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Humans Aren't Boxes, Art Isn't Finite

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HUMANS AREN’T BOXES, ART ISN’T FINITE

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

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Master of Fine Arts, Virginia Commonwealth University, 2019
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Abstract

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By Brianne Alta Humphreys, BFA.
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I am bored. All around me are systems that perpetuate repetitive, reductive, and mundane modes of living. In an attempt to counter a culture obsessed with singular ways of existence and bite-sized perfection, I utilize moving mediums of video and performance to dive head first into a vast array of sloppy sincerity. The crisp, white-washed, analytical, and restrictive is loudly replaced with the empirical, haphazard, and instinctual. My intention is to create and encourage raw, performative-based work that is as multifaceted as unbridled life itself. This alive and physical practice hosts a conglomeration of sweat, memories, heartbreaks, hymn singing, line dancing, cake eating, wig wearing, bedroom jamming, live streaming, code switching, hallway running, body dragging, easter egg hiding, angst, and hair salons.

This is a refusal to slice up, organize, and distill myself and my work into one dish with convoluted, explanatory rhetoric stamped with institutionalized approval and topped with the cherry of MFA status for the sake of being justified and relevant. I have zero obligations to make polished art, resolve things, or pinpoint what makes me “me”, because humans are not boxes and art does not have to be finite.
Intro

“Mommy! If I tape real feathers to my arms and jump off that high place, will I be able to fly?”
“No sweetie”
“Well what if I tape feathers all over my whooooolllle body so that I’m covered in feathers all over, just like a bird. Will I be able to fly then?”
“No”
“What if I grew a beak? Just like a bird. What about then?”
“No honey, you’re a human and humans don’t fly.”

She taped feathers to her arms anyway, and jumped off that “high place” - a couch, maybe?

She didn’t fly. But guess what? She had fun.

Success and failure are measured depending on the outcome in accordance with the expectation. What if instead the goal is the reckless abandon of predescribed function or utility? Not abandon of utility entirely, but the abandon of god-play that aims to prophesy and define utility before the thing or event has begun. What if we just decided to do a thing, meddle, in accordance with instinctual and unknown impulses. The goal instead being a void that is given permission to fill in complete independence of the orchestrator. What is it filled with? Human sentience, perhaps - the rejuvenating reminder of being awake and alive. Something other than a cold, consumer-based product dictated by a singular godhead.

Over the past two years, I have experimented extensively with video and performance, testing the limits of their definition as well as discovering my own language from within. I’ve
had my limp body drug across floors, I’ve created alter-egos, thrown objects at walls, sung hymns, baked cakes, sat in fiberglass, yelled through a megaphone, mindlessly pieced together childhood footage at 3am, stood on tables, ran through hallways in socks, climbed drainage pipes… People have cried, laughed, puzzled, criticized, spat at, and applauded my work. If there is anything I am to take away from it all, it is the reminder that I am the author of my work, and as the author, I am allowed to give myself permission. Permission to be plural. Seeking approval and satisfaction from externalities is a sick and twisted form of slavery that devours the polite and the fragile. I’m no longer interested in making concrete objects, giving answers, or “finishing” something, as if anything in life is ever finished. I am interested only in movement, in relations, in communities. I’m interested in medling, jesting, disrupting, confusing, serving, morphing, and dissolving. I’m in utilizing art as an outlet by which to explore life one step further with no explanations or predetermined goals necessary.

The expectation was never to fly in the first place, but to feel. Not to perfect, but to pursue. To poke a hole in a world constructed by social norms, letting the beautifully messy innards of spontaneity, improvisation, and authentic gut reaction bleed through. Art is nothing if it doesn’t allow a space for this to happen.

“I POSITION THE VIEWER AS AN ACTIVE READER, NOT A CONSUMER. THE GOAL IS NOT A PRODUCT, BUT A SHARED THOUGHT.”

