

**ASSUME THE POSITION:
PLAY'S MEDIATION OF INSTITUTIONAL ANXIETY**

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Abstract

Assume the Position uses visual art's flexible methodologies to consider the complex structural, affective, socioeconomic, and spatial relations between visual artists and the cultural institutions with which they are imbricated. Adopting a transdisciplinary approach that draws from visual art, cultural studies, and sociology, my practice-based research explores anxiety as a physical and temporal approach, as well as a significant relation-to-objects under neoliberalism. Materially diverse projects privilege playful approaches and new attitudes toward temporality as strategies for mediating these contemporary affects. Projects cohere by their strategic complication of vision and time, privileging the local, and emphasizing approachability by engaging humour, play, and the saturated, visual language of childhood.

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“The *then* that disrupts the tyranny of the *now* is both past and future.”
José Esteban Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia* (29)

1. Introduction

Over the past twelve years, my practice-based artistic research has examined processes of socialization into artistic circles and the socio-economic conditions of art making. My primary goal has often been one that the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council somewhat euphemistically calls “knowledge mobilization”: in other words, making complex ideas accessible to a wider audience by tracing paths between insights gained through theory and research, and their practical applications. My work attempts to make visible and intelligible the hegemonic processes that structure relations (and which often depend on remaining hidden to exercise power).

Starting from Sara Ahmed’s theories of feeling and affect, in which she locates ‘feelings’ in the space between subjects, this support paper integrates diverse academic theories to reflect on visual art’s flexible methodology, and explores contemporary social contexts of the feeling of anxiety, and the role of anxiety as a physical, temporal, and metaphorical *approach to objects* that ties subjects and objects together while holding them apart (Ahmed 7). Working within an archive of contemporary feminist and poststructuralist theories and focusing on anxiety’s relationship to neoliberalism, I will examine the affects and positions at play in the relations between and among ‘professional’ artists and cultural institutions. This practice-based research investigates the construction of academic and artistic institutions, and the dialogic affective processes through which those institutions construct artists.

In a climate of economic austerity, how do artists negotiate bureaucracy, political imperatives to professionalize, and precarious public funding to create culture in the public sphere (Black and Burisch; Anonymous; PAARC)? How does it feel? What can be done to mediate anxiety, when anxiety itself mediates relations? How and what can visual art contribute to these

emergent dialogues? By offering insights into the ways artists and institutions interact, my research transverses paths between, among and through socio-economic structures. By making aesthetic space for both social and physical transformation, it develops what Muñoz has called “a flight plan for a collective political becoming” (Muñoz 189).

Working transdisciplinarily, I have developed a diverse yet cohesive body of conceptually based artworks informed by anxiety’s temporality and mediation of relations, which make evident the social and institutional frames through which audiences interpret art and artists. I have used diverse synthetic mediums and techniques to construct images and objects which demand the viewer’s interaction and often challenge liberalism’s privileging of ‘objective’ sight. These include digital photography and video, lenticular imaging, fused beads and other plastics, single image random dot stereograms, vinyl, games, and institutions themselves; methodological strategies include humour, colour, wordplay, ambiguity, pixelation and contextual awareness.

My work often wrestles with questions of belonging, membership, and socialization in artistic communities. How does a person become ‘recognized by one’s peers’ as a professional artist? How does one best perform their role? Besides making art, what actions are necessary? By what means do galleries legitimize artists, and vice versa? Sometimes my work provides provisional answers or suggestions, but more often its function is to ask questions about hegemonic structures and social/economic mechanisms that often remain unspoken, mystified, invisible, or taken for granted. It is this sincere desire to expose, deconstruct, and demystify social and economic structures surrounding visual art that forms the core of my otherwise diverse practice. At its most successful and personally satisfying, my work makes visible and intelligible those imbricated hegemonic processes that often depend on remaining hidden to exercise power.

What might be some coping strategies for the subjects for whom rubbing up against these ‘impressive’ institutions and structures causes friction? *Assume the Position* suggests that playful approaches may begin to mediate anxiety’s physical and temporal advancement.

1.1 Do Something

What does my work do? I have been wrestling with this question without anticipating that a definitive answer will emerge. Throughout this paper I use language that positions art, specifically my work, as the subject of sentences: it *wrestles*, it *provides*, it *makes visible*, it *has a function*. This art is Doing Something. At its most literal level, this style is an aesthetic choice to use what might be considered metaphorical language—juicy action verbs for the sake of engaging writing. However, language can do considerably more.

What does your work do? Once I casually chatted with a scientist-stranger at a potluck who suggested, after seeing me frown when asked what my research is about, that questionnaires could be distributed to the audience, to test what the work is communicating. I cannot say I am not curious. Of course, this is exactly what I would have done when I worked in community health organizations—because of our genuine commitment to making evidence-based programming decisions, and because it was what our funding bodies demanded. But art can do better than that. This suggestion reveals a fundamental misunderstanding of the way art and other aesthetic objects communicate and how they might best be interpreted. In ‘Structure, Sign and Play’, Derrida suggests that there are two possible interpretations of interpretation. Associated with modernist reason, the first kind of interpretation deciphers, dreaming of finding a truth and an origin (Derrida 369). The second takes a playful approach that uses texts as tools for thinking, beginnings rather than ends in themselves. This creative interpretation is non-linear, multiple, and often disinterested in categories of ‘true’ and ‘false’ (370).

During the rise of modernism, *art* became set in opposition to *craft* partially on the basis of usefulness—where craft included useful everyday objects, art’s uses were nebulous, elevated above the lowly practical. While few would likely argue for this imprecise and colonial distinction now, it may be useful to think about what constitutes usefulness and how use

circulates among so-designated aesthetic images and objects. Cuban performance artist Tania Bruguera proposes a new look at what she terms ‘useful art’: art which actively proposes solutions to political problems:

Useful Art is a way of working with aesthetic experiences that focus on the implementation of art in society where art's function is no longer to be a space for "signaling" problems, but the place from which to create the proposal and implementation of possible solutions. We should go back to the times when art was not something to look at in awe, but something to generate from. (Bruguera 2)

At the same time, I am sympathetic to the concerns of those who argue that the arts and humanities should not have to account for their usefulness. Under neoliberalism, economic usefulness is arguably THE condition of value; in the contemporary university, usefulness is all but required. “Precisely in being and celebrating their own lack of instrumentality, in defiantly proclaiming their own auto-telic nature, [the humanities] serve a purpose: exhibiting a paradigm to a community that is preoccupied with more “practical” concerns” (Roochnik 25). Usefulness has value, but usefulness is not itself value. Most relevantly, art’s use or lack of use is re-theorized as necessary based on current political conditions.

Still, arguments about usefulness presume a user-subject who holds the agency. If my choice of language positions my art/text as the subject, does that mean art itself *does*? Yes: as a style of communication, visual art *does* in the same way that any textual object or image can. Recent projects like *Now You See It* and “*Downtown Lethbridge*” take a direct approach to both art and structures as cultural texts. If my language suggests that art *does*, it *does* in the sense that *doing* can result from its readings and interactions as an unstable, proximal textual object that exists in networked relation to other subjects/objects, as well as its relations in the public circulation of emotion—rather than from any inherent or autonomous properties.

2. Theoretical & Cultural Context

This thesis draws from critical, politically engaged theoretical archives across several disciplines. Drawing most heavily from theorists working in visual art, cultural studies and affect theory—with a strong poststructuralist feminist ethic—this paper engages, when necessary, with ideas from, visual studies, queer theory, and the sociology of occupations. I use the word ‘transdisciplinary’ because in current institutional conditions of knowledge production and its social organization, visual art is my primary dissemination tool, a fundamental part of my methodology, and frequently a research topic—but not necessarily my discipline. While other prefixes (inter-, multi-) imply working in the middle of or among many, trans- suggests movement between (Osborne 15). Implicit in this is the notion that disciplinarity is always already politicized and that transdisciplinary research’s methods and approaches will be the best to solve a particular problem. “Transdisciplinarity is not the conceptual product of addressing problems defined as policy challenges... but rather of addressing problems that are culturally and politically defined in such a way as to be amenable to theoretical reformulation” (16).

Transdisciplinary approaches have become fundamental to understanding and addressing the complexities of contemporary life. The relationship between art and research in the academy—specifically, if and how to conceptualize visual practices as research, and what those new discourses will lead to—has been the subject of intense discussion and debate. Because I have located my art practice inside a university (if only temporarily), I have made the political decision to situate this work inside a ‘research’ framework.

2.1 Feminist Ethics

My work engages contemporary feminist methodological directives for ethical research, beginning with the imperative to, in academic writing, *name your archive*. As Halberstam writes in *The Queer Art of Failure*, naming one’s archive can create the illusion of a cohesive textual body where none exists, but is still useful in that its identification forces the writer to situate

herself (20). Academic citation itself is a political practice that can replicate or resituate discourses. Like other researchers, artists too choose our archives. We do it—intentionally or unintentionally—with our media, technique, subject matter, and in our writing. These choices affect not just aesthetics, but who artwork speaks with and to. By being aware of and reflexive about the people to whom we tie our work, artist-researchers extend both reach and relevance. I have chosen, primarily, to talk about both artwork and scholarly writing that is similar in tone (or ‘spirit’), especially (but not exclusively) by women, queers, and people of colour.

Here, naming my archive goes hand in hand with reflexive *situating* of myself and my own position as an artist-researcher. Postcolonial feminisms direct the researcher to *specify* very carefully who she is speaking to and for, as well as when and where; Ien Ang advises the adoption of what she calls “a self-conscious politics of partiality”, in which the assumption of a more limited, non-universal voice strengthens culturally-specific claims, rather than weakens them (Ang 395). My practice-based research attempts to forgo universalizing judgements by (theoretically and literally) valuing local perspectives and particularities. Echoing Ang, historiographer Victoria Hesford asks writers to historicize and contextualize their claims; she reminds us that experiences are “the product of distinct historical trajectories”, and cannot be fully understood outside of their specific, *intersectional* contexts (Hesford 130).

In practice, the commitment to acknowledging and accounting for specificities and differences can roll out as strategic *complications* that sit in opposition to modernist desires toward universality. Poststructuralist attention to language and generative word-play, as modeled most specifically by Ahmed and Butler, exemplifies this drive to complexity and ambiguity. Butler writes: “deconstruction implies only that we suspend all commitments to that to which the term, ‘the subject,’ refers, and that we consider the linguistic functions it serves in the consolidation and concealment of authority” (Butler 15). For Butler, deconstruction as a method

is not nihilistic, but hopeful. It does not destroy or negate, but opens up new possibilities for language's "reusage or redeployment" (15).

In their manifesto 'Xenofeminism: A Politics for Alienation', accelerationist collective Laboria Cuboniks goes further, considering the ideas of intersectionality and the universal in a world mediated by technology and spiraling complexity:

The universal must be grasped as generic, which is to say, intersectional. Intersectionality is not the morcellation of collectives into a static fuzz of cross-referenced identities, but a political orientation that slices through every particular, refusing the crass pigeonholing of bodies. This is not a universal that can be imposed from above, but built from the bottom up—or, better, laterally, opening new lines of transit across an uneven landscape. This non-absolute, generic universality must guard against the facile tendency of conflation with bloated, unmarked particulars—namely Eurocentric universalism—whereby the male is mistaken for the sexless, the white for raceless, the cis for the real, and so on. (Laboria-Cuboniks 0x0F)

2.2 Anxiety & Public Feelings

Why talk about feelings when we talk about art? This is a question that should not be taken for granted. In her introduction to *Hold It Against Me*, Jennifer Doyle writes of artists who make 'difficult' work, "the artists I work with turn to emotion because that is where ideology does its most devastating work" (xi). In relation to art, feelings take multiple roles: they can be a response produced in the viewer, they may be art's subject matter, and they are often seen as an artist's motivation—"something we experience as expressed by the artist" (Doyle 69). As a kind of embodied knowing that happens alongside more organized structures of language and rational/critical thought, feelings can provide important insight that might otherwise be unreachable. Like good art, our feelings move us. The affects of an artwork are often the first thing viewers (especially 'untrained' viewers) experience. Like design's subtly-manipulated formal signals, art's affects too communicate sub- or semi-consciously. Feelings about both art and its practice provide a way of relating to and understanding art that is accessible to everyone. And just like perception that happens through our eyes or other senses, the 'meaning' of feelings

cannot and should not always be taken at face value. Feelings neither grant privileged access to deeper or ‘true’ meaning, nor stand as a barrier to objective understanding – but rather are a misunderstood and too-often ignored part of a good thought process.

In *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, Ahmed introduces the conceptual frameworks that shape her thinking about feelings, asking not “what are emotions?”, but “what do emotions do?” (Ahmed 4). Radically, her functionalist question asserts that emotions *do* things in the external world, rather than exist only psychologically, inside subjects, as personal, extrarational reactions. Emotions “are both about objects, which they hence shape, and are shaped by contact with objects” (7). Ahmed extends the wave feminist mantra ‘the personal is political’ by tracing the flows of affect between human and institutional bodies. Not only do personal feelings and experiences mark individuals’ imbrication in social and political structures, feelings physically and affectively mediate and shape those relations. For Ahmed, feelings exist not inside subjects, but in between bodies and the world; feelings happen in the spaces between, where objects and other subjects touch us, impress on us, and move us. The relations of emotion are relations of power.

In the chapter ‘The Affective Politics of Fear’, Ahmed discusses the subtle differences between fear and anxiety. She questions traditional models of the distinction found in psychological literature, which differentiate the two ‘fearful’ feelings on the basis of their object: fear having a specific object, and anxiety having only a vague, non-specific object, or none at all (64). Medicalized and popular descriptors of anxiety—‘generalized’, ‘free-floating’—imply this absence of an object. While fear may be seen and politically mobilized as a rational response to a ‘scary’ object, anxiety’s perceived lack of an object is offered as proof of its irrationality (and according femininity).

Ahmed argues that the most important differences between fear and anxiety are temporal and proximal. Subjects feel fear in the face of an approaching object that can be seen and

located—a spider, a bear, a ‘terrorist’. Temporally, fear resides in the near future, in the threat or promise that something is about to happen. Working from Heidegger, she argues that fear is bolstered by this uncertainty: the feared object is about to pass very close, and may or may not ‘touch’ us. Later, Ahmed goes into detail about how this negative possibility allows for the political mobilization of fear as justification for violence.

When the tangible, encroaching object of fear passes from view, it only becomes more terrifying. The object of fear still exists (has *permanence*), it has just been lost track of, and could pop up behind us at any moment. Ahmed references Freud’s theories of emotional displacement to describe how passed/past fear slides sideways (in space and/or time) onto other objects to become anxiety. Anxiety—instead of being located ‘nowhere’ or ‘everywhere’ as in the psychological view—is sticky; it is a mode of affective attachment. Anxiety “*becomes an approach to objects* rather than, as with fear, *being produced by an object’s approach*” (Ahmed 20).

If fear is temporally located in the immediate future, then when is anxiety? Anxiety feels like it, too, is about the future, but this may be an example of displacement or slide. Anxiety mediates interactions happening in the *present* by invoking possible futures that are only possible to imagine because of past experiences and ties to multiple, shared, and culturally specific histories and imaginaries. Writing about the temporality of risk, Jasbir Puar offers a productively complicating take, “the future is now: the ambivalence of the present has given way to the anxieties of the present-future, this anxiety is itself a temporality.” Puar’s anxiety is not only a relation-to-objects, but a relation-to-time (Puar and Rai 93).

