





## ***Off Scene***

published on the occasion of the exhibiton  
*Aliza Shvarts: Off Scene*

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Curated by Sarah Fritchey

Artspace  
New Haven, CT

*some objects exist as complicated layers  
of wet sediment and bone,  
ossified indexes of past event  
punctuated by a palpable sense of  
things still happening*

<b>01</b>	<b>INTRODUCTION</b> BY SARAH FRITCHEY
<b>03</b>	<b>ALIZA SHVARTS: MATERIAL FICTIONS</b> BY ANGELIQUE SZYMANEK
<b>09</b>	<i>BANNER (YALE DAILY NEWS)</i>
<b>11</b>	<b>ON SABOTAGE</b>
<b>13</b>	<i>CITE / SITE</i>
<b>23</b>	<b>NONCONSENSUAL COLLABORATIONS, 2012-PRESENT</b> NOTES ON A SHARED CONDITION
<b>35</b>	<i>SIBBOLETH</i>
<b>41</b>	<i>POSTERS</i>
<b>43</b>	<b>HOW DOES IT FEEL TO BE A FICTION?</b> NEW YORK VIRUS
<b>47</b>	<b>HOW DOES IT FEEL TO BE A FICTION?</b> BOGOTÁ VIRUS
<b>50</b>	<b>HOW DOES IT FEEL TO BE A FICTION?</b> NEW HAVEN VIRUS
<b>51</b>	<b>ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS</b>

## INTRODUCTION

BY SARAH FRITCHEY

I checked into a hotel room to write this introduction. It's the first time I've been alone overnight in years, and it feels like anything might be possible. One man in an elevator called me sweetheart; another admired my ability to swipe my key card and hit button six before missing my floor, he was on twenty-two. A young woman held a door for me and I thanked her. Her female friend reaffirmed my gratitude— "it's true, she is the nicest," I am working late at night, which isn't out of the ordinary. But I am performing off scene, eighty miles from home, and I can feel my anonymity here bringing me closer to an understanding of Aliza Shvarts' practice.

In 2008, Aliza Shvarts presented her senior thesis to a committee of undergraduate faculty members and colleagues at the Yale School of Art. She was in her early twenties at the time, double-majoring in Sculpture and English Literature. She proposed to show material evidence from a year-long performance, which was to include objects, video footage and writing. The performance followed the cycle of her body. Each time she was ovulating, she artificially inseminated herself with sperm, donated anonymously. Each time she was menstruating, she checked into a hotel room, where she used abortifacient herbs to induce what could potentially be a miscarriage. She timed the performance so that there was no way for her to tell whether or not she had conceived.

The project reached the attention of Yale University deans after *Drudge Report* and other media outlets picked up an article published online by *The Yale Daily News*. The deans banned Shvarts from presenting the work, and the Art faculty were not permitted to provide

further feedback. Shvarts' ordeal became a topic of public debate, and in a follow up article, a Yale spokesperson described her work as a "creative fiction." As her story circulated nationally and internationally over the internet, it received hundreds of reader comments. This is where the exhibition *Aliza Shvarts: Off Scene* begins, with the question of who has the will and power to name, expose, protect, censor, regulate, and provide testimony for another individual? Or more simply, who is recognized and protected under the law?

Over the past ten years, Shvarts has examined what it is like to live as a so-called "fiction." In the essay from her digital performance piece *How Does it Feel to Be a Fiction?* (2017-present), she describes this experience as one that is not unique. She writes how, often, the disabled body is a fiction to architects, the transgender-fluid body is a fiction to the law, black and brown bodies are fictions to the police, and women's lived experiences are fictions to debates surrounding sexual assault and abortion. In all of these cases, institutions of power exclude the person in the center of the debate from that discourse on the individual's own experience. Real people are transformed into mere matter, conceptual battlegrounds for unregulated public debate.

By returning to New Haven, Shvarts reclaims her status as a real person on Yale's front porch. She arrives newly armed with the benefit of time and perspective, which she has used to study the language of consent, and the traditions in Western art that moralize certain aesthetics and vilify others. In her essay "Nonconsensual Collaborations, 2012-Present: Notes on a Shared Condition," she describes

how the artwork of one artist might be lauded for achieving “transcendental interest,” while the artwork of another is dismissed for being “merely aesthetic” and therefore “inconsequential.”

Recently, I witnessed this effect in Carolee Schneemann’s retrospective at MoMA PS1. While the curators paid attention to the erotic and pedagogical parts of Schneemann’s practice, pulling in fascinating notes and photographs from her personal archive, they did not include her published accounts of the abortions she underwent in the 1950s and 60s. I only learned about these through a magazine I purchased at the New York Art Book Fair.<sup>1</sup> In the magazine, the author describes a letter Schneemann wrote to a friend after a visit to a doctor’s office in Cuba. “Do you want to see it? [the doctor] asked [...] I barely understand and dazedly look at the basin of beautiful purple red colors, thinking why yes that is my own blood, that is its colors...Jim’s is orangey.”<sup>2</sup> This description of the rainbow-colored blood is strikingly vivid. It reframes the highly stigmatized and silenced experience of undergoing an abortion around its aesthetics, shining a light on the “unpredictable gap” between the parts of life that are felt, and parts of life that are viewed. Schneemann’s account performs a type of difficult work that Shvarts advocates for in her essay “On Sabotage.” Shvarts writes, “I advocate for [...] forms of sabotage that question [...] the axiom that when we make things, we must know their value or outcome beforehand.”

Returning to New Haven is a homecoming of sorts for Shvarts, and she returns to a university that has changed. I am curious to see

how an influx of new female leadership at Yale might make her public reception different in 2018. Marta Kuzma has taken over as Dean of the School of Art from Robert Storr; A.L. Steiner, Anna Betbeze, and a new guard of faculty positions occupy mentorship positions; and Claudia Rankine, who writes on questions of political visibility as well as art’s failure, is a Fellow in the English Department. Yale Law School professors Robert Post and Reva Siegel, leading legal scholars on the first amendment and reproductive rights respectively, will participate in a roundtable dialogue on opening night.

I am also curious to see how audiences and cultural leaders in New Haven will receive *Off Scene*. Already, her work has been supported by Nasty Women Connecticut, under founder Lucy McClure’s leadership, at the Ely Center of Contemporary Art. Last April, Shvarts led a workshop at the Ely Center that invited community members who had experienced a moment of overexposure online to explore how, through art, they might find empowerment in the shared aspects of their stories. She gave her own work, *Banner (Yale Daily News)* (2018), as an example, unrolling and inviting them to touch and read the 100-foot scroll that is a part of this exhibition. This is what I admire most about Shvarts’ work: it comes from the gut and seeks to make room for others to connect and start a conversation. As works such as her new installation *Cite/Site* (2018) demonstrate, she understands herself as carrying on a tradition forged by other marginalized practitioners who have interrogated the distinctions made between art and life. I support her on this journey.

<sup>1</sup> Jenny Jaskey and Carolee Schneemann, *Carolee’s. Issue 02. Devoted to Carolee Schneemann*. Köln: Buchhandlung Walther König (2017).

<sup>2</sup> Maggie Nelson, “Meeooww,” *Carolee’s. Issue 02. Devoted to Carolee Schneemann* (2017): 185.

## ALIZA SHVARTS: MATERIAL FICTIONS

BY ANGELIQUE SZYMANEK

The etymological root of fiction in the Latin is *fictionem*, which means “to fashion or feign.” Relatedly, the word *fictilis* refers to that which is “made of clay” or “worked by hand,” while *factor* refers to a sculptor. The haptic quality of the fictive seems a paradox given its location within the realm of the imaginary. Indeed, it is a realm that is understood in relation to its opposite, the real. Truth has traditionally been determined through evidence, proof, or fact—empirical modes of knowing that rest thoroughly within the sphere of the masculine. Fiction, on the other hand, trades in the language of the hoax, the figment, and the lie—the materiality of which is fragmentary, ephemeral, and slippery. Unable to operate within an ontological sphere, fiction captures all those subjects whose gendered, abled, classed, raced, or sexed particularities deny them access to the production of knowledge. The ideological and material conditions of being classified as fiction are those with which artist Aliza Shvarts’ performative practice engages.

When a person’s identity precludes the possibility of subjectivity, what kinds of alternative relations between differently situated bodies are imaginable? Shvarts asks, “What kinds of expressions of volition and agency are possible when the capacity to speak and testify is itself historically produced by a legacy of gendered and racial exclusions?” The exhibition *Off Scene*, like the artist’s practice as a whole, clarifies this question, a query that does more than simply point to various instances of the ideological and institutionalized erasures of minority subjects. It also offers modes through which alternative forms of knowing, making, and relating might be forged. Shvarts’ art embodies what José Esteban Muñoz describes

as a “queer impulse [...] to discuss an object whose ontology, in its ability to ‘count’ as a proper ‘proof,’ is profoundly queer.”<sup>1</sup>

*Off Scene* marks the first time that *Untitled [Senior Thesis]* (2008) has been exhibited. Described by a Yale University spokesperson as “creative fiction,” the project appears in this exhibition in a variety of forms, including video, text, image, and audio. In a series of new works created for *Off Scene—Player, Cite/Site*, and *Banner (Yale Daily News)*—each incorporates components of the 2008 performance and its aftermath. The nuance with which Shvarts has conceptually and materially woven the ephemera of *Untitled [Senior Thesis]* into an a-chronological narrative—the possibilities of which reimagine temporality, space, and materiality—warrants the description of her practice as one of queer feminist world-making. Deploying the performative as a mode of re-telling, Shvarts destabilizes masculinist modes of knowledge and art production. In her work, she mobilizes repetition with a difference as a performative strategy, aesthetic choreography, and narrative structure. To tell (an action distinct from stating or saying) is a form of recounting related to both revelation and deceit. To tell a lie or a secret, for example, is to engage in a linguistic and performative inference of the fictive that parallels the act of narration. Like the various traditions of oral history from which it derives, telling is ideologically at odds with patriarchal colonial indexing insofar as it is emphatically material, temporally irregular, and often covert.

In her call for counter-hegemonic forms of representation, bell hooks, the prominent feminist, describes the necessity for cultural



producers to create “fragments of memory which are not simply represented as flat documentary but constructed to give a ‘new take’ on the old, constructed to move us into a different mode of articulation.”<sup>2</sup> *Off Scene*, in its very naming, beckons to the margins. How Shvarts performs within the space of marginality, moreover, provides the conditions for enacting the “radical openness” for which hooks is calling. *Player*, *Cite/Site*, and *Banner* (*Yale Daily News*) move the discourse around *Untitled [Senior Thesis]* and its maker through modes of articulation that, while foregrounding the persisting conditions of oppression that span the historically meager ten years that lie between them, also retool the language, texts, and images of oppression to new ends.

The material conditions (or rather the pre-suppositions of such) have been at the center of the critical response to Shvarts’ nine-month-long *Untitled [Senior Thesis]* since its public exclusion from Yale’s student art show in April of 2008. In her statement describing the piece, Shvarts details the actions undertaken during the performance, a narrative that has since been retold countless times. Having taken no other public form beyond that statement, the piece, as she writes, “exists only in its telling.” Until now.

The temporal structure of *Untitled [Senior Thesis]* traced the cyclical patterning of the artist’s uterus and ovaries. During the ninth through the fifteenth days of her menstrual cycle, the artist engaged in a process of self-insemination using the sperm of anonymous donors. On the twenty-eighth day, Shvarts ingested an abortifacient that induced severe cramping and heavy bleeding. The pacing of the performance, therefore, was determined by factors that were both controlled from outside the body and set to a pattern of willful ignorance, propelled into motion by the artist’s reproductive organs. Whether or not fertilization was ever achieved is unknown, as is the magnitude of the effects the process had on the artist’s body. The performance exists, as Shvarts describes it, in “multiple temporalities” that de-center artistic authority and destabilize normative biologically constituted chronometries.