Leslie Thornton
Looking Backward and Looking Inward

“No piece of art has ever made me feel as strongly or deeply as this moment right now.” I stepped over the piles of waste and a dead animal that lay on the floor of what used to be our kitchen. Walking through what used to be the home of a happily married couple and four little girls, I felt a vast and wild array of inexplicable yet undeniably real emotions that instantly colored what was my current artistic situation as totally mute and meretricious. I had just endured several unfulfilling months of art making and had reached a point that felt devoid of meaning and relevance. I was desperate to grab onto something that felt real and so, for the first time, I began to unpack personal narratives, histories, and lived experiences as source material. The visit to my childhood home in the summer of 2018 hastened this paradigm shift. I have since committed to create, or at least attempt to create work that rings truer to myself and truer to life, and it all began with reminding myself of who Little Brianne was.
Growing up I was the wildest of four daughters, and a middle child at that. I learned from an early age the importance of finding creative ways to make my voice heard. I was loud, disruptive, sporadic, and intensely animated. I didn’t like following other people's rules, doing things the “normal way”, or sitting still. I’d go into self-inflicted bouts of negative moods just for the “fun” of feeling something strongly and intimately. I could conjure up narratives about total strangers in my head and make myself cry for them. I wanted to be a dancer, an actress, circus performer, indian princess, warrior, gymnast, teacher, mother, chef, fashion designer, makeup artist, salon owner, cowgirl - and my parents always told me I should be a lawyer because I was an expert at arguing for argument’s sake. Contumaciousness was in my blood. Little Brianne has reminded me of the importance of embracing, not ignoring, instinctual urges and my insatiable itch for action and reaction. I realize I am drawn toward performative and time-based mediums because they allow a bold implementation of movement and give opportunity to rage against suppressive and antiquated expectations of a tidy and singular way of being and making.

I spent (and here I’m tempted to say “wasted”) many years trying to find the “right way” to exist in line with popular trends and stigmas. I obsessively arranged and rearranged my bedroom, my outfits, my friends, my persona - all an attempt to say “This is me.”

“Wait nevermind, THIS is me.”

“Okay wait, try this…."

“Is this me???”

“You Could Try To Be Your Best, But Don’t You Know That It’s Suicide”

‘You Want Everything’ by Snowmine
Same thing happened in college, and even bled into graduate school where I’ve spent many hours trying to write in art speak, hoping that if my research and writing sounds smart and interesting, so will my art. To that, thanks to my recent study of Little Brianne, I can now say this:

**Just. Stop. Trying. So. Hard.** Stop cramming yourself into boxes. Stop trying to validate your work by injecting it with frivolous research. Intellectual elites are boring anyway. Let’s make “stupid” art for a change! Liquid art! Moving and alive! Reckless abandon of ego! Doesn’t that feel better?

Anything that exists in stasis is a lie. This very sentence is in the future, now the present, and now the past. Memories are re-lived, histories retold. All matter in existence vibrates, fluctuates, stretches, dissolves, separates, resurfaces and multiplies. Perhaps we should give ourselves and our art the permission to do the same.

*A WORD OF ADVICE: NEVER CEASE TO BE STUPID. IN THIS WORLD WITHOUT A TRACE OF STUPIDITY, NOTHING IS POSSIBLE*”

‘Manoel's Destinies’(1984)
People Give Too Much Power to Wall Decor, Instagram, and Embarrassment

I’m getting really bored of white walls, deadlines, Pinterested wall decor, copy/paste Instagram captions, fad diets, fragile egos, small talk, and sticking to one, consistent version of yourself. It seems we’re born, then immediately expected to present ourselves in an overly-polite and simplified manner for the sake of mass acceptance, or face social ostracism. Maintaining status quo guarantees comfort for those with no backbone, and severe restlessness for the rest of us. Nietzsche said it best, when he said that no artist tolerates reality.\(^1\) My only adjustment to this would be “no good artist tolerates reality”. For me, the most interesting work is that which challenges and cleverly plays with what is considered “normal” or expected. Crucial to this way of making and existing is the realization that our sense of reality is not fixated but in constant flux, predicated on preimposed structures and influences (social, architectural, economic, academic) that continuously reconstruct the way we perceive and are perceived.

While many people today continue to gasp and cringe at that which deviates from singular perceptions of reality, this principle nothing new. As early as the 1700’s, Immanuel Kant and his “transcendental idealism” proclaimed a separation between the experienced world

and the thing itself.\textsuperscript{2} Several decades later, German philosopher Arthur Schopenhauer coined this separation as “World as Idea” which is observed, vs. the “World as Will”, the actual thing which can only be contacted every now and then through the natural and uncontrollable wills of our bodies. Schopenhauer believed art to be specifically important as it can provide an escape from the relentless willing of our natural condition, and also reveal deeper aspects of reality.\textsuperscript{3} In the early 1900’s, Maurice Merleau Ponty emphasized bodily senses as the core creator of reality, continually creating and recreating through the subjective processing of external stimulus.\textsuperscript{4} Fast forward to the late 1900’s to present day, theorists such as Judith Butler asserts that our identity is not stagnant but performed daily through repetitive acts, but is often viewed and categorized through the narrow lens of culturally and socially developed norms.\textsuperscript{5} Meaning, anything that deviates from status quo is often ostracized by lazy masses who only want to digest that which is obedient and aligns with the expected. Pair this with today’s obsessive self-image culture of Instagram and life-style blogs and it’s no wonder we’re seeing such a prevalence of basic bitches. 