Movement is fundamental to both Ahmed’s and popular/psychological conceptions of anxiety, and emotion in general (emotionally affective experiences ‘move us’). Consider the subject’s and object’s capacities for movement. If fear results from an object’s approach, then the feared object moves toward a subject conceived as still. If anxiety is an ‘approach to objects’,

then the subject is the one moving. In popular emotional vocabulary, anxiety is marked by tiny ‘nonproductive’ (hence undesirable) movements: twitching, jittering, shaking, trembling, tweeking, palpitating. Anxiety does not sit still; it manifests physically and viscerally in ‘symptoms’ like pacing, restlessness, difficulty concentrating, and racing thoughts. In front of the approaching feared, the subject is frozen, ‘like a deer in headlights’.

So what does anxiety do? According to Ahmed, anxiety attaches subjects to objects—but, I argue, not always ‘up close’. She reminds that anxiety’s affective attachments can overwhelm other emotions (66). Anxiety plays with the affective boundaries that differentiate and delineate ‘self’ from ‘other’, connecting subjects to objects but disallowing closeness. Anxious attachments wrap the subject in a cocoon of affective mediations, binding some objects near, but buffering other contacts; its sticky strings stretch behind, connecting the subject to personal and collective histories (towing pop psychology’s emotional ‘baggage’). Anxiety’s affective armour erects magnetic fields holding subject and object apart, deflecting attempts at touch and resisting the impressions that form perceptions of feeling. Does the anxious subject have agency while twined and buffered by anxiety’s sticky strings? Yes, while subjected to the same mediating cultural and socio-economic contexts that all subjects are. In fact, for Povinelli, anxiety is a condition of agency and movement.

In *The Empire of Love*, Elizabeth Povinelli offers an account of the psychic production of anxiety. In her writing on ‘the intimate event’ (i.e. ‘falling in love’) and imperialism, Povinelli traces the development of liberal discourses of individualism from the European Enlightenment to what she calls the ‘liberal diaspora’—former British and European colonists who left their overdetermined (what would later become discursively constructed as genealogical) home cultures for the promise of a better future elsewhere. Liberalism and autological culture effected a shift in the requirement of obedience from the crown/family to the individual herself; an individual’s worth was now determined not by bloodline, inheritance, or tradition, but by her own

sovereign and free self-management (Povinelli 185). Povinelli writes, “this self-management would later, especially under the pressure of the psychoanalytic mandate, become re-thematized as anxiety, the price of becoming a subject as such rather than the effect of a specific type of subjectivity and its institutional supports” (195). Analyses of the cultural force of individualism (and its anxiety) are present in nearly every text. For Povinelli, anxiety emerges as a result of the pressures of the fantasy of liberal self-determination. In other words, anxiety is a fundamental condition of the subject under liberalism, and liberalism’s primary relation to objects.

Of course some subjects and objects are more entwined with anxiety than others, and for each subject, anxious entanglements manifest in their own intersecting and locally-specific ways. Visual and performing artists who rely on artistic labour for income are subject to particular types of anxious relations with the cultural institutions on which they must, independently, depend. Under liberalism’s imperative to self-management, artists and other workers must become ‘self-made men’; the urge to self-reliance becomes an imperative.

Most people agree that anxiety ‘feels bad’, but does it feel *badly*? Is it inherently, ontologically negative? Anxiety, when mediated by capitalist settler-colonialism, can prompt individuals to make ‘exceptional’ decisions they might not otherwise endorse (Razack 74). But it may not be useful to interpret emotions and affects as inherently ‘good’/desirable or ‘bad’/undesirable, apart from the specific conditions in which they appear.

So, what is the emotion/approach of anxiety about? If, as Ahmed writes, “the ‘aboutness’ of emotions means they involve a stance on the world, or a way of apprehending the world,” then emotions are types of *positions* in the world (Ahmed 7). Of positions, Judith Butler says “the ‘I’...is constituted by these positions, and these ‘positions’ are not merely theoretical products, but fully embedded organizing principles of material practices and institutional arrangements” (Butler 9). For Butler, positions—like the identities they shape and are shaped by—are produced and re-produced through performative repetition and speech acts (the linguistic performative).

Could the feeling of anxiety be important? Might the feeling of anxiety even be useful or productive? Where can it move us?

2.3 Economic Precarity & Artistic Professionalization

In *I just want to be taken seriously as an artist...* (2008), photographer Shari Hatt's portraits of professional clowns form a sad, amusing, and discomfiting analog for artists' feelings. Hatt's video loop of the same name, in which clowns tell clichéd jokes about artists, art collectors, and gallery staff, is equal parts sincere, creepy, and tragic. Their pathetic jokes reference common social perceptions of artists and their behaviour as unpredictable, sketchy, and incomprehensible, as well as artists' own self-doubt. Curator James Patten writes, "the self deprecating artist-as-clown plays up to the clichéd idea of the artist in the popular imagination demonstrating both the artist's insecurity and his or her complicity in the construction of this stereotype" (Patten). Hatt's work exposes a vicious irony in her subjects' dilemma: their sincere desire for recognition and respect is continually sabotaged by the very conventions and visuality that constitute their chosen profession.

What makes a job a profession? Recently, sociologists have argued that jobs are classified as professions based on their conferral of socio-economic status, legitimation of intellectual authority, progression through and adherence to political models of professionalization, and historical precedent (Cheetham and Chivers 9-13). In *Professions, Competence and Informal Learning*, Cheetham and Chivers survey and compile the work of functionalist organizational sociologists who have listed ideal characteristics seen to be common to most professions (i.e. the "trait model"). A profession:

confers status within society; is organized (into some sort of professional body); is learned – i.e. requires prolonged and specialized training and education; is altruistic (oriented towards service, rather than profit); offers autonomy within job role; is informed by an ethical code of some kind; is non-commercial; has collective influence within society; is self-regulating; is collegial; is client focused (7).

In her 1978 analysis of the rise of professionalism as class system, Magali Sarfatti Larson points to the following “visible characteristics of the professional phenomenon—professional association, cognitive base, institutionalized training, licensing, work autonomy, colleague ‘control,’ code of ethics” as both structuring, disciplining elements and social resources (Larson 208). Medical personnel, lawyers, clergy, and social workers have traditionally been among the increasing numbers of workers whose occupational privilege asks in return that they literally and figuratively “profess”. Larson, like C. Wright Mills three decades earlier, argues that the professions, in the drive to maintain social status, are likely to subscribe to a neoliberal view of social problems as personal and with individual remedies, rather than systemic and calling for collective solutions (Reeser 204). Edgar Burns points out that mid-century definitions of professionalism are time-bound with “modern Western meta-narratives as progress, individualisation, formal rationality, scientific epistemology” (Burns 71), and that the trait model is “inherently ideological in presuming professional goodness” (70).

Traditional professionalism demands specific, often conflicting, types of emotional labour from its affecters. It simultaneously demands the sublimation of spontaneous feelings—often under the guise of objectivity—while expecting specific types of productive emotional labour. *Feeling rules*, according to Arlie Russell Hochschild, are “the social guidelines that direct how we want to try to feel”, and cover cognitive, bodily, and expressive management of feeling and emotion (Hochschild 563). In other words, the spoken and unspoken occupational rules that guide our minds and bodies structure our emotions as well.

One can defy an ideological stance not simply by maintaining an alternative frame on a situation but by maintaining an alternative set of feeling rights and obligations. One can defy an ideological stance by inappropriate affect and by refusing to perform the emotional management necessary to feel what, according to the official frame, it would seem fitting to feel. (Hochschild 567)

Over the past decade, the affective turn in the humanities has led to much scholarship on the public, political meanings of affect, feeling and emotion as they relate to work. In *Depression: a public feeling*, cultural studies scholar Ann Cvetkovitch mixes scholarship and memoir in an examination of sadness and depression as shared public feelings with roots in social inequality, colonialism and economic exploitation. Looking specifically at depression faced by racialized people, queers, artists, and early-career academics, Cvetkovitch theorizes depression (and alternative responses to it) outside psychiatric/medical models of “wrong thinking” or biochemical imbalance.

The forms of productivity demanded by the academic sphere of the professional managerial class can tell us something more general about corporate cultures that demand deliverables and measurable outcomes and that say you are only as good as what you produce. (Cvetkovich 19)

If professions are commonly understood as highly-skilled, high-status occupations requiring extensive academic training and knowledge, adherence to ethical standards, and licensure, then, professionalism “is a mimetic response – an attempt by individuals, occupations and organizations to replicate the social, moral and political power of established professions” (Flanigan Adams 329). That is, by mimicking professional standards of conduct, occupational groups can aspire to similar political power and legitimacy. Professionalism remains an aspirational ideal: one tied intimately to generational values, social class, ethnic cultural norms, and gender.

So, then, what is a ‘professional’ visual artist? According to the definition found in the Canada Council for the Arts’ *Visual Artists Guidelines*, a professional visual artist is one who:

“has specialized training in the artistic field (not necessarily in academic institutions); is recognized as a professional by his or her peers (artists working in the same artistic tradition); is committed to devoting more time to artistic activity, if possible financially, and; has a history of public presentation.” (Canada-Council 2)

Council’s broad and widely referenced, if somewhat circular, definition references education, a career achievement, a social marker, and an intention (Maranda 31)—signs of professionalism that fit within established theorizations of profession. Also notable are the things Council does not mention, including specific behaviours and associations. Qualitatively, Guy Bellavance’s 2011 review *The Visual Arts in Canada: A Synthesis and Critical Analysis of Recent Research*, written on behalf of the Visual Arts Alliance, provides a comprehensive breakdown of existing quantitative social and economic data on visual art as an economic sector, including training, public funding, museum and commercial gallery systems, and professional associations (Bellavance 124). Relatedly, Michael Maranda’s *Waging Culture* survey, conducted with the Art Gallery of York University, takes a more activist approach in collecting new data on artists’ compensation. The survey, first completed in 2007, then again in 2012, used respondent-driven sampling to collect census-like demographic, economic, and career-related data on Canadian visual artists (Maranda 3).

Are artists professionals? By both Cheetham and Chivers’ and Larson’s definitions, the job of ‘visual artist’ meets some of the criteria for being a profession (work autonomy, specialized training), and diverges significantly in others (non-commerciality, licensure). But in most cases, it seems that individual preferences and circumstances of artists’ approaches account for wide-ranging differences. When asked if their practice follows some sort of ethical code, a socially-minded relational aestheticist might answer yes, while a bronze casting sculptor might find the question largely irrelevant. Perhaps this is a place where anxiety takes hold – there are few set paths to follow and little consensus about how to proceed. This process of choosing approaches shapes artists’ work formally, theoretically, and socially. Are artists professionals? Maybe sometimes.

It is important to differentiate professionalism or “being a professional” from professionalization as a social process. Professionalization is the movement toward a

constellation of behaviours and qualities which are, as Flanigan Adams wrote (329), interested primarily in replicating social and moral authority. This movement is always already a political one. Adoption of professional traits by workers who are not, in return, compensated with money and social status (as traditional professionals would be), can be a strategy for using feelings of ‘professional’ responsibility to shift focus from social conditions onto workers’ individual choices.

Modern professionalization of the arts is not a new process, but has mirrored that in broader society. According to University of British Columbia art historian John O’Brian, professionalization can be understood, at its most basic, as a process by which structures are imposed; and “what is imposed upon necessarily is subject to controls and regulations” (PAARC 2:50). Hallmarks of professionalization include, but are not limited to: development of specialized language; emphasis on the economic benefits and justifications for art; framing of the arts as a “sector” with attendant markets, brands, and audiences; new types of highly organized and concrete planning. In her essay on artists who take non-art occupations as a form of performance, art historian Julia Bryan-Wilson paraphrases Mills when she writes “what is on offer with the professionalization of work has become a matter of attitude and affect” (Bryan-Wilson 40).

If both writers and statisticians take professionalization of the visual arts as ubiquitous, there is considerable debate over whether or not it is a good thing. “Who sets these standards? Do you wish to be standardized?” (Berardini) In 2012, the Pacific Association of Artist Run Centres organized an international conference on artist-run culture, *Institutions by Artists*, the broad goal of which was to generate critical dialogue about the present and futures of artist-run initiatives around the world. On the second evening of the conference, six panelists participated in an Oxford-style debate on the topic “Should Artists Professionalize?” Three panelists spoke formally in favour of professionalization, and three against, but their arguments about the stakes and ‘best’ responses were far from clear-cut. There are clearly political and financial imperatives for artists

and our institutions to organize and present ourselves in specific, publically-palatable ways. The question for the panelists was as much: “to what extent should we question or resist these imperatives, and in what ways? what are the alternatives?” (PAARC 9:00)

Another significant difference between the job of an artist and that of a traditional professional is in compensation. Although in Canada CARFAC, IMAA and other artists’ organizations set fee guidelines, few artists are able to support themselves through fees, sales, and commissions alone, and often turn to secondary employment or become reliant on the subsidization of a wealthy family or traditionally-employed partner. Despite having, on average, more education than the general population, in 2007 visual artists made 74% of the national median wage from all their art-related and non-art-related income sources. Only 44% made any profit from their art practices at all (Maranda 5).

In a virtual ‘round-table’ discussion hosted and edited by Jasbir Puar in the summer of 2011, scholars and cultural producers including Judith Butler and Lauren Berlant discussed the economic precarity of artistic, ‘creative’ and affective labour under neoliberalism. In this discussion, political theorist Isabell Lorey identifies ‘precarization’ as a process of normalization not only of working conditions, but of “subjectivation, embodiment, and therefore agency” (Puar 164). In precarization, the unstable individual working conditions (that became a norm during the establishment of industrial capitalism) are reconceptualized and shifted onto ‘post-industrial’ Western worker-subjects. This pattern is familiar to both artists and academics whose livelihoods are dually categorized as both ‘professions’ and ‘vocations’. In other words, inequitable conditions of labour are depoliticized and reframed, colloquially, as the results of individual choices, rather than larger structures. Discourses of poverty/low wages as the inevitable result of choosing to work as an artist are still ubiquitous; outside the ‘professional’ art community, it is ‘common knowledge’ that trying to ‘make a living’ as an artist is folly. These processes are enabled by liberalism’s fantasy of independent self-determination, and rolls out unevenly

according to hierarchies of race, gender, and class. During precarization, individualism's anxious movements are projected back onto social and economic bodies. Butler reminds readers that "what is at stake is a way of rethinking social relationality." (Puar 170).

