Casual Encounters

Catalyst: Cindy Baker

Edited by Ted Hiebert
Catalyst Book Series

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Noxious Sector Press
Victoria • Seattle

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Cover image: Cindy Baker, *Crash Pad*, dc3 Art Projects, Edmonton, Canada, 2018.

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Library and Archives Canada Cataloguing in Publication

Title: Casual encounters : catalyst : Cindy Baker / edited by Ted Hiebert ; contributors: Théo Bignon, Richard Boulet, Blair Brennan, Michelle Lacombe, Aaron McIntosh, Mary-Anne McTrowe, Veronika Merklein, Mikiki, Christine Negus, Shanell Papp, Kristin Rodier, Zoë Schneider, and Stefanie Snider.
Other titles: Casual encounters (Noxious Sector Press)
Names: Hiebert, Ted, 1973- editor.
Description: Essays and illustrations.
Identifiers: Canadiana 20210172290 | ISBN 9780993605895 (softcover)
Subjects: LCSH: Baker, Cindy (Performance artist)—Criticism and interpretation. | LCGFT: Essays.
Classification: LCC NX513.Z9 B3535 2021 | DDC 700.92—dc23

Catalyst

The twenty-first century is a time of prodigious creative and intellectual experimentation, with many thinkers, artists, and makers engaging in a range of practices that are foundationally speculative yet nevertheless transformative. The Catalyst book series aims to represent this space of possibility by coupling theorists and artists in ways that galvanize logics, spaces, politics, and practices that are not yet mapped … and perhaps never can be.

Catalysis instigates processual differentiations over a space of exchange; it is eventful, unpredictable, and generative. To chart a catalyst is to bring attention to the critical and creative processes that reveal hidden perspectives upon the event of their becoming. Thus, contributors to the Catalyst books think *alongside* the catalyst, edging and forging implications, connections, atmospheres and weirdnesses. The essays do not review or critique the catalyst's work but rather sound points of contact in pursuit of resonances, enacting gestures of performative solidarity through intellectual and creative engagement.

Catalyst books build speculative communities, inviting a wide range of perspectives into conversations about shared artistic, political, and intellectual values while privileging the unique, distinct and personal insights that characterize any single voice of engagement. Each volume in the series provides an in-depth look at an active thinker or artist—seeking after the full relevance of their work. The series focuses in particular on voices that have not already been widely featured but who have unique and relevant perspectives to share on questions of art, theory and culture.

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A Biographical Statement

Cindy Baker suffered her first existential crisis in 1987, at the age of 12, when she realized that she was too old to be considered a prodigy, and that the world was not likely to hand her the best it had to offer without her having to work very hard for it. This is not the biography of someone who worked very hard for what she has, or, at least that's not the narrative being constructed here. That would make for a very pedestrian story, and might imply that Baker is a bootstrapper which she most certainly is not. It also might imply that Baker is invested in a conception of labor that considers some people more valuable than others based on their level of productivity, which is a concept she actively opposes in her work. Rather, this is the biography of someone who has worked very hard because she has found that much of the time, work comes relatively easy, and she works very hard in those times, because it is easy and fun.

At other times work comes very hard, and she convalesces and allows her body rest and tries not to come apart at the seams over all the work that is not getting done, and still she works hard, but slowly and with great effort, and therefore maybe not as hard as when it is easy and fun. Much less "work" gets accomplished in those times; sometimes the hard work is in just holding on and getting by, but the evolution of her art and her ways of thinking that come from them is essential to her practice and so she values those times as much as the fun work times, but in different ways.

This is the biography of an artist who doesn't like biographies; or rather, the biography of someone who prefers affect to fact. In crafting the artwork that is this biography, the remaining facts are the sparkly inclusions leftover after all the hard sharp edges of factuality have been polished away, leaving a smooth round pebble of writing that performs the artist's biography rather than describes it.

Growing up in Alberta in the 1980s, Baker made and did every sort of art and craft available to her, from needlepoint to baking to ceramics, drawing and painting and building, writing and sculpting and more. Cindy's mom was the neighborhood cake maker who specialized in children's birthday cakes but was also the go-to for the community's raunchy cake needs, designs she cobbled together from pans shaped like a t-shirt, two doll skirt pans, and a guitar. Cindy learned her love of crafts, her love of experimentation, her sense of humor, and her refusal to fear the body from her mother. Baker's childhood art was inspired by her Aunt Gail, a professional water colour artist, seamstress, and teddy bear enthusiast. It was because of Gail that Baker realized being an artist was a viable profession. She was also inspired by her grandfather, a homesteader who raised a large family in a log cabin with no electricity or running water. Equally inspiring were the stories of her grandmother, the local midwife, and the community that came together to raise the children communally when she died at a young age, allowing them to stay with their father in the cabin on the farm where Cindy and her family later spent their summers. There, she loved to garden, pick berries, and spend time poking through the house and the outbuildings for hidden treasures.

Though she'd developed a lasting love of needlepoint at an early age, Baker fell hard for the sewing machine in

her early teens, and she made her own clothes throughout junior high and high school. These dozens of sweatshirts and sweatpants, hand-painted with kittens and clowns and unicorns, were all she wore; Baker was not exactly popular in her teenage years though the *très* normcore style would probably be very popular today, and she regrets not keeping some of those treasures.

Cindy and her younger sister Alana spent countless hours together baking, crafting, sewing, and inventing games. They once entered the Leduc Black Gold Rodeo fair with their baked goods and handmade jewelry, and won several ribbons in their categories, likely in part because there were no other competitors. Even though they had their own rooms, Cindy and Alana were inseparable, choosing to share a bed so they could talk and laugh all through the night, up until the day Cindy finished school, entered the workforce, and moved into her own apartment in the city.

Baker also spent much of her childhood as she spends much of her adulthood: in pain and with a body that often refused to cooperate, though then her issues went frustratingly undiagnosed and untreated and now she is inspired by the strangeness that is a body, finding content for her work and context for her practice.

Though she'd always dreamed of being an artist, as a youth Baker assumed she'd grow up to be a teacher just like her mom and dad. As a child, she never understood the concept of ambition and thought she'd end up having to settle for whatever the world handed to her, for better or worse; spending a lot of time wondering about what might happen to her when she grew up, Baker never seemed to grasp that she had a role to play in those eventualities.

She never was a prodigy, but for the most part those in Baker's life saw the best in her and lifted her up to enable her to do whatever she wanted, whether she was good at it or not. Almost always taking the path of least resistance, which meant trying lots of new things, doing what she was good at and honing those skills, young Baker abandoned most anything she found difficult because difficult is, mostly, not fun. She played the piano, guitar, drums, and more; she was told she was talented but she never learned to read music and found practicing her instruments impossible to force herself to do, so she quit music altogether. She abandoned her passion for magic when it, too, required more practice than she was willing to give it. There were plenty of difficult and not-fun things in her life: body things, emotional things, physical things, and other life things. Those took a lot of hard work as well, and drained away a lot of the energy she had for the good things. She worked very hard at some of these difficult and not-fun things, and developed keen skills in many of them because they were the things she could not quit; she wanted to master them so as to moderate their impact on her life, and she did so in creative and novel ways like an artist ought. There were also things that were easy and not fun, and Baker learned that simply being good at something does not constitute a compelling practice. This way of living and of moving through the world would come to inform the way she works now as an artist, eschewing faithfulness to medium or to proficiency in favor of the most suitable way to manifest each idea, employing the best mode, medium, or manufacturer for each job. Sometimes this means spending months making work by hand and sometimes it means hiring someone to produce it. Sometimes facility and skill is important

and should be visible (or invisible) within the work, but sometimes a sense of having labored is needed and therefore selecting a medium with which she has less aptitude fits the bill.

Baker also disdains fealty to the white cube, addressing the gallery within her work and pushing its rigid boundaries, calling for a reimagining of the relationships between artist, audience, art, and presentation space. Talking back to the institution was also something Baker was enabled to do through her privilege, education, and upbringing, and she has found through her work that she has a responsibility to do so.

As a person whose interests, energies, abilities, and priorities wax and wane, so too do her roles within her communities. There have been times when Baker has spent considerable energy organizing, assuming leadership roles in professional organizations through her non-profit jobs, and simultaneously taking on formal extracurricular volunteer roles. At one point early in her career in Edmonton, she volunteered coordinating other volunteers at the Works Art and Design Festival and was the president of the board of Latitude 53 Society of Artists while she worked fulltime during the day at Harcourt House Arts Centre and at Metro Cinema Film Society at night. During this time she also created a considerable amount of art. While she lived in Saskatoon and worked at AKA Gallery, Baker was the founding president of the national Artist Run Centres and Collectives Coalition, volunteering at the Gay and Lesbian Health Services and helping found the Saskatoon Diversity Network, Saskatoon's pride festival, in her free time. It was during her tenure at AKA Gallery that Baker received the Collaborator of the Year award from Toronto's

South Asian Visual Arts Centre. Baker's art and curatorial practices grew up alongside her roles in these and many other organizations, and her key interests in collaboration, ethical community engagement, critical social inquiry, and audience agency developed from her involvement with them and their constituents.

Baker's community involvement is less formal these days. Most of her leadership roles are in mentorship and collaboration, and much of her organizing is online—for instance, helping run a body- and gender-affirming apparel fund within the peer-to-peer funding group Give Me Your Money—and she has shifted her employment from working in non-profits to teaching at post-secondary institutions like the University of Alberta and MacEwan University in Edmonton. Baker has become a teacher like her mom and dad after all, and has found that she has much passion for it.

The communities founded around queer, gender, disability, fat, and art discourses facilitated her growth and helped her find her way in the world; now in her mid-40s, Cindy Baker maintains a full time contemporary art practice that engages with those concerns and more. Her interdisciplinary research-based practice draws upon 25 years working, volunteering, and organizing in the diverse communities of which she is part, and it moves fluidly between the arts, humanities, and social sciences, emphasizing the theoretical and conceptual over material concerns. The things that came easily to her have buoyed up the things that were not so easy, and taught her to buoy up others by recognizing that it is the work of others that has allowed some things to come so easily to her. This has become not only the ethic but also much of the content of Baker's practice. It informs her approach to teaching

and mentorship, and is also her approach to collaboration. Her long-term creative partnership with Saskatoon-based contemporary artist Ruth Cuthand, for example, focuses on a shared interest in community issues and the oppressed body, and approaches the idea of collaboration generously and compassionately, not insisting on rigid partnership models or notions of labor distribution.

Baker's thesis work *The Missing Body* theorized techniques that marginalized artists might use for resisting objectification, refusing to be a tool of the dominant discourse, and facilitating the construction of new communities and new identities. The cornerstone of her practice is the establishment of an ethical engagement with the audience that ensures everyone who comes to the work is given agency within the presentation space.

Coming from the "outsider" position of a queer woman with a fat disabled body, Baker makes work that challenges normative standards of the body, beauty ideals, gender and sexuality. Coming from the "insider" position of an artist who has worked for 25 years within the arts presentation system, her work addresses the performative/presentation context and the roles people play within it, including the performance of expected viewership behaviour.

Employing a synthesis of those insider and outsider impulses in her practice, Baker recognizes her relative class, cultural, and educational privileges, using that privilege to make space for those who do not. Curatorial and collaborative projects are thus essential facets of her creative practice, as are academic and non-academic writing and lecturing, and community mentorship.

Relying heavily on an ability to integrate theories of the "other" with a strong popular culture vocabulary, Baker employs methods such as intervention and collaboration to

work simultaneously from without and within the cultures and subcultures that form her communities. Building this cross-disciplinary framework into a strong studio practice facilitates destabilizing the centre that she is intervening into, making room for the other.

Proposing methodological approaches that provoke risk, transgression, distance, and intimacy, Baker hopes to enable a shift in focus from her body to others' bodies, the othered body, and embodiment as a concept. So doing, her work builds empathetic relationships within the gallery while simultaneously creating space for a careful examination of audience response to the work.

Through a focus on rest, play, and resistance, Baker's work confronts cultural expectations of productivity. In other words, in much of her art, Baker has fun and refuses to work. Her former partner of two decades, Harley Morman, says that Baker has earned the ability to make art about not working (by refusing to work) because she has worked very hard her whole life, but it's partly because she spent so much of that time not being able to work at all. Morman also says that Baker's bio is allowed to be really uncool because she's so cool now that it's cool, so take that as you will.

Believing in the importance of creating safer spaces for bodies that fall outside of Western definitions of "normal" (fat, disabled, queer, transgender, racialized and other non-normative bodies), Baker encourages a critical dismantling of the arbitrary boundaries that continue to enact violence upon those marked as different.

Through her work, Baker is making a significant impact in her fields. Important texts which feature her work include *Queer Threads*, edited by John Chaich and Todd Oldham

(Los Angeles: AMMO Books, 2017) and *More Caught in the Act: An anthology of performance art by Canadian Women* edited by Tanya Mars and Johanna Householder, (Toronto: YYZ Books, 2016). Her work is in several public collections, including the Valentine Museum in Richmond VA, the Remai Modern in Saskatoon SK, and the Alberta Foundation for the Arts. She regularly lectures at academic conferences and within professional arts contexts, and her writing has recently been featured in *BlackFlash Magazine* and *Broken Pencil Magazine*. Noxious Sector Press has published a substantial artist book by Baker titled *Never Seen Before* (2020), featuring her ten-year dream journal, and she is the guest editor of a special "Fat Kinship" issue of the *Fat Studies Journal* (forthcoming).

Baker also has a precocious orange tabby named Sashimi who once took second place in a cat pageant, and who accompanies her in her various adventures across Western Canada where her practice is based. She spent the pandemic neither baking bread nor getting "fit," but landing and then quitting her dream job, making animated gifs from doodles, acquiring and wearing a new bikini wardrobe, and starting a toothpaste fanatic Instagram. Baker looks forward to getting an eyelift this fall to remediate her Floppy Eyelid Syndrome, which is a real thing that she didn't make up.

Introduction

Ted Hiebert

I hate opening lines. I always want to just skip the beginning and begin with the follow-up, to forego the expectation for a pithy first statement and instead fast-track to the slower pace of the proper discussion. It's too bad that the opening line always steals the show. Or maybe not? In a sense, I didn't really write an opening line. Instead, maybe I wrote a thought that refused the opening line as that which draws the opening. As such, instead of a line, perhaps I did—by refusing to do what I was doing—exactly that which I had thought was not possible. Perhaps I wrote the beginning of what might become an opening encounter. Against the pithy rhetoric used to signal concrete meaning, a series of meandering words that say nothing concrete but in not saying anything begin to gesture towards the importance of process—and in signaling process also signaling time and the need to listen and attend. Not an ideological gateway, this is instead a signal of encounters waiting to happen.

In 2010 I did a series of performances with the artist Doug Jarvis in which we rolled down stairs, threw things in the air, and ran back and forth across crosswalks while the lights were green. They were just dumb experiments but that was partly the point: they kept things casual. We called the project "gravity research." I mention this project here not because of its success but because of its failure—the problem that we never reconciled with this work was how

to move from gravity to *gravitas*. That is, while the projects concerned themselves with physics, mobility, and space (thus the idea of gravity research) they were, for us, just as much about holding that space as one of serious investment. What we felt was interesting was not just the gravity (though it was that too) but the idea of manufactured *gravitas*—the idea of taking seriously something that otherwise would fall to the side as an irrelevant triviality or just another artist doing something stupid. In retrospect, the problem was that these works failed to turn experiments into encounters.

Against the impetus to firm statements and positions, to clear meanings and boundaries, this is a book of casual encounters. Casual encounters? What could be more counter-intuitive for the current moment—defined as it is by pandemic-induced mandates towards social distancing on the one hand, and high stakes political protests against ongoing systems of injustice on the other? Asked to simultaneously come together (in solidarity) and stay apart (in solidarity), we are caught between the anxiety of viral contagion and the constant reminders of the deep social and political injustices upon which our worlds have been built. But one thing can definitely be said about this age of Zoom and this age of protest: there is not much room for casual encounter anymore. And that's exactly why a book like this is both catalytic and cathartic for the current moment—a book anchored in a belief that creative acts of making, thinking, reflecting and engaging provide alternate contexts that sit in parallel to the current moment, allowing support for communities dedicated to creating the world differently. No opening lines just the ongoing negotiation of a world we are already living within—with all its problems and troubles—and the search for encounters that can help

build and rebuild it differently. This is a coming-together of perspectives that share a desire to attend, to listen, and to share.

Catalyst Cindy Baker

To put it differently, context is key, and there is no artist better positioned to catalyze this kind of a conversation than Cindy Baker—a performance artist whose stated preferred medium is context itself.[1] It might sound like an unusual proposition but I take Baker literally as intending to produce, in her performances, an actual intervention into the relationship between art and life. To use context as a medium is to be purposefully attentive to the ways that art can shift, pressurize, provoke and invite—and thus change—implicit social dynamics. This is not just the "social sculpture" of Joseph Beuys's 1970s imagination,[2] 50 years later, Baker's performances are context interventions—environmental in their ambition, inclusive in their imagination, and attentive to the fact that art holds its greatest capacity for social change when speaking to those who don't already fashion themselves as artists. In the work of Cindy Baker, art is made public—and to use context as a medium is to hold herself accountable to the experience of her work by others. Baker's imagination is one that treats art as social ecology—with care for social environments, but also a need to charge normative thought and life with a renewed sense of creativity.

It's not as easy as it sounds, for everything has context—and importantly, for Baker, context is not always or only an external factor. Instead, no blank slates—no more white walls of pristine galleries waiting for virtuosic

creative explosions—Baker's work disowns the conceit of historically elitist artistic form in favor of examining real world context. In a recent artist talk, she described this as first and foremost understanding what it means to be herself as a performer, a self-described "artist with a taboo body," which audiences automatically read as a statement whether she wants it or not.[3] Thrust into a context, Baker thus responds by making contexts of her own—thinking, writing, researching, and creating works in ways that challenge the social pressure to perform productivity, all while performing in her own creatively counter-productive ways. In Baker's words:

> Because of my extra-large body, and the fact that it will always be the first thing people's brains process when they look at me—before race, even before gender—my performance work will always be read as a statement about the fat body. I have come to understand that no matter the subject of my art or how it is manifested, as a performance artist with a body that society labels taboo, my work must address my body, since it is read into the content of my work whether I intend it to be or not. … In order to take an active critical role in the consumption and dissemination of my own image, I began actively addressing the body throughout my work, (both performative and object-based, through research and practice)—my body, women's bodies, queer bodies, fat bodies and other taboo bodies.[4]

For me, statements such as this reveal the true catalytic potential of Baker's work, marked by the decidedly

purposeful way that she sets the stage for casual encounters. That is, I read the casual—for Baker—as a political statement about how exactly not-casual the seemingly casual can be. Not detached from bias or expectation, the casual is what expects and anticipates nuanced social realities as contexts to be engaged, questioned, and creatively repositioned. Context, in other words, is not just the situation in which one finds oneself—it's the complex constellation of personalities and social architecture that configure in advance the ways any given situation may be inflected and thus manifest in unexpected ways. And that's why the casual is so important too, because it resists an advance understanding of context in favor of just the opposite—a propositional and improvised commitment to navigating space as it happens. Immanently present, the casual refuses the general such as to allow the possibilities of individualized encounter.

In this spirit, rather than attempt to generalize major trends in Baker's work or synthesize any singular interpretation—as might be typical for a more analytic or academic introduction—for me, the best way to honor her work is to simply present a few key moments that I believe stand as representative both of the power of the encounters Baker creates and as a testament to the impact of any enacted performance that takes—as Baker's work surely does—a conscientious and socially-oriented approach.

Plexiglass Box

Cindy Baker constructs a human-sized plexiglass box, attaches wheels to the bottom, and goes for a walk around the city. The box is transparent so the point clearly isn't to hide herself within it but to make obvious a certain labor

of engagement and a certain separation from the world, even while her public presence makes clear the desire to socially engage. She is thus isolated (in her box) and socially present (in the city) in ways not usually brought together.

Cindy Baker, *Plexiglass Box*,
YYZ Artists' Outlet, Toronto, 2005.
Photo credit: Gregory Elgstrand.

She is the opposite of what philosopher Sherry Turkle calls the digital condition of being "alone together"—an argument that networked culture breeds isolation in the name of immanent connectivity.[5] Baker is, instead, social but separated—the perfect pandemic performance (though in a strange twist it was an early project—performed 15 years ahead of its time!). Merging social distance and the desire to be safely present in public, the box makes obvious that something unusual is happening even though there is no real indication of what that might be. And that's the point! In Baker's world of performative encounter, catalysis is key. The piece and performance are designed as curiosities—a transparent spectacle that is hiding nothing but in such disclosure signals intimacy and welcome. In a sense, it is pure performance, mitigated only by the visibly invisible frame of the plexiglass box, and sustained by the artist's labor of pushing it around. This is art on display—as art—foregrounding the bodily labor of the artist herself in the process of making public her work. This is social presencing.

Personal Appearance

Cindy Baker wears a mascot costume of herself, one that she had specially designed to ensure it would meet professional and public standards. In the costume she wanders—nothing particularly special except for the obvious fact that it's special to see a mascot of any sort simply wandering around town. The purpose is to have no purpose; the reason is to have no reason. That's how this becomes an immanently special event—an event without a cause, a rogue mascot cheering life or simply seeing the sights. But to think this piece further is to consider the idea of "putting

oneself on" with all the complexities of such a statement—both a performance of self and a sustained joke designed to be shared with others. This is Lisa Nakamura's "identity tourism" brought out of the digital space of online identity exploration and into the everyday—then enacted on the self as a conceptual and public intervention. Performing as herself, Baker is herself, only not or perhaps more so—a simple yet brilliant performative *non sequitur*, anchored in the concept of bodily form.[6] The mascot costume is quite literally a concept—and equally literally one worn by the body itself. Self-conceptualization becomes an act of labor, performed in context and framed in a cuddly and child-friendly form. It's a perfect lure that Baker describes as follows:

> I try to fashion my work to be humorous or visually seductive, or able to be easily read at a surface level, while always having a complex series of questions buried within. I want the viewers to be just as curious to find out the answers as I am, and therefore invest the time to try to learn or take some enjoyment from it without feeling preached to.[7]

Beneath the mascot costume one assumes (without knowing) that Baker is present—an artist performing as herself, or at least having a version of herself performed. She is thus both present and absent—a Schrödinger's artist that is able to navigate this social paradox with such grace in part because of the cleverness of the work and in part because what Baker understands so brilliantly is that viewers want to play along. For me, the point of the piece is not to question the presence of the artist but to engage people in the quantum incompossibility of social interaction. It

doesn't matter if it's Baker in the costume or not because the work is the context shared by the artist and those who engage. The mascot brings people together.

Cindy Baker, *Personal Appearance*, City of Leduc Summer Street Festival, Leduc, Canada, 2009. Photo credit: Alana Gueutal.

Crash Pad

Cindy Baker rests on a large pill-shaped mattress, staged in the middle of a gallery. Her body is large on the mattress but she is careful to leave room for anyone who might want to join her. Sometimes there are others in the room doing performances of their own; other times she is alone. For hours and days and weeks she rests—in part as a refusal of our culture of hyper-productivity and in part as an invitation to others to rest with her. This mattress Baker describes as a "love poem to a favorite pill."[8] And thus to lay down on the pill is to recite the poem, to swallow the idea, to drop together, so to speak, and appreciate the encounter for wherever it may lead. This is thus a work that proposes togetherness as a pharmaceutical[9]—a crash pad not only as a place for togetherness, but also a place from which to interrogate the imperatives towards fast-pace productivity that saturates the world in which we live. A crash pad is a place to crash but it is also thus a place which—when made public—reverses expectations in curious ways, building metaphoric and real connections among people, pills, time and encounter. A spectacle of leisure—turned into a labor of leisure if one realizes the commitment to rest that such a performance entails. Not just a body in space doing nothing, but a body purposefully not doing other things in order to be fully present in the long moments of an expanded performance. In Baker's words, "being visible makes visible the refusal to perform," making clear that "resisting labor is a lot of labor" but also that the motivation for the action is not simply a spectacle for witness, but a context-creation experiment in which Baker's mattress stands as invitation to step out of pace with reality—to crash—as a form of

artistic engagement but perhaps equally important as an invitation for a viewer to do the same.[10] Participatory leisure; togetherness as art.

Cindy Baker, *Crash Pad*, Performatorium Festival of Queer Performance: Bad (ass) Bodies, Dunlop Gallery, Regina, Canada, 2019.

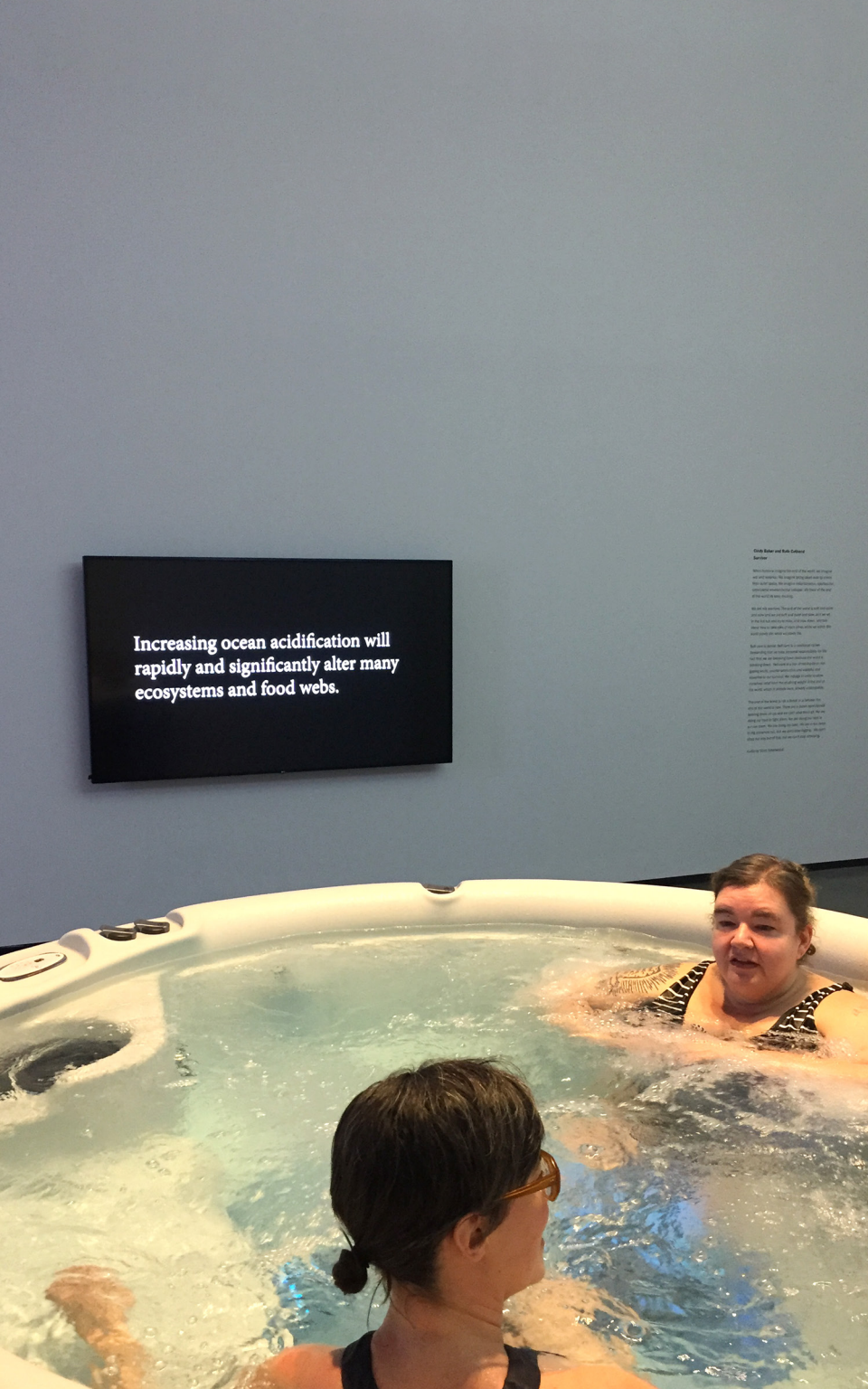
Survivor

Cindy Baker and Ruth Cuthand put a hot tub in an art gallery as a contribution to a conversation about how to think about the end of the world. Sometimes they are there to sit in it, other times it is there to be used by whomever wants to step in. The hot tub is a site of potentially shared space and a place from which to contemplate a list of end time realities—shared on a screen beside the hot tub as a credits-like scroll of end-of-world facts and factoids in categories such as:

Catastrophic climate change
Ecological collapse
Pandemics
Environmental toxins
Nuclear war
Biological and chemical warfare
Artificial intelligence
Biotech disaster
Nanotechnology disaster
Fossil fuel overconsumption
Mental health decline
Unreliable government[11]

Cindy Baker & Ruth Cuthand, *Survivor*,
in the exhibition "Nests for the End of the World,"
Art Gallery of Alberta, Edmonton, Canada, 2020.

Caption info: Baker and AGA curator
Lindsey Sharman in the installation.


Increasing ocean acidification will rapidly and significantly alter many ecosystems and food webs.

This hot tub is thus not just any hot tub—it is a time machine, a site designed to help imagine the present that has already set into motion a certain future inevitability. The hot tub soothes the body while the mind struggles to acknowledge the heavy reality of environmental and political collapse within which we live. But—perhaps most importantly—the hot tub is a social space, signaling that these are not conversations that anyone has to have alone. Perhaps community matters more in end times than ever before.

> The end of the world is not a threat or a fantasy; the end of the world is now. … We are not warriors. The end of the world is soft and quiet and slow and we are soft and quiet and slow, and we sit in the hot tub and try to relax, and slow down, and talk about how to take care of each other, while we watch the world slowly die, while we slowly die.[12]

In times of networked connectivity and pandemic social prohibition what's perhaps more radical than embracing virtuality is to think about the stakes of the body, community, and personal encounter. A hot tub for the end of the world is a survival strategy that can purposefully adopt a caring and soothing context in order to build the most beautiful mindset from which to contemplate our own complacency in the destruction of the planet. Perhaps it's a trap—though better stated as a gentle nudge to accept the not so gentle impacts of human environmental impact, one that provides a place from which to actually want to engage in these difficult conversations with others.

