (*Unmarked* 19)

From the salty traces that form Michelle Lacombe's *Of All the Watery Bodies, I've Only Known My Own*, a performance has apparently happened, and all that remains is the stain on the floor. This stain, (which in the contemporary performance world might be called 'residue' or 'ephemera') is the trace of the performance that is left behind as evidence to future audiences; those who were not witness to the action. In *Cruising Utopia*, Muñoz claims that queer gestures are "vast storehouses of... history and futurity" (81) and that those gestures' ephemera are a crucial part of the work. Muñoz was referring to the trace left behind in the memory of those who witnessed the live performance of those meaningful gestures, but I would suggest that the trace of those gestures is meaningful and impactful even for those who did not directly witness their performance. Especially if we agree that the primary role of the visual in our creation of knowledge is in upholding the dominant narrative, there are other ways of experiencing the

knowledge embodied by physical gesture that do not rely on visual proof of the action.

Lacombe's *Watery Bodies* are proof that those gestures are still knowable.

In the case of objects which exist as stand-ins for the artist's body, the question of whether performance can resist reproduction depends greatly on the kind of stand-in. Phelan insists that objects *can* act as the Self that casts the audience as Other, through an understanding of performance such as I am undertaking. In Rachel Herrick's *Museum for Obeast Conservation Studies*, it seems to me, the artist is less interested in resisting and more interesting in harnessing complicity to deconstruct it from within. Her project of mimicking the museum depends entirely on a wholesale replication of those modes of reproduction that have been shown to be extremely colonial in their method and ideology. It is in the recasting of the audience as performers within the space that they become Other, and are forced to confront their belief systems from a new angle.

Mandy Espezel's interest in interrogating her subjectivity as a white woman complicates her works; they reside in the space between sculptural object and performative object. The heads are missing – the audience's gaze is denied, and yet through their overt, objectified sexuality and submission they still foster a desire in the viewer for ownership and mastery. Mastery in this case means a desire to engage deeper ways of knowing through touch; Espezel's works beg to be felt, fondled, caressed, held. Thus the audience becomes the performer, and the Other. The sculptures clearly reside in the world of objecthood, and not thingness. Because they harness an artworld authority instead of a real-world one, they rely on that need to touch to create their performativity – not an immediate embodied performativity generated by “things” of the outside world, but a physical performativity produced through the action of the viewer in response to the physicality of the work. In Calder Harben's skin-pieces, on the other hand, the soft, slightly uncanny inanimate objects play the role of the aloof lover; they do not beg to be touched; it is the audience

who desires to touch them, or alternately, are driven away. Coolly unaffected, the objects inhabit comfortably the role of master while the audience becomes Other, strongly affected by their reaction to the work.

In the case of performance that presents opportunities for audience transgression within the gallery/performance space, because it is the audience that performs, the viewer *becomes* the other. The problem resides in the objects that present the opportunity for the transgression. Do they reproduce and therefore represent the failure of the artist's project? Not necessarily. If the viewer is the performer, they are the unmarked - those objects become stand-ins for the marked, the dominant. The audience becomes subject to the needs of the work.

In Naima Lowe's *39 Questions for White People*, the audience performs the work through not just reading the questions, but by *considering* them. They are performing a transgression of the politeness of the presentation space, and a transgression of the expectation that whiteness—that the dominant narrative—not be challenged.

Most of the works in my curatorial project do not clearly reside in one or another of the four categories of performance I am discussing, nor should they. Are Michelle Lacombe's pools of saltwater stand-ins for her body, or traces of a performance for which there was no witness? Are Calder Harben's skin objects opportunities for audience transgressions, or stand-ins for the artist's body? Each of the works in the exhibition contains a physical element that marks it as not "pure" performance, which marks it as not categorically one thing or another. I am not presenting a list of possible options that an artist may select from in making performance that resists the dominant narrative. Rather, I am interested in framing new ways of thinking about performance art and I am discussing what I see as the four ways I have identified that work which engages in modes of resistance can be read. The artwork in this exhibition should not be considered perfect

examples of my theoretical ideals; they should be read as voices in the conversation about whether the theoretical model I am positing is viable.

Through the intrinsic concept of loss, Phelan explains performance art's "fundamental bond" with ritual, (*Unmarked* 152) especially in performance that uses physical pain, via its evocation of the (symbolic) death of the performer, which elicits a promise to remember that which is lost.

Michelle Lacombe's work is literally ritualistic, in its repetition of action, marking of the body, observance of lunar cycles, reference to blood. In her work for *The Missing Body*, not only is the body absent, but the ritual is denied us, leaving only a trace of the action and the body in one. If performance is a call to witness the death of the performer, Lacombe's work, which is fundamentally **about** the body, frustrates the viewer's expectations; the performer is dead. They have arrived too late, missed their cue; their role is redundant. Thus Lacombe's work exists within this new mode of the unmarked; it exists to fulfill itself, performs in our absence, and leaves a representation of the body that is not a reproduction; it creates a fully realized Self with no Other.

Blair Brennan's work adopts the ritual as both subject and method, and perhaps it is for this reason that there is such an easy affinity between his (sculptural, installation, drawing, print) work and performance. *IRL* asks the audience not to witness the death of the performer, but to become the performer; it asks the audience to become willing to die and so doing be reborn. The disappearance, over time, of the mark (indentation/scar) left by the work mimics the disappearance of the art, and therefore the death of the artist. In being willing to die, the viewer ritually enacts his own death and carries on his arm the symbolic death of the artist. The potential to cause physical pain is not what makes this work powerfully affective, but its potential to reach one's deepest fears of mortality. The artist, the absent executioner, acknowledges that the viewer

must face this fear alone. Having faced the fear, however, the audience is bonded to the artist and to others who perform the ritual.

The work of Jose Esteban Muñoz, particularly his theory of disidentification, when read together with Phelan's theory of the unmarked, form the main structural foundation of my theoretical framework. Muñoz' project of disidentification concerns a need to stop defining communities and groups in opposition to the dominant culture, but rather to disidentify with them altogether in order to find new ways of constructing identity and subjectivity. Disidentification, according to Muñoz, is the first step towards the creation of (queer) utopia. (145) Notably, Eng's related "resisting visibility" (162) and Halberstam's "dis-appearance" (Failure 140) are key elements in this conversation as well.

To Muñoz, the artistic search for utopia is an essential and revolutionary practice which resists the assimilationism of the contemporary political LGBT\* movement and its desire to be "just like them". Marriage rights, the right to serve in the military and the right to adopt are not queer desires, but heteronormative desires mapped onto the surface of the queer "community". He suggests that artists are in a unique position to present queer alternatives to those ideals which can be used as maps to our utopia. Queerness, to Muñoz, does not yet exist; it is a horizon, a potential, a becoming; it is active, cannot exist as inaction, and is therefore performative.

To imagine and achieve this utopia, according to Muñoz, shock and wonder are two of the artist's best tools. Moments of shock and wonder harness the "squirm," Jill Bennett's term for the moment that exists in the body of the viewer when affect becomes embodied in a very physical way that is undeniably performative. (Bennett 43) Wonder is a moment that can be harnessed within a work of art; rather than the art itself producing that moment of shock, however, Muñoz describes shock as the experience a queer audience has upon turning away from a utopian artwork and being confronted by the reality of "the prison that is heteronormativity"



(*Cruising* 39). In other words, the shock that Muñoz describes is not the moment created when a normative audience encounters the non-normative vision of utopia, or when a viewer is confronted by something outside of the realm of expectation; his “shock” is the moment created when non-normative audiences have completed an encounter with art that was made for them, and realize how little of the world exists for them.

Performance is an ideal medium for the utopian and disidentification projects, as an ephemeral medium that focuses on futurity and is, Muñoz insists, the “way to queerness.”

(*Cruising* 32)

Muñoz also sees the high-art object as essentially queer, in its hopeful, utopian potentiality. Because of queerness’ focus on potentiality, on futurity rather than nowness, the high-art object, in Muñoz’ definition, is potentially performative. Partially through the authority of thingness that pop-art objects access and partly through the hopefulness of beauty accessed by ornament, art objects allow the imagining of a utopia. Thus high-art objects can offer a glimpse of utopia that is unstable and will be disappointed, but it is an important element of the utopian project.

Muñoz, Sedgwick and Phelan all discuss the potential of “radical negativity” (*Cruising* 11-13, Phelan 164-165, Sedgwick, Frank, and Alexander 63) as a fundamental condition which, discounted by the normative system, has wide-open potential for the creation of new politics and modes of representation. Sedgwick claims that modes of negativity are

not distinctly ‘toxic’ parts of a group or individual identity that can be excised; they are instead integral to and residual in the processes by which identity itself is formed. They are available for the work of metamorphosis, reframing, refiguration, transfiguration, affective and symbolic loading and deformation. (Sedgwick, Frank, and Alexander 63)

David Cross references Bataille's argument that repulsion is a social unifier, rather than attraction. (32) The negative, then, may not only be a open field in which Others may gather, but could offer particularly strong opportunities for connection and the re-creation of identity.

Much of my own work, from *Trucker Bombs* to *Lipsticks and Bullets*, *Private Collection* and *Safety First* can be read as employing radical negativity in a search for utopia, and in this way, as experienced by those within my own communities, can affect the performance of the shock. *Trucker Bombs* explicitly references the abject, irresponsibility, and disrespect as the basis for work that intends to be beautiful, ethereal, and magical. It also aims to be explicitly queerly hopeful. *Lipsticks and Bullets*, similarly, focuses on negative conditions in the creation of work that, while not *clearly* utopian, is assuredly not pessimistic in its resolution, certainly queer, and definitely disidentified.

The Guerrilla Girls also harness radical negativity in the project of creating a utopia. Sticker and poster campaigns such as those undertaken by the Girls are performative in multiple ways; the act of political defiance in the act itself is a performance, though meant to be undertaken in secret, invisibly. Then the stickers and posters themselves become sites for performance by the public, as they create a space for dialogue (people talking about them, writing on them etc). and evoke a physically performative response (defacing them, ripping them down, etc.). Muñoz claims:

The performances that the (stickers/posters) demand from viewers open the possibility of critical theory and intervention; they encourage lucidity and political action. They are calls that demand, in the African American vernacular culture, a response. The response is sometimes an outpouring of state ideology, yet at other times the responses are glimpses of an actually existing queer future in the present.... The (sticker/poster) functions as a mode of political pedagogy that intends to publicize the state's machinations of power. While technologies of surveillance

colonize symbolic space, the anonymous performance of (posting) contests that reterritorialization and imagines another moment: a time and place outside the state's electronic eye. This working collective is watching the watcher and providing a much-needed counter-publicity to the state's power. In this work we also glimpse an avant-gardist sexual performance, which is to say a performance that enacts a critique of sexual normativities allowing us to bear witness to a new formation, a future in the present. (*Cruising* 61)

Calder Harben's work is particularly evocative of a queer utopia; in its suggestion of a sexual fantasy involving the self, Harben rejects not only a heteronormative view of the world, but one which holds that the individual cannot occupy multiple positions in a physical space. By modeling the skin-objects after their own body, and describing an imagined world wherein one might watch oneself interacting with another person, Harben imagines an impossible future that is not just unmistakably queer, but fundamentally non-binary in a way that gets to the heart of the project of disidentification.

David Eng's *Feeling of Kinship* provides examples of artists who have successfully resisted attempts at restoring visibility. He suggests that absence is much more powerful than presence, because the desire for an image can make its absence so felt that it is more affective than a reproduction or image-of could be.

Eng argues for art which resists the neoliberal desire to collect and feel better and prove and heal (*itself*) and forget, "whereby visibility is legitimated as the mark of presence and inclusion, more so of justice." (180)

Jonathan Lykes describes those cultures and subcultures that do not see themselves reflected in the cultural products of the mainstream as the "unpopular culture" ("Voices"). These communities have failed in their projects of asserting their visibility because, as Kauffman notes, through globalization, (especially reality TV and the internet,) the unpopular culture is

persistently absorbed into the popular culture, as public appetite for the new and different needs constant feeding. (11) This doesn't suggest that outsiders are made welcome, however; Kylo-Patrick R. Hart notes that the unpopular culture's Otherness must be maintained by the mainstream in order that it be viewed from a safe enough distance to remain entertaining and non-threatening. (1-5) Though being cast as Other is oppressive, there are strategic benefits to exploiting that position, especially from an invisible position. By accepting a position as "Other," artists can examine, question, and dissect the mainstream and its own low-brow product, the popular culture.

In my exhibition, Naima Lowe's work in particular not only resists visibility, but it actively resists the neoliberal longing to feel better and forget; for race issues to go away. While Phelan would describe language as being in the realm of the reproductive, the visible, the marked, Eng calls for a reconsidering of the rift between affect and language, further to his project to reunite affect and history. Affect, in other words, need not be oppositional to language; they can be supplemental. Lowe's work, *Thirty-nine (39) Questions for White People*, based entirely in language, also exists in the realm of the performative and not, I would argue, the reproductive. I suggest that the main difference between Eng's interest in resisting visibility but using language and Phelan's interest in keeping language out of the project of resisting visibility is that Phelan's work, based in psychoanalytic theory, constructs Self and Other in a way which privileges gender as the binary on which her ideas of "difference" are based. Eng's work, on the other hand, is based in critical race studies and literature; he recognizes that racialized histories are constructed, contested, multiple, non-binary, not clearly demarcated, and that language is a conduit for ideas and memories and stories which are valuable for reconstructing/maintaining/distinguishing personal and group identity while resisting visibility.

Eng does recognize a need to revisit history, but describes historical revisionism and political reparation as futile; that attempts to construct a picture of “the way it *really was*” (192) are not possible. Instead, he suggests that “psychic reparation” (192), through affect, can create connections to the past that keep them anchored to the present and therefore tangible and real. Lowe’s work can be read as an attempt at psychic reparation of this nature; of using a series of questions directed at white people to harness the power of affect in reconsidering histories and “realities.”

Mami Takahashi’s photographic series *Hiding/Observing* are documents of performances about resistance to visibility, partly as a way to defy surveillance by the dominant culture and partly as a way to examine that culture unobserved. Her work points out the strategic benefits of resisting visibility in providing a vantage point from which one might be the watcher instead of the watched. Her images embody two stereotypes of the Asian Other that she may have confronted during her immersion in American culture, the shy and the spy, but they do so by declining to picture her. By refusing visibility via a gesture that represents disparate affective positions, Takahashi confuses expectations and declines any sort of construction of her identity by the viewer. This kind of image, as Eng describes it, is “less representational than emotional, and marked by the failure of language; this image is dissociated from the traditional protocols of signification and accompanied by an excruciating affective intensity that alludes, while simultaneously demanding, symbolic inscription.” (168)

Visibility, Eng suggests, is one strategy among many; a strategy that should not be discarded. Visibility can be used to depict a version of the present, as long as it is used in a way that resists the dominant narrative; any attempt to correct history will simply be absorbed into this narrative. He suggests that the realm of the affective is more impactful than that of the visible, and that the best attempts to draw attention to the invisible are not in making them visible but in

replicating their invisibility. (180-183) Nighttraveller, Lowe, Takahashi and Guerrero all make the invisibility they are addressing in their work extremely evident—not visible—but affectively *known*.

In *The Queer Art of Failure*, J. Jack Halberstam talks about how absence can lead to a certain kind of knowledge, using examples from art and popular culture (primarily film) to demonstrate how loss can be queer, forgetting can be a tactic used to resist the dominant narrative, and denial of the self/persona can be a revolutionary act. Referencing moments in history where the colonial power has used the tool of forgetting to dominate occupied cultures (via forced relocations, removal of children from their families and cultures, etc.), Halberstam suggests that artists can harness similar tactics to forget the narrative that has been inscribed upon them and create a new one. Losing can be used in a similar way, exploiting witlessness, stupidity and forgetfulness that may be ascribed to oneself or one's culture in order to ignore and push back against those who would underestimate them. (*Failure* 53-54)

Removal of persona from performance through what Halberstam calls “radical passivity:” performance in which the artist is passive to the actions of the audience, (*Failure* 140) allows the viewer to experience the artist's undoing so that they do not have to experience it within themselves. Feminist theorists Simone de Beauvoir, Monique Wittig, and Jamaica Kincaid have all described the process of becoming a woman as the passive acceptance of the patriarchal order and development into a passive being, but none described a potential mode of resistance which harnessed the passivity ascribed to them. Halberstam describes just such a potential mode of resistance as “passive masochism,” using Yoko Ono's *Cut Piece* as an example of a performance which “demonstrates Deleuze's claim that “the masochist's apparent obedience contains a criticism and a provocation”.” (*Failure* 139) Halberstam determines that passively masochistic works, via Freud's description of the female masochistic fantasy, “transfer punishment

definitively away from the body of the subjugated and onto the body of the oppressor.” (*Failure* 144)

Halberstam presents the concept of “dis-appearance” (*Failure* 140) as a particularly queer version of visibility through absence. One might use the term to describe femme sexuality or “passing” trans\* identity; the things which construct these identities are also what makes them invisible. She describes queer femininity as “a disidentification with the logic of gender variance as the other of normativity;” (*Failure* 142) it is an identity that seems to comprise more of what it is not than of what it is. In *Gaga Feminism*, Halberstam describes how lesbianism “can never either be an origin or a destination—in other words, it can never be either a primary mode of identification, nor can it be the goal a woman might shoot for.” (*Gaga* 84) In cases like these it becomes apparent how adopting a position of invisibility is a very realistic choice given the options one is given. For artists who exist in these categories, utilizing these positions of invisibility can be an instinctive way of asserting one’s presence.

Alternately, artists may use tactics of forgetting (i.e. neglecting to pass on pieces of information ascribed to them by the dominant culture) in order to create truths and histories that do not carry the full weight of their history. Important pieces of information that artists might choose to “forget” are contained in their physicality, and thus removing their body from the work removes it as a piece of their history (within the experience of the audience) of their work. Halberstam suggests that removing their bodies from the art refocuses the work on that which has caused the artist’s invisibility, implicating and inextricably linking the oppressor to the work.