It is relationality that sits at the heart of art's anxious relationship with the professional. There is a desperate ambivalence between the financial and social *need* to be taken as a trustworthy professional, and the simultaneous desire to resist – and to be seen as resisting – some less-desirable characteristics of professionalism. These resistances and their lore are visible in the stories the public tells about artists, and also in the stories artists tell about ourselves. A person needs to produce work on time and on budget, liaise with suppliers and contractors, submit competitive proposals, maintain relationships with curators, patrons, and dealers, keep up appearances, and just get by. But there is a simultaneous need to define oneself as not-professional: not *amateurish*, but instead unstuffy, unstructured, unwilling to obey, uninterested in neoliberal performance metrics and unable to keep ourselves from expressing our true individual visions. These professionalisms and non-professionalisms are both genuine and coerced, but always already performative. In a circular and nearly unwinnable contradiction, successful artists must sometimes be seen as less than professional in order to be taken seriously under the spectre of the genius artist's calling. Just the right amount of non-conformism is a professional necessity. What is the right amount? How much is too much? How does a person know?

2.4 Play

Summing up the formal characteristics of play we might call it a free activity standing quite consciously outside "ordinary" life as being "not serious," but at the same time absorbing the player intensely and utterly. It is an activity connected with no material interest, and no profit can be gained by it. It proceeds within its own proper boundaries of time and space according to fixed rules and in an orderly manner. It promotes the formation of social groupings which tend to surround themselves with secrecy and to stress their difference from the common world by disguise or other means. (Huizinga 13)

Dutch cultural historian Johan Huizinga's 1944 study of play and games, *Homo Ludens*, examines the anthropological, historical, and linguistic origins of play. Often considered the canonical text that launched the field of game studies, Huizinga's work took play seriously. Huizinga argued that it was impossible to understand culture without considering its forms of play and playfulness. His analysis reads as being 'of its era'. He identifies play as a noble, civilizing, and culturally productive force, emphasizing what he considered to be a universal history of play that was "productive of culture by allowing the innate human need of rhythm, harmony, change, alternation, contrast and climax, etc., to unfold in full richness" (81). At the end of his definition above, Huizinga recognizes that people can use play to imagine—and become—something new and apart from the everyday. What might play help us become?

Writing in the late 1950s, French sociologist and literary theorist Roger Callois extends Huizinga's analysis and identifies four forms of play, in an attempt to classify play by the mechanisms of its activities. Though both men's writings suffer from their colonial, explicitly hierarchical worldviews, Callois' work still provides an interesting and relevant framework for thinking about playful activities. Callois' four types of play activities were thus:

- Chance ('alea')
- Competition ('agon')
- Role-playing or simulation ('mimicry')
- Vertigo ('ilinx') (Callois 17-23)

According to Callois, all types of human play could be understood as using combinations of one or more of the above types of activity. For example, a game of Dungeons & Dragons might involve role-playing in the players' imagining of their alter egos, competition with fellow players or non-player characters, and chance in the roll of the dice. Playing on a swing set might involve vertigo in its possibly-disorienting bodily movement, but also an element of competition, if a goal is to see who can swing the highest.

In addition, Callois' play could be differentiated on a continuum, on the basis of whether it made use of predetermined rules and systems (games, or what Callois called 'ludus') or was more spontaneous, free-form, and exuberant (playfulness, or 'paidia') (13). Interestingly, Callois' theory does not distinguish between games played primarily by children and those of adults. Contemporary game designers continue to reference this distinction in balancing structure, direction, and goals with playful chaos and exploration.

Ilinx. The last kind of game includes those which are based on the pursuit of vertigo and which consist of an attempt to momentarily destroy the stability of perception and inflict a kind of voluptuous panic upon an otherwise lucid mind. In all cases, it is a question of surrendering to a kind of spasm, seizure, or shock which destroys reality with sovereign brusqueness. (Callois 23)

Ilinx is destabilizing, vertiginous, confusing-for-its-own-sake. Other scholars have found parallels between this mode of play and the pleasure in suspension of disbelief in front of the "flickering presence of the optical phantasm" experienced by cinema-goers (Pomerance 30). Although Callois identified carnival rides, sports, and drugs (particularly hallucinogens) as examples of this type of play, one could argue that other types of perception-altering games and toys (like stereograms and lenticulars) might be described by it as well. This mode, in the above typology, seems to embody multiple definitions of the English word 'play'. Here, the word 'play' connotes a 'senseless' activity, and also embodies movement, particularly the movement around a center—or non-center—of an ideological structure that governs the play of its elements by simultaneously limiting movement and making movement possible (Derrida 352).

In September 2013 I had the opportunity to go to Moncton, New Brunswick as part of a tiny festival of performance and public intervention art called *Jè-st'*. There, Quebec City-based contemporary artist trio BGL (Jasmin Bilodeau, Sébastien Giguère, and Nicolas Laverdière) set up a one-seat version of their shopping cart carousel, *Le manège*. Having arrived at the festival late, they worked all night to assemble the carousel in a residential green space, then drove around Moncton's alleys to pick up discarded televisions, furniture, and tires that would

approximate the weight of its rider. The carousel's perimeter fence was woven with plastic that fluttered in the wind. Ballasted by a pile of garbage and propelled by the artists' two-man running heave, my shopping cart flew in a tight circle around the central pole. I was overcome first with euphoria, then dread (a voluptuous panic). My body understood with a deep, hallucinatory sureness that my short, thrilling flight was made possible by my carriage's precarious counterbalance by the detritus of overconsumption. Stumbling off the ride, I burst into tears and babbled in English to the crowd of onlookers. It was most deeply affecting and effective artwork I have experienced. In its aggressive *jouissance*, *Le manège* was both physically and figuratively *moving*.

To mark the present as provincial is not to ridicule or demean the spots on queerness's map that do not signify as metropolitan. The here and now has an opposite number, and that would be then and there. I have argued that the *then* that disrupts the tyranny of the *now* is both past and future. (Muñoz 29)

In *Cruising Utopia*, José Esteban Muñoz wrote about queer strategies for thinking about temporality and movement. Like other contemporary queer theorists, Muñoz's queering moves beyond sexualities to propose new orientations to and for the outside and the 'other'. Here, cruising is not only a potentially-sexual and recreational act of assessment and courtship, but also an always-moving approach and relation to possibilities that remain at the horizon (32). Muñoz's work asks us to rethink common Western conceptions of the linear forward-movement of 'straight time'. Our vacation from the present is always already happening. Continuously moving, the anxious contemporary subject can turn anxious approaches into playful ones that look both ahead and back. The following section will outline the methodological strategies used by *Assume the Position*'s cruise between materials, theories, and bodies.

3. Methodology

My work coheres through formal strategies tied closely to the theoretical, political, and ethical considerations discussed above. Below is an overview of methodological strategies used in my practice, which represent the manifestations of currents of thought, action, and circumstance. In-depth project-specific information is included in the project descriptions section.

Titles are integral to my work; often, a title or a phrase will come before thoughts of the physical object. In practice, I think of titles as something like a fulcrum for thought or analysis of work as a text. Titles may use humour, surprise, innuendo, cultural references, and wordplay to change the way an audience thinks about a work.

If I am inclined to think of my work as text, why not just write? Why work in visual art instead of other forms of research and/or activism? Art and other visual practices communicate in ways that text alone cannot, because art-making works on a semi-subconscious level that cannot be fully controlled or anticipated. I'm torn between a strong impulse to didactic narrative and the growing realization that my work may often be strongest when it is not trying to be educational. I often remind myself to 'show, not tell', and to remember that the most effective political work is potentially ambiguous and open to multiple interpretations from multiple angles—and often invisible. The detail-oriented part of my personality often finds this ambiguity uncomfortable, but I have come to believe that my work is both more relatable and more interesting when it uncurls its didactic arm into a more relaxed, open state.

Autobiographical details sneak into my work unintentionally even if I do not plan for them. As a contemporary artist, I sometimes talk about the ideas imbedded in, and theoretical actions performed by, my work as being its 'most important part'. However, in its creation, intuition plays the central role. A developed sense of intuition, or 'gut feeling', is the single most important factor guiding my artistic decisions. This thesis' conscious focus on anxiety is a reaction to themes that I have only recently realized are always either consciously or

unconsciously present in my work. Anxiety is an ever-present characteristic of my own relation to the world; in this work, the political becomes personal (and then political, again). In January 2014 I was approached by curator Amber Christensen, then a graduate student in Cinema and Media Studies at York University; she explained that she planned to write about feelings of social anxiety in my work for Allyson Mitchell’s seminar on queer affect. I was both flattered and appalled. Until Amber’s email, I had been telling myself that probably no one had noticed these anxious affects in my work. After all, I make bright, engaging work that is sometimes almost hyper-social, but which (not as covertly as I had imagined) addresses feelings of anxiety and ambivalence toward the culture of socializing and negotiation of professional relationships that is required of a visual artist.

Ever since childhood constipation that sent me to radiologists and psychiatrists, my bodily feeling of “having to go” is identical to that of physical anxiety. I cannot tell the difference. Anxiety is literally a feeling in my gut about ‘having to move’. My ‘gut feelings’ definitely mean something, but what? Toronto-based artist Hazel Meyer’s installations *No Theory, No Cry* (Art Metropole, 2013) and *Intestinal Anarchy* (AKA Gallery, 2013) covered pink gallery walls with looping, undulating ink—curves and folds equally intestinal and brain-like. Meyer’s playful and sporty work considers the critical role of ‘moving experiences’ and what it means to think and negotiate feelings with our brains, bodies, and guts. Meyer’s evocative, bathetic work has been important to my own thinking about anxiety and movement. Her screen-printed *Everybody Gets Diarrhea Sometimes* tank top (2014) was my favourite thing to wear while speaking in class during my first year of the MFA program.

Working with installation and site-specific work that privileges local context is both a method and an ethical stance. I like to put art in places where people do not expect it. I’ve made work for both inside the ‘white cube’ and outside of it: on the side of a building, under the stairs, beside a broken toilet. I argue that all art can (and maybe should) be considered as installation, in

that every artwork's meaning is affected by its physical context in space. Visual art enters into a dialogic relationship with its environment. Working as if all art is installation could be taken as movement toward a local that is extensible but wary of universalisms. Here, art is *particular*.

People love artwork that reflects their local reality, and that extends to portraits. In my work, portraiture's social function is foregrounded. Engaging both conceptually and as crafted objects, colourful, intricate portraits assert the social status and group membership of both maker and subject. Several years ago as I worked on needlepoint portrait project *Friends of Friends* (in which I sewed portraits of people in other cities whom I had not met, but felt like I knew through the stories and gossip of my social circle), my openly-secret wish was to meet everyone in the project—to associate with them, and be associated with them. When the project began in 2006, by definition I had not met any of the subjects. With time, *Friends* worked like (or maybe as) magic. By the time the project concluded in 2012, I had met 14 of its 17 subjects.

During the two years of my degree, I made two separate but related works that leveraged portraiture's social functions to raise money—and my own profile—at local art auctions. *Glens* was a set of three matching 8" x 10" fused bead heads of Glen MacKinnon, made for Trapdoor's 3x8x10 auction in the spring of 2015. This fundraiser format (where attendees buy tickets to pick any work when their number is called) is a nerve-wracking popularity contest where the crowd favourites move first and some work is literally left hanging. Two years before I had made three *Hoffoses* that were picked quickly (going only after work by David). I was sure I could not top it, but the *Glens* were my attempt. Larger fused bead work *A Billy McCarroll* was made for the Southern Alberta Art Gallery's annual art auction. *A Billy McCarroll* was a pastel yellow and pink attempt to have my work chosen for the live auction, rather than the silent. It was, and was placed beside McCarroll's work. To both of these auctions I donated portraits of older white men with established careers, because their work generally fetches more money. (In 2014, I made

SAAG *An Allan Harding MacKay* because his work had sold for the most money the previous year.)

It may be considered crass to talk about artists' art donation strategies with such bluntness, but it is a fundamental part of my practice to notice, name, and make work with these hidden aspects of 'art world' culture. Simultaneously anxious and genuine, this aspect of my practice can be unflattering in how it makes conscious use of flattery. More than any of my interactive works, with which they may share superficial characteristics, these practices come closest to what might be considered relational aesthetics. Note that I do not consider any of my work to be 'relational' art or 'social practice': not because my work does not sometimes take 'relationships' as a medium, but because of mutually incompatible conceptions of what constitutes both the aesthetic and the ethical. These projects remind viewers of the implications and contradictions of performing the identity and profession of 'visual artist', and suggest mediating strategies artists might use to name anxieties and gain agency inside social structures.

3.1 Strategies Toward Accessibility

In my visual practice, materials and styles drawn from the archive of childhood offer a formal counterpoint to the work's disciplinary content, a strategy for cushioning and/or sneaking in critique of power structures, and a route of affective resistance. My work often shuns traditional art materials for familiar and nostalgic toys, materials, and supplies from Western childhoods (if sometimes a childhood 30 years past). These projects intentionally use play and games as an accessible way to talk to the public about political and disciplinary issues. Because this art does not look like "Art", people who do not like or are intimidated by the class baggage of art may be more likely to engage. At least this is my hope: seduce people with fun and colours, then make them think before they realize what's going on. I do not make work "for children", however, because I want my work to be accessible on different levels and by different approaches, when children are drawn to my work I take it as a sign of success. My work deploys

childhood's formal and affective aspects with the sappy but sincere intention of opening minds and hearts. I want to acknowledge that the affects of childhood may not be positive for everyone. In a 2013 essay about fused bead installation *Art Party*, Lucas Crawford writes about my work's relationship to childhood:

Morman's project does not abide by any innocent or Oedipal myth of the family and childhood. In Morman's hands, a "child" becomes a person who could build queer bodies and desires out of bits and pieces of the tools at their disposal. (Crawford)

Like most animals, I like to play, and believe that is what my art-making should feel like. I find toys and 'low craft' materials formally, physically, and emotionally compelling. For children, play is not frivolous. In this work, the spectre of the child is not a naïve 'blank slate, but rather a creative and canny figure for whom anything is possible. Children's play activities help them learn about, make sense of, and cope with anxieties about the world (A. Freud 111-14). Why should adults not do the same? The projects in *Assume the Position* take playful approaches to the game-like structures and rules of the art world.

Why do I use conscientiously accessible, humorous, and 'friendly' visual strategies to say 'rude' things? In *The Queer Art of Failure*, Judith Halberstam uses the so-called "silly archive" of animated film to discuss the radical potentialities of failure in queer world-building. According to Halberstam, failure offers us "escape from cultural norms that discipline behavior and create orderly adults" (Halberstam 3). Like children who are endearing precisely because they have not yet internalized social rules about what to say and not say, in my work, humour and childlikeness enable critical statements by making them easier to digest. It is important to note specifically that although this support paper spends a significant amount of time talking about politics and anxiety (and other so-called negative affects) I intend for my work to transmit mainly positive and ambiguous affects to its viewers.

We can remark in passing that there is no better starting point for thought than laughter. In particular, thought usually has a better chance when one is shaken by laughter than when one's mind is shaken and upset. (Benjamin 7)

In her 1992 series *Misuse is Abuse*, Ruth Cuthand's purposefully rough drawing style stands in contrast to razor-sharp political and personal observations. Cuthand draws an alter ego as an anonymous, stereotypically-'Indian' doll with braids and buckskin smock. The doll's small and helpless appearance both buffers and amplifies the drawings' text's brutal deadpan humour about native/settler relations and the educational system.