Things I've Forgotten (or Nothing I Didn't Already Know)

Cindy Baker walks into a room, sits down for a little while and then gets up. She makes a trip to her car, parked just outside. There, she gathers blankets, pillows, a suitcase, a few purses, and a couple of large containers of water. Returning to the room, she fills the purses and suitcase with water, gives them to bystanders to hold onto for her, then invites one onlooker to sit down beside her as they whisper together. Eventually she gathers back the purses and pours the leftover water from containers onto her own head. Then she walks out of the gallery, gets in her car and drives away. The performance takes about an hour. It's definitely an uncanny moment, but what is most striking to me about this performance is not its relationship to the absurd. It's also not the slow way in which Baker's work unfolds while holding attention and recasting time as a commitment shared by both the performer (herself) and the audience. What's most striking is that the event feels like a dream—it involves simple and intelligible actions that have no real context and thus seem expanded, holding space but more importantly taking time. Events unfold in slow motion, duration and presence foregrounded as one wonders what will happen next while also not really caring since there is no real message being offered. This is pure togetherness—catalyzed by performative proximity and held together by artistic commitment and viewer curiosity. But yes, most striking is that it feels like a dream—and this because it actually was a dream first. For over 10 years Baker has been keeping a journal of dreams, and not only as a recursive tool for psychological reflection (though it is

that too[13]). Instead, Baker lives her dreams—and has others enact them—as performances. It is a gesture both beautiful and bold, refusing the constraints of the real that would dictate the dream and instead giving dreams their lived and manifest form in her performances. In one iteration Baker rides an oversized Big Wheel around the city, broadcasting her own voice reading out text from her dreams. In another, she hires actors to fight over her, one of them pinning her to the ground for a photograph. In yet another, she invites people from the community to bring her objects from her deams—"*a small birthday cake and a handful of change*; *A puff on your vape with cotton candy-flavored e-juice*; *Reinforced-toe pantyhose*"[14]—which then become catalysts for conversation. This is not the usual scenario where life bleeds into dreams—these projects are literally dreams made real.

Performance as Catalyst

What all of Baker's work has in common is a sense of absolute incommensurability that—at least for me—is deeply tempered by the togethernesses her work sets in motion. Her work is made to be experienced—made to inhabit a context in which people can co-exist with the

Cindy Baker, *Nothing I didn't already know*, Zero Gravity Performance Festival, Latitude 53 Gallery, Edmonton, Canada, 2019.

Caption info: I dreamed that I was compelled to fill my purse with water even though I knew damned-well that it was a bad idea.


PHILIPS

work. It is also made such that any individual experience of the work will differ radically from one person to the next. What makes Baker such a perfect catalyst for this book is what makes her work impossible to categorize in a way that does it justice. Or perhaps to refuse to categorize it is actually the point. Her work relies on a purposeful but casual attitude: that's what makes it accessible to those who aren't already artists and it's what demonstrates her unique ability to anchor her work in the moment of performance.

Casual Encounters

What I have always admired about Baker's work is her ability to leverage performance as transformative social practice—first and foremost, her works are encounters waiting to happen. There is a gravity to her work that is playful on the surface, but draws me into uncomfortable orbit around serious and thoughtful ideas. There is a *gravitas*, which I would posit as a form of social gravity—specifically one that

Cindy Baker, *The Log House and the Ocean*,
VIVA! Art Action and Galerie Verticale, Montreal and Laval, Canada, 2019.

Caption info: *The Log House and the Ocean* was a two-part project; the log house represented waking life and the recurring and vivid architecture from my dreams. The ateliers' warehouse functioned as my bedroom where for the duration of the festival I nested in the evenings. (the city of Laval and the Galerie Verticale site which is located on the river represented my dream world and the many bodies of water that appear in my dreams.)

is aware of itself. People (myself included) are drawn towards Baker's work because the work itself is designed to have this kind of drawing power. She calls it a theory of the audience as "worthy adversary," adopting an approach aligned with Claire Bishop's concept of relational antagonism (as a contrast to Nicolas Bourriaud's often overly romanticized idea of "relational aesthetics")[15]: In Baker's words:

> In my practice I do talk a lot about equality and an egalitarian approach to my audience, but I mean equal in the context of antagonism (one might say I approach the audience as a 'worthy adversary'). In other words, I want them to have all the authority *as the audience* that I have as the artist; I want them to have agency in approaching the work and I will do what I can to give them that agency. In insisting that I want all (potential) participants in my work to have agency, I need to recognize *any* engagement to be a valid approach to the work. If I am interested in engendering the production of new forms of knowledge, I must understand that I cannot predetermine where those forms originate.[16]

That's the spirit in which the authors in this volume engage—drawing attention, circling questions, gathering momentum and sharing ideas that collectively begin to delineate a space for the transformative potential of casual, but critical, encounter. Prominently featured are themes that resonate directly with Baker's work—themes of performance, bodies, politics, fatness, ritual—but more important than the themes are the voices themselves, each

speaking with the kind of absolute humility that invites engagement and thought.

The book begins with Michelle Lacombe's "Some Artifacts," a beautifully evocative series of vignettes, each describing an object acquired, stolen, or discovered in moments of art and life. What the objects all have in common is that their destiny was to become part of a curatorial and domestic collection, drawn together as a sympathetic constellation of an artist's attention.

It's this same kind of artistic attention that anchors Zoë Schneider's essay, "Calmy, Easily, Without Obsession," which outlines main threads of Schneider's recent work, involving bread-based sculpture and meditations on family, fatness, and ritual practices for their transformative potential. Anchored in anecdotes of family history, Schneider's work emphasizes the power of personal memory and incantation, especially when brought into artistic, relational, and public spaces.

Also flirting with ideas of incantation, Shanell Papp shares a possible future sculpture in her contribution, "Cindy Baker Doll." Known for her large-scale woven and knitted works, Papp's sketch sits in a perfectly propositional space, inquiring on the difference between imagining a project and actually making it—in part a playful doodle asking us to imagine a life-sized Cindy Baker doll, in part a voodoo doll enlarged to real-world proportions.

This invitation to imagine is expanded—and made literal—in Blair Brennan's eloquent essay "Skin Care: A Tattoo for Cindy Baker." This chapter is a reflection on an actual tattoo Brennan designed for Baker, accompanied by artist statements from other iterations of his work that emphasize material practice, especially those situated on

flesh and skin. Whether branding marks onto gallery walls or onto bodies themselves, Brennan's work is compelling for precisely that which makes it most unsettling—art that is literally marked onto the contexts he engages.

A similar spirit of literal engagement is given a playful spin in Veronika Merklein's "C. N. Baker in absentia" in which Merklein recreates herself—mind and body—in the form of Cindy Baker. Partly an experiment in trolling an artist, and partly a reflection on the malleability and transposability of identities, Merklein's insight is that thought has the capacity to become both performance and proposition, here catalyzed in proximity to the body of another artist.

A similar duality is present in a different form in Stefanie Snider's essay "Vulnerability and Resistance in Contemporary Visual Art" in which Baker's work is contrasted to that of Nona Faustine, a black American performance artist that Snider appreciates for pressurizing themes of body politics while refusing to ignore the question of race. Here the necessity of difference is paramount, Snider's essay making space for a deeper consideration of the ways activist resistance can be manifest through expressions of vulnerability.

When difference stands as a catalyst rather than a departure, other forms of thought and engagement can also be more easily welcomed. Mikiki's essay "Dream Journal / Sequence!" does just this, presenting, in a compelling and nonlinear way, a series of dream encounters that loop, circle back on themselves and otherwise chart a different form of real world and dream world body engagement. Both dream journal and visually-inflected poem, in Mikiki's work, the catalytic potential of dreams shines brightly as an anchor point for creative and personal work.

The personal is also key to Aaron McIntosh's chapter, "piecework, a practice," which elegantly moves through discussions of queerness, textiles and environmental conscience to share a history of artistic and collaborative engagement. At once critiquing establishment practices and providing new ways to engage, McIntosh's work recenters the concept of queer connection through the practice and metaphor of patchwork.

Also engaging textile media but with a differently inflected meditation on tactility, Théo Bignon's "Mesh Galore" is a compelling elucidation of mesh as an expanded metaphor for thought, pleasure, and practice, emphasizing the form and material as both a grid that orders and a texture that loosens, a beautifully paradoxical material that carries with it erotic and poetic potential. Not just a material, mesh is conceptual materialization.

A spirit of materialization is also decidedly present in Kristin Rodier's essay "I am Cindy Baker," a thoughtful account of personal and performative encounter with Baker's work in which Rodier was asked (by Baker herself) to "be" Cindy Baker for the duration of a conference presentation. Replete with reflections on what it means to inhabit a fat body—or to pretend to be someone else's—and what it means to negotiate social space with the social taboos and prohibitions that fatness entails.

The theme of fatness is also centered in Christine Negus's "A Gut Feeling: Towards a Fat Phenomenology" in which Negus meditates on the phenomenology of large bodies in space, arguing for a queer conceptualization of fatness. Fat bodies take up space and thus also make space when they leave. For Negus, this "wake" of the fat body has tremendous potential to create spaces for joy, predicated on the queering potential of non-standard social engagement.

Richard Boulet's contribution, "ratatattat," shares the dedication to the design of queer conceptual space—both conceptually and literally. Using a process of visual redaction, Boulet's essay emphasizes the affective power of color and form, inflected with deeply intimate anecdotes from his life, dreams, and artistic work—drawn together in a gesture at once poetic and complex. Boulet's work reinforces the idea that casual does not mean trivial—in fact often just the opposite.

Concluding the volume, Mary-Anne McTrowe presents a series of drawings brought together under the title of "Untitled," creating a casual yet multi-faceted visual anchor point for the book. Taking the form of sketched flag banners with text announcing phrases such as "who cares" and "perfect" McTrowe expertly merges ambivalence and celebration. It's a perfect ending to the collection, bringing together in visual form the invitation entailed by celebration and the whimsy of what we might choose to celebrate.

And if there is a final take away that I might propose to this introduction it would be the same as that with which I began—that it's not the opening line that matters but the lines of opening that engagement can create. And that's the power of the casual encounter—that which insists on an attitude of invitation and refuses to operate as a decisive statement; that which posits propositions for consideration, not arguments for debate; that which insists on engagement and participation over scripted responses or definitive meaning. In short, casual encounters can be so provocative and alluring because they are by nature catalytic—despite the seemingly innocuous status of the

casual there is no better way to effectuate change than to simply and casually do it. What's so compelling about the contributions to this book is that they each embody, enact, and conduct an attitude of worldly and artistic response that happens holistically, not because it means to, but because it simply cares about what it's doing. The power of the casual is the power of simple caring—the power of encounter is in caring for others.

Notes

1 Cindy Baker, artist talk, November 12, 2020. Sponsored by the MFA in Creative Writing & Poetics, University of Washington Bothell.
2 Laurie Rojas, "Beuys' Concept of Social Sculpture and Relational Art Practices Today," Chicago Art Magazine, November 29, 2010.
3 Baker, artist talk, UW Bothell.
4 Cindy Baker, *The Missing Body: performance in the absence of the artist*. (MFA Thesis: University of Lethbridge, 2014), 10-11.
5 This is the starting point and central premise of Turkle's book. See Sherry Turkle, *Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other* (New York: Basic Books, 2012).
6 Nakamura is interested in the digital fluidity of identity, and the ethical complexities raised by pretending to be someone that one is not. For me, Baker's project has a similar ethical preoccupation to it, mediated by an explicit performance of self. See Lisa Nakamura "Race in/for Cyberspace: Identity Tourism and Racial Passing on the Internet." in *Works and Days,* Volume 13: 181-193, 1995.
7 Baker, *The Missing Body,* 12.

8 Baker, artist talk, UW Bothell.
9 I'm thinking of Derrida's notion of the pharmakon as an antidote as well as a cure (and sometimes also an alibi). In Baker's work, the pill is as much an alibi for spending time together as it is an agent of chemical intervention. See Jacques Derrida, "Plato's Pharmacy," in *Dissemination*, Barbara Johnston, trans., (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1983).
10 Baker, artist talk, UW Bothell.
11 Cindy Baker & Ruth Cuthand, "Survivor," artist statement, 2014.
12 Ibid.
13 Over 500 entries from Baker's dream journal have been recently compiled into a volume. See Cindy Baker, *Never Before Seen* (Victoria/Seattle: Noxious Sector Press, 2020).
14 Cindy Baker, "The Log House and the Ocean," artist statement, 2019.
15 Bourriaud famously coined the term "relational aesthetics" to describe a certain kind of artwork that capitalized on the idea of social space as a component of the work. For many, including Claire Bishop (in my opinion, Bourriaud's most articulate critic), his theory is too romantic and risks overlooking relationships of power and exploitation. For more on Bourriaud, see Nicolas Bourriaud, *Relational Aesthetics* (Paris: Les presses du reel, 1999). For Bishop's critique see Claire Bishop, "Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics," *October* 110 (Fall 2004), 51-79 and Claire Bishop, *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship* (London: Verso, 2012).
16 Baker, *The Missing Body,* 70.

1 Some Artifacts

Michelle Lacombe

A pair of white briefs that sat in a file holder on a shelf at the back of the office I used to work at. They had been left there for the curator of the event and I recall that they were moist when they arrived, in a white plastic bag. The artist who wore them had begun her performance by greeting the public, one at a time, and asking them to wash their hands. When everyone had entered the space, she crawled slowly between the rows of chairs and cleaned people's feet, or other accessible body parts. The underwear appeared later, when she was finishing her action. It was one of the first performances I had ever seen and, almost fifteen years later, I can't be sure of the details—including if the bagged garment actually got wet from the action or from the hurried post-performance clean up. What I do remember is my increasing desire to take the artifact, and patiently waiting while the curator cycled between making arrangements for pick-up and flaking on our appointments. After more than a year of this, I just stopped following up and took the underwear home. No one noticed. This was the start of my collection.

A piece of Dubble Bubble gum that an artist handed out during a performance about baseball, but also about masculinity, art history, lineage, and competition. I pocketed the gum but forgot about it. A few weeks later, when I inevitably found it, I put it in a glass jar with buttons, marbles, and other small things I don't know what to do with.

A small paper house on my bookshelf that is always hiding something. It is one of many that were hand-folded and stapled for the performance by someone in the artist's family; probably her teenage daughter, but maybe by the artist herself. During the action, a hole was burnt into the roof of some of the dwellings with a cigarette—including the one I have—but you still can't see inside. Currently, my house conceals a small decorative puzzle box made of varnished wood that my partner found in the trash. When we finally figured out how to open it, we discovered a torn, wallet-sized black and white photo of an unknown woman flashing the camera, a streak of pink highlighter drawn across her white breasts.

A rock in my flower garden, which was balanced on an artist's head for a long time. The grey stone is the size of a small watermelon and the artist found it during one of his daily walks in the neighborhood that surrounded the festival headquarters. He told me this was how he collected all his material. Later in the performance, a quiet and contemplative durational piece, he moved slowly across the space filling holes in the concrete floor with water carefully poured from a metal spoon.

Some yellow thread that was pulled from a thick braided carpet as it was carefully unwoven and laboriously wrapped around an artist's head. It was the final moment of a performance about shedding scales and skin, about the texture of transformation. Less than a year later, I used a piece of the thread to mend a hole in the index finger of the artist's glove before returning the lost item to her.

A small metal amulet with a relief of an angel on one side that I keep with broken bits of jewelry. It was among lots of tiny junk that fell from an artist's pocket when he did a handstand in the corner of the gallery. He also paced around the space a lot, and, while I don't think he really did anything else, I was totally captivated by the performance. Maybe I was seduced, or maybe scared …. I grabbed the memento off the floor before his action was even over. Back home, when I could finally take a better look at the object, I was disappointed that it more closely resembled something that my grandmother would have had in her pocket than he would.

A painted glass bottle, one of many seemingly worthless objects entirely resurfaced in turquoise paint by an artist. I recall anticipating her request as soon as I walked into the monochromatic installation: "Please take something." I would be travelling back home by plane so her gift already felt like a burden. I scanned for something useful. In my panic, I chose the bottle, which could be used as a vase. However, I have never actually put anything in it. It just became part of my bedroom clutter.

Four small colored rocks that I collected from a construction site in the suburbs. An artist had guided a small group of people from her parent's house to a future residential development, pulling a functional wearable cardboard excavator arm behind her on a cart. We were invited to explore the landscape via collective play. I scaled large muddy boulders and followed neon markings that provided incomprehensible information regarding the concrete foundations and unfinished sidewalks that surrounded us. Near these pink, blue, orange or yellow drawings, the gravel had been marked by droplets of spray-paint. I searched for a rock of each color. The blue one was the most difficult to find.

A generic pale purple "PARTICIPATION" badge that was picked up along with other post-performance detritus at the end of the night. It may or may not have been among those stapled to the artist's chest by members of the public. I kept it on my desk while I worked at the festival headquarters and found it to be surprisingly good for my morale. When we left the space, I brought it home. It's now in what is best described as the "vanity" section of my bedroom, on top of a dirty plastic organizer filled with hair clips and tweezers and old bracelets that fall off or pinch your arm hair. Around it is scattered an ever-changing assortment of safety pins, broken necklaces, single earrings, dull makeup pencils and whatever else falls out of the mirrored medicine cabinet above. I still find it good for my morale.

A blended mix of grey and black modeling clay that holds the imprint of the inside of an artist's fist. It is an ugly but powerful form that is difficult to hold. The artist handed it to me during his performance, an action that was equal parts poetic, academic, and militant. He made the object at one of several stations that the performers moved between for hours, but he was the only one who removed his shapes from the table. I recall wondering if this detail was or was not part of his instructions to the other performers. Did I benefit from him breaking his own rule?

A white plastic bucket that was likely never used before the performance. The artist had filled it with cold water and, at some point in the action, a white dress shirt hanging from a metal hanger was slowly raised out of the liquid and into the air. This was done using thick chains that—when pulled with force—also moved a large overhead steel lifting beam that was once used to suspend malfunctioning train cars. After the performance, the artist left the perfectly clean bucket behind. I brought it home and it slowly gets dirtier each time I clean my house.

A tabloid-sized piece of white cardstock with a thick line charred through the middle, across the longest side. The drawing was made by a spark (and a thick plume of smoke) that flowed along the tiled floor diagonally, across many sheets of paper. At the end of the line, the artist's hands were tightly clasped over an unknown substance. When the spark reached her, a clear and bright light momentarily escaped from her grip. I found it profoundly beautiful and pleaded with organizers for one of the leftover drawings, which now hangs on my wall.

A small glossy ceramic breast that sits on my bedroom shelf next to a large tin of cheap earrings and a collection of small decorative cats. Despite the fact that the performance occurred multiple times, I never encountered it first hand. It was a friend who met the artist, in character as she pushed a cart of hand-made multiples—*¡Chucherias en venta!*—along the sidewalk. My friend brought the object back to me and I carried it in my pocket for days. It is hollow and the material is unglazed on the inside. I find it pleasant to touch.

Three small plastic toy horses that can't stand up, a few of many thrown across the gallery as an artist pranced around, maybe with a sheet draped around her. She tried to collect them at the end of the performance, but a lot ran away or, more likely, were taken by people like me.

A soup spoon cut with snips in such a way that the part that goes into the mouth is sharp and pointy. I was shocked in the most beautiful way when I saw it transform. The action, like the rest of the performance, was delicate, physical, and violent in its simplicity. I could so easily imagine the feeling of the rough metal edges on the inside of my cheeks, the bottom of the spoon cold and soft on my tongue. But it has never been in a mouth. In the performance, the artist used it to cut cone-shaped holes out of a red apple that was left to slowly brown on a worktable while the performance continued. Since the spoon has entered my home, I have become acutely aware of my cutlery preferences and will often catch myself returning a spoon I picked from the metal can and picking again until a favorite emerges.

A tiny plastic vial that I keep on my desk, close to my lighter. It was one of a few identical items furtively dumped next to the garage door by an artist. When I first noticed them, I assumed they were drugs, or drug related. They had bright red caps but remained discreet in the environment so I did not pick them up, thinking that whoever had dropped them would be happy to return to find them. A day or two later, when walking through the neighboring park, I noticed a larger glass vial sitting on a picnic table, then a few more neatly lined up on another surface. I went back to the garage and picked up one of the containers from the dirt. Inside was a rectangular piece of blue paper with text written on it; a message to those of us who dared to touch dirty things.

Flower bulbs that I planted in the bald spots of my garden five years ago. They were distributed late in the season, during a slow and worrying walk the artist took along the train tracks. At the halfway mark, she talked generously about loss and the passage of time until the baskets of bulbs were empty. I can never remember if they are tulips or daffodils. As summer progresses, the plants die or go dormant and are inevitably replaced by patches of wild growth that also hide the small graves of solemnly buried pets who may or may not still be in the ground.

A loosely knit blanket, made with what I suspect were remnants of yarn because the multi-colored zigzag pattern is uneven and stops repeating halfway through. This blanket was one of many that were collected for the artist so that she could build herself a bed (to share) in the dimly lit corners of the space. Late one night, I ate soup there with her, worried about spilling but feeling comfortable and safe. Post-performance, the lush pile of bedding—like the purses and lamps that were also collected—were re-circulated into the world. Some objects were brought to a local thrift shop, but most of the stuff was taken by volunteers and staff and artists; either as souvenirs or for practical purposes like furnishing a new apartment or softening a workplace office's harsh lighting. I brought the handmade blanket home and, when I need it, its weight and warmth comfort me.

2 Calmly, Easily, Without Obsession

Zoë Schneider

In the fifteenth century Nero's *Domus Aurea*, a forgotten underworld palace, was rediscovered beneath the streets of Rome. The rooms were ornately decorated with frescos, mosaics, and abundant gold leaf. In awe, artists would visit the site, becoming heavily influenced by the spectacle. Deeming the ruin "grottesca" or "of the cave," the imagery and word would eventually morph into the contemporary grotesque.[1] The *Domus Aurea* is not, however, how I would describe popular understandings of the grotesque. When I think of the word grotesque, I imagine abjection, horror, even gore. I do not picture a fat person simply existing and living their life! Grotesque applied to fatness is pejorative; it exposes the biases of the contemporary social imagination.

Thin people have a history of describing my work as grotesque, but only after they discover the theme of fatness in the work. From an objective standpoint, my work uses pastel hues and soft organic forms, and depictions of hearty nourishment like bread or potato chips, things more nurturing than grotesque in and of themselves. So, when someone uses the word grotesque, I know the reference is directed towards the concept of a fat person. Cindy Baker describes this relationship in a way that resonates with me:

> The fat body is accompanied by intense moral judgment against its very physicality in addition to the judgments against all those marked as other made by our culture relating to presumptions of inferior intelligence, desirability, and worth. This makes its rehabilitation through representation that much more difficult, as the image projected by fat people's embodiment is not just lesser, but wrong.[2]

Working against these forms of judgment inflects my process as an artist. I choose to not show representations of the fat body in my work. Instead, I consider topics that engage with fat embodiment including the expanding body, the body under restriction and surveillance, obsession in diet culture, the medical industry and the fat body, inherited food values, and societal confusion around food. The ritual and repetition of witchcraft is utilized as a metaphor for the ritual and repetition in diet culture. Expansion, accumulation, restriction, and shrinkage are referenced through material explorations with bread dough, mortar, and silicone. Often the works show manipulation by the hands, implicating materiality with fat embodiment: concrete is dug with fingers, dough is kneaded and formed, Old Dutch potato chips are covered with gold leaf.

Zoë Schneider, *This Grotto Breathes*, 2020. Foam breads, plywood, found fountain, apoxie sculpt, gold leaf, mortar, acrylic, wubble bubble balls, sand, dimensions variable.

This Grotto Breathes

I have an idea about fatness, specifically that people are actually quite curious about fatness and what fatness feels like, and maybe are even attracted to fatness. Without our preconceived notions about fatness at the forefront of our minds, I wonder if we could experience fatness in an entirely different, kinder, and softer way.

This Grotto Breathes is an immersive exhibition that reorients the concept of fatness and grotesque. Imagery of carbohydrates, like bread and potato chips, complicates ideas of fatness, food, and the modern-day understanding of the word grotesque by situating the viewer inside an abundance of nourishment. The grotto's façade is decorated not with shells (like the rococo grotto) but with breads- a demonized food that is blamed for fatness (Wheat Belly, Atkins, etc.), but is also a source of comfort (as we've seen during the initial stages of the COVID-19 pandemic and the resulting surge of home baking that took place). There is a massive wealth of breads, a number that has the potential to feel overwhelming, chaotic, or comical; words that are interchangeable with derisive concepts of fatness. But the breads, buns, and chips are used in a way that is decorative. This grotto is aesthetically pleasing, like a gingerbread house or a Candyland structure, it is playful and inviting. It engages the abundance of material without manifesting the feelings of disgust or abjection that accompany modern understandings of grotesque. This is partially due to the decorative application of material but is also reinforced by sounds emanating from a mini-waterfall fountain and the use of human scale architecture to create the grotto. The viewer wanders through the grotto as if wandering through

a garden or park; it is a tranquil meander, an opportunity to undo the associations that the grotto-esque/grotesque normally provokes.

This Grotto Breathes. This grotto is alive; it is a human body. The viewer also breathes and thus understands that by breathing there is an implication of aliveness: the grotto is alive. This is a body with a lot of bread and chips, a lot of carbohydrate-based calories, a fat body. In her work *The missing body: performance in the absence of the artist*, Cindy Baker meditates on the nuance of performance:

> In a theoretical framework where definitions of the body are non-specific, concepts of space and time are relative, and the idea of performance is tied as much to theories of affect and embodiment as physical activities, the intention of the artist that something be considered a work of art is one of the anchors I rely on to ground the work. If, as I theorize, a body might be just about anything, space and time have little meaning, and audiences and objects can perform just as well as artists, then performance art could basically be any thing, or action, or feeling. The idea that what makes something art is that the artist says so is not only a frame that contains the work, but is an ethical structure that holds me as an artist responsible for my ideas and actions.[3]

In *This Grotto Breathes* the grotto is the body and the viewer is also the body; the performance (thinking about performance in the way Baker suggests) is the shift in perception of the meaning of the words grotesque and fat.

The performance is the renegotiation of fat as desirable, and grotesque as something mysterious and appealing or curious.

On a personal note, I also notice that people are very curious to know what the breads and buns on the surface of the grotto feel like. Adults will sheepishly ask if they can touch the bread, and the answer is always yes. The response is usually delighted, and further squishing takes place. It is a permitted form of transgression—touching what is not usually meant to be touched—but one that retains its transgressive impact even when authorized. Baker calls this a methodology for performance in the absence of the body:

> Work that is activated, created or completed by audience transgressions in the gallery or presentation space. Transgression is the key element of this work, as it creates the element of risk that enables the performative moment. In this context, I use the word "transgression" to mean any act, action, or response to an artwork which results in a performance, even as slight as an embodied affect (such as the shock, squirm and wonder….[4]

I was having dinner one day at my favorite Italian restaurant just doors down from the gallery where the grotto was installed. The owner came over to my table and asked who the artist was. I raised my hand and she told me a story about how her five-year-old son loves to visit the grotto and squish the breads. That when he wakes up in the morning, he asks "when we can visit the breads?" She told me that he visits the gallery multiple times a day and plays in the bread fountain. She mimicked his hands squishing breads

and told me that her son would be delighted to know she had met me. I choose squishy, life-like breads for a reason. When you squish these breads (made of a type of foam), it feels very much like squishing a fat belly.

Moon Pools

I see a parallel between witchcraft and dieting; both practices are concerned with gaining control, rely on the power of will, are built upon prescriptive rules and programs (a spell, a weight loss plan), and feature deific status placed upon objects (superfoods, crystals, herbs). I see a similarity in the objects used in contemporary witchcraft and the objects associated with weight loss. Calorie-counting apps, smoothie blenders, superfoods, and cure-all cleanses take on the same deific attributes as witchcraft correspondences; they become symbols deeply ingrained in the psyche of the person working to manifest a spell outcome or weight loss.

My *Moon Pools* series explores fat and feminine identity, weight gain and weight loss, and the ability for identity to fluctuate, through material, nature, and magic, spurred by culturally accepted obsession. I shape each pool to represent phases in the moon cycle, drawing parallels between the concept of waxing and waning in the moon, and gaining and losing in a corporeal sense. The pools are created using a modest mold making method. Like sand-candles, the concrete is poured into a trough dug into a base of sand and gravel. Smaller plaster casts of the waxing and waning moon shapes are pressed into the wet concrete. Each pool, depending on cycle (waxing or waning) is filled with a different substance selected to invoke growth, abundance, and fullness, or loss, restriction, and reduction.

These substances include, in the growth phase: avocado oil, chamomile tea, rose quartz, green calcite, apoxie sculpt gold-leafed potato chips, grapes, wheat, cat mint blossoms, chamomile blossoms, potato blossoms. In the reduction phase, I use: amethyst, blue apatite, green tea, dill, spearmint, chili pepper plant leaves, lettuce, kale, dried chilli pepper, and water. These items are selected for their correspondences in witchcraft or dieting. In witchcraft, a correspondence is a symbol used to invoke a desired outcome in a spell. It becomes a carefully collected and cared for object and gains an exalted status.

In a 2016 Canada-wide poll, 48% of women and 37% of men self-report having dieted for weight-loss.[5] According to the NIH Technology Assessment Conference Panel:

> Success rates for long-term weight loss are not good: of those who intentionally lost weight, most will regain about one-third of their weight within the first year, and virtually all will return to their baseline weight within five years.[6]

Zoë Schneider, *Moon Pools (detail),* 2020. Cement, gold ritual cloth, avocado oil, chamomile tea, rose quartz, green calcite, apoxie sculpt gold-leafed potato chips, grapes, wheat, cat mint blossoms, chamomile blossoms, potato blossoms, amethyst, blue apatite, green tea, dill, spearmint, chili pepper plant leaves, lettuce, kale, dried chilli pepper, and water.

For serial dieters there is a definite cycle, defined by a period of hope, determination, and heavy restriction, followed by a period of relapse, nourishment, feelings of failure and sometimes release. A moralistic sense of thinking develops in this process, iterated by Esther Rothblum and Sondra Solovay as one where "people feel superiority or self-loathing based on each calorie or gram of food consumed or not consumed, in each belt notch, pound, or inch gained or lost, in each clothing size smaller or larger."[7] To moralize eating is a way to measure oneself against others, and then hold others accountable to the same standard. Such thinking enacts the same kind of social control that is embedded within organized religion; to count sins is to know who is behaving righteously, and who is not. Yo-yo dieting (or weight cycling) requires a mental energy that easily morphs into obsession. Body scholars Michael Moon and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick describe it in this way:

> The coercive incoherence's of this palimpsestic discourse ensure that when, for example, dieting itself begins to be, as it is now being, labeled as a pathological, addictive "disorder" of lifestyle, that damning diagnosis of thinness or noneating does nothing to budge the damning diagnosis already delivered on fatness and eating. In a culture where the compulsory may become visible only as a manifestation of the individual will, medicine allows the concept of addiction to play a pivotal role; it ensures that any behavior, any condition of being, is subject to discreditation on the grounds that, while it appears to be an exercise of will, it is, in fact, *compulsive*.[8]

In *Moon Pools,* the crystals, weight loss teas, plants, symbols, and oils are combined strategically to invoke outcomes of either loss or gain. Often associated with the feminine, both dieting and witchcraft demonstrate in the witch or dieter an urge to create control that arises out of living within a patriarchal and capitalist society. Our economy, governments, and social systems require the subjugation of *someone* in order to operate. Money and power fuel these systems. A fat person represents a rejection or refusal to be subjugated; they are lost income and lost control. When a person diets, they enact a form of *self control,* but they are still constrained by the external control imposed upon them; they are generating money and power for someone else. *Moon Pools* shows a desire to flip the power dynamic, to take back control and to create it for oneself, but in a way that acknowledges how difficult this can be and how it can become cyclical as one tries and fails and tries again.