*In Shvarts’ performance,  
menstrual timing becomes the  
timing of artistic, rather than  
reproductive, labor.*

One might be reminded of Julia Kristeva’s formulation of “women’s time” as distinct from linear or historical time, written about in her famous 1979 essay of the same name. Feminine time, she argues, consists of two types of temporality: cyclical and monumental, the former of which is associated with the biological, while the latter transcends linear time via the eternal.<sup>3</sup> While cyclical time is certainly invoked in Shvarts’ piece, it is the disruption of its normative patterning that subverts the logic of “women’s time.” Not surprisingly, this disruption continues to be the justification for criticism of the performance and for the many threats of violence against the artist. In Shvarts’ performance, menstrual timing becomes the timing of artistic, rather than reproductive, labor.

The threat that this a-cyclical temporality poses—its rewriting of time according to the creative will of the feminine body—parallels that of the broader issue of women’s reproductive rights and the persisting misogynist rhetoric around abortion in particular. The phrases “abortion artist” and “abortion performance” have often been used to refer to Shvarts and *Untitled [Senior Thesis]*, demonstrating the shared ideological framework under which women’s bodies, as well as their creative and intellectual labor, are regulated and disciplined. What the artist has described in her own writing as a form of sabotage, the re-circuiting of the feminine cycle suggests the explicitly ableist and heterosexist construction of that temporality.<sup>4</sup>

Despite the fact that over 6.1 million women in the U.S. are unable to carry a pregnancy to full-term, the empty womb remains a socio-cultural aberration.<sup>5</sup> In the case of non-heteronormative relationships, this vacancy is all the more deviant for its supposed will-

ful misuse, or even disuse, of the procreative. The persistent call to reverse the federal legalization of abortion care in the U.S. illustrates the criminality assigned to oppressed persons who attempt to wield agency over their own reproductive capacity. Insisting, therefore, that the performative choreographies of *Untitled [Senior Thesis]* included the enactment of abortions is to name the aesthetic deployment of the reproductive as criminal. This sentiment resounds in the commentary section of Shvarts' online artist statement which includes numerous demands for the artist to be jailed and even "executed" for her "crimes." Given that the verb "abort" means to end abruptly and, as Merriam-Webster phrases it, "without successful completion," to be named an "abortion artist" is to be considered unable to produce a viable art object. In other words, Shvarts was deemed a fiction insofar as her failures to properly reproduce also foreclosed her ability to engage in artistic production.

*Player* (2018) is a variable-speed media player that plays video containing documentation of *Untitled [Senior Thesis]* in accordance with the duration of the exhibition. Running through custom software, the video does not loop but, rather, runs in one continuous take as the original footage was adjusted to accommodate the temporal structure of *Off Scene*. Therefore, it is nearly impossible to see the video in its entirety. Given the content of the footage, moreover, one may see a fairly mundane decelerated image of an empty bathroom, the artist reading while seated on the floor beside the bathtub, or, perhaps, her nude body tucked inside it. Other moments are more suggestive of the forensic than others, such as the marking of blood on the artist's thighs or collected in cups. The durational lag, however, obscures more than it reveals. This illegibility is not unique to the video, but rather it formalizes the mythology of the ontological relationship between performance and its documentation. If one views this video as a response to the call for the evidentiary, then Shvarts has produced it here in a form that announces its own failure. Rather than position the documentation of her performance as "proof"—that is, as facts to counter fiction—Shvarts engages

with her own subjectivity and the ideological impossibility of ever reading her work as "truth." To borrow a phrase from José Esteban Muñoz, *Player* is a form of "anti-evidence," a distinctly queer mode of aestheticizing or performing one's status as a fiction.<sup>6</sup>

In *Cite/Site* (2018), a series of 72 18x24" posters arranged in three rows span an approximately 39-foot wall in the middle of the gallery. Among the images are citations and images of women whose speech or actions have been disavowed or, as the artist describes, "interdicted" in some way. Photographs of Anita Hill, Tawana Brawley, and Monica Lewinsky, for example, are juxtaposed with images of the performative pieces of Ana Mendieta and Suzanne Lacy, constituting a fragmented archive that indexes instances of the suppression of political speech and creative acts which sought to announce histories of sexual violence. As with *Player*, *Cite/Site* does not offer itself as cohesive or exhaustive evidence. Rather, it situates Shvarts in relation to the systemic as opposed to the exceptional or anomalous, the realms to which the language of monstrosity and criminality found in popular discourse about the artist attempt to relegate her.

*Oppressed subjects who speak are swiftly reduced to their materiality. They are all body, the mere visibility of which is used to justify acts of symbolic and physical violence. The paradox of being a material fiction is that one is simultaneously invisible as a subject yet hyper-visible as an object.*

When the artist's statement regarding *Untitled [Senior Thesis]* was released ten years ago, representatives of Yale University were quick to reassure the public that Shvarts "did not impregnate herself and [...] did not induce any miscarriages," an undermining of the artist's own statements. Thus, the university assigned the status of fiction not only to the work but also to the artist herself.<sup>7</sup> The in-

stitutional delegitimizing of the artist's speech is echoed in the more acerbic language of online commentary that is littered with the words "hoax," "liar," "monster," and "sick." The disciplinary intentions of Yale's statement and those that proliferate in the digital sphere betray an undeniable relation to the language of rape culture. They are, after all, produced from within it.

The many claims that Shvarts' performance was nothing more than an exhibitionist ploy to garner attention is part of a legacy that has been fundamental to the history of performance art, the early critical response toward Carolee Schneemann, Hannah Wilke, and Valie Export come to mind. The "attention whore," however, is a trope that permeates all sectors of culture, conjured to signify the "she-was-asking-for-it" rhetoric launched against all feminized and/or racialized bodies who attempt to appear in the public sphere as a subject with sexual agency, like the women included in *Cite/Site*. Oppressed subjects who speak are swiftly reduced to their materiality. They are all body, the mere visibility of which is used to justify acts of symbolic and physical violence. The paradox of being a material fiction is that one is simultaneously invisible as a subject yet hyper-visible as an object.

The various iterations of *Untitled [Senior Thesis]* that appear throughout *Off Scene* emerge as ephemera, tracing paths back to the original events of 2008 in arcs of a-temporality that are out of sync with the hetero-masculinist imperatives of linear time. Muñoz theorizes ephemera as a modality which resists the epistemological in favor of those forms of knowledge that have been historically and culturally devalued, such as rumor and gossip. As ways of transmitting that are often anecdotal, covert, and contested, ephemera often appear, as Muñoz describes, as "traces, glimmers, residues, and specks of things."<sup>8</sup> The materiality of these forms of extra-institutional knowledge reveal and name their slippery haptics. Rather than a discrete set of autonomous objects

or performative acts, the works in *Off Scene* remind viewers of the shared conditions under which they were made. They emerge from within and in relation to one another.

*Banner (Yale Daily News)* (2018) is a 100-foot-long vinyl facsimile of the commentary left by the public in response to the article Shvarts published in the *Yale Daily News* explaining her thesis project. The massive sculptural object unfurls into the gallery space and viewers are invited to touch the piece. The scroll-like aesthetics of *Banner (Yale Daily News)* actualize the virtual scrolling that one must engage with to read Shvarts' article on its original digital platform. The scale of the piece monumentalizes the comments, pulling them from the supposed no-place of the internet into the comparatively intimate space of the gallery. This shift in context, as well as form, recalibrates the barrage of threats and misogynist slurs, putting them to work differently. The project materializes a common form of violence that is frequently dismissed as "unreal" because of its appearance in the cybersphere. In its excessive materiality, *Banner (Yale Daily News)* not only reverses some of the ideological and political work that the myth of digital disembodiment instigates, but it reiterates the hyper-visibility of Shvarts as the controversy of her project unfolded.

In *Banner (Yale Daily News)*, the virtual is made subject to touch, a touch that shapes, displaces, and reacts in response to its public. Over the course of the exhibition, the many fingers that will meet the surface of *Banner (Yale Daily News)* will not only leave traces and stains, but they will change the shape of the piece, altering its relationship to the gallery in which it is situated. *Banner (Yale Daily News)* reconfigures online hate speech, a particularly pervasive tool of oppression, as a malleable object. By making *Banner (Yale Daily News)* malleable, Shvarts imposes upon that speech the very conditions it intended to enact upon her, effectively performing what Walter Benjamin once called "tactile appropriation."<sup>9</sup>

The appropriative gestures of Shvarts' work are urgent. In light of the current U.S. administration and its regressive approach to reproductive health as well as the open misogyny of President Trump, an enthusiasm for which seemed to be superseded only by that which has been publically performed in response to his racist and xenophobic speech, imagining ways of engagement that counter these narratives is paramount. After the 2016 election, Shvarts was commissioned by Recess, a community art space and gallery in Brooklyn, New York, to create a piece that engaged with the appropriative potential of "fake news." Information has been deemed "fake" by the Trump administration and its supporters only insofar as it is information that undermines the kleptocratic imperatives of the U.S. government and consumer capitalism more broadly. Authored and disseminated most readily via digital platforms, the supposedly democratic nature of these spaces has been an active fiction of its own since their inception. Just as activists, hackers, feminists, and other marginalized groups began to harness the political potential of the virtual, the architects of this technology and its programming began to admit to the ideological underpinning of the digital sphere.

The Recess commission resulted in the digital performance *How Does it Feel to be a Fiction?* (2017), which is included in *Off Scene*. For the piece, Shvarts solicited participation through an email. Consenting viewers would then be directed to a website containing an essay that "considers the many bodies that live as 'fictions' to the State."<sup>10</sup> In this, Shvarts articulates some of the very real violence inflicted on bodies who are denied citizenship and subjectivity under the neoliberal democratic state. The potentially utopic tone of the fictive that characterizes this perspective on Shvarts should not be at the cost of recognizing this reality, but rather in spite of it. The multiple modes of creative, intellectual, and political resistance that Shvarts has mobilized in her artistic practice are a testament to its capacities to destabilize mechanisms of oppression. The fictive has always been the necessary backdrop against which the truth is made visible. The messy dialectics of this relationship, however, are systematically sanitized and naturalized. The reversing, stalling, disrupting, and sabotaging choreographies of Shvarts' work suggests that the truth is most vulnerable when it is subject to touch.

<sup>1</sup> José Esteban Muñoz, "Ephemera as Evidence: Introductory Notes to Queer Acts," *Women and Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 8:2 (1996): 6.

<sup>2</sup> bell hooks, "Choosing the Margin as a Space of Radical Openness," *Framework*, 36 (1989, 17).

<sup>3</sup> Julia Kristeva, "Women's Time," trans. Alice Jardin and Harry Blake, *Signs* vol. 7 no. 1 (Autumn 1981): 15-17.

<sup>4</sup> Aliza Shvarts, "On Sabotage," *Bodies Burning at the Edges* (with Kiki Smith, Jacolby Satterwhite, Robert Montgomery, and Thomas Beale. Curated by Sarah Victoria Bothwell Fels and Jonah King). Leroy Neiman Gallery, Columbia University. New York, NY (October 2015).

<sup>5</sup> According to statistics provided by the Center for Disease Control and Prevention, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, at <https://www.womenshealth.gov/a-z-topics/infertility> (last accessed 16 April 2018).

<sup>6</sup> Muñoz 5-16

<sup>7</sup> Shvarts reproduces this statement in *Off Scene*. It was originally reported in Zachary Abrahamson, Thomas Kaplan, and Martine Powers, "University calls art project a fiction; Shvarts '08 disputes Yale's claim," *Yale Daily News*, April 17, 2008.

