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Failing In My Own Class

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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May, 2020

Acknowledgements

It was a blessing to work on this project with my amazing thesis committee: Caitlin Cherry, Hilary Wilder, and Noah Simblast. Their important feedback and generous encouragement was a guiding light throughout the formation of my artwork and revisions of this research statement (thankyou for everything!). The moral support from my cohort has been invaluable to my art practice, and I was lucky enough to have experienced graduate school with all of them. I'm grateful for the aid, support and expertise of the many individuals at VCU's School of the Arts for making my experience over the last two years a worthwhile and memorable one. Thank you to my family for their unconditional love. I dedicate this project to y'all.

Table of Contents

Abstract	4
Key Words	5
Fata Morgana and Audience	6 - 16
The Disabled Speaker and Education	17 - 21
Text, Sound and Abstraction	22 - 27
Becoming Dysfluent, Theory of Chalkboards, Materiality	28 - 36
Conclusion	37
Bibliography	38 - 40

Abstract

Failing In My Own Class
By Bryan Castro, Master of Fine Arts

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

Virginia Commonwealth University, 2020.

Major Director: Caitlin Cherry, Assistant Professor, Department of Painting + Printmaking

This research statement summarizes how my artwork has shifted from my performance-lecture *Say It After Me* to the painting-installation *Becoming Dysfluent*. To understand that shift in my practice, an account of my performance-lecture *Say It After Me* is explained in order to understand how it's similar and different to Joseph Beuys's performances with blackboards. Next, the relationship between the American educational system and my identity is explained in order to understand how my experiences as an instructor in higher education informed the creation of my performance persona Professor Castro. After discussing my identity as a Puerto Rican-American, my decision to engage in a conversation about stuttering through text, sound, and abstraction will be elaborated. Last but not least, a formal analysis and description of the painting-installation *Becoming Dysfluent* is explained in order to understand how my artistic practice is about visualizing and performing dysfluency.

Key Words

Stuttering

Stutter

Stutterer

Puerto Rican-American

Instructor

Student

Intelligibility

Fluency

Dysfluency

Biopolitics

Hegemony

Assimilation

Speech

Language

Bilingualism

Did I Stutter?

Speech Pathology

Normalcy

Markmaking

Writing

Drawing

Painting-Installation

Performance-Lecture

Fata Morgana and Audience

My art practice engages in a conversation about stuttering in order to resist the cultural process of conforming with dominant speech patterns.¹ Since disability is my subject matter, I combine the medium of drawing and painting with performance to represent my voice as a Puerto Rican-American, instructor, and stutterer. I address stuttering in my artwork because it is a part of my everyday social interactions. It's a political act to stutter, and I want my audience to directly participate in my work without them being shamed for their way of speaking. By engaging explicitly with an audience, my art practice creates a paradigm shift about stutterers in which stuttering is reframed as a resistance to fluency.

In the spring of 2019, I participated in a group exhibition called *Fata Morgana* from April 27th through May 4th. This exhibition took place in a series of empty storefronts at *Westover Place*, a strip mall on the southside of Richmond, Virginia. My exhibition space had been a beauty salon called *Beauty Heaven VA* (Fig. 1) that sold wigs and hair pieces. I used half of that space to transfer-knowledge about stuttering by making the performance-installation *On Purpose*. One of the objectives for this installation was to explore the idea of fluency / disfluency through the performance-lecture *Say It After Me* in order to guide an audience in how stuttering looks, sounds, and feels. *Fata Morgana* was the perfect space and time to experiment and educate an audience without the institutional feel of a white cube gallery.

Before the performance-lecture *Say It After Me*, I painted scat-lyrics all along the walls with black chalkboard paint and sidewalk chalk. At one end of the room I crumbled sticks of chalk

¹ "Did I Stutter," *Did I Stutter?* accessed February 28, 2020. <https://www.didistutter.org/about.htm>

around a small cardboard box with texts ranging from *Cloak and Dagger* comic books to personal speech therapy reports from middle school. I left empty space on the floor but around the edges of the room were paintings on canvas and panels leaning up against the wall and front windows. There were 20 in total and each were 18 inches by 24 inches. At the other end of the room I positioned a freestanding, movable blackboard with one side empty and the other side full of texts, doodles, and diagrams. I built this whole installation to be activated by transforming it into a classroom-theater for people to read the large scat-lyrics encircling the space and literature in the cardboard box.

On the opening night of *Fata Morgana*, I did a performance through my performance persona - Professor Castro - using the visualizations, literature, and other objects in the performance-installation *On Purpose*. The performance began while I was a few blocks away outside of the exhibition space where I was easing my social anxiety. Before I showed up to the space as Professor Castro, I had my “teaching assistant” (TA) arrive at my installation at 7:00pm and announce to everybody waiting for me that I was running late. I also told my TA to lead everybody in vocal exercises based on his discretion. After five minutes past, I showed up to the space by running into it while breathing heavily to get the audience’s attention. Next, I hung my messenger bag in a corner of the room, and I took out a binder with my plan of actions for the performance-lecture.

The first thing I did was write on the empty side of the blackboard “Say It With Me”. As a group, we read aloud the scat-lyrics on the wall painting (Fig.1 & Fig.2). I instructed the audience to say

this text because it represents forms of speech therapy that emphasize steady rhythm and doing voluntary stuttering.



Figure 1. *On Purpose*, 2019, black chalkboard paint and chalk on walls, one freestanding movable double-sided blackboard, one cardboard box, eight panels covered with black chalkboard paint and pastels, twelve canvases covered with pastels, chalk, and acrylic paint, blackboard 52 x 22 x 70 in, cardboard box 18 x 12 x 12 in, panels 18 x 24 in each, canvases 18 x 24 in each



Figure 2. *On Purpose*, 2019, black chalkboard paint and chalk on walls, one freestanding movable double-sided blackboard, one cardboard box, eight panels covered with black chalkboard paint and pastels, twelve canvases covered with pastels, chalk, and acrylic paint, blackboard 52 x 22 x 70 in, cardboard box 18 x 12 x 12 in, panels 18 x 24 in each, canvases 18 x 24 in each

As a method in speech therapy, rhythm was first used in the 1800s when the French physician Marc Columbat “devised a metronome-like device to help stutterers time their syllables to a steady beat,”² and methods such as foot-tapping helped stutterers add rhythm to their speech.³ The idea of rhythm as an aid to fluency goes against the natural idiosyncrasies of a person’s speech, and stutterers usually feel robotic when speaking in a calculated manner. An opposite

² William D. Parry, *Understanding & Controlling Stuttering: A Comprehensive New Approach Based on the Valsalva Hypothesis* (New York: National Stuttering Association, 2013),143.