\textit{This is what the world wants.}

I thoroughly believe that girls of today (I say girls because I am one. I cannot speak for the men of this world) are in a world-wide competition to see who can look more like the other, all the while posting captions that say “Be yourself, because there’s only one of you”. Social


media algorithms have graciously determined for us what looks best on a screen, and now its an incestuous madman’s race to be the most successful at achieving the best candid laugh - selfie sunday - positive vibes only - coffee is life - outfit of the day - inspirational quote - blonde hair don’t care - live love laugh - cheers to the weekend - about last night - food from an aerial angle - no makeup - check my new blog post - link in bio uptoic social media template.
The myth of the self-made man⁶ and the obsessive self-publicatory pursuit of a bite-sized “American dream” image squeezed through the pinhole of social media births a predictable, copy/paste culture that abides by consumerist’s demands for an expectation; a disappointingly meretriciousness status quo that brainwashes and devours a good chunk of my generation and the one(s) below. No good artist tolerates this.

Erotic and Adolescence as Power

Mierle Laderman Ukeles attested to the superior intuition of children when she noticed them being the most interesting participants in one of her performative works: “Whenever anyone entered the space, I would wipe out their tracks, Some kids noticed, and started turning circles, They ended up making me do things, directing me. They know how to play with it.”⁷ Children mostly exist in a pre-blinded state where learned knowledge and acquired ego has yet to prohibit them from seeing life as the game that it is, and choosing to play. Despite countless studies on the concrete benefits of embracing adolescent-like play as adults⁸, I’m saddened at how this beautifully naive spirit is laid siege more and more as one grows up and passively acclimates into the suppressive structures and powers that be.⁹

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Many of these powers deny the natural and erotic agency of the youthful, the female, the queer, and the “other”. You’re expected to exist, but not too much, for too much existence draws attention to the fact that you behold yourself - that you live in accordance with your natural needs and desires rather than those prescribed by external powers. This can’t be had. You must be an addict for the system, or silenced. I’ll never forget the weighted feeling of gratitude when reading the words of Audre Lorde who boldly scolded the immorality of a system that deprives one of their own felt impulses, intuitions and desires - a system that dictates what you do based on profit rather than human need - a system that asks you to animate yourself in accordance with its machinery and rubrics:

“Such a system reduces work to a travesty of necessities, a duty by which we earn bread or oblivion for ourselves and those we love. But this is tantamount to blinding a painter and then telling her to improve her work, and to enjoy the act of painting. It is not only next to impossible, it is also profoundly cruel.”

I mourn the years I spent blindfolding my own bodily agency and fluidity. There is power in being impulsive, liberation through disruption, redemption in refusal, and therapy in embracing adolescent-like play. Spit everything else out. If it doesn’t work for you, don’t do it.
If you would rather “dry up” than capitulate to the limitations the world throws at you, so be it. There is power in the performance of no, of denial, of refusal to participate\textsuperscript{11}. But equal to the power of “no” is the performance of a “yes” as no - the stubborn and wilful participation in the system for the sake of challenging it. The choice to play the game, but doing it your way.

\textsuperscript{11}“Ways to Defy the Pressure to Perform :: Why Is Everybody Being so Nice? - DE APPEL.” Accessed May 9, 2019.
Having Cake and Eating it Too: “Yes” in the Face of “No”

Script excerpt from “Having Cake and Eating it Too” performance:

