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## Fragments of Social Life

Rachel Leah Cohn

*Virginia Commonwealth University*

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# **Fragments of Social Life**

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of  
Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

by

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## Abstract

### Fragments of Social Life

By Rachel Leah Cohn MFA

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts at Virginia Commonwealth University.

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Major Director: Richard Roth, Professor

This paper examines selected events from biography and how those events have influenced my philosophies about art-making as well as the work I have produced while a graduate student at Virginia Commonwealth University. This thesis is an attempt to give an expanded context for my work through various lenses, including the personal, the traumatic, the historical and the material.

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*I am for an art that is political-erotic-mystical, that does something other than sit on its ass in a museum. I am for an art that grows up not knowing it is art at all, an art given the chance of having a starting point of zero. I am for an art that embroils itself with the everyday crap & still comes out on top. I am for an art that imitates the human, that is comic, if necessary, or violent, or whatever is necessary. I am for an art that takes its form from the lines of life itself, that twists and extends and accumulates and spits and drips, and is heavy and coarse and blunt and sweet and stupid as life itself. I am for art that is put on and taken off, like pants, which develops holes, like socks, which is eaten, like a piece of pie, or abandoned with great contempt, like a piece of shit.*

Claes Oldenburg, I am for an Art  
Documents from The Store, 1961

I find myself looking back a lot at writings from the 1960s and thinking about how much happens in fifty years. Reading this manifesto by Oldenburg despite that time however, I agree with what he is saying and I think it is still completely relevant. Or maybe relevant again? I am also for an art that speaks to some humanity, both in terms of reflecting outward, but also containing the personal. I want what I make to be large in its smallness, not in terms of scale, but in content. I have always liked the expression “warts and all” because warts are disgusting, but they are skin and completely human. I don’t think art should be neat and tidy because nothing else is. I would rather accept the blurry edits, the hot glue in the shot and clumsy sculpture in the name of moving forward, of trying to say something. I hope that the immediacy in my work allows for the viewer to not remain on the outside, by allowing them to encounter something made by a person rather than an austere art object that is exclusively enigmatic. I want the work to be democratic and not only for an educated art audience. There should be levels at which different viewers with their own reference points can plug in or participate in creating a narrative. I can only make what I want to see, but I do not want to tell someone what to see themselves.

Since I was a student in college, people within academia have debated what have been called crude aesthetics in my work. This has often become a circuitous conversation

for me, but one that I have had to think about for a long time now. Claes Oldenburg as well as others like Red Grooms and Tony Oursler have been important role models for me in that regard. Tony Oursler's videos from the 1980s are completely rough, handmade and immediate. Over time, he has refined that aesthetic while maintaining the spirit of the earlier work. Oldenburg moved between media, which over time "neatened" his sculptures, from crude plaster to aluminum public sculpture. In both of these examples, I still prefer the more immediate earlier work, but the lesson I have taken from them is that if you stop and worry all the time about how people perceive aesthetics, progress is stopped.

This has been one of my biggest studio problems here at graduate school and a great deal of energy has been exerted on worrying about what I have always felt intuitively was the wrong thing for me to worry about. It is very hard for me to have to define what I think my strengths as an artist are in writing, but I feel very strongly about my desire to create the kind of mystical potency that I think Oldenburg is talking about, something that is beyond writing and speaking. Sometimes at museums I play a game where take the paintings and describe them in words. A woman smiling in front of a landscape. Some flowers in a pond. A red square on top of another red square. The idea is not the art.

At my graduation from RISD, Kurt Andersen from NPR spoke about the importance of amateurism as a way to avoid stagnation and to discover new skills and ways of looking. While that has always been present in my work, I have really actively engaged with that as a guiding principle for the last decade. I like being slightly behind the curve and pushing myself to stretch for something I don't quite know how to do. I want to have as many tools available to me as possible rather than perfecting my skills in one direction. It is in that stretching that I can more actively engage my imagination and powers of invention in order to push my work past the familiar and develop my own artistic language.

## Sapta's Gum Figurines

My great-grandmother, my mother's grandmother, was nearly bedridden by stress following the Holocaust. She lived in Israel and I only met her once when I was young. My memory of her comes from the sculptures she made for me, molded out of chewing gum and painted with nail polish. Sometimes she would recreate photographs from our life, like a portrait of my cat or a family member. I imagine her lying in bed chewing and chewing, physically creating material to work with in order to have an outlet to speak something from the trauma of her life and to connect to her far-away family that she had never really met. The objects have a physicality, which is a history of their process: the softening of the gum, the mashing of each piece together, slowly molding the form and then the painting, done with great care and detail. They are imbued with Sapta's energy and carry emotional power. They carry a necessity for creation that has permeated my own ideas of art making.



Lately working with miniature figures myself, these sculptures of my great grandmother's are obviously very present. Beyond the similarity in scale, however, I think it is the kind of care and emotion that I hope that my work can also communicate. In the same way that my grandmother worked with everyday materials she could reach from her bed, I have been working with paper and cardboard. In both cases, the objects are mediated through an individual, which is important to me. I can only comfortably speak from my own point of view and hope that my observations about a larger culture that I live in are interesting to a viewer.

Paper, much like gum, is a material that is completely accessible and open, able to become anything with very little effort. It still amazes me about art that what was once an obsolete phone book and old cardboard boxes can become a sauna full of sweating women with their own personalities and narratives. It is in that limiting of materials that I find the most possibility.



## **The Daughters of Edward Darley Boit**

When I was in high school, I had a ritual with a friend of going to the Museum of Fine Arts in Boston every weekend for a year. There I was most fascinated by the paintings of John Singer Sargent. In particular, there was one painting that I looked at every time I went, *The Daughters of Edward Darley Boit*. It is a large, almost life-size painting of four girls in a room. They stand in a threshold of what looks like a well decorated home and the girls seem isolated from each other. They look lonely, two hidden in the shadows, one faced away from the viewer, the last sitting far apart in the center of the room. In this painting, I am captivated by the way he captures emotion, light, fabric and pattern in the minimum marks he can use. I studied it because I wanted to understand how he could do it. I thought about the skill that I believe it took for him to get to that point that he could leave it be. There is nothing belabored or overworked, just enough information is given.