<sup>8</sup> Muñoz 10

<sup>9</sup> Walter Benjamin, *The Work of Art in the Age of its Technological Reproduction and Other Writings on Media*, trans. E.F.N. Jephcott. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press (2008), 39.

<sup>10</sup> Aliza Shvarts, "Aliza Shvarts: How Does it Feel to be a Fiction?" (2017), [https://alizashvarts.com/ASIS/How\\_does\\_it\\_feel\\_to\\_be\\_a\\_fiction\\_%282017%29.html](https://alizashvarts.com/ASIS/How_does_it_feel_to_be_a_fiction_%282017%29.html).



## Shvarts explains her 'repeated self-induced miscarriages'

ALIZA SHVARTS APR 18, 2008

For the past year, I performed repeated self-induced miscarriages. I created a group of fabricators from volunteers who submitted to periodic STD screenings and agreed to their complete and permanent anonymity. From the 9th to the 15th day of my menstrual cycle, the fabricators would provide me with sperm samples, which I used to privately self-inseminate. Using a needleless syringe, I would inject the sperm near my cervix within 30 minutes of its collection, so as to insure the possibility of fertilization. On the 28th day of my cycle, I would ingest an abortifacient, after which I would experience cramps and heavy bleeding.

To protect myself and others, only I know the number of fabricators who participated, the frequency and accuracy with which I inseminated and the specific abortifacient I used. Because of the measures of privacy, the piece exists only in its telling. This tell can take textual, visual, spatial, temporal and performative forms: copies of copies of which there is no original.

This piece — in its textual and sculptural forms — is meant to question the relationship between form and function as they converge on the body. The artwork exists as the verbal narrative you see above, as an installation that will take place in Green Hall, as a time-based performance, as a independent concept, as a myth and as a public discourse.

It creates an ambiguity that isolates the locus of ontology to the of readership. An intentional ambiguity pervades both the objects I produced in relation to it. The performance as I chose to represent it. For me, the most poignant representation — the part most meaningful to the public agenda (and, incidentally, to the artist) — is the one that this form

my stress, then I wouldn't have spent so many years developing skill. Nor would I have to work so hard to get the PR. What was I thinking?

Tenochy 9 years ago  
Personally, I would've found this exercise far more surgically removed and embalmed, wrapped in a used to fog people as she ran one&#44;I'd learned through taken at face value&#41;. but it certainly would

entry 9 years ago  
find this entry interesting, if you'd

the falling of the work is safely and coherent

to be on the same page with you

to be on the same page with you

to be on the same page with you

to be on the same page with you

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to be on the same page with you

Banner (Yale Daily News)  
14.4in x 1226.5in continuous digital screen grab  
on 13oz vinyl, 2018



## ON SABOTAGE<sup>1</sup>

I wonder if we can think about the question of sabotage as a question of time. The figure of the saboteur operates in a temporality outside the time of the cohesive rational actor, the universal subject of enlightenment, the one man with his one voice, his one (patrilineal) name, and his one vote. To sabotage something is to act out of time with it, to trouble the linear narrative of progress, to stymie cause and effect. To sabotage something—or oneself—is to engage the multiplicity that operates outside of the presumption of continuity that enables the honest relations of consent, contracts, etc., which are inexorably bound up in a capitalist logic of exchange in which to be accountable is to be subject to account.

In a lecture called “The Touring Machine,” Fred Moten says that the history of blackness is a history of the tenuous and unstable distinction between subjecthood and objecthood (overwritten by co-emergent formulations of the enlightened rational subject, whose very possibility depended on the existence of those non-subjects or human commodities produced and reproduced through colonialism and enslavement). This history thus opens up the possibility to consent to non-consent, that is, to consent to being more than a single continuous subject that is the implied subject of consent.

Sabotage is an abstraction of this consent to non-consent. To sabotage is to violate the dictum that a self be continuous over time, it is to challenge the idea that everyone have access to this type of cohesive subjecthood: a subjecthood invoked as the subject of labor and marriage contracts, sexual or social consent, etc., the possibility of which were historically produced in the nonconsensual and noncontractual relations

of slavery and coloniality. Such a singular subject both depends on and obscures the historical figures of the 3/5ths man, the untouchable, the second sex—figures on whom were produced the present conditions of our subjection; figures who, at the same time, sow the seed of our continuing possibility.

When we talk about trustworthiness or honesty, we are really talking about a relationship to power and to the future: an ability to guarantee that things will be as we say (a temporality which becomes more apparent in speech acts like “I promise”). We are also communicating that the language of such guarantees can belong to us, that we are the speaking subjects such language presupposes. This relationship to the future presumes a subjectivity historically produced by the object relations and material histories of a significant amount of people. And there seems something worthwhile to me to refuse this position, to refuse to assure others of your ability to maintain the latent history of a normative subjectivity—the dehistoricized, deracinated, unmarked “good guy” produced in the assurances between other “good guys” that such a thing exists.

Different men in my life have asked me, in relation to not only my gender but also my work, how they can trust me. And though I think the things I make and do are pretty self-evident, I have responded to these various men by saying that they shouldn’t, because I don’t think that trustworthiness is ever anything that I could have access to. It is a temporal enclosure that is part of a lineage of historical and material enclosures. I am not—and do not want to be—its rightful heir.



The body can be a form of sabotage, particularly those corporeal excesses that overflow, overwhelm, and otherwise breach the smooth silhouette of the subject-form. The sabotaging body is marked by both overabundance and lack, qualities distributed within different gendered, raced, and sexed productions of difference, but not confined to those positions. The sabotaging body disrupts the working body, even when it is coterminous with it, bound by the same flesh, contained in the same skin. It troubles the seamless capture of human action by abstract value, expending energies and performing actions that elude the language of exchange. Any one body may contain simultaneous working and sabotaging parts.

Intuition can be a form of sabotage in that it short-circuits the channels of knowledge production, directing them away from truth-producing institutions of power and back toward the self. Instead of relying on the corroboration or confirmation of an outside source, intuition draws its power from the depths of the selfsame body that deploys it, bringing together that opposition upon which so much of enlightened thought depends: the irreconcilable difference between knowing and feeling. Intuition so thoroughly undermines this distinction as to produce knowledge and feeling as one and the same. It is a form of knowing by feeling, feeling within oneself a truth that at the same time exists beyond the self, waiting to be known.

Aesthetic production can be a form of sabotage, precisely because it is useless—because it is quite likely that no one will read what you have written, no one’s life depends on your art. This lack of utility is the aesthetic’s great power: it’s what makes it a realm (perhaps the only realm) where experimentation is possible. This is the place to provisionally rehearse new ways of being, to fantastically conjure new worlds, to take up utopian projects and the full extent of their unmaking, because this is the place—if there is any place—where consequence need not fully attach. This is the place where the narratives of what is good, valuable, productive, or beautiful can be troubled, the place where we can survive the difficulty of that troubling—survive, though perhaps not remain unchanged.

I was asked once by a tenured art historian, when I brought up the work of a “difficult” body artist whom I know, love, and respect, whether I was “advocating” for this type of work. I did not know what to say then, which I regret, because I do know what I would say now. I advocate for these and other forms of sabotage: for work that questions the borders of the body, the frameworks of our theoretical models, and above all the axiom that when we make things, we must know their value or outcome beforehand. Such advocacy, as I must have recognized in that encounter, is perhaps itself a form of sabotage. So with this writing, I advocate; I enact; I recruit.

<sup>1</sup> Originally published in *Bodies Burning at the Edges* (with Kiki Smith, Jacolby Satterwhite, Robert Montgomery, and Thomas Beale. Curated by Sarah Victoria Bothwell Fels and Jonah King). Leroy Neiman Gallery, Columbia University. New York, NY (October 2015).

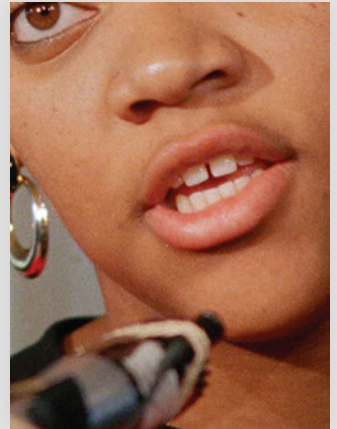
Until recently, I could not open,  
much less examine, the contents  
of a certain folder.



She used her menstrual blood as  
a way to inscribe her message  
and was not heard.

I hate to say it, but the conviction  
that artists are somehow "asking for  
it" bears a striking resemblance to  
the logic once used to justify rape.

purported



At issue are the limits of power  
and privilege. At stake are human  
dignity and equality under the law.  
The opportunity presented by this  
case will not likely arise again.

If I had to chose between a  
15-year-old black girl and a white  
legal system that has always done  
us wrong, I'm going with her.



she just lost her balance

virago

No matter how she got there. No matter who did it to her—and even if she did it to herself. Her condition was clearly the expression of some crime against her, some tremendous violence, some great violation that challenges comprehension.



The ability to perform speech acts of certain kinds can be a mark of political power.

To assert that Celia was raped is to issue a provocation.

Six and a half years later, in 2005, a miscarriage of justice was declared.





With the first public circulation of my photographs, I was intensely aware of the invasive and transformative power of the camera and of the ideological contextualization of my images, which left me with little or no agency.

look

the metaphoric character of flesh,  
not its physical properties



"having pain" may come to be thought of as the most vibrant example of what it is to "have certainty," while for the other person it is so elusive that "hearing about pain" may exist as the primary model of what it is "to have doubt"

Peoples lives are being shattered and destroyed by a mere allegation. Some are true and some are false. Some are old and some are new. There is no recovery for someone falsely accused - life and career are gone. Is there no such thing any longer as Due Process?



The direct manifestation of the law's legitimation of whiteness as reputation is revealed in the well-established doctrine that to call a white person "Black" is to defame her.

to advance herself professionally with minimal risk, since she resides abroad and enjoys a kind of media coverage that serves as a protective shield.



жидовка



I believe the women.

But I will not glorify those aspects of my culture that have injured me and which have injured me in the name of protecting me.

malinchista

WHO IS WORTH  
MY LOVE, MY  
STRENGTH, &  
MY RAGE?

The witness said he tried to tell police what he knew but was brushed off.

I did not see this as a meeting with a fellow theorist.

I'm a writer, not an actress.



an hypothesis based on an inference and a premise



It seems clear, however, that "Family" as we practice and understand it "in the West"—the *vertical* transfer of bloodline, of a patronymic, of titles and entitlements, of real estate and the prerogatives of "cold cash," from *fathers* to *sons* and in the supposedly free exchange of affectional ties between a make and a female of *his* choice—becomes the mythically revered privilege of a free and freed community.



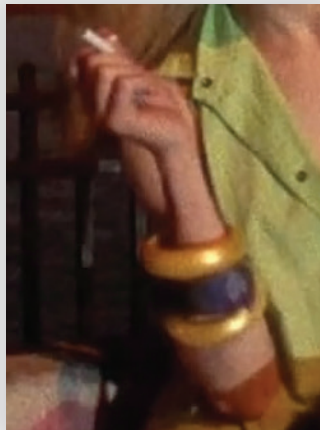
She is an unbroken egg:



My performance was taken out of context, and I was presented in an inaccurate and maliciously misleading way.

bobbitize

Genovese syndrome



This has everything to do with the fact that leaving too much of a trace has often meant that the queer subject has left herself open for attack.

Did you ever read my words

or did you merely finger through them for quotations which you thought might valuably support an already-conceived idea concerning some old and distorted connection between us?

We've decided.



Oh! Celia, Celia, Celia

listen

the evidence we have of racism and sexism is deemed insufficient because of racism and sexism



Perhaps, paradoxically, "representation" will be shown to make sense for feminism only when the subject of "women" is nowhere presumed.





"finger through." Here again, history is a hole to penetrate, but not with the usual instruments.