“You can’t be in school and focus on what makes you happy”
“You can’t be blunt and ladylike”
“You can’t be erotic and reasonable”
“You can’t wear boyish clothes and expect to be seen as pretty”
“You can’t be skinny and out of shape”
“You can’t demand pleasure and a living wage”
“You can’t move 1200 miles away and keep the boyfriend”
“You can’t wear sexy clothes and be treated with respect”
“You can’t be depressed and high-functioning”
“You can’t go on your school trip to Italy and make it to your granddad’s funeral”
“You can’t be a graduate student and physically healthy”
“You can’t get a good education and an affordable education”
“You can’t be a Christian and support gay people”
“You can’t afford rent and car insurance”
“You can’t get a full night’s sleep and finish that assignment”
“You can’t be short and a model”
“You can’t be conservative and liberal”
“You can’t be a performance artist and make money”
“You can’t accept a free drink then say “no” to them later”
“You can’t be indecisive and have a successful thesis”
“You can’t be beautiful and acknowledge it”
“You can’t be sexy and intelligent”
“You can’t be confident and humble”
“You can’t choose something then complain about it”
“You can’t wear makeup and have clear skin”
“You can’t call it rape if you weren’t fighting it”
“You can’t go against the grain and expect comradery”
“You can’t exist in an institution and be anti-institutional”
“You can’t have an attractive partner and a committed partner”
“You can’t be super muscular and feminine”
“You can’t have a fiance and regrets”
“You can’t have a husband and your own freedom”
“You can’t be a straight woman and see women as sexually attractive”
“You can’t make a Facebook post and ask for privacy”
“You can’t know someone without moving in with them”
“You can’t be in a relationship and abstain from sex”
“You can’t have sex without being attached to that person forever”
“You can’t be so independent and expect to find love”
“You can’t be a student and close to your family”
“You can’t be feminine and have a pixie cut”
“You can’t live out of state and have visitation rights”
“You can’t follow your dreams and be there for your friends”
“You can’t cry in public and be strong”
“You can’t have wings and use them”
“You can’t smile and feel like dying”
“You can’t let your voice be heard and seen as polite”
“You can speak your voice but not too much”
“You can’t express things as loud as you feel them”
“You can’t be contemporary and religious”
“You can’t say I love you just because”
“You can’t make eye contact without feeling insecure”
“You can’t be the sun and walk freely”
“You can’t walk these streets and not be accosted”
“You can’t keep it a secret for so long and then expect to be believed”
“You can’t say no without further explanation”
“You can’t love him and move on”
“You can’t be here and there”
“You can’t have wings that big and not be shot down”
“You can’t shine that bright without being blocked at every turn”
“You can’t run and not hurt”
“You can’t be hurt and have time to heal”
“You can’t give yourself permission and not be self-centered”
“You can’t give yourself permission and not feel guilty”
“You can’t make and be confused”
“You can’t please yourself and them”
“You can’t choose not to choose and receive approval”
“You can’t refuse categories and be readable”
“You can’t be too grunge”
“You can’t be too pink”
“You can’t be too powerful”
“You can’t be too submissive”
“You can’t be too assertive”
“You. CAN’T.”

It often feels as though the powers that be use the phrase “you can’t have cake and eat it too” as a deflection anytime anyone other than them asks for something that challenges the often immoral or illogical structures upon which their power and privilege rests. In this system, the only ones allowed to actually have cake and eat it too are the ones at the top - the ones with the rules - the ones with the boxes. All this does is fuel my burning desire to stare the “no” directly in the face, and eat a damn cake anyway.
Once assigned my space in the Anderson Gallery for the MFA Thesis Exhibition, there were intense and immediate frustrations and repulsions toward its complete opposition to what I had requested. Rather than allowing the initial setbacks and limitations to remain as such, I chose to utilize this as an opportunity to say “yes” to a bold and performative embrace of the innermost felt reactions and impulses I’ve tirelessly fought to elevate as a valid language all year, in spite of the being potentially read as immature. The room’s inadequacy combined with the zero dollars I received in funding as well as the gallery director’s “cautionary” discouragement of performance during opening night ultimately presented me with the perfect “no” to perform a “yes” in the face of.
Acknowledging this opportunity, I chose to highlight the complete inadequacy I had been so graciously gifted as the content. Opening night was a sloppy, awkward, and forceful duet with the space to the tune of performative protest. It was all of physical, durational, dysfunctional, and irreverent with a severe intentionally that, if chosen to hide, would have silenced a greater part of myself and my commitment to raw and honest reactions.
Excerpt from Audre Lorde:

“We have been raised to fear the yes within ourselves, our deepest cravings. But, once recognized, those which do not enhance our future lose their power and can be altered. The fear of our deepest cravings keeps them suspect and indiscriminately powerful, for to suppress any truth is to give it strength beyond endurance. The fear that we cannot grow beyond whatever distortions we may find within ourselves keeps us docile and loyal and obedient, externally defined, and leads us to accept many facets of our own oppression as women. When we live outside ourselves, and by that I mean on external directives only rather than from our internal knowledge and needs, when we live away from those erotic guides from within ourselves, then our lives are limited by external and alien forms, and we conform to the needs of a structure that is not based on human need, let alone an individual's. But when we begin to live from within outward, in touch with the power of the erotic within ourselves, and allowing that power to inform and illuminate our actions upon the world around us, then we begin to be responsible to ourselves in the deepest sense. For as we begin to recognize our deepest feelings, we begin to give up, of necessity, being satisfied with suffering, and self-negation, and with the numbness which so often seems like the only alternative in our society. Our acts against oppression become integral with self, motivated and empowered from within. In touch with the erotic, I become less willing to accept powerlessness, or those other supplied states of being which are not native to me, such as resignation, despair, self-effacement, depression, self-denial.”12