## Artist Explorer

I grew up on a street in a suburb of Boston of nearly identical brick duplexes, which shared one long backyard, ideal for elongated soccer games that ran the whole block. This was in the less economically desirable side of town and the people who lived there tended to be recent immigrants to the country, from places like Thailand, Russia, Iceland, Turkey, Taiwan and Iran. My mother is also a naturalized citizen from Israel and like many post-war Jewish families, her family came from different places, settled in different places and spoke different languages. I grew hearing English in many different accents and levels of competency and surrounded by an international community that shared with me their customs, history and food. On that street, each house was a new culture to explore.

This melting pot of my childhood has affected me in many ways throughout my life. I think that there was born my interest in interaction with other cultures, language, the experience of the foreigner and how one looks at culture through their own history. I took a six-week painting course in the summer before my junior year in college. While I had always been interested in engaging with other cultures, being in Italy was my first time as a foreigner myself and with each experience travelling abroad, my perspective of myself as well as art history has shifted.

We went on tours of all the greatest hits of Italian art and I was fascinated by all the details, especially the grotesque, the devils that seemed to eat themselves and the odd perspectives. My sketchbooks from that summer are filled with copies of these creatures that I loved to find hidden in the background. My absolute favorite painting was Piero della Francesca's Legend of the True Cross in Arezzo. The style and color seems so fresh and I was interested in the strong sense of narrative and symbolism, which has a weight of time. As part of our program there, I took Italian classes and I managed to be able to hold conversations with Romans on the street. It was the hottest summer in centuries so I would go out at night when it was cooler and paint. I wanted to capture every scene and color that I experienced there and interact with as many people as possible. Plein air painting in Italy was probably the first time I used my art practice to

engage with the public and to learn about a place, which was completely inspired by the history of painting which hangs over that city and country. The images I made there are imbued with a sense of time and for me, a memory of the experience of making them.

When I look at a painting of a Roman street scene at night, I remember the sounds and heat of the summer and the people I spoke to, while sitting in the same spot for hours.

I went to Havana in 2004, a completely different cultural space with a completely different history. There, I took a lot of inspiration from the ingenuity of the Cuban artists. After the fall of the USSR, they were basically cut off from consumer goods and from that poverty, were forced into invention. We went to dinner at someone's house where all the drinking glasses were cut from soda bottles and the lamps made from emptied toothpaste containers. At the art academy, I met a student who was ingeniously etching comic books onto the lunch trays from the cafeteria, using the divisions in the tray as the structure for his stories. While the economic conditions of the people we met were at times very depressing, my memories of the trip are vibrant and colorful. From my own economic background, I have also always looked at everyday objects as material for art out of necessity and the Cuban art scene was inspiring to me in the way they were using these common materials to speak about the politics and culture of their home.

## **Fluxus is Alive and Well**

My most extensive travel experiences have been in Scandinavia, where for three years, my home base was in Copenhagen, Denmark. The most startling thing about the Danish art scene for me was that Fluxus, which I had been taught in art history class was a historic movement of the 1960s, was in a present tense.

Ken Friedman, a seminal Fluxus artist, describes the artists working in this way as a laboratory. He broke the characteristics of the laboratory's research into 12 ideas:

1. globalism
2. the unity of art and life
3. intermedia
4. experimentalism
5. chance
6. playfulness
7. simplicity
8. implicativeness
9. exemplativism
10. specificity
11. presence in time
12. musicality

His contemporary, Dick Higgins also summarized, "Fluxus is not a moment in history, or an art movement. Fluxus is a way of doing things, a tradition, and a way of life and death."

While I would not call myself or the people I know in Denmark Fluxus artists, I think that this attitude toward art making has been influential to me. More accurately, I felt when I went to Denmark that I found people who shared in my philosophy of art in a way that I had never found before, which in part comes from this embracing of Fluxus as a part of the history and undercurrent of Danish art. There is an emphasis on D.I.Y. that

is not about style as much as sheer desire for creation, solving a problem and getting things done. Through working with my husband's art group, Parfyme, I was exposed to a community of hard working artists who were combining performance, painting, sculpture, sound, and community interaction in ways that stretched for me what I had considered to be my art. When I first arrived, I called myself a painter because I thought that was an important identifier. Three years later, I would not make that distinction.

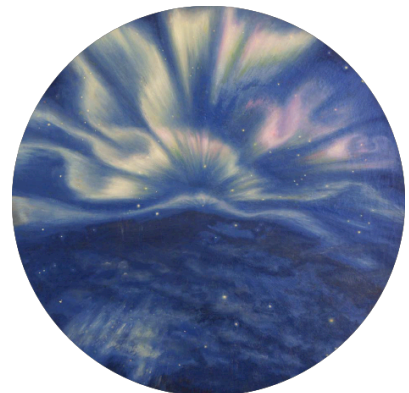
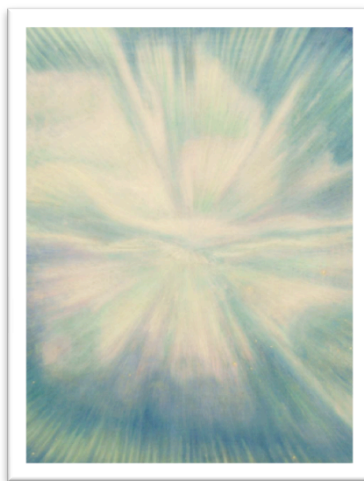
Working within a group of artists in Denmark, there was a prejudice toward painters for the isolation and self-determination that painting requires. While I am most interested in painting, I also don't like to sit in a studio by myself all day.