In 1927, Sigmund Freud wrote "Humour is not resigned, it is rebellious. It signifies not only the triumph of the ego but also of the pleasure principle, which is able here to assert itself against the unkindness of the real circumstance" (S. Freud 6). In other words, humour, at its root, contains critique, and artists use humour to respond to and cope with real life circumstances. Feminist art historian Jo Anna Isaak notes that many contemporary women artists use humour to playfully force social structures to reveal themselves. "...*instancing* the continual discovery of ways to interrogate the generative nature and generative bounds of representation, making it *display* through its own playful lapsus its structural elements, its inviolable conventional limits, its immanent possibilities" (Isaak 15) .

Comparing women artists' humour to that found at traditional European carnival, in which everyone and everything—including otherwise inviolable religious dogma, and individuals in positions of authority—became fair game for ridicule, Isaak explores the cultural roots of political humour and satire as a medium of the people (15-6). My work uses humour and satire for the same reason that media outlets like The Onion and The Daily Show do: because a little sugar helps the medicine go down. Like my work's 'childlike' aesthetic, humour lubricates the field, making smooth and palatable fare which might otherwise be indigestible.

3.2 Language Games

My game-based work takes a playful approach, often encouraging or requiring players to break or subvert the rules that might traditionally be associated with a game's form or mechanism. During the first year of my MFA program I worked on three one-off game-based artworks that dealt with themes of time, anxiety, sense and nonsense, movement within structures, and the social rules of education. These games are also representative of a design and text-heavy current in my work that is less represented in my thesis exhibition, but remains a primary strategy for approaching projects in and for public space.

3.2.1 Studio Mad Lib #1: How to Survive an Art School Critique

Studio Mad Lib #1: How to Survive an Art School Critique is a mad lib created from found text—a WikiHow article of the same name. Mad libs are a type of fill-in-the-blank word game played by people of all ages, commonly used for both recreation and education, as well as a vehicle for social criticism and satire. As texts, mad libs challenge modern notions of authorship and confound the 'language games' that depend on 'sense' to exercise power.

WikiHow is a wiki focused on instructions and tutorials. As with any wiki, the article was written by multiple authors—who, in this case, are anonymous. From the style, one might infer that they are 2nd or 3rd year undergraduates who recently became comfortable with the challenging new pedagogic form and wanted to help others through it. Mad libs are a style of phrasal template word game; sentences with missing words are supplied for players, who are directed to fill-in-the-blanks with the specified parts of speech. *Studio Mad Lib* directly reproduced the wiki's text (minus the selection of playable words), including spelling and grammatical errors.

Studio Mad Lib posed real questions that loomed large in my mind as a new art student. In a critique with a group of students, which voices should a person listen to? What constitutes 'good' advice, and from where might it come? Does a cacophony of voices produce garbled

nonsense, or might something new and amazing emerge—possibly by accident? What new forms of reading could we use to understand such a nonsensical text?

Mad libs are popular with children and families as slightly educational leisure activities, but are also mobilized as vehicles for social critique. Since their wide popularization in the late 1950s, mad libs might be seen as straddling a cultural line between ‘the modern’ and something like ‘the postmodern’, in that they use the techniques and structures of modernism to make results that were playful, context-dependent, uncontrollable, and left to chance. As a literal ‘language game’, mad libs help youth learn the structure and rules of written English. Mad libs teach through both positive and negative examples, or, Derrida might say, through a system of differences (Derrida 354). They model both ‘correct’ grammatical structure, and ‘incorrect’ humorous play within it. When appearing singly in publications for adults, mad libs become a vehicle for criticism and/or satire; this type of mad lib is sometimes ‘performed’ out loud for large groups.

Is it also useful to differentiate between two different sources for mad libs’ phrasal templates: purpose-written mad libs vs texts from which words have been removed. In the first type, a mad lib’s template was written as such; there is no ‘original’ text to compare it to, and thus no possible ‘correct’ answer to compare a finished mad lib to, aside from players’ sense of humour. In the second type, an existing text (poem, piece of fiction, song, etc...) has had some of its words removed. This style of template sourcing is more common with the critical or satirical mad libs. Here, ‘mad libbing’ an existing text can be (among other things) a simple silly act, an attempt at subversion through nonsense, an emphasis of the unknowability of the text’s subject, or a statement about the sensibility (or lack thereof) or style (robotic/generic or itself nonsensical) the source text.

Mad libs seem to suggest that all parts are replaceable, infinitely substitutable; they are an invitation to experiment. Likewise, when the mass media likens texts (usually speeches) to mad

libs, it is usually in criticism of what is perceived as nonsensical, random, or replaceable content. The humour in mad libs depends on the play between the surprise of the new and uncanny familiarity. Mad libs usually accomplish this by hiding (or somehow masking) their structure and ‘topic’ during the first word-giving phase. In published Mad Lib game books, a player is not allowed to view the text before she writes down the directed words. Supposedly, this leads to the creation of objectively random words, unsullied by the thematic thinking that might result from prior knowledge. But in order to be interesting, a mad lib must not *just* be random. It must hit the sweet spot between nonsense and profundity. In her 2012 book *Loaded Words*, Harvard English professor Marjorie Garber writes in a chapter about ‘madness’: “Mad Libs were a kind of pop-psychological free association: you said what popped into your mind ... But it did not take a Freud to indicate that no ‘association’ was really ‘free’ (Garber 24). In other words, mad libs are subjective and depend on the subconscious. The unconscious mind that you tried to trick into producing objectively random words is not objective at all. Truly random words (like those that might be generated by a computer) can produce absurd juxtapositions, but a human subconscious is more adept the random-seeming ‘coincidences’. This immediacy is one of the reasons that mad libs’ humour is often localized to the people and specific circumstances in which they were played. Mad libs depend on ‘doing them yourself’. Without readers’ illogical proximity, the ‘hidden meanings’ in mad libs fall apart, and they become just silly strings of words. Douglas Guerra writes about phrasal template word games, “the pleasure of playing is in creating a temporary narrative unity out of a figure of raw (but structured) indeterminacy” (Guerra 489).

Mad libs emphasize the poststructuralist insight that we cannot trust language systems to convey a unified ‘truth’ (Derrida 360). The center of an ideological structure governs the play of its elements by simultaneously limiting movement and making it possible (352). In narrative, one usually-unspoken structural ‘center’ might be seen as the assumption of rationality or sense; mad libs’ gleeful flight from rationality for nonsense might be seen as decentering. For Lyotard,

‘Language games’ are relations of power that comprise the social bond (Lyotard 10). In other words, humans’ social ‘realities’ are continuously negotiated and renegotiated, positioned and repositioned, through pragmatic acts of speech. Mad libs have an orderly sort of disorder, bricolaging formal grammatical structures with the chaos of blind, distributed authorship. As a game, Mad libs might be said to use the formal structure of language against itself.

Studio Mad Lib #1 was made for the ubiquitous “20 Things” assignment given to my studio group as a way to get students started at the beginning of the Fall 2014 term. As a one-off project, students found it humorous. It may have gamed the requirement to make twenty by being an open-editioned multiple. For me, its most interesting element was the layering of crowd-sourced text-material (from WikiHow and the students). It might be considered most successful and interesting when viewed as part of this larger project of using text-based games to investigate collaborative knowledge creation and transmission.

3.2.2 Congratulations!

Congratulations! is a maze/puzzle that was produced in three different formats during the spring of 2015. The puzzle was called *Congratulations!* because that was the word that was centered in large bold letters, at the top of the email that notified me of my acceptance into the MFA program. Made for the 2015 Fine Arts Colloquium, its first iteration was a 48” square colour ‘academic poster’ set up on the 8th floor landing for students to play. A nearby table with crayons and dice also had 11x17 paper copies. A third version—with cut vinyl, stickers and paint—was installed in April 2015 for the group exhibition *This is Water: Emerging Practices in Contemporary Art* at the SAAG. *Congratulations!* asked players to assume the role of a University of Lethbridge graduate student, and make their way through a day in the Centre for the Arts. As players moved through the maze, they would periodically come to a ‘room’, where their roll of a d6 die would determine which direction they should go. The maze’s action attempted to mimic and work through the social contract of being a student: it required repeated choices about

how to participate—including if and when to break rules, backtrack and try again, or quit. Additionally, it modeled non-traditional movement through spaces by asking players to break what are understood as a maze’s unspoken rules (e.g. make an unbroken path, no crossing lines or doubling back). As players moved through the space through both choice and chance, *Congratulations!* frustrated and subverted expectations of what constitutes 'appropriate' engagement with the unspoken rules of the game.

Always historicize! This slogan—the one absolute and we may even say ‘transhistorical’ imperative of all dialectical thought—will unsurprisingly turn out to be the moral of *The Political Unconscious* as well. But ... the historicizing operation can follow two distinct paths, which only ultimately meet in the same place: the path of the object and the path of the subject, the historical origins of the things themselves and that more intangible historicity of the concepts and categories by which we attempt to understand those things. (Jameson 9)

3.2.3 *Check In, Please: My Academic Autograph Book*

Check In, Please: My Academic Autograph Book is an activity book for people involved in academia: students as well as instructors. It is a 32-page half-legal sized book that functions as a shell for content added by its owner and/or their friends. Users are prompted to pick a line-number, then fill out their answers to the questions posed at the top of each page. *Check In, Please* was closely modeled after a early-1980s book series called *Sign In, Please*, whose three books invited youth to answer dishy questions about classmates and preferences. (The series was wildly popular at my elementary school, to the horror of teachers—one of whom gave me detention for “keeping secrets” after she discovered me passing it around during reading class in grade 3.)

The questions in *Check In, Please* ask about people, preferences, memories, and intentions for the future. They are intended to be applicable to the widest breadth of disciplines and specializations possible. Questions about cohorts, colleagues, and theorists are, on their face, absurd and potentially embarrassing. They are a counterpoint to the structured and formal, and

highly politicized relations present in a university. Despite their cheek, they diagram the informal ways we are tied to each other by both proximity and the academy's collaborative knowledge-making processes. Questions focusing on preferences and favourites most obviously track directions and trends. Other pages question the user about their ideals, expectations, and dreams; right now, where do we imagine ourselves going? Other pages ask us to remember—what, right now, do we pick out as important moments? Does our perception of what has qualified as a “turning point” change over time? The phrase “checking in” connotes arrival—especially at a place related to travel, like an airport or hotel. The expression “check in” is also used in both group therapy and humanistic business meetings to refer to a go-round at the beginning of a meeting where group members recap how they are and “where they’re at” in the moment. In its design, the book is intended to resemble both a child’s game book and a self-help quiz book.

This project was a response to persistent, frustrating trends of intellectual ‘presentism’ in students’ critical interpretation of older course readings in Denton Fredrickson’s Theory in Art Studio course in the fall of 2014. During class discussions, some students expressed feelings ranging from dissatisfaction to exasperation and outright dismissiveness with what seem to have been perceived as old-fashioned, passé or politically naïve ideas. Contemporary western historians who study intellectual history consider these habits a logical fallacy of interpretation called ‘presentism’, and note its ubiquity in student and popular textual analysis (Spoerhase 50). Like Marxist literary theorist Frederic Jameson, who exhorted scholars to “Always historicize!” (Jameson 9) Denton appropriately encouraged productive reflection on if and how the ‘problematic’ ideas may have been influential in their time, and important in the development of thought and our present-day interpretations.

In summary, *Check In, Please* serves as an archive and an incitement to historicization and contextualization – of both ourselves and our surroundings. It is a personalized reminder of the inevitability of change. Like memories of our pasts, it is potentially uncomfortable and maybe

embarrassing, but also hopeful. The book’s trick is that, like aging, its specific insights only appear once time has passed. It might be thought of as a tool for recording and viewing an archive of its user’s intellectual development in social context.

3.3 Rules

Like a game, I frequently make rules for myself in my practice. Both consciously and subconsciously, these guidelines structure what I make and what I think about as being possible to make. Note that I do not generally consider myself to be strict or self-disciplined – rather the opposite. Often, when presented with a broad array of options, I become overwhelmed and paralyzed by indecision. By specifying my situation and limiting the choices available, rules can help me to unstick myself and find a way forward. When appropriately and implemented, these constrictions can facilitate good work by providing a consensual structure to think around and through. I do my best work when under constraints.

These working guidelines are based on my own preferences, availability of material, and/or other local needs and conditions. They might include specifications of site, material, colour, or anything else. Because I am committed to reflexivity of process, I try to notice and name them. For example, depending on the project, guidelines might sound like “use only yarn bought from thrift stores”, “photograph using only natural light”, or “stick to this typographic palette”. This is also one of the reasons that I have come to enjoy working site-specifically, and responding to calls for submissions. These rules are always flexible. I break them if I need to— but once they need to be broken, they have already served their purpose. These rules’ most common and apparent manifestation is the choice to work with materials that have a limited colour selection—for example fused beads, self-adhesive vinyl, and retail tagboard. These rules might be seen as coping mechanisms for negotiating the anxieties of production.

3.4 *Artistic Labour*

Remember those times we stayed up working late at the studio
Strung out on caffeine we painted while the CBC played on the radio
Inhaling fumes of god knows what making it hard to concentrate
And the next day I'll do it again despite the doctor warning me to take a break
Now-a-days I find less time to drag out the old paint set
I'm still sleep deprived but I've got nothing to show for it
There's no more studio days and nights

I remember fondly all those nights trying to get things right
Scribbling and erasing, painting and scraping all those errant lines
And when I run out of white paint at 3am the stores are closed
This white out will have to work out—you can hardly tell—no one will ever know
Now that I'm moving on in years I look back and I fret
There's only one thing I truly do regret
That there's no more studio days and nights
There's no more studio days and nights
(The Cedar Tavern Singers AKA Les Phonoréalistes, "Studio Days and Nights")

In their song "Studio Days and Nights", Lethbridge's own Cedar Tavern Singers AKA Les Phonoréalistes (Mary-Anne McTrowe and Dan Wong) sing of obsessive artistic work of the type performed by students. Slow and wistful, their lyrics remember studio working behavior that, when described, sound sounds badly-planned, negligent, or simply desperate. Their irony would seem cynical if their romanticism for obsessive production were not so easy to identify with. I am drawn to materials requiring compulsive, detail-oriented production. I cannot overstate the importance of *making* on the way I understand my work. The labour of making objects by hand helps me understand them, their actions, and their place (in my practice and in the world). This labour is obvious in work with fused plastic beads, but is also present in details like lenticular images' tiny alignment tolerances.

In the fall of 2014, the contrasts between thinking with handmade objects versus thinking with designed/outsourced objects became especially apparent with the project "*Downtown Lethbridge*". "*Downtown Lethbridge*" was commissioned by the Southern Alberta Art Gallery. It was part of Into the Streets: Avenues for Art, a public art initiative presented in collaboration with Musagetes, an international organization devoted to making art more central in our lives, and

Cities for People, an initiative launched by the McConnell Foundation to explore the role of arts and culture in advancing urban resilience and livability. Five artists were invited by the SAAG to propose projects that somehow animated Lethbridge’s downtown area.

“Downtown Lethbridge” inserted punctuation marks into the external facades of five buildings in the downtown area: the Lethbridge Public Library, the Southern Alberta Art Gallery, Oddfellows Hall (at the corner of 4th Avenue and 5th Street), Lethbridge Fire Hall #1, and the Trianon Building. *“Downtown Lethbridge”* began with the idea of making buildings and their stories legible: their design and architectural style and their actual history and use, as well as the uses and histories that the public assumed or imagined for them. Visually subtle and deliberately ambiguous, they blended in with the structures’ existing design. Punctuation marks give language structure; they are signs that can either aid interpretation or completely change meaning. This project literalizes the task of ‘reading’ architecture as text, as well as considering that buildings themselves speak.