In “Mediated Deviance and Social Otherness,” Kylo-Patrick R. Hart describes the social phenomenon that how a group of people is represented determines how they are treated in the world; that representation constructs how we see others and that in turn determines how we treat them. (Hart 2)

Oppressed groups, then, are the most negatively impacted by this phenomenon, while the dominant culture benefits from it. This supports Phelan and Muñoz' theories that suggest that increasing visibility is not necessarily an effective strategy, especially not at this moment in history. Because *The Missing Body* (my curatorial project and my creative thesis work) resists representation through hiding the bodies of the artists, it problematizes their/our construction as Others. By making the artists' absence conspicuous, it makes the inability to read this "reality" visible; it exposes the constructedness of the so-called reality of the representation of the groups of which the artist is seen to be a member.

### **3.2 The Body**

It would be a mistake to think we know what a body is when we see one.  
("One-Legged Gender", Marilyn Strathern 242)

Because our brains synthesize visual information more efficiently than other forms of information, the visual is accepted as "truth." This provides us a particularly skewed view of the world, which is vulnerable to falsification. (Gurrieri 197)

In *Stocky Bodies*, Gurrieri argues that since images construct our understanding of the world, and our understanding of the world is primarily shaped by the dominant culture, resisting representational convention is a key strategy for allowing other kinds of knowledge to be adopted into our worldview. Gurrieri advocates for the creation of "visible voice" (203) wherein people in the position of "other" but who represent acceptable positions within society are centred, quoting Feuer; "for those of us subject to what might be called 'visual oppression', representation is the necessary first step toward liberation" (203). I disagree with this strategy; for those of us subject to visual oppression, clearly, representation is the primary cause of that oppression. However, I agree with her that resisting representational convention is a key strategy, in that by resisting



representation altogether we can open the door for any number of new ways of knowing, via queer strategies such as disidentification, dis-appearance, the unmarked, and resisting visibility. I think another effective strategy for resisting representational convention is in centering the positions of the “other,” but not those who form the image of “acceptable other” as Gurrieri would suggest; rather we might center those who represent viable (defiant, unabashed, incomparable) alternatives.

Gurrieri’s text is a useful companion to Phelan’s *Unmarked* in that it focuses on the fat body. The fat body is accompanied by intense moral judgment against its very physicality in addition to the judgments against all those marked as other made by our culture relating to presumptions of inferior intelligence, desirability, and worth. This makes its rehabilitation through representation that much more difficult, as the image projected by fat people’s embodiment is not just lesser, but wrong.

In her essay “Offbeat and Naked,” Linda Nochlin talks about supersize model Aviva as being a “participant in the performance (of photographs of her) rather than a mere object of the photographic gaze” (“Offbeat”). Performance artist Carolee Schneemann pioneered this technique, asking, “How can I have authority as both an image and an image maker?” and answering, “By using (my) own body, I transform object into subject.” (Kaufman 52) It is an empowering act to perform one’s identity for another’s gaze, and thus oftentimes threatening to the viewer. But how can an artist perform their identity for another’s gaze when their body effectively silences them, or when the threat of their identity makes the audience blind to it? They take authority by removing their body from the content of the work, from the image, and by applying the same techniques to work from which their bodies are absent.

In “Fatties On Stage,” Petra Kuppers asks “How can we as women of size present ourselves, perform our specific and subjective identity in a world in which our bodies are read

against our will?” (277) This is a question I have been grappling with for 14 years, and which has been one of the major questions leading me to this research project.

Kuppers argues that fat “splits away agency and subjectivity, ...takes away the voice and acquires its own vocabulary. And that vocabulary of the fat female body tells not of agency but of loss of control.” (278) In performance, then, a fat artist has no mode of communication except the sign of their fatness, and any attempt to communicate (orally or otherwise), translates as a loss of control, as evidence of their excessive, messy, uncontainable, uncontrollable nature. Kuppers notes, of the fat performer, “they are too easily read—to twist discourse away from their size proves nearly impossible. Their size is already performance, prior to any staging of it.” (278)

My understanding of this phenomenon, not as pedagogically acquired knowledge but as a deep embodied experience, is how I came to develop this theory for a new methodology of performance. My intersectional identity and experience working with artists along with the research I have done to date suggest that it might be useful outside of fat performance, by any artist whose bodily subjectivity exposes them to an oppressive gaze.

David Cross’ research closely parallels my own in many ways; a focus on the hidden body in performance, an interest in the theories of Muñoz, Phelan, and others, and an emphasis on bodies that are deemed unworthy by society. His research is therefore of particular interest to me; in this section I will try to avoid simply pointing out instances in which we agree on common theories (of which there are many, and his writing is quite thorough) and instead try to pinpoint areas where his scholarship has been enlightening of my own, and where our paths diverge. Because his art is also included in my curatorial exhibition, I write about his work elsewhere in the paper from a curator’s perspective.

In my work, I talk about the taboo body – one which society deems unsuitable. People with taboo bodies are silenced, they do not see their experience reflected in the dominant

narrative, and they are given cultural messages that they should not exist. David Cross' work focuses on what he calls the non-preferred body; similar to the taboo body, the non-preferred body includes any body which society considers valueless; the revolting, the abject, the grotesque. Rather than describing it as the "abnormal" body, as Foucault did—implying that the nature of the problem exists in and on the body (i.e. not "normal")—Cross uses the word "non-preferred" to remove the focus from the body as the site of the issue and place it on the society which rejects it. (53) He borrows this concept from film theorist Kaja Silverman who, in *The Threshold of the Visible World*, suggests a need to stop referring to bodies in terms of a hierarchy of characteristics ("good bodies" and "bad bodies"), and refer to bodies in terms of a matter of choice ("bodies we prefer" and "bodies we do not prefer"). (Cross 12)

My own use of the word "taboo" has similar goals; in refusing to point to those features which construct a body as taboo (fat, queer, disabled, etc.) and using a word which instead points out that these constructions are socially-enabled (a taboo is a social proscription), I preserve the value of the body while positioning it in opposition to those forces which would oppress it.

Cross' theoretical project, while very similar to my own, focuses specifically on physical difference that can be discussed in terms of social value as expression of the extent to which a body is considered desirable. The "un-preferred" body is the body which nobody loves; more explicitly, the un-preferred body is the body that nobody *can* love.

As implied by his use of the word "non-preferred," Cross is less interested in engaging an investigation into the body itself, and more interested in society's response to it, through creating opportunities that encourage the audience to interrogate their role in a system which creates hierarchies of value based on physical appearance. These opportunities, in Cross' art (as in much of my own, older, work), are extremely active, inviting the audience to literally climb onto the work. The *Mighty Men and Mistress Maker* does the same, though most of the other work in my

creative exhibition tries to create opportunities for the audience to perform the work in much more subtle ways that attempt to demonstrate how the nature of performance need not be actively physical, but instead exist in as little response as an embodied affect. This is essential to my work in that it acknowledges “performance” is not necessarily visible, but felt.

Cross references Silverman’s category of “the good enough” as an alternative to cultural ideals. (64) Silverman suggests that because the category of the (almost) ideal represents the tiniest minority of people, to somehow create a category of good enough into which most people would fall and yet still be considered acceptable might help people to identify with those currently marked as Other. The “Others” in our society, according to this concept, are people who are separated from the “normal” by an insurmountable barrier consisting of the line between those who can strive to attain the ideal, and those who for a variety of reasons (race, gender, sexuality, age, body difference, etc.) cannot. The unattainability of the ideal means both that no one deserves it and that no one is inadequate to try; the *only* option is the good enough.

*My Lipsticks and Bullets* approximate each other in this “good enough” way that speaks to non-ideal bodies; they are enough like each other to coexist and be seen as the same, though they are in fact vastly different. They are also “good enough” in and of themselves; they do not try to be perfect; they are not perfectly finished, they are not perfect reproductions, and they are not perfect imitations of themselves.

Foucault’s “gaze,” according to Cross, represents the mechanism of society’s desire to weed out those that do not fit and correct them; (Cross 53) he focuses on the visual (in terms of the non-preferred), looking at Muñoz, Phelan, Silverman, Judith Butler, Donna Haraway, Laura Mulvey and others in the formation of a model of invisibility-as-strategy for resisting surveillance, (much as I have). However, he (mis)reads Phelan’s proposal of the Unmarked by suggesting that she “equates visibility... with vulnerability,” (56), believing that the project is

about hiding *rather* than engaging with the problematic discourse; that if visibility is problematic, then invisibility is worse and functions to disempower Othered bodies. I contend that this misreading of Phelan's theory (which I assume would extend to his readings of other theorists' projects of resisting visibility, such as Muñoz and Eng) is based in his interest in visibility, and in the non-preferred body, as *fundamentally visual concerns*. Though the non-preferred body is bound up in social hierarchies, in which it is on the bottom rung of the beauty ladder, this is a social hierarchy of looks, and so resisting visibility is about resisting the sum total of the inherent value differential that is in peril. It could very well be that for these people, resisting visibility is counterproductive. Those populations marked as Other whose difference is not primarily visual (though it may well be extremely visible) such as women, queer people, people of colour, trans\* people, and people with disabilities may find that resisting visibility is a vital strategy for carving out community and shared identity, something that I do not think is a project of Cross' nor the non-preferred. My reading of his project suggests that the greater desire is to "fit in," to be considered "good enough" to be part of the dominant culture. Visibility is not what condemns the non-preferred body to the position of Otherness, the dominant narrative is. Resisting visibility, for those who are Other apart from how they appear, is an undertaking designed to remove oneself from that culture altogether, recognizing it as irredeemably damaged, and build a culture not based in opposition to the dominant but learning, at least, from its mistakes.

Paul Couillard and David Cross both refer to Philip Auslander's assertion that the media (through live TV, reality TV, digital streaming, digital video recorders, mobile devices, etc.) has made "liveness" both imprecise as a concept and superfluous. (Cross 100) Couillard contests that claim, suggesting that mediatization has created a culture which begs for personal connection, and that it is driving the return to the body we see in performance art today. (Couillard 6, note 18) Cross says much the same, and distinguishes liveness from *presence*, which the media does not in

any way approximate. I don't think these concepts are mutually exclusive; in fact, I agree with all three – that liveness is no longer relevant, that the media environment has created a desire for personal connection and a return to the body, and that there is a need now more than ever for presence in art. Where I make a distinction between liveness and presence is in the fact that I think there is a need for audiences to experience and interact with art and artists; that the need for presence relates, in general, more to audiences than it does to artists (for the most part, artists are still very present in relation to their own art), and that it is not only the genre of performance for which this is true.

In *Crip Theory*, Robert McRuer examines the history of disability as a social construction, focusing on representation of the disabled body, and tracing the history of disability scholarship through queer and feminist theory. McRuer discusses Rosemarie Garland-Thomson's four categories of crip representation: the wondrous (or what is, these days, sometimes called "cripspirational;" images of people with disabilities doing everyday activities but are presented as awe-inspiring), the sentimental (pitiful, and certainly lesser-than), exotic (the disabled as freaky; unnatural, kinky by very nature of daring to be sexual while "abnormal"), and normal ("just like us;" and, unfortunately just as constructed as the other 3 categories).(172) These categories represent easily digestible stereotypes of disabled identity that prevent people from being seen or engaged with as individuals. The fact that disabled people have been unable to successfully resist these constructions suggests that artistic strategies of resisting visibility may be ideal for them/us as well. In fact, McRuer suggests that "crip reality" (63) is incomprehensible to the general public in the absence of a conception of a disabled community or identity; our lives are already invisible, not only through reproduction but simply through representation.

Thus, I would suggest that for the crip artist, visibility need not be resisted so much as invisibility can be exploited. Loss, as Halberstam suggests, be used as a tool of empowerment;

having no formal relationship, as an individual, to the dominant narrative provides opportunities for “a new version of selfhood, a queer version that depends upon... improvised relations to community.” (*Failure* 80)

De Preester’s paper “To Perform the Layered Body” presents, in part, a context for an expanded definition of the body; her suggestion of the ease of the human body in incorporating foreign objects as extensions of itself implies that the definition of the body needs to be considered quite broadly. She quotes Merleau-Ponty’s descriptions of objects as diverse as feathers in hats and automobiles:

A woman may, without any calculation, keep a safe distance between the feather in her hat and things which might break it off. If I am in the habit of driving a car, I enter a narrow opening and see that I can ‘get through’ without comparing the width of the opening with that of the wings, just as I go through a doorway without checking the width of the doorway against that of my body. The hat and the car have ceased to be objects with a size and volume which is established by comparison with other objects. (Merleau-Ponty 126)”

In this sense, these objects are not prostheses; they are tools for perceiving and navigating the world as much as our eyes or fingers or legs. New technologies have allowed for the public’s imagination of what a body is to become quite flexible; Google glass, brain-powered wheelchairs, prosthetic limbs and speech software, cochlear implants, vehicles that recognize us, houses that know when we are home and adjust the temperature and lighting to our preferred settings. People are now questioning whether athletes with prostheses should be allowed to compete against “able-bodied” athletes, claiming that prosthetic limbs have advanced to the point where they are no longer a disability, but a vast improvement comprising an unfair advantage. De Preester demonstrates that these changes to the body do not impact on one’s sense of ownership of it; rather, that the brain seamlessly takes ownership of those extensions and incorporates them into the sense of self. She suggests that this function protects us from the sense of alienation from our bodies we might risk upon sudden changes to its schema (loss of limbs, development of a

pregnant belly, etc.) (De Preester 364). I found this to be quite striking in my Personal Appearance performance, wherein I wore a mascot costume of myself; becoming “me” was really quite seamless; learning to move in a hugely cumbersome body, to express myself without use of my face or voice was just a matter of stepping into the costume and doing it.

De Preester further suggests that mundane activities, once elevated to the status of art through performance, may lose their casualness and ordinariness such that they are rendered explicit, visible, conscious. In this case, a gesture which has been translated into art may become, rather than natural, an extension of the body; object-like. (368) The entire body can become object-like, in the service of gestural performance, becoming, through the brain’s extreme ease in accepting outside objects as part of itself, an extension of the audience’s own body.

According to De Preester, in politically charged performances, where the audience is confronted by someone marked Other, explicitness evokes a need in the audience’s brain to depathologize that difference – which can be a powerful and important goal in itself– but what if the performer transgresses or needs to transgress acceptability? They can, I argue, create performance that achieves those goals while removing their body to dampen the effects of that transgression. Using methods I outline in this paper, artists can turn objects and other people and the audience into tools that, according to De Preester, can easily become extensions of their body in order to be more confrontational than they might otherwise be able to be. (369)

Naima Lowe’s work exploits this tactic; if she were to perform the work live, depending on the audience, the content might be too intense to affect the thoughtful engagement she is hoping for; allowing the written text to be an extension of her body allows her racial difference not to be a barrier to those in the dominant culture, even though her racial identity is hardly disguised. This tactic is not a way of being less confrontational; it is because the artist *can’t* be less confrontational that these tactics are useful.



### 3.3 Performance

Paul Couillard's work in and about performance has greatly informed my own practice over the past 14 years. Couillard's work is rooted firmly in the (his) body; it is a research-based practice examining the ontology of embodiment. He is interested in testing the limits of his body as a way of knowing it fully. Though they diverge, his conception of performance is essential to my own. The basic foundations of our work are very much the same, in consideration of the nature of performance art; Couillard says:

My approach to understanding performance art has relied less on tracing its progress in Western art history than on exploring the basic elements of all performance practices— time, space, the performer's body, and the relationship between performer and audience – thus opening up possibilities for linking what I do as a performance artist not only to art history, but also to other practices such as performing arts, ritual, sports, social gatherings and public behaviour. (3)

Couillard's concept of performance as a (the) medium by which an artist can connect to the world matches closely with my own, not only in its definition of basic properties, but in an understanding that it has the potential for connection between art, artist and "real life."

Women, queer people, people of colour, and other oppressed peoples have been early adopters of new artistic media such as performance (and video), as forms which had not yet been colonized by the hetero white male dominated artistic mainstream. These groups of people have historically used their creative work to agitate for social change about topics that affect them, (refuting the notion of women's art, indigenous art, and the artistic products of "Other" cultural traditions as primarily decorative and of lesser social value than that of Western white men's). As Joan Braderman says, her work was "about creating alternative representations of dominant rhetorical categories such as woman, sexuality, space, or politics." (199) Performance remains largely open to non-mainstream cultural producers, and is not only a perfect venue for work

focusing on the body and identity, but, as Couillard notes, for creating that connection between the artist and the world.

Another point on which Couillard and I definitely agree is that of the belief in the equality of the audience in relation to the artist; not in a carefully-crafted way that predetermines the roles of artist and audience and ensures that no one steps out of line, but in recognizing the agency of all players within the performance space as essential to the realization of the work.

He suggests that in considering performance, the “work” should not be considered a noun (i.e. a ‘work of art’) but a verb (6); something that *happens*, not something which exists or is created. This concept of performance meshes well with theorists’ such as Muñoz, Halberstam and Phelan who posit that performance, via its ephemeral nature, is the ideal medium for opposing the dominant narrative, and that visibility is a liability in this project.

This, I think, is where Couillard and I start to part ways. I agree with his assertion that documentation is not performance, (6) though it may serve some important purpose and, indeed, I have included documentation of performances in my curatorial exhibition. However, I disagree with his implication that interaction cannot be achieved in the artist’s absence. I argue that interaction is possible even using those methodologies where the artist is completely absent from the work, through a belief that objects can embody an artist’s experience, and that experience, if the object can engender a performative response, can facilitate a mediated interaction.

I understand that Couillard’s practice relies heavily on his own embodied experience and therefore his work cannot be achieved without his physical presence. However, I firmly believe that the same knowledge that Couillard is searching for in his work (and that I have sought in mine) is something that an audience can also seek through art, and find within their own embodied experience; that as artists we can share this search for knowledge, and that removing our bodies from the work is an effective way to do this.

What is lost in this approach to performance, as I think Couillard would fear, is the artist's own experience of the work; it is true that work where the artist shares time and space with an audience, and where that shared experience generates meaning, is not possible in some of the methodologies I am forwarding. I think what is to be gained in its place, the creation of audiences with deeply embodied knowledge of the work, is worth the trade-off, and can greatly enrich an artistic practice which engages multiple approaches to artmaking.