³ William D. Parry, *Understanding & Controlling Stuttering*,143.

method in speech therapy is voluntary stuttering, which requires people “stutter on purpose.”⁴ I enhanced the audience’s disfluency by combining both methods in a scat-lyric to generate noise from their variant ways of saying the text. When the audience generated enough noise, I started to clap and dance, and everybody started to clap along.

After reading the scat-lyrics on the wall, I went over to the blackboard, flipped it over, and gave a lecture about stuttering. I used the blackboard *Untitled (How Stuttering Works Inside of My Body)* to illustrate the process of communicating between myself and a non-stutterer through images of rocks, vocal chords, and hyphens.



Figure 3. *Say It After Me*, 2019. Documentation of performance-lecture.

⁴ Ibid.,156.

In this lecture (Fig. 3) I used images of rocks because I associate them as being non-entities, which is a metaphor to represent “the other who has been rendered a nonentity by colonialism.”⁵ I labeled each rock with the letter A or B, and this abstract image was inspired by the speaking-circuit described in Ferdinand de Saussure's *Course on Linguistics* (Fig.4).⁶ I riffed off of his abstract diagram because I wanted to explore the relationship between the study of linguistics with a person's identity. Instead of depicting two white males talking to one another, the rocks represents those who are in the space of the undercommons - black people, indigenous people, queer people, poor people, and any other group of people that cohabit in that space.⁷ The image on the blackboard is a response to the communication expectations placed on queer, disabled speakers of color in classroom settings. The blackboard became a channel of communication where I edited diagrammatic images in real-time by adding and connecting parts of its composition.

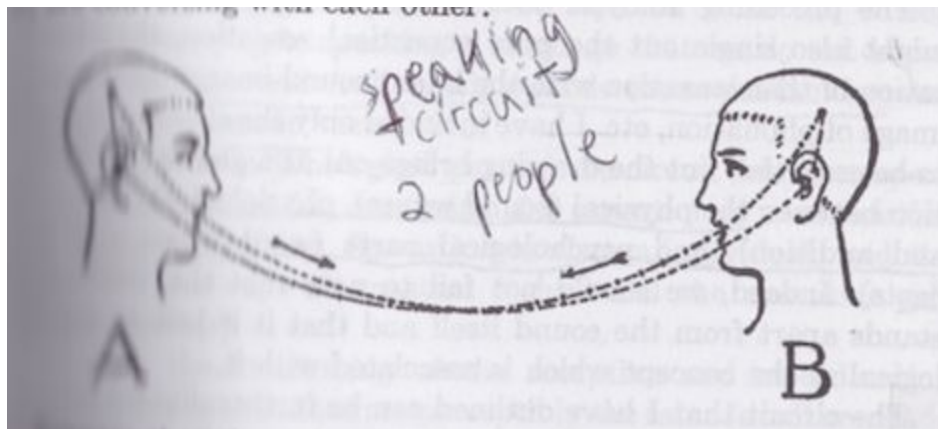


Figure 4 diagram of speaking circuit (Ferdinand de Saussure, “The Object of Linguistics” in *Course in General Linguistics*, ed. Perry Meisel and Haun Saussy. New York: Columbia University Press, 2011, 11).

⁵ Jack Halberstam, “The Wild Beyond: With and for the Undercommons,” in *Undercommons: Fugitive Planning & Black Study*, Stefano Harney & Fred Moten (New York: Minor Compositions, 2013), 8.

⁶ Ferdinand de Saussure, “The Object of Linguistics,” in *Course in General Linguistics*, ed. Perry Meisel and Huan Saussy (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 11.

⁷ Jack Halberstam, “The Wild Beyond: With And For The Undercommons,” 6

To explain how stuttering works inside my body, I drew a thought bubble over Rock B and wrote, “What are they saying?” about Rock A. Next I attached a white line from the thought bubble to a copyright symbol that’s attached to a text referencing a rap lyric. This text says “ / you got lost off the snare off impeach the president,”⁸ by rapper GZA off the song *As High As Wu-Tang Get*. Soon after, I drew a line going through this text to a graph titled “Rate of Speech 4 Rock A,” with the onomatopoeia diagram labeled “Pow Pow.” I then drew two white lines from an oval labeled “breaks” to Rock A and a group of abstract hyphens. Overlapping that oval is another oval labeled “collisions” where I drew a line to connect it to the orange dotted lines of communication between Rock A and Rock B. Just like the scat-lyrics of the wall painting, I asked the audience to repeat the word “process” after I explained how my vocal chords move together when I speak. Through drawing on the blackboard about my breakdown in communication, I illustrated my process of speech.

When this lecture ended, I moved on to another speech exercise in which I asked the audience to individually read the highlighted page numbers from the book *Stuttering is Cool: A Guide to Stuttering in a Fast-Talking World* by Daniele Rossi. The content in this book is the author’s personal life, specifically how he lives as a person who stutters. Its aim is to share ways to voluntarily stutter in all matters of life from job interviews to dating in order for stutterers to embrace their natural speaking voices. The format of my speech exercise with this book was similar to the first group reading. I introduced the exercise, I did it myself and then I asked the audience if anybody wanted to read it aloud. My friends from our performance class read them aloud, and they passed it to one another when they were done. I used this book in my

⁸ “As High As Wu-Tang Get,” *Genius*, accessed May 19, 2020. <https://genius.com/243144>

performance to show the audience that even though they may not identify as stutterers, they could have more similarities than differences in the way each other speaks.