Part of that do-it-yourself attitude has been the willingness to accept the work as it is and understand imperfections as part of the process. This is the distinction between messing things up and allowing things to become messed up. It would be dishonest for me to not make something to the best of my ability, but I aim for my own concept of perfection, which I inherently cannot achieve. There is no need to fake mistakes because I make plenty of them on my own. Embracing that quality of art making has been important to my work.

## Ethnographic Film and Trying to Capture the Northern Lights

In Denmark, I became very interested in the Age of Exploration and the Scandinavian heroes of that time, like Fridtjof Nansen and Knud Rasmussen. The documentations of Rasmussen's explorations of Canada and Greenland have influenced my ideas of narrative structure in film. These films capture scenes from daily life, cutting between shots of the explorers, animals, native people and landscape where the camera, and Rasmussen, becomes just an eye observing this new place, without comment or judgment but honestly trying to capture as much as possible of the place. Of course other films of this period, such as *Nanook of the North*, have been criticized for their editing, staging and mediation in representation of a native people, but for me, I imagine the sense of wonderment and also great respect Rasmussen had as he saw these places for the first time.

Another influence in Denmark was the Danish Meteorological Institute's weather paintings. These were paintings done in the beginning of the twentieth century where artists had gone on scientific expeditions to the North and documented the weather, such as the Northern Lights. I have always liked plein air painting for its necessity to quickly capture something that is often rapidly changing, the desire to capture something accurately in nature often has more possibility for abstraction and play in painting because it is abstraction based in reality. These Northern Lights paintings were for me the ultimate in plein-air, a light show that can not actually be captured in a sitting, but rather was a recording of the memory of seeing something, which I think is magical. I also liked the subjective nature of these paintings as documentation on a scientific expedition.



## **The Salem Witch Museum**

One of my favorite places to visit when I was young was the Salem Witch Museum. When you enter in, there is a large glowing red circle on the floor with Wiccan symbols. The Devil speaks and tells you the story of what happened during the Witch Trials. As each event is discussed, lights illuminate a life size scene. Here lies the body of Giles Corey, crushed to death by stones. And we see a man who was squashed to death by stones that were placed on top of him until he would confess to being a witch. He cries out “more weight” and my heart lunges into my throat. He is a brave man who will never confess to being something he is not. We see Tituba the slave, who supposedly started the whole thing by telling stories of African witchcraft to the bored girls of Salem. We see the poorhouse. Most of the accused were not hanged, but rather fined. When they could not pay, they had to stay in jail and many died there. The jail reached from floor to ceiling, cells one on top of each other and each innocent person wasting away, hopeless.

For many years, I thought that they were animatronics because they seemed so life-like. Tituba gesturing while telling a story, a dead man hanging at Gallows’ Hill, his limp body blowing in the breeze. I was there again about ten years ago and I was surprised to see that they were not. The entire narrative functions because of light and sound and the implied movement that we, the viewers, imagine. With all the lights on, we would be sitting in a large room with floor to ceiling life-size sculptures in vignettes and we are guided through it on an elaborate theatrical tour. I like to think about these scenes stacked on top of each other, kind of like a giant comic book. Each scene passes on to the next, but they are in different locations, different moments.

## History and Place

In many ways, history and place has been a subject in my work. Sometimes I have re-presented stories from a place that may have been forgotten, the story of Mercy Brown in a window display in Providence, RI or the life of the author Martin Andersen Nexø, in Bornholm, Denmark. This was also the nature of the Brattleboro Pageant of 1912, a ten minute long reenactment of a historical event in Vermont. The video followed the original structure of the Pageant, which was based on a playbill that I had found at the town historical society several years ago.

The impetus to make the work came from my own difficulty in finding more information about it. I liked the structure of the pageant, with acts devoted to specific historical events, condensing 300 years into 11 acts of a very edited and influenced history. These pageants came out of the industrial revolution, where small towns worried that as industry changed, they might lose their town's identity. Of course, in the time since, the advent of the Internet has shifted that idea of a place's identity even more. I also liked the community effort.



Still from *The Brattleboro Pageant of 1912*, 2012  
Video, Running time 8:52



The pageant was put on by 700 local people and animals. It was a major orchestration of the local community to do something for itself. I thought about how that idea of community spirit has shifted in the time period, how hard it would be to get people together like that to celebrate their town and in that way, the document became for me a kind of memorial to a different way of engaging with local community. At the time I found it, I just felt like it was such a special document, a record (however skewed) of how this same town came to be and I felt like it was a shame that I couldn't find out anything more about it.

So I tried to reenact it to understand the story myself based on the information I did have. After a couple years, I presented the video at the Brattleboro Museum of Art in September of 2012, one hundred years after the original production. The story of this town in Vermont though, is more expansive. It is the story of the development of this country, or at least of New England. I am interested in that specificity, but also how it opens up into a broader narrative.

## Influences

I'm not the kind of artist who keeps reproductions of paintings on my studio wall as inspiration and reference. That should not imply that I am not interested in looking at paintings or art, but rather that I don't like to be surrounded by it. The Internet has made everything more accessible, but has also leveled out source material. When I was an undergraduate, I went to the library to check out images clipped from magazines as photographs. In only a few years, Google image search and YouTube have become staples in my artistic production. I am particularly aware of this in terms of video that I had only heard about, but had never seen, like those early works by Tony Oursler. Suddenly, everything is accessible at the same speed.