The punctuation shapes, based on Monotype’s version of Century Schoolbook Bold, were cut with a plasma router from 1/8 stainless steel. Although this project involved months of research, design work, consultations, and negotiations with building owners, the physical pieces themselves were machined by a welding contractor; SAAG staff oversaw their installation while I was out of town. The process of making *“Downtown Lethbridge”* was fundamentally collaborative between the SAAG’s curatorial staff, building managers, community members, and I. It felt more like project management than my usual art-making ways (which typically involve hands-on, repetitive and exacting labour, even when I’ve worked with contractors). This process did not feel wrong, just different—I really like this way of working and have been actively seeking out similar opportunities. But as a result of the project’s different relation to my labour, when I arrived home and saw the finished and installed work for the first time, it was a bit of a shock. It did not feel or look like ‘my art’ in the way that new work usually does. It was several

months before I felt like I could talk about the project with something approaching a full understanding of how it worked. For me, the feelings produced by this experience prompted new insights into the relationship between embodied labour and understanding, and the ways that they might constitute a materially-grounded, creation-based research practice.

3.5 Everything in Particular

The task of perception entails pulverizing the world, but also one of spiritualizing its dust. (Deleuze 87)

According to Muñoz, a queer utopian hermeneutic would “strain to activate the no-longer-conscious and to extend a glance toward that which is forward-dawning, anticipatory illuminations of the not-yet-conscious. The purpose of such temporal maneuvers is to wrest ourselves from the present’s stultifying hold, to know our queerness as a belonging in particularity” (Muñoz 28).

It may be useful to note the multiple senses of the word ‘particular’, which might be seen to embody the values of the intersectional feminist outlook described above. Its first sense, uniqueness and individualized detail, connotes both the strange and special. This sometimes-overwhelming specificity has been launched as a critique of feminist and post-structural thought, where the ‘each’, in its grainy strangeness, annihilates the very possibility of a group (Butler 4). This critique misunderstands the role of the individual; in fact, identification with the general is itself made possible through an empathy for the particular. In its second sense, *the particular* is literally that which is made of particles. Here, the whole reasserts itself as a conglomerate. Reconstituting itself as a whole made of parts, this ‘particular’ is irreducibly multiple.

Japanese artist Yayoi Kusama became famous for her sculptural installations, performative ‘happenings’, and paintings, based on her own childhood hallucinations, in which she experienced surfaces as covered with polka dots. Kusama’s iconic installation work combines dots and mirrors, in which dots become a formal vehicle for an infinity that obliterates form,

space, self, and sense (Elwood). For Gilles Deleuze, the *molecular* refers to objects and systems that are open dynamic masses, constantly moving, becoming, and dispersing. Molecularity contrasts with the *molar*'s closed system of solid, stable wholeness. It is tiny, atomic sensations to the molar's compact, patterned firmness. "The molecular sensibility is found in Deleuze's appreciation of microscopic things, in the tiny perceptions or inclinations that destabilize perception as a whole" (Conley 178). Molar and molecular forms are not mutually exclusive, but rather dependent on and of each other. In *A Thousand Plateaus*, Deleuze and Félix Guattari identify political superstructures as molar, and molecularity with the 'micropolitics' of perception, affect, and incident. (217-20)

In *Assume the Position*, the dot or pixel symbolizes not only the subjectivity of vision, but of a whole that is always already multiple. My own use of pixel-dots emerged from the pragmatic considerations of working with and from photographs. Early in my practice, lifelong love of craft and a reticence to do anything that felt like drawing led me to prefer needlepoint, beads, mosaic toys, and painted wooden balls as materials. I first consciously thought about pixelation as a strategy several years ago while working on the fused bead series *Art Party*. During my the second term, Graduate Studio instructor Dagmar Dahle pointed out that the dots on my shirt (in the video *Hamster Cheeks*) and the white dice pips in a test photo (that would later become part of *Party in the Front*) became more formally interesting together. This conversation stuck in my head, and I began to notice dots everywhere in my work: beads, polka dots, pips, balls, and static. By the summer, I had decided to do it on purpose, and privilege dots as a subtle (or not) connecting formal theme in my thesis exhibition.

Hiding, in vision and out of it, has also become a common tactic in my practice. Recently this has been accomplished in the use of 'secret languages' (*Art Party*'s hankies), through the mechanisms of games (word search puzzles), and by the use of camouflaging fields of dots or pixels. In contemporary art, meaning itself 'hides' in metaphor, symbol, and abstraction.

In his 1988 essay on the history of vision and modernity *Techniques of the Observer*, Jonathan Crary summarizes Goethe's *Colour Theory*, in its observations that colour and other optical phenomena are produced in the body of the seer (4). He identifies this as the beginning of the theoretical movement from considering sight as the objective and scientific byproduct of observable conditions to an subjective expression of the relations between the external and an internal, embodied, physiological experience. Not every person sees 'the same thing' (6). Crary documents some of the pre-cinematic toys and gadgets of the 1820-30s, such as the thaumatrope, zellotrope, and faraday wheel. These diverse optical devices "made unequivocally clear the hallucinatory and fabricated nature of the image and the absolute rupture between perception and its object" (17). He goes on to recount how this (at the time) revolutionary realization fed modern efforts to quantify and establish 'normal' perception and otherwise rationalize the new, subjective subject. Goethe's work led to "a new abstraction and mobility of images, [and also] an inverse disciplining of the observer in terms of rigidly fixed relations to image and apparatus" (Crary 15). This reaction may strike some as ironic, but the drive to quantification and rationalization of the 'individual' are at the core of neoliberalism, the apex of colonial modernity.

If the visibility of troubling subjects' subjectivity leads to movement toward the normative centre, might there be benefits from remaining hidden? Many mainstream identity-based social movements call for increased visibility of difference, but in certain circumstances might invisibility itself become a strategy for survival against an overwhelming normative tide? In *The Feeling of Kinship*, David Eng examines contemporary queer liberalism in the United States. Eng suggests that visibility, as a political strategy, is just one of many, and that attempts to picture what is hidden may be most impactful when they take emotional, rather than literal/visual approaches. In discussing the establishment of presence through absence, he writes "picturing absence through this aesthetic strategy, ...relocates history to the domain of the affective, to the realm of ghosts, and to the space of the "non-visible" (Eng 183). In a publication accompanying

curated performance art exhibition *The Missing Body*, Cindy Baker argues that “the best attempts to draw attention to the invisible are not in making them visible but in replicating their invisibility” (Baker 30).

What does it mean to ‘hide’ content? It seems to be a truism of contemporary art education that moving away from narrative by abstracting ‘intention’ or making illustration more difficult to discern opens the work up to other, unexpected interpretations. These non-directive interpretations may hold more meaning for a viewer than work that directs them to a specific conclusion. Similar didactic methods (based in design, communications, and public education) hold a special place in my heart and in the evolution of my practice. However, recently my practice has reconsidered how to implement its ideals of accessibility and friendly tone; *Assume the Position* and other recent work’s conscious embrace of *hiding* represents a movement toward non-direction. By engaging the mechanism of hiding as a strategy, work may prompt viewers to consider, if subconsciously, that other ideas, texts, and ideological structures may be hiding everywhere.

In 2012, about a year before he died, my father suffered a series of small strokes. My partner Cindy and I flew to Minnesota, and we all ended up at the Mayo clinic. During his intake, the neurologist handed him a photocopied paper with a line drawing of a scene from a family kitchen. On the right, an older woman spoke to two children playing at a kitchen table, while a pie cooled on the windowsill. Behind them on the left, a pot of spaghetti boiled over while a cat played in a spilled puddle of pasta sauce. The neurologist asked my dad to tell her what was happening in the picture. “Well, the kids aren’t interested in listening to their grandma. They just want to do their own thing. She’s trying to tell them stories about the old days...” he began, weaving a story about the relationships between the people in the picture. “Anything else?” she asked? “That’s just about it.”

Later, while my father was out of the room, the neurologist explained how his answer was indicative of brain damage: When one part of a brain is injured, the ‘healthy’ parts take over. His visual comprehension had been affected by the stroke, so the emotional, imaginative parts stepped in. Also, my father had gone blind in the left half of each eye, a condition called homonymous hemianopsia. He did not know, and we were not allowed to tell him, in case the shock of realization prevented his brain from learning to compensate.

Several weeks and an angioplasty later we returned for a follow up appointment; he was given the same sheet. “There’s a pot boiling over, and the cat has gotten into something while they’re not looking.” The neurologist was satisfied with this answer.

3.6 Plastics

Materially, *Assume the Position* represents a move toward working with plastics and other ‘artificial’ materials. This includes not only fusible beads, but acrylic, vinyl, and the variety of thermoplastics, resins, and synthetic polymers used to make both lenticular sheet and many of the objects in *Party in the Front*’s photographs. Although plastics have been an incidentally prominent material in my practice for several years, it is only recently that I named and began to theorize why I have been attracted to them. Colloquially, plastics’ primary and overwhelming association is with fakeness, or lack of substance. Plastics are disposable trash—manufactured objects that could not possibly be as valuable as things made ‘by hand’ from more traditional or ‘natural’ materials. Their name is synonymous with surface, artifice, and ephemerality. Scholar of the anthropocene Heather Davis writes for a catalogue essay about art and plastic “when we point out the synthetic or “artificial” nature of something, what we are pointing to is the way in which it develops, emerges or is created irrespective of its surrounding environment” (Davis 3).

Formally, I’m attracted to plastics’ capacity for intense colour and shininess, malleability, and durability. Plastics are available in an almost unlimited variety of colours, textures, and transparencies; they can be shaped, reconfigured, and transformed over and over. Here, the

optimism of colour and sheen are complicated by the weight of historical archive and a possibly-ruinous future. Plastics' commercial proliferation is emblematic of both modernity's flight from the past and a post-modern globalism that defies the idea of the local (Davis 4-5). As a material, plastic can never not be of the historical and political context of its development and emergence; that stickyglomeration of archives and contexts becomes an integral part of the work.

Contemporary petrochemical extraction practices (on which plastics manufacture depends) are unsustainable at best, and at worst environmentally catastrophic. I would argue that modern Western culture has gotten plastic 'backwards'. Let's reconceptualize plastic, as an art material, as something valuable, finite, and definitely not disposable. If plastics will last for many hundreds or thousands of years, they become a material to be taken seriously and used with care. It is a joke to claim that plastics and other petrochemical products are made of liquid dinosaurs. However, it is entirely true that a pressurized combination of time and science has transformed the organic into something entirely different. The distinction between the natural and the unnatural is one of time and context. Using plastics seems like an extension of my practice's assumption of poststructural values that are critical of post-postmodern assumptions about naturalness and their objections to the artificial. "Plastic cracks time," Davis writes, but offers a word of caution. "If we follow the life-cycle of plastic, it leads not to an ephemeral non-ontological force, but to an all too material and materialized set of implications" for human and non-human animals (5).

4. Thesis Project Statements

The name of my thesis exhibition, *Assume the Position*, ambiguously references multiple literal and colloquial usages. Functionally, ‘assume the position’ forms a complete imperative sentence which speaks directly to the reader. In a literal sense, it implies the adoption of—or assumptions about—physical, political, and/or figurative positions. Temporally, it moves in the present by demanding preparation for the future. Although a ‘position’ is stationary, the title suggests movement between them – implying that the coming position is temporary, and more changes will come. The phrase also references popular culture: specifically 1978 film *Animal House*, where the command is given as part of an upper-class fraternity’s extra-curricular—but institutional supported—corporal hazing rituals. Here, the ‘position’ is down on all fours; it is ambiguously threatening and sexual, and definitely humiliating. (It’s for the subject’s own good, of course. Afterwards they’ll be ‘one of us’.) Sometimes, the phrase is used humorously, even invitingly. It is cartoonishly suggestive: when heard spoken to another, a viewer may assume they are about to witness something shocking, secret, ‘dirty’, or even pornographic. More threateningly, the phrase has also been associated with directions given by police to people who are about to be arrested. The phrase evokes authority, even authoritarianism. Ideally, the exhibition title gives the uncomfortable, affectively anxious command that the directed listener must prepare herself for whatever is to come.

Judith Butler considers the social and political processes by which a theoretical position comes to be seen as such, and how these positions are constitutive of subjects. She reminds us that “subjects are constituted through exclusion” (Butler 12); the ‘I’ that I am is constructed through its relationships to theoretical positions and matrices of power. These relations assemble to form a position by the authorizing power that comes from outside the position itself. Positions are formed not only by what they represent, but what they exclude (9). Butler’s ‘I’ may perform a position more or less consensually, but

the ‘I’ who would select between them is always already constituted by them...these ‘positions’ are not merely theoretical products, but fully embedded organizing principles of material practices and institutional arrangements, those matrices of power and discourse that produce me as a viable ‘subject’. (Butler 9)

Many of *Assume the Position*’s projects assume a self-conscious stance as a student. I realize that this may be a cliché, or at least an undesirable practice. However, this self-consciousness that leads to making art about school is not the point in itself, but is an effect of both my interests and the larger themes in my practice that, for example, choose to acknowledge and privilege local context. Looking at ‘art about school’ in the context of my practice, it is not dissimilar to previous projects that consider art in/from specific geographic regions or among certain demographics. For example, *Super Fun Art Activity Book* (2014), took as subject matter the history of art in what is arguably another small, mostly enclosed system: the province of Saskatchewan. Given my long-time interest in the social and working conditions of the arts, how could a committee expect other of my work? My thesis exhibition enacts new theoretical and material developments in my practice, which nevertheless remain consistent with the spirit, tone, and political orientation of past work.

Sometimes I feel uncomfortable with saying my work is ‘about’ a single thing. When strangers at parties ask me what my work is about, I rarely have a good answer. Is my work ‘about’ parties, or portraiture, or anxiety? Saying so seems reductive and inaccurate. Maybe in the project descriptions below it is possible to think of ‘aboutness’ in a different way. Consider Ahmed’s assertion that ‘aboutness’ involves a stance. Let us not think ‘about’ as in an idea having a direct explanatory relationship to an object (“my photographs are about anxiety”). Conversely, notice and read aboutness as a spatial preposition: (‘she threw the balls about’). About as in all around, as in nearby or adjacent to. A physical descriptor of proximity and relationship. Because objects are never ‘by themselves’ (outside context and discourse) this sort

of proximal *about* is never alone; this document's plural *abouts* are lodged in a web of relationships, only some of whose strands we will trace.

Taking off from the earlier discussion of movement and anxiety, throughout these project statements I will discuss my work's 'approaches'. But what does that mean? Remember, the anxious subject is moving toward the object of her anxiety. Considering a work's approaches means that we imagine it as *approaching*, as in motion. This movement may happen by diverse aspects and along many trajectories. These approaches may represent movement of feeling through space, of shuffling signifier and signified, of mobilized, unstable meaning. Movement through time (in any direction). Across and around, over-under-through. Art-as-text assumes a superposition, a permanent, semi-knowable instability. In discussing its approaches, I ask a reader to acknowledge that my work, as art, may resist occupying—or being seen by—a single, stable perspective.