To end the performance my teaching assistant and I, along with a volunteer from the audience, hung up a set of paintings on panels. Each panel had chalkboard paint and pastels, and each was a letter or number that was meant to be shuffled around to form a word, similar to the game of *Scrabble*. After hanging them up the incorrect way the first time, we switched them around to their correct formation and I asked the audience to sound out the phrase. The word was Isaiah 32, which is the chapter in the Bible that associates “the eradication of stuttering...with the redemption of the world.”⁹ After I said the word, I went to my messenger bag, took out the bible, and read Isaiah 32, verse 4, which states, “The fearful heart will know and understand, and the stammering tongue will be fluent and clear.”¹⁰ After I said that Bible verse out loud, I announced that I was “late for a meeting” and then I ran out of the storefront.

⁹ Jay Timothy Dolmage, *Disability Rhetoric* (New York: Syracuse University Press),230.

¹⁰ “Isaiah 32:4”, *BibleGateway*, accessed May 4, 2020, <https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Isaiah+32%3A4&version=NIV>



Figure 5. *Untitled (How Stuttering Works Inside of My Body)*, 2019, pastels on blackboard, 48 x 36 in

My painting *Untitled (How Stuttering Works Inside My Body)* (Fig.5) is similar to Joseph Beuys blackboards in their illegibility, but they functioned differently because his compositions weren't taken into consideration before his performances. His blackboards' function as drawings or sketches done in real-time as he was in dialogue with his audience. Most of *Untitled (How Stuttering Working Inside My Body)* was done before my performance, and after I performed the blackboard barely changed but nonetheless became more visually dense and loud. My materials were also different from Beuys since I used pastels to create the image, which have a higher hue intensity and made the picture visually striking. These varied colors helped me speak during my

lecture without having to rely on a script but instead improvise based on the structure of its composition. The drawings Beuys completed on the blackboards were not just a matter of record but a form of imagination and actions that became more didactic in the 1970s.¹¹ His piece *For the lecture: The Social Organism - a work of art, Bochum, 2nd March 1974* is considered an important artifact of his lecture in the city of Bochum, Germany because lectures like that helped him promote his theory of Social Sculpture,

Social sculpture is... based on the concept that everything is art, that every aspect of life could be approached creatively and, as a result, everyone has the potential to be an artist. Social sculpture united Joseph Beuys's idealistic ideas of a utopian society together with his aesthetic practice. He believed that life is a social sculpture that everyone helps to shape.¹²

Social artwork is one way for an artist to be engaged with their audience by making the artwork be an exchange of thoughts, ideas or things between one another. The participation of the crowd was important to Beuys's concept of Social Sculpture because the artwork wasn't considered complete without their participation.¹³ Beuys pedagogical actions with his blackboards took on a tone of condensation since his identity as a white, heterosexual male lecturing about politics set-up a hierarchical, power relationship with his audience. My blackboard and black wall painting along with my performance persona put me in center stage much like Beuys in his lectures where both of us staged an intersection between gallery and classroom. One of the main differences between our performances was the modes of delivery and content where I used humor as a pedagogical method to give space for me and audience members' stutters.

¹¹ Bernice Rose, "Joseph Beuys and the Language of Drawing," in *Thinking is Form: The Drawings of Joseph Beuys*, by Ann Tempkin and Bernice Rose (New York: Thames and Hudson), 107.

¹² "Social Sculpture," *Tate*, accessed April 24th, 2020 <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/art-terms/s/social-sculpture>

¹³ "A Brief Genealogy of Social Sculpture," *Joaap*, accessed April 24th, 2020 <http://www.joaap.org/webonly/moore.htm>

The audiences' participation or role in my performance-lecture *Say It After Me* was formed by the educational aesthetics and materials in my exhibition space. My role as an instructor set-up a power relation between me and my audience where our exchange of communication was based on collective exercises like reading aloud illegible text. It was important for the installation *On Purpose* to be a space for people to stutter because it's difficult and unfair to claim space for the way I communicate without making room for others and their differences.¹⁴ To be a queer, disabled speaker of color is already grounds for exclusion because our voices and bodies are considered deplorable by American educational systems, which makes our frameworks against social structures of oppression difficult to tear down. Through the opening night of *Fata Morgana*, my TA gathered a crowd in my exhibition space for me to give a lesson on stuttering. This lesson questioned the problem of stuttering by relating it to how my body produces stutters. In the end, the topic of my talk was unclear in order to me and the audience to embody disfluent voices.

¹⁴ Joshua St. Pierre, "Voicing Disability with Disabled Voices: Reimagining a Stuttered Identity," in *Barriers and Belonging: Personal Narratives of Disability*, ed. Michelle Jarman, Leila Monaghan, and Alison Quaggin Harkin. (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2017), 103.

The Disabled Speaker and Education

My performance persona was driven by my anxiety to be a strong verbal communicator as a teacher in higher education, or any professional setting for that matter. As an instructor in higher education, one of my concerns was instructing my own class without sounding / appearing normal or ordinary to my students. In this regard, I relate to Joseph P. Carter who says, “No matter the situation, the familiarity of speech appears to me in anxiety-filled moments that I’ve come to predict with almost scientific precision. Speech is such an uncanny phenomenon for me. I’m never at home with my stuttering; I feel ashamed on a daily basis. I am conspicuous.”¹⁵ Because stuttering breaks the flow of communication involuntarily, I use writing instruments like dry erase board markers to draw out my instructions or lessons of the day on a whiteboard. This only goes so far since students usually ask oral questions that are difficult for me to respond to in a timely manner. As a stutterer, I find it hard to work through the anxiety of speaking on a daily basis because so much information is gathered from the delivery of one’s speech, specifically the authority of the speaker and importance of message.