Here are some of the artists that I have been thinking of in the studio over while at VCU:

Eva Hesse  
Sophie Calle  
Pierre Huyghe  
Nathalie Djurberg  
Nina Katchadourian  
Joan Jonas  
Allan Kaprow  
Claes Oldenburg  
Red Grooms  
Georges Melies  
Georges Seurat  
Edouard Manet  
Marcel Duchamp  
Peter Callesen  
Jennifer and Kevin McCoy  
Steve Reinke  
Joan Jonas  
Kiki Smith  
Liliana Porter

I have always appreciated Red Grooms' work for its humor and detail. Through his work, I began thinking of painting as an act as well as a medium, that a painting could

be three-dimensional and play with pictorial as well as real space. His film work seems absurd, but becomes incredibly emotional and plays with the line between comedy and tragedy. Red Grooms, like Kaprow and Oldenburg was also working in every possible medium, from impermanent paper to bronze, completely disregarding any kind of boundaries. They were inspiring to me because I share that impulse, to want to just create things and they were models of canonized artists who did just that.

If I could gather all of these people together I would love to hear from them about their processes of working and navigating a system that seems to question motivation and aesthetics. Really I have wondered if it is a situation of age, theoretical basis or of gender that has given me such difficulty in feeling accepted as making art within the institution.

I try to imagine a scenario where someone walks in to Oldenburg's store and questions if it is art at all or folk art or "women's work" because of his choice of materials and scale.

When I think about artists that influence me, I am most curious about their biography and what they were like before they were making "mature work." I hope to draw from these people, their constitution and seeming ability to keep their head down and keep making. I tend to respond the most to art where I can see through the work to the person who made it, to a real sense of why this came to be.

Looking over this list of artists, there are notably less contemporary artists, and especially contemporary female artists, than I would hope. This is not because I don't want to want to align myself with contemporary art, but probably reveals more about a gap in my knowledge. Coming from a strong painting background in undergraduate, my work has opened up since that point in terms of media and influence and I find myself searching for role models who work in a similar way. When I moved to Denmark, I was exposed to a different attitude toward art, but I lost touch with what was happening in the broader art world. While at VCU, I have been exposed to new artists, but have still found myself questioning where my work fits in. It is also important to me to have female role models and I think it is my responsibility to be more actively engaged in seeking out other artists that I feel could be in greater conversation with my work, as a larger community for me.

## Lessons in Economy

In 2005, I moved to New York City along with most of my graduating class. At first, I worked part time as an artist assistant and in a gallery, but I very quickly realized that I needed more money. I was naive in understanding what it could mean to be a painter in New York so I asked around at every party I could about what other people were doing. This was how I became a decorative painter.

My first assignment was painting trompe l'oeil trunks for display at a leather company's showroom. I was nervous about my skills in realism, but the studio was in a pinch and was willing to give me a try. The trunks came as boxes covered in the new season's leather and we painted all the details: nails, buckles and straps. My job was painting nails: one circle with a small dot of highlight and a swipe of shadow underneath, around 100 per box. The pace was fast in the assembly line and as time went on, I caught up to that speed. I could not look at each dot and determine its convincibility, the difference between a "good" nail and a "bad" nail collapsed.

In the commercial world of painting ranging from murals, window display, theaters and film sets, the idea of quality is intertwined with time, money and illusion. Each of these kinds of painting has it's own needs and techniques. In a window display, there is only a pane of glass separating the viewer from the painting, so it must be detailed enough to be convincing. On the stage, texture must be seen from a distance. Learning these varied ways of painting introduced a new vocabulary to my own work. While on the job, I learned shorthand ways to describe light and form: diagrammatic methods for illusion.

In decorative painting, you can get away with a lot. A dot inside a dot becomes a nail through suggestion in context. I am interested in that leap of imagination in an imperfect illusion and it is that gap which allows for a shared moment of invention. I am also interested in the ability to mimic anything through paint. Working at the studio, jobs would just come in to make fake marble, wood, and crystal and there is always a way to systemize it and make a replica. It is magic to me to be able to make something from nothing.

As I have been working on my thesis show, I have also come to see these design sensibilities as a potential problem. Looking around my studio today, there is a sense of life and organic development, which comes from a workshop. The gallery, however, is about presentation, just like the department store window. It was my job for years to arrange objects in the most aesthetically pleasing way I could, using my arsenal of pedestals, Plexiglas blocks and monofilament. I followed systems of displaying shoes (one side view, one top view) and make-up kits to be eye catching, but familiar to customers. It is a space in my life where I find it incredibly easy to tidy up because there is a clear logic. I don't want to understand the same logic within the space of an art gallery and I don't want an art gallery to be the same kind of commercial space as a department store vitrine.

From 2010-2011, I was an apprentice in scenic painting for the Royal Theater of Denmark in Copenhagen. There, they taught me traditional techniques for theater painting, working on 100-foot long canvases nailed to the floor. As part of my apprenticeship, I had to research and then perform tests of scenic painting. Once I made a test board of many different kinds of faux wood (oak, teak, pine, etc.), looking at the original block and experimenting with how to most accurately replicate it. For one production of a Brecht play, we had to make a ½-sized model of the stage of the Royal Theater, simplifying and translating every detail. That stage is the same that I have presented in my thesis at Anderson Gallery in a miniature scale. It is a painting I have done before, of a place that I know well, copying our system for copying the real stage. It is a painting of a painting as well as a representation of the stage.

As I have used these techniques from scenic painting in my own work, I have still applied the rigidity of these systems while allowing them to loosen up aesthetically. The faux wood in the sauna is made in a shorthand way that comes from my experience of painting the same thing for the theater. Without the need for illusion and realism that was demanded at work, I can use these same ways of painting and allow them to become more painterly and expressive. My faux wood, especially presented at Anderson in the sauna as well as the séance, is not *trompe l'oeil*. It signifies wood, but at the same time, remains a painting of wood.



Above: In-progress studio shot, The Royal Theater of Denmark, Copenhagen, 2011  
Below: *Sauna/Theater*, 2013

## Early Cinema and B-Movies

I have long been inspired by the period in film that directly predates Hollywood, which has directly led to my work with scenic painting as well as my love for handmade illusions. George Méliès, who was a stage magician, was able to translate those kinds of tricks to film using simple editing, multiple exposure and set building. Watching those films more than a hundred years later, it is easy enough to understand how he did it and in that sense, some of the illusion and mystification that that early audience must have felt is lost. However, I don't think so entirely, I think it is still appealing for that same reason and all the more so because of the simplicity in which he did it. We are not fooled intellectually, but to me it is more emotional. In looking at that early work, at the beginning of a new technology, there were no rules in place with how things needed to look or behave. The sets were wildly designed and imaginative and hand-made, like in *Dr. Caligari*. A woman slams the door and it shakes because it is really made of cardboard, a filmed stage set.