I give birth to myself amid the violence of sobs

I have contracted. I have eased.



One Art

(What kind of art would I make in such a society? Perhaps the kind of art that Frank Stella, whose work I like very much, makes in this one.)

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## NONCONSENSUAL COLLABORATIONS, 2012-PRESENT

### NOTES ON A SHARED CONDITION<sup>1</sup>

Since 2012, I have been working on a series of nonconsensual collaborations: performances with other artists who did not agree to their participation. So far there have been five, but the project is ongoing. A “nonconsensual collaboration” goes against the axioms of intention and volition that structure art practice; it troubles the idea of art as an authoritative act, highlighting instead those entangled processes through which we make things—processes that sometimes belie our own sense of agency. For this reason, the nonconsensual collaborations are not worked out before hand. They do not have a set duration, venue, or directive. They cannot be witnessed live. Yet like all performance, they are actions undertaken by a body and sustained over time. And like many of the works in my particular performance practice, they concern not only performed actions or events, but also the performative power of language to shape, recalibrate, and make such action tangible.

The nonconsensual collaborations grapple with the fact that we make things in relation, and yet relation is difficult to formalize. “Collaboration” and “consent” give us narratives through which to outline the contours of our imbrication; they authorize habits of interaction and help us understand what we can expect from each other. Often, “collaboration” and “consent” imply a contractual agreement, stipulating the conditions under which bodies come together and orienting those bodies around a shared future goal. Yet the contract—with its juridical and ideological understanding of the subject—is perhaps an inadequate framework through which to fully explore the forms relation might take. With the nonconsensual collaborations, I examine

what else we might make from our entanglement. These *nonconsensual* collaborations question how authorization intersects with authorship—that is, how the contingencies of power structure production and its legibility. As *collaborations*, they propose one way such difficult relationality can be rendered as productive, rather than merely resolved. As *performance*,<sup>2</sup> they apply artistic criteria to the complexity of lived interactions, asking how we might make something more from entanglement—and in so doing, recalibrate a feminist capacity to act.

It is, for a feminist, a dangerous move to critique consent as a mechanism of agency, especially when the elaboration of consent as a legal measure has been a necessary tool in enabling women to make both visible and prosecutable some of the more violent interpersonal expressions of misogyny before the law. Within the legal sphere, where power, agency, and the ability to voice grievance are premised on an ingrained history of property relations, the question of consent and the illegality of nonconsensual sexual violence remains—of course—necessary. However, within lived social relations and performance practice, the issue of consent can be explored with greater nuance—that is, in a venue broader than that rarefied court-bound sphere of legal action. Consent bears a relation (so often left out of contemporary liberal feminism) to the histories of capitalist expropriation, gender and racial difference, and the ideological disciplines of subjecthood and objecthood that undergird property. The subject able to give consent, to exercise will, and to demonstrate injury before the law is neither timeless nor universal, but materially and historically produced. As Said-

iya Hartman powerfully describes in *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth-Century America*, this subject is configured through the convolutions of personhood and property that animated the nineteenth-century legal logic of US chattel slavery: “the law’s selective recognition of slave humanity [which] nullified the captive’s ability to give consent or act as agent and, at the same time, acknowledged the intentionality and agency of the slave but only as it assumed the form of criminality.”<sup>3</sup> Through an analysis of those instances of sexual violence that fall outside the legal definitions of rape—namely, “the sexual exploitation of slave women cloaked as the legitimate use of property and the castration and assault of slave men”—she points to the racist and heteronormative framing of rape within legal discourse and the presumed relationships between will, consent, subjectivity, and injury that such discourse entails.<sup>4</sup>

Insofar as the context of sexual assault delimits the conversation on consent, its broader ideological context remains obscured. At the heart of most theorizations of democracy is the idea of *consensus*: the capacity for people to come to an agreement, to achieve a group mentality and feeling. This idea rests on the philosophical imagination of a citizen-subject: that autonomous individual who possesses a capacity to *consent*—to give permission, to willfully negotiate power difference in a manner that preserves the supposition of agency.<sup>5</sup> Yet the discourse of consent—particularly as it has also been taken up in relation to scientific research and medical procedures, recording and surveillance technologies, and the liability in the workplace—illuminates how power, agency, and the ability to voice grievance are premised on an ingrained material history. We require consent from some bodies disproportionately: from working class bodies that are overwhelmingly the objects of labor abuses; from feminine and queer bodies that are too often objects of physical and sexual aggression; from black and brown bodies that have unduly been objects of scientific and medical exploitation—and continue to be objects of increased state surveillance and violence. Such

bodies seem misaligned with that philosophical imagination of the citizen-subject: they have not historically been the inheritors of property; in context of the enduring history of trans-Atlantic trade and global capitalism, they are the bodies inherited as property.

By aestheticizing the question of consent, this project takes aim at the logic of legal precedent and the larger tautology of power: the fact that both injury and value are recognized only in the terms by which they have already been recognized. In the context of these histories of bondage and ownership, we might critique consent as a market relation, a negotiation about property, and/or a waiving of liability. Consent as a horizon of relation obscures a defining characteristic of the social: the fact that lived relation occurs as a process, the idea that things might change over time. To consent is to reify the body in an economy of exchange. Yet what possibilities of agency and encounter would open up if we were to proceed from the premise that the body is incommensurate with property relations? If we were to act as if our interactions—social, sexual, and otherwise—could not be reified as such, could not be measured by the familiar metrics of value, particularly when these metrics measure only the conditions of their making? Or to phrase it another way: Can we, as feminists, do more with the concept of consent than give or demand it? And is it possible to mine its performative dimensions as a resource for artistic production?

*The subject able to give consent, to exercise will, and to demonstrate injury before the law is neither timeless nor universal, but materially and historically produced.*

This is a project that asks what could be gained or broken open if we thought about relations not through social scripts, but aesthetic ones. Specifically, it investigates what possibilities emerge when we consider the historically and

politically charged notion of consent through the lens of art. There is a long tradition in art practice of troubling the distinction between art and everyday life. As Peter Bürger has argued in *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, the work of many 20<sup>th</sup> century avant-garde movements has been to interrogate this distinction between high art and mere life—or as he writes, “to return art to the praxis of life.”<sup>6</sup> This ethic continued to animate the politicized practices of the 70s, 80s, and 90s: in the notion (taken up by so many feminist practitioners) that the personal is political; and in the notion (taken up by so many queer practitioners, especially those working during the height of the AIDS epidemic) that the distinction between what is merely personal and what is properly political can be the difference between life and death; and in the notion (taken up by so many black artists and artists of color), that the categories of the personal and political are shaped by the history of violence that attends the distinction between personhood and property. These traditions of art practice illustrate how the social world can be mined through aesthetic form; and conversely, aesthetic forms structure the ways social interactions have meaning. Aesthetic experience is, in its simplest terms, sensory experience, though how that sensory experience relates to questions of beauty, morality, or value remains a deeply contested discourse. In Western traditions of aesthetic theory, art has been described as pleasurable “imitation,”<sup>7</sup> vilified as actively deceptive, an obstacle to ethical life;<sup>8</sup> and lauded as a social or metaphysical good, an experience of beauty that hones moral feeling.<sup>9</sup> Thus, my question with this project and in my practice and scholarship more generally, is not *whether* social relations can be made aesthetic, but rather *whose* social relations, historically and in the present, comprise the aesthetic as we uphold and reproduce it, and *to what end*. Whose social relations are dismissed as “mere aesthetic,” decorative or inconsequential, which is to say outside the rubric of value production? And whose social relations bear a higher “transcendental” interest? In short, this work engages the fraught criteria by which some labors are recognized as fine art, while others are not. It highlights the gendered dimensions of that

distinction, the different capacities of different bodies to name art as such. Or, as Mierle Laderman Ukeles puts it in her “Manifesto for Maintenance Art,” the historical difficulty of claiming, from a feminist position, “that what I say is art is art.”<sup>10</sup>

*What animates this project is not the desire to insist on the fact of relation, but rather to ask: How do we mark our relations to each other when the terms of that marking are themselves not neutral, when the terms of the mark privilege a certain subject position over others?*

On one level, these nonconsensual collaborations are the work of a predatory imagination, a monstrously feminine voracity that threatens to introject. On another, they are an absurdist exercise, wherein predation becomes a feminist critique of the unacknowledged historical contingencies of agency—that fact, which we all confront but confront differently, that we must make choices in conditions that are not of our choosing. This is to say that the scraps I am presenting now are not meant to prove anything. I have no stake in the truth of these collaborations: they are, by design, un-corroborated by contractual relation, nonconsensual. What animates this project is not the desire to insist on the fact of relation, but rather to ask: How do we mark our relations to each other when the terms of that marking are themselves not neutral, when the terms of the mark privilege a certain subject position over others? What relations can be forged through an acknowledgement of this difference in historical power relation rather than through a presumption of sameness in the present?

By naming the following encounters nonconsensual collaborations, I am not attempting to make disempowerment visible; I am not asking that anything be rectified. Rather, this project works through invisibility, exploring how disempowerment can be turned into a covert

tactic. In short, this project resists the political shorthand of making something visible explores, instead, how performative framing can be a tool of transformation. Nonconsensual collaboration becomes a way of claiming those interactions and entanglements we did not necessarily choose. It turns the inadequacies of agency into a resource, where the impasses of social life become a medium for making.

## I.

The first nonconsensual collaboration took place over the summer of 2012, when I began an email exchange with a musician who was a well-known figure in the Norwegian black metal scene. He had been incarcerated for violent crimes and while in jail had become increasingly neo-fascistic, nationalistic, and virulently anti-Semitic and Islamophobic. I was interested in his transition from the radically subcultural to radically regressive: how the blood-letting and extreme aesthetics that characterized his metal career—aesthetics that looked a lot like the queer *S/M* performance taking place at the same time in the US—transmogrified into the song of the nation state, into a concern over keeping the national body intact. As I have written about elsewhere, the correspondence between the visual imagery of black metal and queer subculture, while not structured by direct artistic influence or citation, could be understood as arising from a shared stake: a marking of that originary colonial trauma that instantiated the systems of heteropatriarchy at the nexus of Church and State. Aesthetically, this shared stake takes the form of a shared occult imaginary of dark feminine or effeminized monstrosity—an iconography that hails me from behind the corpse paint, even though, as a queer Jewish woman, I am no black metal musician’s intended audience.<sup>11</sup>

What interested me about this black metal musician is my own feeling about him: why I liked him and felt so compelled by that metal scene which could never have been for me—by the aesthetic innovation of a man who, if he ever knew me, would hate me. This corresponds to the question I have about a lot of

the philosophical texts I read as well: What does it mean to love the men who would find my love of them, my use of them for my own thought, so horrifying? What does it mean to be called by a thing that has not understood itself as calling you? After finding his email address through his website, I wrote to the metal musician for about a month. I never got a response. The last email simply said, “I am coming to find you,” and I went to Oslo.