What to do with this bread?

My grandmother made bread in unusual quantities (twelve loaves every Monday, an estimated 31,200 loaves over fifty years). Her breadmaking history became the basis for the installation *What to do with this bread?*. If a house is a metaphor for a person or a psyche, depicting my fraught and inherited relationship with food might look like an architectural ruin. Preserved bread loaves become bricks held together with blue-tinted mortar; unlike clay bricks, bread and mortar create a sense of vulnerability and/or lack of stability. The walls are uneven in height, giving the impression of a structure that is incomplete or broken down. Amidst the bread ruin is a smaller sculpture, *Three*

Zoë Schneider, *What to do with this bread?*, 2018. Bread, mortar, powdered tempera, dimensions variable.

Generations, made from baked bread that balloons out of found ceramic containers that are mortared together and decorated with shellacked buns. This smaller sculpture serves as a compact study of the same ideas but highlights an intergenerational relationship important to my story.

Food and fat people are inextricably linked in the mind of the general public. Read any comment section of any online news article related to fatness and it will be easy to see the commonly held belief that fat people are constantly eating high fat, high carbohydrate foods and that is the reason they are fat. It is a simplistic and flawed representation but one that persists nevertheless. Fat studies scholar Samantha Murray effectively sums up the contradiction:

> As a "fat" woman, I am aware that my body is visibly marked in our society as a symbol of abject lack of control. However, my life has been mapped by control for as long as I can remember. From measuring food portions to measuring my waistline, from weighing out my meals to weighing myself, I have been brought into being by these rigorous processes.[9]

As a person who has spent over twenty years weight cycling, I felt compelled to examine my own values around food. What started as an examination of the origins of my own body weight and food issues eventually led to an examination of my parents, and then my grandparents' relationships with food. I began to understand that our values around food are often inherited, and informed by culture and class. My grandmothers showed love with

food, rewarded achievements with food, comforted losses and hurts with food. My maternal grandmother's love and care came in the form of freshly bread baked every Monday for over fifty years, chocolate mocha cakes on birthdays, and delicately decorated shortbread cookies at Christmas. She passed away in 2010, and the thought of how much of her food I had refused over the years due to strict dieting behavior is devastating, especially now knowing the nurturing value she infused into the food she prepared.

Like my grandmother, my mother's food is imbued with love; love is a palpable ingredient that she works into every favorite meal, holiday dinner, and batch of cookies. She cooks and bakes for her family, friends, neighbors, and coworkers. Some of my first memories of dieting and weight loss revolve around the period when my mother joined Weight Watchers. I remember her having a special binder to track her food intakes and progress, and I remember her going to weekly meetings that included public weigh-ins. We joined the weight-loss focused, women-only gym Curves together when I was fifteen; in addition to the cardio and weight resistance activities we also signed up for the low-carb, low-sugar, low-calorie plan. We lost weight, we gained it back, the cycle continues. Both of my grandmothers were/are preoccupied with weight despite their intense desire to nourish the people around them. Within these contexts the values I place on food

Zoë Schneider, *Three Generations*, 2018. Buns, bread dough, found ceramic vessels, mortar, powdered tempera, 36" x 18".

are complex and often contradictory. "What to do with this bread?" is, in this sense, not just a rhetorical question but an acknowledgment of the lived entanglements among food, weight, love, and family.

Last Ditch

A spell demonstrates the wishes of the spell-caster. Usually the spell is cast as a last resort or where no other solutions to a problem are available. After many years of trying desperately to lose weight I decided to make one last ditch effort with a ritual spell. *Last Ditch* shows the anguish in the mind of a chronic dieter.

I am holding a small ball of bread dough shaped like a belly. I gently submerge the dough belly into the water and begin to wash it while chanting:

> This weight leaves me, in a healthy way.
> Calmly, easily, without obsession.
> From 248, to 172.
> May this spell, make it true.

As I wash the dough belly it dissolves in the water, creating a pale cloud of flour and salt. My incantation repeats deliberately, gaining speed slowly, accompanied by the sounds of the lapping water. Eventually the dough belly is completely dissolved in the water, I rinse my hands and flick off drops of water as the screen fades to black.

Last Ditch appropriates elements of witchcraft to speak to the nature of diet culture. A ritual rhythmic action combined with the chanting of a spell illustrate the repetitive and obsessive behaviors so commonly enacted by

Zoë Schneider, Still image from *Last Ditch*, 2019.
Video, 03:30.

an individual engaged in dieting. The words used in the spell are carefully chosen to show the nature of dieting. "In a healthy way": when I diet the process is extremely unhealthy. No matter what diet it is (I have tried countless diets over the last 20 years), the restriction of quantity or entire food groups ends up being a destructive process to my body. I experience a foggy brain, hunger pain, nausea, weakness, depression, irritability, and I tend to isolate myself socially. Inevitably, I end up gaining back all the weight I had lost, usually more than I had started with. "Calmly, easily, without obsession": my mental state during a dieting phase is turbulent, self-absorbed, obsessive, and self-destructive. Nothing matters but weight loss.

Conclusion

I work in ways that refer to the experience of fatness rather than a representation, using sculpture, video, and installation as my media. I take inspiration from Baker's idea of "object-based artworks that are stand-ins for the artists' own bodies" which she elaborates as follows:

> This category of performance is less about inventing new ways to talk about what is essentially sculpture/installation and more about learning, as artists, to conceptualize art in ways which give the audience agency, allowing for their development of new ways of knowing and avenues to deeper connection with the artists, the work, and the ideas within.[10]

My goal is for the audience to develop a new way of thinking about fatness; one that lacks disgust, derision, and

bias and allows for the dissolution of the fear of becoming fat. In this new way of thinking we can approach bodily diversity with care and kindness, but also let it inform our understandings of accessibility and pleasure. Additionally, I work to create empathy in the viewer for fat people by making visible the struggle so many fat people go through in a quest to become thin, as well as the struggle that comes with living in a society steeped in anti-fat bias. I hope that the use of relatable themes of food and dieting, and spells and rituals can serve as catalysts to this shift in thinking/feeling about fatness.

Notes

1 Michael Squire, "Fantasies so varied and bizarre: The Domus Aurea, the Renaissance, and the 'grotesque'," in M. Dinter and E. Buckley (eds.), *The Blackwell Companion to the Age of Nero* (Malden, MA: Wiley-Blackwell, 2012), 449.
2 Cindy Baker, *The missing body: performance in the absence of the artist*, MFA Thesis (University of Lethbridge, 2014), 41.
3 Baker, 4.
4 Baker, 19.
5 Steve Mossop, "Two-in-Five Canadians Tried to Lose Weight Over the Past Year," *Insights West*, July 13, 2017. https://insightswest.com/news/two-in-five-canadians-tried-to-lose-weight-over-the-pastyear.
6 Glenn Gaesser. "Is "Permanent Weight Loss" an Oxymoron?," in Esther Rothblum and Sondra Solovay, eds., *The Fat Studies Reader* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), 38.
7 Esther Rothblum and Sondra Solovay, eds., *The Fat Studies Reader* (New York: New York University Press, 2009), xv.
8 Michael Moon and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, "Divinity: A Dossier, a Performance Piece, a Little-Understood Emo-

tion," in Jana Braziel and Kathleen LeBesco, eds., *Bodies out of bounds*. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2001), 327.

9 Samantha Murray, *The 'Fat' Female Body* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 4.

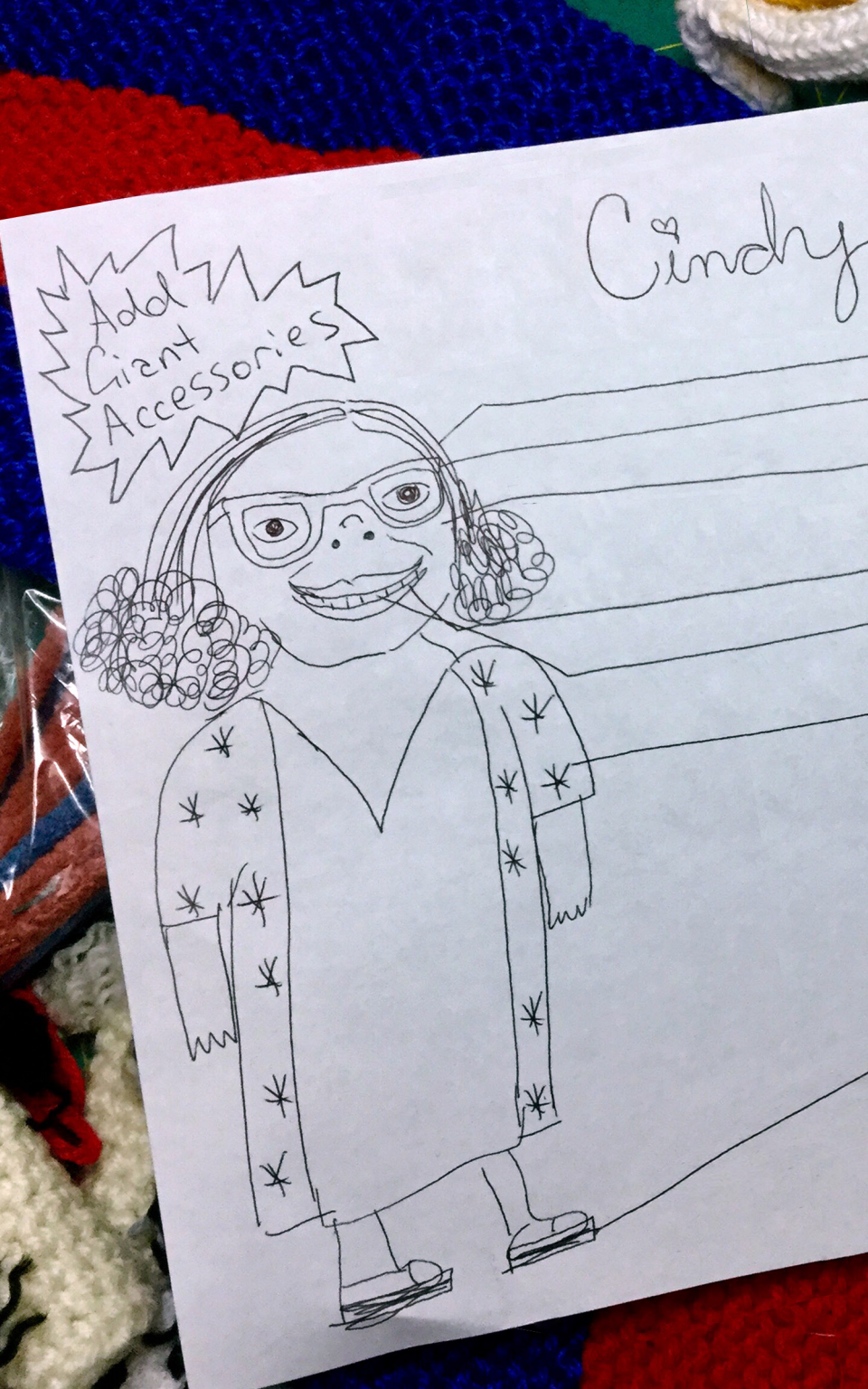
10 Baker, 22.

3 Cindy Baker Doll

Shanell Papp

Image Credits

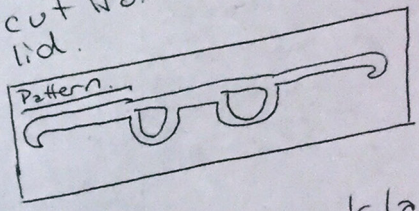
Shanell Papp. *Cindy Baker Doll*, 2020.
Ball point pen on paper, 11” x 8.5”.


Add Giant Accessories
Cindy

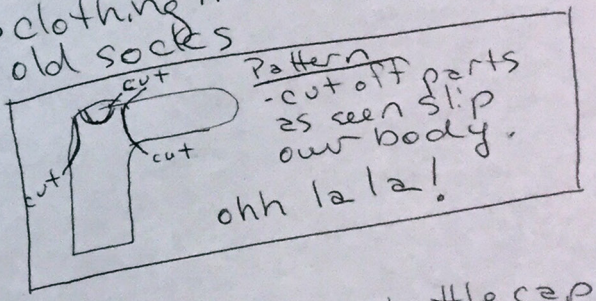
Baker Doll*

*Talismanic Oracle.

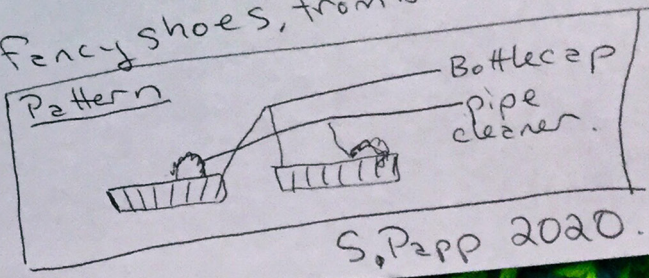
- yarn hair
- plastic glasses - cut from old margarine lid.
- crochet wool face + body.



- felt lips.
- teeth from a junk store necklace.
- clothing made from old socks



- fancy shoes, from bottlecaps.



S. Papp 2020.

4 Skin Care
A Tattoo for Cindy Baker

Blair Brennan

At the end of a newsy chain of emails, Cindy Baker suggests a couple of "trashy" shows that I might like. *How Far is Tattoo Far?* and the UK version, *Just Tattoo of Us* are reality shows where two frenemies (yes, that's the only word I can use) design tattoos for each other. The tattoo application is shielded from the "victim." The highlight of the show is a big reveal where the two "Hating-ass BFFs" (as one show describes them) find a tattoo with a message—usually something like "back stabbing b***h," "cheater," "slut," "momma's boy," "you're dumped" or "Guess who f***** your man"—permanently plastered on their soft, soft skin.[1] Drama ensues. If you miss Jerry Springer, these might be the shows for you.

For me, *How Far is Tattoo Far?* and *Just Tattoo of Us* have become guilty pleasures and they remind me, in a small way, of a tattoo project that I worked on with Cindy.

In 2010, Cindy asked if I would provide her with text for a tattoo.

***

What Must Be Done (A makeshift statement)[2]

> It is often forgotten that (dictionaries) are artificial repositories, put together well after the languages they define. The roots of language are irrational and of a magical nature.
>
> —Jorge Luis Borges, *El Otro, El Mismo*.

Words are magic and words are tools. My father told me to use the right tool for the right job and a *mot juste* is a word-tool, so right for the job that it transforms a sentence into an invocation. Despite Dad's advice, I have hammered nails with a wrench, whittled down words to shim up big ideas, and broken blades when a knife became an impromptu pry bar or screwdriver. I have hammered words into ill-fitting spaces and found poetry in the most unlikely places.

We will need dark tools and drop-forged words because there is work to be done. We must take "pen in hand, as a sore shouldered and world weary field-man might take a scythe in hand, going forth with naught but the doomful vow of what must be done," as author Nick Tosches suggests of Dante (in his novel In the Hand of Dante). Here are your tasks in order: roll up your sleeves, sharpen the knives, fill the gas can, compile and distribute a new dictionary. Put on your coveralls and work gloves, heat the water, check the battery and radiator, learn to read Latin, and bundle those cut branches with old telephone cords. Heat the irons, sweep the floor, heal the lame and the blind, sharpen sticks, and straighten bent nails. Chop wood, write a poem, change a light bulb, cast a spell, and make lunch. Empty the rain barrel, work on a Holy Ghost building, cut the

Blair Brennan. *X Marks*, 2003. Branded wall, steel branding iron, steel trivet, propane tank and torch, gloves, and striker. Dimensions variable.

lawn, invent a noun-resistance language, and light a candle. Dig a hole, get a tattoo, bring the dead back to life, recycle the newspapers or cut them up and rearrange the words. Kill and butcher a cow, tan the hide, and write something on that parchment that's worth killing a cow for. Get your tools together and sort them for the work to be done, finish on time, save string, pray, and have the typewriter serviced.

Jackson Pollock said, "I am nature." I'm not nature but I know what must be done when it gets in the way, and these are the tools I'll need.

***

Cindy and I observe popular culture through the lens of our individual art practices. We are both interested in tattoos and contemporary tattoo culture. While the phrase "…got this tattoo when I was drunk/wasted/on a reality show" is now part of our culture, I choose to believe that this five thousand plus year-old tradition has more sacred origins, in particular a belief in the commemorative and talismanic nature of tattoos. Naturally mummified bodies like Ötzi, the iceman and two of seven individuals from Egypt's pre-dynastic period, currently preserved in the British Museum, bear tattoos. Daniel Antoine, curator of physical anthropology at the British Museum, acknowledges that we don't know the exact meaning of ancient tattoos for the bearers or the viewers though he goes on to speculate that they may be connected to cult knowledge, bravery or protection.[3]

***

Blair Brennan, *Baiting Jonah, Trapping Cain, Haunting Ahab*, 2007. Makeshift table (wooden gates, saw horse and old table legs), branded leather, branding irons, found and hand made knives, sharpening stones, cast iron frying pan, tool box, axe, splitting maul, fire wood, kerosene can and matches. Dimensions variable.

I PROMISE

Some I Rip[4]

Writing, especially with a computer, seems like work but it is not. No matter what personal details are revealed, nothing is really risked. Not blood and bone which, American writer Harry Crews points out, are the only currency acceptable when payment is due for "the miracle of the world, the miracle of a rebirth of the senses, the miracle of an accepting heart…"[5] I write and I make art that incorporates words and language. I'm not naïve enough to believe that my conventional writing is less vague than the text based art work. I exploit the slipperiness of language in both.

Words are things to me and this compliments (or even allows) my use of language as magical charm or spell.[6] This further defines my role as an object maker (rather than a sculptor) and my interest in ritual (rather than art) objects. I'm aware that this presents a sort of paradox. If the public considers my objects at all, it is as an art object though I insist, most genuinely, that the objects have a ritual function even when that function is veiled or entirely fictive. I make these objects in my garage. When I am feeling more generous or getting more time out there I call it a "studio". There is a sort of hierarchy to my working process. I think of it as a sort of "ladder of procrastination". All of these activities are related, however, when I read, I think I should be writing. When I write, I think I should be drawing.

Blair Brennan, *Some I Rip (J's Promise)*, 2012.
Branded drywall, welded and forged steel branding irons, propane bottle and torch, gloves and striker.
Dimensions variable.

Blair Brennan, *Some I Rip (J's Promise)*, 2012.
Branded drywall, welded and forged steel branding irons, propane bottle and torch, gloves and striker.
Dimensions variable.

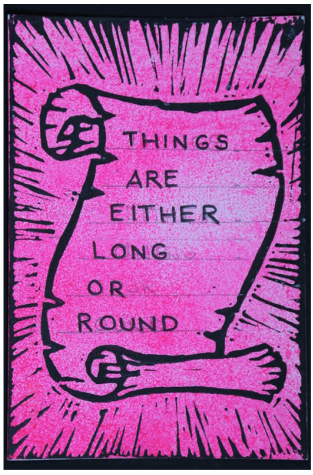
When I draw, I think I should be making objects that I will later incorporate into other works. And when I'm doing all of these things, I should actually be building a fence, shingling my roof, cleaning my gutters or getting a quote for the cost to get someone to do a better job than I would. I'm not sure why this hierarchy exists but I like to (over) intellectualize. Michel Serres says "All around us language replaces experience. The sign, so soft, substitutes itself for the thing which is hard."[7] I like to think he is describing my art, my substitution problem as I stray from the object towards the word.

***

I had six phrases in mind for Cindy's tattoo project (none of them would get us on any tattoo-based reality program). I wanted her to choose a phrase and I wanted to present the options within a consistent format so I created a relief print of a scroll. I printed the scroll image on postcards with a fluorescent pink background. I crudely wrote my six phrases on the scroll on individual postcards and mailed them off to Cindy. We often send each other "anonymous" postcards so I was pleased that I had also turned this tattoo project into one of our mail art exchanges.

The postcards made their way by regular mail, one a week for six weeks bearing these inscriptions:

- THINGS ARE EITHER LONG OR ROUND
- EVERYWHERE THERE ARE SPIRITS
- REMARKABLY WELL ADJUSTED
- SAFE AND CONVENIENT
- IT WASN'T LIKE THIS BEFORE
- EVERYTHING MEANS SOMETHING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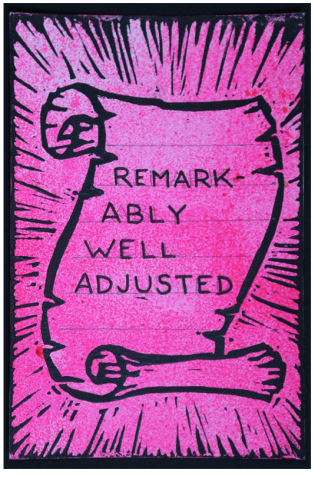
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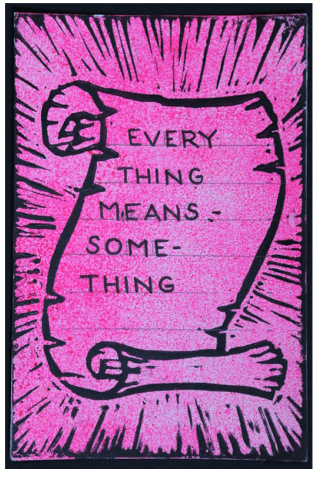
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These are the kind of phrases that could appear in my works on paper and Cindy's work in a number of media. Both Cindy and I are interested in the free mixing of text and image, in visual and verbal non sequiturs, in fragments of conversation found by the side of the road, in our own version of postmodern poetry and abbreviated magick spells— small enough for a post card but big enough to cause change to occur in conformity with will.

***

Sacra Privata[8]

> 'Sacra Privata' was the term given by the Romans to the private religious rites of a household, family or tribe.
>
> —Robin Skelton, *The Practice of Witchcraft*

My "Sacra Privata" is a body of drawings started in 1990 and continuing to present. They are small (11" x 8 ½"), quick, spontaneous, automatic and ragged but, most importantly, they are frequent. To date, there are several hundred of these small works on paper. They form a sort of diary of a difficult time in my life—"a memoir of disintegration" to use the words of American artist David Wojnarowicz—but also a record of recovery and reconstruction after disintegration.

Blair Brennan, *Tattoo Designs for Cindy Baker*, 2010.
Spray paint, relief print and sharpie on card, 6" x 4" ea.

"What is the work about?" is a question that all art viewers (and writers of artist statements) confront. The implicit secrecy of diary–type projects brings an additional complication to this question. Both literary and visual diaries are the result of a kind of compulsion. The artist's urge to record (in some form) is so overpowering and the desperation to "get it on paper" so conspicuous, that one may justifiably ask if the work is even intended for a viewer to decipher. Like much autobiographical work, a visual diary can transform private experience in a manner that is relevant for the author and the viewer.

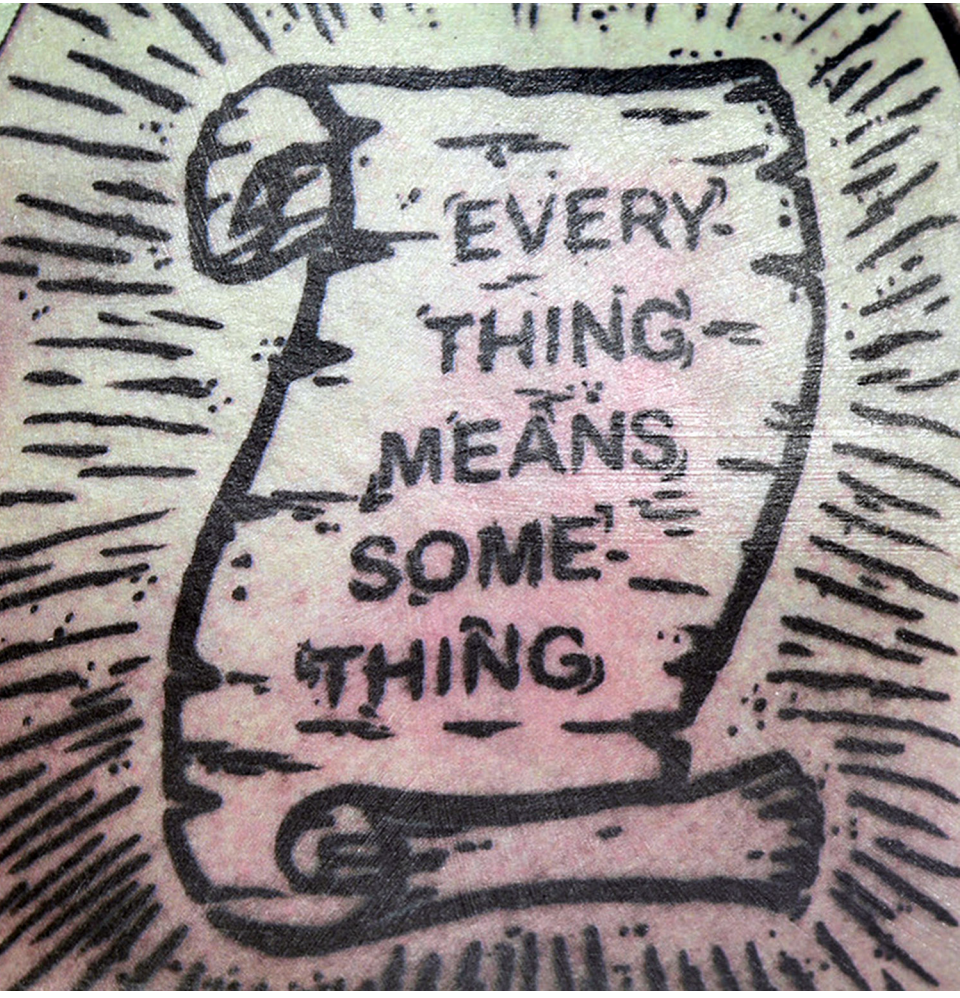
Much of "Sacra Privata" is motivated by secret thoughts and private experience—some trite and banal, some complex and glorious but all of it obsessively (at times desperately) recorded. The secret things are the most difficult for both the diarist/artist and the reader/viewer. Perhaps, for this reason, the investigation is more rewarding.

***

I received an email from Cindy on September 7, 2010 saying that she had received the last post card that day and that it was "the hands-down winner." Cindy had EVERYTHING MEANS SOMETHING tattooed on her right upper arm by Garrett Egles formerly with Blackbird Electric Tattoo and now with Radio Block Tattoo in Calgary.[9] I always imagined that the chosen text would

Blair Brennan, A selection of works from the series *Sacra Privata*, 1990-present. Drawings, 11" x 8.5".


BABYLON
THE
CREAT
REAL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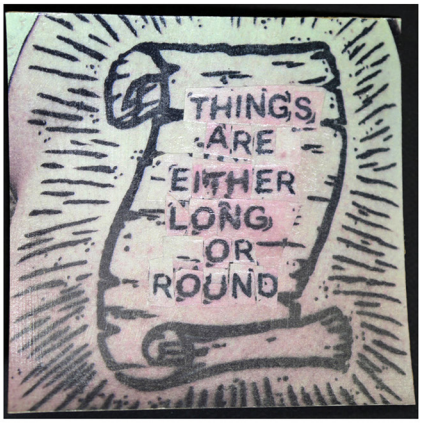
appear in some form of scroll or banner but I was quite surprised to see my scroll design reproduced with such fidelity, even including a fluorescent pink sheen. Our tattoo project was an opportunity to transform a private project into a collaborative "artwork" revealed to the public on Cindy's arm.

***

From a photograph of the tattoo, Cindy made collages of each of the options I had sent her. In a case of psychic symmetry, Cindy mailed her collages back to me. Our tattoo project had become a mail art project twice or, more accurately, a visual and textual call and response.

For as long as we've known each other, Cindy and I have been sharing information, showing each other photographs and sketches of finished and in-process artworks and regularly gifting small works to each other. We also exchange mix tapes/CDs with handmade covers and, as previously mentioned, postcards/mail art projects. Our smaller more intimate projects may seem extraneous to the more public part of our art practices however, this is not so. These projects are a vital part of our art practices and reveal, I hope, the extent to which Cindy and I scale up or down ideas and related art works. The words, images and ideas that Cindy and I have been sharing for decades are seeds for future projects and gestures of a lasting friendship.

Cindy Baker, *Tattoo Collage for Blair Brennan*, 2013.
Photographs and newspaper on card. 5" x 6".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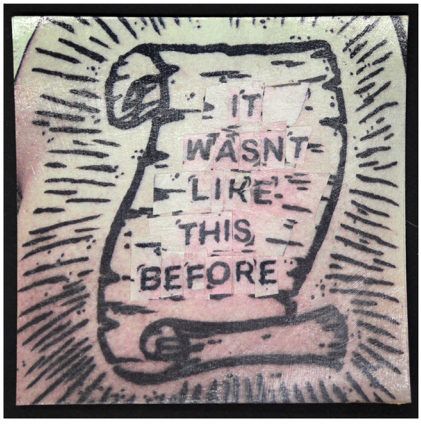
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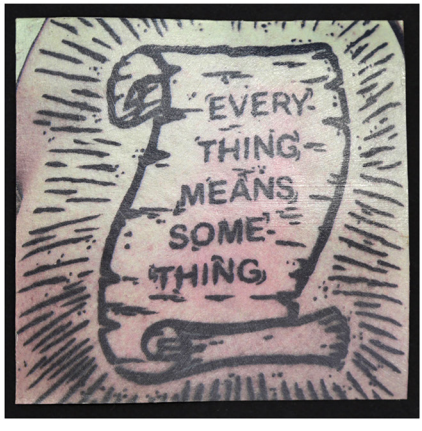
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MEANS
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Notes

1. *How Far is Tattoo Far?* and *Just Tattoo of Us* are easy to find on YouTube. I have no specific recommendations. And, yes, the Tattoos included the asterisks.
2. Blair Brennan, excerpted from "The New Alchemists: Catherine Burgess and Blair Brennan," Caterina Piznias, curator (Edmonton: Harcourt House Arts Centre, 2007).
3. The British Museum, "5,000 year-old tattoos," *Curator's Corner*, season 3 episode 6 (2018). https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=R0wcdhZu7pQ
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5 C. N. Baker in absentia

Veronika Merklein

His one bedroom apartment was small, it had a bathroom, if you even could call it that and a hallway with a faded white curtain on the end into which I vanished for a while. The windows of the bedroom and the kitchen both faced the backyard parking lot, which was surrounded by the backsides of other houses, with people on balconies who communicated with each other on a regular basis. I went through his music, his cupboards. I laid down on his bed and inhaled the moments he might have had when he woke up listening to the melancholia of the song "Smalltown Boy" by Bronski Beat. I thought about how the intelligentsia and artists move to bigger cities to be surrounded by others of others who other others, so the othering is less of an issue. Not a safe space, but a safer space to the other, where the other originated from. His calendar said he was in China. I was freezing in front of an open freezer while thinking hard about the dozens of frozen bananas which basically filled up almost the whole space next to a blown up beer bottle. It seems that he put them in the freezer on his way out, probably not knowing that defrosted bananas are not good anymore. As soon as you freeze a banana it has to stay frozen, otherwise it becomes a tainted love. This was summer 2006. As far as I can remember, I spent most of the time going up and down in an old dark-brown and "wood-ish" elevator, inside a gloomy house.

