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Politics of Being a Lover: in art, (space) and kink

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Politics of Being a Lover: in art, (space) and kink

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

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To my sculpture girly, Häsler Gomez

And to all my friends and lovers, the ones that stayed, the ones I never saw again,
and the ones that keep coming back - all appreciated.

yes yes yes
yes yes
yes yes
yes
yes

POLITICS OF BEING A LOVER:

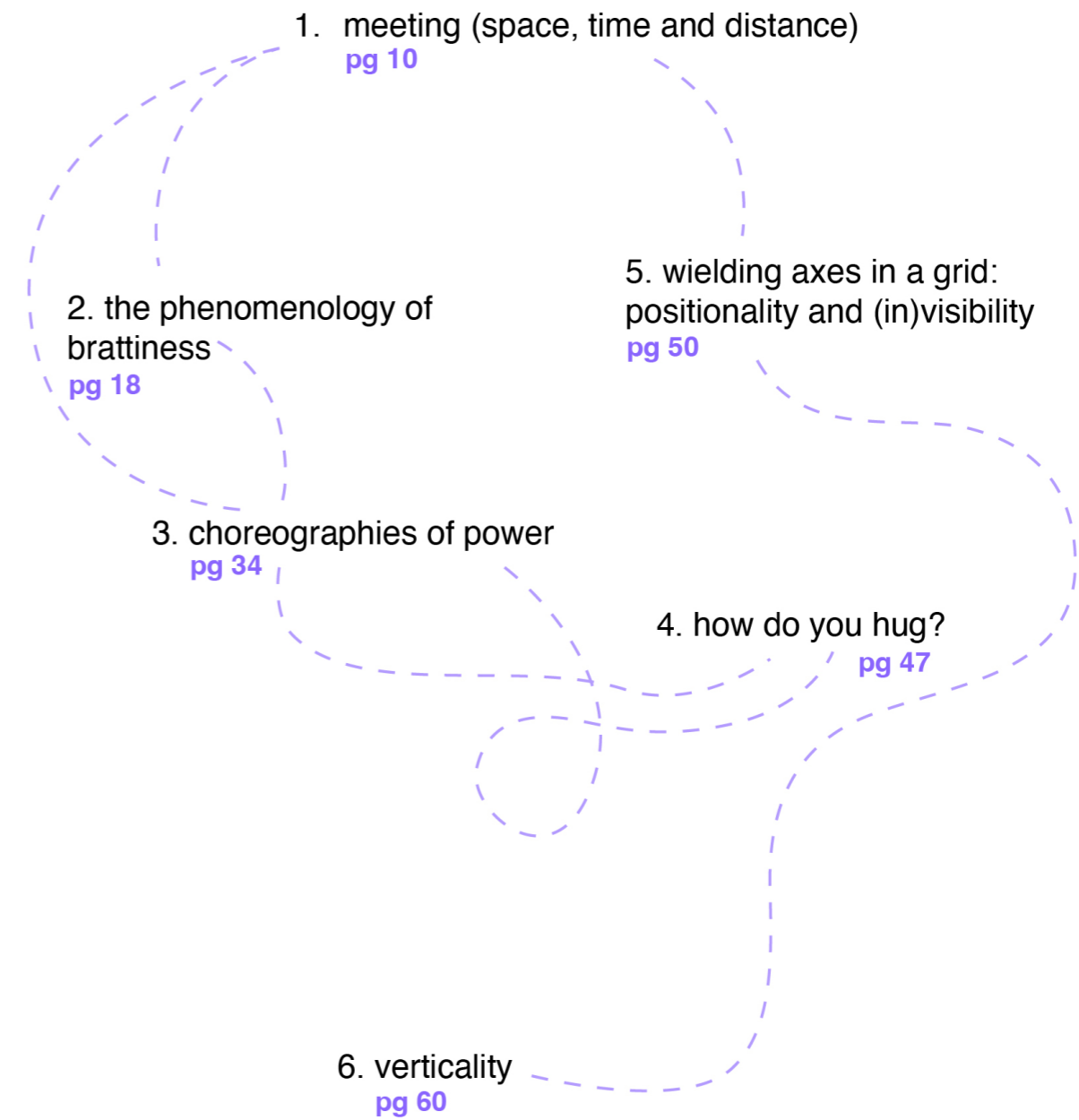
in art,
(space) and kink



Abstract

Politics of being a lover: in art, (space) and kink explores my relationship with my practice through observations and stories that draw parallels with romance and kink. Narrated as love affairs turned into complex commitment, it shuffles through logics of structural power, control, and communication in the context of praxis and art institutions.

Index



meeting (place, time and distance)

space + I

space is hot. space is also cold.

The sound refused to sync with anything which is why it had to sound like nothing.

Had I given up control entirely or withheld an extent of control?

Space can be radical because of its history, it can ask for interventions because of its character. Space can be expansive, it can be claustrophobic. Space is what I need from the person I went out with last night after we hooked up. They are asking me questions that will lessen the space between us and in turn I create more.

Most of the time after I produce work, I want to spend more time with it. There is a week of sadness that begins the night before I deinstall. I feel heavy and so does the space. On other occasions, there isn't enough space between me and the work that came from me. Maybe it needs space from me.