12 “Uses of the Erotic: The Erotic as Power by Audre Lorde.” Fred and Far by Melody G
Performing “yes” in the face of “no” has long been a point of comical yet extremely effective and sincere entry into one of the deepest conditions of human existence. There’s something about futility paired with a stubborn persistence and commitment to “do it anyway” that strikes a very human chord. Kate Gilmore’s plethora of task-based performances are neither functionall nor resolutory yet are all of mesmerizing and oddly relatable. Scott Wolniak shoves intentionally oversized canvases through doorways that are too small and I can’t help but feel an excitement and livelihood that otherwise polished and “successful” art would fail to deliver. I think about YouTube fail compilations and the strangely addictive power of watching other people screw up. We are attracted to struggle and failure because it reminds us that we are alive. Alongside our capacity for love and pain, our inherent struggle and failure comprise the universal litmus test for being human.


Heterotopias & Cannibalism

Inspired by Foucault’s essay “Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias”\textsuperscript{15}, I began to consider my previous work as a hairstylist and the very sacred, heterotopic space hair salons provide - a momentary escape from everyday life where one is not only allowed, but \textit{required} to sit still and participate in a very communal interaction between stylist and client. While being touched and pampered, people’s mental and emotional vulnerability is elevated and the salon transforms quickly from \textit{just} a salon to a place of often extremely intimate and therapeutic disclosures. I regularly miss the constant and unexpected communal activation the salon environment provided me. It was a space made so alive by such simple conditions, and by nature possessed an exciting and ever-changing flow of energy that I’ve often felt lacked in graduate student life. The act of hairstyling is innately performative. After six years in the industry I’ve nearly mastered the constant code-switching and persona adaptation required in order to accommodate each and every individual client - a very exciting feeling of being someone \textit{slightly} different each time a new body sat in the chair - never \textit{not} Brianne, but never \textit{wholly} Brianne.

When considering the ability for such heterotopic spaces to carve intense meaning out of almost nothing, I thought of my exhibition space and saw yet another opportunity. How much life could I possibly squeeze into the small space and time which was allotted me? I committed to never allowing my space to become stale, but subjecting it instead with a maximalist amount of heterotopic activations. An over-performance of continual adaptations. A generous counterbalance to the irreverent opening performance.

In a single day, the dysfunctional screening room created during opening night was taken down and replaced with “Salon FAB”, a functioning hair salon that offered free haircuts and styles to anyone who booked online. The following day, a clothing rack loaded with second hand clothing for sale was placed by the doorway of my space, and the
signage was updated to “Salon FAB & Boutique”. On Tuesday and Thursday mornings, the salon furniture was moved outside, yoga mats layed down, and free stretching/meditation sessions were held under the direction of Emily Kuckenbecker (MFA student in Craft and Material Studies). The quick transition from the hair salon to the yoga studio and back was live streamed on Instagram, as were the majority of the events and happenings throughout the two weeks. These specific heterotopias allowed me to enact an intentional blurring of art and life, one that delightedly produced a wellspring of confused and perplexed faces of those who were almost too timid to enter the salon and touch anything for fear that it might be “art”. The fact that the stigma of art as still, precious, and untouchable maintains such a stronghold in people’s perception of art even in an arts institution completely fascinates me. How sad it must be to have such a tiny window by which to look though.
On the first Friday and second Wednesday I performed “Having Cake and Eating it Too”, a piece that spilled out of my space and in the stairwell of the gallery, filling the old building with my reverberating megaphoned voice, crumbled pieces of paper, and empty plates of eaten cake. On the second week of the exhibition, a makeshift VIP single-person-sitter screening room was installed into the 3x9ft closet in the nmy space, where people were able to view my thesis film with noise cancelling headphones while waiting for a haircut if they so wished. Over time the space began to swell with piles of hair, added decor, remnants of performances, candy, magazines, a megaphone, cowboy boots, increased traffic, changes of clothes, etc.
Still from “Having Cake and Eating it Too” performance
This regenerative and cannibalistic activation throughout the two weeks of Thesis appropriately mirrors the quasi-performative / quasi-autobiographical video of which I initially intended to show for thesis. In this video, footage constantly interrupts footage, one Brianne cuts into the other, frames from the past hush frames from the present, and vice-versa. This video is, by intention, perpetually in progress. It is constantly re-worked, added to, expanded, cut, shrunk, and repeated. If alive, it would be some kind of heaving, undulating beast, always reaching for more segments to chew up, spit out, and chew again. I don’t intend for this beast to ever be fully satisfied. In essence, this video is infinite. I suppose when I die, some will consider it as finished, but they’re wrong.