4.1 Assume the Position

Assume the Position will function as the title wall, and is the phrase "ASSUME THE POSITION" cut from acrylic mirror, with vinyl and paint.

In my thesis exhibition, I have used various types of dots as a repeating motif that ties projects together formally. These include polka dots, ping pong balls, faculty heads, 'cheeks', static, and pixelation. *Assume the Position*'s typography and exhibition design is based on the look of The Print Shop, desktop publishing software first released for Apple II series computers in 1984 by German software company Brøderbund. Files (for vinyl, etc..) were not actually made with the Print Shop software (which would not have been possible), but rather to mimic its look. The process of recreating the blocky look of on-screen type on a modern computer, was helped by using an Apple IIe emulator to run a version of The Print Shop on my laptop.

The colours used in the exhibition design (as well as some work, as discussed below) are based on the screen colours of an Apple IIe monitor. In low-resolution graphic mode, these

monitors could produce 16 solid colours (including black, white, and two identical greys). The Apple IIe's high-resolution graphics mode used 'composite artifact colour', in which clusters of pixels in different on-off configurations were used render more colours:

The actual pixels were white and did not contain color/hue or saturation information. Each of bits, except the highest, of every memory byte for the HGR page could display a single dot if set (logical 1). A single memory location could set up to seven consecutive pixels. Pixels on even horizontal lines would appear as purple first, on odd lines they would be green first. If one pixel was set, it would be in color on a color monitor. If two adjacent pixels were set, they would appear as a double-wide white pixel. Similarly, if two adjacent pixels were off, they would appear as black. The trick to getting solid colors was to place pixels in an alternating on-off-on pattern. (Nerdly-Pleasures)

In this colour mode, white characters on a black screen often had stray bleeds of colour pairs around their edges: typically violet/fuchsia and green, or sometimes light blue and orange. The giddy mix of old and new digital aesthetic contributes to the exhibition's mashed-up, nonlinear temporality. The use of old desktop publishing software's graphical user interface as a model for exhibition design emphasizes the *designedness* of the exhibition, and might suggest the works as texts meant to be read. *Assume the Position*'s pixilation artifact colours look of a different era, but—too-slick and out of their original context—they clearly could not have been recreated without contemporary digital technology.

4.2 Alberta Artists Whose Houses I've Thrown Up At

Alberta Artists Whose Houses I've Thrown Up At is a portrait series of artists' heads in fused plastic beads. Currently there are three: Todd Janes, Shara Rosko, and Robyn Moody. The series is exactly as the name suggests, and remains ongoing.

Fusible plastic beads, brightly coloured cylinders 0.2" across, were popularized in the 1980's, known by the brand names Perler or Hama. Beads are arranged on pegboards, masked with tape, then ironed on low temperature to permanently melt them together. A single portrait in this series is made of between 6,500-7,500 beads. *Alberta Artists*, like all my portrait work, uses

photographs as its source material. Using Adobe Photoshop, photos are reprocessed into a limited number of colours, and resized down so that one pixel becomes one bead -- essentially becoming pixelated. Fused beads are difficult to photograph; even when documentation photos are sharp, the beads' squared-circular pixels look like a jpeg with terrible compression artifacts.

Alberta Artists is an overt example of social 'grouping' of subjects that has been a feature of my portrait work. The title's absurd specificity is used for humour, visibility, and to assert the sociospatial location of the artist. From 2007-12 I worked intensively on the needlepoint series *Friends of Friends*. With plastic canvas and vintage yarn I sewed photographic portraits of people I had never met, but felt like I knew through the stories and art community gossip of my friends. The colourful, intricate portraits are not only objects of fine craft, but conceptually engaging, asserting the group membership of both maker and subject. *Friends of Friends* was, in part, about asserting my place in the art community by claiming social ties and affirming the social status of their subjects. (If someone has made art about them they must be important, I imagined the viewer thinking.) *Friends* also had a distinctly fannish aspect, in both its use of popular "low craft" materials and obsessive production. Eventually, wanting to work faster and bigger, I looked to another material from my childhood: fused plastic beads. Over the next three years, I worked on a new project called *Art Party*, a series of life-sized fused bead portraits of queer Canadian performance artists that explored the roles of friendship, innuendo and storytelling in Canadian art sector. *Where Friends* demurred, *Art Party* gleefully insinuated, but neither project actually told the stories to which they alluded. In contrast, *Alberta Artists*, builds a portrait set around a very specific experience—throwing up at someone's house—but lets the audience make their own assumptions about the circumstances.

Eccentric behavior (of the type I only wish I had a reputation for) is a common stereotype of visual artists; "having an artistic temperament" is a euphemism for obsessive behavior and dramatic, volatile emotions. (It is also, notably, a euphemism for homosexuality). The character

Maude Lebowski, in the 1998 Coen brothers film *The Big Lebowski*, is an example of the quirky, erratic artist archetype. Deserved or not, the public reputation for wackiness and ‘unprofessional’ behaviour, particularly by performance artists, is something I have played with for several years.

My work in fused plastic beads has a distinctly fannish aspect, in its use of popular ‘low craft’ materials and tedious, labour-intensive production. This portrait work is directly influenced by fan culture; like fan art, their celebritized subjects have little control over how they’re represented. Fan art is, by definition, art made by amateurs. It may be seen as embarrassing, pathetic, or even creepy; my work embraces these negative affective associations. Like older projects that made use of portraiture (for example *Friends of Friends* and *Art Party*), *Alberta Artists* claims social ties—and therefore status—by naming relationships. Like a ‘humblebragging’ Facebook status that bathes in bathos, *Alberta Artists* makes self-conscious fun of an unfortunate thing that may have taken place in glamorous circumstances.

4.3 All My Faculties

All My Faculties is a fused bead installation of a self-portrait with heads of all the academic faculty I have worked with during my degree. It is not a picture of the Department of Art, although it may appear to be at first glance; it is a self-portrait with people to whom I am or have been accountable during my time here. It includes my supervisor and committee members, people with whom I did coursework, and people for whose courses I was a teaching assistant.

In *All My Faculties*, a fused-bead self-portrait ‘bounces’ twelve multicoloured beaded heads, like a group of smiling party balloons. Can I keep all the balloon-balls in the air? Will some of them fall? The name and my more-athletic-than-usual volleyball stance might suggest I am trying as hard as I can. Technically, this work is an innovation in size (the self-portrait is the largest fused bead work I’ve made), complexity, and the way it uses Perler’s limited palette of colours. The coloured polka dots on my sweater correspond to the colours of the heads. Have people been rubbing off on me? Or is it more like spatter?

Previous fused bead projects used, without permission, photographs from the internet and social media (and were therefore another step removed from me). For this project, I took all the *Faculties* photos myself. In *Alberta Artists*, the faces of the subjects stare straight at the viewer—worried, disgusted, amused—as if themselves an audience watching the viewer barf in front of them. However, the stolen source photos are just a simile—they may have looked at me ‘like this’, but their bemused chorus is clearly a recreation.

The photos used in *All My Faculties* show the faces faculty made at me while I took their picture. Expressions range from mugging to sportingly awkward to barely tolerant, but most are smiling. The photos were taken at the University of Lethbridge in the locations where we would interact: offices, hallways, classrooms, the library, and my studio. All use only natural light, resulting unpredictable angles of light and shadow. The finished heads’ sizes and colours were purely aesthetic choices, as were their placement on the wall. These choices were reactions to the style and lighting conditions of their photographs, as well as the timing and order of their making – rather than some objective or subjective hierarchy of importance. Heads were beaded in the order that I photographed people; the largest and smallest were among the last to be finished. The fact that these differences may be heavily read into is just one of the aspects of this project that makes me uncomfortable (in a good, generative way).

In ‘bouncing ideas around’, *All My Faculties* may play into the trope of the disembodied/disabled academic. In this common trope, for people who perform intellectual labour—located in the head by liberal western discourse—a body is redundant and even a burden. Here, genius counters physical disability or debility; see Dr. Strangelove or Charles Xavier (X-Men) (tvtropes.org). This interpretation is countered by other projects (like *Hamster Cheeks*) which forward a more embodied, though ambivalent, stance on how thinking happens.

In its making, this project began as an earnest but cheeky tribute to faculty members to whom I am genuinely grateful and indebted. I imagined the heads like balloons: as ideas

bouncing around, and as representations not of people's real bodies, but of abstract selves. The heads are 'you' and also quite a bit more. But *All My Faculties*' exclusions are as present as its inclusions. Seen as a representation of the department, *All My Faculties* appears inequitable. Missing are many people who have been significant advisory and supportive parts of my experience here, including the technicians, sessionals (who teach mainly first year courses and are not expected to mentor), the recently-hired, and others I never had a chance to work with. The grouping 'faculty with whom I've worked' is a set with specific boundaries, but in its constitution may be based on a combination of chance and larger political forces outside my control. Then again, my relations with Mary-Anne (for example) have never been structured by authority or formalized accountability-to—aside from general ways like making sure my students do not make a huge public mess, feelings of responsibility to a larger Lethbridge 'community', or to her as a person and friend. It is this same relation-to-authority that, in part, structures interpretations of *All My Faculties*. This work makes calculated use of the flattering aspects of portraiture. It is a playful visual metaphor for my own negotiation of and anxiety about the relational power structures present at the university and in the art community at large. Will the authority figures I picture be pleased with their representations and how will that affect our relationship? *All My Faculties* designated specific formalized relations (committee members, people from whom I took courses, and people for whom I was a teaching assistant) whose faculty members were included. If working with graduate students is desirable, then—intentionally and unintentionally—it revealed that hierarchy by replicating it. *All My Faculties* follows the rules set down for its production; it does not attempt reparations in the sense of making-visible; it lets invisibility speak for itself. Will the people left out by this circle (new faculty, sessionals, art historians, nearly everyone from other departments in the university) feel bad? Possibly. Will I feel anxious about all of these approaches? Definitely. These feelings are all acceptable, and an

important part of the work. *All My Faculties* extends my practice's investigations into how portraiture can function in the arts and other occupational groups.

4.4 Party in the Front, Business in the Back

Party in the Front, Business in the Back is an ongoing series of lenticular digital images that can help us envision new temporal possibilities for professional artistic disaster.

The images in *Party in the Front, Business in the Back* use a combination of 1/12-scale miniatures inexpertly constructed from wood and paper, toys (erasers, play-doh, plastic spiders), and other small objects (rubber bands, pencils, dice). All of them, to one extent or another, depict “artistic disasters”: things going wrong or flying off control, or just being not quite right. Many are deliberately ambiguous, making use of associative contrast and connotation to leave viewers enchanted but uneasy.

Lenticular images use a transparent plastic film comprised of hundreds of narrow cylindrical lenses (“lenticules”). The lenses refract a different offset image to each eye, which tricks the brain into thinking an image is three-dimensional. Widely used in children's toys, religious iconography, and vintage porn, lenticular printing implicates the audience by demanding a present viewer's binocular eyesight to become fully visible. Lenticular prints are a sandwich: a digital print on DisplayTrans backlight media, a layer of optically clear adhesive, and the lens sheet on top, precisely aligned. The photo at the bottom of the sandwich is printed in stripes – one stripe of each image under each lens. My lenticular sheet is 30 lenses per inch, so prints with two images have 60 stripes per inch. (Prints with three base images would have 90 stripes per inch, and so on.) I'm excited by their possibilities for storytelling that use embodied vision to create an ambiguous temporality – one that disrupts the clear vision it depends on.

Lenticulars expose viewers' subjectivity by demanding our present bodies with two eyes. 3D images 'realism' “presupposes perceptual experience to be essentially an apprehension of differences” (Crary 27). These images' resolution is an illusion produced by my body and its

specific position. Their grainy images, even when fully resolved, hold the promise of transforming into something else with the slightest movement. If, physically and textually, the images move, they move temporally as well. *Party in the Front*'s unstable images are located simultaneously in the past, present, and future. They are haunted by the ghosts of what they are not, of what they might become, and of what they are *about to* become. They flicker, unstable. Initially composed of two images, the lenticular prints become more than two: a physical, visual, and temporal array. Instead of merely reconciling opposites (each defined by what they are not), the lenticulars' image binaries have become inextricably conjoined.

People, when looking at the light boxes hung in my studio, run all over the place. They get close, then far away; they run back and forth and duck down below the pieces to see how the view changes. Sometimes they just sway. Not only do lenticulars' flickering images themselves move, but they prompt the viewer to move as well. 'Looking' at *Party in the Front* is an embodied experience that is more than just visual.

The name *Party in the Front, Business in the Back* is an idiom reversed from one describing a mullet – the infamous 'short on top, long in back' hockey hair often associated with both rural metal bands and lesbians. Spatially, it describes the space of an art gallery, foregrounding the social and economic relations; there might be a glamorous reception in the foyer, but a different sort of work is happening behind the scenes. The name uses special metaphors to imply layers of meaning. Something serious—rather, something to be taken seriously—hides underneath the shiny surface. And what type of business conducts itself at the back of a party? Surely a naughty one, as films and police procedurals teach us. A business that is illicit or even illegal (under the table), probably involving uncomfortable displays of power and even larger amounts of cash. *Party in the Front*, with its physically and temporally unstable images—and viewers, extends my practice's giddy-but-ambivalent illumination of artists and art institutions behind-the-scenes.

4.5 Ideas

Ideas is a series of stereogrammatic posters that each hide variations of the word ‘IDEA’; they offer a somewhat cynical take on the legibility of art and images. Single image random dot stereograms (sometimes called SIRDS) are computer-generated pattern fields, which, when viewed at the correct distance and focal angle, resolve into dimensional images. *Ideas* depends on a body’s binocular vision. to become legible.

The word ‘stereogram’ can refer to several things: two-dimensional images that engage special photographic and/or viewing techniques to represent scenes in 3-D (such as stereoscopic photography and holography), as well as autostereograms. Autostereograms, as their name implies, use a ‘single’ image field, viewed in specific ways, to represent the Z-axis of depth. Single image random dot stereograms are a specific type of autostereogram that makes use of fine-grained randomized patterns, rather than repeated photographs or patterned illustrations. These images subtly modulate fields of visual noise to disguise their ‘secret messages’ in static. Viewers must either cross their eyes or (in this case) look ‘through’ the plane of the picture for the hidden image to resolve.

Ideas’ ‘ideas’ (both literal and figurative) may be invisible to many viewers, and that is part of the point. *Ideas’* message does not need to be seen or deciphered for it to be enjoyed. Some people’s eyes just cannot focus in the required way. I developed a prototype last spring—the last project presented to the studio group led by Dagmar Dahle. Projected in the dark critique room, few of the students could make out anything in this first attempt. I assured the students that it was ok—that their struggle was possibly part of the artwork. Many tears later, they could not shake the feeling that they were missing something. Although my technique has dramatically improved, the ‘ideas’ are still not easy to see for people who are not practiced in this specialized kind of looking. This project was originally an idea for a public art project that I never ended up proposing (for the AKA/PAVED billboard in Saskatoon). On a billboard, *Ideas* might comment

sharply on the legibility of art and images intended to be visually accessible or for the ‘public’. *Ideas* definitely has something to say about the ability of art to reliably communicate meaning. Does it matter if the ideas behind a work of art are visible? Maybe, or maybe not, depending on the circumstances. It would not be inaccurate to say this work is partially in reference to (or *about*) my experiences in school critiques, in learning to draw meaning out of ‘thin’ student work, particularly abstract painting.