What I am talking about is privileging the audience, even in research-based practice centred in the body; realizing that the knowledge that another person can gain by allowing them to inhabit the space normally occupied by oneself is incredibly valuable, trusting that as an artist one might learn something just as valuable by doing so, and being willing to take the risk whether that reciprocal value is acquired or not.

In his papers "Implicit Bodies Through Explicit Action" and "The Implicit Body As Performance: Analyzing Interactive Art," Nathaniel Stern argues that the body *is* performance; he uses this argument as the basis for an examination of media art that is interactive but in which a body may or may not be "performing" in the traditional (artistic) sense.

Stern compares two important definitions of performance which are useful to keep in mind when discussing performance art; my own conception of performance borrows from these (and others, as discussed herein) to define any work in which the body of the artist or viewer is purposefully activated in the experience of the work. (I would say "in the making of the work," which more clearly states what I mean, except that I have already excluded from my examination of performance those art objects which are considered performative through the act of their making, i.e. "action art.")

According to Stern, Butler's "performance" is a metaphor for the notion that gender is a persona that one plays, as well as a reference to the texts which construct us; it is an agreement to

enter into a cultural fiction. Nicole Ridgway's definition of performance, on the other hand, is that performance *is* the relationship between the body and the world. ("Implicit Bodies" 27)

This definition of performance, obviously, allows for a very broad discussion of what performance art might be; in relation to performance in the *absence* of the body, however, it forces us to confront the question of where the art resides.

If the *explicit* body is the productive body, the body that explains its presence, then the *implicit* body as defined by Stern ("Body as Performance" 234) is that which is implied by the fact of its performance. He is discussing work that exists primarily in virtual worlds and electronic landscapes, where physical, flesh and blood bodies *cannot* exist, but the model is applicable to the physical world as well. Following his model, art that is performance *has* a body, by virtue of the fact that it is performance and not reliant on a body for its definition. The body through performance remains legible because it creates legibility.

Performance in the absence of the artist's body, considered apart from the artist's body entirely, allows the artist to talk about and do things that performance, singularly, can do, while shedding those markings of the explicit body and the ghosts that inhabit them.

Performance that involves the audience activates, potentially, both an explicit and an implicit body. In Cheli Nighthtraveller's work for *The Missing Body*, her body is, essentially, both present and absent simultaneously. Communication between the artist and the audience is essential to the work, but that interaction exists, even through the absence of interaction, as an implied understanding that the artist is present even if she is not known for certain to be.

Stern explains the difference between "interactive art" and what he calls the "implicit body framework," ("Body as Performance" 234) in that conventional interactive art literally explains that it is interactive and *how* it is interactive but does not say what is expected of the audience. The implicit body framework makes clear what the physical options are, which fosters

critical understanding of the work by the participants. By this definition, the art in *The Missing Body* which some might see as interactive are clearly performative; they are not opaque machines which require intervention in order to make their use clear. They are intuitive tools for the creation of knowledge that the audience is given the agency to negotiate.

In my research, these models not only form a theoretical framework; they are an investment in the paradigm of performance as a critical mode of production and discussion about contemporary art as a site for the creation of meaning. Stern insists that the implicit body in interactive art provides opportunities for the audience to harness corporeal forms of knowledge production. (“Body as Performance” 240)

In *Touching Feeling*, Sedgwick’s theory of performativity follows Derrida through Butler and its influence on writings about queerness and performativity.

While acknowledging language as performative—in an Austinian sense, i.e. the utterance as performance (4)—in *Touching Feeling*, Sedgwick is more interested in the “haptic absorption” (22) between two subjects, or between subject and object, which she theorizes as performative. She argues that as important as the visual is in framing and creating knowledge, upon close physical proximity, the visual gives way to the sense of touch as a more concrete and therefore more reliable form of knowledge. Touch, she suggests, is also better at communicating than language. As a way to generate and perform knowledge, then, the haptic is useful in its ability to circumvent the tyranny of the dominant narrative asserted by visual culture; it is also an important tool of communication for those for whom the visual and written/spoken language are inadequate or inaccessible. For people with disabilities (blind people, people who don’t use language, the mentally disabled), people immersed in a non-native language, and, more broadly, people marked as ‘other,’ employing strategies that use physical touch can create effective, *affective* performance. Touch, Sedgwick demonstrates, can articulate so much more than words or images

can, even if we are hard-pressed to put that knowledge into words. It is a sublime language that, because it cannot always be put into words, is difficult to write about, but is profoundly affective to those who know it.

As a curator, I face unique challenges in curating work that acknowledges the need for a haptic reading. How does one create a space that respects the artwork and ensures its safety while allowing the audience an experience of the work that will allow them to understand it as fully as you know they could if they had access to that experience? Museums and galleries are primarily visual spaces and therefore fall firmly within the realm of the dominant discourse, not allowing for alternate readings or modes of expression without major concessions and exceptions that few institutions can easily make. Permitting physical interaction with artwork means providing extra staff/volunteers who are carefully trained in how the public can touch the work/how “far” they can go, extra insurance when the work inevitably breaks, is soiled, wears down, or, heaven forbid, hurts someone, and the implementation of systems that ensure the public understands that this work is an *exception*, and that they should not attempt to interact with other work in the gallery, now or in the future. Curating haptic work is an exercise in queering the institution.

Mandy Espezal’s works in *The Missing Body* are objects that, in my opinion, are only fully knowable when touched. Placing them in the SAAG Gallery was not just a function of deciding where and amongst whose art the work would look best, but one designed to resist the inherent normativity of the gallery space. Even if (or, some might argue, *especially if*) the artist and the gallery do not allow work to be touched, in this space the work becomes *more* performative because of the tension between desire and expectation; the desire for the haptic knowledge expressed by the work and the expectation of appropriate audience behaviour. Espezal’s sculptural objects and the environments she places them in explicitly evoke this desire for a physical experience of the work, through the use of varied textures, the scale of the work

relative to the viewer's body and hands, and elements designed to provoke temptation to transgress the boundaries of the institution.

David Cross' *Bounce*, on the other hand, simply cannot be understood without a particularly engaged physical interaction, one that is facilitated through its presentation (rather than tensely acquiesced to). Rather than appearing as an art object which evokes a desire to touch it, *Bounce* appears as – and functions quite fully as – an inflatable play structure; albeit one with a twist. Though a viewer might intellectually know that the artist is inside the inflatable sculpture, the act of playful interaction engendered by the work, followed by physical exertion required to mount the object, and finally then, only when they are literally on top of him, seeing his eyes peering out from just under the surface, gives the audience an experience of the work that is worlds away from merely understanding these facts to be true, or from witnessing the experience of other people's encounters with the work.

Soft, hard, smooth, rough, caress, grope, scratch, smack, embrace, press, hold, push, grab, warm, dry, rigid, supple: the signifiers of the haptic—the words which we use to talk about touch—are often read as explicitly sexual. Indeed, our culture is so afraid of touch outside of (heteronormative) sexual relationships that any focus on it is labeled as queer and as dangerous. Sedgwick suggests that this makes touch fertile ground for queer artists to explore, particularly as it relates to performativity and shame. Political projects that attempt to redress group shame (i.e. any sort of “pride” movement), she argues, cannot fully succeed because they are based in language and not the physical, where shame resides. (62) I would elaborate that those artistic projects that attempt to address histories of shame (as attached to oppression) through haptic performance are some of the most affective, memorable, and therefore potentially effective works.

Calder Harben's work, similarly to Espezel's, promises a level of knowing that can only be accessed through touching the work, but because of its uncanny resemblance to real skin, it simultaneously repulses; the viewer can be left with a satisfying understanding of the work which exists in the space between the desire and aversion to it. Harben's work exploits shame as a particularly affective tool; Sedgwick describes shame as an authenticating emotion, one that drives the performative urge at the same time as it denies it and therefore functions to situate identity.

In my own work which provides the audience opportunities for transgression within the presentation space, including the *Mighty Men and Mistress Maker* as well as several older works, it has been important to both create rich opportunities for haptic knowledge and to present them in spaces that normally deny this kind of opportunity, without providing instructions for how to engage with the work. Rather than saying "welcome to my art: here is what to do," I allow the viewer to make decisions about how to engage the work; my art is not "interactive," in that the viewer is the switch which turns on the rest of the machine, my work is performative in that from the moment a human encounters it, their experience of it, including their potential decision not to engage with the work, is the performance of the work. I recognize that in order to make art that attempts to queer the institution in this way, I have had to access my privilege, my insider knowledge and position within the art world, and I don't expect that the kind of work I make is available for all artists to be able to make. Having the privilege to make work that can be shown in the gallery *and* provide access to a haptic knowledge of the work is one of my most treasured joys as an artist, and one of the reasons I continue to work on both sides of the curatorial divide to queer the institution and ensure access to a physical experience of art.

Nigel Thrift proposes a theory of "lyric materiality" (123) that addresses contemporary problems with old definitions of materiality. These problems arise from current technology's



problematization of the material relative to concepts such as space and the organic, pointing to the fact that material substance is a construction inseparable from our depictions of it, and that our understanding of what is real in the world of the invisible (e.g. outer space, mathematics, the cyber, the atomic) relies primarily on our imaginations. He describes wonder as a sort of performance of this materiality, produced in the instant of experience. This “wonder” is what I would describe as one particular experience of affect in the broader category of what Jill Bennett would call “the squirm.” Thrift differentiates wonder from shock, another embodiment of the squirm which is more easily recognized as performance, which Fisher describes: “With shock we face the all or nothing, the Russian roulette of a mind or a system at the end of its rope” (Fisher 5). Thus, the squirm does not rely on negative reactions of discomfort, but can be embodied in experiences of attraction as well.

That performance might exist in an embodiment of affect and that an artwork might exist within this performance is the crux of one of the four methodologies in my thesis. What I describe as the opportunity for audience transgression can exist on many levels, but the most basic of these relies on that moment of the squirm, whether the audience member makes a conscious decision to physically engage with the work or not.

Using the same theory of lyric materiality, Thrift also demonstrates the need to question our definitions of the body, and assumptions that it is contained by our physical skin-suit. He suggests that the body is relative to that which surrounds it, consists not only of flesh but of all the physical and non-physical apparatuses which extend it, and is made up of a set of relationships with the world within which it exists.

In the absence of a definitive physical body, Thrift describes embodiment as a set of space and time qualifiers; the same qualifiers which I have used in my definition of performance art.

Thrift's theory is valuable in imagining performance (art) in the absence of the body; particularly his idea that performance has the potential for use by those on the outside to agitate the dominant culture. By conceiving of performance as a "cultural store of expressive longings... not by any means always in the cognitive domain" (Thrift 129) artists have access—even in their absence, through embodiment of non-fleshly parts of their bodies (i.e. lyrical embodiment), and the application of the squirm—to affect cultural change.

In *Sweet Dreams: Contemporary Art and Complicity*, Johanna Drucker delineates the differences between "thingness" and "objecthood" – objecthood referring to purity and sculpture and aesthetic principles, and thingness referring to [art] objects that are inextricably linked to material culture and references to other objects. In conceiving of things as performative objects, it is important to distinguish that those objects that might perform are the ones that harness "thingness". (164)

Objecthood allows a work of art (even, I would argue, a performance) to harness the authority of the art world; this may be a good strategy for artists to use for many reasons. However, achieving objecthood confines the art to the realm of the aesthetic, where it cannot interact with people, problems, and ideas that exist outside of aesthetic concerns. Thingness harnesses the authority of the thing; the manufactured good – that in which the public has faith because it was mass-produced (in theory) via the laws of supply and demand. The authority of the thing puts artwork in the category of things that *act*, rather than objects of contemplation.

The historical shift from handmade as the only option, pre-industrial revolution, to a preference for the manufactured as a symbol of class and wealth has been experiencing a shift back to a preference for handmade/small-batch/artisanal/one-of-a-kind objects, carrying the same class complications. Because of this shift, there's a potential to harness thingness via the signifiers of an object that mark it as handmade, but it is complicated by the fact that those

artisanal/small-batch/handmade thingmakers are actively working to imbue their commercial things with the outward signifiers of objecthood (imprecision, flaws, the mark of the hand) if not the inherent artistic characteristics of objecthood. I am still more interested in the thingness of manufactured things, because they speak to the masses.

Those artworks which perform are the ones which exist in the world, which have the potential to draw the viewer into a conversation not just about art but about life and problems and a search for solutions:

In capitulating to material culture, they embody its most phantasmic properties: continually deferred possession, seductive contemplation, and endlessly displaced signification... With whimsy and terror, the work manages to reify the strategies of consumer desire as well as to celebrate the material richness – resonant, redolent, replete with associative meanings of that material culture. (Drucker 157)

‘Complicity’ in art has been theorized as one method of approaching relationships to the dominant narrative (antagonism being the alternative). In George Marcus’ text “The Uses of Complicity in the Changing Mise en Scene of Anthropological Fieldwork,” complicity stands in opposition to rapport, ‘complicit’ implying a vaguely evil partnership between two agents against a larger entity, and therefore potentially useful as a tool for resistance. Looking at performance art - particularly that which addresses the “other” - through the lens of anthropological fieldwork is useful relative to my project of creating more viable relationships between artist and audience; examining new models for the relationship between anthropologist and informant (“informant” as partner in the anthropological activity rather than “subject” as the subject/object of study).

Marcus’ use of the word complicit is an attempt to provide an alternative model for the traditional notion of ‘rapport,’ its hierarchical positioning of anthropological fieldwork relationships having long since lost validity within the field but with no workable model having

yet replaced it. In short, the need for “authority” in the field has shifted, but not the desire (or perception of need) to be read as an “insider” to one’s field of study. (79)

The reason “rapport” does not work is because it assumes that it is possible for someone on the outside of a culture to position themselves such that they can have access to the inner workings of another culture, recognizing at the same time that they will always remain marginal – “that they could be relatively more insiders than outsiders if only by mastering the skills of translation, sensitivity and learned cultural competencies.” (81) Rapport sets up a discourse whereby, “(i)n effect, subjects are participating in discourses that are thoroughly localized but that are not their own.” (82)

Complicity, on the other hand (in its anthropological use here) does not fully reject the inside-outside dichotomy, but it recognizes that there is truly no such thing as being inside of a culture, even for the subject of study, because cultures exist among and between other cultures, are always shifting, and can never be contained. Complicity does, however, position anthropologists as “ever-present markers of outsideness,” (81) and their informer “a subject who is sensitive to the outside.” (82)

Positioning the anthropologist as perpetual outsider is where this model becomes useful for performance art strategies; “insideness” is still sought and valued in contemporary art. The need for authority in art has similarly shifted, but, as in anthropology, the desire to be read as an insider to one’s field of research in art remains significant. I would suggest that the use of the word complicity in this context, as a relationship built on the cross-boundary negotiation of competing needs and curiosities as compared against the familiar insider friendliness of rapport, has much more in common with the word antagonism in the contemporary art field, as a tense but mutually respectful relationship between artist and audience, compared against the art world’s “complicity,” a collaborative relationship built on a (usually false) assumption of shared goals.

So, while the use of the word complicity in this context is completely impractical (perhaps to be replaced by “collusion”?) the concept of the artist considering themselves as an outsider seeking communication with one who is sensitive to the outside is highly useful.

Though I anchor my research to a belief in the intention of the artist—that is, that an artwork is an artwork when an artist declares it so—Roland Barthes’s “The Death of the Author” is instructional in illustrating the concept that the moment of activation of an artwork exists not with the artist but with the audience. That is, in relative terms, if a work is performed, it is performed as much by the viewer as it is by the body of the person creating the work. (Barthes 41) In Kaprow’s “Notes on the Elimination of the Audience,” he argues for an elimination of the artist-audience divide as a way of allowing art to produce a “heightened sense of the everyday” (Kaprow 102) rather than what he sees as a terminally uninteresting artificial relationship within the performance space. Ironically, reading “Death of the Author” alongside “Notes on the Elimination of the Audience” provides a model for understanding the performance space as egalitarian and generative.

Referencing Judith Butler’s theory of gender performativity, namely, that performance “produces that which it names” (Butler, 2) Allyson Mitchell states that “claiming, “I am fat” can be revolutionary, while hearing “You are fat” can be oppressive.” (“Fashion Plate”) Therefore, the revolutionary potential of performance is also its oppressive potential. In “Trauma, Bodies and Performance Art,” Sophie Anne Oliver suggests that the genre of performance art creates a unique opportunity for ethical spectatorship which, I would suggest, resists that oppressive potential – making room for the revolutionary.

Oliver examines performance art as a potential model for new models of ethics in trauma studies; her outside eye on the art form provides an important view of the genre that can shed light on artists, audiences, and ethics.

The act of viewing turns the person being viewed into an object. This becomes problematic when the performer is an “Other,” (women, people of colour [POC], differently-bodied and differently-abled people, etc.) as they are doubly othered – already Other by nature of their status as not a member of the dominant culture or group, and Othered through being watched (often by members of the dominant group). To date, most scholarship on “ethical spectatorship” (120) posits an “ideal moral witness,” (119) but new ways of thinking which are in line with my own ideas propose to recognize that to witness trauma is inherently complex, while suggesting ways of responding and reflecting that acknowledge accountability.

Oliver presents the concept of viewing performances by the Other as a way of re-visiting and ‘being spectators to their pain,’ (119) and defines “the traumatized body” as both the victims of atrocity as well as “the site upon which trauma and its discourses are negotiated.” (119) She uses the word “response-ability” to refer to the responsibility of the spectator to be responsive. As an audience member, I understand the need to be responsive, but I am not always sure how. As an artist, I want to know: How do I build into my work the opportunity and impulse towards this response-ability?

Oliver suggests that performance art is by its nature inclined towards this ethics because the performance calls for a witness to their experience. Though it might seem like it should, the ethics of spectatorship in performance does not expect that viewers will not feel pleasure, revulsion, or guilt; these are sincere embodied reactions that cannot simply be turned off. She uses Jill Bennett’s theory of sense memory (121) to create a new ethics based in performance art that we might borrow to look at performance and trauma in a new light.