A space must be maintained or desire ends.¹

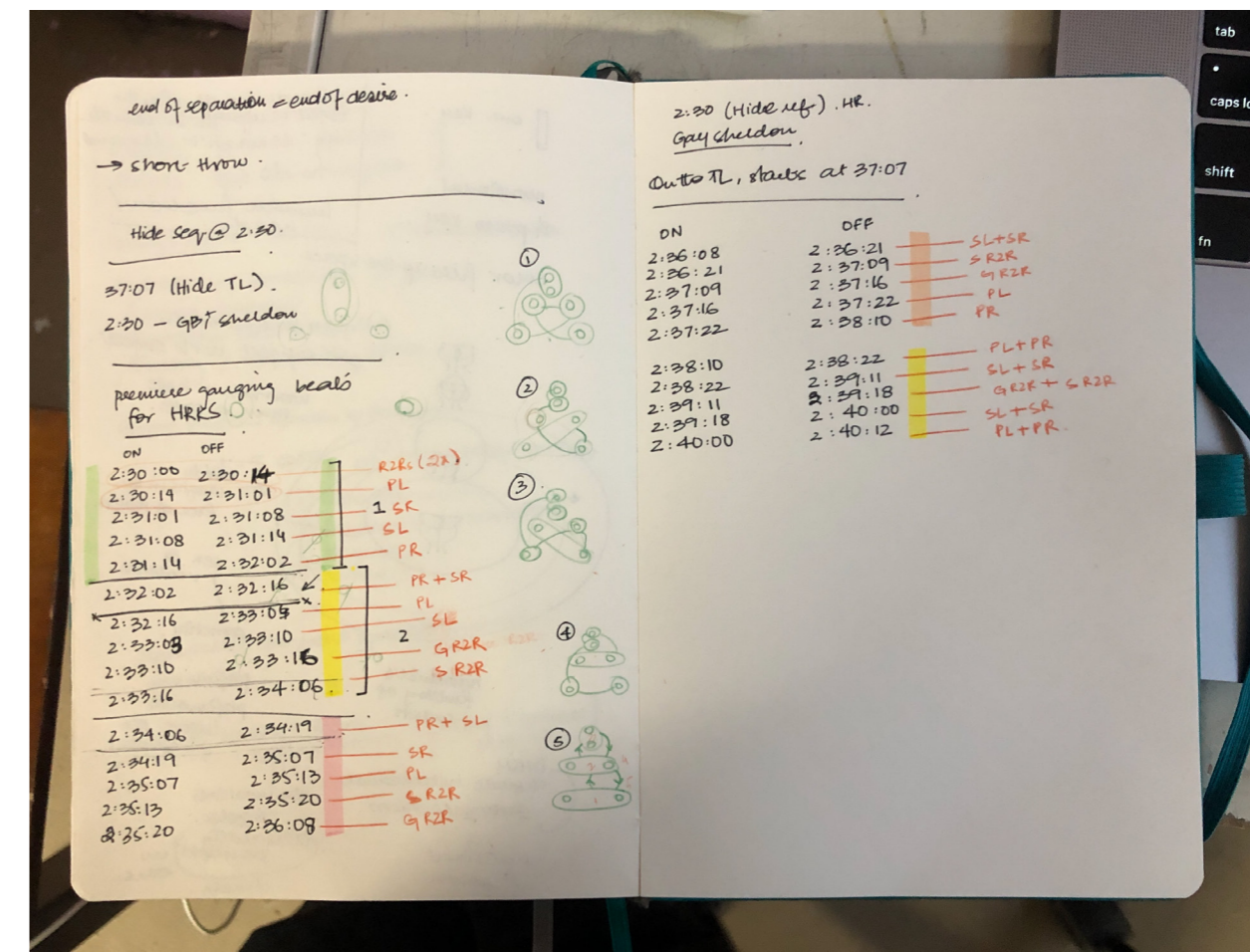
In artspeak, it is unavoidable to understand space as site. But *space* - in time and in distance - helps understand layers of control. If it is not me creating space, something else is and I am not in power.