Formally, in *Assume the Position*, the posters serve to draw viewers to specific parts of the gallery. I have always preferred full, slightly overwhelming installs; *Ideas*’ pixel-like digital static and too-bright colours create the impression of ‘more’. *Ideas* uses the same ‘screen’ colour palette as the larger exhibition design and *Assume the Position*.

4.6 Hamster Cheeks

Hamster Cheeks, a pair of looped digital videos, is a humorous look at feminine clothing as affective structure, and a consideration of the choices and anxieties that, in 'keeping ourselves together', we keep to ourselves.

In the first *Hamster Cheeks* video, a woman stashes objects in her bra, then removes them. Framed from the bottom of my chin to my waist, I take objects from an off-screen table to my left and hide them, one by one, under my shirt. The objects are domestic items from my studio: office supplies, scissors, utensils, a pack of cigarettes, small toys. Then, one by one, the objects are removed. Some are visible as they pass by the camera; others remain hidden in my hand and the folds of my cowl.

Recently, after beginning a new job, it began to feel necessary to ‘dress up’ in skirts and dresses. These feminine clothes often lacked pockets, so I began habitually stashing small objects in my bra: typically, my cell phone and a USB drive, maybe a winning Tim’s rim. This was enabled by the fact that I had recently switched to a new bra style after my old one was discontinued. An irregularly-sized chest in my new bras (with the foamy molded cups that are

Penningtons' only option) provided a ready-made left-side pocket that camouflaged telltale bumps. The video is a 16-minute loop—all in and all out—that has no narrative (other than expectation, and perhaps awe).

In June I watched the original *Mad Max* for the first time. Max's girlfriend, a truly secondary character with few lines, spends much of the movie running while plucking her bikini bottom out of her bum. Running from murderous gang members, over and over she'd twist around to pull out a wedgie. The wedgies did not seem at all related to the action, and looked like an oversight. I was fascinated and wondered what unfortunate costuming choices could have been causing her wardrobe malfunction.

The second video, finished several months later, is the 'ass' to my earlier 'tits'. It is a 6-minute loop of me squirming, fiddling with my skirt, and aggressively picking my underwear out of my bum. Like in the first video, there is clearly some sort of invisible 'structure' under my business clothes – but here, instead of being helpful, it causes obvious discomfort. Like in the first video, my clothing's internal structure is all but invisible. The viewer has to assume it must be there, and speculate on its unusual nature. What's happening under there? Based on reactions I have received from friends and faculty, the pair of videos definitely invite speculation. I could not be more pleased that my underwear has become a site of public inquiry.

As a pair, the two *Hamster Cheeks* videos might be seen to comment on women's negotiation of what we hide/reveal as we perform professionalism. Its style references that of feminist video artists who, since the 1970s have used their own bodies for what is sometimes described as performance for the camera—for example, Ana Mendieta, Sanja Iveković, and Suzy Lake. *Hamster Cheeks* uses close framing to emphasize embodiment. My head is out of frame to depersonalize its subject. The figure is obviously me, but can also be an extensible 'not me' more easily because my face is not visible. This choice may risk my becoming a Headless Fatty'; the Headless Fatty is a trope where photos and video of fat people destined for use in fearmongering

news stories are shot from the neck down to preserve the anonymity of its unconsenting objects (Cooper). *Hamster Cheeks* resists this objectifying interpretation by its insistence on subjectivity through anxious performance of self.

The first *Hamster Cheeks* video raises questions the accumulation of objects in defining selfhood. Do the objects become ‘me’ when they are inside my shirt? Or do the objects possibly disappear entirely into, say, a pocket dimension. ‘Bigger on the inside’ bags, pockets, and other devices are a common trope in fiction. Classic examples include Dungeons and Dragons’ ‘bags of holding’ (which always weighs the same amount no matter what is put into it); Mary Poppins’ carpet bag (from which she produces a hat stand, mirror, and other furniture); in Doctor Who, both the Doctor’s coatpockets and the Tardis itself; in Harry Potter, Hermione Granger’s beaded handbag (in which she carries, among other things, a small library). These magic bags testify to the competence and preparedness of their owners.

4.7 Coping Mechanism

Coping Mechanism is a motion-activated ping pong ball launcher that, when approached, spits out balls printed with words and phrases that I use frequently. It was designed as a practical and pragmatic response to particular—and particularly awkward—demands of social situations that are common in both academia and the arts: receiving studio visitors, schmoozing at parties, speaking with people of perceived power or high social status, etc.

Coping Mechanism is a performative stand-in for my own body. Its ‘mouth’ speaks written text that was itself chosen for how often it is spoken. Originally called ‘Name Dropper’, this work was initially conceptualized as a performance for the ostensibly-‘non-performative’ spaces at galleries and cultural events. In October 2012 I was hired as Animateur for the Mountain Standard Time Festival of Performative Art. There (for the second time), I performed *Cooler*, a durational performance during which I wrote a ‘gossip blog’ about the other artists. I spent a lot of time hunched over my laptop attempting to write humour pieces in semi-public

spaces like foyers and university hallways. The format of the festival often scheduled multiple performances in Truck’s old basement space on one night. It was not a cabaret: the audience would troop in and out while the gallery was reset, and we spent more time waiting than watching art. If I had not been so busy, I would have found these cramped, sweaty spaces socially horrifying. *Coping Mechanism* is a cheeky response to the types of social interactions that are professionally demanded of artists.

In that it sits still and responds to others’ approaches, rather than making its own, Ahmed might consider *Coping Mechanism* a fearful object. Still, if one considers it an intervention into the artist’s trajectory—rather than an object on its own—its anxious origins are all too obvious. Notably, this is the only project in *Assume the Position* that might be considered primarily an object, rather than an image.

Coping Mechanism was made with an Arduino Uno, by slightly modifying premade code. This represents my first time working with microcontrollers, or anything electronic. Before beginning I had no knowledge of programming languages, aside from basic experience with XHTML, CSS, and Javascript. It was my intention that *Coping Mechanism* might work in multiple social situations, as both the defense and the offence. Sitting behind me in my studio, it might intercept visitors’ questions with a well-timed pop. At an exhibition, it might throw out greetings or casually drop artists’ names. This project extends and literalizes *Assume the Position*’s obsession with dots and balls.

4.8 No Discipline, No Class

No Discipline, No Class is a set of two patches sewn with punch-needle embroidery and grosgrain ribbon. The patches read “No Discipline” and “No Class” in thick cursive script, mimicking the traditional collegiate style that one might see affixed to a letterman jacket.

Closely related to rug hooking, embroidery punch needles pushed loops of yarn (or other stranded material) through the weave of a sturdy, loosely woven fabric. Designs are worked from

the back, frequently following a pattern outline printed or transferred onto the fabric. Depending on the type of materials used, punch embroidery can produce glossy, painterly designs or cartoonish, poodle-like fuzziness of the type that may be been applied onto your childhood jumpers. It is this last style that *No Discipline, No Class* approaches.

This work's deliberately ambiguous title conjures both the social functions of patches and messages of possible ambivalence regarding academic organization. Do the patches refer to discipline as in self-control, or discipline as in organized branch of scholarly inquiry? Class as in classroom or classy? Patches often signal identity, marking the wearer as someone who belongs, or as a self-professed outsider. When affixed to an item of clothing, do the patches represent the words of the wearer, or those of some other body? Were they, like the 'letters' they are modeled after, won for some sort of achievement? In the context of a thesis exhibition, the patches might be read as a childlike (or childish) anti-school sentiment, an activist wish, or as a warning stating cause and effect.

This project was conceived in response to an invitation by Regina-based curator Zoë Schneider. Her exhibition of fabric patches and their culture, *Scutelliphily*, will bring together work by women textile artists from Saskatchewan and Alberta at the Saskatchewan Craft Council's Affinity Gallery in spring 2017. For this exhibition, artist-made patches will be affixed to the back of a series of identical denim jackets, with industrially-produced multiples for sale.

5. Conclusion: Fuzzy Resolution

The nomad has a territory; he follows customary paths; he goes from one point to another; he is not ignorant of points (water points, dwelling points, assembly points, etc.). But the question is what in nomad life is a principle and what is only a consequence. To begin with, although the points determine paths, they are strictly subordinated to the paths they determine, the reverse of what happens with the sedentary. The water point is reached only in order to be left behind; every point is a relay and exists only as a relay. A path is always between two points, but the in-between has taken on all the consistency and enjoys both an autonomy and a direction of its own. The life of the nomad is the intermezzo. (Deleuze and Guattari 380)

As Ahmed describes, the feeling of anxiety might be described as located *between* a subject and another subject or object (7). As a mediating approach, anxiety is an affect of movement, and is linked to subjects' individual agency under liberalism. What can be done to mediate anxiety, when anxiety itself mediates relations? Anxiety might be seen as important as a light signaling that a subject is *moving toward*: even if one cannot see it, one is approaching something. When hegemonic social structures so often depend on subtle invisibility to function, anxiety becomes powerful. Art's guidance may be able to provide remediation: if not solutions that make people 'feel better', then at least tools to help them feel *better*.

My aspirational 'identity' as a 'professional' queer and feminist artist demands I examine the forces at play behind the structures with which I, and my chosen profession, are imbricated. *Assume the Position* queries both what it means and how it feels to be an artist, as both occupation and identity, and envisions new affective trajectories through expectation. Using interactive play and materials drawn from childhood's archives, my work proposes new ways of thinking about how artists and their work might move through the world.

Much of *Assume the Position* uses fuzzy, garbled, otherwise unclear communication styles to convey information. Even when meaning is obscured, affect remains thinkable and feelable. *Assume the Position* attempts to come to terms with the subtle themes of social and professional anxiety that have existed in my work for years, but which I've tried to ignore—or

sometimes mediate with gratuitous displays of sociality. This exhibition might be interpreted, partially, as an attempt to illustrate my own anxieties about economic and professional precarity, as we humans hurdle into the future.

Perhaps yet another goal of this work is to cultivate, in its audience, a new sense of amazement at the complexity and contingency of the world.

Prepositions describe spatial and temporal relationships; they locate humans and our worlds in space and time. In the Sesame Street segment “Over, Under, Around, and Through” (1971), Grover attempts to teach six basic prepositions by physically demonstrating them to the audience, who he addresses directly. (See Appendix B.) “Around, around, around, around,” he sings, cantering around a set of Western swinging doors. “Over!” he peeks at the audience; “and under!” he looks under; “and through!” he bursts through the doors. His meaning is clear to us—but not to the unseen audience to whom Grover speaks. Persistent, he tries again and again, gasping narration of his experience of failing to teach between lines of the song. His initial perkiness fades into exasperation, and then exhaustion tinged with panic. Finally acknowledging that his audience understands, Grover collapses in slapstick exhaustion. Prepositions are my favourite part of speech.

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Appendix A: List of Works in Exhibition

Below is a list of the artworks that appeared in the thesis exhibition *Assume the Position*. In projects with multiple components, pieces are listed individually. Projects are listed counter-clockwise around the gallery, with individual pieces within each project listed left to right (in most cases).

<i>Assume the Position</i> (mirror title text)	<i>FBH</i> (key)
<i>Assume the Position</i> (lenticular)	
<i>Assume the Position</i> (postcards)	<i>All My Faculties</i> (fused bead self-portrait and heads)
<i>Alberta Artists Whose Houses I've Thrown</i>	<i>Annie Martin</i>
<i>Up At</i> (fused bead heads)	<i>Denton Fredrickson</i>
<i>Shara Rosko</i>	<i>Anne Dymond</i>
<i>Robyn Moody</i>	<i>Victoria Baster</i>
<i>Todd Janes</i>	<i>Kimberly Mair</i>
	<i>Don Gill</i>
<i>Hamster Cheeks</i>	<i>Dagmar Dahle</i>
<i>Hamster Cheeks: Tits</i> (16:30)	<i>Mary Kavanagh</i>
<i>Hamster Cheeks: Ass</i> (6:17)	<i>Suzanne Lenon</i>
	<i>Michael Campbell</i>
<i>Party in the Front, Business in the Back</i> (lenticular digital images)	<i>Glenna Westwood</i>
<i>Yellow Dice</i>	<i>Glen MacKinnon</i>
<i>Blue Dice</i>	
<i>Tan Dice</i>	<i>Ideas</i> (stereograms)
<i>Crumple</i>	<i>Idea #1</i>
<i>Garbage Recycling</i>	<i>Idea #2</i>
<i>Studio Trees</i>	<i>Idea #3</i>
<i>Ladder Flood</i>	<i>Idea #4</i>
<i>Rubber Band Crate</i>	<i>Idea #6</i>
<i>Pencil Trees</i>	<i>Idea #7</i>
<i>Spool Pallet</i>	<i>Idea #8</i>
<i>Apple Glyptodon</i>	
<i>Golden Peanuts</i>	<i>Coping Mechanism</i> (ping pong ball launcher)
<i>Play-doh</i>	
<i>Spider-Egg</i>	<i>No Discipline, No Class</i> (2 patches)
<i>Clowncakes</i>	<i>No Discipline</i>
	<i>No Class</i>

Appendix B: Over, Under, Around, and Through

Transcript of “Over, Under, Around, and Through,” *Sesame Street* 1971

Grover sings: “Hello there everybody! Today I am going to teach you a whole bunch of things so you look and listen closely. Ok? Here goes...

Around around around around over and under and through
That’s what I’m teaching
Around around around around over and under and through
You see? Now watch
Near!
Far!
Near! And go far again...
Far! See that’s what it’s all about. Ya understand?
Ok I’ll show one more time
Whew!

Around around around around over and under and through
Ya see? Now...that’s what I’m teaching
Now you understand all that. Isn’t that nice.
You don’t understand all that huh
I’m gonna show you again, ok watch

Around around around around over and under and through
Ya see?
Around around around around over and under and through
And there’s near
Near!
And here we go over here
Far!
And we go up to near again
Near!
I have to go back there again!
Far!
And I come up over here
Oh I’m so glad you understand!
You don’t. Ahhhhh!