Unethical spectatorship, Oliver claims, exists in the act of turning away from atrocity as well as, potentially, in how we witness it. Witnessing without empathy, as though a spectacle (as out mediatized world has trained us to do) is unethical. Photographic representations of trauma

are most in danger of perpetuating this objectification, which Others the victims and fetishizes them. Janet Jacobs suggests that, confronted with these representations of trauma, the viewer is “always already compromised,” (121) unable to oppose the position of objectifier we have been placed in and, (as Elaine Scarry corroborates) unable to avoid re-enacting the trauma upon them. Oliver warns against the creation of the ‘unethical spectator,’ however, which would imply that particular reactions are wrong. Instead, she suggests that a model of ethical spectatorship should be built upon those very real reactions. She claims that performance art starts from a foundation that the work will evoke discomfort and thus provides an ethically sound model, referencing the early performance work of feminist artists as a successful project in taking back the objectified body in which the artists harnessed the strong responses of audiences to their visceral work. Oliver clarifies that she does not consider performance audiences to be more ethical than anyone else, rather that performance art relies on expected responses of disgust, voyeurism, etc. and actively seeks to problematize them.

Cheli Nightraveller, for instance, is setting out to evoke discomfort through the presence of her cigar-store Indian, and she is doing so in the service of a discussion about *why* we are uncomfortable. Performance is not only useful in revealing how we see Others, however; as this project by Oliver demonstrates,

Performance art also encourages us to consider more self-consciously the role of spectator as one which is also always complicit in and with the representation, forcing us to acknowledge the unavoidable ethical ambivalence of seeing the suffering of others. In this sense, performance art encourages a revised formulation of spectatorial ethics, one that is not based only in the imposition of ideal or ‘appropriate’ responses. (Oliver 123)

Performances that provide opportunities for audience interaction are inherently ethical in that they give the spectator agency in the way they react to the spectacle, rather than simply becoming the objectifier as when viewing images of trauma. Even though they may give the

audience options to *act* unethically, and even when an audience member acts unethically within the performance space, the ethics are transparent.

Oliver describes performance, after Phelan, as an act of loss, and as such suggests that it is much like trauma. She suggests that this is why so many performance artists make work about trauma, or rather, why so many people who have been traumatized turn to performance as a way of working through the experience. In performance's call for witnesses to trauma, Oliver claims that performance has a uniquely, radically ethical relationship to its audience.

The ethical spectator of performance is described by Martin Jay, who identifies 2 types of seeing, epistemological ('the staring gaze') and ontological. (125) This ontological gaze, according to Oliver, situates the viewer within the setting of that which they are witnessing, and is representative of how audiences tend to view performance. Rather than objectifying, this gaze suggests that the viewer recognizes themselves as a participant in the field of vision, as a performer within the space.

This ethical spectatorship is triggered in the performance space where a live body is present, but is it possible to reproduce this response-able spectatorship when there is no body? Can it be reproduced when the audience is the performer? I believe that it can. Because the audience member is experiencing the trauma themselves, in a space which, rather than being accusatory, presents itself as offering an experience of sameness, a shared knowledge, a bonding. Also because the audience member/performer is not alone in the space – they are witnessed as experiencing the work – by the other audience members, by the artist, by the gallery, by the work itself which retains a trace of their presence, by their body which is marked and which may bear witness to those outside the performance space, potentially long after the performance is over.

Rachel Herrick's *Obeasts*, for example, ask the audience to bear witness to her traumatized body, though she's not present in the space. Blair Brennan's work asks the audience



to share in an experience of pain. Naima Lowe asks the audience to answer difficult questions, knowing the pain they have already caused her.

In the presence of the artist's body performing traumatic acts, the active participation by the audience is actively provoked; in the absence of the artist's body, the performative interaction by the audience is much more subtle. Art Historian Jill Bennett theorizes about the performative moment of "the squirm," (37) the embodied unease that is evoked as a reaction to an act by another. She describes the squirm:

Although the squirm is a recoil, a moment of regrouping the self, it is also the condition of continued participation, the sensation that works with and against the deeper level response, which on its own is 'unbearable'. The squirm lets us feel the image, but also maintain tension between self and image. It is a part of a loop in which the image incites mimetic contagion acted out in the body of the spectator, which must continue to separate itself from the body of the other. (Bennett 37)

Psychologically speaking, according to Oliver, the squirm perfectly recreates a moment of deeply felt empathy.

The squirm perfectly describes the moment of performance I seek to capture in works such as *Safety First*, a bronze electrical outlet safety cover that would surely electrocute anyone who tried to use it – that performance can happen in the moment of encountering a work, that performance may be no more or less than a feeling that is evoked in a viewer that is so strong they can not deny that something has physically changed in them. Bennett's "squirm" is a performative affect that, she contends, happens in response to witnessing a traumatized body. However, read alongside Thrift's "wonder," and Muñoz' "shock," I think all three (categories of the same, really) are performative responses that can be evoked in a variety of ways, and while they may require direct interaction (an ontological gaze), do not rely on the presence of another body.

Oliver suggests that “embodied spectatorship” (127) such as that evoked by the squirm allow for the use of sense memory rather than (unreliable) fact memory. Sense memory can access other ways of knowing rather than visual, which, as Sedgwick has demonstrated, is untrustworthy, or epistemological, which is not inherently ethical. Sense memory acts like the squirm in that it registers as affect in the body producing moments of empathy, and it makes the viewer aware of their position as witness to trauma, opening up a space for their ethical response.

From an ethical viewpoint, according to Oliver, there is no distinction in performance art between artist and audience, between passive and active; performance makes each participant aware of their presence in the performative space.

In terms of my project, then, performance art challenges us to view “the other” as human; it resists the dehumanizing preconceptions of “other” while not erasing difference. Therefore, positioning performance in the absence of the artist’s body *as* performance (not just theorizing it as such, but *making* it so, talking about it, curating it, and presenting it as such) has the potential to create more responsive, responsible and ethical roles for the audience.

### **3.4 Some Thoughts About Relational Aesthetics**

I do not want to do an interactive work. I want to do an active work. To me, the most important activity that an art work can provoke is the activity of thinking. Andy Warhol’s Big Electric Chair (1967) makes me think, but it is a painting on a museum wall. An active work requires that I first give of myself.  
(Thomas Hirschhorn, quoted in Morgan, p. 63)

It is relevant to address Relational Aesthetics, Social Practice, and those related schools of art which claim that engagement with the public is their primary mode of practice. As an artist who makes work that hopes to engage the audience and is, to the casual observer, interactive,

participatory, and performative, the question has often been raised about my relationship to Relational Aesthetics. My short answer is that I don't have one; my long answer could be its own thesis. I will keep this version brief, to the point, and focused around Claire Bishop's critical texts.

In *Artificial Hells*, Bishop chronicles the trend towards participation in contemporary art, from the 1960s onward. It is a key text in terms of raising concerns with art that attempts to be friendly, art that wants to save the world, and art that wants everyone to be the artist, but does not want to relinquish control. Bishop notes the urgency in the artistic project of making art meaningful in the face of a crushing capitalist regime that renders everything a commodity, but she lays out some broad problems facing artists who make participatory art. First is the problem of equality, which butts heads with several other impulses including quality (which is difficult to control when all participants are equal), and message (it is hard to stay on point when not everyone is on the same page to begin with). The second problem is authorship; artists are rarely willing or able to truly relinquish authorial control of their work to a collective partnership. The third problem is the artist as political actor (or social worker, or recycling expert, or urban planner, etc.) Artists often want to change the world, but are usually not qualified to take on the work they decide needs doing, and in taking it on they not only make a mockery of the people who are doing what they can to make a difference from inside their professions, but are potentially damaging or endangering the communities they are working within.

In *Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics*, Bishop tracks the history of social engagement in contemporary art, noting that a desire for direct engagement is certainly not unique to Relational Aesthetics. However, she suggests that Relational Aesthetics' claim to be interested in earnest sharing, open communication, friendliness, pleasantness, and happiness is misguided at best and dishonest at worst. (65) In this text, Bishop suggests an alternate model for participatory

art, which respects the opposing roles artists and audiences play; she calls this relational antagonism.

She claims that Bourriaud, author and grandfather of Relational Aesthetics, misunderstands Umberto Eco's definition of the "open" work of art as a matter of the artist's intention, rather than how it is received by the audience, and so Relational Aesthetics is fundamentally flawed. (62) I agree with Bishop that the work of art cannot produce the conditions of our experience; interactivity of relational art as superior to contemplation is at the crux of the difficulty I have with Relational Aesthetics. The audience's embodiment of their experience is superior in my mind, regardless of the 'human relationship' cultivated or not cultivated through interactive and performative works.

Bishop further describes how Bourriaud's theory of Relational Aesthetics is based in Althusser's assertion that culture, the ideological apparatus of the state, produces society. Feminist artists of the 1970s, she notes, responded to this idea by discovering better ways to critique the institution. By the 1990s, Bourriaud had taken Althusser's text and transposed it quite literally onto his new art movement, which claimed that artwork can produce social relationships. (63)

Besides the fact that I don't believe this to be true/possible/a good idea, Bourriaud's concepts run counter to the theories I consider foundational to my own work; theories of the unmarked, disidentification, dis-appearance, and resistance of visibility all take Althusser's text as a cautionary tale rather than a blueprint.

Bourriaud places more importance on the structure of an artwork than on its content, Bishop suggests – so much so as to consider it the subject matter of the work – claiming that the relationships in Relational Aesthetics are irrelevant compared to the encounters they produce.

(64) This treatment of people as interchangeable pegs seems not only of questionable value to me, it also seems downright unethical.

According to Bishop, Bourriaud claims that works of Relational Aesthetics are socially responsible, but that's an impossible argument. By and large, the artists are in no way qualified to make decisions about what is socially responsible about their works and how it might be, and there is no system in place holding them to any sort of standards of social responsibility.

Bishop also notes that Relational Aesthetics claims to create microtopias (Bourriaud 13). The utopias suggested by theorists like Muñoz aim to correct injustices and imagine ideal spaces for oppressed people (*Cruising* 28); the microtopias created by Relational Aestheticians are predicated on art-world exclusivity.

Bishop contrasts her reading of Relational Aesthetics (and by extension Althusser's claim that culture produces society) with Laclau and Mouffe's theory of democracy as antagonism. One of the distinguishing factors, in her mind, between Relational Aesthetics and what she calls relational antagonism is that relational antagonism relies on relationships, interaction, dialogue and negotiation, but does not consider these relationships part of the *content of the artwork*. ("Antagonism" 79) Another distinguishing factor is the tension/awkwardness that exists in the presentation space (a tension, I would add, which is potentially, inherently *productive* of empathetic response as per Oliver's theory of ethical spectatorship). Another key distinguishing characteristic that sets relational antagonism apart from Relational Aesthetics is that it does not require the audience to participate in a prescribed way, but only asks that they be thoughtful; rather than being pressured to play-act the artist's fantasy, the viewer is assumed to be a freethinking human, and is given the agency of one.

A lot of the work I make, curate and reference within my research falls under the category of participatory art, and that makes Artificial Hells important as a cautionary guide. Key

strategies I employ in staying out of the “artificial hells” trap include maintaining an antagonistic relationship with the audience (i.e. relational antagonism as defined by Bishop), never pretending to relinquish control of something I am not fully capable of letting go of, and not trying to save the world or do any other job that I am not fully qualified to do. In my practice I do talk a lot about equality and an egalitarian approach to my audience, but I mean equal in the context of antagonism (one might say I approach the audience as a ‘worthy adversary’). In other words, I want them to have all the authority *as the audience* that I have as the artist; I want them to have agency in approaching the work and I will do what I can to give them that agency. In insisting that I want all (potential) participants in my work to have agency, I need to recognize *any* engagement to be a valid approach to the work. If I am interested in engendering the production of new forms of knowledge, I must understand that I cannot predetermine where those forms originate. In desiring a multiplicity of approaches, I acknowledge that a decision not to engage is as interesting as any kind of active engagement, and that if the work is performative, that decision not to engage is as performative as any other. Of course, hostile approaches might need to be met with hostility; this is one of the key ways that I can distinguish my work from Relational Aesthetics, which aims at all times to be affable; my methodology aims to be egalitarian, not entirely selfless and generous. Critical engagement should meet critical response. David Cross, for example, talks about Hayley Newman’s fascination with those who decline to respond to her interventive performance, (Cross, 103) suggesting that the ambivalence of those who do not respond enhances the experience of the social context of the work for those who do respond. The decision not to engage *is* a valid engagement and helps set up a dynamic framework for the performance.

Currently, there is a proliferation of scholarship on teaching Relational Aesthetics and related practices. Books such as *Education for Socially Engaged Art* (Helguera) which grapple

with questions about how to create a pedagogy of social practice seem, to me, to simply reaffirm that there are major flaws in trying to think of socially-engaged art as a school, a practice or a medium rather than confronting the problem of how art has forgotten how to, and should/can/might/must learn to engage the rest of the world.

#### **4. DISCUSSION OF THE WORK**

In this section, I examine each of the works in *The Missing Body* exhibition, relative to the thesis (and its four methodologies). I discuss each work within its own context not specifically related to the thesis, touch briefly on other art I have made during my MFA program, and compare the works against older projects of mine and art by other artists, as relevant to the discussion of the work.

For as formal as the writing in the first sections of this thesis paper is (or not), the descriptions of the projects in this section are relatively less so; the style and writing conventions I use to talk about each of my own projects are more creative and change to suit each artwork. Some include short stories or sections that read as poetry. Each of these project descriptions should be considered as part of the artwork they are describing, though the artwork, I hope, would be able to stand alone from the description. Similarly, the discussions of the work in the curatorial exhibition fluctuate in length and style.

##### **4.1 Trucker Bombs**

I drive a lot. Everywhere. Road trips; pleasure trips, business trips. I get most of my deepest, most creative, best thinking done when I drive. I love to watch the landscape slip by and think of it as washing over my brain, cleaning out all the crap from the nooks and crannies and resetting it.

While I am driving, on long stretches of highway, I often see what are known as “trucker bombs” – bottles of urine hurled to the side of the road from moving vehicles, the driver apparently too lazy, too hurried or too weak-bladdered to stop and seek out a bathroom.



The proliferation of trucker bombs in recent years says a lot about the state of the trucking industry, the oil industry, our growing cities and insatiable consumer culture, and driving conditions – and by extension, our capitalist system. With the decimation of trucker's unions, overworked non-unionized truckers who are paid only for time they spend driving or, worse, paid by the shipment, are under pressure to drive longer and longer hours. More oil development, more construction and more products being shipped means more trucks and more miles to drive, while inadequate numbers of rest stops and roadside pull outs for trucks to safely stop at mean less options for stopping.

But they also say something about male privilege, abuse of power, and territory marking. Men are not the only people capable of littering and they are not the only ones driving commercial trucks. But obviously it is only men who can pee in a bottle while they are driving; by leaving these golden, glowing little lanterns of piss by the side of the highway they are effectively staking out their territory and terrorizing the rest of us who use the roads, not to mention those whose job it is to clean them up.

As a series of small actions, when driving on road trips (to and from Saskatoon, Calgary, Edmonton, Minnesota, etc.), I have started creating my own trucker bombs. Making sure I am carrying sealable, disposable drinking containers of water, I drive towards my destination until I need to urinate. I then do what I can to approximate the same series of actions that a man undertakes to create a trucker bomb. As a woman with very different physiology, however, it is a much more awkward and time-consuming process. I slow down and stop the car by the side of the road. Putting on my hazard lights, I get out of the car, go to the passenger side, open front and back passenger doors for shelter from the eyes of passing motorists, remove my underwear, place a funnel against my crotch, and squat into a bottle.

After the whole process I document the result and get back on the road, keeping the bottle until I can dispose of it properly.

The action is awkward, pathetic, abject; meant to contrast against the cavalier, macho act as performed by male drivers. Even the violence implied in the name – trucker bomb (or torpedo) is extremely masculine, powerful, and erases the patheticness and emasculation inherent in a system that forces men to resort to pissing in plastic bottles and removes their agency to take a fucking potty break. Trucker bombs are the male driver's way of re-asserting their power and reminding every other driver on the road of their supremacy.

By presenting the photos as beautiful objects, I want to feminize them; domesticate them. They are like religious icons, stained glass windows, amulets, jewels in the sun. My trucker bombs are powerful but for their beauty and not their violence.

As beautiful, carefully crafted images presented in slick lightboxes, they are also like commercial advertisements, subtly implicating the capitalist system that creates the demand that acts upon these men's bodies and, by extension, implicating all of us.

The photos exist as documents of performative action where the body is not present but is still visible, not only in metaphorical form, but in literal residue form.

The images of the bottles, as stand-ins for my body, still allow for the kind of body policing that fat people endure, as they let the viewer make judgments about what I am putting into my body such that the urine appears the way it does – whether it is too dark, too light, the wrong colour, too cloudy. In fact, it heightens and crystallizes that body policing by creating a visual correlative for the highly erroneous but widely accepted “calories in/calories out” fallacy of weight maintenance via a scrutinization of not just what goes in the body of a fat person, but what comes out of the body as well.

To make this work, I used almost exclusively water bottles. It was important to me that the bottle reference the body in as many ways as possible. Besides the fact that they contain my bodily fluid, and would quite adequately stand in for my body in that respect, by using water bottles, the container conceptually references the body (the human body contains mostly water and requires water to survive). The bottle also visually references the body; bottle designs (and water bottles in particular) have historically referenced the woman's body as the source of life, designed to evoke notions of purity, refreshment, health, sexiness, freshness, sleekness, desirability, and honesty. (Miller 17, Norman 48-53)

I did use plastic milk bottles in two cases, justifying their anomalous use by rationalizing that milk is also a woman's bodily fluid (and in both cases, the bottles, which had been designed to resemble a glass milk bottle, very closely mimicked the shape of a woman's body).