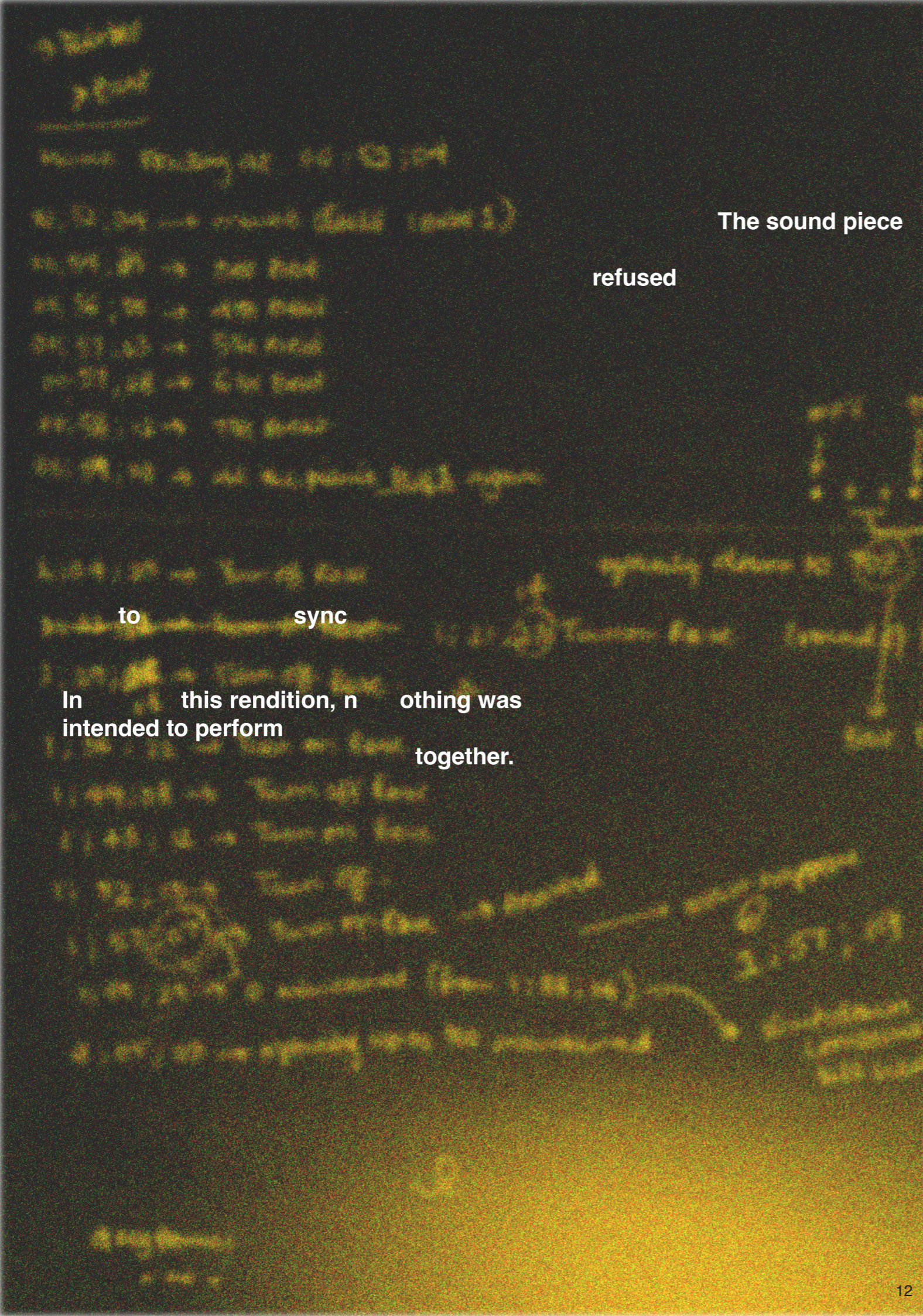
Last year, I worked on an installation which involved projection mapping and sound. I tried to do it without retaining any control.

.breaking its linearity
Breaking its narrative.

just threads.

Control is embedded in the setup of the work. I create individual animations that are fed through software to a projector placed in a designated spot within the installation, with sound that syncs precisely with the visual. In this rendition, nothing was intended to sync. Each element was created in isolation. Control withheld control.