In a series of collected lectures and writings, Adrian Piper describes xenophobia in relation to dynamics of violation. She writes,

Xenophobia is defined as the fear of strangers, but it actually is not just the fear of strangers as such; for example, xenophobia does not apply to people in one’s family, relatives whom one happens to have not met, or to neighbors, or to other inhabitants of one’s small town. Xenophobia is about the fear of the other considered as an alien—someone who does not look the way one is used to having people look, someone who does not behave in the way that one takes to be normal. It’s about the violation of boundaries, and I think that this perhaps has increasing resonance now in the European context, because of the demographic changes and waves of immigration that you experience from Eastern Europe, Asia, and Africa.<sup>12</sup>

The “violation of boundaries,” which Piper identifies as the animating fear of the xenophobic, is at the same time the animating erotic of black metal. Boundaries are repeatedly violated—sonically and bodily—in order to rehearse the trauma of that initial violation which is the subject of the music, the colonial imposition of a Christian order on a Pagan prehistory. As a performer, I also find an erotic in the fear of violated boundaries—in my audience’s fear that they might be subsumed in the action, in my own fear that the action will leak out into the everyday and fail to cohere legibly as art. I come from a slightly different perspective though: one that neither presumes nor seeks to restore an idea of an inviolable self, as this inviolable self rests on a relationship to subjecthood, property, and agency which I fail to inherit or embody. Rather, in relation to the xenophobic charge of black metal music, mine is a xenophobic impulse. I seek to

ingest that which is not meant for me, to derive sustenance for myself where there is none, to turn into a resource something that is not meant for me. Xenophagy describes the state when the herbivore becomes carnivorous, the hunter necrophagous. It is an adaptive change born of necessity, on the insistence that the inhospitable environs in which one might find oneself must offer something for survival. It is a behavior that reflects a greedy yet willful insistence on one's own flourishing.

I went to Oslo hungry for an encounter. I searched and, in the process, became sated with the search itself. How do you tell the story of searching for something and not finding it? How do you frame a search as an ongoing relation rather than its object? What is the difference between a fantasized relation and a real one? An earnest search and a failed one? What confirmations do you then find all around you? On some level, this was a search for origins—for the cradle that fostered a radical and genuinely complicated musical subculture. I was looking for him because I was looking for metal-ness and the ineffable quality of the quest was met with an atmospheric quality of its object. What we made together, what I made with him, is metal-ness as a way of looking: a question asked and answered through the act of looking for it. Non-consent in this context names the imagination of one's own capacity to capture—especially when that capacity is imagined in the face of complete inaccessibility, the pretension to agency that marks any fringe subject.

## II.

The second nonconsensual collaboration took place in the summer of 2013, which began when I had an encounter with another performance artist in the men's room of a New York City Chinatown bar. It was the after party for an art event, and the artist—quite drunk—was complaining about how all the women he was hitting on “couldn't handle” him. I could handle him and was appropriately provoked by the provocation. So I took him into the men's room where he ate my pussy.

This was an artist whose work I have written about and am interested in precisely because it negotiates questions of consensual acts and vulnerability. During our encounter he made a lot of the same salacious statements he makes in his performance work. For several days afterward, the artist and I texted. Then, from an unknown number, I got a picture of what was unmistakably his photo-shopped hand holding a cell phone. The phone displayed a text message exchange between the artist and me, but one that had never happened. It contained excerpts from things we'd both said publicly about our work, the status of the document, and the nature of evidentiary truth. I was excited and decided to send something equally exciting back. So I sent him a clip from a performance I had done several years earlier with a rape kit, where I swab my vaginal cavity and put the swabs in evidence collection envelopes. I sent the video clip as a text, along with another text that said “77 hours later,” counting up from the moment of our encounter. And I sent this not to the unknown number, but the one I already had for him.

*Who gets to insist on the separation between aesthetic and social life? Certainly not me; certainly not most women. The rape kit is itself a poignant embodiment of that.*

It turned out that the artist had not sent me the original image of his hand. It was, very coincidentally, part of a work a friend was putting together—one that imagined different artists and celebrities who've all experienced negative media attention at a dinner party together. My friend had chosen to represent my presence non-visually in an imagined text exchange between this other performance artist and myself, and had texted me the resulting image. For some reason, I had not saved her number in my phone from the last time we talked. Understandably, the performance artist was very upset by my video and its implication of evidentiary capture. The forensic gesture



of “discovering” him, of capturing his bodily matter, where neither of us refute he had been, where we both already knew it was. He yelled at me about it for a while and then said something that was the impetus for the way I’ve been thinking about this project: that his art and life are separate.

Given the clear confluence of his performance work and our bathroom encounter, this seemed patently untrue. But of more interest to me is the question of who gets to make that assertion: Who gets to insist on the separation between aesthetic and social life? Certainly not me; certainly not most women. The rape kit is itself a poignant embodiment of that. It highlights the way a woman’s body is always at least partially a landscape of the social: a field on which meaning is produced, truth is discovered, value is created. As I have explored elsewhere, rape kits exist because of the evidentiary difference between a woman’s voice and her body.<sup>13</sup> My previous work with the rape kit was about the material expropriation at its heart: the idea that structures of visibility, agency, and power remain materially bound to the feminine position as it is reduced to the vaginal cavity: the hole that speaks—that is made to speak—and overspeaks that other hole, the mouth, the seat of representational agency we usually refer to as “voice.” The rape kit as such a highly choreographed object asks, for me, not what truths can be discovered, but what harms *cannot* be voiced? What complicated entanglements cannot be understood simply in terms of harm? These questions informed the encounter I had with this artist before we ever walked into the men’s room. They have a form and structure, which is not aesthetic for him, but is certainly—given the nature of my practice—aesthetic for me. When I was performing with the rape kit, I tried and failed to write about false rape reporting. The question of the false rape report is one of how someone can use an incomplete tool of capture—a tool that reproduces those terms of erasure which make such capture necessary in the first place—to capture something that escapes, the violence, violations, and historical conditions of subjugation that cannot be

voiced. Part of the logic of the kit is that it demands a perpetrator. Though what possibilities open up in the object when perpetration is not thought of as an individual act, but an institutional one? There’s an incommensurability between the performance artist’s and my understanding of perpetration and capture. And our nonconsensual collaborative work centers on the question of what happens when that incommensurability is formalized and shown rather than erased.

### III.

The third nonconsensual collaboration is easier to date from its end rather than its beginning. In the fall of 2013, one partner in a couple I had been close to sent me a break-up email. She was upset about what she understood as deceit on the part of the other partner, deceit that became attributed to me. She was angry, specifically, about a sexual encounter that I had with that partner, which was kept as a long-hidden secret for a significant portion of our friendship—a secret I eventually told. It’s not that sexual encounters between us were inherently disallowed. It was that in telling—telling what was, at that point, likely already known, or at least long-suspected—I had violated the tangled structures of power, pedagogy, and dependence that came to define our triangular relations. So the wronged partner, the one I was closer to on many accounts, sent me an email that I understand as a score to go fuck myself:

aliza  
three last bits:

#### **MONDAY**

recently there was mention that you were aiming to confirm interview for Monday? no, not necessary.

#### **THE REST**

who fucking cares? you got fucked by [X] with a handheld dirty disposable plastic prop dick. you got text messages to follow. this new years offer to [X] - as i left for myanmar

reflected a very uninterested and bored me. a nuisance. now: you can't hold your end of the annoying long-held bargain to leave it alone. as i pointed out, i am disgusted that you would trash [X] first - before your desperate fingering blurt.

aiming for the low blow is right in line with mediocre cocksucking. overall, we'd just rather you just didn't.

### **about final commitments**

submit your final design and writing to me for TDR as our last correspondence via dropbox. due in MONDAY Nov 11th. the intern will be in touch to get your submission/payment paperwork together. you will receive \$100.

if you decide to withdraw, leave the ALIZA personal dropbox folder as it is - empty.

I had collaborated with this partner on work about our relation before: about the question of generations between queer and feminist art practice, about the difficulty of what remains and what can be passed on. We'd always struggled to formalize our exchanges, being too much inside the shared social world we created, the shared language of our mutual feeling, enacted through years of conversation and through the accumulation of everyday gestures of care. Paradoxically, in her gesture of ending our friendship, the wronged partner put into aesthetic imperatives that which had been the subject of our shared concern. The carefully crafted and typographically considered phrases introduce a language of domination that is made more communicative for its florid detail. The pronoun "we" retroactively places her at the moment of betrayal, and this reinsertion covers over the real violation, which was not sexual transgression but exclusion. In this sense we might understand the email as itself

a performative text, one where she imagines a scene of bad sex in order to bear witness to it. At the same time, the email is clearly a score: a set of directives for performance, a demand for specific movement perhaps best encapsulated by imperative mood of the words "submit" and "leave."

How do you attend to the porousness of influence while you are still in it, under it? How does a feeling of ostracization become a feeling held in common—and more importantly, a basis for commonality? How do you collectivize bitterness—feelings of having been overlooked, forgotten, discounted? Can you act in ways that allow for both bitterness and love? The score formalizes our common stake through the same gesture that obviates it. As an emissary, a direction to action, the email not only feels like a score, but also a gift. Like all gifts, it is premised in violence: in exchange that can never be made even, in a reciprocity that could only ever be felt as debt. In "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex," Gayle Rubin describes how women are the first gift: given from one man to another, the woman becomes gendered in the exchange, the bearer of kinship relation that will be carried out in her reproductive labors. There seems an echo of this dynamic in relations of queer kinship. As a kinship structure, queerness is not exempted from the questions of inheritance, propriety, and belonging that undergird the heteropatriarchal order. In queer relation, one might negotiate those questions differently, with a different politics in mind, but nothing guarantees the realization of such difference. Or perhaps queerness simply offers the possibility of broaching intergenerational relation with a different orientation towards pleasure and prohibition. In the relationship with these two older queer artists, it felt as though I was something they passed from one another to concretize their relation—something offered and received. This gifting—my gifting—was something I could take pleasure in as well, as in their negotiations I could experience the charge of my own objectification. But the difficulty of this dynamic, I came to realize, is that once you have ceded agency in this respect, allowed yourself to become a term

of relation for others, it is difficult to then opt out. I opted out by telling that which I knew I was not supposed to tell, by announcing the terms of their unspoken deal with each other—an exchange between them but about me. With the score as a type of gift, I become no longer just the object but also a subject of exchange. In this transition from object to subjecthood, I was released. Like most release, it was both painful and gratifying—an agential act but not exactly a choice.

In adultery narratives, there is the corroboration of the couple: they reinforce each other's story. The damage control seems one of reconfiguring the bounds of the world they share, of shoring up what they both know about it, of coming to agreement on what there is to know. As an oblique third in any relationship, you don't want to pierce that tenuous bubble—we all only depend on the kindness of others to maintain that surface tension of relation that binds any form of intimacy. (Of course, perhaps part of the pleasure and power of the third is the knowledge that you could.) Intimacy is, in this sense, a depth produced always at the surface, an enclosure that is merely a fold, an inversion, an invagination of the outside. From the other side of intimacy emerges a new set of questions: How do you choreograph pain? What room is there for other feeling when you have been the source of pain for others? How do you understand yourself as the mark against which others come together, against which new intimacies can form of which you are not a part? I think, in a profound way, there is an answer that lies in the experience of getting fucked and then being told to get fucked—in being told to get fucked because you got fucked. It's a call and response structure out of time, in the wrong order, you could even say a queer order—one retroactively fulfilled. What interests me is how the attempt to cut off relation instead suspends us in one. What is nonconsensual in this relation is what also might be construed as a willful act of misreading: to look at something violent and recognize it as care. And there's a reciprocal violence in reading this email as a score, and more so in reading

it as a good score, a beautiful score: a violence all the more troubling to enact (and I'm sure to experience) because it is presented as an objectively critical capacity to appreciate aesthetic value—that is, because it is shrouded as taste.

#### IV.

The fourth nonconsensual collaboration took place in the spring of 2014. An older artist left a message on my answering machine with an invitation to attend the VIP night of a museum opening as her guest. I'd worked for the artist—unhappily—when I first moved to New York and had not kept in touch with her over the past several years, so was surprised to get the invitation. But an article had been making the rounds about my work and I thought perhaps this had reminded her of her interest in me. So I called back and accepted the invitation. I even bought her a corsage. Once the excitement wore off though, I began to worry that she had meant to call someone else who shares my name. All my friends told me I was being paranoid—that my name was unusual and unlikely to be confused. One told me I had low self-esteem. Yet when I showed up to the event to meet the artist, my paranoia was confirmed: I was the wrong Aliza. And because I had anxiously rehearsed this exact situation in my head for the entire week prior, I did not look appropriately surprised. I think the artist thinks that I tricked her. When I see her out in the world, she seems to still regard me with suspicion and—perhaps symptomatically—can never remember my name.