I was watching a documentary about making b-movies and pre-CGI monsters which most often involved stop motion animation. Those kinds of monsters are appealing in their inability to fool anyone, letting the viewer in on the joke in some way. I think about that with my own sculptures and I think it is why at this moment, I would not like them to look more realistic. Again there is a gap where there is no way that you could look at these little paper people and not know that they were constructed, that they are not human. Rather than being an individual, I think that this opens them up to be more universal stand-ins. There is no attempt to create realism, but an alternate created world.



## Art and Trauma

I often feel uncomfortable about disclosing personal details of my life to people I do not trust with that information, which is probably characteristic of most people who have suffered traumas in their life. It does not have to do with shame, but rather a guarding of my inner self against people who I feel like won't understand and will use this against me. I believe in the theory that the self is only a web of neurons that tell a story of what happened to a body, that identity is a narrative created over a lifetime. Therefore my own physicality is important to my understanding of my self and to the development of my artwork.

I was diagnosed with thyroid cancer in the summer after high school and just before September 11th, 2001. This was a transitional time on a couple levels: developmentally moving from adolescent to adult, finding a new community in a new city while the country was dealing with a tragedy that still affects how we view our security and safety.



*Becoming a Pig*, oil on canvas, 36"x48", 2003

The effect of my surgery was unavoidable for people to notice—a giant gash across my neck— but really difficult for people to approach me about. I felt isolated from my peers. The longer lasting effect has been a chronic health condition in which I can lose control of myself to my own body. The disease cycles me through a wide range of emotions and has left me questioning my own and other's mind-body connections.



My earliest paintings at college attempted to process these physiological changes. The work was cathartic for me at the time, but inaccessible to my peers. It was too literal and therefore not relatable to a larger audience. I have since in my work tried to find ways to abstract my experiences in order to let other people in.



From a paper I wrote about Sophie Calle last semester:

Trauma has historically been a potent subject for visual art making because the two discourses share a major defining characteristic: both exist outside of a reality which can be defined solely through language. French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan describes trauma as “an appointment with the real that eludes us.” For Lacan, the real is something completely authentic and absolute. This exists beyond the symbolic world, which we accept as our reality, and which is constructed by language.

While a person is born into a primordial Real, it is in the Mirror Stage where subjectivity shifts into the symbolic order, through the reconciliation with the image of the self in the mirror. The individuals no longer see themselves as whole, but rather as disjointed and imaginary. Identity is constructed through the idea of otherness, in the same way that the symbolic can only know itself through others. Trauma creates a break in the constructed reality. It is an event which cannot be processed through language because it is unrecognizable within daily life. Visual art evokes the possibility of being a “spectator to one’s own feelings” because while a traumatic memory appears in a fragmented form, there is immediacy to the experience, but also a separation from the self.

In *Obscene, Abject, Traumatic*, Hal Foster concludes “...[trauma] has absolute authority, for one cannot challenge the trauma of another: one can only believe it, even identify with it, or not. In trauma discourse then, the subject is evacuated and elevated at once. “ Trauma discourse satisfies two contradictory imperatives- to guarantee identity, on the one hand and to deconstruct its foundation on the other. He describes artists as driven to “a place of total affect and are drained of affect all together... This oscillation suggests the dynamic of psychic shock. Pure affect, no affect: It hurts, I can’t feel anything.”

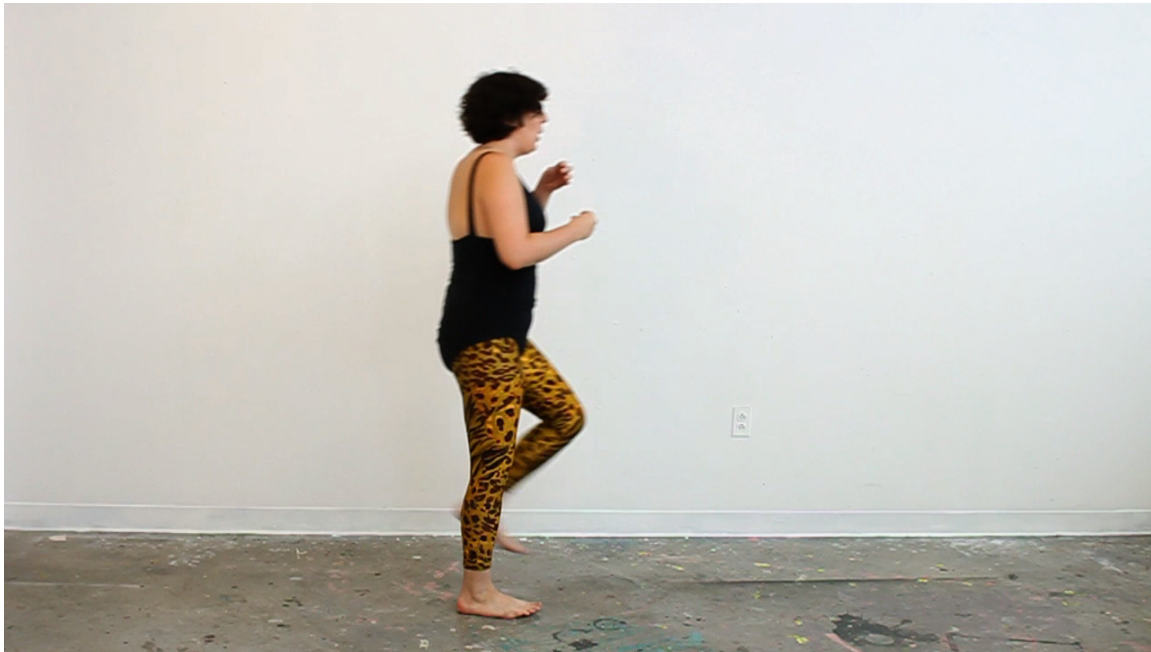
I wrote that in regards to an analysis of Sophie Calle’s work, *Take Care of Yourself*, but I have thought about trauma discourse as a lens in regard to my own work as well. I do not want to think or say that everything I make comes from a dark open

wound in my autobiography. Louise Bourgeois, who also works from her autobiography, thought that through her work, she was reliving her trauma. I believe that making things helps me to examine and understand myself and my behavior and the way that other people act.