When I returned to my artistic life back home, I applied to a show with a work titled *C. S. Lindberg in absentia*. The jury accepted my proposal but I never showed-up. The e-mail confirmation sat silently in my spam folder, which had obviously imposed its own ethical judgment on my circumstances. To be honest, I felt sneaky and guilty for diving into a life that never belonged to me, the life of someone who had never pronounced, let alone spelled, my name. Still, C. S. Lindberg was a ghost—a memo in the backyard of my brain. When I recently found his artist website, it brought to life a life that happened for me after my silent encounter with him. While I was not digging around in his undies anymore, I learned that he was digging through his own family history. As artists, we probably all dig around in other peoples' lives.

It was winter 1948 when the universal human right to physical integrity was declared. However, we do not yet have a statutory law to guarantee physical and emotional touch. It was autumn 2020. We, the audience, sat together, all wearing face masks, trying hard not to be a tangible danger to each other. On stage, performers mirrored our lack of communication, a lack of speaking, a lack of telling the story. It was a sixty-minute theater piece, focused on the insecurities of five performers who never found closeness. I remembered these experiences as I was flipping through C. N. Baker's pictures trying to scrape the inside of her brain. I was a tiny entity travelling through a wormhole into her life; I felt like I imagine she must have felt when she slid babuska-like into her own body when performing as a mascot of herself.

I remain an onlooker of the play *C. N. Baker in absentia* in a digital sphere where we are forced to squeeze ourselves into length times width. We long for ways of getting to know each other, being close to each other, making the other less of an other. Digitally imitating someone else's behavior is a somewhat abstract cannibalistic act, pairing zeros and ones in the right order. I remain a helpless mammal. Ultimately, everything depends on touch.

Opposite:
Veronika Merklein, *C. N. Baker in absentia*, 2020. Digital image.


Farbe
Farbfelder
Suchen
SK
xxx20201009_185440.psd bei 50% (Ebene 0 Kopie 2, RGB/8)
50%
Dok: 15,3 MB/50,0 MB

6 Vulnerability and Resistance in Contemporary Visual Art
Cindy Baker and Nona Faustine

Stefanie Snider

By training, I am an art historian. This is probably my strongest *chosen* identity—the one I most connect to, that I sought out on my own. I am also a fat, white, queer, disabled, cisgender woman—all identities I happily claim and revel in though they are not voluntarily chosen. My work as an art historian and my experiences as a fat, white, queer, disabled cis-woman inform each other closely in my professional scholarship and in my activism (which often takes the form of formal and informal scholarship and teaching). As a result, I have largely focused on researching and writing about visual art practitioners who come from and make work about marginalized communities in the contemporary era (c.1960s through today). Even though the conventional art history canon, and the history of art history itself, upholds a set of (fictionally) "objective" ideas about "truth" and "beauty," I have sought in my work to approach art history through a lens of social justice, to further the recognition of and knowledge about artists and practices that have historically been neglected, implicitly hidden, and/or actively absented from histories of visual representation.

It is because of this trajectory of my career that I met Cindy Baker and came to know her work—at a conference panel on "Health, Embodiment, and Visual Culture" at

McMaster University in 2010, where she discussed her own performance work and I presented on Laura Aguilar, a fat, lesbian, disabled, Chicana photographer. Our work resonated with one another, as we were both looking at the ways in which embodiment is significant in the visual practices of fat queer artists. Since then, I have participated in and written about several of Baker's artworks as both a scholar and a fan.

This essay brings together my continuing interest in Baker's work and my more recent investigations into activist art made by contemporary Black women artists, focusing specifically on the work of Nona Faustine. I am especially interested in exploring the ways that resistance is represented in art by marginalized artists and how that resistance is always tied closely to the vulnerability of the artists and their communities. As both Michel Foucault and Peggy Phelan have elaborated, while visibility typically seems an obvious way to fight against oppressive systems, making one's self and one's communities visible within dominant cultures that have brutally silenced marginalized communities is an incredibly risky action.[1] Faustine and Baker willingly and willfully take such risks to visualize themselves and their communities, using images and performance to challenge how the present and past are envisioned within dominant culture. It is precisely this kind of artwork that invigorates me, as an art historian and a disabled, fat, white, bisexual, cis-woman, to keep working toward a more just world, visually and otherwise. This essay builds outwards from Cindy Baker's work towards that of Nona Faustine in the spirit of a book "dedicated to catalytic possibility."[2]

Theorizing Vulnerability and Resistance

In a 2018 interview with Jessa Gillespie talking about her performance installation work *Crash Pad*, Cindy Baker notes the ways that her work is imbued with a sense of vulnerability, in large part because of how it involves intimate and public expressions of the self and the body. *Crash Pad* was an installation and performance that showcased Baker (and frequently friends) in states of rest, lying on a bespoke "bed" surface within a gallery space decorated with imagery Baker created of scenes of people—often disabled and in queer groupings —as they get ready for bed. Whatever the size of her audience (or even without one), Baker places herself on display, in open settings and sites that encourage looking, staring, and close investigating by viewers. Sometimes Baker's work interrogates the ways in which audiences must enact or activate an artwork (rather than the artist herself); other times she presents her own body for interrogation. In both cases, Baker's work emphasizes the body as a site of vulnerability and resistance, entangling public and personal readings of her body as fat, white, disabled, and female.[3]

As Baker notes in the interview, in her early performance work her fat body became an unexpected focus:

> I recognized that I was being read as a fat woman; that it was being read as content. I've always been fat, I've always been a fat woman, and I've always been aware of it and interested in thinking about it. But, I had never before realized that I had to address it in my work. And so my work became more about the body than I ever thought it would

> have to be. … My work shifted to be very much about the body, and in great part because I had to, because that's how people we're reading it. It seemed so disingenuous to be like: "nah, that's not what it's about at all" even though everybody was seeing that in it.[4]

The revelation that Baker's fatness would become a significant aspect of her performance work gives insight into how artists' bodies are seen, whether in performance, self-portraiture, or collaborative and multi-media work. Even when an artist recognizes the particularities of their body, they might not anticipate the kinds of interpretations brought to the work by viewers. For artists from marginalized communities or embodying marginalized identities, their bodies frequently become the center of attention—what Rosemarie Garland-Thomson calls "a subject of stares"—in ways unplanned or unpredicted.[5] Considering together an artist's understanding of their work and that of the viewers can bring forth questions about how bodies are interpolated and connected. How does an artist connect to other artists and artworks? How do they invite and manage relationships to personal and cultural histories? How are resilience and vulnerability enacted through an exchange of gazes in uneven and/or overdetermined ways?

The concerns around vulnerability and visual attention that emerge from Baker's work also resonate with another contemporary artist, Nona Faustine. Faustine is a fat, Black, New York-based photographer whose work engages the intersections of history, memory, violence, joy, and embodiment through self-portraiture and family portraiture. Her practice confronts the ways

that photography contributes to an ongoing history of racism and colonialism in the United States. In her *White Shoes* (2012-2016) series of self-portraits, for instance, Faustine exposes brutal stories of enslavement, anti-Black racism, and white supremacy by revisiting their legacies through her body and the geography of North America. Describing her work, Faustine writes, "My practice walks the line between the past and the present. My work starts where intersecting identities meet history. Through the family album and self-portraiture I explore the inherited legacy of trauma, lineage, history."[6] The white shoes Faustine wears in this series of images represent "the white patriarchy that we cannot escape"[7] and provide a visual contrast between her warm brown skin tones and soft bodily curves, and the smooth, structured, and pristine leather heels on her feet. Faustine uses the bright white shoes as the only element of clothing in most of these photographs, forcing viewers to think about how the foundations of white cisheteronormative patriarchy undergirds systems of politics, classification, economics, and—not least for a collection of nude photographic self-portraits— vision and desire, in the United States.

While Baker's work does not foreground themes of racialization and slavery, it does expose underlying ideas about embodiment and marginalization as they relate to disability, chronic illness, fatness, economics, and labor within cisheteronormative neoliberal structures of power. As Gillespie writes, her work "calls attention to hierarchies of value linked to ability and productivity within a neoliberal-capitalism framework."[8] The theme of precarity unites Baker and Faustine's work, pointing to the particularities of lived existence in non-normative bodies; the specifics

of each artist's work creates connections between them. Baker's kinship with and divergences from Faustine's work showcase the multiplicities of embodiment and the distinctions in readings of representational artworks across media and location.

White Shoes and Public Sites of History

Faustine's *White Shoes* is a photographic series exploring the connections between Faustine's fat Black female body and typically hidden (in plain sight) geographies of enslavement in New York City. In these photographs Faustine creates a visual web delineating and calling forth the ways in which white cisheteropatriarchy produced the slave trade, as capitalist economic systems became established in the Americas through white supremacy and enslaved labor beginning in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries. In Katherine McKittrick's words, "The site of memory is also the *sight* of memory—imagination requires a return to and an engagement with painful places, worlds where [B]lack people were and are denied humanity, belonging, and formal citizenship; this means a writing of where and how [B]lack people occupy space through different forms of violence and disavowal."[9] Faustine re-envisions these sites of violence through her own nude, fat, Black body, tying together individual and social threads of pain and resistance.

Complimenting *White Shoes* is Faustine's *Mitochondria* (2008-present), an ongoing photographic series wherein the artist pictures her mother, her sister, her daughter, and herself within personal, often domestic, settings. *Mitochondria* acts as a kind of family album, inspired in

part by Faustine's father's documentation of her family when she was a child. According to Faustine, "I wanted to give my daughter the same gift my father gave me: a visual diary. As a single mother, I wanted her to see how much she was loved."[10] In both series of photographs, Black women—individualized and generalized—are representations of resistance and resilience, but not in a way that subjects them to the stereotype of the "strong Black woman" who must uphold her family, household, and nation through emotional and physical labor and under threat of white supremacist violence. Instead, Faustine embeds a sense of vulnerability in her imagery, through her willingness to give iconic status to her loved ones and her own nude self in the photographs. In opening her world and body to viewers, Faustine links personal and state violence, individual and collective memory, and past, present, and future in a racialized and gendered visual imaginary.

In one photograph from *White Shoes*, Faustine's fat, Black, nude figure faces away from the viewer as she strides up the steep stairs of New York's Tweed Courthouse. From the viewer's vantage point, she towers above us, and above her towers the grey and white stone and concrete Neoclassical façade of the building. The rich black and brown tones of the figure's nude body contrast strongly with the bright white high-heeled shoes she wears, which further stand out against the dirty-grey steps she stands on. She holds something in her left hand, difficult to fully decipher until the viewer looks closely and sees the rusty links of a chain connecting hand shackles, likely forged in the eighteenth or nineteenth century given their design and age. And all at once, with that recognition, the photograph begins to resolve itself: this is an image about

the enslavement of African and African American people in the United States, and even more specifically, in New York City. It is a scene most white people in the USA are unaccustomed to, having the privilege to forget and neglect this history of enslavement. Further, it is a location most white people in the USA—whether located and educated in the "North" or "South"—might never expect; a visual trace of the slave trade in New York City, of all places. But for several decades in the eighteenth century, as the nation and slavery were established together, New York City was a major site of the slave trade.[11] It was in this area of lower Manhattan that the first slave market in the city was built in 1711, though slavery had been part of New York history since at least 1626;[12] the market was merely a way to for the city to organize and codify the selling of enslaved Africans and African Americans. The land on which the current Tweed Courthouse and the adjacent New York City Hall, parkland, and government buildings are positioned was on the outer edges of the city in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries and used by African and African American free and enslaved people as a burial ground.[13] But beyond the African Burial Ground Monument (completed in 2006) some blocks north of Tweed Courthouse and City Hall, and a small plaque installed at the corner of Wall Street and Water Street in 2015, little information is conveyed in the landscape of this part of Manhattan to indicate the presence of African and African American communities there, free or enslaved, in the early centuries of colonial expansion in North America. Faustine's photograph helps to reposition the contemporary landscape of the city within the traumatic, white supremacist, capitalist history of the transatlantic slave trade and extend an understanding of its continued power in the present.

This photograph, entitled *Over My Dead Body* (2013), also embodies a vulnerable resistance in the figure of the subject, through Faustine's fat, Black, and nude body. As Judith Butler argued, corporeal resistance is frequently used by surveilled and oppressed individuals and communities strategically to "mobilize vulnerability for the purposes of asserting existence, claiming the right to public space, equality, and opposing violent police, security, and military actions."[14] By exposing her body to those who view the photograph and to the audience that was present at the original scene of the image-making, Faustine stages a form of vulnerability. It is an action that asserts her, and her ancestors' and descendants', right to exist and to take up space—and to mark that right in the socio-cultural and architectural landscape.

Faustine challenges the historical and contemporary regimes that pronounce(d) Black people as objects to be owned, bought, sold, and brutalized. In addition, as a fat, Black woman, Faustine's nudity emphasizes the interlocking oppressions of racism and fatphobia that developed together in the colonization and enslavement of Africans and African Americans in Europe and the Americas beginning in the seventeenth century.[15] Faustine's body acts as a representation of the social body that literally and metaphorically opens itself to potential harm by moving, naked and without shame, in public spaces typically designated for "proper" business and leisure activities by citizens of white, thin, fully-clothed, dominant culture. Faustine's dark skin color and size also implicitly reference the stereotypical figure of the "mammy," the fat Black desexualized house slave and caretaker for white slaveowners, a figure that has been the site of artistic challenges to anti-Black brutality,

enslavement, and disempowerment in artworks by other Black women, including Bettye Saar (*The Liberation of Aunt Jemima,* 1972) and Faith Ringgold (*Who's Afraid of Aunt Jemima,* 1983). Emma Bond writes that Faustine's use of her own nude, fat, exposed, Black body in these photographs "becomes a symbol of the body's ability to exceed, subvert, and challenge categories through its generative and creative possibilities."[16] As Butler contends in regard to putting one's body (especially a body deemed threatening by dominant white ideals) at risk in sites that embody potential danger to oppressed subjects, "there is a renewal of popular sovereignty outside, and against, the terms of state sovereignty and police power, one that often involves a concerted and corporeal form of exposure and resistance."[17] Faustine's photographs shape and document this concomitant exposure and resistance, linking personal and political, individual and social, past and present.

Mitochondria and Portraits of Intimacy

The ideas of risk and vulnerability come to the fore in Faustine's *Mitochondria* (2008-present) series in subtly different ways, when she pictures three generations of her family—her mother, her sister, herself, and her daughter—in everyday settings, within the house that they share together. Whereas *White Shoes* was largely about a public marking of space through the artist's fat, Black body to acknowledge the past in the present, *Mitochondria* is about personal moments on view in intimate settings, to preserve for the future the quotidian life and resilience of Black women. Faustine connects broader Black feminist histories to this series when she states:

> Through difficult times, [B]lack women have kept their families together. The [B]lack mother has uplifted, sustained and pushed her children and grandchildren forward to build something out of this life. That is where my heart lives and what I love about who we are as a people."[18]

It is no surprise, then, that the series name, *Mitochondria*, was chosen as a reference to the one part of each human cell that is inherited only from one's genetic mother, the mitochondrial DNA. As a result, "the series commemorates the continuity of African-American womanhood from one generation to another," extending the past through the present and into the future.[19] Mitochondria are also often described as the "powerhouse" of the cell because they produce and contain the chemical energy that fuels the cell's biochemical reactions.[20] This seems an apt second definition for the title of Faustine's project given how this series of photographs empowers the subjects pictured as well as Black women more generally. *Mitichondria*'s role(s) as a photographic series parallels that of its cellular function, matriarchally linking lines of powerful women whose descendants survive today and hereafter. Faustine notes, "Black women came off the slave ships as feminists. There was no one there to protect us."[21] *Mitochondria* presents agentic and interdependent Black women who care for one another within a continuing context of misogyny and anti-Black racism in the US.

Mitochondria began when Faustine was pregnant with her daughter in 2008 and is open-ended, continuing through the present. It was this series, in fact, that was the impetus for the creation of *White Shoes* when Faustine

photographed herself and her daughter, Queen Ming, on a beach in 2012. This double portrait of Faustine and her daughter from *Mitochondria*, titled *My Liberation*, presents the two subjects sitting on a towel on Coney Island beach, the ocean's waves swelling behind them. While Queen Ming is absorbed in playing in the sand, Faustine, wearing a black strapless swimsuit and reflective sunglasses, turns her head to look directly at the camera. According to Faustine, this was the first time she had worn a bathing suit to a beach, prompting her to think about the ways that her own and other bodies interacted with the landscape of New York, and inspiring her to begin planning the *White Shoes* series.[22] The photograph reads as a rather ordinary moment of relaxation for Faustine and her daughter, and that is in part what makes it so important. Many of the photographs in *Mitochondria* feature banal and/or leisurely moments in the life of Faustine's family; the images often read more as snapshots than as planned and posed "art photography." They comprise a family album, or as Faustine describes, "a visual diary."[23] The casualness of many of *Mitochondria*'s photographs contrast with the intense but often implicit labor displayed in the *White Shoes* images.

As with many of the *White Shoes* photographs, Faustine exposes her fat, Black body in *My Liberation* within the public sphere, in an act of vulnerability and resistance. Pictured with her child, Faustine visualizes her generational connections in public and explicitly for audience viewing, allowing viewers a glimpse of her mother-daughter relationship. Faustine deliberately invites viewers to get to know her and her family in a way that both particularizes and generalizes their presence. At one and the same time, Faustine can be read as a photographer, a mother,

a daughter, and a sister and a powerful representation of Black culture and life. But that power is always on the edge of being misinterpreted within white supremacist culture as a stereotype, and Faustine's photographic series quietly wrestles with the tension inherent in that split. As with the relationship between vulnerability and resistance that both Faustine's and Baker's artworks portray, the association between the individual and the stereotype is cyclical and multi-directional, fostered primarily through a viewer's cultural context as it relates to the artworks.

Exploring Interlocking Oppressions: A Conclusion

The fact that an image titled *My Liberation* documents the first time Faustine wore a bathing suit to a beach quietly underscores the significance of the fatness of her Black body and its representations in her artwork. This also draws attention to fat as a physical and social substance with multi-layered meanings that echo those in Baker's work. In studying cultural histories of fat Black bodies, Sabrina Strings attests to the ways in which anti-Black racism formulated the conditions and contexts for the development of fatphobia in Europe and North America beginning in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries through enslavement and other forms of exploitation of Black women.[24] As with the seemingly opposing relationship between vulnerablity and resilience—and individuals and stereotypes—interpretations of Faustine's fatness as it intersects with her Blackness is perceived differently by different viewers. While Baker places her fat white body on display in many of her performances, it is interpret-

ed in overlapping, but significantly different ways than Faustine's body due to the assumptions placed on Black women versus white women in North American contexts. Faustine mentions in an interview that one possible dismissive view of *White Shoes* is that "my fat, Black, naked, female body [is] on display. People often don't like seeing that because it conjures up a lot of emotional baggage for some."[25] The "emotional baggage" of fatness and its cultural relationships to labor, economics, and social norms of productivity and appearance are one of the thematic links between Faustine's and Baker's artworks. In *Crash Pad*, Baker critiques these aspects of neoliberal social structures by placing value on care, rest, and connection, challenging norms of work (physical and emotional), capitalism, and their relationships to fat, and especially female, bodies. In linking vulnerability and resistance, individual and social, personal and political, past, present, and future, Faustine's *White Shoes* and *Mitochondria* profoundly critique anti-Black racism in white supremacist culture. Faustine uses representations of herself and her loved ones' Black bodies to connect to and to mediate legacies of enslavement and Black stereotypes through public and domestic landscapes that are significant in personal and historical ways.

Crash Pad consists of Baker's in-gallery performances of rest, along with ink and watercolor drawings, wallpaper, and duvets featuring nude and semi-nude women on their way to bed. This mundane act is punctuated in Baker's imagery by featuring fat figures in multiple body shapes, sizes, and skin colors with a variety of disabilities and devices (wheelchairs, prostheses, sleep apnea masks and machines) exposed in the intimacy of the bedroom. Whether heading to sleep alone or with partners, the figures are relaxed and

unidealized even as Baker imbues the paintings and their paper and fabric prints with tones of blue to create the appearance of a rather gentle and inviting toile design. As Carolyn Jervis describes it, "Baker plays with modes of normalization in these drawings to make visible the loving intimacy of women with curves and folds, chronic health issues and disabilities. The artist has often discussed her own body and the way it 'fails.' The blue drawings, however, show no indication of physical challenges being any impediment to deep, everyday connection between the women pictured."[26]

Faustine's *Mitochondria* photographs function in a very similar way, and while I have only described in detail a single image, the majority of the photographs feature similarly candid "snapshot" scenes of Faustine and her female family members at home, in intimate domestic scenarios that emphasize Black love and joy in everyday life. Faustine's imagery, in parallel to Baker's performances of resting and bodily "failure" in *Crash Pad*, exposes the lack of media, popular culture, or even "fine art" images of physical and emotional care.[27] This is especially important because it is work that marginalized communities so frequently perform for themselves and within close circles to share love and enact what disabled queer of color activist Mia Mingus calls "access intimacy."[28] Access intimacy is a term used to describe the feelings created when others understand and readily work within one's access needs regarding illness and disability, creating a sense of relief and community for people who typically face the insidiousness of ableism.[29] This sense of community is something that Jervis notes in describing the imagery in Baker's drawings and toile patterning in

Crash Pad: "the predictable rhythm through the images of prosthetic removal, pill ingestion and conversation among bedfellows reinforces the everydayness of these beautiful and vulnerable homosocial intimacies, which are often shared but rarely seen in visual culture."[30] The same sentiment is very much true of Faustine's treatment of Black women and Black family; she creates a visual platform for celebrating the concurrent vulnerability and resistance in Black life. Faustine risks herself and her families' bodies to situate them as the perpetrators of a more liberatory gaze by intervening in public and domestic landscapes and placing Black female subjects at the center of contemporary visual representation. In starkly distinct, but complementary ways, Faustine and Baker support notions of care work, access intimacy, pleasure, vulnerability, and resistance in their respective bodies of visual artwork.

Notes

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2 Many thanks to Ted Hiebert for his editing assistance and this specific turn of phrase.

3 Stefanie Snider, "Bodily Presence and Absence in Cindy Baker's Performance Art," in *More Caught in the Act: An Anthology of Performance Art by Canadian Women,* Johanna Householder and Tanya Mars, eds. (Toronto: YYZ Books, 2016).

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22 Ibid
23 Ibid.
24 Strings.
25 Faustine, quoted in Mestrich.
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7 Dream Journal / Sequence!

Mikiki

1 – photographer, politician, punk, parent
2 – hometown
3 – Guidi Vidi Gut
4 – Provincial Art gallery, Museum & Archives

there was some search across the water

sheilak who was really sheilagh o'leary*

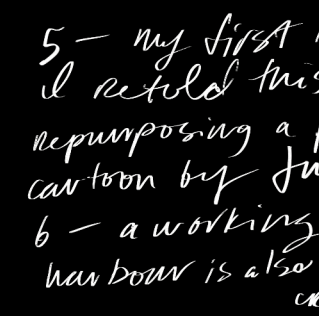
but anyway we landed in st. john's** which was supposed to be the gut*** but it was reworked in miniature.

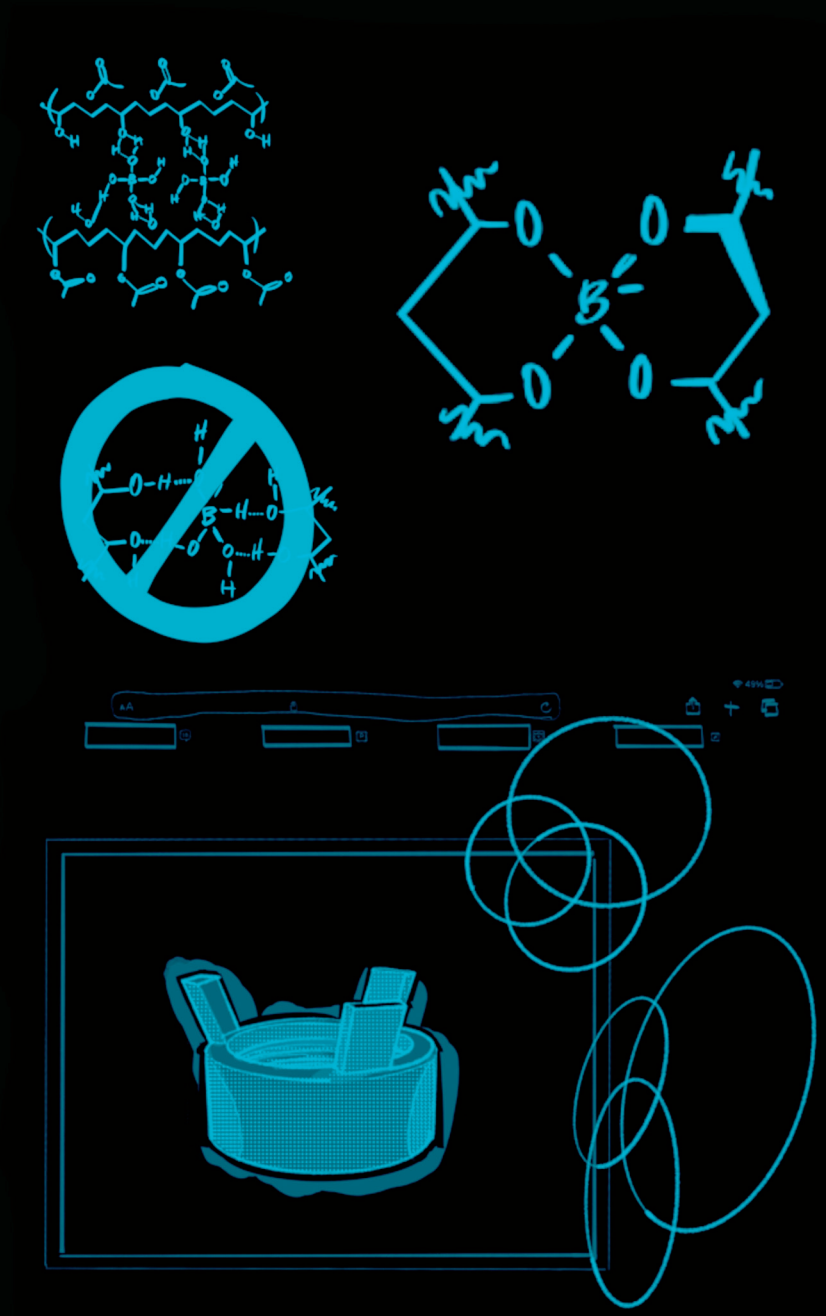
all the houses were redone coming up from the water to resemble lunch-box sized storage units in the shape of The Rooms**** buildings.

I wanted to say that this wasn't the real harbour but I wasn't sure if I was a character or the narrator.

SHADOW

FORWARD, BACK,


5 — my first lover, as a teen.
I retold this story in a zine
repurposing a pornographic
cartoon by Julius
6 — a working port, St. John's
harbour is also one of the city's
cruising spots.



soon I was sailing a very very short distance into the harbour to a drawing class and remember remarking earlier about a voice telling Christine or Caroline (fr) that she looked (sickly) like she's skipped breakfast.

she was to be a life model for a drawing class.

this drawing class was taking place in a floating room. the floor was missing but the walls were floating above the surface, but unsecured.

I was Christine and after getting down from my pose I swam, realizing desperately and resignedly that I was very weak indeed in my attempts to dog-paddle to the other side of the bed where people were drawing, lounging in various poses with legs in the water, some drawing with brush and ink, some pencil.

I tried to put one leg, then another up onto the bed and when i shifted my whole weight onto the bed i felt the entire mattress submerge, too much, and people got angry.

I alleviated my weight from the mattress in the wave that occurred and the anger dissipated.

there was someone in front of me who was talking to me as if my boss or supervisor, maybe about scheduling or payment while this happened.

there was some search across the water

sheilak who was really sheilagh o'leary*

but anyway we landed in st. john's** which was supposed to be the gut*** but it was reworked in miniature.

all the houses were redone coming up from the water to resemble lunch-box sized storage units in the shape of The Rooms**** buildings.

I wanted to say that this wasn't the real harbour but I wasn't sure if I was a character or the narrator.

1 – photographer, politician, punk, parent
2 – hometown
3 – Guidi Vidi Gut
4 – Provincial Art gallery, Museum & Archives

I saw brian earles***** with his legs slung over a beam coming off a mast of a boat in miniature and realized all our boats were in miniature and he was complaining about how all the harbourfront had been changed******.

he was hanging upside down by his knees from a beam high up on the boat, so that with his weight it should have capsized but it didn't.

soon he opened up one of the doors, the entire façade of the small Rooms and was complaining about how he couldn't store a lightbulb in there even if he had one.

I then realized that this was all being spoken in french with a newfoundland accent.

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5 — my first lover, as a team. I retold this story in a zine repurposing a pornographic cartoon by Julius
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8 piecework, a practice

Aaron McIntosh

cruising as encounter

My initial impulse when prompted to respond to the theme of "casual encounters" was to write about cruising. My own personal history with covert sexuality: pre-out fumblings on the internet, early adventures to known parks with older men waiting in cars, bizarre times in sex clubs in Berlin, Chicago, Seoul, and a kind of casual, sleezy, everyday cruising that seems to settle in as one ages in the gay community. Over the years, my artwork has incorporated cruising and the gay male gaze in unexpected domestic forms, such as quilts, furniture, crocheted blankets and paper-cut dolls. I've cultivated a habit of "cruising" the images, words and pictures of a queer past when I dig amongst unsorted boxes of LGBTQ2+ archives. These days I'm more fascinated by how others approach cruising: how this non-verbal practice has been emancipated from the associations with same-sex male encounters, its appeal broadened to seemingly anyone with an anonymous itch to scratch. To my utter amazement, a young queer womon and former-student of mine has dangled titillating stories of crashing "male only" sex parties in Brooklyn, decked-out in her homemade bondage gear, confusing and angering many attendees.