*I'm interested in all the work, all the anxiety, all the aspiration that goes into that banal relational form of showing up.*

People talk about the terrible responsibility of the people who are in positions of power but what is often overlooked is the terrible responsibility of the dependent: the burden of both recognizing while pretending not to see the fragility of those upon whom you depend, the

nakedness of power's violability. Is it significant, does it mean anything, to be the wrong one, the right name and wrong body? To have to bear the shame of your own misrecognition? There lies in this a basic feminist question: why must we, who are misrecognized, carry the violence of that encounter with us? How does the naïve earnestness of response—that *not-knowing-better-than-to-show-up*—become a violence done to someone else? I'm interested in all the work, all the anxiety, all the aspiration that goes into that banal relational form of showing up. In how promises are often posed as calls—calls to power, calls to belonging—yet how belonging or solidarity might actually manifest in the misrecognition of oneself as being called.

Everyone who attended this VIP night of the museum art opening received a party favor: a hideous box shaped like a metallic apple. Different lengths of spikes stick out of the apple at all sides and it feels like it is made of a type of heavy plastic. The lid is ill-fitting and the construction is shoddy. Nonetheless, I kept the apple as a marker of my evening. It reminded me of a Greek myth, recounted by Ovid, that tells of a golden apple. Eris, the goddess of discord, creates a golden apple engraved with the dedication: "to the fairest one." Three goddesses claimed the apple: Hera, Athena, and Aphrodite. They asked Zeus to judge who should receive the gift. Unable to decide, Zeus assigns the judging to the mortal Paris. There's an ending to the story—the goddesses try and bribe Paris, Aphrodite has the best bribe, Helen, and wins the apple though also starts the Trojan war. But what I find most compelling in this myth are the dynamics of giving and gifting. The golden apple is mobilized in a world of women—women who are its equivalent, women as a medium of exchange: an apple for a hand in marriage, an apple for other parts. Yet the measure of this medium does not change. As Peggy Phelan writes in her analysis of gender performativity and illusory power of feminine representation, "Zeus to Paris: the golden apple is always given by men to other men."<sup>15</sup>

The phallogocentrism of aesthetic value works in similar dynamics. In what Mary Kelly has described as "the coincidence of language and patriarchy,"<sup>16</sup> the medium—and those bodies who are historically, and in the present, nothing but mediums for other things to pass through—fails to announce itself, fails to claim its own terms. "Consent" becomes an inadequate term through which to understand our dependence. How do you claim something that has happened to you? Can it ever be independent from a relation to the other? This difficulty bespeaks the structural dependence between a "you" and a "me." On whose terms is that dependence figured and understood?

## V.

The fifth nonconsensual collaboration took place from the fall of 2014 to the spring of 2015. It was with another artist whose work could be described as "sexually aggressive," though the actual loci of sex and aggression in her practice is more complicated than that term suggests. Like me, this artist had become the subject of public controversy because of her art practice. Over many home-cooked dinners, this artist and I discussed ideas of violation, intimacy, dependence, and agency in our practices—the ways in which our approaches differed and the way they overlapped. We came up with a term that seemed to describe the personal and political disposition we shared and that we came to identify in other artists: the condition.

The condition is primarily marked by a certain type of excess, one that bears a relationship to femininity—that well-worn "monstrous" feminine that is too much: that wants too much, loves too much, is too soft, too wet, too excitable, too effusive, too much. The condition describes, in part, a femininity reduced to its sensuousness, its object-ness—an understanding of the ways a reproductive body, a maternal body, is under threat of being consigned to mere matter. Part of the condition is that there is no real name for the condition. The condition is marked by its effects: a scandal-

ized relationship to a public sphere, a pathologized relationship to community, a predatory relationship to interpersonal encounters. The condition often manifests as notoriety: as the public scandal, hate mail, death threats. It often goes by the wrong names—hysteria, narcissism, self-indulgence—pseudonyms by which it circulates in the social. The condition is not a symptom, but a proclivity: a capacity to play the villain in a narrative that precedes you, a willingness to be burned at the stake.

*The condition is shorthand for the fact that we make work under conditions not of our choosing—conditions under which the axioms of value and agency arise from the historical conditions of heteropatriarchy and white supremacy.*

Part of the condition is that we were able to recognize one another. Those who have it wear it on the outmost surfaces of their skin—as the first layer that touches the world. Part of the condition is that we will feel stolen from by each other—and part of the condition is our capacity to perversely recognize such theft as love. Ours is a collectivity that comes from need, from a suspect relation to autonomous individuality. The condition is an acknowledgement and struggle with the dependencies of social life, an experiment with that dependency that should be understood as political. In “Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy,” Karl Marx writes—in a poignant acknowledgement of the affective stakes of material conditions—that “to be sensuous is to suffer.”<sup>17</sup> To exist as an object, as matter, as something more than an abstraction, is to exist for others. As soon as you have an object, that object has you for an object. The condition describes exactly this state of living objecthood; this state of being for and in relation to each other.

The artist and I lost each other eventually. A large portion of what initially brought us together was that we both experience intense social connections: at times they take the form of internet stalkers, obsessive ex-lovers; other times, they manifest through sudden friend break-ups, repeated falling outs. Perhaps it should have been no surprise that we might eventually experience that with each other. While I miss my friend at times and worry about my own capacities for friendship, I feel comforted by a deeper commonality that shows itself only as turbulence in the smoothing action of social connection. The artist does not consent to my writing about the condition in these pages, but part of the condition is that we cannot decide what we owe each other: something between everything and nothing. The condition is shorthand for the fact that we make work under conditions not of our choosing—conditions under which the axioms of value and agency arise from the historical conditions of heteropatriarchy and white supremacy.

“The condition,” as a term, plays with the language of feminine pathology. It is an inculcating practice, one that explores how the already-available scripts of hysteria, manipulation, and deception can be turned into a resource: one that explores how an embrace of the pejorative can become reparative, or more importantly, can become politicized critique. The condition as a diagnostic tool describes how the constraint of these material conditions are both shared and felt. We find each other, lose each other, enable each other through a partial knowing—in ways that confirm both our so-called pathology and our power.

- <sup>1</sup> Originally published in *Special Issue: A Gun for Every Girl*, Guest edited by Trista Mallory, Jen Kennedy, and Angeliqye Szymanek *The Journal of Feminist Scholarship*. (Spring 2017). University of Massachusetts, Dartmouth, <http://www.jfsonline.org/issue12-13/articles/shvarts/>
- <sup>2</sup> “Performance” can be a broad term that refers to a diverse set of practices within multiple art historical contexts—from avant-garde theater and experimental dance to “happenings” and durational body art. It is also a term recently invoked in critical theory, both in the context of speech action (see J.L. Austin, *How to Do Things With Words* [Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1975]), as well as gender identity (see Judith Butler, *Gender Trouble: Feminism and the Subversion of Identity* [London: Routledge, 2006]). Thinking across these contexts, I here engage the term to refer to consequential action undertaken by a body over time.
- <sup>3</sup> Saidiya Hartman, *Scenes of Subjection: Terror, Slavery, and Self-Making in Nineteenth Century America* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997) 80.
- <sup>4</sup> Hartman 80-81
- <sup>5</sup> Here I refer to ideologies of citizenship and subjecthood produced in Enlightenment thinking. For a compelling history of this production, see Genevieve Lloyd, *The Man of Reason: ‘Male’ and ‘Female’ in Western Philosophy* (London: Routledge [1984] 1993).
- <sup>6</sup> Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984), 86.
- <sup>7</sup> “Imitation comes naturally to human beings [...] so does the universal pleasure in imitations [...] The reason for this is that understanding is extremely pleasant, not just for philosophers but for others too in the same way, despite their limited capacity for it. This is the reason people take delight in seeing images; what happens is that as they come to view them they come to understand and work out what each thing is (e.g. This is so-and-so).” Aristotle, *Poetics* trans. Malcolm Heath (New York: Penguin, 1996), 48b.
- <sup>8</sup> “[...]Painting and imitation as a whole are far from the truth when they produce their work; and that, moreover, imitation keeps company with the part in us that is far from prudence, and is not comrade and friend for any healthy or true purpose.” Plato, *The Republic of Plato*, trans. Allan Bloom (New York: Basic Books, [1968] 1991), 603b.
- <sup>9</sup> “Taste enables us, as it were, to make the transition from sensible charm to a habitual moral interest without making too violent a leap; for taste presents the imagination as admitting, even in its freedom, of determination that is purposive for the understanding, and it teaches us to like even objects of sense freely, even apart from sensible charm.” Immanuel Kant *Critique of Judgment*, trans. Werner S. Pluhar, (Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1987), 230.
- <sup>10</sup> Mierle Laderman Ukeles, “Manifesto for Maintenance Art 1969!”. 1969. *Ronald Feldman Fine Arts* [www.feldmangallery.com/media/pdfs/Ukeles\\_MANIFESTO.pdf](http://www.feldmangallery.com/media/pdfs/Ukeles_MANIFESTO.pdf)
- <sup>11</sup> See Aliza Shvarts, “Troubled air: the drone and doom of reproduction in SunnO)))’s metal maieutic,” *Women & Performance: a journal of feminist theory* 24:2-3 (2014): 203-219.
- <sup>12</sup> Adrian Piper, “Xenophobia and the Indexical Present II: Lecture,” *Out of Order, Out of Sight: Volume 1: Selected Writings in Meta-Art, 1968-1992* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1996) 255.
- <sup>13</sup> <http://www.extensionsjournal.org/the-journal/6/how-i-learned-to-stop-worrying-and-love-the-rape-kit>
- <sup>14</sup> See Gayle Rubin, “The Traffic in Women: Notes on the ‘Political Economy’ of Sex,” *Toward an Anthropology of Women*, ed. Ranya R. Reitner (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1975) 157-210.
- <sup>15</sup> Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 111.
- <sup>16</sup> Mary Kelly, *Imaging Desire* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1993), 23.
- <sup>17</sup> Karl Marx, “Critique of Hegel’s Philosophy in General,” Marxists Internet Archive, accessed 25 August 2016, <[www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1844/manuscripts/hegel.htm](http://www.marxists.org/archive/marx/works/1844/manuscripts/hegel.htm)>





*Sibboleth*

interactive sound installation via (5) 2in x 2in QR codes, 22:51min, 2016

**Must listen with headphones**















Statement by Helaine S. Klasky — Yale University, Spokesperson

**New Haven, Conn. — April 17, 2008**

Ms. Shvarts is engaged in performance art. Her art project includes visual representations, a press release and other narrative materials. She stated to three senior Yale University officials today, including two deans, that she did not impregnate herself and that she did not induce any miscarriages. The entire project is an art piece, a creative fiction designed to draw attention to the ambiguity surrounding form and function of a woman's body.

She is an artist and has the right to express herself through performance art.

Had these acts been real, they would have violated basic ethical standards and raised serious mental and physical health concerns.

*Posters*

(2) 18in x 24in inkjet prints on paper, performance documentation from *Untitled [Senior Thesis]* (2008), 2017

For an academic year, I performed repeated self-induced miscarriages. I created a group of fabricators from volunteers who submitted to periodic STI screenings and agreed to complete and permanent anonymity. From the 9th to the 15th day of my menstrual cycle, the fabricators would provide me with sperm samples, which I used to privately self-inseminate. Using a needless syringe, I would inject the sperm near my cervix within 30 minutes of its collection, so as to insure the possibility of fertilization. On the 28th day of my cycle, I would ingest an herbal abortifacient, after which I would experience cramps and heavy bleeding. To protect myself and others, only I know the number of fabricators who participated, the frequency and accuracy with which I inseminated, and the specific abortifacient I used. Because of these measures of privacy, the piece exists only in its telling. This telling can take textual, visual, spatial, temporal, and performative forms—copies of copies for which there is no original.