In the essay *The Construction of the Disabled Speaker: Locating Stuttering in Disability Studies*, Joshua St. Pierre deconstructs myths around stutterers. Since only about one percent of the population in North America stutters,¹⁶ it’s often difficult to engage in discourse around stuttering without the focus being solely on or about a stutterer/speaker. Usually the response to stuttering is framed around the medical model of curing or managing it. The problem with this

¹⁵ Joseph P. Carter, “The Everyday Anxiety of the Stutterer.” In *The New York Times*. December 20, 2016. <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/12/20/opinion/the-everyday-anxiety-of-the-stutterer.html>

¹⁶ Joshua St. Pierre. “The Construction of the Disabled Speaker: Locating Stuttering in Disability Studies.” In *Canadian Journal of Disability Studies*, 1, no.3 (2012): 2, <https://doi.org/10.15353/cjds.v1i3.54>

framing device is that it leads to objectification of people's bodies while casting a shadow over the various contexts that inform the discourse around stuttering.¹⁷

The stutterer finds and defines herself in a context dominated by expectations of efficiency. Wielded to notions of success and productivity within capitalism, expediency of labor and communication sets the terms for participation in our socio-economic system while also enforcing the production of the sorts of subjects it requires¹⁸

In a capitalist world the stutterer's identity as a citizen is questioned because of her failure to live up to North American ideals. An inability to control one's body marks one as unusual and thus unacceptable behaviour in American culture. The failure of a stutterer to learn to talk properly or normally in the context of liberal individualism and capitalism is a reminder of our limited power to control our own bodies.¹⁹ Therefore Americans' understanding of stutterers as contaminated and disgraced marginalizes our voices because our bodies are perceived to be shameful and not clearly disabled or abled.

Working with speech therapists for most of my life, I perceived that it was important to overcome my speech impediment. When I looked back at some school documents, I got the overall sense that my stutter fluctuated from mild to severe, and I was surprised to find that my parents and teachers recommended me for speech therapy. Maybe there was a general concern over my lack of friends, isolation, and the emotional toll it took on me. Because of my sensitive reactions when it came to stuttering, my relationships with many of the figures of authority in my life were attempts to make up for my disability. Despite the success of speech therapy exercises at home and in class, I found it frustrating to try to plan out and control my speech in daily conversations because it felt uncomfortable. To me part of these power relationships with speech

¹⁷ Joshua St. Pierre, "The Construction of the Disabled Speaker," 6

¹⁸ Ibid, 12

¹⁹ Ibid, 16.

therapists and teachers was based on my successful performances of fluency with them in a controlled environment like a classroom. These educational devices have felt like an illusionary safe space to learn because of the pressure to demonstrate verbal clarity or concreteness as a student.

Ann O'Connell compares the development of the United States as a nation and the history of its educational system for those who are disabled in her dissertation, *The Development of Speech Pathology in America, 1890 - 1940*. O'Connell describes how many of the methods initially used in the U.S. were adapted from models in European countries like Germany or France. Speech pathology at this time wasn't called what it is today but rather it was named speech correction. The practice of speech correction was developed by three Scotsmen: Alexander Bell, Alexander Melville Bell, and Alexander Graham Bell. One of them - Alexander Melville Bell - "believed that since stuttering was a bad habit its treatment was not in the area of medicine or surgery but of the educator."²⁰

...the constant influx into this country of foreigners from every nation upon the earth has a tendency to corrupt our speech. The schoolroom is almost the only place where a remedy can be applied.²¹

The need for uniformity in speech and language became ever more important in the Industrial Revolution because of the need for communicating in factories where mass production coincided with a diverse linguistic body. Spurred by the labor movement, public schools were introducing speech correction as a set of practices to the children of immigrants so they could fully assimilate into the factories once they grew up.

²⁰ Ann O'Connell, "The Development of Speech Pathology in America, 1890-1940" (PhD diss., Loyola University Chicago, 1990), 18. https://ecommons.luc.edu/luc_diss/2744

²¹ Ann O'Connell, "The Development of Speech Pathology in America" 20.

O’Connell describes how, in the late 19th century, a relationship between education and business started forming due to the combining of small businesses into big corporations. Interestingly enough, because these corporations like the United States Steel Corporation made billions of dollars, the educational system started looking at this business model for a framework of organization. This industrialization and desire for maximum profits led businesses to hire speech therapists. “The need existed not only to help foreign-born workers learn English but also to help them speak in a clear, unaccented manner.”²² There was much public emphasis on the relationship between speech and livelihood. Schools were doing some of the work in correcting the speech patterns of their students in order for them to better assimilate into the workforce. A key proponent of this business approach to education was Ellwood P. Cubberly who was also an advocate for the Americanization of new immigrants.²³ As he sought to remove the ethnic heritage of these new immigrants from Southern and Eastern Europe via education, Cubberly (like many others) aimed not only to make their voices sound Anglo-Saxon, but to also embody and mark the values of a White-Anglo-Saxon-Protestant via accent and speech patterns.

My identity as a second-generation, Puerto Rican-American comes partly through my way of speaking Spanish, but because I’m not fluent in that language it takes the form of Spanglish. Spanglish is a hybrid language between English and Spanish, and it’s predominantly taken up by aspiring middle-class second-generation Latinos.²⁴ Spanglish is the result of “the mesh of two empires, countries, and peoples - what Illan Stavans, the foremost champion of Spanglish, calls

²²Ibid., 30.

²³Ibid., 32.

²⁴ Sara Menkedick, “Living on the Hyphen,” *Oxford Magazine* 86 October 14, 2014
<https://www.oxfordamerican.org/magazine/item/352-living-on-the-hyphen>

‘to live on the hyphen, in between’²⁵ To be bilingual is difficult for me because I’m living in between two cultures; I feel barriers and belongings to both but never feel settled in one or the other. As Puerto Rican humorist Salvador Tio said, “Bilingualism consists of thinking in one tongue and speaking in another. It is to perform the functions of a human being and a dictionary at once...Bilingualism is a machine that produces stutterers.”²⁶ I stutter to expand my own language and way of speaking because I want to represent my fluid, hybrid identity without having to choose between one culture or another.