Truck drivers rarely use individual-serving water bottles to make trucker bombs, preferring 4-litre plastic milk jugs. From anecdotal accounts and first-hand experience, it seems that men favor the soft, translucent jugs for their wider mouths which are easier to urinate into, the handle which makes it easier to hold, and for their resilient shape; a milk jug is more likely to bounce than burst when it hits the side of the road, especially if it is only filled to a fraction of its capacity. Though single-use bottles are readily available absolutely everywhere, I have heard stories from family-members of truck drivers who have helped save and wash out milk jugs for the men who drive truck. Milk jug trucker bombs do not glisten beautifully in the sunlight as pop bottle or water bottle trucker bombs do, but according to empirical evidence and news reports, they make up the vast majority of bottles of urine found by the side of the road. (Llanos)

My description of the performative element of the work makes it sound as though it is the performance that defines this work, however it is important for me to note that aesthetic concerns shaped the work at least as much as performative ones did. (Though to be fair, the "performative

impulse,” as in the need to urinate, did always prompt each discrete action and the creation of each image.) Other concerns which dictated whether or not an image could be used included:

The light in the sky: The sun could not be obscured by clouds, and had to be low enough in sky to provide the right amount of light to shine through the bottle, not just onto it, and yet not so low that the light was too warm to provide a nice contrast to the urine or too dim to allow it to glow brightly. The best pictures were taken early in the day and late in the day, making it hard to be spontaneous.

The quality of urine: If I had eaten a meal recently, the urine would be likely to be cloudy and provide less glow (depending on the kind of light in the sky, this cloudiness sometimes came in handy in creating a diffuse glow that could be quite beautiful). If I was particularly dehydrated, the urine would be fairly dark, which was actually desirable, because when photographing the bottle from behind, light-coloured urine was often too clear; drinking enough water to fill a bottle for photographing did not make it easy to keep the urine dark. If I could make one early in the morning, I could capture the brightest vitamin-steeped urine – however, this meant getting on the road before eating breakfast, avoiding urinating before I left and yet drinking quite a bit of water immediately after starting my trip. It made for a lot of jagged starts to days of travel, but some of the best pictures. It also highlighted just how ‘inauthentic’ the process was.

The road I was traveling on: In order to ensure that the sun was behind the bottle, shining through it and creating the beautiful glow I so desired, and to make sure that the bottle was on or near enough the road that the road featured prominently in each shot (ideally traveling up the frame rather than across it), I had to drive until the road curved just enough to give me the right angle, or I had to turn off onto a side road, or I had to photograph the bottle not always in the direction I was traveling but sometimes back the way from which I had just come. Safety

concerns often dictated whether I could stop or not; lack of a wide shoulder, a too-busy highway, extreme weather conditions.

Taking the picture was as much of a production and a performance as making the trucker bombs. In order to photograph the bottle straight-on, sitting on the side of the road, I had to lay right down beside it, my camera sitting flat on the asphalt. Eventually, I stopped doing the project when I was almost always interrupted by concerned motorists stopping to see if I was alright (unless I was on small back roads). I can't blame people for being concerned when they saw a woman laying on the side of the highway next to a stopped car, but after trying to explain to at least a dozen people that I was in fact fine, and having to tell them what I was doing (I made up a story about being a photojournalist doing a story about trucker bombs) and successfully fending off two state patrolmen, I found it at least a little bit helpful to have an accomplice/travel companion standing as nonchalantly as possible beside the car as a signal to passersby that everything was alright. Hazard lights and traffic cones did not seem to allay people's concerns and seemed only to worry them more; I suppose that these are most often used by passenger vehicles as signs of some sort of distress.

Being hurried to leave early in the morning (I am not a morning person), being encouraged to push on into the evening after a long day of driving, altering my eating habits and holding in my urine until just the right moment were just a few of the ways that, in the end, I did feel as though this project forced me to approximate the stress that a trucker's body is put through on the job.

#### **4.2 Lipsticks and Bullets**

Lipstick factories making bullets. Bullet factories making lipsticks. Factories that produce both lipsticks and bullets which shift during the war to producing only bullets. Factories that produce bullets during the war which shift to producing

lipsticks after the war. People pretending to make lipsticks in order to covertly make bullets. Lipstick tubes recycled into bullet casings. Lipstick sold wrapped in paper to save brass for bullet casings. Used bullet casings saved during the war for makeshift lipstick cases. Unused bullet casings factory-crimped into lipstick cases. Bullet factory workers encouraged to wear lipstick. Free lipstick provided by cosmetics companies to bullet factory workers. Creation of demand for lipstick by newly-out-in-the-workforce women. Creation of demand for lipstick by women whose men have returned home and taken over their jobs. Bullet-shaped lipstick swivel tubes. Lipstick-shaped bullets. Women working in bullet factories. Men working in lipstick factories. Official US Marines uniform lipstick colour: Montezuma Red. In peacetime, bullet = bad guy. In wartime, bullet = good guy. In peacetime, lipstick = bad girl. In wartime, lipstick = good girl. The term for a molded piece of lipstick is a “bullet”. The term for a lipstick mold is a “bullet mold”. The Red Cross considered lipstick an “essential” toiletry and provided it to women in service during wartime. 30 brass lipstick tubes could be recycled into 20 brass bullet casings. “The lipstick effect” refers to the economic upturn seen by the cosmetics industry during recession and wartime. The US Director of Economic Stabilization ordered factories to stock women’s rooms with free lipstick to improve efficiency. Wartime novelty lipstick shaped like binoculars, flashlights, switchblades. Lipstick as mandatory corporate uniform. 1941: US women spent \$20 million on lipstick. 1946: US women spent \$30 million on lipstick. 1959: US women spent \$96 million on lipstick. 2005: US companies sold \$9.4 billion in lipstick to women worldwide. The average woman buys 4 lipsticks per year. 4 cosmetics companies account for 75% of all lipstick sales worldwide. 10 cosmetic companies account for 89% of all lipstick sales worldwide. “The lipstick wars” saw mass corporate espionage and violent destruction of product. The first lipstick tube was invented by a man working at a munitions factory. Lancôme lipstick makes a “definitive, well-engineered click.” Givenchy lipstick makes a “heavy click, more metallic than plastic.” Clinique lipstick makes a “resounding snap.” During WWII, European countries placed restrictions on lipstick ingredients to save fat and brass for the war effort. During WWII, the US considered lipstick a household necessity and placed no restrictions on its production. In London during WWII there was a burgeoning lipstick black market. In the US during WWII cosmetics companies reported that their sales doubled. In Germany during WWII backlash against the lipstick ban by women refusing to work under such “harsh conditions” forced the government to relent. A federal US luxury tax on lipstick allowed the US to collect \$6 million per year during WWII. During the depression, women reported applying lipstick more often than they brushed their teeth. Industry leaders Helena Rubenstein and Elizabeth Arden opened their first beauty salons in the 1930s. The KGB invented a gun concealed in a fully functional tube of lipstick, called the Kiss of Death. Navy nurses in WWII polled about what one item they would save if they received orders to evacuate overwhelmingly chose their lipstick. American cosmetics companies advertised lipstick as being an important part of the war effort. The names of lipstick colours change to reflect the social and political climate; “hussy” red becomes “courage” red. The first law regulating lipstick ingredients was passed in the US in 1936. The phrase “the generation gap” was

coined in 1925 by a marketing company to explain the difference in lipstick habits between women and their daughters. The New York Board of Health tried to ban lipstick out of concern for the health of the men who kissed women wearing it. The California Women Legislator's Caucus gives out "Read My Lipstick" shame awards to politicians who demean women. Egyptian feminist Nawal El Saadawi calls lipstick the "post-modern veil." Resistance to cosmetics regulation caused the US Pure Food and Drugs Act, 1897 to drop its cosmetics provision when the act eventually passed in 1906. Under prohibition, lipstick was the US' fourth biggest industry, after cars, movies, and bootleg liquor. Companies advertised that lipstick would prevent women from inhaling germs and the fumes of industrial society. Bavarian Red Liquor was advertised as promising to turn women's lips red whether they rubbed it on or drank it. The Malaysian government banned lipstick, rationalizing that it inspires "illicit sex." The Iranian government punished lipstick-wearing women by having their lips rubbed with shards of glass. The women's suffrage movement appropriated lipstick as an emblem of women's emancipation and wore it with the express purpose of evoking disgust. A bill introduced in the Kansas legislature's 1915 session would have made it a misdemeanor for any woman under age 44 to wear cosmetics if "for the purpose of creating a false impression." Historic Catholic texts declared lipstick use a mortal sin. In Elizabethan England, lipstick sometimes served as currency. Queen Elizabeth believed lipstick had lifesaving properties; upon death, her lips were caked with nearly a half-inch of lipstick. In 1770, the British Parliament passed a law that said a woman wearing lipstick could be tried for witchcraft. Victorian women traded recipes and produced them together in underground lip rouge societies. In 1770 the State of Pennsylvania passed a law stating that a man could have a marriage nullified if the wife had, during courtship, deceived the man by having worn lipstick. In Edwardian England, lip rouge peddlers were hanged as sorcerers. Lipstick formulas from Ancient Egypt and Victorian England to mid-20<sup>th</sup> century America have been found to contain many deadly poisons. Egyptian lipstick cases were made of brass. Under Greek law, prostitutes could be punished for improperly posing as ladies if they appeared in public without their lipstick. In the 1300s AD lipstick merchants were jailed for witchcraft. Early lipsticks, like bullets, were made primarily of lead.

- Plastic toy lipstick
- Real nontoxic toy children's cosmetic lipstick
- Candy lipstick in plastic case
- Sample lipstick in plastic case
- Antique sample lipstick in plastic case
- Antique sample lipstick in brass case
- Antique full size lipstick in brass case
- Antique miniature lipstick in brass case
- Rounded bullet tip lipstick
- Pointed bullet tip lipstick

- Chisel tip lipstick
  - Angled tip lipstick
  - Plastic toy bullets
  - Antique metal toy bullets
  - Antique plastic toy bullets
  - Antique wooden toy bullets
  - Resin replica antique wooden toy bullets
  - Resin replica antique plastic bullets
  - Antique metal collector commemorative bullets
  - Antique metal toy bullets cast from wooden original
  - The artist's engorged clitoris
  - The artist's left index finger
  - The artist's partner's right index finger
- 
- Lipsticks and bullets that look like each other (mostly like bullets)
  - Things that are neither lipsticks nor bullets (lump of metal, fingers, clits)
  - Lipsticks that look more like bullets
  - Lipsticks with their lids on
  - Lipstick containers with no lipstick in
  - Lipsticks and bullets that are malformed
  - Candy lipsticks
  - Lipsticks that, because of the shape of the makeup itself, look distinctly like lipstick
  - Bullets that require assembly/lone ranger bullets
  - Bullet tips out of a bullet mold
  - Lipstick tips only
- 
- Cast in bronze
  - Cast in aluminum
  - Lipstick cast into bullet mold and fitted into bullet casings
  - Lipsticks made out of ceramic
  - Bullets made out of ceramic
  - Lipstickbullets made out of ceramic
  - Bronze candy lipsticks put back into plastic candy containers
  - Bronze bullet tips put into plastic lipstick containers
  - Bronze bullet tips put into brass lipstick containers
  - Bronze lipstick tips put into brass lipstick containers
  - Bronze lipstick tips put into brass bullet casings
  - Bronze bullet tips put into brass bullet casings
  - Bronze “silver bullet” tips put into cast aluminum casings
  - Aluminum “silver bullet” tips put into cast bronze casings



When doing our job on munitions, we don't neglect our appearance - but still keep our feminine charm by always having Escapade lipstick with us.

For a while, she has said good-bye to her old self... You see her, trim and jaunty in her uniform, doing a thousand vital jobs, and doing them well. Driving trucks and service cars... slogging away at barrack-room desks... packing a parachute on which a precious life may depend... tapping urgent messages from hot, tin-shanty towns. Working wherever possible to free a man for the grimmer, sterner tasks of war. The float-y evening gown has been laid aside. She has said good-bye to coiffures intricate and beflowered, to happy leisure hours in a room of her own and to many things so dear to the feminine heart. Her country needed her and cheerfully she answered that call. Our thanks and gratitude go out to these daughters of Australia, who are playing so great a part in winning the war. Let us do all we can to hasten the day when she'll be free to return to her former self and grace our homes and hearts in all her womanly charm.

Being in the Army doesn't mean that a girl should neglect her appearance and risk losing her feminine charm. In fact, it is quite the opposite. We have to do justice to the uniform we wear. The finishing touch to my "make-up" is Escapade Lipstick. Escapade is made from the formula of our principals, who are one of America's foremost cosmetic manufacturers.

Even if you are working harder than ever before for victory there's no reason why your extra war-time duties should stop you from looking attractive. You can look lovelier than ever... and without expensive beauty treatments. Pond's Powder and Pond's "Lips" are inexpensive to buy, economical to use and definitely beauty-making. Pond's Powder clings for hours and hours... it's made with the softest, finest texture. Pond's "Lips" stay on and on and on - to the very last kiss. All chemists and stores sell Pond's Powder and Lipstick. Six exquisite shades to choose from.

By day she serves... by night she fascinates... With Pond's Lips and Pond's Powder. When you step out of your Service clothes - uniforms, dungarees, or office frock... you deserve to look your loveliest. And that means Pond's "Lips" and Pond's Powder. Ponds "Lips" not only always get their man, but they stay on longer - noticeably longer. And Pond's Powder gives your skin that irresistible 'orchid' look - no male can resist for long. No wonder - Pond's Powder has the softest, finest texture of all. It's glare-proof, and it clings for hours. Six smart shades of powder and lipstick to choose from at all chemists and stores. ("Lipsticks, Bullets and Bombs")

#### **4.2.1 Collecting Lipsticks and Bullets**

My interest in lipsticks and bullets stems from the fact that they are so visually similar and yet, to me, represent opposite ends of the gender socialization spectrum. When I started my thesis work at the University of Lethbridge, I began collecting lipsticks and bullets as a way of thinking through this conundrum. Initially, I was interested in collecting toy lipsticks and bullets; in part because when translated into plastic toys via a design process that would highlight each object's most familiar characteristics, I knew that their similarities would be heightened and that the two objects would be easily confused. I also started collecting sample lipsticks, of the kind that I used as toys as a child once they had been used and/or rejected by my mother, because of their similarity in size to the other toy lipsticks and bullets that I was collecting and because of their proximate use as toys. The collection started to organize itself into apparent logical categories, as my collecting habits became more refined. Toy lipsticks and bullets are no longer made in the same size they once were (i.e. similar in size to the real thing) due to regulation regarding concerns over possible choking hazards. I was never interested in oversized/artificially unwieldy objects, so I avoided these, and collected old and antique toys. Girls' toy sets usually contained one toy lipstick whereas boys' toy sets contained 6 or more bullets each, so finding old toy bullets is relatively easier than finding old toy lipsticks. Add to that the fact that toy gun sets are incredibly collectible, and the market for these bullets is actually vast. One can find bullets for their antique toy guns in dozens of gun makes and models, and from dozens of original manufacturers. Due to the fact that there is a burgeoning market, however, prices are high. There is a thriving replica market to serve those whose toy bullets are rare, and I collected those as well.

This collection fed my interest in the simulacra; the symbol; the signifier; as listed above, I found original wooden toy bullets modeled after real lead-and-brass bullets, resin collector

replicas of those original wooden toy bullets modeled after real lead-and-brass bullets, plastic replicas of original plastic toy bullets, plastic toy lipsticks, “real” child’s lipsticks to be used for play but which contained real cosmetics, and lipstick samples which were used, in real life, as toys. Some toy bullets, in attempting to replicate the brass casing/copper head look of the real bullet, used yellow and red plastic, unwittingly moving closer to their toy lipstick counterparts which employed yellow and red plastic to approximate the brass and scarlet of the lipsticks they were mimicking.

I also discovered easy access to lipstick samples, both historical and contemporary. These samples were often available by the dozen or even by the gross, at very low prices; new lipsticks because the cost of production is very low and because the samples act as an effective form of advertising, and old samples because, I suppose, the market for collecting old mouldering lipstick is soft nowadays. (Interestingly, I discovered that the copper content of old lipsticks must be very high, as many of my old lipstick samples – named “soft peach” or “sunset,” for example – have turned a vibrant shade of green.) Having fallen down the rabbit-hole of online lipstick sales, I also discovered (and purchased) several beautiful old full-sized lipsticks in brass cases. These lipsticks resembled bullets in shape and detail more, even, than most of the other lipsticks I had collected. Their waxy tips were molded to a sharp point; their brass cases looked quite exactly like bullet cases. Upon doing some research into the history of lipstick production, I found this to be no coincidence. Perhaps the reasons for casting lipstick into a perfectly bullet-like tip were less conscious, but I soon discovered that the first brass lipstick cases were produced on exactly the same machinery that produced munitions during World War II, that they were invented by a bullet-maker, and that the histories of lipsticks and bullets were more entwined than I could ever have imagined.

#### **4.2.2 Methods of production**

Interestingly, while the process, machinery, and, often, the specific factories for producing the brass casings for lipsticks and bullets is basically the same, the process for creating the soft/functioning/active/"meat" part of lipsticks and bullets is also the same – cast a molten substance (lead- or wax-based) into a mold, let cool, de-mold, and fit into casings. And while the bottom of a bullet casing contains a cap and/or a propellant to make it go, the bottom of a lipstick case also contains a mechanism to make the lipstick project up and down. Long before lipstick was sold in "stick" format, lip pigments were being made and used – the Mesopotamians and ancient Egyptians both used lipstick. Similarly, bullets were made and used long before guns were invented. In Latin, the word for bullet is literally "glans." "Sling bullets" engraved with phrases comparing their use to rape have been found in Greece dating back to the 4<sup>th</sup> century BC. (Friedman 24, Paunov and Dimitrov 44)

#### **4.2.3 History of the Object and its Wearer**

Beyond the factual history of the objects, on researching further I read about the violence that the history of lipstick has enacted on women, lipstick's role in the machinery of both war and the economy, and its powerful social role throughout history.

Once I had amassed my collection and done some reading about its histories, I found I was more interested in confusing the objects than I was in clarifying the differences, in part because I wanted to emphasize how confused and confusing their histories already are. In this decision, some things fell away; I am not focusing in great part on bullets themselves. I feel like their history and their impact has been well-documented and well-felt. Bullets are known to be dangerous, powerful, and masculine. Because lipstick is gendered as feminine, its complicated

dangerous and powerful history has been largely ignored, leaving only the spectre of the dangerous lipstick-wearing femme fatale amongst a sea of pretty ladies and their trivial beauty concerns.