The circumstance of Thesis, although initially seen as a set back, allowed me to perform in the same way I’ve edited as well as flaunt a fierce bout of adrenaline, determination, and rigor that has remained co’nsistent throughout every piece of mine. I’m tired, but I wouldn’t have it any other way.
Salon FAB Appointment Diary

April 29

9:45am OM/I: Quiet and wide-eyed at first. “Funny how silencing new experiences are”. Sang ABCs and Itsy Bitsy Spiders to toes to keep still.

11:15 RF.: Hadn’t had a trim in over a year. Talked about musicals and plays with SH - impressively knowledgeable about them.

12:00 SH.: Talked about how kind and understanding and human RG is in Sound. Talked about her sound project where she fucked with the audio of disney cartoon clips and memes. Said half the class seemed disinterested. I like her spunk.

1:00 MS: Tipped me in a hand thrown mug (microwave safe) and a rolled joint. Mentioned something about parties and having “too much fun” in college.

2:00 MP: Cute “mrs frizzle” glasses. Was so happy with her haircut she jumped around smiling and dancing. Gave me a hug and kiss on the cheek after.

3:00 PF: Had a shaven mustache - said he got tired of it. Talked about the task of maintaining a healthy relationship with parents who don’t have the same views as us - a lot of necessary denial and taboos and things we just don’t talk about in order to keep the peace. Doesn’t think morals need to be tied to a religious standing to have validity

3:30 OD: Thick hair with product in it - made it hard to comb through. Hadn’t had it cut in years. Was quiet mostly. Lit up and smiled a lot when she saw the final result.

April 30

11:00 AN: Computer engineering student. Confided that he doesn’t even like it. Been playing piano for 15 years and might like to do something with that or teach soccer. Also interested in volleyball. Has been reading the book Finding Your North Star and is being encouraged by it. I hope he does what his heart wants.

11:30 HS: Committee shot down her romance novel as a part of her thesis. Discouraged. She cussed in front of her dad for the first time ever the night of Thesis instal. Lack of physical touch. Had to tell her husband how to hug and comfort her properly. Can’t wait to go home and live with him. They still have unopened wedding presents from over two years ago.

2:00 SW: Went to a music festival in VB the precious weekend and didn’t remember most of it because Molly + beer + Four Locos

2:15 AP: Tipped me with a burger from Cobra Cabana later that evening

3:00 KS: Told him he could be a hair model. Might minor in fashion marketing. Tipped me only $3 for 40 minutes
5:30 AB: Talked mostly about work the whole time with AP. Told me what Molly feels like. Her husband (bf?) loves her with short hair.

6:15 SF: Teaches medical illustration. Really into K-pop (started as curiosity then grew into obsessive intrigue). Went out of country for the first time a few years ago. Plans to hike the pacific northwest this summer. Wants to do Europe next. Had a big red sucker with her the whole time.

May 1st

11:00 KK: Sophomore in graphic design. Hopes he can find something applicable.

11:30 MS/ “DJ Sparky”: brought vintage rock and roll photos / magazine cover prints to hang on wall - also gifted me with a heart that lights up when you and someone else touch while holding it, a tiny hand to wear on one finger, fake baby puke, and other random things - asked to take my picture in the hidden stairwell of the Anderson

12:45 AM: More masculine haircut. Not comfortable with either salon or barber - wonders where “her” place is. We talked about how I hope to break the binaries in salons if I ever pursue salon work more seriously. Very kind.

1:15 LP: mom calls her “her little boy” when she gets short haircuts, not meant in a good way, but she loves it and wears it proud in spite of. Can’t wait to quit her job and get off social media. Going to Mexico for the same residency as Sandy this summer.