The sound piece

refused

to sync

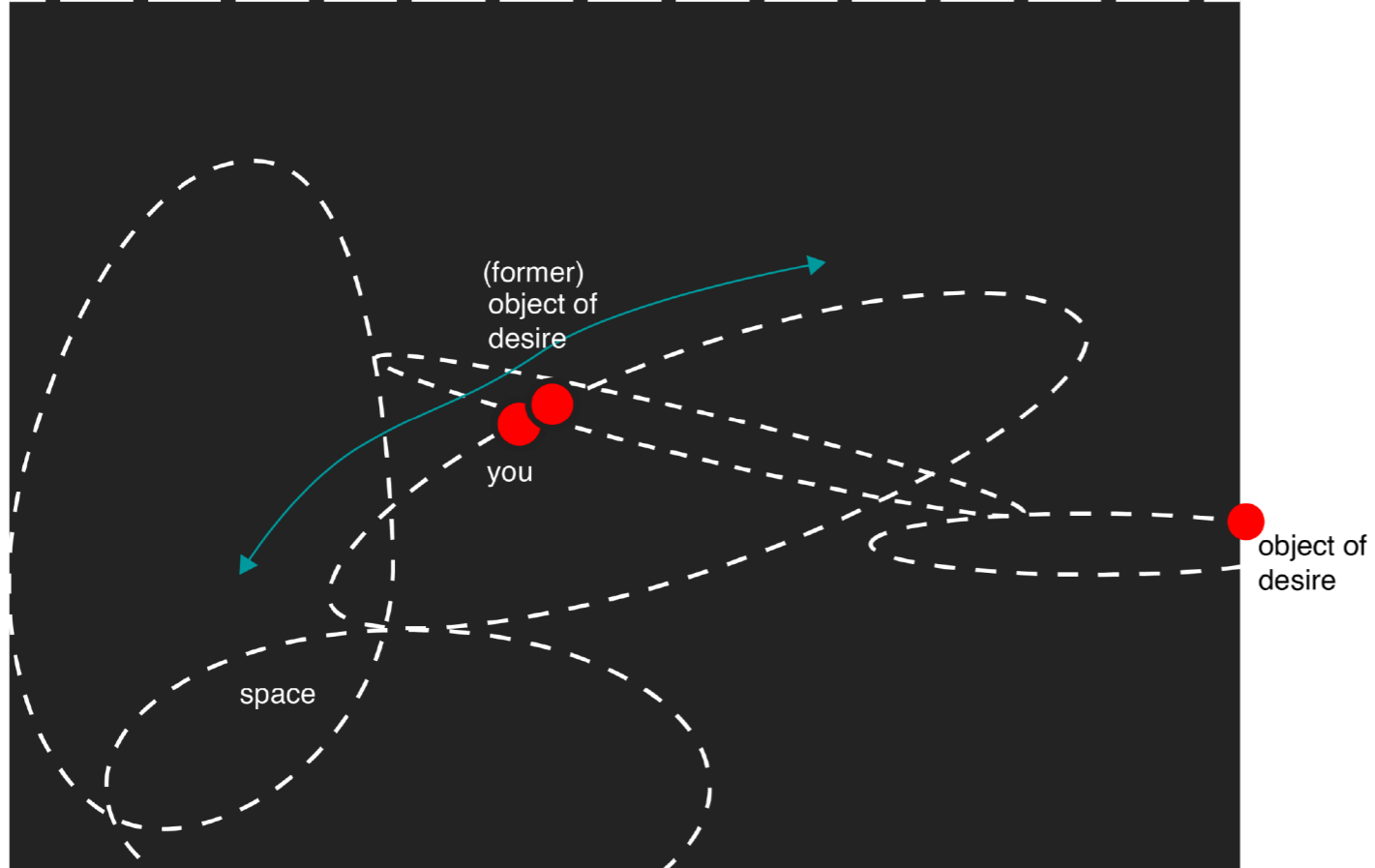
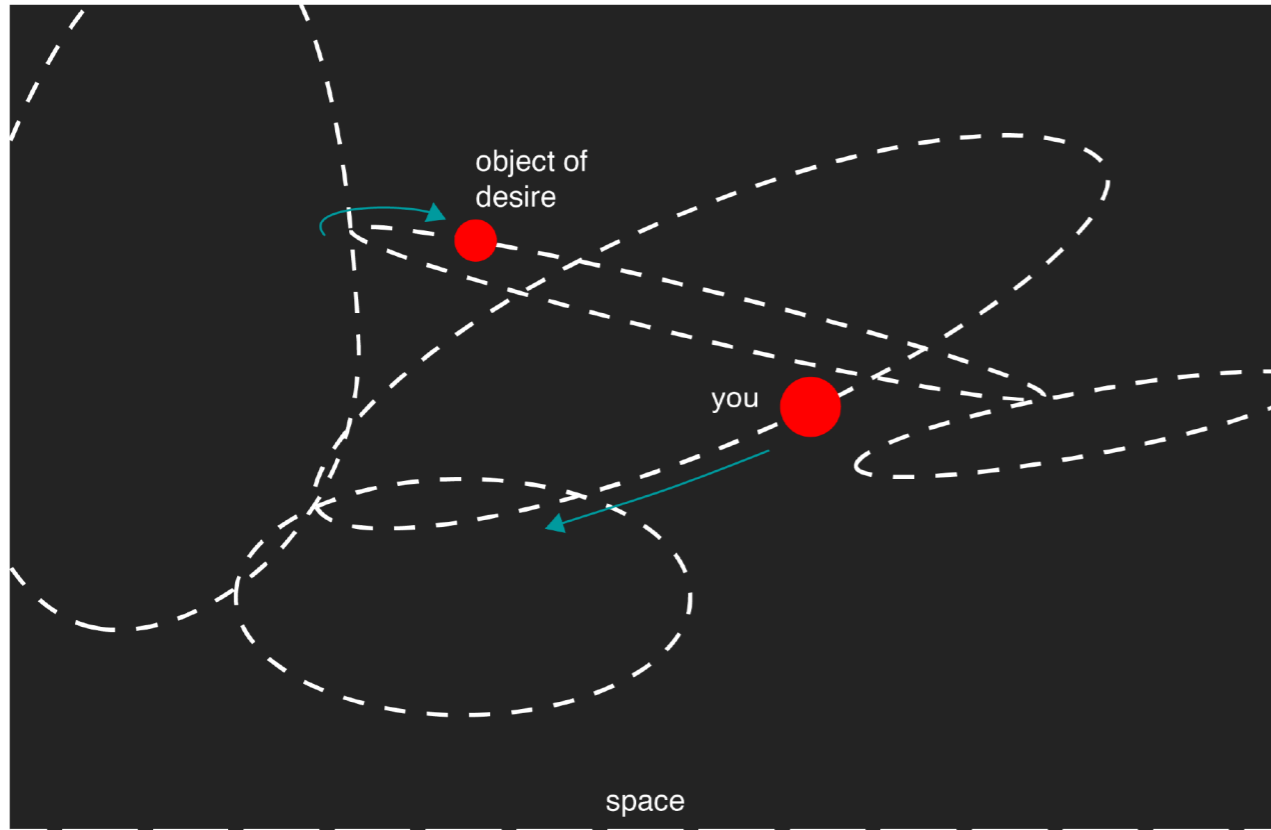
In this rendition, nothing was intended to perform together.

which is why it had to sound like nothing

or everything.

Ontologically, it's a question of whether I had given up control entirely or withheld an extent of control.

space



Every element from the project either hid itself from me in my studio or left altogether.

And I did not try to reach out.

It was painful to think we had spent time in each other's company.

It having happened does not merit a binary moral judgment. It was never supposed to be a good or a bad thing. It was. It happened.

The work offered new forms of being seen in space as sound synced up differently with varying animations which met each other in new permutations each time they looped again. At the same time, refusing control for the piece required a lot of control during the process of making it. It seemed that I was being an untruthful narrator by insisting that I had, in fact, given it up at all.

The sound worked for the piece because it was designed to align with nothing and not be specific to anything. Lack of specificity helps one stay aligned with everything.