²⁵ Sara Menkedick, “Living on the Hyphen,” *Oxford Magazine* 86, October 14, 2014, <https://www.oxfordamerican.org/magazine/item/352-living-on-the-hyphen>

²⁶ Sara Menkedick, “Living on the Hyphen,” *Oxford Magazine* 86, October 14, 2014, <https://www.oxfordamerican.org/magazine/item/352-living-on-the-hyphen>

Text, Sound and Abstraction

My art practice articulates my personal story in a way that prioritizes ambivalence and strangeness. My work is inspired by jazz music, specifically scat-singing because it's a great example of not following a beat but rather letting one's voice convey a range of emotions and create meaning out of irregularity or difference. Scat-singing is one of only a few representations of stutters that's not music or noise, language or speech. It's important for me to render how I feel through my artwork. Abstraction allows for my work to be framed not only around stuttering, but also in regard to my identity. By using language and drawing to build images, my objective is to be vulnerable and honest about "challenging normalcy as it is assumed in speech and speech pathology."²⁷

I represent scat lyrics to visualize a stutter through painting strategies and materials that privilege direct expression. How can I push a viewer to stutter while reading or looking at one of my pieces? One similarity I noticed between how a stutterer's speech and a jazz vocalist's lyrics are often written is the use of hyphens to break apart the syllables. It's an iconic, common and even private way to imitate stutterers without being afraid of doing it the wrong way. In the song *Scatman (Ski-Ba-Bop-Ba-Dop-Bop)* by "Scatman John" (John Larkin), he raps: "...But what you don't know / I, gonna tell you right now / That the stutter and the scat is the same thing."²⁸

By abstracting my literature on stuttering into a visual stutter or scat, the expansiveness of that fragmentation opened the door for me to imagine the kind of voice that was behind the words.

The segmentation from stutters, combined with the feel from scat-singing into text-based

²⁷"Did I Stutter," accessed February 28, 2020. <https://www.didistutter.org/about.htm>

²⁸ Scatman John, "The Stutter and the Scat is the Same Thing," interview by Ira Zimmerman, *Advance for Speech Pathologists and Audiologists Magazine*, November 20, 1995, <https://www.mnsu.edu/comdis/kuster/famous/irascat.html>

paintings or drawings, gave me the freedom to articulate emotions or feelings.



Figure 6. Tony Lewis, *Ts, Ts, Tsss*, 2017, graphite, pencil, and coloured pencil on paper, 78 x 100 x 3 in. Courtesy Massimo De Carlo Milan/London/Hong Kong. ©Todd-White Art Photography

The artwork of Tony Lewis is a good entry point to understand my painting-installation *Becoming Dysfluent* because of the inspiration Lewis takes from scat artists Ella Fitzgerald and American Modernist painter Stuart Davis. In his 2017 exhibition *When I Felt Like I Could Sing That, Then I Felt Like I Was In*, he used graphite, pencil and coloured pencil on paper to create biomorphic forms in blotches of color. “Understanding the relationship between music,

improvisation, sound, rhythm, and then Stuart Davis, and then Eve Hesse, and then linguistics, is the problem I'm trying to make sense of through my drawings."²⁹ His interest in representing his body through the movement and relationship of vivid colors in intermeshed shapes is one way to achieve an effect similar to that of Ella Fitzgerald's voice when scat-singing. The narratives conveyed in the drawings of that exhibition are understood in one's body through the combination of broken up speech sounds with colors, which resembles the artist's experience of listening to jazz.

Language and semiotics play an important role in Tony Lewis's practice through pen stenography. The representations of pure abstractions like *Ts*, *Ts*, *Tsss* (Fig.6)³⁰ developed after his earlier work referring to the Gregg shorthand system. This writing system is a form of pen stenography, and it was invented in the United States in the 19th century as a way to record and copy the phonetics of a word.³¹ Lewis uses this method of writing through an economy of lines and figures that break down the relationship between speech and sound. The symbols or glyphs he renders start off as the foundation of a piece where he can then riff off of them with "pre-existing collaborations of"³² colors. By marking surfaces with the shorthand of language, the flowing gesture of writing takes precedence over any specific meaning behind those marks.

Graphite is a metaphor for Tony's body, which situates his work within a discussion about race

²⁹ Tony Lewis, "Interview | Tony Lewis" interview by Daisy Schofield, Schön! Magazine, February 21st, 2017, <https://schonmagazine.com/interview-tony-lewis/>

³⁰ Tony Lewis, *Ts, Ts, Tsss*, 2016, graphite, pencil and coloured pencil on paper, 78 by 100 by 2 inches. London, in exhibition at Massimo De Carlo. "Interview | Tony Lewis." Schön! Magazine, February 21st, 2017. Accessed May 16, 2020. <https://schonmagazine.com/interview-tony-lewis/>

³¹ "When I Felt Like I Could Sing, Then I Felt Like I Was In" *GalleriesNow*, accessed May 16, 2020.

<https://www.galleriesnow.net/shows/tony-lewis-when-i-felt-like-i-could-sing-that-then-i-felt-like-i-was-in/>

³² Tony Lewis, "Tony Lewis - Interview: 'I've got to wear a Tyvek suit, a ventilation mask, two pairs of gloves, and two pairs of shoes whenever I go to the studio,'" interview by Elizabeth Fullerton, Studio International, May 5th, 2020, <https://www.studiointernational.com/index.php/tony-lewis-interview-the-dangers-as-far-as-i-can-see-massimo-de-carlo-milan>

and power structures because of the materiality of the medium and how much space it takes up.³³ His final pieces on paper end up transforming the concept of the word or symbol into visual poetry through the language of abstraction.