This essay thinks through the myriad ways that casual queer encounters have shaped my practice over the past

decade, and how they are shaping my current projects with a nod to collaborations with the beyond-human. From object-making to social practice, from archives to dioramas, my work cruises for potent moments among people, place, nature and material.

queer threads

Aaron (to student participants): "We are here for a workshop this week with Cindy Baker to think through complex issues surrounding garments, identity, the fashion industry and accommodation of differently-sized bodies. Everyone will be creating a "look" that Cindy will model on the catwalk in a take-down/redo of the fashion show runway. A note for everyone, there will be no use of measuring tools like tapes or rulers—you must figure out alternative ways to capture proportions of Cindy's body, preferably by physically touching Cindy's body directly with pieces of cloth, and this is an exercise in confronting your fears and shame of differently-sized bodies."

Cindy (to me, privately): "Please stop saying 'differently-sized bodies.' I am fat. This work is about confronting shame around that kind

Aaron McIntosh, *Road to Tennessee*, 2015.
Digitally printed cotton, family cloth, batting, thread.
Collection of Bill and Pam Royal.

of body and identity, but also that word. We are socially-conditioned to attach stigma to fat bodies. If we're going to work together this week, you need to be okay with saying this work is about my fat body".

Aaron: "Ah…ok. I see the point. And why it matters. Thank you and I'm sorry. It is a source of shame for me, a holdover from having many fat relatives, and a fat-phobic mother."

Cindy (laughing): "It's so Canadian of you to be so 'sorry'!"

Aaron: "No, it's very Southern of me to always be 'sorry'!"

I am new to Canada, having arrived in Montréal in September 2019 to take up a new teaching post at Concordia University. Having developed my entire art practice and teaching career in the southern United States, I had no connections to the place I now call home. Curiously, yet unsurprisingly, the only Canadian artists I had ever met were Cindy Baker and Allyson Mitchell, two queer artists also working in fiber and textiles with practices grounded in identity politics. In 2013, I invited Allyson Mitchell to the Maryland Institute College of Art as a visiting artist

Cindy Baker, *Fashion Plate Workshop*, 2017. Participants: Virginia Commonwealth University students, Aaron McIntosh, Théo Bignon & Jeanne Vaccaro.

and to host one of her famous potlucks with our Fiber Department. Cindy Baker landed in Richmond, Virginia, in 2017, for a week-long iteration of her *Fashion Plate* project at Virginia Commonwealth University, and I was her local host.[1] The hectic pace of organizing students and putting on a fashion show performance forged an instant fondness between us, yet we have still not seen each other since that exhausting and warm April week. Our meeting was itself a kind of casual encounter, but supported by an underlying network of textile and queer energies that increasingly criss-cross international boundaries.

Who knew, in 2014, that a thematic exhibition being planned in New York focused on LGBTQ2+ fiber art would expand into a small universe of connective threads across North America and beyond. Such was the case with *Queer Threads: Crafting Identity and Community,*[2] curated by the inimitable John Chaich, an independent curator whose interest in queer textiles was sparked by a Visual AIDS project he convened for LaMama Galleria, in which many of the exhibiting artists used cloth, clothing or stitching to communicate the legacy and contemporary urgency of AIDS activism.[3] The project opened at the Leslie-Lohman Museum; what began as a pile of artists crammed into a tiny New York floor-plan expanded into an exhibition series and eventually became a book project co-designed with Todd Oldham. In Chiach's words:

> [The project] spotlights an international, intergenerational, intersectional mix of thirty artists who are remixing fiber craft traditions, such as crochet, embroidery, quilting, and sewing, while reconsidering the binaries of art and craft, masculine and feminine, and gay and straight.[4]

The exhibitions and press built a kind of momentum around this assorted group of artists, and were a zeitgeist in the relatively small world of fiber and textile art. For so long it seemed like the artists in our field who identified as LGBTQ2+ were the ones making the most daring and contemporary work, challenging material and craft

Rameko O'Arwisters, *Crochet Jam Workshop*, Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA, 2017

hierarchies, and yet not exhibited or contextualized in any cohesive way. Many of us just assumed it was the low-grade homophobia of many institutions and publications. It also seemed a pivotal moment for the field of fiber arts, moving from a 40-year curated avoidance of anything psychologically related to the domestic sphere and hobby craft to a messy embrace of these practices through an identity-based and political rubric. I recall in my final semester of graduate

Stitched Queer Baltimore, 2016. Community project developed by Aubrey Longley-Cook and Aaron McIntosh involving Baltimore LGBTQ+ elders and archives and MICA students.

school in 2009, a professor haranguing me by saying: "You are combining homoerotics with grandma craft aesthetics. No one will ever understand this and you really should consider new content." Her assessment was cruel and wrong—something I always knew—but it took *Queer Threads* to help me find "my people" in the art world … and I think this is an experience shared by many artists in the show.

John Chaich and I created several off-shoot programs from the exhibition that brought wider communities together to experience lectures, conversations and making activities, and these were the activations in which *Queer Threads* really had an impact on my personal practice. I was introduced to a number of artists whose practices included making with others and within community, such as Ramekon O'Arwisters and Aubrey Longley-Cook. During this zeitgeist of queer threads, I became increasingly surrounded by artists who were situating textiles within activism practices. I was also confronted by the somewhat apolitical nature of my work up to that point.

Certainly, queer desire was loud and proud in my work, but I had not yet considered shifting my practice beyond my own personal frame of reference. I had not been bold enough to take on the messy work of public-facing proclamations, of making with others, of holding space for queer his/herstories amidst the structural challenges of the South.

a weed to connect us

Since 2013 I have been working through a series of representational quilted sculptures called *Weeds*, in which I draw a metaphoric line between the unwanted plants of our family garden and my own anxious efflorescence as a queer


MAILE CLUB
MAILE CLUB

person in an Appalachian culture steeped in heteronormative tradition. This led me to take on the ultimate Southern weed: kudzu. An "invasive" species imported from Japan in the mid-twentieth century to control soil erosion, kudzu now engulfs entire landscapes from Virginia to Texas. Initially, I had been making kudzu for myself, indexing my own queer desire through gay literary and erotic materials, such as those used in prior works.

In 2015, current events swirling around my community forced other considerations to the forefront of my practice. A same-sex marriage decision was before the United States Supreme Court, and as the arguments boiled over across liberal America, LGBTQ2+ Southerners were being held to blame for the inefficacy of a national movement. To be caricatured as laissez-faire, non-organized or self-loathing in national news media was a wake-up call. I had been working with kudzu, and struggling to realize its sheer mass, and it dawned on me how much more politically powerful it would be to shift the work's focus away from me, and to tell the stories of many other Southern queers. This was the crystallization of the *Invasive Queer Kudzu* project.

The tenacious kudzu vine is both an environmental nuisance and a fixture of the landscape, figuring prominently into the Gothic mythologizing of the Southern United States. Kudzu taps into regional fears of otherness, connecting it in many ways to perceptions of queerness and the persistent fear that a "homosexual agenda" could

Nick Clifford Simko and Aaron McIntosh, *Invasive Species*, 2013. Archival inkjet print.

sweep across the nation if left unchecked. Today, polls show that many parts of the U.S. are "naturally" accepting gay marriage equality and expanded rights for LGBTQ2+ people. Yet, the Southern home of kudzu is often portrayed as a place of entrenched homophobia. Lost in this politi-

Aaron McIntosh, *Invasive Queer Kudzu: Baltimore (detail)*, 2018.

cized fray are the lives, memories, stories and histories of Southern LGBTQ2+ and their ingenuity when contending with the status quo.

Queer people and communities in the South are like kudzu. We have thrived in inhospitable soils. Despite efforts to eradicate us, we have persisted. Kudzu's growth is exponential; because a vine can grow over 60 feet in one season (a foot a day in early summer) and its roots sometimes stretch over 12 feet into the ground, it has proved to be formidably resistant to pesticide. Imagine if we could "grow" queer visibility and community across the South with the vigor of kudzu! The *Invasive Queer Kudzu* project seeks to destigmatize this plant, rooting out blatant xenophobia, and understanding from a more holistic perspective the plant's ancient origins and probable futures.

In the beginning, I felt charged to create Southern queer kudzu through a historical lens. I wanted to understand the histories of queer Southern identity, and to look for connections to the complex legacy of kudzu itself. Ann Cvetkovich, in her writing on lesbian cultures and queer archives, explains that "in the absence of institutionalized documentation or in opposition to official histories," gay and lesbian archives were formed through grassroots efforts, with collections often begun in the homes of self- or group-anointed "keepers of the flame."[5] Cvetkovich proposes these as an "archive of feelings," or "the collection of cultural texts and objects that serve as repositories of feelings and emotions, which are encoded not only in the context of the texts themselves but in the practices that surround their production and reception."[6] Cvetkovich further expounds on trauma, which, because it is often "unspeakable and unrepresentable and marked

by forgetting and dissociation," seems to "leave behind no records at all.":

> Trauma puts pressure on conventional forms of documentation, representation, and commemoration, giving rise to new genres of expression, such as testimony, and new forms of monuments, rituals, and performances that can call into being collective witnesses and publics. [7]

As I considered Cvetkoich's call for understanding "new monuments" to trauma, a particular archive project became further inspiration for the *Invasive Queer Kudzu* project: the *AIDS Memorial Quilt* of the NAMES Project Foundation. In her book, *Fray: Art + Textile Politics*, Julia Bryan-Wilson expands the political and psycho-social dimensionality of textiles. She encourages a new verb use of "textile," as in "to textile politics,"[8] or add texture, pliability and high-low confusion to politics. Bryan-Wilson uses the *AIDS Memorial Quilt* as a case study in the permeability of textile forms, which can simultaneously hold nationalistic romantic notions of community, signal feminist craft reclamation, and render ambivalent the human devastation of the AIDS disease.

These ideas allowed the project to expand in two directions: first, towards building a future archive as a type of monument, and second, towards the development of interactive and touchable ways to teach and learn Southern Queer history and stories. After visiting archives such as the Houston-area Botts and Gulf Coast Archives and the ONE Archive in Los Angeles, I began producing my first leaves and vines, but felt something amiss. I didn't completely trust the archives to tell the full story of Southern queer life

at the intersections of race, non-binary gender and class. I decided that the project needed to include voices and stories from the present as well, alongside those from the past, and so I took the idea of story collection into queer communities. Theses stories are vital in the project's goal to "invade"

Aaron McIntosh, *Invasive Queer Kudzu workshop*, Richmond, VA, 2017. Hosted in collaboration with Studio Two Three

dominant Southern narratives with queer histories that have been obscured for so long. And so, since 2015, I have been traveling across the Southern states, collecting stories of LGBTQ2+ people through community workshops and from special archives. Drawing on the preeminence of quilting in Southern folkways and my own connection to quiltmaking, the collected stories, photographs, and digitized archive

Aaron McIntosh, *Invasive Queer Kudzu: Richmond*, 2019. 1708 Gallery, Richmond, VA. Photo credit: Terry Brown.

documents are quilted into kudzu leaves and vines. As of Fall 2020, the project has accumulated 7,200+ LGBTQ2+ story leaves, which are presented as installations of queer kudzu "invading" emblematic and/or problematic "monuments" of the South, such as Confederate statuary, flagpoles, Jim Crow era segregation architecture, statehouses, churches, log cabins, mental asylums and other structures

Aaron McIntosh, *Invasive Queer Kudzu: Richmond*, 2019. 1708 Gallery, Richmond, VA. Photo credit: Terry Brown.

that symbolize oppressive histories. Former gay bars, nightclubs and other queer landmarks that have become targets for removal are also reclaimed by queer vines. For each of the larger exhibitions, the monument being blanketed in the kudzu is specific to the intersectional anti-oppression struggles of that region. The most recent exhibition of the project, *Invasive Queer Kudzu: Richmond*, featured several monuments of the South, all of them problematic, featured in the process of being invaded and reclaimed by queer kudzu stories. Most notable among them was a to-scale recreation of the central column of the Jefferson Davis monolith, currently holding sway over Monument Avenue. In the wake of Confederate monument removals in New Orleans, Baltimore and Charlottesville, Richmond's newly-elected mayor Levar Stoney charged a commission of key stakeholders to determine the future of Richmond City's Confederate monuments. In 2018, the commission's detailed proceedings unanimously suggested the Jefferson Davis memorial for removal, the only one of four statues considered. However, the column is protected by restrictions in Virginia's state laws governing the removal of war memorials, ensuring that it will not be removed anytime soon. *Invasive Queer Kudzu* imagined the destruction of this, and other, monuments, putting fallen statues on display in order to contemplate the problematic legacy of historical monuments and the ways that destruction might be viewed as a critical stage in the life cycle of human history.

Taking a cue from the Parisian Communards' felling of the Vendome column and its subsequent reconstruction, as well as Romantic era excursions to the sites of crumbling architectural antiquity sites, *Invasive Queer Kudzu* hosted a series of picnics among the vine-covered ruins of a felled Jefferson Davis memorial column. These picnics took place

on weekends during the run of the exhibition and featured Queer Quilting Bees, where the kudzu story leaves were quilted with queer and ally communities, as well as lectures and demonstrations by various speakers, community organizers, and kudzu enthusiasts.

Kudzu Basket Weaving Workshop with Julia Gartrell, in conjunction with *Invasive Queer Kudzu: Richmond*, 2019. 1708 Gallery, Richmond, VA.


ACAB
Stop Pretending your RACISM is Patriotism
HER DADDY CHANGED THE WORLD WHILE HE COULD NOT BREATHE
FUCK THIS STATUE
BLM
SAY HIS NAME
LIVES

After an energetic five-year run, and with my move to Montreal on the horizon, I decided to refocus the *Invasive Queer Kudzu* project on continued story-gathering through invitational community workshops, as well as launching an interactive participatory website. It proved to be a prescient decision given that the COVID-19 pandemic would foreclose on the community workshops that had been planned for the spring and fall months of 2020. To my utter surprise and tearful delight, in the wake of nationwide protests against anti-Black police violence spurred by the murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis, those invidious Confederate statues in Richmond—including the one we recreated to topple—became themselves pillars of protest, covered in graffiti, dismantled and maimed, and eventually removed by city and state authorities.

becoming-with nature studies

Within my reimagining of *Invasive Queer Kudzu*, I found a renewed thirst for plant knowledge. I bought medieval herbal guides and read novels of orchid thieves. Perhaps it was because I had spent so much time in the tangled mess of this sprawling public art project while simultaneously saying goodbye to my first home garden and moving to Canada. At this crossroads was my persistent desire to propagate plants and to plant metaphors. I would look at images of the Richmond *Queer Kudzu* installation—

Robert E. Lee Monument as it stands on July 1, 2020 after being defaced during the George Floyd Protests. Photo credit: Mk17b. Distributed under a CC BY-SA 4.0 license.

fictional plants crawling over structures and walls—and connect them to other instances of plants packed indoors: greenhouses, but also science museums where displays of artificial plants perform background duty for more animate beings. I explored rabbit-holes of plant dioramas and botanical illustrations, and I found myself retreating into the strange warren that is nature studies. Brimming equally with problematics and possibilities, plant nomenclature and morphology forced me to turn to the poetic and political implications of working with plants.

Eurocentric versions of nature studies have tended to enforce a patriarchal, Christian and colonizing worldview that centers biparental (male and female) reproductive capacity and genetic fitness, neglecting the vagaries of sexuality, desire, pleasure that are detached from procreative reproduction, as well as instances of hermaphroditism, self-fertilization and polyamory. These "natural" histories (and convenient omissions) have informed social contexts for sexual and gender variation. Until the late 20th century, homosexuality, intersexuality and non-binary gender expressions were considered "unnatural" and either criminalized or institutionalized to bolster the "natural order" of humankind. Despite a long history of scientific observation of queer animal behavior, even fields of biology and medicine have been used to pathologize queer bodies and codify homophobia.

Aaron McIntosh, *Botanical Exuberance: Ficus elastica (Rubber Plant)*, 2019.
Mixed fabric appliqué on linen, thread

Catriona Mortimer-Sandilands and Bruce Erickson, in their anthology, *Queer Ecologies: Sex, Nature, Politics, Desire*, argue that:

> We should reorient our politics and take on something like a queer ecological perspective, a transgressive and historically relevant critique of dominant pairings of nature and environment with heteronormativity and homophobia … that is equally critical of the continued organization of metrosexualities based on an environmentally disastrous (and often ethically void) lifestyle consumerism.[9]

Mortimer-Sandilands and Erickson make the case "not only of queering ecology, but of greening queer politics." They write:

> The extension of queer into ecology is not, then, simply a question of making nature more welcome to gay inhabitation; it is also an invitation to open queer theory to ecological possibilities and thus produce a queering of ecocultural relations.[10]

Imagining such ecocultural relations has been the core of thinker Donna Haraway's work for the past 20 years. In her *Companion Species Manifesto*, she makes the case for

Aaron McIntosh, *Botanical Exuberance: Orificium plenus (Shared Bounty)*, 2019. Mixed fabric appliqué on linen, thread

understanding the implosion of nature and culture in the joint lives of pets and people as bonded in "significant otherness."[11] Her followup work, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*, offers provocative new ways to reconfigure our relations to the Earth and all its inhabitants. Haraway acknowledges the current crises of climate change and ecological devastation, but eschews the concept of the Anthropocene—the idea that we humans alone have made this mess and are alone in our ability to fix it. She proposes her own neologism for our times, the Chthulucene, from "chthonos," Greek for earth or underworld, and "kainos," a time of beginnings. Interweaving the abbreviation SF as a simultaneous stand-in for science fiction, speculative fabulation, string figures, speculative feminisms, and science fact, Haraway looks at ways we make kinship with and hold response-ability for other species, how we might do things together, or as she puts it, through "sym-poiesis," making together.[12]

One of the ideas Haraway has espoused in *Staying with the Trouble* is that of innate and reciprocal plant intelligence. She offers the idea that:

> [The] sublime aestheticization of plants leads us astray from their role as earth-making companion species. Plants are consummate communicators in a vast terrain array of modalities, making and exchanging meanings among and between an astonishing galaxy of associates across the taxa of living beings. Plants, along with bacteria and fungi, are also animals' lifelines to communication with the abiotic world, from sun to gas to rock.[13]

These ideas are supported by recent science fact, such as that in the work of Peter Wohlleben, a forester and botanist whose *Hidden Life of Trees: What They Feel, How They Communicate* makes the case for highly sophisticated communication between trees' root networks. His research is supported by studies that demonstrate that plants do something like sensory communication via mycorrhizal networks with other plants of the same or different species. Mycorrhizal networks allow for the transfers of signals and cues between plants which influence the behavior of the connected plants by inducing morphological or physiological changes. The chemical substances which act as these signals and cues are referred to as "infochemicals," and help trees exchange nutrients, and communicate with one another about weather changes or potential herbivore predation.[14]

Haraway and Wohlleben inspire my research to draw on connections between plants and people, using fabric scraps and the process of quiltmaking as a material conduit to convey these entanglements. The metaphoric power of plants to ascribe identity, rethink gendered language, and envision community is expansive terrain for LGBTQ2+ conversations.

worlding hothouse flowers

In 2006, an exhibition opened at the Norwegian Naturhistorisk Museum, University of Oslo, titled *Against Nature?: An Exhibition on Animal Homosexuality*. Based on landmark research into homosexual and homosocial behavior by biologist Bruce Bagemihl, the museum curated the first-ever display of queer animals, using models,

photos, texts and taxidermy specimens.[15] The explicit goal of the exhibition was to spark discussion and reflection on the historical rejection of homosexuality in humans, a fact only further bolstered by even our most progressive or creative institutions:

> Sadly, most museums have no traditions for airing difficult, unspoken, and possibly controversial questions. Homosexuality is certainly such a question.[16]

The museum diorama is a microcosm of the world we have been born into, in which cultural forces are pressed upon bodies, minds and lived experiences. For individuals and communities who do not fit a society's notion of "normal," such worlds are often structured by oppressive forces such as racism, colonialism, heterosexism, or ableism. In recent years, the concept of "worldmaking," "world building" or simply "worlding" has taken root in artistic and academic cultural production as an imaginative, futuristic response to the current international climate of increased violence against minoritarian livelihoods.[17]

Within this zeitgeist, my newest body of work interrogates how the natural world has been "built" by knowledge production that centers heterosexual relations, reproduction and biological determinism. I propose that these paradigms can be flipped to imagine a queerness

Aaron McIntosh, *Botanical Exuberance: Lilium lizzo (Lily for Lizzo)*, 2019.
Mixed fabric appliqué on linen, thread.

differently informed by nature-based undercurrents, in tandem with the sexual and gender-variant dynamisms present in the plant world. I ask the question: How can a radical realignment of botanic and queer knowledge be comingled and brought to bear on sites as distinct as the biology textbook, the science museum, or the dancefloor?

I begin with a greenhouse—a home for "hothouse flowers," or specimens so fabulous and rare that attentive care is necessary. *Hot House/Maison Chaude* is a series of artworks, and a structural and theoretical container for thinking about their impact. Informed by the Biodome and Victorian-era "hot houses," the project projects "world-building" potential into a structural form built to protect and nourish special species. By way of direct French translation, *Maison Chaude* also connects the mechanical function of the greenhouse—trapping heat and light—to the hot, stuffy, sweaty, sexy, neon and shimmer-infused indoor reverie of queer nightlife.

Drawing on fields as diverse as evolutionary biology, queer ecology, science fiction, ethnobotany, indigenous knowledge, eco-feminism, social practice and institutional critique, *House/Maison Chaude* cross-pollinates. The project cruises LGBTQ2+ and botanic archives—two conservation communities that rarely intersect—to create visual scenarios across time, from antiquity to Instagram, in which diverse queer bodies are enmeshed with plant-life modeled from historic narratives and speculative futures.

Aaron McIntosh, *Botanical Exuberance: toxicus relego (Bleeding Balls)*, 2019.
Mixed fabric appliqué on linen, thread.

A core component of the project includes an indexed catalogue of plants of the natural world that have intertwined histories with human sexual and gender evolutions. Mining the field of ethnobotany, *Hot House/Maison Chaude* seeks out plant species that likely co-evolved alongside humans for the mutual benefit of expanding gender and sexualities. As gay counterculture historian Arthur Evans explains:

> early rural pagans and later medieval witches viewed their sensuality as the key to who they were as people, and not something to be repressed as Christianity mandated …. Their very survival depending on being in touch with their bodies and knowing how to communicate with plants and animals … theirs was a world of enchantment with natural feelings."[18]

Titled *Exuberant Botanica*, this series of drawings, lithographic prints and appliqué panels feature known plants with deviant histories, as well as speculative queer plant "herbals," imagined for healing contemporary issues such as misogyny, gender alignment or eco-friendly sex toys. Other sculptural plants become homages to queer figures throughout human history, lovingly entangled with culturally-specific plants and plant metaphors.

These appliquéd images will eventually find themselves ensconced as botanical prints in a fabricated mobile greenhouse, which will also house a series of plant sculptures nourished by a "queer compost" made of various pulped LGBTQ2+ texts, clothing remnants and queer archival ephemera. Inside, educational didactic panels will focus on queer ecology, exploring queer nature, and seeking to

share gender and sexual diversity in the non-human natural world. The goal is to de-stigmatize biology for LGBTQ2+ audiences whose bodies have been historically maligned by science.

Designed as a mobile unit, the hot house will serve as a space for community activities and forums. It will also be used to host a dance party series that builds on the idea that nightlife fertilizes, cultivates and nurtures queer communities. Queering the concept of cultivation and propagation, this *Hot House/Maison Chaude* will be a fertile space for initiating new queer dialogues, working to shift tired paradigms of natural education.

The various projects that make up my practice are united by a desire to recenter queer connection. From the cruise to the fragile archival urge, queer knowledge espouses connection: communal, intimate, desirous, furtive, haptic, physical, seen, sited. Additionally, coursing through these works is my vision of quiltmaking as a possible language, form and tool. My creative output expands and broadens understanding of this traditional craft, proposing patchwork—work with scraps—as a global paradigm of identity formation.

Notes

1 For a review of this project, see: Lia Tabackman, " 'Queer Threads' symposium weaves together art and community," *The Commonwealth Times*, April 18, 2017. https://commonwealthtimes.org/2017/04/18/queer-threads-symposium/.

2 John Chaich, *QUEER THREADS: Crafting Identity and Community*, Leslie Lohman Museum of Art,

January 17-March 16, 2014. https://www.leslielohman.org/exhibitions/queer-threads- crafting-identity-and-community/.

3 Visual AIDS is a contemporary art organization that utilizes the arts to fight AIDS by provoking dialogue, supporting HIV+ artists, and preserving a legacy, because AIDS is not over. http://www.visualaids.org/. For more on the exhibition, see Holland Cotter, "'MIXED MESSAGES': 'A(I)DS, Art + Words," *The New York Times*, June 23, 2011. https://www.nytimes.com/2011/06/24/arts/design/mixed-messages-aids-art-words.html/

4 John Chaich and Todd Oldham, eds. *Queer Threads: Crafting Identity and Community* (Los Angeles: AMMO Books, 2017), iv.

5 Ann Cvetkovich, *An Archive of Feelings: Trauma, Sexuality, and Lesbian Public Cultures* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2003), 8.

6 Ibid.

7 Ibid, 7.

8 Julia Bryan-Wilson, *Fray: Art Textile Politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), PAGE NUMBER.

9 Catriona Sandilands and Bruce Erickson, *Queer Ecologies: Sex, Nature, Politics, Desire* (Bloomington.: Indiana University Press, 2010), 22.

10 Ibid.

11 Donna Jeanne Haraway, *The Companion Species Manifesto: Dogs, People, and Significant Otherness* (Chicago: Prickly Paradigm Press, 2003), 100.

12 Donna Jeanne Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), 56.

13 Ibid, 122.

14 Peter Wohlleben, Tim F Flannery, and S Simard, *The Hidden Life of Trees: What They Feel, How They Communicate—Discoveries from a Secret World*. Jane Billinghurst, trans. (Vancouver: David Suzuki Institute, 2016), 7-12.

15 Bruce Bagemihl, *Biological Exuberance: Animal Homosexuality and Natural Diversity* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1999), 36.

16 Geir Söli and Petter Böckman, *Against Nature?: An Exhibition on Animal Homosexuality*, UiO Naturhistorisk Museum, October 12, 2006-August 19, 2007. https://www.nhm.uio.no/besok-oss/utstillinger/skiftende/tidligere/againstnature/index-eng.html.

17 Sarah Rose Sharp, "How Art Making Is Like World Building," *Hyperallergic,* January 30, 2017. https://hyperallergic.com/354519/how-art-making-is-like-world-building/.

18 Arthur Evans, *Witchcraft and the Gay Counterculture (*San Francisco: Fag Rag Books, 1978), 85.

9 Mesh Galore

Théo Bignon

This essay takes a trip down several speculative roads, or rather, propositions. After all, a catalyst is some sort of precipitated event that catalyzess an increase in a given rate of activity. The following six propositions are written accounts of several years of latent thoughts and times that felt like catalytic events in my mind: once the door is opened, the paths to follow keep multiplying.

Mesh does that for me.

It's the pleasure of touching it, of seeing someone wearing it or of wearing it oneself without anyone knowing it. It's the rabbit hole of its own textile histories, the satisfaction of making it or finding some. There are countless "mesh moments" that excite me.

I want to think of this specific material in an expansive way, tapping from history, production, and the identity of its wearers and makers. I want to make outrageous connections, meshing eras and places.

I want to use mesh as a purposely unstable reading grid.

mesh is precise, mesh is blurry

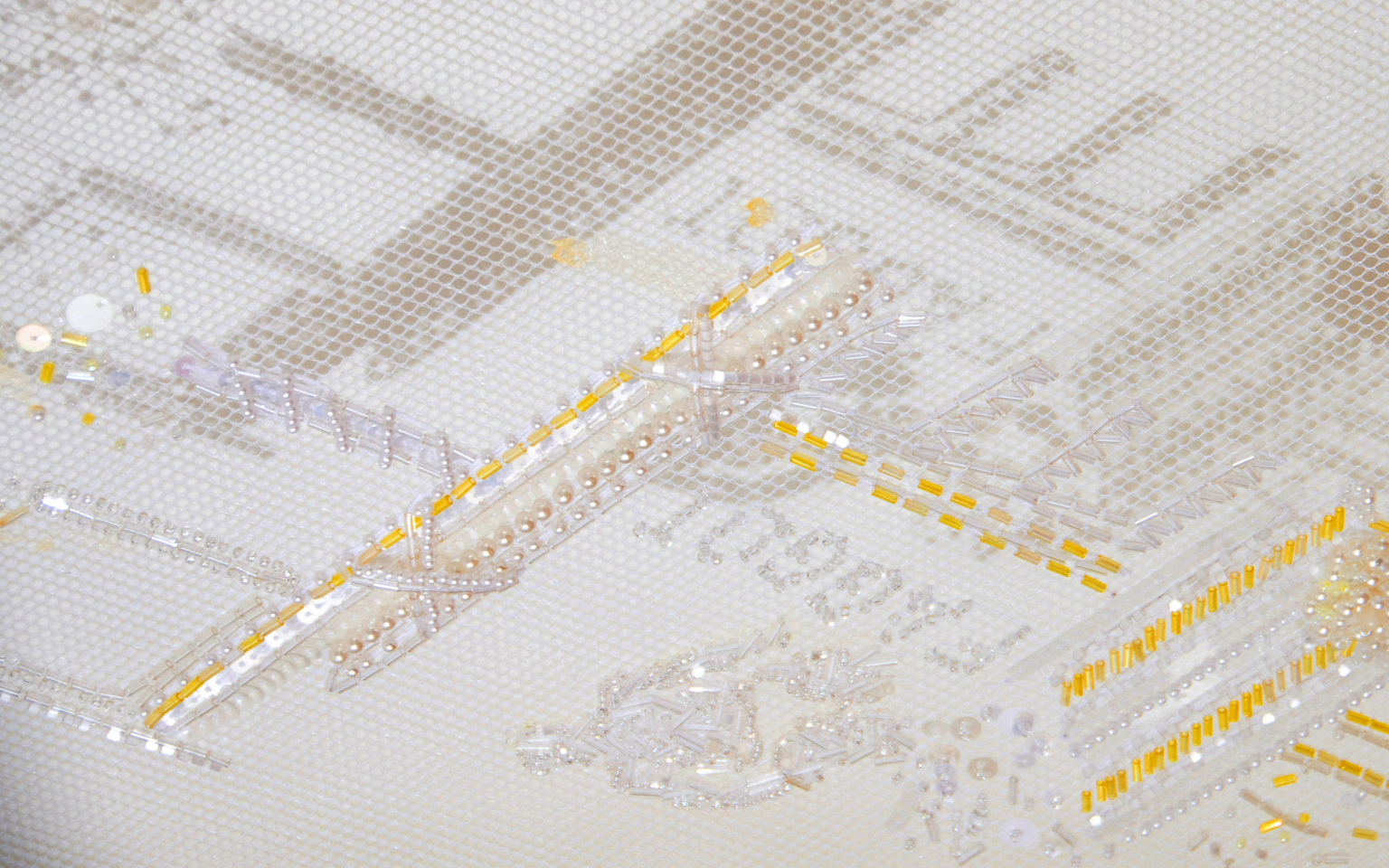
The desire to define something is very often limiting and the human propensity for categorization too often finds its origins in dark racist and colonial rhetoric. For this reason, *Oxford English Dictionary* might seem like a counter-intuitive starting point for this discussion—except that in the case of "mesh," its classifications fail to clearly categorize and instead open up different possible trajectories of thought.