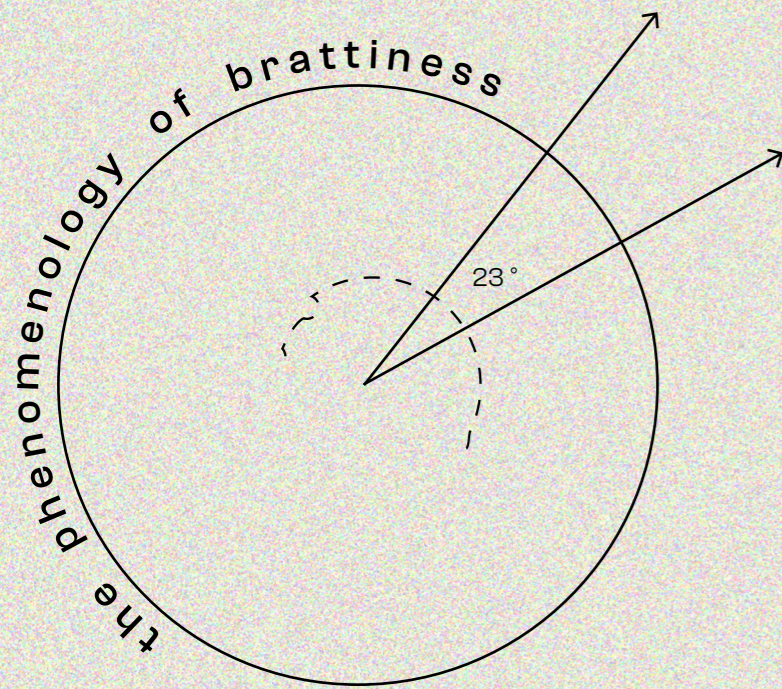
for whom?

If you refuse to engage in an argument, you will be unproblematic.

If you are aware of a continuous problem but never voice it out, your passivity will aggravate the problem. In order to be agreeable with everything, you need to lose positionality – float between options. I seem to have a clear position on everything.

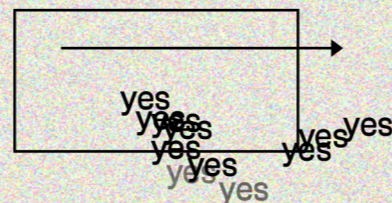
My positionality is nuanced and fluid. It announces itself.

The sound piece worked but not for me.