## HOW DOES IT FEEL TO BE A FICTION?

NEWYORK VIRUS (APRIL 13-JUNE 14, 2017)

RECESS, NEWYORK

I became a fiction in 2008, which was a year that many things revealed themselves as fictions: “sub-prime mortgage,” “too big to fail,” “regulation of the financial industry,” “the American dream.” That year I concluded a controversial work, *Untitled [Senior Thesis]*, which was my undergraduate thesis project for the art major at Yale University.<sup>1</sup> About a month before the undergraduate thesis exhibition was to be installed, I gave a presentation on the project to the art department’s senior colloquium. From there, news of the project spread as an early internet viral phenomenon—from the *Yale Daily News* to the *Drudge Report* and then to every major national media outlet and several international news sites. As a result, my installation for the project was banned and the project as a whole was denounced as a “creative fiction” in an official statement by the university.<sup>2</sup>

While this was the first time I was called a fiction explicitly, it was not the first time I felt myself to be one. In the many polite misogynies, casual homophobias, and soft sexual assaults of my youth that I misrecognized as care, I suspected something fake about my own sense of agency, something about myself that would always be subject to interpretations not my own. That a woman’s body and her voice are sites of regulation—base matter or *mere material* for the production of other meanings—was a thesis both posited and confirmed in the scope of that project. And it remains, in many respects, a focus of my current scholarly and creative work.

Many of us are fictions—both in relation to the histories of subjectivity as well as in tangible ways that shape our everyday engagements

with larger structures of power. Many of us have felt our fictive quality in circumstances far more consequential than those surrounding an artwork. Being deemed a fiction constitutes a certain type of erasure, an interdiction of agency, but can also authorize real tangible violence against the body. To put it bluntly: being a fiction can be life threatening. It can lead, as it often does on the larger stage of national and global politics, to intergenerational cycles of poverty, exodus, and dispossession. It can lead, in non-metaphorical ways, to death.

Fiction denotes a position, or lack thereof, within the historical formation of subjecthood. It does not describe an essential state of being; rather, it is a relation of difference from that presumed citizen-subject of the Western philosophical tradition: the white, property-owning, able-bodied heterosexual man who is the “proper” agent of knowledge, capitalism, and law. Insofar as “woman” reads as a mark of difference, she is a fiction—someone who, in the words of Simone de Beauvoir, “is not born but becomes.”<sup>3</sup> Insofar as “black man” reads as a mark of difference, he is a fiction—someone who, in the words of Frantz Fanon, “lacks ontological resistance in the eyes of the white man.”<sup>4</sup> While gender and race are two hyper-visible forms of difference within the context of patriarchy and white supremacy, they are neither exclusive nor exhaustive. To be disabled is to be a fiction to inaccessible architectures; to be poor is to be a fiction to capitalist subjectivity; to be indigenous is to be a fiction to colonizing armies and genocidal regimes; to be undocumented is to be a fiction the State. To this end, fiction is the lived legacy of having been silenced, deported, disenfranchised, incarcerated, genocided, sterilized,



burned, interned, or lobotomized. It is the gray area that shades the subject's presumption of an agential self.

People are, of course, not fictions. Not really. Not any of us. Our bodies are tangible, palpable, real. We take up space; we contain truth; we exist. That anybody should be a "fiction" is a requirement of those systems of governance that seek to parse meaning from bare life. In this context, fiction is a monument to an abjected state of being: it covers over that space left behind when real existences are jettisoned from social and political legibility. It marks as it masks the violent legacies of subjugation that form the foundation of subjecthood, at once a suture and a scar. Through fiction, we are mobilized not as subjects, but as objects of discourse within those structures of power from which we have been historically excluded. Note, for example, how in the halls of state and federal governments, a woman's body is invoked as a site of discipline in the debates surrounding abortion and sexual assault, particularly as the two come together in the right-wing fantasies of "legitimate rape." Note, how—in the strict gender binarism of institutional spaces such as prisons, school bathrooms, state documents, etc.—the trans or gender-fluid body becomes a site of impossibility, or worse, a site of pathology, criminality, or liability. Note—as there has indeed been a nationwide call to note—the dual-fiction that dematerializes black and brown bodies as specters of criminality and renders them immaterial as victims of police shootings and other state-sanctioned crimes. On the one hand, such fiction authorizes the increased militarization of police forces and the expansion of prisons and border walls; on the other, it

absolves and renders "victim-less" the violent action of the State.

That our status as fiction can be *revealed* as fiction changes nothing. Fictions are not simply effects of power, but endemic to it, making possible that foundational *other* fiction that is unmarked: the naturalization of the straight white male citizen as the neutral subject of culture, economy, and law. Fiction in this sense becomes a demarcation between power and disempowerment, between who gets called something and who does the calling. It signals, in that contested space between the caller and the called, whose voice we are supposed to trust. In a 2016 talk by Cheryl Harris—in which she discussed the connection between racial and economic subjectivity, and importantly, the role of stolen life in capitalist accumulation—she brought up the question of trust and its racialization. Discussing a recent tumble in the Chinese stock market, which US economic experts and pundits attributed to the Chinese State's attempt to interfere with and regulate markets, she observed:

The fact that after the worldwide economic collapse in 2008 anybody could be scolded for failing to trust the market is really quite stunning—but it says something about the durability of certain premises and their immunity to facts. This rhetoric also has undertones of a kind of racialized presumption about master and pupil that's rendered even more ironic given the rickety state of the US economic situation.<sup>5</sup>

Delving further into the question of "trust"—or more specifically, who succeeds and fails to inhabit it—Harris cited Karen Ho's sociological work on the role of "trustworthiness" in modern business interactions,<sup>6</sup> as well as

Sumi Cho's recent critique of the "weak ties" that forge economic relations, such as trust, reliability, and credibility.<sup>7</sup> Perhaps it is no surprise that both found trustworthiness itself to be gendered and raced. As Harris described:

What's very interesting and what Sumi points out is that the studies that have been done to demonstrate the existence and I guess viability of these weak ties are all studies that look at the ways in which these weak ties rely on trust, reliability, and credibility—but as she points out all of the studies were basically 99% white and virtually all male. And so the desired traits that bolster and make weak ties possible are actually racially encrypted. These are characteristics that are in fact characteristics of the white male fraternity. And as Ho argues, the market is not a neutral field from which certain people are merely excluded; it is rather constructed through normative assumptions and connections to white male subjectivity and the traits associated with the proper economic subject.<sup>8</sup>

To be able to be trusted, to be able to testify to fact, to be able to be believed—these are attributes of something more than personal disposition. Many of us know this already: we know that trust is something we will always be earning rather than anything that is ever simply afforded to us, that truth (even about our own bodies) is something we will always be in the process of proving rather than anything we can automatically claim. And we know that this comes at great cost. If trustworthiness can never be ours, can never be decanted from the historically situated identity position from which it arises and to which it attaches—the "white male fraternity"—then we might look to another inheritance. While there is no universal character to exclusion, nothing that wouldn't elide the multiple and intersecting histories of oppression that people navigate with dramatically different consequences, there is perhaps a resource in the fiction of our shared state of "fiction."

Following the outcome of the 2016 US presidential election, there has been a lot of discussion over the viral spread of "fake news": how the advent of social media and Web 2.0 has allowed for its proliferation; how we face a new crisis of information, of trust in media, of

truth. Yet as many researchers and commentators have contended, "fake news" is not new.<sup>9</sup> Rumor, gossip, myth, and tall tales have always shaped the political and social field; they have always outlined alternative pathways for information to circulate. As feminist Marxist scholar Silvia Federici has noted, "gossip" used to refer to the woman herself before it came to name her delegitimized speech—speech that circulated within female friendships, which were becoming an increasing object of suspicion, denounced by the Church as undermining the sacred bond between husband and wife.<sup>10</sup> Gossip in this context describes the passing of meaningful information between people whose conviviality is regulated: truth in the guise of frivolity. It is a form of speech available to you when you know you will never be believed, when your subject position is itself grounds for defamation. "Fake news," on the other hand, works through an inversion of this logic. It relies on the embodiment of a subject position that inspires trust, on a neutral journalistic voice unmarked by gender or racial difference, which is already presumed to testify to truth. In this sense, we might understand "fake news" as an appropriation of gossip's travelling power for the purpose of exposure rather than maintaining confidences or intimacy. "Fake news" demands the light of day, seeking to authoritatively broadcast hidden knowledge into the public sphere for judgment. Nonetheless, I won't denounce the form—especially not in the name of truth, a name that can never really be mine. Instead, I propose that the mechanism by which "fake news" spreads might be reclaimed in the name of an older feminist epistemology. Viral digital dissemination might be used to testify to the fact of fiction itself.

As an artist, I might have a slightly different relationship to the term fiction than others. It's useful as a word that describes the generative power of language, a term that has been most effective for me as an alibi. Since the painful experience of being a salacious viral news story, my practice has been invested in creating alibis. Rather than trying to "redeem" myself within those structures of trust-

worthiness and believability, I've decided to stay on the wrong side of truth—to explore the intimate and occulted pathways by which knowledge might circulate and meaning can be produced. From here, I am able to voice a different set of questions: How do fictions perpetuate themselves? How do fictions find community? In the digital and discursive field, they travel virally: they reproduce waywardly, claiming connection outside the arboreal logics of knowledge or kinship. They infect. This text is my first attempt to make a work through digital infection. By the time you have read this far, *How does it feel to be a fiction?* will have reproduced itself through your social relations as captured in your email activity. As described on the landing page, when you clicked “consent” and this text appeared on the next screen, an email was simultaneously sent in your name to every email address stored in your Gmail account. Should one of your contacts click on the link in that email and give their consent, *another* email will be sent in *their* name to every address stored in *their* Gmail account, and so on. Through you passed a digital germ, one that interpellates as it incants.

To feel yourself a fiction is to say “no” and know it will not matter, to feel the capacity of others to overwrite that basic existential act

of refusal. To feel yourself a fiction is to feel yourself at odds with the framework of subjecthood and citizenship—one premised on the white property-owning family men who are its historical model. To feel yourself a fiction is to feel a certain thinness to your voice: to know that what you say is inseparable from how you say it, from those sonic cadences or bodily markers that are in excess of the presumed white heteromascularity of an objective voice, and that for that reason, will be subject to greater scrutiny—if heard at all. You speak in words that, if recognized as yours, will be pathologized as contagious or dangerous for the way they infiltrate and spread. And if they are legible, they will be taken from you. You will perhaps be told you are “so articulate,” but in the same breath, be told to “use your own words” as though the language of theory, analysis, or cultural critique could only be mere mimicry when mediated through your flesh. If you have never felt yourself a fiction, consider this a mark of your privilege. Perhaps you don't identify with experiences I describe in this text, or perhaps you have yet to recognize them. That's fine. Doubt only confirms our fictive state.