The reminders of my own trauma are through my body. I mean this in terms of my own physicality as well as my relationship to my body because of my illness. I often think about my connection (and disconnection) to my body and am sensitive to changes, like weight fluctuations and hormonal imbalances. Most of my work at VCU has dealt with the body in some way, which I attribute to my interest in portraying humanity. Sometimes, in video, there has been the portrayal of my own body, in motion and testing actions in front of the camera. Others have been more allegorical, such as my paintings of freshly shucked oysters, in which I was fascinated by the differences in their fleshiness. In my work of the past year, I have made figurative sculptures that have investigated in some way specificity in portraiture even when they are people from memory or imagination. Physicality and body has been important to *The Watermelon Man*, a man with a goiter who is carrying a physical marker of disease that affected our interaction at a flea market. In *the Sauna*, with 60 different bodies, I was thinking about how we are all so similar naked in one sense while maintaining our own individual shapes. Each woman in that sauna could come into that experience with a different understanding of her body and what it means to sit naked in a group of people. For me, it is a freeing experience because it is so physical. Concentrating on sweating and breathing in a sauna puts me in a mindset where I am the most in my own body.

## Marching Band and Green Screens

The first piece I made when I came to VCU was a video of me marching back and forth in front of the camera playing every instrument I could remember in a marching band. The sounds are mostly spitting and guttural, accompanied by hand motions, which indicate each instrument. Each instrument plays it's own melody and beat, not a song, but more an improvised memory of sound. When I lived in Copenhagen, I felt isolated by the language and culture. Thinking about coming back to the U.S., I imagined a feeling of liberation from that, that my world would be folded over again and something exposed. I made several versions of a marching band, where I was edited together, walking in an endless loop. But the original version seems the most powerful to me. It represents to me both my exuberance at a new independence, but also the extreme loneliness I felt at the time.



Still from *Marching Band*, video, running time 9:35, 2011

The videos that followed were all of me alone or duplicated doing mundane activities, such as jump roping, fishing, acting as a band and playing as a matador. The pretense for the work was to learn techniques with video because after working at a

smaller scale with animation, I had thought about how I could expand those sets to include performance using green screen. These videos are less about action and more of a mirror or a self-check of identity. I felt like each time I turned the camera on, it was a test for myself of what I looked like or how I moved. I have the feeling watching those videos of watching someone else, like I somehow did succeed in becoming a puppet.

Arriving at graduate school, I wanted these videos to shake up my initial impulse to make work by changing my idea generating process. Instead of coming to the work with a narrative or concept to illustrate or constructing a set with characters and a stage, I tried to come with what I thought was as little as I could, myself, a blank wall and a video camera.



Stills from *Self Portrait Series*, variable running time, 2011 [youtube.com/rachelleahcohn](https://www.youtube.com/rachelleahcohn)

I gave a presentation about this work in seminar at the end of first semester in which I talked about it partially through a lens of Rhizomatics. The theory presented by Deleuze and Guattari has to do with the development of things through connections resisting chronology, moving outward randomly rather than serially. Rhizomatics gives validation in the idea that production and inspiration can be random and can reconnect at any time. I like the idea of starting in the middle.

The concept of “Becoming” is one of the most important ideas of Rhizomatics and I think that is an interesting concept as I consider acting as well as using the green screen. They use the example of the becoming-horse, a masochist who puts on a bridle projecting a new identity rather than accessing a suppressed memory. I am interested in thinking of this concept when thinking about both using the green screen and acting. The green screen represents the potential for transformation. It is not a blank canvas, which I will project onto, but rather represents negative space that can be filled with anything. Anything else that is being filmed, people, props etc. is unrelated. That space has the potential to transform into anything and everything equally.

At the same time, I became very interested in anthropological research of the understanding of self, which was conjoined with these videos as well as my own physicality. In the book, *Soul Hunters*, Rane Willerslev, a Danish anthropologist, describes the difference between a western perspective in which we act in the world through our bodies, with our bodies as the subject with the Siberian tribe, the Yukaghirs don’t see their bodies as fully-controlled. This is described by the idea of experiencing oneself both as “me” and “not me.” The body is both subject and object and so is seen simultaneously as self and other. I think that through my experience of disease and trauma, I have been more acutely aware of that way of experiencing the world. When something goes wrong with me physically, I feel that loss of control that I think somehow plays into those videos, as I said a kind of check of my body and what I could make it do. The other important characteristic of those videos was the kind of subtle humor that really belied the sadness and loneliness. To me looking back on that, those short videos contain an emotional rawness that was possibly made less accessible to the viewer through aesthetics, through the familiarity of the green screen.

## Empathy for Oysters

In January, our class decided to make a small group show together which was going to feature oysters. It was a strange prompt, one which I really had no connection to, but which became allegorical investigation of other people. The piece in the show was a life size papier maché oyster, which had a speaker inside. My idea had been to create a voice from within the shell, which was the song of a pearl.