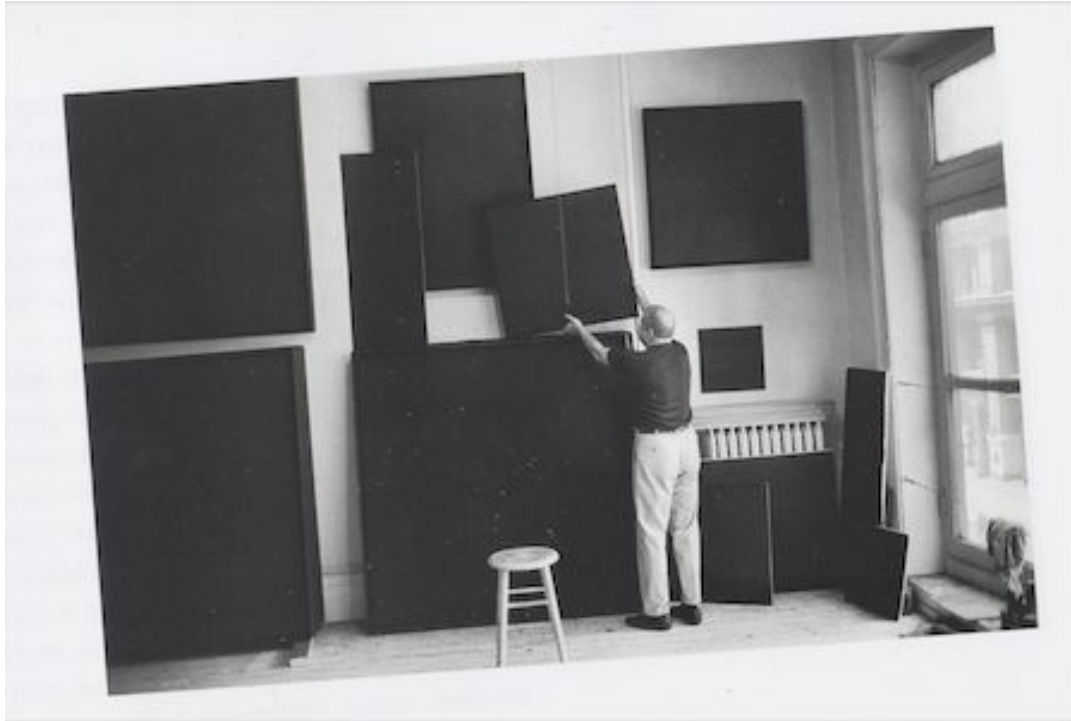


Fig. 7 “Ad Reinhardt hanging paintings in his studio, New York, 1966.”³⁴ (Lanka Tattersall, “Black Lives, Matter,” in *Kerry James Marshall: Mastry*, ed. Helen Molesworth. New York: Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, 2016, 63, Figure 28).

Lewis’s expanded drawing practice is similar to my art practice since we both relate to the history of abstraction in painting. We express emotion with language through colors, lines and shapes so that the effect of the work is part of its meaning. Our practices depart from the

³³ Tony Lewis, “‘It’s a Call to Action’: Why Artist Tony Lewis Is Battling the Legacy of William F. Buckley, the Godfather of American Conservatism,” interview by Janella Zara, *On View*, Artnet News, May 31, 2019 <https://news.artnet.com/exhibitions/tony-lewis-blum-poe-los-angeles-1561066>

³⁴ Lanka Tattersall, “Black Lives, Matter,” in *Kerry James Marshall: Mastry*, ed. Helen Molesworth (Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, 2016 63,

modernist idea of maintaining art's purity from the degeneracies of culture by refusing to make pictures within a system of "binary oppositions."³⁵

Abstract painting, despite its long history of emancipatory promise, is inadequate to the project of representing the underrepresented. Historically, abstraction has been a utopian mode that most fully allows for the foregrounding of the material conditions of painting—the material, perceptual, phenomenological facticity of pigment on a support—and black has always been at the core of these explorations.³⁶

Because of my strained relationship to communicating or verbalizing my ideas, developing a practice between drawing, writing, and painting allows me to leave traces of my body along a textured green canvas with letters or other shapes that allow multiple meanings. The impurity of intertwined forms in my artwork is a strategy of refusal from having my work's value lie in its formal qualities only. For example, the black abstract paintings (Fig.7) made in the 1950s by white, heterosexual male painter Ad Reinhardt sought to erase the symbolic and cultural connotations of his materials and methodology.³⁷ The representations of stutters and the color brown in my artwork are intrinsic qualities to my identity, connote my cultural heritage, and depict a performance of resistance to fully assimilate into American mainstream culture.

I extract further meaning from my literature on stuttering by writing out scat lyrics. The more I learn about stuttering I see connections being traced to perceptions of identity. In American culture it is important to sound Anglo-Saxon because it's an embodiment of the beliefs or values of a White Anglo Saxon Protestant through the accent and language of a person. People who stutter were one fantasized by Charles Van Riper, a pioneer in speech pathology in the United

³⁵ Briony Fer, "Abstraction/Corruption" In *Mel Bochner: If The Color Changes*, ed. Achim Borchardt-Hume and Doro Globus (London:Whitechapel Gallery and Ridinghouse, 2012), 28.

³⁶ Lanka Tattersall, "Black Lives, Matter," in *Kerry James Marshall: Mastry*, ed. Helen Molesworth (Chicago: Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago, 2016), 61.

³⁷ Lanka Tattersall, "Black Lives, Matter," 62.

States, to longer exist by the year 2700 AD.³⁸ This speculative writing is not only eugenic in nature but also resembles the structural forces in the U.S. that shape the experiences of queer, disabled speakers of color. Through a mixture of colors with various forms, the abstractions in my art practice give visibility to different parts of my Puerto Rican-American identity. Stuttering is an abstraction from the English that is expected to be learned in school. Speech education is important because it helps people learn how to speak the language from a culture, but it shouldn't be about correction, management, or a policy towards one's own voice. The abstraction of English with colors like green or brown comes in not only to affirm the place of stutterers and others alike from history but to establish a relationship to multiplicity.

³⁸ Charles Van Riper, "Stuttering: Where and Whither?" American Speech Hearing Association, No. 9, (September 16, 1974): 487

Becoming Dysfluent, The Theory of Chalkboards, Materiality

The painting installation *Becoming Dysfluent* is a diary in which I process fluency as hegemony and biopolitics on 48" x 36" ready-made green magnetic chalkboards through the use of color and materiality of the marked surfaces. The metallic backsides of the chalkboards offer their viewers a metaphorical, self-reflective experience that subverts our expectations about fluency.

The color on the front side, along with its portrait orientation, made it clearer for me to perceive my position of looking at the color black not as an absence or lack of anything. The choice to have a green board over a black board is in line with the dysfluent perception of my identity.

In this painting installation, there's an aggregation of marks in a variety of mediums like oil pastel and charcoal on the chalkboards' vinyl surfaces and aluminum frames. One of these chalkboards was installed backwards, which revealed the mirrored and subtly striated quality of its back. There are sixteen of these chalkboards mounted close to each other in a single row. Because each piece is orientated vertically like a portrait, they are life-like in size since they tightly fit the frame of my body. The boards' matte, opaque surface plus reflective, metallic framed sides and plastic, grey edges add to the installation's visceral energy by giving it a physicality and weight.