The history of lipstick regulation across all cultures demonstrates an overwhelming concern for men who might be ensnared by women and a complete lack of concern for women's health and safety regarding the makeup's formulation. Early laws regulating lipstick formulas reference concern for the health and safety of men who might be kissed by women wearing lipstick. (Schaffer 13) Aversion to lip colouring throughout history is firmly grounded in the notion that a woman who paints her lips is hiding her true (implicitly, less attractive) self as a way of tricking men. Whether seen as the sign of the prostitute whose job is to lure men in for profit, the older woman who relies on it to appear less unacceptably aged, the younger perhaps less favourably endowed woman who needs it to attract a husband, or the witch who employs its trickery to appear to be something that she is not, social, political/legal and religious prohibitions against lipstick invariably have everything to do with protecting men from women and nothing to do with protecting women. (Ironically, over time, the angry feminist has been characterized as both a woman who wears garish lipstick and a woman who wears no makeup at all.) Current studies which estimate not only how much lipstick the average woman consumes per year but tally the amount of lipstick consumed by men (teenage boys apparently consume more lipstick than any other demographic) demonstrate that anxiety over men's health is required to evaluate the level of concern we should have over the ingredients in cosmetics. (Schaffer 60) The poisonous nature of ancient (and not-so ancient) lipstick formulas and the lack of its regulation until very recent times, combined with the fact that cultures have often found lipstick to be the sign of a menacing woman who seriously endangers the man she stalks (so dangerous that to wear

it was to be shunned, or worse, put on trial for a crime punishable by death) demonstrates how lipstick's history marks it as fatal as the bullet.

#### 4.2.4 Masculine Versus Feminine Histories

As much as we understand that war (and the bullet, by extension) is all about economics, cosmetics are usually not understood to be as implicated in the economic or war machine. The concept of makeup as frivolous is deeply inaccurate.

We are told that the bullet is a phallus; we are told that the lipstick is also a phallus. Mountains of psychoanalytic-based readings of both objects agree on this: a cursory search of digital academic library JSTOR uncovers hundreds/thousands of results for academic papers referencing "lipstick" or "bullet" against the words "phallus" and "psychoanalysis," and a simple internet search uncovers millions, broad categories of which include artworks, opinion pieces, fiction and pornography, as well as several brands of "novelty" (penis-shaped) lipstick. Just a few academic articles and books which tackle the topics include such titles as "Lipstick Ascending: Claes Oldenburg in New Haven in 1969" (Williams), "Pipilotti's Pickle: Making meaning from the feminist position" (Mangini), "Giggles and Guns: The phallic myth in *Unforgiven*" (Kelley), *Manhood in Hollywood from Bush to Bush* (Greven), *Taking it Like a Man: White masculinity, masochism and contemporary American culture* (Savran), *Images of Bliss: Ejaculation, masculinity, meaning* (Aydemir), and "The illusions of Phallic Agency: Invisible Man, Totem and Taboo and the Santa Claus Surprise" (Steward 529) – the titular "surprise" being that the main female character was "raped" by Santa Claus using a lipstick on her belly. Relevant internet results include "Retail therapy: How Ernest Dichter, an acolyte of Sigmund Freud, revolutionised marketing" (The Economist), "Getting the Id to Go Shopping: Psychoanalysis, advertising, Barbie dolls, and the invention of the consumer unconscious" (Bennett), "Subconscious

Seduction: Phallic Signifiers in Cosmetic Advertisements” (melpinto), and “Lipstick: the ultimate phallic symbol” (menstuff.org).

Both lipstick and bullet are objects designed to penetrate the soft flesh of the body. Both are cylindrical, rounded at the tip, contain a “head”; are “penis-shaped”. Both are powerful, “virile,” sexy objects. A man shooting a gun is demonstrating his masculine prowess. A woman applying lipstick is acting out a sexual performance whereby the lipstick/penis penetrates her mouth/vagina. Powerful images, all.

What I find interesting about these readings are that both the lipstick and the bullet are gendered masculine; they do not in fact represent, in psychoanalytic terms, opposite ends of the gender socialization spectrum. As powerful, sexual objects, both must be rendered male. However, it is possible to read these objects in a different way, one that challenges the traditional heteronormative male reading. Both objects can indeed be read as extremely sexual; the bullet is meant to penetrate the body, the lipstick is designed to be dragged around the perimeter of the mouth. However, both are designed to be able to be used with as little force as possible: a gun is fired with the slight squeeze of one finger, and lipstick is applied with a light touch. The words one would use to describe each – sleek, smooth, rounded – are associated with the “fairer sex.” Both objects are small; so small, in fact, that if we are being truthful, they more closely resemble the clitoris. (If the reader thinks I am stretching this point based on images of bullets in their minds that do not align with the ones I am picturing, I would solicit them to recall all those objects in our world that have been claimed for the phallus, such as the Washington Monument, and allow me a small fraction of the leeway afforded that image.) To be blunt, I cannot think of another phallic object besides the bullet for which claims of smallness equals power. It is perhaps for this reason that I am less interested in an examination of large munitions, though similarly-shaped: huge bullets, missiles, rockets, warheads and mortars, which are meant to symbolize our

“bigger is better” giant-penis culture. I am also less interested in examining art and cultural imagery of the lipstick-as-missile phenomenon, though examples abound. Where lipstick and bullets are conflated to the benefit of engorged penis phallus symbology, I think whatever content is there has been well mined, and I am just not that interested.

Try as I might, I just cannot shake the image of the bullet as clitoral. So much energy in such a tiny package; (the glans of the clitoris contains a greater concentration of nerve endings than any other human body part, if popular science is to be believed;) the shape, the size. Lipstick, too; it is not meant to be shoved into and out of the mouth, it is to be rubbed gently. In fact, I think both lipsticks and bullets are actually very queer objects and could use a thorough queer reading. As a symbol of potent male virility, why does a man only ever shoot a man? It is culturally forbidden for a man to shoot a woman, under any circumstance. The demonstration of a man’s phallic potency which can only be used against another man is incredibly homoerotic; one man’s bullet penetrating deep into another man’s guts. Even in hunting imagery, the conquest is always for the male of the species (e.g. the 6-point buck), and the bigger the better.

The lipstick is potentially just as queer, or at least female-empowered; if a woman’s lips are a surrogate vagina, and rubbing the lipstick (clitoris or penis) on them causes them to be redder/engorged, then the sexual imagery of lipstick application implies that it is the woman/receptive partner who derives sexual pleasure from the encounter, not the man/active partner. Because the woman usually applies her own lipstick without regard for an outside actor (as opposed to the bullet, which is usually used between two partners), I would say that the lipstick is an apt symbol of female sexual empowerment and self-satisfaction.

#### **4.2.5 The Artwork**



The objects that I have been making in this project embody all of the above discoveries, ideas and thought processes. I decided to work in bronze for a number of reasons. First, I wanted to learn new materials skills during my MFA, and I had never cast in metals before. Second, I wanted to work in a medium that would allow me to make many multiples of the same object. Third, I was interested in using a material which would reference the original object, and I knew that bronze could look very much like the brass of bullet and lipstick casings. I was also interested in butting up the loaded history of bronze as a high art medium with the mass-produced pop cultural objects I was reproducing, creating a clash between thingness and objecthood, handmade and mass-produced, precious and disposable, craftsperson and factory which seemed to get at the heart of everything I was already thinking about lipsticks and bullets, and more, adding layers of meaning and clarity and confusion to the project.

Part of the way I wanted to get at that confusion and clarity of meaning was by creating masses of the objects. Lipsticks that looked like bullets, bullets that looked like lipsticks, objects that could not be reliably identified as either, and just dozens and hundreds equaling information upon information so that it was overwhelming and contradictory and might seem to add up to some sort of coherent story but really just was a cacophony of meaning. David Cross describes how confusion can be employed to allow for increased levels of access to an artwork, rather than a prescriptive response; “By destabilizing the conditions by which the art is experienced, it is more difficult to distinguish between different categories. As stated, rather than simply defining what is beautiful and what is grotesque, I am concerned to shift the participant’s decision making to a level of uncertainty.” (Cross 13) By eschewing lucidity in favour of ambiguity, space is opened up for the creation of new kinds of knowledge.

As I worked with the materials, I also became interested in the material translation – from plastic toy to silicone or plaster mold to wax to ceramic shell to bronze (and further, from original

brass and lead bullet to wooden replica to plastic cast toy to silicone mold to was to ceramic shell to bronze...) Each of those steps and the meaning behind them fascinated me, and I wanted them to be visible within the work as a part of the retelling of their history. When deformations happened, I kept them as testament to that process. Somehow those deformations and imperfections spoke simultaneously to their thingness – signs of having been “produced” via a process of reproduction rather than hand-made, *and* their objecthood – signs of their being imperfectly made by hand, rather than machine-produced. The fact that none of the objects are exact replicas demonstrates that they are not true reproduction; that there is no such thing as a true reproduction. The intention is carried within the form. Through this project, then, I managed to accomplish one of the main goals of my MFA – to challenge my typical working method whereby I read and research and write and theorize a project until I am satisfied with it **before** I start to produce it. By the time I am finished making a work of art, I usually find that its physicality is so far removed from its intellectual underpinnings that while it may be a successful project, it is no longer about what I originally thought (or intended). I have a much more physical, a much more intimate relationship to these objects already than I do to most of my previous works. Because of this, it has enabled my thinking about affect, embodiment, and performativity; the work itself has helped guide me to the sources I have used as a foundational theoretical framework.

#### **4.2.6 Production as Performance, Objects as Performance**

In terms of how this body of work relates to my thesis, I spent so long making it (working on it steadily throughout my entire degree) that I had the opportunity to think a lot about creation as performance. Readers will note that creation-as-performance is **not** a methodology I discuss as one of the four strategies underpinning my thesis. Creation as performance has been used by

artists and theorized about artists at least since the action painting of the 1940s, and, like many other potential types of performance, is not specifically relevant to my thesis. But it did give me a lot of time to think about performance, and to feel that I was performing while I created the work, helping me work through ideas of artist-as-factory, production, and the role of the artist. In my artistic practice, I have often made work in which the ‘hand of the artist’ is both apparent and important to the understanding of the work (most of the time I actually made that work myself, but not always). I have also often employed industry in the production of my work, hiring companies who would be much better at making the object I want made when the object itself is what is important, and not how it was made (or when it is *exactly* important that it *was* factory-made). It is a much rarer occasion that I have made art that is meant to straddle those lines, and thinking of production-line as performance has been helpful to the process. Though I did not particularly consider the production of this work as performative, that does not mean that the production-line system of production was not an essential element of the work. Because of the history I discovered about the production of lipsticks and bullets, that they were made in the same factories, that men made lipsticks and women made bullets, and because of all the interesting and confusing history connected to not only the objects but the factories and the people that worked in them, becoming a factory not only allowed me to try to embody that history, but it left traces of that production on the objects themselves in a way that enriches the work.

As it relates to my four stated methodologies, this body of work functions both as a stand-in for my body and as an opportunity for audience transgression via “the squirm.” It does this in several ways. I created the works as a literal stand-in for my body through the inclusion of several additional pieces – bronze casts of clits and fingers. These were added in order to make quite literal reference (in case it wasn’t clear enough) to the sexual imagery that lipsticks and bullets have been loaded with. These are sexual objects, they are genitalia, and more specifically,

they are clitorises. The inclusion of clits in the work make quite clear the fact that bullets and lipsticks are more female than male, speaking in terms of cisgender anatomy: one will have to look quite closely in order to find those lipstick/bullet hybrids which feature replica genitalia. They are not just sculpted clits or random clits, they are casts of my own. They are truly stand-ins for *my* body.

They are stand-ins for my unapologetically sexual/ized body, using the strategy of hiding my taboo body in order not to alienate the audience. They are stand-ins for a **performing** sexual body, the bullet and the lipstick being potent symbols of *active* sexuality; the inclusions of my and my partner's fingers a tacit symbol of queer sex. They perform my feminine virility, acting as a phallic symbol would (and not how a yonic symbol might perform my fertility), announcing my size, my strength, my sexual power!

Phelan talks about the phallus-as-bullet, as that which wounds, in *Unmarked*. She references MacCannell's *Figuring Lacan* in a psychoanalytic description of our culture's need to obliterate the Mother's genitals in order that the phallus reign supreme. (*Unmarked* 151) Judith Butler and J. Jack Halberstam, however, theorize the "lesbian phallus" as a potential byproduct of socialization, in Lacanian terms. (*Failure* 140) (Butler 43-56) My clitoral bullets literally stand off against the phallus, offering a resistance against the phallocentric. The power of a man wielded by a woman is socially threatening; the power of a man *invisibly* wielded by a *femme* is simply deadly.

There is also an opportunity for the audience to literally perform the work by taking away and wearing the lipstick cast in bullet molds and held in brass bullet casings, by putting a bullet right to their lips while they consider its complicated history.

Finally, the work provides an opportunity for audience transgression through the creation of embodied affect (the squirm) through the discovery of any (or all) of the layers of meaning within the work that might connect with them.

The *Lipsticks and Bullets* series is meant to embody all of these facts, all of these claims, all of these histories and theories and memories and feelings. I wanted to melt them all down and spit them out one at a time as newly-minted amalgams which clarify at the same time as they confuse – by placing facts and ideas in close proximity they shed new light on one another, yet by mixing them all together create a bewildering set of concepts. I am not interested in discovering a “truth” because I do not believe there is such a thing. To attempt to create something authentic in the place where the histories of lipsticks and bullets collide would be beside the point; it is all simulacra, all symbol, all representation, all performance.

#### **4.3 Mighty Men and Mistress Maker**

As a child, my brother had a toy called Mighty Men and Monster Maker. This toy consisted of several plastic plates with raised images on them representing different heads, torsos and legs of generic superheroes and villains; the boy was supposed to pick out a set of plates to create his own man or monster, making an image of it by overlaying a piece of paper and rubbing on the surface with a crayon. This toy was very clearly gendered, as was my sister’s Fashion Plate, (basically the same toy, but made for girls with images of Barbie-like women), which lets the girl put together her own fabulous outfits for her favorite doll. I was never confused about my preference for the monster maker; I don’t think it had anything to do with sexual preference or gendered behaviour; the boy’s play set simply had much more imaginative options, allowing for creation of not only superheroes, not only villains, but the potential mash-up of both into one hideous, glorious creature!

Around the same time in my childhood, I was fascinated by my father's not-so-secret dirty book collection. Well, that is to say, it was no secret that he had pictures of naked ladies adorning his basement workshop, but the smutty novellas I was so titillated by were not exactly out in plain sight - in his office, in the back of the bottom desk drawer. They were filled with stories of sexual adventure so much more colourful and diverse than any naked lady centerfold could ever hope to be. I kept *this* obsession secret throughout my childhood.

Like the centerfolds in the workshop, though, the nudie magazines the centerfolds were ripped from were somehow more acceptable to share with siblings, friends, and other visitors to the house. At least once every couple of months, I would find myself hiding behind the furnace with friends (or sisters), or new acquaintances, leafing through a playboy magazine and giggling. Whenever my brother was caught, he would be in big trouble; usually a spanking and an afternoon spent alone in his room. When my sisters and I were found with Dad's dirty mags, though, we were gently chastised for "sneaking around" and let off with a warning. Later, my parents would tell me that the reason for this double standard is that for boys, it is dirty. For girls, they are just exploring their own bodies. I wonder if they ever thought about that parenting choice the first time I brought a girl home. I doubt it. It never really crossed their minds, just like it never crossed mine, either, for as titillating as all that naked flesh was. I wonder if it would have been different if I had been caught with one of those smutty books, which did not contain pictures that I could compare to my own body, but instead filled my head with pictures of bodies of all shapes and sizes that I certainly had no real-life comparison for.

Now that I am older and have more sophisticated, complicated tastes, I think back to those childhood toys and wish I could have them again (but this time to have the girls and the boys, the good guys and the bad guys, the toys and the sex all rolled into one)—to allow me to

design the perfect lover, and for others to design their own lovers, and to giggle with them and with all the visitors over our fantastic and impossible and desirable creations.

*Mighty Men and Mistress Maker* is a sculptural object, designed for gallery installation. Designed to look like a life-sized plastic toy bed, it comes with interchangeable plastic plates with mix and match body parts that can be placed on the bed. Visitors coming into the gallery are invited to select the body parts to design their ideal lover. Like the toy, the images will not be printed on the plates but sculpturally raised so that you can place a piece of paper over the plates and using a crayon or other soft drawing implement, rub over the surface to create an image of the person you have created. *Mighty Men and Mistress Maker* begs to be performed. The performance of this work is two-fold – in order to create the ‘print’ of their ideal mate, the audience member must physically engage with the object, moving plates, placing paper down and rubbing the image into being. At the same time, the person creating the work becomes a spectacle for the other viewers, as they kneel beside, lay on top of, or straddle the life-sized bed and, therefore, their own hand-selected sexual fantasy creature, rubbing every line, curve, and bump on their body in order to flesh out the image. so that the act becomes a potentially scandalous spectacle for other gallery visitors and observers.

#### **4.4 Self-portraits**

Through a series of photographs exploring fat women and sexuality, I tried to evoke the dual sensations of attraction and repulsion inherent in our society's relationship to fat women, creating ridiculous bodyscapes using only my hand. These farcical sexscapes, intended to be mistaken for other, larger bodyparts, were meant to appear alien to the average viewer. Because our collective denial of the fat woman's body includes all of her parts, including her hands, even after the viewer comes to understand what the subject of the photographs is, the image remains

largely incomprehensible. The natural lighting, and pictures taken at various times during the day are meant to suggest a comfortable, placid environment and a day filled with self-indulgent lounging. The subject of a partner or a second body is never broached, except when the viewer imagines one amidst the creases and rolls. This atmosphere set up through the series subtly confirms our learned suppositions of fat women as self-indulgent, and resists confrontationalism by refusing to suggest the viewer's role in this taboo sexcapade, thus allowing us to let our guard down enough to explore the attraction/repulsion element of the physicality of the body, which we normally are forbidden from engaging.