*Pearl's Song*, papier maché, acrylic paint, mp3 player, 3"x5", 2012

I can't write music, so I stole an empty sea shanty midi and rewrote the lyrics to describe what I imagined to be a naive, but strong woman who didn't really know her worth except through other people and doesn't truly understand her potential because she feels trapped inside of her shell. As soon as I had written it, I felt embarrassed because I felt like I was exposing simplistic, childish and narcissistic way of viewing myself, especially in the context of my life in Denmark. I think that through the allegory of a pearl, I wanted to make a statement empowering myself and also a crudely obvious feminist statement. The pearl is an object imbued with the idea of value and preciousness and it is completely a cheesy subject matter to talk about being trapped and out of your own control and not being understood in the same way that you see yourself.



The other songs on the Oyster Songs EP were attempting to create other characters or voices through researching the biology and history of oysters. I think they contain also allusions to stories or feelings from my own life, but I was trying to build characters and examine them through another lens. I was listening to the music of Scott Walker and Kurt Schwitters, Ursonate and trying to imagine how to describe the voice of something completely foreign. I felt like the shanties, even though they were old fashioned, carried with them the historical tradition of songs that should be sung while experiencing the movement of water.

While I ultimately imagined the piece as a sculptural, sound installation, the project shifted greatly when I came across an anecdote from a student of John Cage, Le Monte Young. He questioned what constituted a sound, using the example of a fly.

While a fly's movement is often inaudible to human ears, he argued that it is still a part of the larger soundscape of the room. So as I was sitting and imagining what an oyster would sound like, I wasn't really listening to its real sound. I experimented with an underwater microphone to no success. There is no audible noise to be heard. I consulted Even though there is movement in the pumping mechanism of the oyster, the sound cannot be separated from its environment.

I was shucking oysters for the first time and became fascinated with how differently they each looked inside their shell. In a series of observational paintings, I tried to capture those differences, knowing of the historical tradition of oysters in still life painting as well as the oyster's importance to the history and local ecosystem of this area.

Each painting in the series was an attempt to depict something that at times was ephemeral and other times disgusting, a real spectrum of difference within a single subject.



Above: *Oyster Portraits (Detail)*

Right: *Oyster Portraits*, acrylic on canvasboard framed, each 15"x18". 2012



## **Sculptures, Props, Paintings: Anderson Gallery**

Why not paint an image of a sauna? In my time here, I have become more aware of my relationship to materiality and I think the answer to this also has to do with limitations and how I work with different materials. With a painting, I feel completely in control of how an image is formed and what my limits are in terms of realism or stylization. When it enters into the realm of sculpture, there is another interaction for me where there is something more unknown, a kind of collaboration with material. The process that I work from when building these figures has more to do with painting than sculpture because my interest is really primarily in the surface. There is a certain amount of pleasure in the making of the forms, thinking about posture and gesture and how to simplify the forms. There is the wrestling with the paper and the acceptance that it behaves in a certain way, a certain stiffness or a weird wrinkle. But I still see it within a factory system; making dozens of torsos at a time or 20 legs, 40 feet whatever and generally assembling rough figures, which are very complicated, shaped canvases. This is the stage where they are conceptual and dispensable. I have several rejected bodies in different phases sitting on my desk here who just didn't make the cut for a variety of reasons.

It is in their painted details that they become worthwhile.





The body of work that I presented for the thesis show began from a short experience at a flea market in Richmond over the summer where I saw a beautiful blue truck with sweaty wet watermelons. The image seemed very important to me and I spent some time with the owner of the truck, a man who happened to have a goiter, talking about the culture of that flea market and stories of things he had sold. I wanted to take a photograph of his truck, but he didn't feel comfortable. I did manage to get a snapshot from the car as we were leaving, but for several weeks, I was mulling over that scene with different details emerging. Part of my connection to the man was through his goiter and my empathy for an illness that he had to bear physically. I was also overwhelmed by the American-ness of the scene as well as the colors of the still life. I wanted to capture that moment as an image, but once I painted it, I felt like it was too flat and not satisfying enough.

I ended up recreating the components of the painting which were the details from my memory and a short audio recording: a rabbit cage, tuna cans filled with water and carrots, a chair, a guitar, a young girl, as small three-dimensional models.

I built the set to fit the memory, for a single shot, a car driving up and away which I did using a handmade dolly. The heat of that day was also important to that moment, the watermelons were glistening from their sweat and I built a special cloud cover to try to give that effect. Overall, I feel like that video was not a great success because it became too ambient, straying from my initial impulse to recreate that kind of moment exactly.

The incident with the watermelon man in the flea market was completely fleeting, something seen from a car window, but that in an instant was indelible and special. It was an interesting conversation with a stranger that I walked away from and could not forget.

Stripped of the rest of the color market scene, he seems lonely and that he is carrying all of his possessions in the world. The dynamics between him and the girl are also intriguing to me, like they are together and completely alone.



*The Watermelon Man*, papier mache, wire, clay, nylon, 16"x20", 2012

This scene started me thinking about other situations that I have interacted with groups where one is really alone and I began to connect the man in the market with a séance that I had gone to in New York City at the Spiritualist Church. In the year of 2007-2008, I was faced with a lot of choices about my career and where I wanted to live and my search for a more close knit community. I first got into going to these meetings with a friend out of our common interest in ghosts and spirits, but I also truly want to believe in what people told me. I made a lot of decisions in my life that year based on this kind of information from spirit guides and while I have a hard time justifying ghosts, I do believe that people can put out their desires or other kinds of non-verbal information that is understood by sensitive others. Everyone came to that séance for different reasons, but with a desire for some kind of communication. That is why I felt like it was a very potent social space.