Mesh is both a noun and a verb, a thing and an action. It "entangles as if in a net,"[1] a quite graphic explanation that brings textiles to the center of the term. And while its etymology remains blurry, it most likely comes from the Proto-Indo-European *mezg* meaning "to knit, twist, plait."

As a noun, mesh is both a "material formed of a network" and a "material containing a pattern of holes." Nothing about this definition suggests that this material is a textile. Actually, what really defines mesh is its network of holes. Yet, nothing indicates that this *network* or *pattern* has to be regular, it simply implies repetition. Nothing even indicates the size of the holes or what the substrate is made of.

From the mesh tank-top one might wear at the club to the fence at the border of a country, mesh is an expansive term that refuses categorization, therefore lends itself very well to self-identification and appropriation.

Théo Bignon, *Entre*, detail, 2019.
Wood, paint, pearl trim, various mesh fabrics,
steel installation. Photo credit: Brittany Laurent.



mesh is matter, mesh is void

Defined by its holes, mesh is probably the only surface characterized by the absence of the material that it is made from. Materiality and void sit on equal grounds. And while the number of holes relative to the amount of material can shift from zero to one-hundred percent, there will always be a relation of codependency. On the molecular level, every surface can become mesh.

The metaphoric potentials of these holes are boundless. Psychologically, Jacques Lacan believed that no matter how much a patient would share their thoughts and emotions, the gaps and omissions in the stories were the most productive. Psychoanalyst Parveen Adams described Lacan's psychoanalytic process as:

> that which from time makes a stuff of [what is said], not borrowed from the imaginary, but rather from a textile, where the knots speak of nothing but the holes which are there.[2]

The holes can be that space of trauma, of repression, and of loss. Worn, they can be an empowering way to decide exactly how much of your body you want to reveal.

Théo Bignon, *F* (Old Sins Cast Long Shadows)*, 2019. Hand-embroidered glass beads on mesh, ejaculate, wood, paint, 22"x16." Photo credit: J. Houston.

mesh is the grid, but better

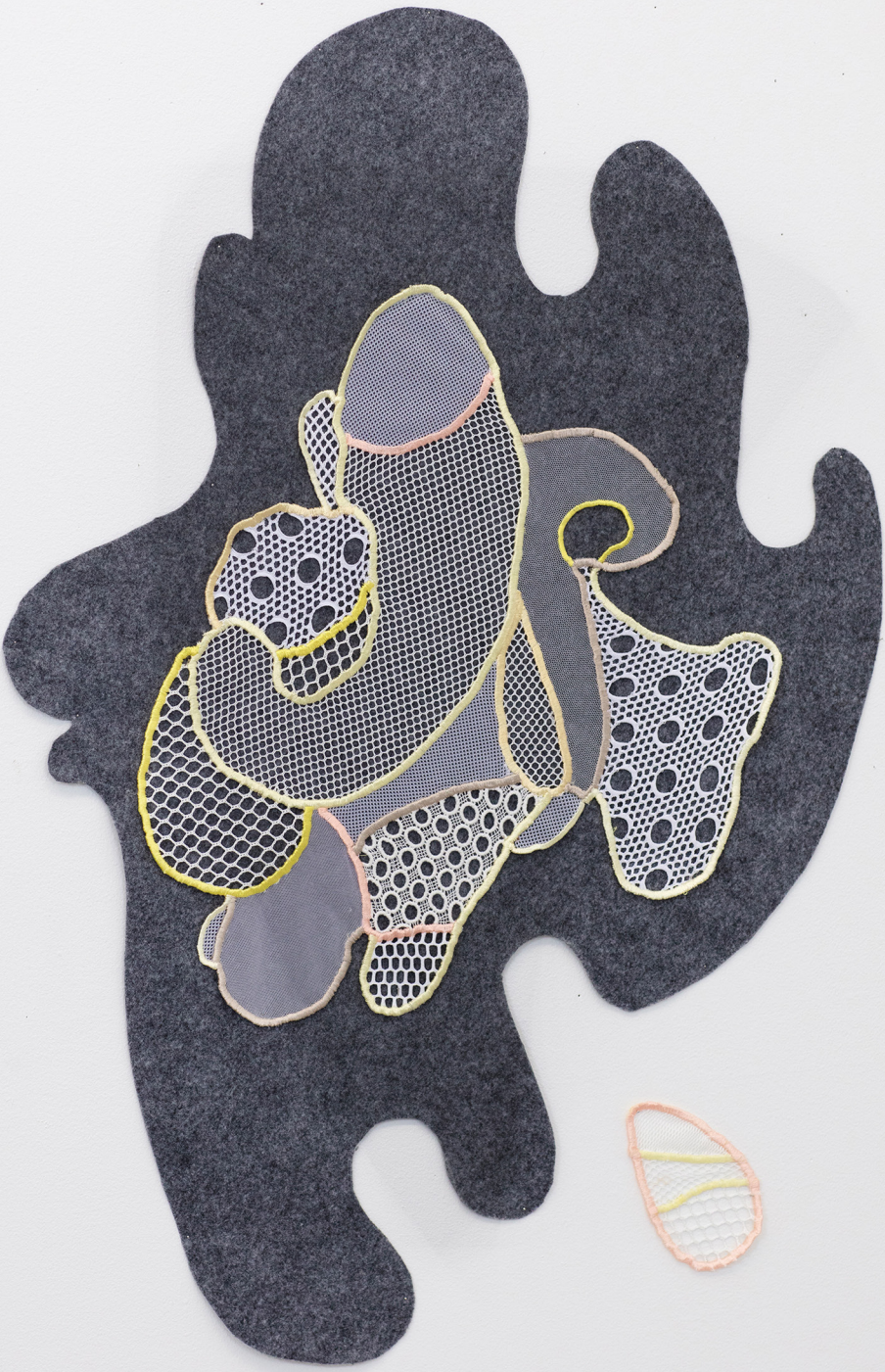
Let's take a break from the holes and focus on what is present. Let's go even further and put the structure of mesh in conversation with art history and the modernist grid.

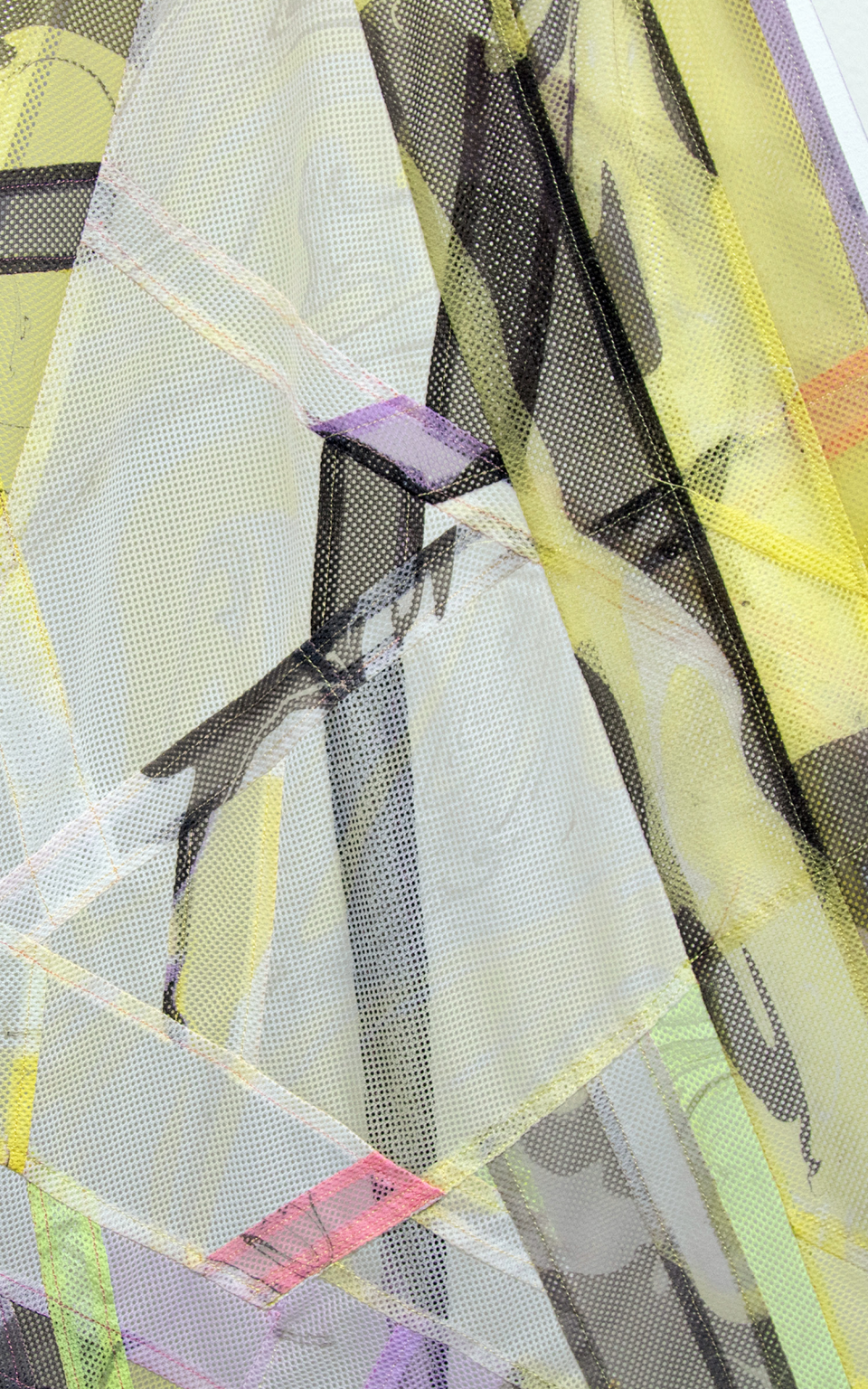
A kind of icon of modernism, the grid is also a mesh. Rosalind Krauss's seminal text "Grids" focuses on these "geometricized," "antinatural," and "antireal" structures and how they can be read through a mesh lens.[3] "The peculiar power of the grid," she writes, "arises from its potential to preside over this shame: to mask and to reveal it at one and the same time." Mesh has this same power, but enhanced by the fact that it is a physical object and not purely mental construction.

Mesh is a better grid. While it loses the infinite potential of the grid because of the limits of its material, it fulfills the grid's true non-hierarchical promise by materializing the codependent relationship between material and holes. One needs the other to exist. Mesh can also stretch and take any shape it wraps. It doesn't have to be "flattened" or "geometricized." It can be as organic and voluminous as it wishes. It doesn't need to be straight, and actually often follows diagonal and deviant lines.

Mesh is a grid that acknowledges the textile nature of paintings, a field that is often too occupied with representing grids to realize that under the coats of Gesso lies a gridded canvas.

Théo Bignon, *Cruise*, detail, 2019. Various mesh fabric, thread, felt, variable dimensions. Photo credit: Brittany Laurent.





mesh is antique, mesh is cutting-edge

Mesh and humankind go hand in hand. Mesh is a primal structure that will be around until we are gone. There is no birthplace of mesh; it was simultaneously invented in various parts of the world as a mechanism of survival. Nets were the first mesh structures, invented to provide shelter and facilitate hunting. They were originally made out of whatever knotted natural fibers were available; they were then turned into carriers and tent-like structures by layering other material on top.

Since those early manifestations, mesh was constantly reinvented, perfected, transformed. The functional net eventually gave to filet crochet, which opened the way to lace. Mesh went from necessity to coveted luxury, from hand crocheted cricket wear to digitally engineered and thermo-sealed athletic wear. Increasingly, mesh is ever-present. Today, this ancestral structure serves as the basis for the most advanced digital modelling and computer renderings.

The first nets were made of perishable materials and they have all disappeared; only a few entanglements remain. It is a lost and fragmented origin story that reminds me of queer identities: we have always existed, and so much of our history is inaccessible or unknown. We are often left only with scraps of narratives.

Théo Bignon, *X (The Hole)*, detail, 2019.
Hand-marbled polyester mesh, thread, wood, paint, found handle, 31" x 80" x 11" (leaning).

mesh is trash, mesh is a $3,400 Dior tote bag

Mesh has been in and out of style repeatedly since the 1960s in the United States and Western Europe. However, now it seems it's here to stay in our athleisure-filled pandemic days.

Tacky, gauche or even sometimes considered a serious *faux pas*, mass-produced mesh has had a bit of a bad rep from tastemakers over the decades. It's either too femme or too butch: what decent person would wear fishnet in public?

It is specifically for its relationship to indecency that mesh became a cherished textile for misfits, activists and counter-cultural groups in the second half of the 20th century. Radical Dykes, SF Clones, and punks found in this porous material an object of radical visibility with a refusal of normativity and of the erasure of sexuality. Mesh was a semiotic marker for the deviant, purposely injecting eroticism into wardrobes, one hole at a time.

Now mesh is mainstream again. Mesh is for health freaks and the ones that love their gear. It satisfies the desire for slick contemporary design while being warm and cozy. It's an inexpensive utility fabric that has the power to become a luxurious overpriced bag.[4]

Look around, you will see it everywhere.

Théo Bignon, *Us*, detail, 2018-ongoing. Hand-embroidered glass beads, pearls, ribbons, leather, rubber, mesh fabric, trims on suede, ejaculate, jockstraps, 23"x18." Photo credit: Carlos Ribeiro.

mesh is gay, mesh is queer

Two major mesh moments happened in 1993, the year I was born.

The first occurred when the toy company Mattel decided to rebrand and update their tired old Ken Doll. The results: blond highlights, a cock ring necklace and, last but not least, a lavender mesh shirt with a matching pleather vest. There are no better words than the ones of fashion columnist Dan Savage to describe this cultural glitch: "The makers saw Prince and Madonna's dancers wearing it in her concerts and films and, as it happens, what ACT UP and Queer Nation fags and dykes were wearing to demos and raves."[5] This accidental best-seller proved that, when filtered through the mainstream, the gayness of mesh is misunderstood and becomes comical. When the makers of *Earring Magic Ken* realized what they had done, they removed it from the market. It was just too gay for Mattel.

The second major moment was the publication of the seminal text *Tendencies* by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, in which she defines queerness as an "open mesh of possibilities, gaps, overlaps, dissonances and resonances, lapses and excesses of meaning when the constituent elements of anyone's gender, of anyone's sexuality are not made (or can't be made) to signify monolithically."[6] It is no accident that one of the pillars of early queer theories was to use mesh to understand queerness. After all its structure was seen as "unnatural" by modernist discourse but it has also

Théo Bignon, *Rush (Never Fake It)*, detail, 2019. Hand-sewnupholstery trims on mesh, wood, paint, 25" x 17." Photo credit: J. Houston.

been around since the beginning of human culture. Mesh represents the impossibility of ever truly defining gender.

Mesh is ever-present in my work. I embroider on mesh, I hand-marble mesh; I cut it, restitch it, shape it… I engage in never-ending play with this material.

From the *Oxford English Dictionary* to Sedgwick, these six propositions are ones that I carry with me constantly in the studio; I dwell on them and make them connect in one way or another. Each of these speculations are embedded in my work. In a way similar to the bi-faceted power of mesh —to cover and to reveal—my work is about camouflage: sex club narratives in colorful marbled mesh or shiny beads that encode what is seen as "deviant" into a decorative pattern. I enjoy having different audiences understand the works differently. A pearl necklace might be a sexual reference, a kitsch or campy element, or simply a decorative trim. I encourage viewers to decode the work for themselves.

While mesh can be an obvious metaphor for a politics of visibility, its inherent queerness goes deeper than the simple binary of exposure and concealment. Mesh is a perfect record of time. It holds and presents stains, wears, and repairs that act as evidence of human experiences. During the COVID-19 pandemic, I have taken on a project that involves diaristic embroidery, on a piece of cotton mesh left in the uneven shape I have found it. I stitch a bead onto it at least every day. It is a pandemic journal, centered on

Théo Bignon, *Pandemic Journal*, detail, 2020-ongoing. Hand-embroidered glass beads on found mesh, 30" x 14."

the repetitive domestic experience we are currently sharing, looking at the erotic and poetic potential of this daily textile act.

Notes

1 "Mesh." Oxford English Disctionary.
2 Clio Padovani & Paul Whittaker, "Twists, Knots and Holes: Collecting, The Gaze and Knitting The Impossible", in Jessica Hemmings, ed. *In The Loop, Rethink Knitting* (London: Blakc Dog Publishing, 2010), 3.
3 Rosalind Krauss, "Grids." *October*, vol. 9 (1979), 51–64.
4 For example, see the Dior Book Tote (Black Mesh Embroidery). https://www.dior.com/en_ca/products/couture-M1286ZWRA_M911-dior-book-tote-black-mesh-embroidery
5 Dan Savage, "Dan Ken Comes Out: Barbie's boyfriend sports a cock ring," *The Chicago Reader*, July 22, 1993. https://www.chicagoreader.com/chicago/ken-comes-out/Content?oid=882402
6 Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, *Tendencies* (Durham: Duke University Press, 1993), 8.

10 I am Cindy Baker

Kristin Rodier

This is the story of how I became Cindy Baker for an afternoon. This is also the story of how our universes ran in parallel for years and only recently converged. But in this meeting something else occurred. Perhaps I have always been Cindy Baker. We are interchangeable yet distinct, bound by an empathetic subjectivity that pools beyond our physical distinction.

Twinning

A number of years ago, I went on an all-inclusive with a fat friend of mine, Sarah (everyone in these stories is fat unless you hear otherwise). We were both white brunettes separated by a 10-year age gap. Each of us at different crossroads in life (me, entering graduate school, she, newly divorced), we decided to do what many middle-class whites from Canada do: we ventured out to an all-inclusive, to lounge at a pool in Mexico. There was something about going with another fatty to a place where no one would know me that made it safe enough for me to agree. Safety in numbers and all that. Otherwise, I had not been swimming much.

Swimming is on a list of things that can be terrifying as a fat person. People stare, mock, point, and say things very loudly that they want you to hear. There are whale comments, water displacement comments, bodily recoiling,

and simply pointing and laughing. The most frequent are boys aged 9-15 and older white women. Once when I was swimming laps another person at the pool asked me if it was "working"? "Am I losing weight?" is always the tired question and conversation when I exercise in public. I told Cindy how I hate being seen getting in and out of the pool, how I try to avoid people and hide my legs with a towel until the moment I drop into the water, which everyone is of course watching "to see how it will go." Cindy told me they are watching because I cower. She told me to not even bring a towel and hold my head up and just stare right into their faces as I get in the pool. No fucking way, I thought. How could I stare back? In what world would I be able to stare right back into these dehumanizing glares?

When Sarah and I left for the trip, we arrived at the airport early and stopped to get snacks together. The cashier took Sarah's money and gave me the change even though I was behind her in line with my own things to buy. The first time, we laughed about how as fat white brunettes we are interchangeable. We wrote "Fatty and Felma" on our hands and took a picture to commemorate the moment (not on a smart phone!). In Mexico, when we were checking into the hotel under Sarah's name and payment, the concierge gave me the receipt and the keys. Generously, Sarah concluded: "They think we are a couple." We both laughed. "Well, at least we have a suite with a King bed!" Excited by our presumed (yet inaccurate) queerness, we suited up and headed to the pool, the restaurant, the bar, repeat. Throughout the week, the same thing happened again and again. Servers would give me the food or drinks that Sarah had ordered and vice versa. It became quite obvious that we were not just being mistaken for each other accidentally,

Kristin Rodier, *Fatty and Felma*, 2007.
Color photograph.

but that after a week of eating and drinking at the same bar and restaurant, no one had cared to notice that we were discrete entities.

I had been twinning with other fatties for years. I knew there were spaces and places I would only go if I had another fatty to watch my back. For most of that history, I would have never dared to use "fatty." My best friend from high school, Erica, has always been someone to twin with. Eating while fat in public (never an iced cap!), exercising while fat in public (limit the jiggling!), shopping while fat in public (what are you buying??). I have one friend who calls it being partners in fat crime, or #fattiesinthewild. I am always trying and failing to combat the hypervisibility of my fatness. If there are two of us, at least it won't just be me. We can get through it together. If we have to pick up ice cream and cry afterwards, we will.

The Zellers Incident

In the early 2000s, Erica and I were shopping at Zellers in the "above average" section for some Delta Burke clothes that wouldn't fit well but I would have to buy anyway. My friend's body was hidden behind a clothing rack, but mine wasn't. An older white man who, judging by his outfit and hygiene seemed to be a farmer or a mechanic, walked behind me and made a motion to my friend. I'm sure you have seen this before. He puffed out his cheeks, put his arms way out on his sides and toddled like Humpty Dumpty behind my back. I was oblivious. The performance was for Erica; I was going through racks of shitty clothes that would be destroyed in three washes. Suddenly, she exploded "You piece of shit! Who do you think you are? You are a fucking asshole! Fuck off!" Shocked, I ducked! I had never seen that

from her and I had no idea what had happened. I asked her, what she would have done if he had acted like this towards her? "Nothing, of course!" she said. Her fierce protectiveness was for me.

At around the same time as the Zellers incident, a few kilometers down the road in the same city, Cindy Baker was walking a large plexiglass box across Saskatoon's 25th Street bridge. The box was heavy and on wheels and she was inside of it, pushing it around the city as part of a performance designed in part to physicalize the feeling of being on display, of being there to be looked at by anyone for any length of time. If I had seen the performance, I know I would have thought it was too much. It captures a painful personal experience that persists to this day, but I would have rejected it at the time. It would have been too close to my skin. I wanted to be invisible, not to fight the hypervisibility.

The amount of visual attention that I draw shapes my everyday experience. I have very fat arms and legs. Certainly not a plus-sized insta fashion model body. Fat clothes aren't made for where I go in and out. They have never worked. My body has even defied my own above average sewing abilities. Nothing can be tailored, nothing can be made from a pattern. The shapes and folds know no deliberate design. It is all consolation, settling, and hiding. Sarah coined the term "obesity smock" for when you just need something that covers.

Fat twinning has always meant that clothes are shared and exchanged with no monetary return. All of the money is wasted, so you may as well take it. Every time someone goes a size up or down, we are able to go through each other's closets and take what fits or looks OK. I hold onto things because I know this friend or that friend might have

the right butt, stomach, or chest for a piece of clothing. I trust them to know my body and we work together to find solutions. We dress each other. I don't show arms, this person wears their tops long, this one needs more room here or there. After something has circulated among us all, it is still held onto in case of a size change. Scarcity mindset and stigma negotiation. My storage space abounds.

But, what if someone actually made clothes designed for my body? What if there was an offer of this kind of space, time, and attention? Who could or would be trusted to do this? What would look good? Would they resort to the classic Pennington's model of putting landscape scenery across a sweater, or more glitter and flowers than anyone would want? Or, is there a way to highlight and enjoy bodies like mine? Could I be a mannequin that someone designed for? These questions were only hypotheticals that bounced around my own mind after one disappointing shopping trip after another. I would find out a decade later that Cindy had explored these questions too: another moment of parallel living. My intimate screams played out in an object-making performance where Cindy placed herself in the position of model and mannequin.

I Met Cindy Baker

The first time I met Cindy Baker was at a Fat Studies conference in Washington D.C. in 2012. I had just given a talk on fat futures and how dominant ideologies want

Cindy Baker, *Plexiglass Box*, 2003.
Performance in conjunction with the exhibition *Cartographies*, Dunlop Art Gallery, Regina, SK.

fat people to not exist (eugenics) or to die (because we are killing ourselves anyway). After my talk, a woman came up to me with big glasses and a soft voice. I felt like a fish out of water at a radical conference in another country. Imposter syndrome was bubbling.

"I'm Cindy, where are you from?"

I waved my hand. "Oh, I'm Canadian." I was used to saying this to Americans, since explaining where Edmonton is usually didn't hold much interest. "You wouldn't know."

"I bet I would," Cindy smiled.

I realized that she had just listened to my presentation, hearing me talk for an hour and would have detected my Canadian accent. I felt a little heat on my cheeks. "Oh, well, I live in Edmonton now, but I'm from Saskatoon."

"I live in Lethbridge but I lived in Saskatoon for quite a while … I noticed you right away because we have the same fat on our arms."

After ten minutes of talking, Cindy and I sussed out mutual friends (as you do on the prairies). We were both active in LGBTQ groups at the same time in Saskatoon. We had most likely been to the same events, or crossed paths somewhere or somehow.

I knew that Cindy's work explored the question of the artist's body. As a fat person, her body is read into her work no matter what she does. Her response is to play with her body and its social presence, to draw attention to it, to push back, etc. I experienced similar issues being an academic for ten years before I "gave in" and started

Cindy Baker, *Fashion Plate 2017*.
Virginia Commonwealth University, Richmond, VA.


Blues Bash

writing about my body, and not just the body. Writing in feminist philosophy about oppression and embodiment was no longer working anyway. I needed to start talking about fat because feminist critiques of beautification and objectification did not work for a body that was perceived as a disgusting gender monster. Outside of womanness, outside of heteronormativity, outside of humanity—this is where I needed feminism to stretch. This is what drew me to Cindy's *Personal Appearance* project, where she made a full mascot costume of herself. The project at first hit me with memories of being treated as the non-threatening "fat friend" or the "desexualized confidant," something I link to moments when I have been treated as a fat sidekick to witness their experiences (main character in the movie), but with none of my own (just there for exposition/comedy). But, when I dug deeper into the mascot costume, I tapped into some anger. Cindy was playing with the question of whether it really was Cindy Baker inside the costume, and whether people would be so friendly to her outside of it. I felt like the reactions to her were another confirmation of the dehumanization I feel daily. Not only could people stare as much as they want, they poked, prodded, and grabbed the "lifeless" fat foam, especially focusing on boobs and butt. Fat sexuality, again, is a joke. And anyway, people treat us like we are just wearing fat suits and killing the "real" thin person inside. Cindy's art pushes me to confront what I already know. Her kindness shines through the

Cindy Baker, *Personal Appearance*, 2008.
Performance presented by Open Space, Victoria, BC.

vulnerability of putting herself out on display. She has the patience and creativity to explore. I'm just angry.

Over the next few years, I wrote about Cindy's work in my scholarship, I invited her to speak to my Gender Studies classes, and we struck up a friendship. I must have said to her "I'm not cool enough to understand art" a hundred times. Gallery spaces and the people in them feel hostile to my body. I feel like I'm presumed to not even understand anything anyway. People are always shocked when I tell them I have a Ph.D. If you think I got it to say "fuck you" to my stigmatizers, you are correct. I just hate art galleries. There's nowhere to sit to take breaks. I'm always thirsty (can I bring a drink in? I'm never sure). But I love Cindy, and I would never miss one of her shows. Hers are the only performance art shows and gallery openings that I've ever been to. They are the only ones I would go to. We started to spend a lot of time talking and being fat in public together. Our worlds ran closer together.

Togethering in Reception

I knew I was starting to double with Cindy when we had a period of a few years where we would meet up every other week for supper. Cindy always arrived first. Just like what happens with many doubled friends, no matter how busy the restaurant, the host never asked me who I was meeting, they just pointed fatty to fatty. We talked fat activism. We talked discount groceries. We even bought garbage bags of clothes from a dead fat woman (with expensive taste!) and went through her clothes together. I still wear her bathing suit. So many genie pants! We carved out rad fatty spaces in Edmonton together.

I received an email from Cindy one bright day in August of 2018. She asked if I would be willing to give an artist's lecture for her.

"Oh, you can't make it?" I asked.

"No, not exactly," Cindy said. Long pause.

I said, "So you want me to perform Cindy Baker? I'm not putting on a fucking mascot suit" I said.

"It wouldn't be 'performing.' You would be doing a task I set for myself. You would be me, doing the task I've set for you."

What I did understand was that I was being asked to read Cindy's words and show pictures of her performances, acting as a stand-in for her as "absent." OK, that I could do. I got my first performance butterflies in a while. Public speaking is no issue for me. I lecture for hours a week, but its was a new kind of anticipation to an academic talk as someone else when the audience was expecting the real Cindy Baker.

The symposium was for an academic Theatre Studies symposium on performance (which Cindy patiently explained to me is not the same as performance art). The theme was about "Rewriting Distance" and the afternoon where I would be performing was "Togethering in Reception." Cindy gave me a paper to read about the ways that an artist's body can be absent from their work and ways that one could actively remove their body. It engaged the tabooness of her body and the ways in which is it nearly impossible to represent oneself with agency when one's body is so taboo.

I showed up about fifteen minutes early with a flowing dress on, big glasses, and bright lipstick. I was rolling my briefcase through the parking lot quite far from the

performance space and noticed about ten different people just standing, well-spaced out around the building, facing different directions. About every five seconds, they would all simultaneously change the direction they were facing. "I've found the participants," I thought. I was nervous. I had a pit in my stomach the whole walk over. Naively, I was sure someone would call me out for not being Cindy Baker immediately! We look nothing alike other than we are both fat white brunettes.

It was mid-afternoon on a large prairie campus. There were many people walking along, doing their own thing hustling between buildings. At least two symposiasts waved to me with recognition and indicated to me which door to enter and how to find the performance space. I guess this won't be too difficult.

I entered the performance space and found the organizer. I introduced myself, "I'm Cindy Baker." Her face fell and flashed angry. She sighed and said "alright" in a resigned tone. She was the first person, and from what I could tell, the only person, to know. She knew what was up and she was not happy.