Given the educational function of the chalkboards, the pieces are made to look like they are done by multiple people. I embodied my position as both a teacher and student in higher education when making pictures on the chalkboards by overlapping forms and texts to create a layered and dense effect. The stains from the oil pastels on some of the chalkboards contrast with the dry, smudged chalk mark making beside them. I pasted pieces of paper on other chalkboards and used

chalk, charcoal, pastels, and oil sticks to create the look of a lined notebook page along with doodles, handwriting, and edit marks. Their frames also have text onto them but the writing is a lot more sparse than that on the boards. Some of the text functions as knowledge-transfer, while other sections resemble the exercise of repeatedly writing out a phrase as punishment.

Green Chalkboard No.8 (Fig. 1) stands out as one of the most instructional chalkboards because of its didactic, informational statements about stuttering. Despite authoritative declarations in the piece like, “ Stuttering is not a medical defect,”³⁹ the giant red F on the bottom makes it look like an authority figure corrected a mistake. There are statements in the foreground while the background is composed like a lined notebook page. Next to the statements are yellow, lined squares that resemble sticky notes in size with each square containing a letter. Compositionally the red from the letter F shows up at the top of the piece in the outline of a speech bubble with the words “Did I Stutter?” Within the speech bubble the text acts like a citation by acknowledging the *Did I Stutter* project as the source of the statements on the chalkboard. In a way, this whole piece is like a visualization of a student’s notes from a lecture. My position as a student was critical for me in creating works like *Green Chalkboard No.8* to represent my process of unlearning fluency as an aspiration.

³⁹ Did I Stutter? “Home.” Accessed December 9, 2019. <https://www.didistutter.org/>



Fig. 8 Green Chalkboard No.8, 2020, pastels, oil pastels, and chalk on chalkboard, 48 x 36 in.



Fig. 9 Green Chalkboard No.12 (Mirror No.1) 2020, oil paint markers on backside of chalkboard, 48 x 36 in.

When making *Green Chalkboard No.8* I was thinking about how important the statements from the *Did I Stutter* community were to not only my understanding of stuttering but for my hybrid identity. I copied those statements from the *Did I Stutter* project website because of the personal need to heal from oppressive forms of communication and cultural expectations to “fix” my speech with “enough determination.”⁴⁰

The problem of stuttering as a breakdown of communication... cannot solely be conceived as *my* problem as the disabled speaker...Our culture’s approach to stuttering is primarily a discrimination against certain ways of communicating and using one’s body. Stuttering is a problem because our culture places so much value on efficiency and self-mastery.⁴¹

The *Did I Stutter* project is a “knowledge-translation and activist community” which “was created by and for stutterers to embrace dysfluent voices and raise awareness of speech discrimination.”⁴² The artwork *Green Chalkboard No.8* embodies the declaration of the multiple contributors and voices from the *Did I Stutter* project. By transcribing those collective statements on the chalkboard, it was a way for me to get to know that knowledge. The words aren’t clearly written out on *Green Chalkboard No.8*, and they are crossed-out in the same color that they were written in. The meaning of these rewritten statements above “medical lingo?” and “healing from what?” in red oil pastel which correspond to the big, red letter F in a circle. There’s a negation that happens in the piece; the meaning of the statements change from being declarative and self-empowering to demonstrating failure from a teacher’s point of view.

⁴⁰ Joshua St Pierre. “Voicing Disability with Disabled Voices: Reimagining a Stuttered Identity.” In *Barriers and Belonging: Personal Narratives of Disability*, edited by Michelle Jarman, Leila Monaghan, and Alison Quaggin Harkin. Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 2017. 102.

⁴¹ Joshua St.Pierre, “Voicing Disability with Disabled Voices: Reimagining a Stuttered Identity,”101.

⁴² “Home,” accessed May 19, 2020. <https://www.joshuastpierre.com/>

The name of this series of paintings refers to the article *Becoming Dysfluent: Fluency as Biopolitics and Hegemony* by Joshua St. Pierre, scholar and disability rights activist. This article outlines ablebodiedness and ableist practices of communication used in disability studies in order to shift attention from ideology to the material site of politics.⁴³ St. Pierre discusses concepts like biopower, hegemony, and fluency in order to imagine a resource against those systems of oppression. Biopower is defined here according to Michel Foucault as

the governance of the life of a population. Hegemony, on the other hand, is the notion derived from the Italian Marxist Antonio Gramsci that, as Beasley-Murray glosses, the state maintains its dominance (and that of social and economic elites) thanks to the consent of those it dominates. Where it does not win consent, this theory suggests, the state resorts to coercion.”⁴⁴

The concept of fluency is at the intersection of biopolitics and hegemony where it acts as a process of normalization of language and speech by governing a speaker’s body. It conforms speakers into one fixed voice or position within systems of control by managing their time. Fluency is a productive force that urges speakers to participate in a world where large flows of information and being talkative and ready to impart or relay knowledge swiftly without failure are extremely valuable.⁴⁵ It collapses speakers into representations with only one meaning where transparency and clarity are used to solidify social order. This social order helps capitalism thrive through a regulation of the aspirations and bonds between social groups employed for wages. Disfluency is a critical response to an ableist beat by asking from us to reorientate our bodies to the other - the undercommons - that colonialism renders as a non-entity.⁴⁶ A dysfluent speaker is

⁴³ St. Pierre, Joshua. “Becoming Dysfluent: Fluency as Biopolitics.” In *Journal of Literary & Cultural Studies*, 11.3 (2017) 340 - 341 <https://online.liverpooluniversitypress.co.uk/doi/pdf/10.3828/jlcs.2017.26>

⁴⁴ St. Pierre, Joshua. “Becoming Dysfluent: Fluency as Biopolitics,” 341.

⁴⁵ Ibid. 344

⁴⁶ Ibid., 351

resistant to hegemony because their speech and language must be received and understood through all of a person's senses, not just their intellect.