May 2nd

12:45 SB: Husband tried to kiss her on their first date after he put his awkward bike helmet on. Doesn’t think he really cares what she looks like.

1:30 EH: first time living away from home. Very positive about it. Thinks she is getting to the point where she doesn’t want to stay in the same place for long. Tipped me in sushi using one of her meal swipes.

3:00 AT: Not sure why but her prettiness was almost intimidating to me. She reminded me of the “popular girls” in middle school/early high school.

4:30 DW: Gorgeous thick and full/wavy hair. Wanted to chop it off for sister’s graduation. Sister doesn’t know.

5:15 AL: Husband lives in Alabama. Doesn’t like it that much.

6:00 RE: Had a hard time in school trying to figure herself out and her concepts. Doesn’t like that she works with the same person every day.

6:30 LN: ordered JimmyJohns for us

May 3rd

1:00 JD: “not doing anything this weekend”

1:30 OG: Contagious energy. Bought some clothes - saw her later wearing one of the tops

2:00 SE: both of us love Tracy Stonestreet. Listened intently about opening night. Loved my work - asked to see documentation.
May 6th

11:30 AK: met his gf through VCU but they’re both from the same town

11:15 CF: mother is Korean and keeps her hair short because it’s so thick and heavy. Wishes her AFO professor didn’t have the students talk about their art at the beginning of crits.

12:00 HB: Stopped bringing food and drinks to her committee meetings and crits because they weren’t appreciating it. Going camping by herself this week.

1:15 RC: kind, sweet spirit

1:45 RDL: first person who’s hair I cut here at VCU. It’s been two years now. It was a very sentimental “last haircut”

2:15 NN: tipped me with a pizza. Engineering and anthropology - used to dance


3:00 KS: Grew her hair out only because partner wanted to see what it looked like long. Wants to do purple hair next.

May 7th

3:00 MJR: cheated on ex with current boyfriend who thought he was completely gay at the time

3:45 SV: Beginning to feel like art is more of a chore

4:30 MP: very friendly, very bubbly, but for some reason I can’t remember any distinctly interesting thing about our conversation

11 TS: “Have they always been that way? They were so anti-performance” Yep. I know.


2:00 AH: is gender fluid but wonders if the masculine side is just conforming to the popular male-dominant society / way of being
Less Answering, More Doing

If truth be told, I fear being seen as boring myself. I fear that people will leave and forget. But I have noticed that this only happens when I spend too much time trying to explain myself. So, rather than wrestling with answers, I emphasize actions, happenings, impulses, struggle, and questions. I prefer to keep people guessing. The insatiable human need to know everything and our total inability to sit contently with the uncertain guarantees that an answer will be produced via the audience’s uncontrollable urge to finish the puzzle, whether or not I as the author hand over the last piece.

One of the most intriguing aspects of art is the beautifully human and inexact way it is received - 100 different ways for every 100 viewers. Artists can waste a lot of time catering toward others and worrying that the audience didn’t “get” the art the way they intended. But does art ever really do exactly what you set it out to do? Should we really be spending so much time trying to decide who the art is for? In the words of Sol Lewit to an overly concerned Eva Hesse: “Stop it, and just do”\(^\text{16}\). When you are asked whether or not these

\begin{quote}
**“THINKING ABOUT AN AUDIENCE CAN DAMPEN THE CREATIVE SPIRIT. I OFTEN DON’T THINK ABOUT AN AUDIENCE. I MAKE THE WORK FOR MYSELF.”**
Barbara Hammer
\end{quote}
“doings” are to be considered “art” or something else, respond by challenging the very utility of that question.

- Haul washing and drying machine up four flights of stairs inside gallery during opening night, wearing wig and formal attire.
- Call businesses using a strong southern accent.
- Impersonate visiting artist. Convince student the work being displayed is mine.
- Entertain fancy dates with unknown men. Pretending to be acclimated with the “high life”.
- Fill 100 Easter eggs with notes of discouragement. Hide them throughout the VCU Fine Arts Building.
- Record over-the-phone breakup.
- Give performative lecture with bag of frozen peas over ankle the entire time. Let students question the authenticity of the sprain.
- Lay in a sunny spot on the stairwell of the Fine Arts Building and nap until security guard is notified.
- Run in circles in a public bathroom until someone comes in. Wait until they leave. Repeat.
- Appear as Lauren K and conduct flash-mob styled country line dancing.
- Steal twelve construction cones on Thanksgiving. Decorated friend’s yard with them.
- Sweat onto transparent paper while staring at audience and singing hymns from memory
- Sit on a table in class and eat cake while staring the professor in the eye.
- Install hair salon in an art gallery. Offered free haircuts.
- Climb drainage pipe to the roof of building while singing ABC’s.
- Attend an entire day of graduate school as Allison.
- “Spin the sharpie”
- Run the length of the Fine Arts lobby while wearing socks. Go back and forth until camera dies.
- Cry in front of professor while watching footage of your deteriorating childhood home.