I was Cindy Baker

I definitely had a self-conscious smile on. I was trying to play a bit with the fact that at least some of the participants must be in on what's happening. I went into the performance space and set up my laptop. Participants were sending huge

Kristin Rodier, *Car selfie as Cindy Baker, before the symposium*, 2018. Color photograph.

smiles of recognition; they were anticipating a lecture from a well-known artist—a huge "get" for the symposium. I felt a little famous, actually. I started my slide show and settled in to reading my paper. The room was dimly lit and participants were laying on cushions, some people were stretching, and I was off to the side with my slides to my right and the participants all around me like a kindergarten class.

The beginning of the paper covers core concepts and dilemmas in performance art scholarship. It starts with Cindy's preferred definition of performance art: "a body at risk in space over time." But, Cindy wasn't in this space! I was certainly at risk of falling apart at any moment. At any moment someone could put up their hand and say, "You aren't Cindy Baker!" For that to happen, all they would need is to be able to tell us apart. And as I went through the slides, it would become clearer and clearer—sorry, it should have become clearer—that the artist in the photos was not me. Despite the dim lighting, it should have been clear that I was not Cindy Baker.

The paper covered the theoretical underpinnings of Cindy's work and was written in an accessible tone using the first personal to connect directly to her projects. Reading the paper, I started to really emphasize the words "I" and "my work." I editorialized as I thought an artist would. I would read something like, "The potential for opening dialogue, for creating moments of empathy, is what make these methodologies particularly relevant" and follow it with my own extempore addition: "This is one of the things I was exploring in *Fashion Plate*. I think the participants were empathetic with my body because they were invested in trying to fulfill their own fashion intentions. I became a unique person to them because they had to dialogue

with me about my body in order to fulfill their project." I hoped Cindy would agree! I decided to dive into the convincingness of our doubling.

I started editorializing even more. I cracked jokes about things that happened at performances (anecdotes that Cindy had told me over the years, things I had witnessed, conversations I had overheard, people telling her "you're so brave" and the like). I talked about performances I had been to. I talked about performances I had written about in depth and had used to teach my students. For all I know, anytime I was at one of Cindy Baker's art openings, I could have been mistaken for her anyway!

The longer the talk went on, the more the audience snoozed, and the more they snoozed, the angrier I got. I started to emit a hostile amount of eye contact, pausing for far too long at the most pertinent parts of the paper. My initial impulse to make the performance convincing and light started to become a fierce need to convey the complexity of Cindy's work and wake up the audience that they were experiencing her performance right now. If only they could notice we were playing with the absent artist. But, since it was clear to me that no one was noticing, something started to change. I took drastic action:

"I'm presenting reasons why artists might want to remove themselves from the work, ..." beat … beat … scanning the room for eye contact. Nothing.

"… why artists might want to resist visibility within a dominant culture that oppresses them to avoid re-traumatization." Flash another picture of Cindy's face close up and scan the room.

Looking at the room, then at her picture, I started to think more about Cindy. Her life's work was in this slideshow, her most deeply thought commitments in this

paper. I was flooded with the sense of trust she placed in me to do this. I was not merely "stunt doubling" for Cindy Baker, which I had told friends in anticipation. I wasn't performing Cindy Baker. I was Cindy Baker.

I thought about how she approaches her art as an exploration of vulnerability, embodiment, and challenging the tabooness of her body. She approaches these topics with curiosity and fierce intelligence. Cindy's intention is for herself as a fat artist "to find ways to be angry and confrontational without alienating the audience." This intention worked through me without me knowing it would. I thought about Erica's anger on my behalf. I thought about all of the times Sarah and I cackled about being the same person. I thought about how the same system that treats us as interchangeable allows for the most seamless relationships in my life. It has created twins for someone who always longed for a sister. I have my partners in fat crime to move through this world together.

Cindy's paper ends, "the new ways of knowing that we seek for ourselves, we need to want to make accessible to others too, and to understand that they will bring new ways of knowing to us." To know and be these women I am interchanged with makes this world liveable. Having their bodies reach mine—reach out beyond distinction cultivates the kind of protective anger, unbridled laughter, and profound empathy that a highly stigmatized person can rarely muster individually. I have been made through Erica and Sarah, and I am Cindy Baker.

Kristin Rodier, *Cindy and I*, April 2, 2021.
Color photograph.

11 A Gut Feeling
Towards a Fat Phenomenology

Christine Negus

A man stands on a surfboard, riding a small wave. He is alone. He is white, fat, middle-aged, and bald and is wearing dark bathing suit briefs. He looks in the direction he is travelling: forwards. He is on a trajectory, moving away from something and towards something else.

The scene made an impression on someone who deemed it noticeable enough to record. This unknown photographer framed the man with sun-lit blue-green water. It is very much in line with the category of vacation documents; the photograph engenders recollection. It captures a fleeting memory—and its pedestrian nature indicates, probably, a seemingly equal fleeting moment of attention.

Beyond its original context, the image continues to engender consideration. Specifically, it has gained traction in the social realm, turning into a series of viral memes that reframe the photograph while continually disparaging the fat body. Yet, I want to consider one iteration in particular, and concentrate on an extraordinary element: the figure's occupation of space. While the memes and I both focus on the fat body, we do so with opposite intentions. For me, this body brings hope. It clears the way for the possibility of joy.

Rather than fixating on this man's *shape* in space, as many have, I affix my gaze on his posture, his *positioning* in space. This focus draws on Sara Ahmed's notion of "queer

phenomenology," where Ahmed proposes that the places we inhabit and the ways we arrive at them are the result of normalized, "invisible" directives that enforce Western society's reproduction of white, hetero spaces, bodies, and lives.[1] Beginning with the example of the table and the lines (real and projected) extending outward from it, she proposes that being "out of line"—being outside of and, therefore, in opposition to those socially enforced white, hetero lives—means existing in a queer manner.[2] Ahmed's queerness doesn't explicitly refer to sexual orientation; instead, it elaborates Maurice Merleau-Ponty's description, in *Phenomenology of Perception*, of moments of disorientation: when things appear "slant-wise," or off of a normative angle.[3] In Ahmed's work, queerness denotes "off line"-ness.[4]

Within these positional terms, the fat body too is queer. It is always out of line: it supersedes the boundaries of normative delineation, pushes into space, and requires, overall, more room than smaller bodies are afforded. Though Ahmed identifies unique footings for the navigation of spaces from the perspective of *other*-ed (particularly queer and racialized) bodies, I'd like to make a new application of this theory to discuss the particularities—overlooked in Ahmed's writing—that the fat body faces. Grounded in Ahmed's framework of queer phenomenology, I aim to identify the unique conditions that define and direct the arrival of fat bodies into social spaces. I call this phenomenon a Fat Arrival, a public entrance that willfully deviates from a "normal" (or normalized) arrival and thus engenders a spatial reorientation that might be thought of as the groundwork for a Fat Phenomenology. Intrinsic to this study will be an investigation of social oppositions to

the movement and inclusion of fat bodies. Ultimately, I'd like to consider ways of "spreading out," or moving towards a radical reorientation and reoccupation of space for the fat body.

Directions

Let's return to the photograph of the surfer. Unlike most documentation of surfers, crouched with knees bent and arms readied for action, the man in the photo stands upright, in an almost perfect vertical orientation. For Ahmed, this vertical axis is particularly important, representing a social collective measuring tool that keeps bodies in line:

> The body that is 'in line' is one that can extend into space, at the same time that such spaces are effects of retracing those lines…. If lines are traces of other lines, then this [vertical] alignment depends on straightening devices that keep things in line, in part by 'holding' things in place.[5]

Insofar as straightness is a production of and way to maintain a heterosexual social norm, I am also thinking about straightness in terms of the shape and positioning of the body. A thin body visually manifests and also upholds a vertical line. And so the surfing man in the photo represents what Ahmed would term a perversion: the straight axis, starting at his head, is sustained by his slim arms and legs but is broken by the projection of his stomach, incongruously out of line with everything else.[6] For me, this off line stomach is significant: pointed in the direction he travels, seeming as if to carry him forwards,

this off line stomach is a tool that clears the way for Fat possibilities.

While this photograph has been circulating for some time, it was recently reintroduced into the public realm with the updated text "Heading into 2021 like" re-directing the subject. Implicitly reducing his freedom of movement, this caption anchors the figure to ironic ridicule. The body does double work: the man's unabashed and unselfconscious posturing stands in for a watered-down version of radical body acceptance (the well circulated notion of collective and "acceptable" weight gain during the non-normative living and working conditions of the 2020 global pandemic) while also being put to work as *other* (the projected assumption of the non-normativity of his actual figure). The words "Heading into 2021 like" play on the already-restricted reading of the fat body—as a body facing collective disgust—while attempting to reorient the fear and real possibility of becoming that *other*, the fear of becoming fat.

This double restriction takes form in clear ways: if "being 'in line' allows bodies to extend into spaces that, as it were, have already taken their shape"[7]—meaning "some spaces extend certain bodies and simply do not leave room for others"[8]—then this meme tricks us into thinking it is adopting a non-normative position. It snickers "though doomed, we can still have joy" while ultimately situating the fat body at the center of the joke. This humor is, crucially, an attempt to solicit collective laughter. It is, therefore, what Ahmed calls a "straightening device"[9] while also being divisive: the implied "we" is not really the fat body. The "we" feigns alignment while delineating boundaries of

acceptability and making one thing very clear: the "we" *should never be*—or even *can never be*—fat.

From the fringes, however, a different "we"—one anchored in "me"—claims a possibility for counter-collective revolt. With text wiped clean and trolling aside, I believe in the potential of the photograph. Earnestly. It demonstrates, in the loosening of the figure's posture, an ease that is normally prohibited. The man does not tighten his muscles to bring his stomach back in line with the rest of his body. He does not consciously tip his pelvis back for stomach de-emphasis. He is carefree. His movement is unregulated by self-consciousness. His stomach, in fact, leads the way. I too arrive at this point—similar to the man in this photograph—gut first.

Gutsy Arrivals

To arrive "gut first" means to arrive incorrectly—to arrive too early, too far in advance of the head, without the work of thought, without deliberation or volition. Normative arrival is purposeful, led by action and reason, so one usually comes to be in a space through the work of their head and arms and legs that break any barriers of access and allow one to freely move towards situating oneself in that space. This possibility of normative arrival is habitual and is carried out in a similar manner to those who have already arrived.[10] But if you have a gut, such an entry is almost always out of reach because the entry into a space is encountered by the stomach as a first point of contact. A gut-oriented arrival is the kind that is relegated to a fat body: the gut is a social marker of the breakdown of normalized cognitive and able-bodied volitions. Such breakdown is perceived as

a demonstrable failure, the body having not self-regulated to stay "in line" with other bodies. The gut, Ahmed would say, just does not fit in.[11] Ahmed argues:

> For bodies to arrive in spaces where they are not already at home, where they are not "in place" involves hard work: indeed it involves painstaking labor for bodies to inhabit spaces that do not extend their shape.[12]

Gut first arrivals are challenging, and therefore, gutsy. I call this kind of disturbance a Fat Arrival. But nevertheless, to arrive fat, in the eyes of the collective is to show up thoughtlessly "out of shape" and "out of place." This is, of course, never explicit. This is a feeling that impresses upon fat bodies.

Going With The Gut

When we have an impression—a feeling—we are told to trust our gut. We are also told that a gut is an untrustworthy thing—especially if it exists in a wayward manner, straying far from the vertical axis of the body. So, then, it is impressed upon us that gut-intuition is only valid when felt by certain, "socially normalized" bodies. Against this, consider the intuition of the fat individual, who senses space in the gut, who intuits the availability of certain spaces to their arrival and orientation, whose gut is the exact reason they know whether they are unwelcome. If, as Ahmed suggests, "'what' we think 'from' is an orientation device,"[13] then the fat individual's gut is the site of orientation and disorientation. Space has the ability to affect our guts: "we are affected by

'what' we come in contact with. ... Emotions are directed to what we come into contact with: they move us 'toward' and 'away' from such objects."[14] Both spaces and guts move people—and this can be felt in the pit of the stomach.

Instinctively, people turn away when they don't see enough room. Space directs bodies,[15] and a Fat Phenomenology locates the directives to this body as centered around exclusion, a pushing away of fat bodies. The fat body is halted in action when trying to situate among these directives because movement "depends on … the ways in which the world is available as a space for action."[16] The question is how one recognizes availability? Such recognition is a process of apprehending space. Spaces are "reachable" when bodies like one's own are on the "horizon."[17] When scanning the horizon, the fat individual rarely sees a self-reflection, and this lack of recognition makes an impression. Seeing others like oneself in a space means seeing oneself in a space, creating an available path to enter and traverse, which is necessary for access. Space is not accessible or familiar to all bodies. This is felt not just *in* the gut but also *on* the gut. Indeed, as Ahmed concludes, "familiarity is shaped by the 'feel' of a space or by how spaces 'impress' upon bodies."[18]

Things That Count

Following Ahmed, I think it is productive to examine the disparity between space and access through the metaphor of the table. While Ahmed's discussion focuses on the writing table in a domestic space, I'd like to situate us at a table in the public realm: let's gather in a shopping mall food court. The food court is a place already fraught with

trauma for the fat body: it is a site of collective public insult and shame, but in spite of this history and association, a fat individual may want or need to rest there. They see other bodies sitting, many bodies collected on the horizon, so they come to know this is a space for such activities: sitting, resting, collecting. They move to a table, commonly a booth or one with chairs affixed to the ground, and try to sit. The table, normally designed for sitting, instead denies access and re-directs the fat body elsewhere. Spatial barriers impress upon fat guts: the fat body does not fit. As a result of tables, these bodies are directed away. This is a common experience, a moment in the collective consciousness of Fat knowledge that demonstrates how "being out of line can be uncomfortable."[19]

Tables (or objects of any sort)—including food court infrastructure—can be straightening devices. In particular, the table is not a *tabula rasa*. It is not just a clear space that in turn clears the way for actions to take place. Tables are surfaces allowing for a variety of activities to unfold, but their function runs much deeper. They are tabular in nature—regulatory objects and gauging devices that keep bodies in check, accepting those that "measure up" and rejecting those that stray. The economies of space play out through the calculations of objects.

Objects are thus a mechanism for keeping bodies "in line," for maintaining social norms. They uphold collective desires and directions. They help point the body towards or away. Ahmed speaks about the power of direction in relation to social maintenance:

> Collectives come to have 'lines' in the sense of being modes of following: to inhabit a collective might be to follow a line…[L]ines

> also mark out boundaries, which clear spaces as well as delimit them by marking their edges. Such lines would establish who is and is not in a given collective: the partial function of lines marks the edges of belonging, even when they allow bodies through.[20]

However, objects are not the only ways to limit the fat body. Think of different tables, those in a crowded restaurant where thin bodies splay into aisles. These narrow walkways play host to people who have leisurely pushed away from tables, but the arrival of a fat body disturbs that relaxation. While smaller bodies slide through with ease, fat bodies are denied the ability to "pass," becoming "hypervisible": "they 'stand out' and 'stand apart'."[21] This is exemplary of a Fat Arrival, where the appearance of the fat body becomes an event that requires novel spatial negotiations.

The Fat Arrival does not align with the crowd: it is unwanted, it asks for collective change, and it is rarely accommodated. To even attempt to take a seat at the table, a fat body has to disrupt the group in a way distinct from the arrival of a "normative" body: "Those who are 'in place,'" Ahmed observes, not only "notice the arrival of those who appear 'out of place'"[22] but also experience "*disorientation*: people blink and look again."[23] The fat body is thus not absorbed into the habitual; it remains unfamiliar. We see this when we consider the 'double take' process of noticing the fat body, it is an arrival of notation, and establishes it as *other*. Yet, despite it being "hypervisible" it is also rarely accepted into the field of vision and this contra-duality is essential to the Fat experience. Similar to how the table redirects fat bodies away, the blink that follows the *other*-ing second look invariably clears it from the horizon. This

shifting recognition from the level of an individual to that of an object, a "thing," that is pushed away from, does the work of erasure. The eye blinks and with the re-view the fat body fades into the background, just far enough out of sight to negate any real apprehension of the subject.

Fat Disruptions

Fat Phenomenology must constantly negotiate these kinds of impossibly restrictive situations, but there are prospective alternatives. Thinking back to the photograph of the man on the surfboard, we can see one way of occupying space that shifts a pejorative disorientation into a counter-reorientation. The photograph not only captures the figure but also the "noticing" of the figure's arrival. Standing in for the collective gaze, the camera is witness to the subject. This gaze is not returned, and despite the singling out of his body, the figure does not bear witness to the collective viewer. He does not notice his own "out of sorts" arrival but fixes his gaze on his own path, forwards. With nothing in his way, he moves blissfully unencumbered, unaware that his existence could be anything of note.

Denying, negating, or simply even ignoring the "noticing" gaze of others may allow fat bodies to move more freely. Another possible reorientation is to embody a Fat Arrival. Ahmed notes that: "bodies stand out when they are out of place."[24] To focus on this "standing out," and the occupation of the unfamiliarity it provokes, can constitute a reorientation, a performative re-action. Artist Cindy Baker's *Personal Appearance* is an example of this kind of performative arrival of the fat body. In this project, Baker wears a mascot costume of herself as she negotiates public

space. The mascot figures a white, fat woman with short brown hair. Her mouth is open, and her red lips stretch out in a smile. She wears glasses and femme clothing. Poking fun at the (mis)alignment of the fat body with the larger-than-life qualities associated with a mascot, Baker's project constitutes a Fat Arrival precisely because it cannot fail to be noticed and therefore cannot be pushed into the background of interaction. She just sticks out.

In contrast to the Ahmedian "double take," *Personal Appearance* recasts "noticing" by adding another spin, effectively constituting a *triple* take. This unfolds temporally and sequentially as onlookers arrive and orient themselves to the situation. First, they see a body. Second, they see the body "sticking out," and notice it as a fat body. The third take occurs when the viewer notices that the body is actually a mascot costume of a fat body. This is a dizzying reorientation that throws the onlooker.[25] It is the third and final take that is the most important in this unsettling process, as it does the work of helping to occupy the Fat Arrival. The oscillating pull-push of uncanniness is a technology of its own. It "others" *other*-ness and denies the inherent impulse response to turn away from the fat body. The mascot costume allows Baker to maintain control and ownership of her Fat Arrival, confusing the normative attraction-repulsion and drawing viewers near.

A Fat Arrival of this sort can initiate a process of transference: Baker's fat mascot body disrupts viewers by enticing them to move between familiar and unfamiliar points of reference. The disruption is not temporal, like the act of "noticing," but is a product of entangled signs: the familiarity of a body, the unfamiliarity of the fat body, and the simultaneous familiarity and unfamiliarity of the

mascot. The power of Baker's project lies in its capacity to disorient onlookers, destabilizing the negative connotations associated with the appearance of the fat body, and thus allowing Baker to draw the audience near and invite them into alignment with her "body."

Baker's Fat Arrival thus extends the body outwards into collective space. Her performance centers the fat body and asks others to celebrate its existence. The documentation of *Personal Appearance* attests to the abundance of this celebration: people orient themselves around Baker; they gravitate towards her and cling to her "body." She is welcomed into space, and space opens up around her. Fatphobia and the usual impulse to "turn away" are negated. Attraction is centered on her. Those who gather around accept Baker's extended body *as one that is not expected to fit*, or "fit in"—so *Personal Appearance* turns the tables on exclusion, unsettling the mechanized responses of shock and laughter that normally greet and reject fat bodies by bringing shock and laughter into proximity with the body from a different direction.

The crowd's laughter, an excited collective response, seems reciprocated by the mascot's smiling mouth, which suggests that she is participating and encouraging their joy. However, Baker is not necessarily joining in on the communal response—hidden as she is within the mascot suit. Her own laughter—what one might call Fat laughter—cannot be subsumed by the collective. It might in fact serve to pervert it. It works to *perform* collectivity, to undermine exclusion and gain a footing. The subversive laughter of the mascot impresses upon the skin of the social collective and moves bodies in a non-normative way. Bodies make way for Baker, who parts the crowd for future Fat Arrivals.

Unsettling Bodies

In *Queer Phenomenology*, Sara Ahmed identifies the barriers that prevent marginalized identities from extending into space—and she seeks to disrupt these obstacles. I wish to move this phenomenological framework beyond metaphorical and figurative barriers by exploring moments of literal blockage, regulatory objects that deny expansion and re-direct the fat body away from the public realm. I believe this is "in line" with Ahmed's aims, even if the line is a little off-kilter. Indeed, this off-kilter way of proceeding is what situates my investigation. A collective undoing (and undoing of the collective) from the margins is central to my own modes of production as a fat artist practitioner and researcher. Like both the surfer and Baker, my life—and by proxy my work—is one permeated by disruption. From this position, why not begin to disrupt histories and troll philosophical traditions? To reorient theory around a body that has been out of the frame for so long is a radical act. It is an act which brings gut-busting laughter and a joy that bursts at the seams in hopes of weighing heavy on instruments of direction. This pressure seeks to break the lines that make up these glass tables and unseat those who have been comfortable for far too long.

Theorizing Fat Arrivals and Fat Phenomenology is an intersectional exploration: it should acknowledge the complexities faced by people who have identities that exist between leading lines. While Ahmed explores queer and racialized lives and I focus on fat bodies, these conceptions of arrival and phenomenology also can help us understand the ways that spaces are set up to additionally disorient and deny access to disabled bodies. Collectively, from the

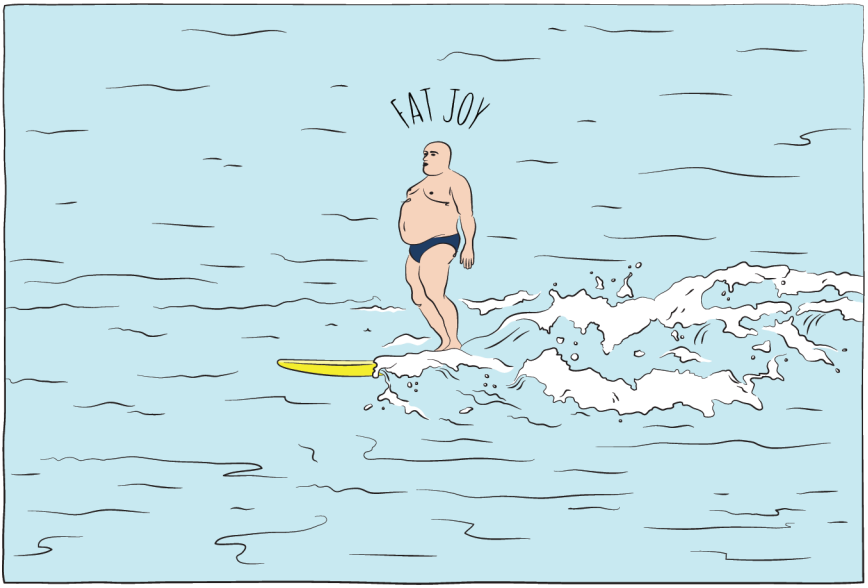
sidelines, bodies can come together in their embrace of not-fitting-in, finding new or better paths forward while also unsettling those norms that take up too much room. We can unsettle the "we."

For the fat body, considering space means confronting places, objects, and directives that were not built for this other "we." These are spaces that do not want *us*. This is an arresting process: it preconceives a constant battle, continued disappointment, and an active process of keeping the fat body out of sight. Yet there are ways to counter. To deny difference and to occupy exclusion are two ways forward. To trace these already established lines means reclaiming those directives, which is, in part, a counter-erasure that works to change and reconfigure the image of the fat body, clearing both a past and a path. These radical modes of existence and the actions that follow are impressive. They subvert tactics of exclusion and disorientation to orientate the fat body towards a future. While it is not straightforward or without effort, this work of resistance creates possibility.

And joy.

Fat resistance creates joy.

Fat joy creates resistance.

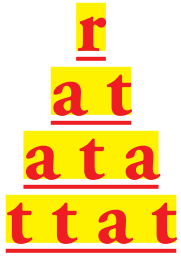


Christine Negus in collaboration with Jessica Negus,
Fat Joy, 2020. Digital drawing.

Notes

1 Sara Ahmed, *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2006), 79-92.
2 Ibid, 65-79.
3 Ibid, 65.
4 Ibid, 107.
5 Ibid, 66.
6 Ibid, 78.
7 Ibid, 15.
8 Ibid, 11.
9 Ibid, 82.
10 Ibid, 7, 12-15, 37-44.
11 Ibid, 12.
12 Ibid, 62.
13 Ibid, 4.
14 Ibid, 2.
15 Ibid, 5-15, 27-28, 51.
16 Ibid, 109.
17 Ibid, 2, 55-58.
18 Ibid, 7.
19 Ibid, 82.
20 Ibid, 119.
21 Ibid, 135.
22 Ibid, 9.
23 Ibid, 135.
24 Ibid, 135.
25 Ibid, 40.

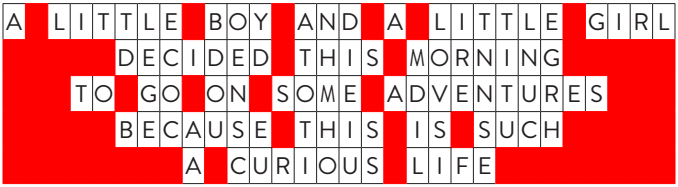
Richard Boulet



and Just
Over
the Horizon
pleNty of flowers
Can grow and grow
fAr away
from the use of lanGuage
that wE the civilized
use toJ ustify
Ongoing punches
below tHe belt
N
CAGE

It is part of our human experience to be

Let us not forget that.



My teenage angst was relieved, in part, by listening to David Bowie which resulted, in part, from listening to Brian Eno, which resulted in my discovery of Eno's "Obscure Records" on various musicians, which contained a short vocal piece by John Cage that used a poem by EE Cummings referred to as "Forever and sunsmell." The result was a substantial realignment for me of what music could be about. I will also mention Edgard Varese which … oh there were plenty of tangents in all dimensions musical and otherwise that led to so much growth. I need to mention Gertrude Stein for writing. My adult exposure to creativity started with music then architecture then art then literature. I saw philosophical patterns connecting one field of study with another. It was the start of much coalescence.

my very own little rhizome has evolved to include some points of connection with----------
----------C I N D Y B A K E R

ROLLROLLROLL

"I have nothing to say and I am saying it and that is poetry as I need it." — John Cage

John Cage
Erik Satie
Arnold Schoenberg
Dmitri Shostakovich
Country and Western

Vulnerability

and

Empathy

are linked

serve as catalysts for

not so much

inent

talk of Cin

practice and I get to link art practice n

liti dy's

Much of what you need to know about us:

Cindy Baker Richard Boulet Alberta and beyond Cindy Baker Richard Boulet Alberta and beyond Cindy Baker Richard Boulet Alberta and beyond Cindy Baker Richard Boulet Alberta and beyond

Frankly, I do not take anything for granted. Most people who have been through the mill do not take things for granted.

Aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa aaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaTHE MILLaaaaaavvvvvvviiiiiiiii

THREE HOTS AND A COT

GRATITUDE

I remember [redacted] the first lunch [redacted]ndy[redacted] I had with Cindy. We really got to know each other. We talked openly about our queer stories. I am gay. Cindy and I also talked about fat politics. I am a plus sized m---a---man s I am quite sympathetic to Cindy's courage to quite literally, put her body on the line. I have yet to make any art that references my physical size. I [redacted] ha[redacted]e [redacted] desire fo We also talked about mental health and some of our struggles in this often neglected and stigmatized topic. .

investigating fat politics that Cindy [redacted] I am sure glad these days. Just because. [redacted]e

I iiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiqqqq I I also have schizophrenia.

disclosure **disclosure and more disclosure is required** [redacted] for psycho-**therapy** to **work** I find Cindy's art [redacted] empowers me. I will disclose that [redacted] . [redacted] to put [redacted] fect [redacted] I [redacted] bee [redacted]

SOON ENOUGH

Tomorrow is an important day for me and Cindy. I have had this thought on my mind most of the evening. The fretting about tomorrow is just starting to fade. I think I can finally fall asleep. Maybe it is more than fretting. Juice juice I drank too much juice this evening. All that extra sugar is making it that much harder to fall asleep. **I also ate too much. I have been known to** binge eat when stressed. needle needle needle and thread thread. There is medication for that. There is medication for that. Cindy and I are going to collaborate in some performance art tomorrow.

ENOUGH

I HAVE HAD MORE THAN ENOUGH.

I am on a new medication as of yesterday. It is meant to curb my appetite and reduce cravings. It will take eight weeks to reach the full therapeutic dose. This is what is really on my mind.

The dream.

It is very early spring. The leaves have yet to grow beyond buds. I start to ride my bicycle down the tree lined streets of my neighborhood. I plan to ride my bicycle every day until winter is here. That is it. That is all I remember.

Richard Boulet. *A euphoria from long ago*, 2018.
Gel pen, felt pen, pencil crayons on paper, 12”x 9”.

It is quite common for people with schizophrenia to put on a good deal of weight as a side effect of some of the required medications. I have been on the same anti-psychotic for over 20 years. This medication is doing wonders for helping me manage the schizophrenia. The trade-off has been a long and slow increase in weight.

MOVE THIS
QQQQQQQQQQQQQQQQQQQQQQQQQQQQ
QQQQQQQQQQQQQQQQQQQQQQQQQQQQQQQQQQ
QQQQQQQQQQQQQQQQQQQQQQQQQQQQQQQ
QQQQQQQQQQQQQQQQQQQQQQQQQQQQQQQQ
QQQQwork work work away.

CA[redacted]GS[redacted]&DOGS. SOME [redacted] CATS AND [redacted] SOME PEOPLE ARE [redacted] Cindy and I get along pretty darn good. Peas in a pod good.