Reading all of the information on the chalkboards in *Becoming Dysfluent* is overwhelming, and it places a lot of work on the viewer to understand its content in regards to fluency. The pieces have their own language but because they are installed right next to each other in a row, it's difficult to decipher without a guide. They are not placed in chronological order, and their impenetrability makes the experience of looking at them all together a frustrating one. My intention for the experience of this painting installation was to make it irritating because much of the content is based on my personal and professional experiences in graduate school. Much of the information in those pieces was also inspired by a response to institutional expectations. By abstracting this intention through the abundance of text, colors, and chalkboards next to each other, the experience of this painting installation is meant to also point to the white walls around the chalkboards as part of their content. The racial connotations of the white walls in the *Anderson Gallery* must be considered within the meaning of my chalkboards in order to understand my position as a queer, disabled speaker of color.

Another piece within this painting installation is the artwork *Green Chalkboard No.12 (Mirror No.1)* (Fig.2), which flips the chalkboard around, showing its mirrored back and reflecting the walls all around it. Within this reflection is a red speech bubble with stutters that translates to, "I'm growing up in this white-walled world. Is it toxic?" It's important to note that attached to this statement is a grey outline of my figure on one half of the board while on the other side is a backwards F. Right above the F is another text that resembles edit-marks from a teacher but because everything is mostly in grey or carved onto the surface, the picture on this piece unfolds

over time after close observation. Just like *Green Chalkboard No.8*, this piece includes a rendering of a lined notebook page where one of its texts says, “Check on and in with yourself.” Formally, the rest of this piece is meant to mirror white-walls as a way to remind myself and people like me that a white-cube gallery is not a neutral, politically free place but rather one that strips everything out of context.⁴⁷ Through doodling and mark-making, I want my chalkboards to embody disfluency in order to resist intelligibility from the art world.

Chalkboards as objects and technological inventions in American educational institutions appeared in the early 19th century when instruction in public schools - elementary and secondary level - was not a group activity but rather a matter of individual study.⁴⁸ They were successfully implemented into classrooms because they complemented the Lancasterian method of instruction. This method was a way to organize the physical arrangement of a classroom to accommodate large groups of students for a small cost through inexpensive materials like a blackboard,⁴⁹ which could be as simple as black paint on a wooden support.⁵⁰ “As Bart Simpson demonstrates in the opening credits of *The Simpsons*, the chalkboard can be used as a tool of tediously repetitive punishment just as easily as it can be used for innovative and effective teaching.”⁵¹ It’s an effective device for capturing one’s thoughts down on a surface as they come to an instructor or student in real-time.

⁴⁷ Robert Storr, *Dislocations* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1991), 55.

⁴⁸ Steven D. Krause, “Among the Greatest Benefactors of Mankind”: What the Success of Chalkboards Tells Us about the Future of Computers in the Classroom.” *The Journal of the Midwest Modern Language Association* 33, no. 2 (2000): 6-16. Accessed April 15, 2020. doi:10.2307/1315198. 9

⁴⁹ Steven D. Krause, “Among the Greatest Benefactors of Mankind”: What the Success of Chalkboards Tells Us about the Future of Computers in the Classroom.”¹⁰

⁵⁰ Livia Gershon, “How Blackboards Transformed American Education,” *JSTOR DAILY*, December 28, 2017. <https://daily.jstor.org/how-blackboards-transformed-american-education/>

⁵¹ Steven D. Krause, “Among the Greatest Benefactors of Mankind”: What the Success of Chalkboards Tells Us about the Future of Computers in the Classroom.”¹⁰

Becoming Dysfluent is designed to be viewed without a linear flow of information in order to make its viewing experience richer. I use green, medium sized chalkboards to represent my hybrid identity and professional life as an artist / teacher by making pictures that reference stuttering and the artworld. For me, the experience of making marks on those surfaces has felt like freedom from the oppressive expectations of fluency. Because the chalkboards are fabricated for utility, working on them in solitude without the intention of making sense or using them for a performance has itself been a performative act for me. They are about understanding stuttering as separate from speech pathology and using stuttering as a critical-creative process in order to see stuttering not as an aspect of speech but as an imminent quality of language itself.⁵² These chalkboards are paintings that use language as a medium to directly address the viewer with statements like “Did I Stutter?”. One of their repetitive elements is the color red in the form of letters and icons rendered with oil pastels. The way these sculptural oil pastels sit on the chalkboards evidences my position as an instructor. The impasto quality of the red contrasts with the dryness of other materials on the chalkboards to conjure the space of a classroom; it represents dysfluent voices and resists the negative energy of a white space.

⁵² Jay Timothy Dolmage, *Disability Rhetoric* (New York: Syracuse University Press),235.

Conclusion

A viewer might experience frustration in figuring out the meaning of the painting-installation *Becoming Dysfluent* because by the very nature of a chalkboard's history, some kind of instruction is supposed to take place to help the viewer understand all of its information. This body of work is a sharp shift from my performance-installation *On Purpose* where I use my performance persona to explain how stuttering works inside of my body. I changed the color and type of chalkboard for this new body of work in order to accurately represent myself as a student and teacher. I didn't want my chalkboards to convey a hierarchy of power between me and my viewer. I also didn't want to misuse the color black because of its symbolic and cultural connotations. These chalkboards in *Becoming Dysfluent* were manufactured for teaching, taking notes, and making pictures in a variety of settings like home, work, or school.⁵³ With pieces like *Green Chalkboard No.8* I explicitly reference stuttering by appropriating text from the *Did I Stutter?* project in order for my chalkboards to embody disfluent voices in an art context. The abstraction of content in *Green Chalkboard No.12 (Mirror #1)* speaks a different language where the white-walls in the *Anderson Gallery* need to be considered in the artwork's meaning. The value of the work lies in its materiality to give off a feeling or mood of failure through its image rather than a performance-lecture. Because each chalkboard is close to each other, it's difficult to experience each one individually like a traditional painting on canvas. Overall, the interruption of meaning in my painting-installation is a political strategy of dysfluency in order to resist the art world's toxic fluency.

⁵³ "Master of Boards," *Amazon*, accessed February 28, 2020.
https://www.amazon.com/Magnetic-Aluminium-Excellent-Solution-Available/dp/B07N41XTSD/ref=sr_1_27?dchild=1&keywords=chalkboard&qid=1589852686&sr=8-27&th=1

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