Taken with a now-obsolete first-generation Sony Mavica digital camera w/macro lens capable of shooting screen-quality images only, the super-pixelized images were first printed extremely large, echoing historical artistic representations of the female figure while simultaneously foregrounding the digital medium and using it as a barrier to the subject. I wanted the scale to approximate life-size; the large pixels to both reference surface texture and function to blur the obvious skin texture of the hand that would give away the image too quickly. Eventually, I changed course entirely, printing the images on translucent film and encasing them in hand-held plastic viewers. I felt that this resolved the work for several reasons: First, I liked the life-size scale of the enlargements, but the surface texture of the pixel referenced pornography in a way that I wasn't satisfied with; the work is about sexuality/sensuality, not graphic smuttiness. Reducing the images and putting them in viewers still approximated the same scale as the life-sized images, when held up to the eye, but provided a much more pleasing, "organic"-looking grain texture from the printer that looks like film grain. Second, the work is more intimate, in size, in the viewer's conceptual relationship to the work (only one person can see each image at a time; while you are looking at the image, it belongs to only you), and in the audience's physical relationship to the work (it must be brought directly to your face, where the image of my hand is



in intimate contact with the audience's hand; my [symbolic] body cradled in theirs). Finally, the work, now hidden in tiny, brightly-coloured plastic objects, needs to be discovered instead of being confrontational, in a way that I think really benefits the work, not to mention makes it very performative in terms of the audience's physical interaction with the work, as well as their potential embodied reaction to it.

#### **4.5 CANON BALLZ: a Relational Aesthetics critique of Relational Aesthetics**

*CANON BALLZ* is a 2-chamber 25¢ gumball machine filled with colourful wooden balls. Dyed with Kool-Aid and finished with tung oil, each ball is debossed with one letter from one of two texts about Relational Aesthetics. The audience is invited to purchase the art (as they would gum) for a quarter apiece.

I called this project *CANON BALLZ* because Bourriaud's text Relational Aesthetics has become canon for those making relational or socially engaged art. (I used the Z in BALLZ because it is more "hipster" and therefore indicative of the all surface/no substance relational work that I am criticizing through this project.)

First, just like any other work of Relational Aesthetics, it is illegible to the casual and even interested/engaged viewer. It is only available to those in the know; those inside the work.

Second, it is impossible to reassemble; impossible to know by those not inside the creation of (conception of) the work. This is a critique that could be made of many artworks across many modes of artmaking, but is particularly damning of Relational Aesthetics because of the insistence that its very mode, aim, and end product is a connection with others.

Third, as the ballz are dispersed into the world (it is not just a metaphor for Relational Aesthetics work, *CANON BALLZ literally makes a relational artwork*), the original text—the

meaning—is destroyed, and the new owners of the ballz (the relational participants) can remake meaning with only the small pieces they own/their small experience of the work.

People interact with and assist in the creation of the work for 25¢, simultaneously purchasing a piece of the art. Walking away from the encounter pleased with their encounter, (albeit somewhat mystified, in many cases) people are satisfied with the exchange— does this mark my critique as *unsuccessful*? In other words, is the critique only valid if people are unhappy with the interaction, as Relational Aesthetics predominantly aims to create pleasurable or at least satisfactory interactions with the public? No! Quite the opposite! People are pleased with the interaction, but they cannot understand what it is that they are a part of, as the text is illegible. Also, the vast majority of those who choose to engage in the work are those already in the know (as is the case with the worst offenders in the relational field) and *not*, in fact, the “general public” that the artists purport to work with.

By handing out quarters to encourage participation in the work, I am critiquing the fact that works of Relational Aestheticians usually rely on the support of friends and people who are bribed to participate (making it a truly inauthentic experience and artwork). I am also critiquing the capitalist system as it is implicated in the contemporary art world and, specifically, in relational works; i.e. the commodification of relational exchange. How do we avoid turning art into product when the desire within the system is so strong, when the artist is tempted, and when the field of work has so few avenues for financial success?

One of the ways that Relational Aestheticians bribe other artists to participate in their projects is through the implication that, as a “collaborative” project, participants can include the work as a line on their CV. I advertised this as one of the benefits of participating in *CANON BALLZ* as a critique of Relational Aesthetics’ common reliance on a very small community of artists/Relational Aestheticians in the creation of the work. Artists participate in one another’s

Relational Aesthetics pieces in exchange for reciprocation, creating a truly hermetic system.

Purportedly, oftentimes, the artists are the community of people most interested in the work, but usually this happens because the work is in danger of failing without ensuring a built-in audience – so the work is actually artificial. Either way, a movement which claims to be about building social connections and creating opportunities for audiences to engage with art but is actually incredibly elitist and exclusive has both failed miserably and replicated the disasters of art movements it claims to be pushing against, only worse.

I included two different texts, one on each side of the gumball machine – partly to give space to both sides of the argument, but mostly to point out that debate within the field of Relational Aesthetics is just as opaque and inaccessible as the content of the work itself. Criticism, and change, have to come from outside the movement; as interesting as some of the ideas have been, and as useful as some of the methods, the movement itself, as a movement, and an exclusive one at that, is of questionable value.

The two texts that make up CANON BALLZ:

Artistic activity is a game, whose forms and functions develop and evolve according to periods and social contexts; it is not an immutable essence... In order to invent more effective tools and more valid viewpoints, it behooves us to understand the changes nowadays occurring in the social arena, and grasp what has already changed and what is still changing...

The possibility of a relational art (an art taking as its theoretical horizon the realm of human interactions and its social context, rather than the assertion of an independent and private symbolic space), points to a radical upheaval of the aesthetic, cultural and political goals introduced by modern art. To sketch a sociology of this, this evolution stems essentially from the birth of a world-wide urban culture, and from the extension of this city model to more or less all cultural phenomena. (*Relational Aesthetics*, Nicolas Bourriaud 1998)

...to be politically relevant and effective, such experiments need to be grounded in social movements and struggles. As a gallery-based game, relational practices are cut off by an institutional divide from those who could use them. Who are

the consumers of relational art? The cultural élite of the dominant classes, primarily... (And this is a very different demographic from those marginalized communities whose members are sometimes enlisted for roles in relational works). In general, this audience does not tend to overlap with the people actively attempting to generate pressure for deep social change. But this is how the disruptive utopian energies that *do* exist in relational art are managed and kept within tolerable limits: the social separations, stratifications and (self-)selections of the art system enact a liberalization – that is, a *de-radicalization* – of social desire. (“A Very Short Critique of Relational Aesthetics,” Radical Culture Research Collective)

So, CANON BALLZ functions as a genuine work of Relational Aesthetics as defined by

Bourriaud (loosely), or more specifically as it is practiced by those who connect to the movement today – or to social practice, dialogical aesthetics, and other related practices. It also functions more importantly as the kind of performance I theorize in my research, and about which Claire Bishop claims is the more responsible participatory art form: that of relational antagonism.

(*Antagonism* 65-67) As a more honest form of interaction, antagonism allows for critique from within, and acknowledges that the concept of an “authentic” artist/audience connection is fraught with trouble.

#### **4.6 Fat Haircuts**

*Fat Haircuts* is a bookwork in which I ask the public to engage with notions of beauty either through direct participation as a model or as a casual reader of the work. Remember those giant “look books” from the hair salons of the eighties, filled with pictures of all the best, featheriest, blown-outest hair ever? You would flip through those books while waiting for your appointment to pinpoint exactly the look you wanted the stylist to give you, which they of course did to the best of their ability (and relative to their trained understanding of how to make that haircut look “good” for your face’s shape, even if it meant destroying the *actual style you wanted in the first place*).

Of course, the further one is from society's beauty ideals, the more likely they are to be told by their stylist "I'm a beautician, not a magician!" Hairstylists, barbers and aestheticians, like most of us, have simply been indoctrinated into a system that values certain physical characteristics above all others, the difference being that they have been given the tools by which to quantify those characteristics, dispensing remedies to our shortcomings in small doses like over-the-counter ugliness medication. No, they can't make your face less round, but they can help make you LOOK like it is.

#### **4.6.1 Fashionable Versus Fatness**

In 1893, ethics theorist Herbert Spencer suggested that the artificial construct of fashion is not only a signifier of class, role and status, but in fact controls individuals' place in our society, saying "Fashion is a form of social regulation analogous to constitutional government as a form of political regulation." (Chapkis 86) If that is the case, then the oppression of those who fall outside the beauty ideals is regimented by the fact that we cannot fit within the narrowly-defined construct of fashion either because of our size, physical appearance, gender presentation, race, physical ability, or age, not to mention the class, role, and the status conferred on us by our lack of access to financial resources. If fashion controls my place in society, then regardless of what I aspire to, my place in society is limited by my body and its physical appearance. Though we may have the money to buy our way out of the fashion underclasses, until our bodies cease to be unfashionable, no amount of dressing-up will make us so.

Furthermore, there's no such thing as a fat haircut. It is arguable that there are hairstyles that look better on "fat faces" but you can bet that every hairstyle has at one time or another been styled onto every shape of person, and you can bet that whether a style looks good or not has virtually nothing to do with the weight of the person wearing it. Certain styles that supposedly

work better on fat faces, or clothes that we are told work better on fat bodies are in reality tools of camouflage, designed to make those that do not fit the beauty ideal blend in and become invisible. The word “flattering” means “makes you look more like us” because difference is despised in any system that promotes the following of trends.

I am fascinated by the ways haircut art performances and the grassroots queer community haircutting movement question fashion and its attendant rules. Some of these projects that have happened over the past decade include FASTWURMS’ Unisex: House of Bangs, Mammalian Diving Reflex’s Haircuts by Children, Dyke Haircuts, Butch Haircuts, Queer Haircut Collective, Lesbian Haircuts and Bike Shop, Lesbian Haircuts for Anyone. I am attracted to the connections they foster (within the queer and art communities) via physical contact and bonding, the economics of bartering/trade within subcultural communities, and the playful treatment of trust as a sport.

Queer stylists emerged to fill a need within the queer community for “gender inappropriate” or subculture-specific styles; I see a need for a similar fat stylist movement. Unashamed fatness queers the body, and it is important in my practice to draw those connections. The old adage says “never trust a bald barber.” I want to know: do people fear a fat stylist as much as the stylist fears the fat customer?

In September 2012, I put out a call for photos of fat haircuts via Facebook and various (fat/queer/art) activist groups of which I am a member. I invited people to either allow me to take their picture or to send me pictures of their “fat haircuts.” I asked for information including real name, modeling name for publication, hairstylist or barber, the name of the hairstyle, photo credit, and any other information they thought was relevant, making it clear that they could provide as much or as little of this information as they wished. In writing the call, I made several strategic decisions. The first was an omission: I did not define what a fat haircut was, but left it up

to the reader to have to decide whether or not they had one, (and then, whether they wanted to share it in a book, and if so why). In this way, the performance of the work began long before the photos were even submitted, in my challenging people to wonder whether the call was directed at them, whether it was an accusation, whether they believed themselves to be fat and if they were okay with that, whether they felt their hairstyle was worthy of immortalizing in a book, what a fat hairstyle is, whether they had a “fat hairstyle,” whether they were okay with that, whether my project was self-aware/self-critical or simply documentary, and so forth. This strategy engages people in the content of the work whether they choose to participate actively or not, as is their right, and ensures that the making of that decision is a critically engaged function of the work.

The second strategy I employed in the call for photos was the request for information, Through it I marked out space for participants to take ownership of the project and to be represented as real people and not simply as nameless models. I wanted their voices to be heard, insofar as they wished to share them. In doing this, I denied the fashion establishment’s strategy of turning models into glamorous clotheshangers whose identities are subsumed by the needs of the industry, and I made visible the people who are systematically rendered invisible within that same industry.

Finally, accepting and including submissions from all who submitted, and encouraging people to send me photographs (instead of taking them all myself) was my third strategy in creating *Fat Haircuts*. This approach distanced me as the focus of the work even further than simply removing my body as the subject did. By being the organizer/compiler artist rather than creative genius/curator/photographer/designer artist, I worked to actively level the creative playing field within the work, allowing the creative acts of modeling, photography, and self-representation to be just as important as any of my own creative acts in putting the work together.

#### 4.6.2 Representation

Of course, by disseminating the call broadly and then accepting all submissions, I gave up some control over how the work would turn out; I enjoy flirting with this element of unpredictability; there is always some degree of the unknown in performance or in any work involving participation. To attempt to prevent it would be to suffocate the work. *Fat Haircuts*, however, truly relied on that unpredictability to generate content. The substance of the work lies not only in the photos and the object of the book, in the models' performance, or in the artist's intent – the content of the work also lies in the reality of who is represented, and why. Building pockets of unpredictability into my work is one of the ways I can make my art function as active research; by designing questions that can only be answered through the realization of the work, and analyzing the results, which are then used to inform new projects.

Why, for instance, are most of the people who responded to the call women? Mostly I am sure this is because of my social and professional circles. The conference where most of the pictures came from was attended primarily by women; a greater percentage of the people I know and am friends with are women. That can't be the whole reason though. A great majority of the people in my social sphere are white, for example, and yet the project is racially diverse. Another possible reason for the female-heavy response is that when we think of models and hairstyles, women come to mind more often than men. When it comes to signification, women and men are coded along gendered lines: women and representation, men and function. This work presented itself as being about representation, and thus garnered more responses from women. It is very important to me that the work, in the end, is not overtly "female" – several non-cisgendered people are in the book as well as people who may identify as cisgendered women but present as butch, androgynous, or overtly masculine. This only adds to the project's critique of



“normalizing” beauty standards, as does the fact that a broad a range of ages and races are represented.

Another curious aspect of the final product is that the call elicited responses from several well-known names in the fat activist world. This fact might change the project’s reception in those communities, giving it more currency, or a frisson of recognition. What does it mean if it is not a book of fat haircuts on random people, but the fat haircuts of famous academics, musicians, artists, bloggers, writers, and others from the fatosphere? Because these people make up a relatively small percentage of the book, it doesn’t devolve into a yearbook, a “Who’s Who of Fat Activism in 2012”. Rather, it simply helps to make one of the key points of the project: that the models are individuals; they are humans with personalities and flesh and blood bodies, not just ideas or images or clotheshangers.

#### **4.6.3 The Object of the Book**

The desire to manifest this project as a mass-produced object, rather than as a traditional live performance was about harnessing the authority of the object, the book specifically (rather than harnessing nostalgia, or parody, strategies I have employed in other works that employ the authority of the mass-produced object).

As Joanna Drucker states about art that utilizes the modes of product design, “The synthesis of mainstream culture industry production and fine art production makes it nearly impossible to distinguish them...with all that it implies about image rather than actuality.” (218) Making *Fat Haircuts* into a book lays bare the false nature of fashion as descriptive of anything true, or useful for anything rather than oppression. And when resistance is part of the rhetoric of such design-art, “As a product, it could well find its place in precisely the world it criticizes. This collapse of critical distance and cooperation is what gives (the) work its interest and edge... The

art is at risk because it comes so close to participating in mainstream culture” (219) Here the art is at risk, rather than the artist or the models; this is where the work can succeed rather than simply sensationalize, by being risky rather than putting people at risk.

Drucker asks with what content artist-designers are able to imbue their work in its presentation as mass culture product, posing “The issue is not merely one of content, nor of form and production values, but of the capacity of the work to leverage the distinction between familiar formulae and the momentary epistemic disjunction that results in awareness and insight... Their semiotic condition is fraught with the perils of mistaken identity, of product branding... (the work must) call attention to the line that keeps these worlds distinct.”. (225-226)

By becoming the compiler-organizer of the *Fat Haircuts* project rather than genius-artist, I also assert the “thingness” of the work rather than its “objecthood.” In other words, by simply ‘publishing’ them into a book I make fat haircuts desirable as consumer commodities. I make the participants into models, and make their fatness consumable as a desired state of being. In contrast, *Fashion Plate* highlights the social difficulty of living in a fat body.

#### **4.6.4 Implication of Others in the Performance of the Work**

The implication of the other in the performance of my work is not just something I do in asking people to participate in my projects. Rather, if I had my way I would destroy the notion of “audience” entirely, and simply consider people part of site and context as an element of my work. In 1966 Allan Kaprow said in his Notes on the Elimination of the Audience:

“Audiences should be eliminated entirely. All the elements – people, space, the particular materials and character of the environment, time - can in this way be integrated. And the last shred of theatrical convention disappears... To assemble people and say that they are participating if apples are thrown at them or they are herded about is to ask very little of the notion of participation. Most of the time the reaction of the audience is half-hearted or even reluctant, and sometimes the reaction is even vicious and therefore destructive to the work... After a few

years, in any case, ‘audience response’ proves to be so predictably pure cliché that anyone serious about the problem should not tolerate it, any more than the painter should continue the use of dripped paint as a stamp of modernity when it has been adopted by every lampshade and Formica manufacturer in the country.” (103)

In *Fat Haircuts*, the work’s performance began with the call for models; if the performance of the work started before people had decided whether to participate, then it is entirely reasonable to posit that anyone who received and read the call participated in and performed the work. On the other end of the spectrum, because the artwork exists as a book, or a performance that is meant to resemble (or “be read as”) a Book with all the authority of a Book, the work is not complete unless it is read by others; it is in the reading of the book that the work is activated, “performed,” and completed as art.

## CONCLUSION

The concept of performance in the absence of the artist's body is not about justifying opening up the field of performance to include every possible genre of art, though I think I have demonstrated how most any form of art can be conceptualized as performance. Rather, I am interested in how the potential of performance art to affect positive outcomes can be harnessed in new and previously unconsidered ways, and by people who, for various reasons, had not thought performance was accessible to them.

*The Missing Body* proposes several strategies for opening discourse around diverse body-centred subjects (e.g. trauma, beauty, Otherness – race, gender, sexuality, disability, body difference). It offers tools for addressing concerns that artists, particularly performance artists, demonstrate an ongoing interest in, such as avoiding revisiting trauma, resisting objectification, battling becoming a tool of the dominant discourse, facilitating the construction of new communities and new identities. It also avoids centering the performance on the particular subjectivity of the artist so that the artist can address other topics, particularly those related to their embodied Otherness.