“RATHER THAN HARBORING ANY FALSE PRETENCE OF RESOLVING THINGS, WE ARE LEFT WITH A DEEPLY CONFOUNDING IMPRESSION OF THE WORLD”

Martin Patrick, on Pope.L
Plurality, Please

My focus rests not on individual acts nor whether they are “art”, but on the overarching concept of plurality and the severely intentional act of choosing not to choose a singular track or definition. Within this choice lies an inherent battle against an antiquated, systematic, and male-centric paradigm that tells you to consider the thing, research the thing, make the thing, then explain it. I reject both the pretense that humans are capable of understanding the deepest powers and inspirations within them, and the subsequent expectation of explaining those powers. I also reject the Westernized perception of a fixated or complete self and the harmful, candy-coated obsession with “staying true” to this one self. In the face of a culture that demands a singular and digestible object, I embrace instead a fluid practice that is given permission to ebb and flow with the prismatic nature of life itself. One that is fueled by mobility, improvisation, self-reflexivity, adaptability, redemptive rebelliousness, and a reckless abandon of ego in favor of honest and curious pursuits. In the face of boring intellect, I’d rather jest. In the face of stillness, I’d rather run. In the face of singularity, I’d rather disperse into a million pieces. 17

If this practice manifests in work that becomes transcendent for a viewer, wonderful. If it exists simply within Brianne’s own mind and body, fabulous. If it is never even recognized as

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17
“art”, even better. I do not care. The goal is to not give a shit and just be, whatever “being” means for me.

Be young.

Be naive.

Be bold. Be immature.

Be erotic.

Be adaptable. Be tired.

Be yourself.

Be someone else. Be complex.

Be confused.

Be angry.

Be ecstatic.

Just never, ever be still.
“I’D RATHER FEEL
TIME AND LIFE
WHIP THROUGH ME
LIKE A FIERCE GUST
OF OKLAHOMA
WIND
THAN PRETEND
THE BREATH I JUST
TOOK IS OF THE
SAME AIR AS THE
ONE BEFORE ”

Brianne Alta Humphreys
Conclusion

“The goal is for my obituary to confuse people.” - Brianne Alta Humphreys
P.S.

Performative work has long been a safe haven and an outlet for the misfits who feel stifled by the mundane structures of everyday life and can’t seem to find an adequate voice within traditional frameworks. That being said, one of the most inadequate frameworks is language. Thus, what you have just read is in and of itself largely misleading. The very requirement of this paper’s existence for the sake of validating and accrediting my artistic experience and education is absurd and rooted in an antiquated and highly inefficient method. I wholly reject this paper as an acceptable supplement or support of my work therein.

xoxo,

Brianne
1. Art has the freedom to oscillate between source and deposit (not limited by these two points but rather on an infinite sliding scale)

2. Art does not have to please anyone

3. Art does not have to answer questions or solve anything

4. If the community around you does not support your work, change your community

5. If the medium you work in is not accomplishing your goal, change your medium

6. If making art is no longer fulfilling, quit art

7. There is no hierarchy that places “fine art” above movies, music videos, podcasts, youtube tutorials, cooking shows, DIY, etc...

8. The second you start taking art seriously is the second you should quit art

9. You are not obligated to slave for art

10. You are not obligated to stay an artist

11. Art doesn’t require objects

12. Art doesn’t require money

13. Art that offends highlights the amateurity of the audience, not the art.

14. There is no such thing as a “safe space” within art

15. You are allowed to make without understanding

16. We make because we were made

17. Art’s value does not depend on how it’s received

18. There is no such thing as value
19. Art has the freedom to ebb and flow with the person or thing making it

20. Art doesn’t have to be finite

21. Art happens where words don’t

22. Words are inadequate at completing art

23. In no universe is the artist held responsible for what other people do and do not think art is, should be, or how it should make them feel.

24. Art can be for yourself and yourself alone

25. Art can be as grey as life itself if you give it the permission

26. You are allowed to give permission

27. You are allowed to disagree with everything on this list


https://bombmagazine.org/articles/barbara-hammer/.


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