*Séance*, papier maché, acrylic paint, armature wire, balsa wood, 30" diameter circle, 2013

If a séance is a spiritual social space, that led me to the much more physical side of spirituality, the sauna. While living in Denmark, going to the bathhouse every week was an important social activity for me. I wanted to try to represent the specific moment when you open the door to the sauna. Steam clouds your vision and out of that, a group of naked women emerges. Everyone is there for the same general purpose and nudity, an incidental to the process, creates a certain vulnerability as well as level of comfort. I like the idea of everyone sweating out their problems alone, but sitting next to someone else who is sweating it out too. This sauna is not a specific memory of a particular visit, but a different kind of recurring visual memory



*Sauna/Theater*, papier maché, cardboard, terry cloth, acrylic paint, lacquer, velvet, velour, gold tassel, Swarovski crystal, LED lamp, projector, 96"x36", 2013



## Scale Shifting

The majority of the work in my thesis show at Anderson is miniature: the sweating women, the sauna, the theater, and the people at the séance. There is something intimate and satisfying about that scale, something that can be held in your hand. Even if you can't move and play with the figures, they are doll-sized and imply play. There is also something very satisfying to me about painting at that scale, with tiny specific and detailed brushstrokes. I have always found miniatures appealing, but I began working at a small scale using animation a few years ago when I didn't have a studio. Small sculptures are easy to work with and I like the ability for scale to shift dramatically through video. I could build small pieces at a time and reconstruct the scene in the camera or in the computer.

In recent sculptural works, I have been thinking about scale shifts in a more complex way. The scene of the séance was originally conceived as a set for a video, in which it was very important for me to capture the correct spiritual environment through light. The figures were seated on a wood floor in front of stained glass windows and lit from behind to simulate afternoon light. The bathing of the figures in that colored light reinforced spirituality and the mystical, an almost cliché codification. When I decided to present the work as a sculptural group in the gallery, I wanted to reenact that lighting condition, but try to find a way to add animation to the scene through light and sound rather than video.

Changing the floor to a circle, to reinforce the circle of the group and the power/spiritual energy moving circularly around them, shifted the figures from props in a video to sculptures. The stained glass window, which was importantly the symbol for me of that spiritual energy was enlarged to almost life-size for the viewer. I thought that the viewer would then relate to that window as both a real window and as a giant window for the small people. The sound was isolated using a parabolic speaker, so that it was heard in context of the sculpture, but also seemed detached, like a ghost. The recurring sound is that of a watch, which I thought of as time, but also of the sound of waiting for something to happen. I imagined someone at a séance who wants to believe and is waiting to receive some spiritual communication, but is distracted by their watch, people

shifting, coughing, sounds from the human world which are in tension with their desire for the spiritual world. The life-size hand coming from the wall carries that sound of the watch, as well as the idea of connection, in a completely literal way. To listen to the sound piece, a viewer must come within inches of the fingertips, almost connecting.



Above: *Séance (hand)*, papier maché, acrylic paint, 5"x30"x3", 2013

Below: *Séance*, papier maché, acrylic paint, armature wire, balsa wood, acetate, wood frame, studio lamp, 30" dia pedestal, window= 23"x42", 2013



## **Relating and Participating**

Ending college, I really struggled with what it meant for me to be a painter and how I could continue to make paintings outside of an academic structure because of my insecurities with image making and what to do with painting as an object. I felt pushed into a singular path of showing work at galleries in New York and worried about my impulse to not create work in more packageable series. I didn't know very much about an alternative art scene, besides examples, which are still canonized within art history. When I moved to Denmark, I felt like I had really discovered an answer for myself in relational aesthetics. It combined my interests in collaboration, social engagement, experiencing place and a merger between art and life.

In Nicolas Bourriaud's manifesto, *Relational Aesthetics*, written in 1998, he talks about "the work of art as a social interstice taking as its theoretical horizon the sphere of human interactions and its social context, rather than the assertion of an autonomous and private symbolic space. Art that comes from the sphere of interhuman relationships." This seemed like the direct answer to my questioning about my painting or art could do, as a tool for experiencing life and social interaction. I understood that the work was made with immediacy, collaboratively and did not seem to refer to any art of the past and I felt like I had finally found some theory that I could work from.

I learned a lot from my time in Denmark working with different artists in a community that seemed to embrace all possibilities in art in a way that I had not experienced before. But if it were a scientific experiment for myself, with the hypothesis that this way of working would solve all of the problems I had with art making, I think the overall result was a mixed bag. I am reminded of Allan Kaprow talking about audience participation in *Notes on the Elimination of the Audience*, 1966:

Then on a human plane, to assemble people unprepared for an event and say that are 'participating' if apples are thrown at them or they are herded about is to ask very little of the whole notion of participating. Most of the time the audience is either half-hearted or even reluctant.

In the desire to eliminate the ego or to make truly community based work, it seems to me that most of that time it still ends up being even more about the artist than the participants, as it is in other approaches to art making as well. There is a loss of transparency though because there is some kind of pretending that is not that way. The artist always has ownership and sometimes as the participant, it feels like we have been tricked into doing someone else's work under the guise of "experience." I am interested in collaboration and working with other people, but I guess my response to these issues has been to turn further inward. I do not want to ask of people something that they don't want to do and I don't want to force anyone into feeling uncomfortable or I guess into participation in any way.

I would rather that people who look at my work or participate in making it, are willing participants. I know that thinking about your "viewer" is something that seems very important within the academic setting of art making, but I feel like what I can do is make work for me and the people I know and have faith that others will be interested. I have always operated under the assumption that the only way to be original is to be as true as possible to myself, but I also try not to think about that when working.

## **Conclusion**

Obviously my time at graduate school has opened up more new questions in my work than answers. The constant thread in my work has been the mediation of life through my autobiography and the importance of the personal and the human in everything I make. Looking at my show in the gallery, I am definitely filled with that mix of pride and disgust when looking at so many things my hands have touched.

Through making objects, I have learned about myself and about how I see life. My studio has been my workshop, my magic toyshop and my laboratory. Sometimes I feel happy at what I made from nothing and sometimes I laugh at my own jokes. Sometimes I am embarrassed at what I reveal about myself and sometimes it makes me sad. What is most important though is that there is life in my work that makes me feel emotions and I think connects the work to other people. I make this work for me, but also to share with other people.