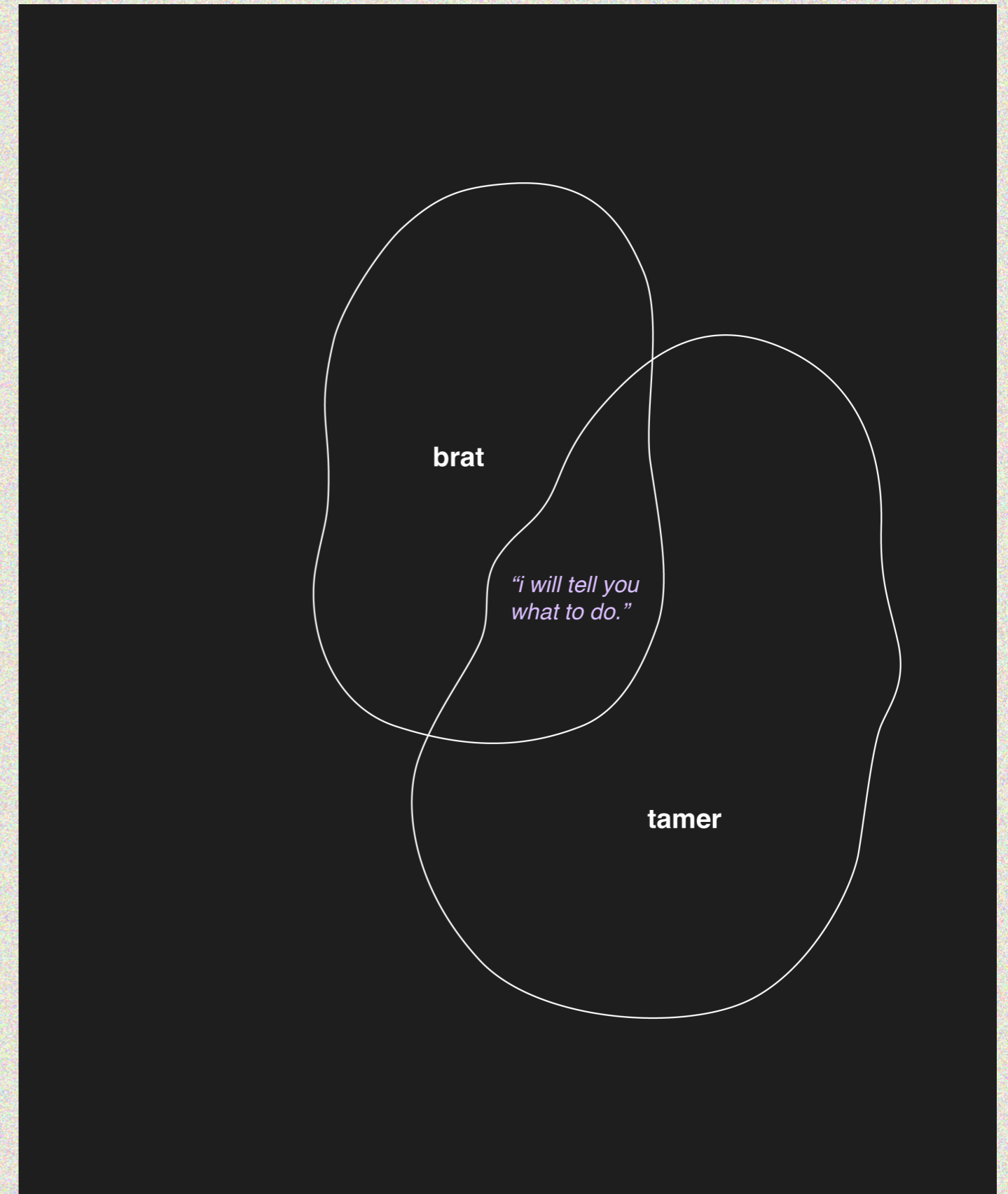


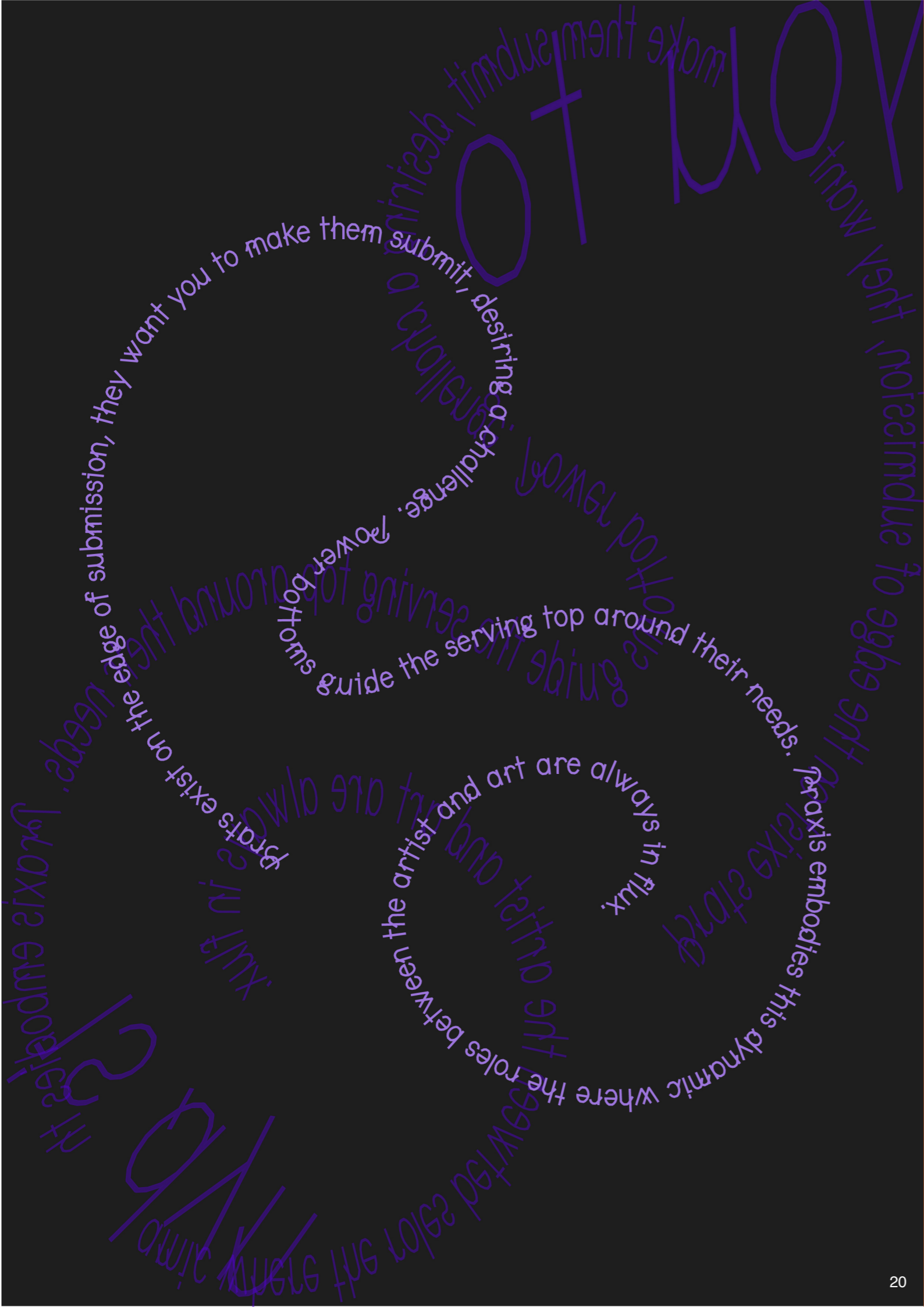
S&M dynamic is relevant in this conversation. Sadomasochistic partners play with power for pleasure (sensual, physical and mental). People that indulge in S&M - sadists and masochists - seek pleasure in inflicting and receiving pain or humiliation, respectively.

While the masochist assumes a submissive position, it is still their threshold of pain/humiliation that defines the intensity of all activity that follows in a healthy relationship. The submissive is ultimately the one setting boundaries; the dominant is serving the submissive.



Submission carries range - power bottoms and brats are a good indicator of this dynamic.