Around around around around over and under and through
You see? Oh boy!
Over! See?
And under
And through! There we go
Once more?! We go
Over and under and thr- and thr- and thr- and through!
Huh I did it.
Uhhhhhhhhh”

Appendix C: Coping Mechanism's Words & Phrases

1. absolutely
2. aw
3. awesome!
4. ballz
5. bye!
6. cool
7. cool cool
8. definitely
9. definitely not
10. does that make sense?
11. dude
12. eeek!
13. eh?
14. fantastic
15. fuck!
16. god damn it!
17. good morning!
18. great
19. hello!
20. hey
21. hi there
22. hi!
23. holy shit
24. how are you?
25. how's it going?
26. I guess so
27. I love it
28. I think...
29. I was just going to get some coffee...
30. if that makes sense
31. if that's cool...
32. is that ok?
33. it was so great to meet you
34. it's going ok
35. I'm not sure
36. I'm ok
37. I'm so tired
38. I'm sorry
39. jeepers
40. no problem
41. no problem!
42. no way!
43. not at all
44. not really
45. o-kay!
46. oh gosh
47. oh hi there
48. oh jeez
49. oh shit
50. oh wow
51. oh wow thank you so much!!
52. oh yikes
53. oh...
54. oh?
55. ohhh
56. ok
57. ok bye
58. okay?
59. really sorry about that!
60. right on
61. so...
62. sorry!
63. super!
64. thank you so much!
65. thank you!
66. thanks so much for your help
67. thanks!
68. that makes sense
69. they're fun to make
70. uhhh....
71. um
72. unacceptable
73. whaaaat?!
74. whatcha up to?
75. whatcha workin' on?
76. will you be here tomorrow?
77. wow yeah!
78. yaaay!
79. yay!
80. yeah
81. yeah, I'm fine
82. yipes
83. you're right
84. *big wave*
85. *nods*
86. *quotey fingers*
87. *thumbs up*
88. *two thumbs up*
89. *waves hands*
90. *wiggles fingers*

Appendix D: Exhibition Documentation



Fig. 1: *Assume the Position* title wall and *Alberta Artists*

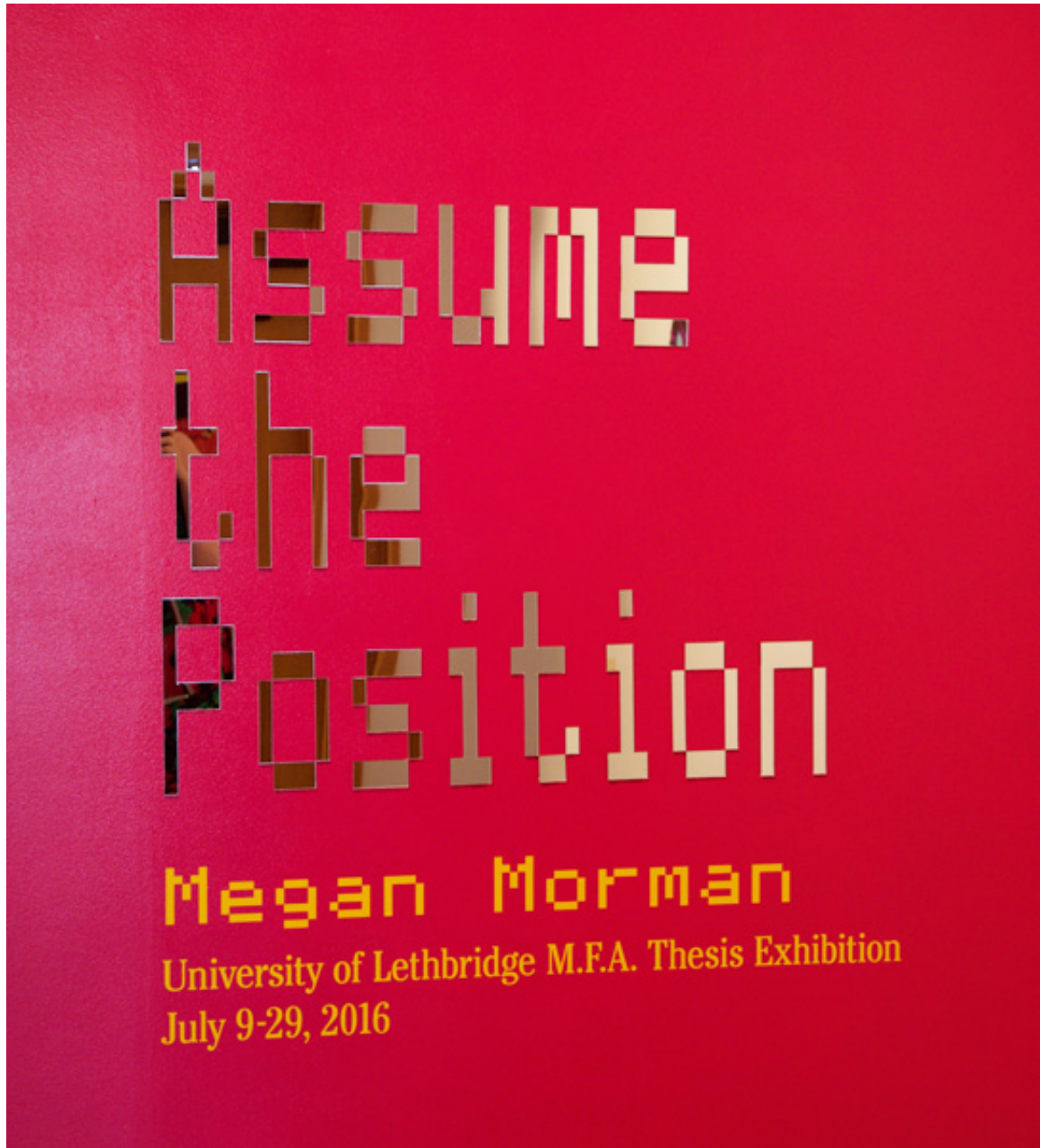


Fig. 2: *Assume the Position* title wall



Fig. 3: *Alberta Artists Whose Houses I've Thrown Up At*



Fig. 4: *Assume the Position* (lenticular digital image)



Fig. 5: Exhibition long view



Fig. 6: *Hamster Cheeks*



Fig. 7: *Hamster Cheeks: Tits and Party in the Front, Business in the Back*



Fig. 8: *Party in the Front*: exit corner installation



Fig. 9: *Party in the Front: Clowncakes*



Fig. 10: *Party in the Front*: back wall installation, first view



Fig. 11: *Party in the Front*: back wall, second view



Fig. 12: *Party in the Front: Garbage Recycling and Studio Trees*



Fig. 13: *Party in the Front*: corner installation view



Fig. 14: *Party in the Front: Apple Glyptodon and Golden Peanuts*, first view



Fig. 15: *Party in the Front: Apple Glyptodon and Golden Peanuts*, second view



Fig. 16: *Party in the Front: Crumple*



Fig. 17: *Party in the Front: Tan Dice*, first view



Fig. 18: *Party in the Front: Tan Dice*, second view



Fig. 19: Exhibition long view



Fig. 20: *FBH*



Fig. 21: *FBH*



Fig. 22: *All My Faculties*: long view



Fig. 23: *All My Faculties*: right side view



Fig. 24: *All My Faculties*: left side view



Fig. 25: *All My Faculties: Glen MacKinnon*

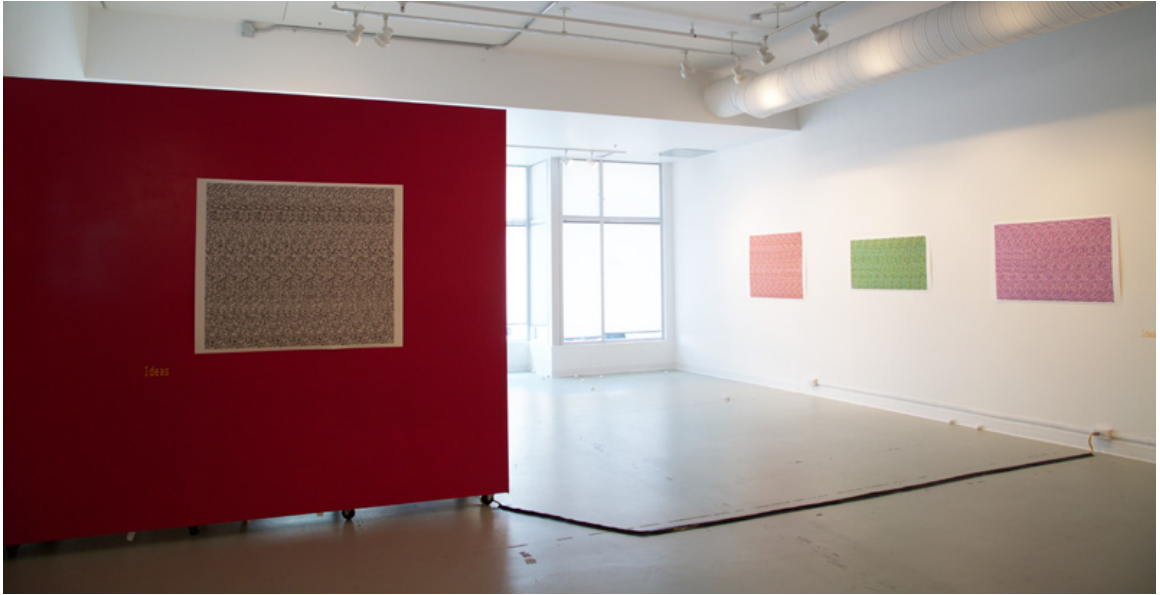


Fig. 26: *Ideas*: installation view



Fig. 27: *Ideas: Idea #7*



Fig. 28: *Ideas: Idea #3, Idea #4, Idea #6*

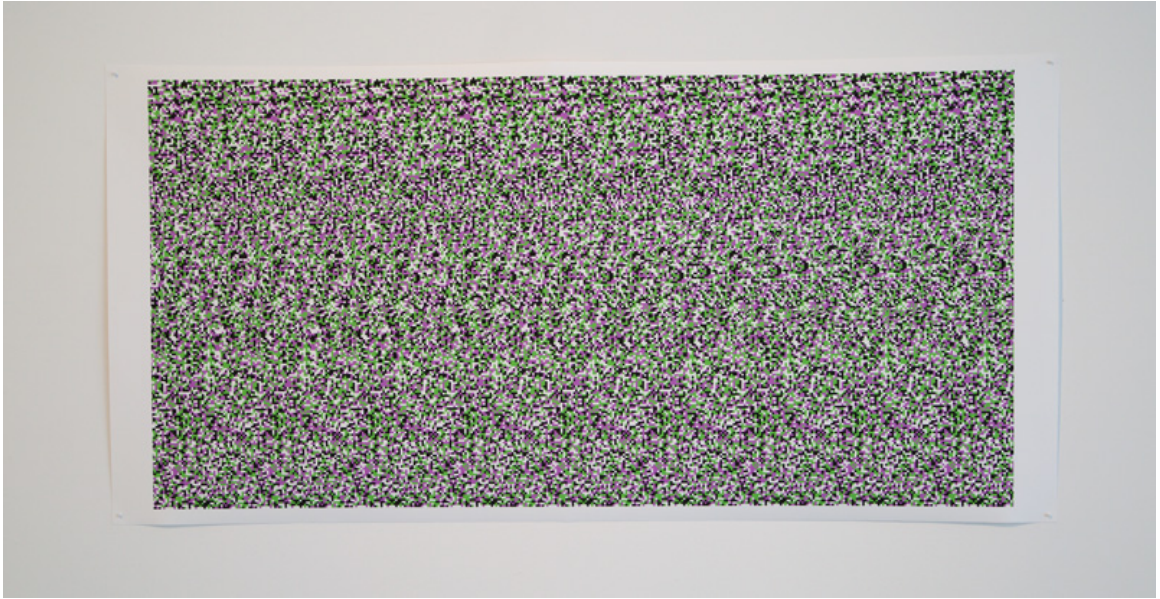


Fig. 29: *Ideas: Idea #2*



Fig. 30: *Ideas and Coping Mechanism*



Fig. 31: *Coping Mechanism: balls*

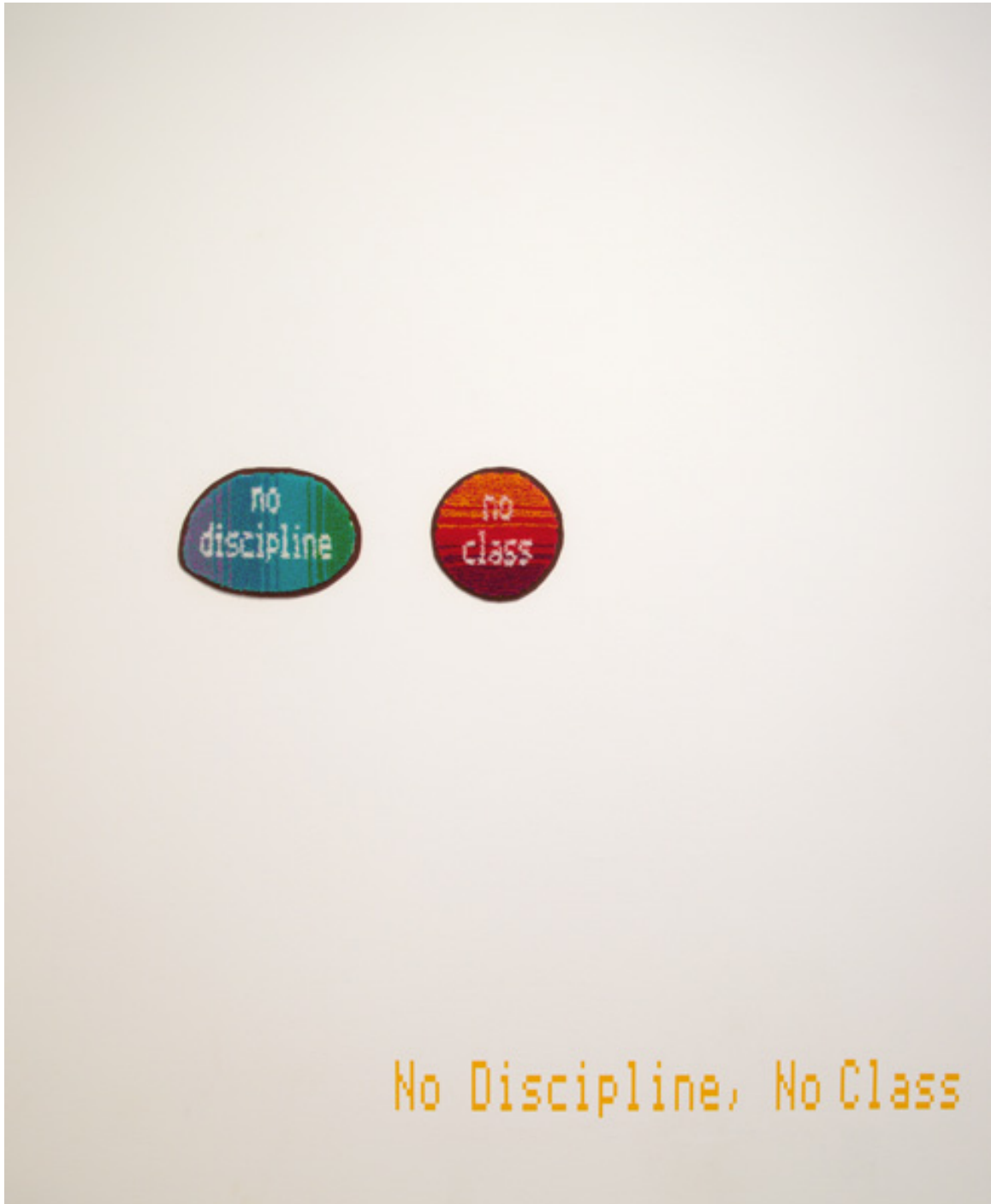


Fig. 32: *No Discipline, No Class*: installation view



Fig. 33: *No Discipline, No Class*