EVEN WITH MARGINAL LIVING

the most important word

is

gratitude

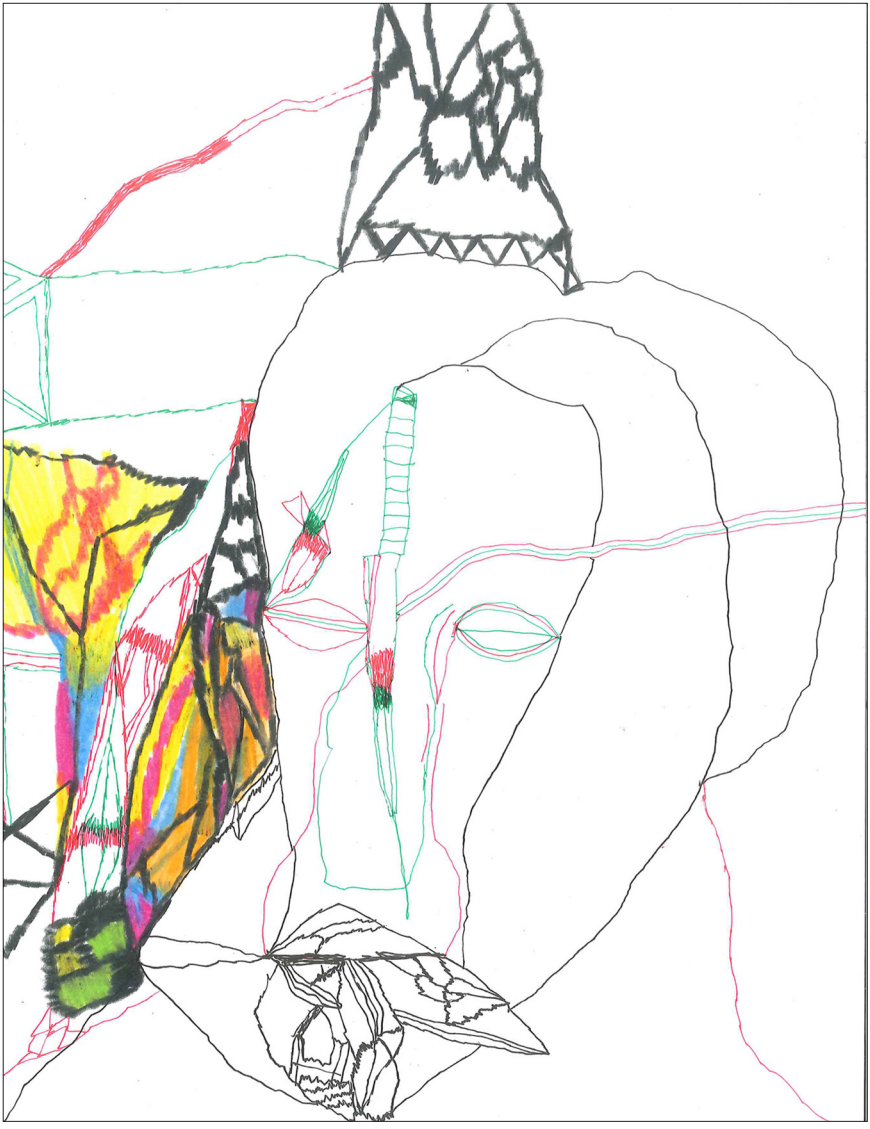
I first came upon mesostic poetry in the John Cage book *Silence*. The lecture was called "Overpopulation and Art."

i suppose Canned fish
I s not that distasteful.
my panNdemic
aDvisesd
fourteen daY supply

of non-perishaBles
is safely stored in my lArder
speaKing for myself
salmon is more palatablE than tuna
i am Really enjoying eating yogurt

I have a fRidge and larder
full of privi I edge
even if I am low inCome
I Have
hAd
plenty of suppoRts over the years
anD

to Boot
my childhOod
was safe and secUre
my parents Loved
Each other and
ensured The family was strong in spirit



A DREAM

We are in a hospital room at night. My friend is ill and in bed. She is slowly rocking back and forth. I am holding a vigil in the room. There are so many medications that she needs to take for so many problems. When one of her medications is adjusted it usually creates problems with other meds. She just had a major med change and the result was a new side effect severe enough for a hospitalization. I have my cross-stitch with me for my vigil. My needle and thread is so much needed at this particular time. Needle work is my meditation. I am so very worried about my friend this time around. This is all I can remember. My dreams usually fade pretty fast.

Awake

1,2,3,4,5,6,7,8,9,10,11,12,13

I have 12 different medications I take daily plus one more to take whenever I am struggling with too much anxiety and paranoia. I have meds for schizophrenia, middle age this and that and meds to keep a cornea transplant in my right eye free from rejection and infection.

Too much to chew
Razor blade colors
A cut lip

Richard Boulet. *I am good in a clutch*, 2018.
Gel pen, felt pen, pencil crayons on paper, 12”x 9”.

My art practice is quite peaceful and quiet as I am cross-stitching text for will c at e so ue is ues. I am also starting a body of work that talks of childhood. I have made art on this topic on the past. 200 from Edmonton IIIIIIIIIIIIIIzed in intermedia.

a person zoPPED pl e v ri my hop e . in my art.

These days I am putting together a number of queer flavored textiles each with a cross-stitch that lays out my use of text. QQQQQQQQQQQQQQQ Cindy has given me courage to solidify my own social politics

. be simple and so grand

wi assss th they belong

als

QQQQQQQQQQQQQQQQQQQQQQQQQ

work to do

[redacted] more and more people [redacted] will hopefully lead to [redacted] cul[redacted]

qqqqqqqqqqqqqqqqqqqqqqqqqqqqqqqqqqqqqqqqqqqqqqq
qqqqqqqqqqqqqqqqqqqqqqqqqqqqqqqqqqqqqqqqqqqqqqq
qqqqqqqqqqqqqqqqqqqqqqqqqQQQQQQQQQQQQQ
QQQQQQQQQQQQQQQQQQQQQQQQQ

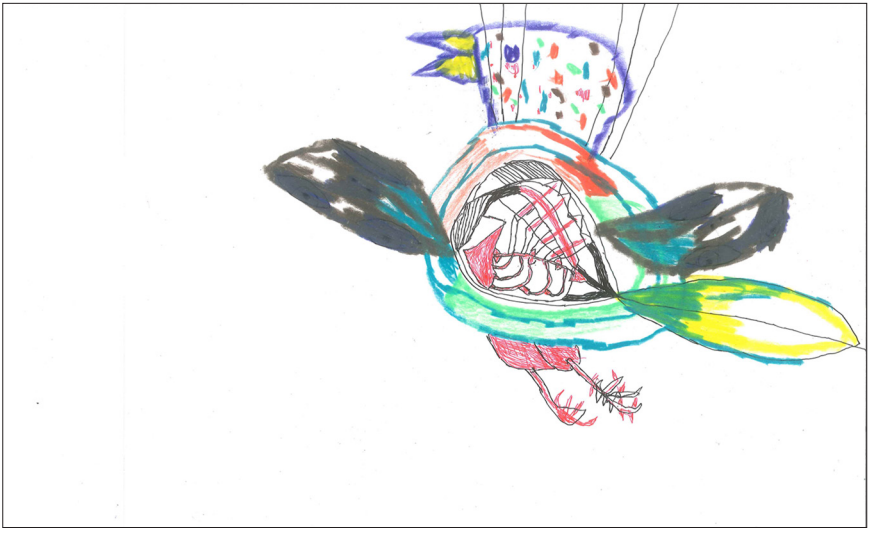
as many ways

[redacted]

I work in a non-profit mental health agency. Aside from my office duties I have joined a peer group in the non-profit that focuses on textiles such as quilting, crochet and garment construction. This group is part of a larger peer support program.

ogra onto [redacted]
wide variety

All the peer groups in the non-profit where I work are for persons with lived experience with mental illness. Most participants have a mental illness. Some of us are family, friends or caretakers that support someone with a mental illness. I have been a member of this group for about a dozen years. The group functions as a drop in and we do not turn people away. We come with all kinds of life experiences and skills. [redacted]



Richard Boulet. *Yet another bird*, 2018.
Gel pen, felt pen, pencil crayons on paper, 12”x 9”.

A bird that works for a living

I am in another dream. I am still in a hospital room marking time for my dear friend. The morning light is beginning to enter the room. I fully open the blinds. This seems to be important; to fully open the blinds. Some gentle light illuminates her face. She is sleeping. She had a tough night of tossing and turning. My friend was calling out to her mother in her fevered dreams. The early morning nurse says her fever is over. Breakfast arrives shortly after but I ask that my friend just sleeps. I wake up. It is midnight. It seems I just dozed off. My needle work has fallen to the floor. My friend is not the only one who is worn out.

The ribs still have flesh
The claws have fresh blood
EVISCERATION

We all struggle as we search for some deeply felt truth or desire. We damage ourselves, accidently and on purpose. Can I feel this? Can I feel that? Most of us, not all of us, crave for the intimacy of a certain other. It seems as I age towards 60 years old I have turned out to be a solo bird. I am fine with that, truly. I have that much more time to devote to my art practice. I have had and continue to have a very rich life. Case in point is my brother David who is a year older than me. Our mother used to say quite often that we were joined at the hip when we were babies. We are still like that. David is the family member that can openly talk to my psychiatrist and psychologist. He is also my guardian and power of attorney. We love each other dearly. I have a very tight family. There is plenty of love between all of us. This is a true blessing.

sac·ro·sanct
/ˈsakrōˌsaNG(k)t/

Learn to pronounce

adjective
adjective: sacrosanct
(especially of a principle, place, or routine) regarded as too important or valuable to be interfered with.

"the individual's right to work has been upheld as sacrosanct"

SOMETIMES IT IS

A DAY LABOR SWAMPER

SOMETIMES IT IS

10 CENTS FOR EACH BRICK YOU CLEAN. 200 BRICKS MEANS A 20 DOLLAR BILL.

DON'T KNOCK IT.

GRATITUDE

[redacted] [redacted] [redacted] WE ARE tailor made for diversity

Handicapped.

mental health

that offer

advocates

Part of

[redacted] is a [redacted] e [redacted] m [redacted] where the common thread is that we are all learning to manage [redacted] addiction histories. [redacted] Every man in this group has their own story that is respected by the group. We are simply men among men.

I have been taught tolerance and humility disclose some more and then even more.

cats and dogs and cats and dogs peas in a pod peas in a pod

xxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxxx

SUBTERRANEAN

I USED TO DREAM OF FEAR

My deepest fear as a young man was trying to come out of the closet. The time I spent living in a heightened state of pre-diagnosed schizophrenia triggered a revisiting of my closeted fears via sacred and secular delusions. I still live with sacred and secular delusions but they are less intense and I have developed some pretty good coping skills. Just writing through my fear based mental states is one coping skill. Making autobiographical art that touches on the Queer is something Cindy and I share and yes, it is a coping skill for me. The meditative qualities found in cross-stitching helps with the anxiety that fear produces.

Some people who have given me courage:

Cindy Baker
Kenneth Patchen
John Cage
The Beats
Gertrude Stein
Frida Kahlo
My Family

I AM FINE

One way I occasionally use to manage my psychosis based gay fears is to make Ex Votos as part of my art practice. Ex Votos are a form of votive petitioning to God for the relief of suffering. My first Ex Voto was made while living marginally before I was diagnosed with schizophrenia. Life is good! Life is grand!

Richard Boulet. *Enough said already*, 2018.
Gel pen, felt pen, pencil crayons on paper, 12”x 9”.

a beautiful piece of yellow that just happened to end up here

be gentle on yourself chin up

do not forget to work for it

a tiny gesture in just one day can count as work

Let us call this sunshine yellow.

uction

bout

vvvvvv

QQQQQQQQQQQQQQQQQQQQQQQQQQQQQQQQ
QQQQQQQQQQQQQQQQQQQQQQQ
QQQQQQQQQQQQQQQQQ
QQQQQQQQQQQQQQQ

my involvement
y live by [redacted]

[redacted]

[redacted] ulte [redacted] having a congruent [redacted] sto [redacted]

about anything
what
[redacted] m a glass [redacted]
[redacted] enjoy [redacted]
[redacted]

LIFT THEN LOAD THEN DRAG THEN DUMP THEN REST
LIFT THEN LOAD THEN DRAG THEN DUMP THEN REST
LIFT THEN LOAD THEN DRAG THEN DUMP THEN REST
LIFT THEN LOAD THEN DRAG THEN DUMP THEN REST
LIFT THEN LOAD THEN DRAG THEN DUMP THEN REST
LIFT THEN LOAD THEN DRAG THEN DUMP THEN REST

HOY **BOY**

Richard Boulet. *A walk in the autumn air*, 2018.
Gel pen, felt pen, pencil crayons on paper, 12”x 9”.

CINDY 1 CINDY 2

My sleep last night was pretty solid. The dreams ended with the friend finally adjusting to her med change. Today is going to be a day of wonder.

So this particular [redacted] is [redacted] self-portrait [redacted] four [redacted], all smiling I [redacted] add. [redacted] is [redacted] communication [redacted] the [redacted] and t [redacted]. Trees that shed their leaves in the autumn are something to behold. The sturdy trunk to the tiniest of the past season's new growth is quite [redacted] the cold black dirt and fresh air in sunshine is a sum [redacted] insects and birds and hollows dug out by animals.

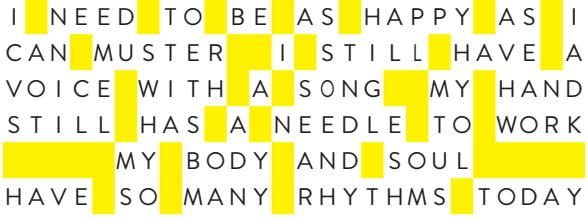
The gorgeous and the hell often intermingle and this state of affairs can be as rapturous as it is disabling.

STEADY AS IT GOES

Why two Cindys? It's probably smoke and mirrors. I cannot see myself; I cannot see an endgame. There really is not supposed to be an endgame anyways. My best guess is to remember an earlier quote from an earlier me and an earlier cross-stitch: "AS A YOUNG MAN HE WAS LEARNING TO FARM THE LAND THAT EXISTED IN THE SPACES BETWEEN LETTERS ON A PAGE. HIS OLDER BROTHER TOLD HIM TO ALSO PAY ATTENTION TO PRIME NUMBERS." *Queer isn't it?*

There is some truth in what you say and therein lies the danger.

EMBOLDEN



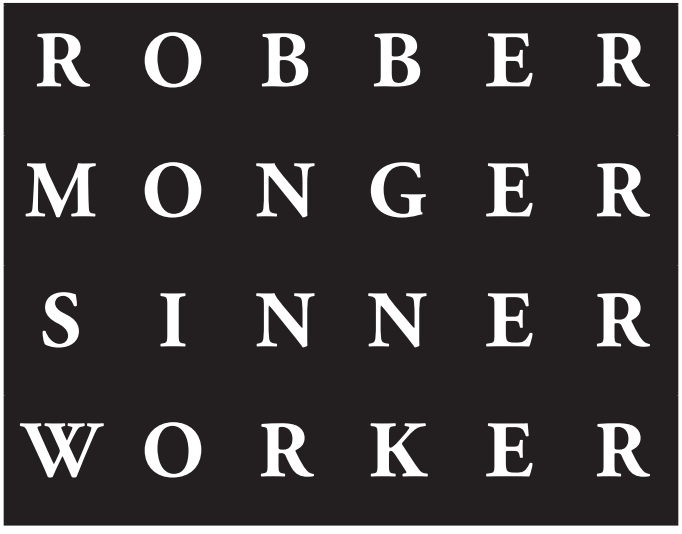
SOME
TIMES
A
RETREAT
TO REST
AND
GATHER
ONE'S
THOUGHTS
IS
THE
BEST
STRATEGY.
TAKE
STOCK.
COUNT
YOUR
BLESSINGS

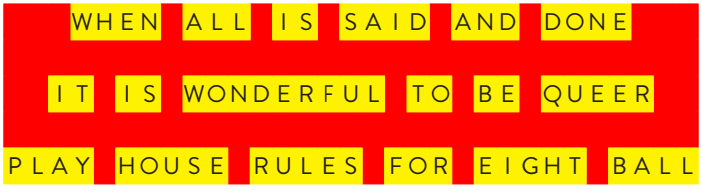
TRANSFORM DEBATE

INVALID DOMAIN

PROTECT CAPACITY

INSISTENT MANOEUVER





HULLABALO

I had a dream about a horse and 4 rocket ships. Where is Cindy in this dream? I do not know anything about dream interpretation and I just may not want to know. I am going to stop instead and change topics. I am particularly fond of the green gel pen work that surrounds the rocket ship in the middle of the drawing.

One of my favorite artists is El Greco. His work is so incredibly ecstatic. One of my favorite sculptures is by Bernini. It is the *Ecstasy of Saint Teresa* (of Avila). I have read some of her work too: her autobiography and a book called *Interior Castle*. I am drawn to ecstatic experiences. Maybe I have had one or two of these experiences myself. Maybe not. It is very hard to tell. I do suspect that the vast majority of people have dwelt upon the possibility of the divine at some point in their lives, whether atheist, agnostic, Buddhist, whatever. We are all marking time together.

Some people embrace the inevitability of death and rejoice the awaited experience. Some bury themselves in the embrace of material culture. Some probably just toss the entire phenomenon of death aside with hardly any thought at all. I am an artist who desires the experience of the ecstatic. Saint Teresa experienced rapture. Those big issues are hard to resist for some of us. But my soul is also comforted by embracing the mundane. And there is not much more to say, without any fuss.

Richard Boulet. *A super fast horse*, 2018.
Gel pen, felt pen, pencil crayons on paper, 12”x 9”.

CQQQQQIQQQNDQQQQYQBAKQ
QQQQQQQQQQERQQQRICQQHQ
AQQQQRDQQQQQQQQQQQQQBO
QQQQQQQLQQQQQEQQQTQQ
QQQ QQ QQ QUEER

The LGBTQ2S etc. movement is now organizing globally.

LADYBUG, KITTEN, MOTH, FOAL, BEE, LAMB, ANT, KIT, BUTTERFLY, PUP, HORNET, CUB, TERMITE, CALF

LEFT FOOT RIGHT FOOT REPEAT

A FRIEND TOLD ME COURAGE TAKES
ILLUSTRATION, REPETITION AND DISCIPLINE.

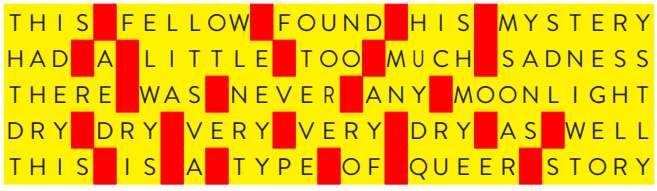
Long Term Effort

YEARS

R
IC
HAR
D'S

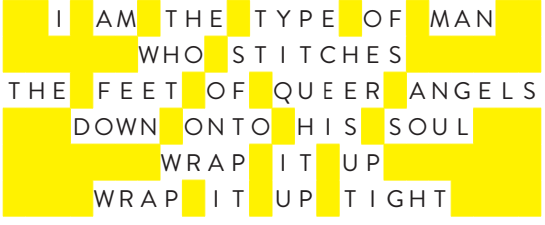
Cross-stitch schematic for adolescent angst:

OONNOONNXX



Another cross-stitch plan just to say everything has turned out fine:

FLAG



FATIGUE? NO!

One final dream with Cindy

I had a very vivid dream that I remember quite well. I was sitting on a wooden chair in a corner of a well-lit room with very tall walls. I was working on a cross-stitch. The chair was not that comfortable. I had to continually shift my weight to find comfort for my sore back. Cindy was lying down on some sort of square platform with a round bottom and a round mattress on top. She was partially covered by a quilt. It did not look that comfortable either as she was continually shifting her weight. In fact, there were times that Cindy looked so uncomfortable that she kept shifting her weight and shifting her weight until the platform actually started to spin about! As the dream progressed I started to notice my body sitting on the chair with an ever increasing amount of sensitivity; from my sore back all the way down in scale to the ever so delicate actions of my fingers as they were pulling the needle and thread through a cross-stitch cloth over and over again, stitch by stitch. This awareness of my body offered me comfort. I eventually stopped my needle work and just watched Cindy spin about and about. I was mesmerized. Oh, I could go on and on in detail. I even remember the fabric pattern on the quilt. When I woke up I remembered the dream where I was watching Cindy in a hospital room.

13 Untitled

Mary-Anne McTrowe

Image Credits

Mary-Anne McTrowe. *Untitled (Okay)*, *Untitled (Alright Alright Alright)*, *Untitled (As If)*, *Untitled (Who Cares)*, *Untitled (Perfect)*, 2020. Digital drawings, 8.5”x 11”.


O
K
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Y


ALRIGHT
ALRIGHT
ALRIGHT


A
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WHO
CARES


PERFECT

Contributors

Théo Bignon is a French artist and independant researcher whose work investigates the intersections of desire, ornamentation and queer existence. His work has been exhibited internationally including Villa Noailles (Hyères, France), The Hive Gallery (Los Angeles, CA), Site:Brooklyn (Brooklyn,NY), and Bunker Projects (Pittsburgh, PA). He holds an MFA from the School of the Art Institute of Chicago in the Fiber & Material Studies Department, and a BA from Sciences Po Paris. Théo is currently based in Montréal, Canada.

Mid-career Canadian artist Richard Boulet maintains an active studio practice in drawing and textiles. He addresses issues of marginalization, specifically the topics of mental health and more recently, concerns relating to LGBTQ2S+ communities. He has exhibited widely within Canada. The content of his work conveys a searching for sensibilities of community engagement primarily through semi-autobiographical works rooted in identifying as a person with lived experience with mental illness. Richard's most recent degree is an MFA from the University of Alberta, in drawing and intermedia, where he refined his desire to work in fibre combining text and image. Richard is employed with the Edmonton office of the Canadian Mental Health Association, and his professional art practice is represented through dc3 art projects. Richard is currently collaborating in textiles with Marilyn Olson who he met through the Textile Arts Open Studio peer support club at CMHA-

Edmonton. Marilyn is also a person with lived experience with mental illness.

Blair Brennan has exhibited his artwork nationally and internationally. He has written for a number of arts and cultural publications, in print and online. Brennan was born in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada and continues to base his practice from his home in Treaty 6 territory: land held sacred by Nehiyawak (Cree), Nakota Sioux, Niittsitupi (Blackfoot), Dene suliné, Salteaux, and Métis peoples. Recent illness, injury, related spinal cord surgeries, and resultant physical deficiencies have forced Brennan to consider his practice from a disabled or differently-abled perspective. To date, Brennan's artwork documented his magickal progress in the world. Despite health challenges, Brennan anticipates the continuation of this process.

Since graduating from Concordia University (Montréal) in 2006, Michelle Lacombe has developed a unique practice located at the intersection of performance, drawing, and body art. Her work, which takes the form of either short-duration actions or research-based projects rooted in conceptual embodiment, is characterized by her use of simple gestures, mark making, and strategies of discomfort to complicate the reading of her body. Recipient of the 2015 Bourse Plein Sud, her work has been shown in North America, Mexico, Argentina and Europe in the context of performance events, exhibitions, and colloquiums. Her artistic practice is paralleled by a commitment to supporting undisciplined and independent forms of art making. She is currently the director of VIVA! Art Action.

Aaron McIntosh is a cross-disciplinary artist and fourth-generation quilt maker whose work mines the intersections of material culture, family tradition, sexual desire and identity politics in a range of works including quilts, sculpture, collage, drawing and writing. His work has been widely exhibited across the United States and internationally. Since 2015, McIntosh has managed *Invasive Queer Kudzu*, a community storytelling and archive project across the LGBTQ2+ Southern US. His current research creation project, *Hot House/Maison Chaude*, is supported by a 2020-2022 SSHRC Insight Development grant. Additionally, McIntosh is a recipient of the 2020 United States Artist Fellowship in Craft, as well as a 2018 Virginia Museum of Fine Arts Fellowship. He has held residencies at the Banff Centre, Haystack Mountain School of Crafts, and the Virginia Center for Creative Arts. His critical writing has been published in the *Brooklyn Rail*, *Hyperallergic*, the *Surface Design Journal*, and the *Journal of Modern Craft*. He currently lives and works in Montreal as an Associate Professor in the Fibres & Material Practices program at Concordia University.

Mary-Anne McTrowe was born and raised in Southern Alberta. She earned her BFA from the University of Lethbridge in 1998 and her MFA from Concordia University, Montreal, in 2001. Her work has spanned a number of different media, her practice focussing on the question of how things that are familiar to us can be made unfamiliar; how a change in context can render something temporarily strange and perhaps even unrecognizable. Her areas of research and production include crochet as a carrier of information; conceptual textiles; Sasquatch; ukulele;

the vegetable lamb; globsters; written and spoken text. McTrowe works as a Technician in the Art Department at the University of Lethbridge and was a member of the now-retired folk art-ernative band The Cedar Tavern Singers AKA Les Phonréalistes with Daniel Wong.

Veronika Merklein is an artist and fat-activist located in Vienna, Austria. Her main interests are body politics and "the pure and brutal (inner) life of human beings." She works within different media mainly using performance art, text, photography and food. Since 2016, Merklein has been represented by the Gallery Michaela Stock, Vienna. www.veronikamerklein.com

Mikiki is a performance and video artist and queer community health activist of Acadian/Mi'kmaq and Irish descent from Ktaqmkuk/Newfoundland, Canada. They attended NSCAD and Concordia before returning to St. John's to work as Programming Coordinator at Eastern Edge Gallery and later to Mohkinstsis/Calgary to work as the Director of TRUCK Gallery. Their work has been presented throughout Canada and internationally in self-produced interventions, artist-run centres, performance art festivals and public galleries.Their identity as an artist is informed and intrinsically linked to their history as a sexual health educator, harm reduction worker and activist. Mikiki's creative themes often address safety and responsibility, disclosure and self-determination, community building and reckoning with trauma and loss. Mikiki has worked variously as Sexuality Educator in Mohkinstsis/Calgary's public schools, Bathhouse Attendant in sâskwatôn/Saskatoon, & Drag Queen Karaoke Hostess in St. John's.

Mikiki has worked in numerous capacities in the gay men's health and HIV response both nationally/internationally and as well in Kitche Zibi/Ottawa, Tiohtià:ke/Montreal and Tkaronto/Toronto, recently focusing in homelessness & harm reduction outreach and HIV testing. Mikiki is irregularly found hosting their Golden Girls screening and queer cultural studies lecture series Rose Beef.

Christine Negus is a multidisciplinary artist, writer, and cultural worker who received the National Film Board of Canada's Best Emerging Canadian Video/Filmmaker award through Images Festival in 2008. Negus obtained her MFA from Northwestern University in Chicago IL and her BFA from Western University in London ON. Some of her notable exhibitions and screenings include: CROSSROADS, the8fest, Queer City Cinema, MIX NYC, Process Film Festival, Artists' Television Access, Dunlop Gallery, AKA artist-run, Milwaukee Underground Film Festival, Swedish Film Institute, Experiments in Cinema, Art Gallery of York University, and Kasseler Dokfest. She has had solo exhibitions at RPL Film Theatre, Forest City Gallery, Gallery TPW, gallerywest, Julius Caesar, The Pitch Project, and Modern Fuel, as well as a forthcoming show at YYZ Artists' Outlet. Her work has been reviewed in numerous publications, including *The Globe and Mail* and *Modern Painters*, and an interview on Negus' video practice appeared in the Spring 2016 issue of *BlackFlash Magazine*.

Shanell Papp maintains an isolated and intensive art practice, working in textiles, sculpture, photography, and drawing. Papp's work has earned a large following online, shared widely and viral multiple times over. The work

blurs/redefines the boundaries of Textile Craft and Fine Art. At times grotesque, horrific and other times painfully funny. Their work can mesmerize with its charming labored oddness. Solo exhibitions at the CASA, Pith, The New Gallery, Gallery Gachet, University of Saskatchewan, Estevan, Latitude 53. Selected group exhibitions at the SAAG, The University of Lethbridge, The Triannon, AKA, The Eskar, City of Craft, Textile Museum of Canada. Publications include: CBC (2020 and 2018), Ripleys believe it or not a century of strange #15, Ceci n'est pas un pull (Pyramyd editions, France, 2017), I laughed, I cried, I split my side (Blackdog press, England, 2016), SNAP CRACKLE POP (University of Lethbridge, 2010). Selected Interviews with the CBC (strombo, television, online), Hemjold magazine (Sweden), Order of the Good death/Caitlyn Doritey (U.S.A), *Juxtapose Magazine, Make Magazine, Vice Magazine,* and *MICE*. She holds a BFA from the University of Lethbridge (2006) and an MFA from the University of Saskatchewan (2010).

Kristin Rodier is an Assistant Professor of philosophy at Athabasca University in Alberta, Canada. Her writing explores a critical phenomenology of the body that intersects fatness, gender, ability, and race. Her research is grounded in feminist philosophy and investigates changing selfhood in light of time, habit, and gender oppression—especially as it relates to the fat body. She also writes on sexual violence against fat people, fat temporality, and Simone de Beauvoir. Originally from small-town Saskatchewan, Rodier lives in St. Albert, Alberta, with a variety of human and non-human animals. Her hobbies include cross-country skiing, gardening, and stand-up comedy.

Zoë Schneider (she/her) is based in Regina, Treaty 4 Territory, Saskatchewan, Canada. Working in sculpture, video, and installation to critically examine the complexity of fat identity, Schneider considers topics including the expanding body, the body under restriction and surveillance, obsession in diet culture, the medical industry and the fat body, inherited food values, and societal confusion around food. Schneider holds an MFA from the University of Saskatchewan (2018), and a BFA from the Alberta University of the Arts (formerly ACAD) (2009). In Canada Schneider has exhibited in Regina, Saskatoon, Estevan, Guelph, Mississauga, Lethbridge, and internationally in Denmark, Germany, and the United States.

Stefanie Snider, PhD, is Assistant Professor of Art History at Kendall College of Art and Design in Grand Rapids, Michigan, USA. Her teaching interests include Contemporary Art, history of photography, museum studies, and visual art as activism. Her research focuses on contemporary visual representations by, for, and about marginalized communities, including LGBTQ+ people, fat people, disabled people, and people of color. She is dedicated to showcasing makers and subjects who have historically been left out of conventional art spaces and Art History discourses as part of a larger view toward representing Art History as a project dedicated at least in part to social justice and the politics of visibility.

ART / THEORY / PHILOSOPHY

A mattress, conceived as a place to crash, together. A hot tub, imagined as a site to encounter the end of the world. In times of networked connectivity what's perhaps more radical than embracing virtuality is to think about the stakes of the body, community, and personal encounter. These are themes engaged by the work of artist Cindy Baker, whose projects speculate on the forms of intimacy and interaction that art is capable of generating. Brought together by Baker as catalyst, the contributors to this volume share a spirit of creative community and the belief in art as a form of transformative social practice.

Contributors

Théo Bignon
Richard Boulet
Blair Brennan
Michelle Lacombe
Aaron McIntosh
Mary-Anne McTrowe
Veronika Merklein
Mikiki
Christine Negus
Shanell Papp
Kristin Rodier
Zoë Schneider
Stefanie Snider

Catalyst books build speculative communities, inviting a wide range of perspectives into conversations about shared artistic, political, and intellectual values while privileging the unique, distinct and personal insights that characterize any single voice of engagement. Each volume in the series provides an in-depth look at a thinker or artist who is actively working—seeking after the full relevance of their work in the present moment. The series focuses in particular on voices that have not already been widely featured but who have unique and relevant perspectives to share on questions of art, theory and culture.

noxious sector

ISBN 978-0-9936058-9-5