The current return to the body in performance, encouraged by cultural theorists who encourage adopting performance as a way of resisting the dominant narrative, and spurred by the dearth of personal connection created by our mediatized world, is reassuring as a corrective to artistic and cultural movements that have hindered the advancement of oppressed groups and damaged connections between artists and audiences. However, this return to the body in standard contemporary modes of performance art (vast though the genre may be), has continued to exclude those who could best benefit from its application, such as those whose bodies effectively silence their voice, those whose messages would likely alienate the audiences that need to hear them,

people who cannot bear the trauma of being witnessed, and those who cannot perform because of the circumstances of their bodies, spaces, location, and access to audiences, technologies, financial or other resources.

By breaking down the elements of performance in the absence in the artist's body into its discrete components and thoroughly researching each one, I have developed some key understandings about the best ways to conceptualize the problem at hand.

**Absence** – Performance, because it fails to reproduce, equals invisibility within the dominant narrative. Therefore, for many artists and theorists, performance equates to an *absence* of the artist's body, and is a way of avoiding problematic representation while still actively claiming cultural territory. Performance, by nature, is usually *inclusive* of the artist's body. Harnessing the tactics of resisting visibility even *within* performance, not simply *through* performance, can replicate these successes of resistance for people whose bodies, by virtue of their very presence, produce barriers.

**Body:** The brain is incredibly plastic in its ability to adopt new features; objects can extend the body to the point that it is made up of mostly non-fleshy parts, other people's bodies become part of the body, or even to the point that the body is completely hidden within mechanisms which function as the body (e.g. vehicles, machines). Objects that are powered by human consciousness can replace bodies altogether (e.g. remotely-controlled robots). Bodies can exist in any virtual spaces that can be inhabited by human consciousness but not flesh. Bodies are bodies *because* of the fact that the work is performative and therefore a body must exist. The body, I have shown, can be just about anything the artist intends it to be. If it is inhabited by the consciousness or the intention of the artist, it can be a body.

**Performance:** The realm of the performative is live, it is virtual, it is anywhere there is an audience for the work, even if the artist is not there. Anything an artist or their "body" does is

performance. Relative to the intent of an artist that an audience activate or perform their art, or relative to whether that work is successfully affective, any work can be performance. The key to this type of performance is the creation of an ethical and antagonistic space that can open up the possibility for an embodied affective experience; an experienced performative moment. If the artist can design their work and their practice such that they give the audience agency as actors within the space, then anything the audience does can be performance.

The combined reading of the theories collected herein tells the story of how important it is that as artists with research-based practices, practices that focus on embodied experience or learning from our work, or as artists making any sort of art that relies on or hopes to connect with other people, our practices need to be based, from their very foundation, on an understanding that the people we engage in our work bring as much to the work, the experience, *our* experience, as we do. We must have a desire to make the new ways of knowing that we seek for ourselves accessible to others too, and to understand that they will bring new ways of knowing to us. Given that the cornerstone to each of the strategies outlined in this paper is the establishment of an ethical engagement with the audience that ensures everyone who comes to the work is given agency within the performative space, perhaps the mystery of *The Missing Body* lies in the unearthing of the Present Audience.

FIGURES



2.2.2.a *Safety 1st*



2.2.2.b *Safety 1st*





4.1.a *Trucker Bombs*



4.1.b *Trucker Bombs*



4.1.c *Trucker Bombs*



4.1.d *Trucker Bombs*



4.1.e *Trucker Bombs* (installation shot)



4.2.a *Lipsticks and Bullets* (installation shot)



4.2.b *Lipsticks and Bullets* (installation shot, metal case)



4.2.c *Lipsticks and Bullets* (installation shot, metal case)





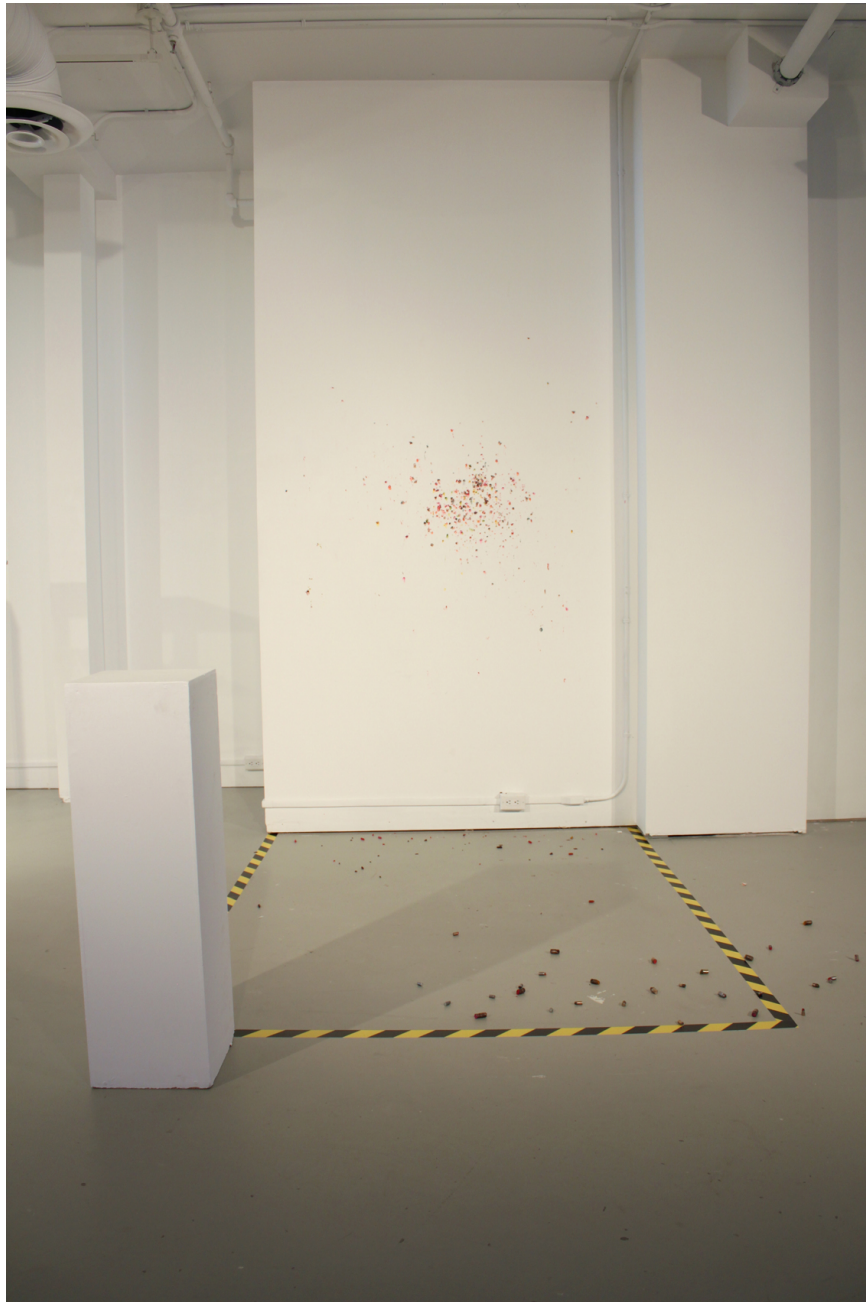
4.2.d *Lipsticks and Bullets* (bronze)



4.2.e *Lipsticks and Bullets* (bronze)



4.2.f *Lipsticks and Bullets* (bronze)



4.2.g *Lipsticks and Bullets* (installation shot, range)



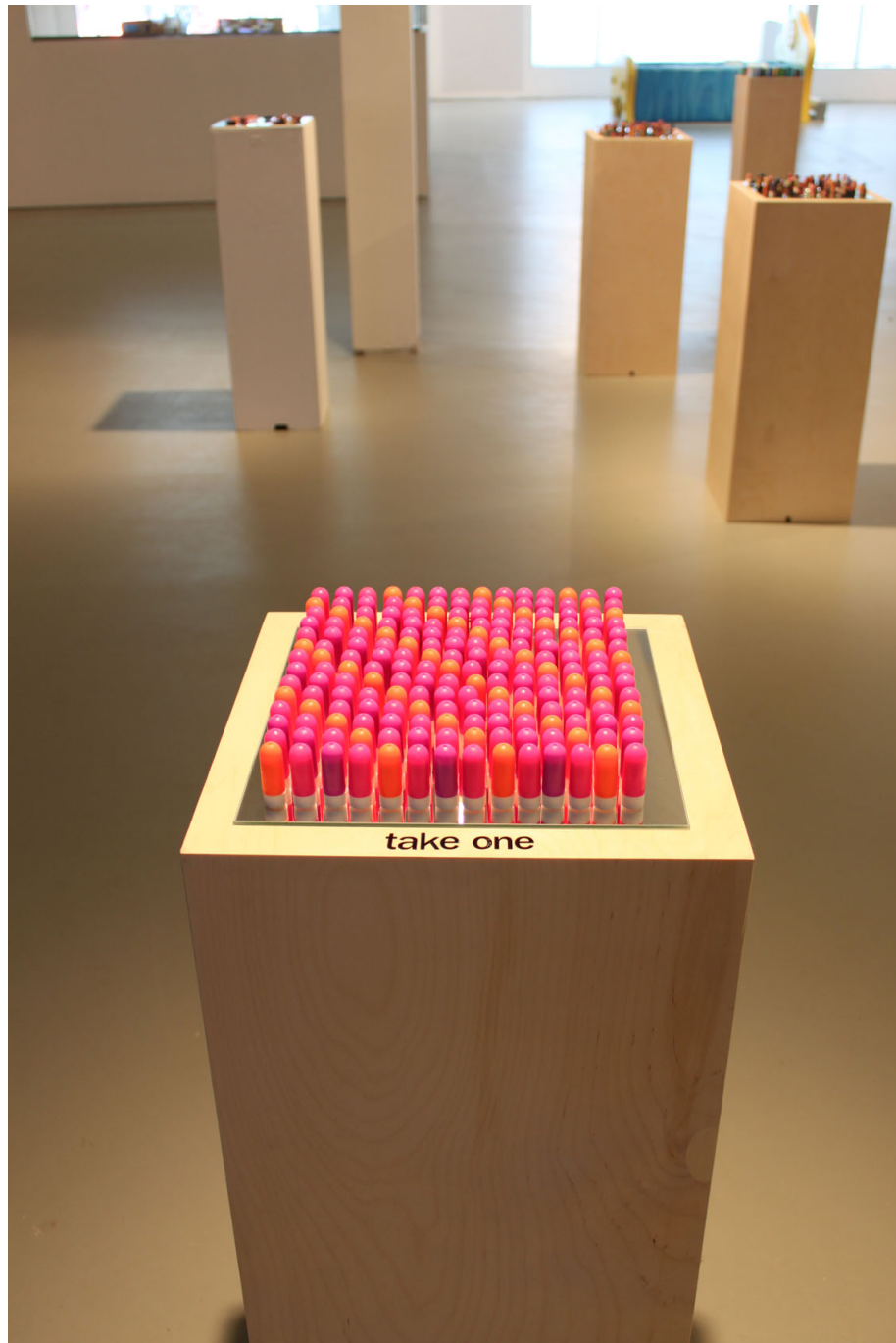
4.2.h *Lipsticks and Bullets* (installation shot, shelves)



4.2.i *Lipsticks and Bullets* (lipsticks)



4.2.j *Lipsticks and Bullets* (testers)



4.2.k *Lipsticks and Bullets (candy)*

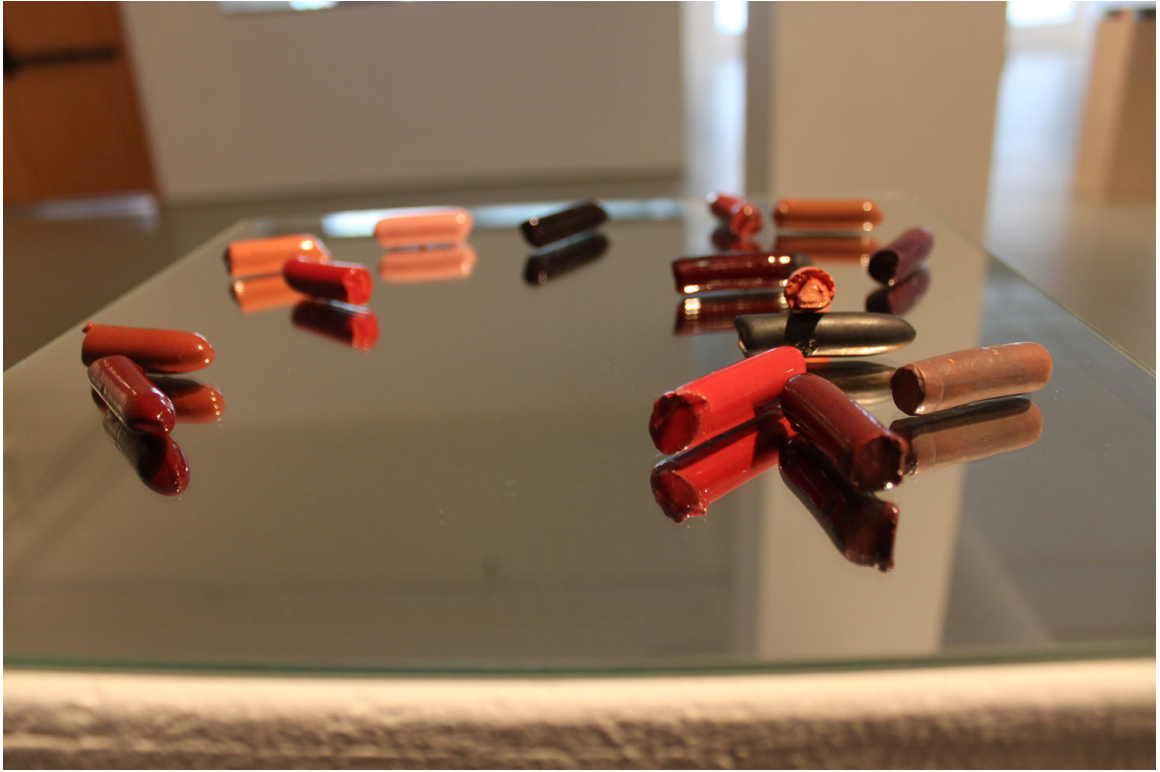




4.2.1 *Lipsticks and Bullets* (ceramic)



4.2.m *Lipsticks and Bullets* (ceramic)



4.2.n *Lipsticks and Bullets* (ceramic lipstick pieces)



4.3.a *Mighty Men & Mistress Maker* (installation shot)



4.3.b *Mighty Men & Mistress Maker*



4.3.c *Mighty Men & Mistress Maker*



4.3.d *Mighty Men & Mistress Maker*

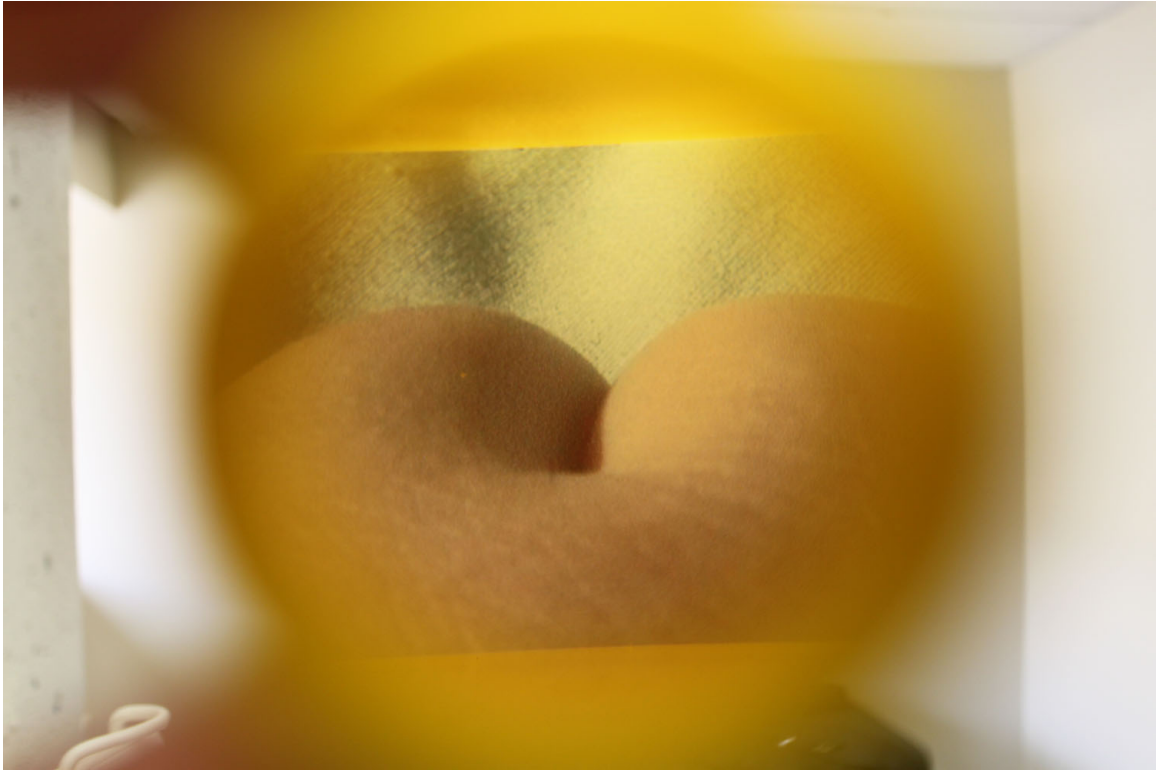


4.4.a *Self-portraits*





4.4.b *Self-portraits* (installation shot, viewers)



4.4.c *Self-portraits* (inside viewer)



4.5.a *CANON BALLZ*



4.6.a *Fat Haircuts* (cover design)



4.6.b *Fat Haircuts*



4.6.c *Fat Haircuts*

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