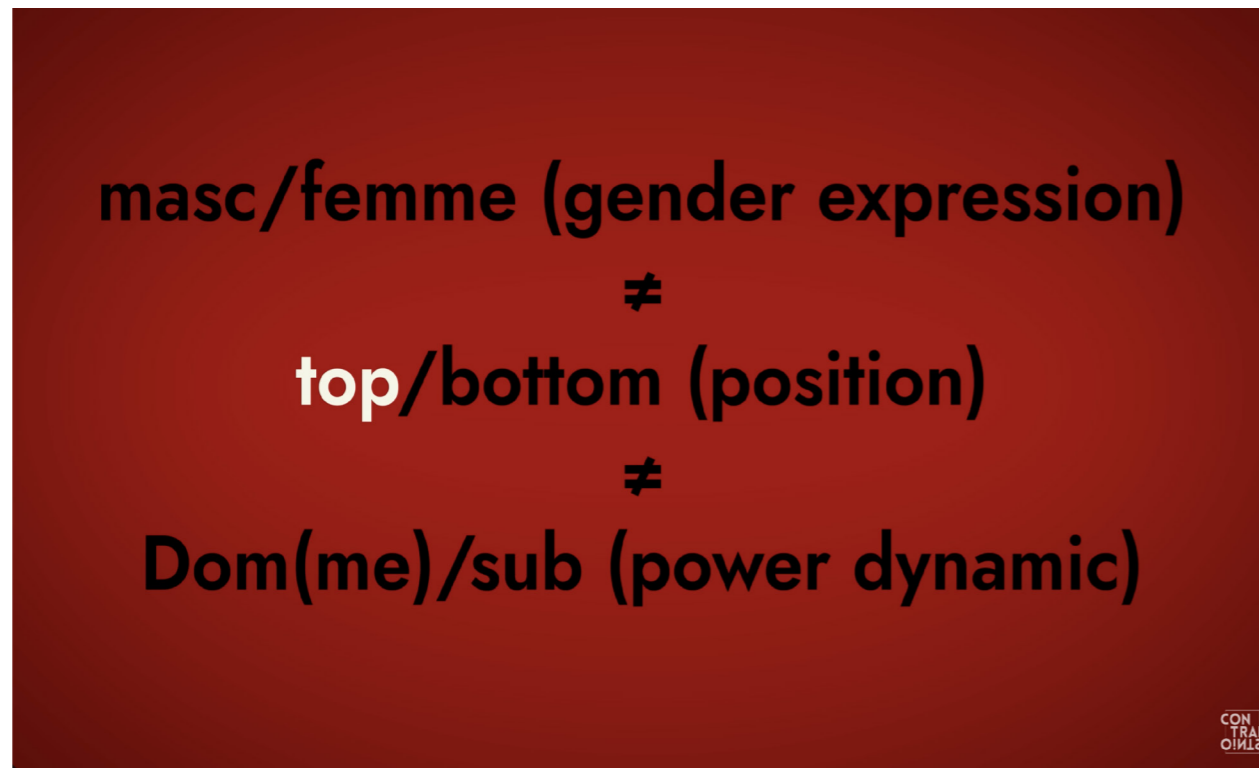
You approach the work with an idea, a direction, a starting point. Once you have all the necessary elements, you have to give up control and listen to what the work desires.

is your work a brat or are you?

the masochist says: "Hurt me."
The sadist replies: "No."²

The pop-culture idea of a sadist is in reality a projected fantasy of the masochist. They are not truly complementary.

Similarly, identities/characteristics grouped together do not mean the same thing.



Screenshot (video essay) *Twilight* by ContraPoints³

Natalie Wynn, in her video essay 'Twilight' explores a default heteronormative understanding of BDSM. Her equation is a helpful guide to mindfully distinguish between terms we often perceive as ones that coexist or mean the same thing. For example, a dom is also a top and that role is associated with masculinity. But a dom is not always a top and that is not necessarily masculine or feminine. This grouping is a false construct.

Similarly, in a non-heteronormative kink-friendly relationship with your practice, you could assume the position of a bottom and still foster a power dynamic where you are the one who is dominant, or vice versa.

3 Wynn, N. [ContraPoints]. (2024, March 1). 'Twilight | ContraPoints' [Video]. *YouTube*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bqloPw5wp48>