—April, 2017

“Fabrication,” Maksim Levental

- <sup>1</sup> For more information about this project, see [http://alizashvarts.com/ASIS/Untitled\\_%5BSenior\\_Thesis%5D\\_%282008%29.html](http://alizashvarts.com/ASIS/Untitled_%5BSenior_Thesis%5D_%282008%29.html)
- <sup>2</sup> “Statement by Helaine S. Klasky—Yale University, Spokesperson.” 17 April 2008.
- <sup>3</sup> Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, trans. Constance Borde and Sheila Malovany-Chevallier, (New York: Vintage Book, 2011) 144.
- <sup>4</sup> Frantz Fanon, *Black Skins, White Masks*, trans. Richard Philcox (New York: Grove Press, [1952] 2008), 90.
- <sup>5</sup> Cheryl Harris, “The Afterlife of Slavery: Markets, Property, and Race,” talk at Artists Space, 19 January 2016. See <https://soundcloud.com/artistspace/cheryl-i-harris-the-afterlife-of-slavery-markets-property-and-race>
- <sup>6</sup> see Karen Ho, *Liquidated: An Ethnography of Wall Street* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009).
- <sup>7</sup> see Sumi Cho, “Embedded Whiteness: Theorizing Exclusion in Public Contracting,” *Berkeley La Raza Law Journal* 19: 2 (2008): 5-25.
- <sup>8</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>9</sup> for a study of the impact of “fake news” on the 2016 presidential election and a review of the literature, see Hunt Allcott and Matthew Gentzkow, “Social Media and Fake News in the 2016 Election,” March 2017: <https://web.stanford.edu/~gentzkow/research/fakenews.pdf>
- <sup>10</sup> Silvia Federici, *Caliban and the Witch: Women, the Body and Primitive Accumulation* (Brooklyn: Autonomedia, [2004] 2009), 186.

## HOW DOES IT FEEL TO BE FICTION?

BOGOTÁ VIRUS (OCTOBER 19-NOVEMBER 25, 2017)

UNIVERSIDAD DE LOS ANDES, BOGOTÁ, COLOMBIA

In the first edition of this piece, *How does it feel to be a fiction?* New York Virus (2017), I considered how many of us are produced as fictions. The female body becomes a fiction in the halls of state and federal government, a figuration of lack invoked as a site of discipline in the debates surrounding abortion and sexual assault. The trans or gender-fluid body becomes a fiction in relation to the strict gender binarism of institutional spaces such as prisons, school bathrooms, and state documents, an aporia visible as only a site of pathology, criminality, or liability. The black body becomes a fiction in relation to law enforcement, a site of erasure absolves and renders “victim-less” police shootings and other state-sanctioned crimes. The undocumented body becomes a fiction in relation to the body politic, lacking representation, conjured only as a specter that precipitates vengeful imaginations of increased border control. The indigenus body becomes a fiction to the project of colonization, an artifact genocided and then historicized in the mythology of the nation. The poor or working class body becomes a fiction to state-sanctioned capitalisms, an unreality that enables the erosion of labor protections and the slashing of public assistance programs. These fictions are produced through specific contexts with different histories and stakes, and this list is nowhere near exhaustive; yet in each case, being deemed a fiction constitutes a certain type of erasure, an interdiction of agency, which authorizes real and tangible violence against the body.

I want to begin this second essay with another, perhaps more difficult claim: that we are produced as fictions not only on the mac-

ro-scale of power, but also on the micro-scale of interpersonal connection. That is to say, we are fictions not just to the law, the nation, the economy, etc., but also fictions to each other. Janet Malcolm writes in *Psychoanalysis: The Impossible Profession* that, “The phenomenon of transference—how we all invent each other according to early blueprints—was Freud’s most original and radical discovery. [...] It at once destroys faith in personal relations and explains why they are tragic: we cannot know each other.”<sup>1</sup> In the dynamics of transference, we become historical fictions in each other’s eyes, generative sites for the revivification of past traumas in the present. Freud first recognized transference as occurring between analyst and patient. When, one after another, his patients began professing to be in love with him, he felt that the cause must be something other than what he coyly described as “the charms of my person.”<sup>2</sup> Eventually he theorized the phenomenon of transference, which explained that those feelings of love or desire that the patient holds for the therapist are the repetition of a prior attachment re-performed in the scene of analysis. Transference is central to the talking cure insofar as it allows the traumas of past relationships to be worked through. As Adam Phillips has pithily posited, “Psychoanalysis is about what two people can say to each other if they agree not to have sex.”<sup>3</sup> Yet transference is not exclusive to the psychoanalytic encounter. It is in fact an element of every attachment, every relationship. The possibility of human connectivity emerges only from the intractable reality of alienation: “We must grope around for each other through a dense thicket of absent others. We cannot see each other plain.”<sup>4</sup>

Fiction names a lived relationship to power: the way in which one's body might be discounted, one's voice ventriloquized, one's culture appropriated, one's existence erased. Yet with the same breath, fiction names the operative mechanism of relation itself, the psychic transfers of past attachment to a present context that undergirds the continuity of emotional life. The phenomenon of transference renders us, even within the space of relation, alone; yet paradoxically, it renders us plural. We carry our parents, siblings, lovers, etc. with us. They continue to populate our psychic interior. Apparitions, they become the medium through which we apprehend the new. On one hand, this illusory familiarity protects us—prevents us—from ever truly encountering the alterity of other people; on the other hand, it offers (at least in the therapeutic encounter) the opportunity for repair.

To this end, transference names something else quite troubling: the fact that our reactions and confrontations, when transferred, are displaced. This means that we do not confront the person who once loved us or once wronged us directly—for example our father or mother. We confront them only insofar as we have projected them on to another—for example, our boss, our lover, or the therapist. We might understand this as a failure of justice. There is, in the temporality of transference, an unethical slippage between the receiver of love or punishment and that original prior object of attachment, committer of the crime. As Heathcliff declares in Emily Brontë's *Wuthering Heights*, "The tyrant grinds down his slaves and they don't turn against him; they crush those beneath them."<sup>5</sup> Reaction lags, trailing those originary relationships that were

its catalysts, finding more proximate objects. Yet another way of looking at this would be to say that transference names a mode of repair that becomes available when one has been disabused of justice—when power relations are such that direct confrontation was never an option, that is, when we take seriously the impossibility of talking back to tyranny. Justice, as it is available to most of us, is a function of juridical systems premised on the very-same material histories that produced different populations as fictions. Knowing this, we might doubt its ability to serve us; we might begin to explore other avenues of healing. We might turn to a homeopathy of fictions: to articulate what could never be said to the hierarchies of power through the lateral relations of connection, the fictions that enable solidarity.

By the time you have read this far, *How does it feel to be a fiction?* will have reproduced itself through your social network as captured in your email activity. As was described to you on the landing page, when you clicked "consent" and this text appeared on the next screen, an email was simultaneously sent in your name to every email address stored in your Gmail account. Should one of your contacts click on the link in that email and give their consent, *another* email will be sent in *their* name to every address stored in *their* Gmail account, and so on. In the last edition of this work, I understood this process as corresponding to viral transmission. I was thinking specifically about the context of the 2016 US Presidential election and the role of the "viral" in re-shaping the civic space of democracy, and wondering how that mode of communication could be used to spread another type of political discourse—one that, through its medium and

content, made visible the experience of living fiction, the experience of being discounted as fake. This time, however, even though the digital mechanism is the same, I have a different understanding of the act being performed: this time the virus spreads as a way to make visible the operative fictions of relation, the ways we remain alive to each other, entangled, even if such entanglement is illusory.

The email invitation that has been sent in your name will reach lovers and ex-lovers, friends and ex-friends, bosses and ex-bosses, the living and the dead. It travels not only laterally but also backwards through the archive of social relations that is your email contact list, revivifying past relations in the present-tense of a new transmission. Perhaps you received the initial email invitation this way, through someone from the past suddenly encroaching on your present. Perhaps you felt a pang of emotion seeing their name. It's no longer a piece that makes use of the wayward circulation of information to demand a different kind of visibility for fictionalized subjects; rather, it has become a piece about the landscape of relation, the way our inboxes make tangible those internal archives of feeling. Of course, as the invitation describes, if a recipient replies

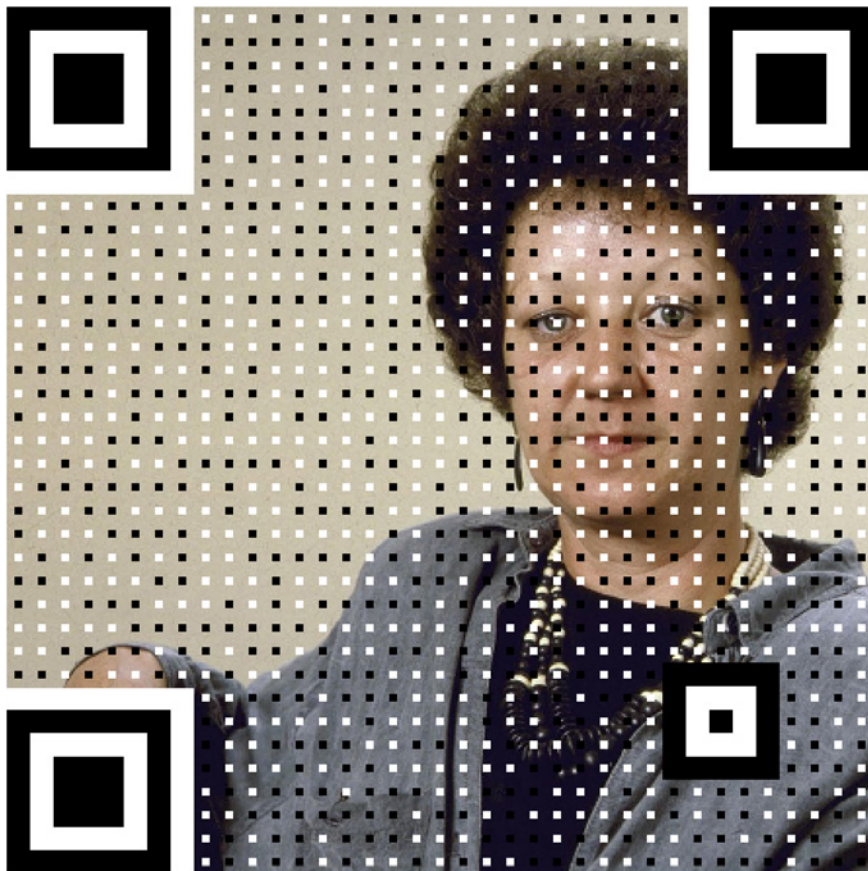
to the invitation email directly, they will not reach you. In the act of transmission, sender and receiver will have missed each other, temporally displaced by the viral mechanism of transfer, which is at once a metaphor for and a literalization of our desire to connect. Through you will have simply passed a digital germ and relational vector, one that interpellates as it incants.

To feel yourself a fiction is to feel yourself alive in the networks of desire; it is to imagine in yourself a muscle that can bear the attachment of others; it is to imagine your own capacity to attach. To feel yourself a fiction is to feel yourself animated beyond your body, introjected by the other and carried away. Transformed from a subject into an object: you become a mere marionette in their life's story. And if you are not a figure, you are the ground: overwritten by the desire of another, you become a screen onto which they project the ghosts of relations past. To feel yourself a fiction is to feel your role in the dynamics of human connection. It is at once to feel that you are loved, that you can love. It is to know that through these acts, you will never be truly seen, but that in your invisibility, you are not alone.

—October, 2017  
“Fabrication,” Maksim Levental

- <sup>1</sup> Janet Malcolm, *Psychoanalysis: The Impossible Profession* (New York: Random House, 1980) 6.
- <sup>2</sup> Sigmund Freud quoted in Janet Malcolm, “The Patient is Always Right,” *The New York Review of Books* (December 1984): <http://www.nybooks.com/articles/1984/12/20/the-patient-is-always-right/> (accessed 14 October 2017)
- <sup>3</sup> Adam Phillips, “Introduction,” *Wild Analysis*, Sigmund Freud, trans. Alan Bance (London: Penguin Books, 2002) xx.
- <sup>4</sup> Malcolm *Psychoanalysis: The Impossible Profession* 6
- <sup>5</sup> Emily Brontë, *Wuthering Heights* (London: Wordsworth Editions, [1997] 2000) 81.

**HOW DOES IT FEEL TO BE A FICTION?**  
NEW HAVEN VIRUS (MAY 11-JUNE 30, 2018)  
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