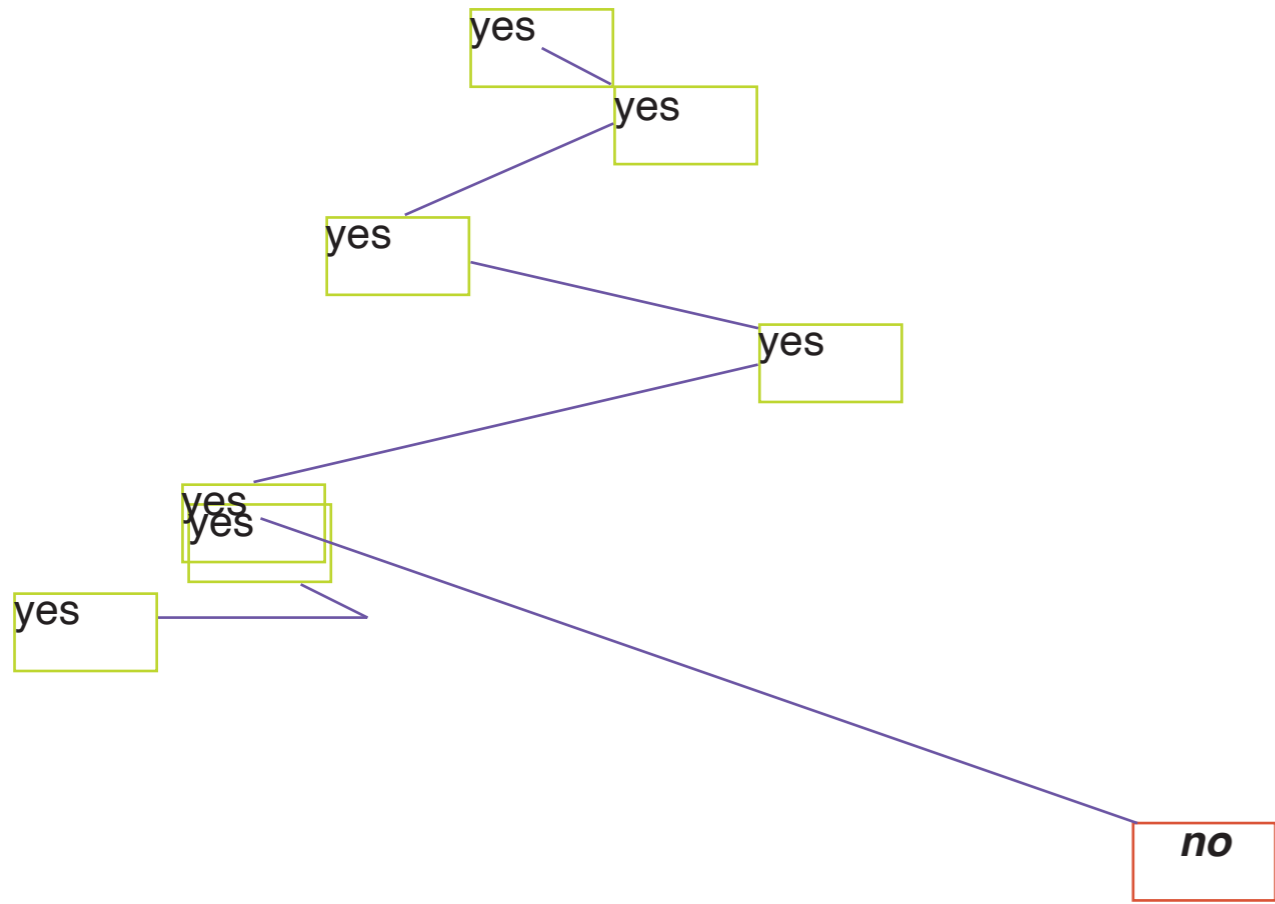
Roles are perhaps most enjoyable when positionality is negotiable and remains in flux. A list of roles, positions and expressions grouped in binary categories is an exciting device to consult in order to apply said roles, positions and expressions to oneself for each interaction in the studio.

Can the work be the object while also being the lover that makes you the beloved? Maybe a transducer receives and gives, for eternity, until it refuses.

If something doesn't feel right, you can switch it with its counter or put it back entirely.



Screenshot (video essay) *Twilight* by ContraPoints

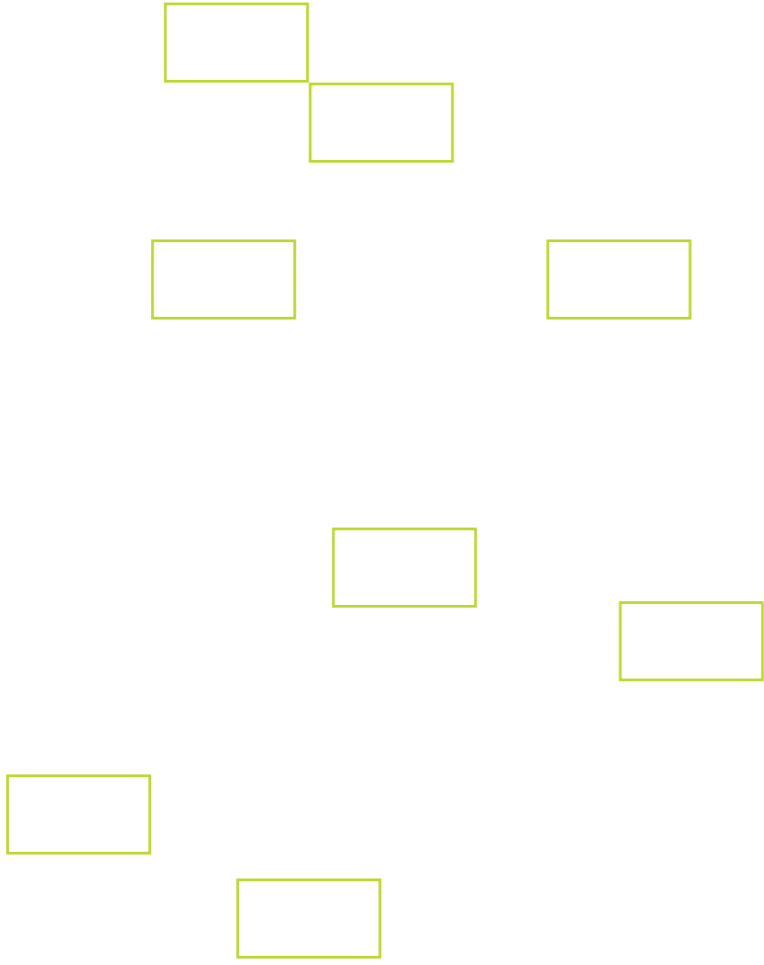


yes

yes

yes

yes





Ghosting

is not being in the same room.

choreographies of power

Purring Table,⁴ my hot love affair, commands and rewards. You kneel and you bow. You listen and you desire. It whispers. You hold it and it holds you back.

The lover and the beloved.







Viewers/Listeners situate themselves on punctuated spots marked around the table.

The table purrs as sound reverberates through the surface via transducers, felt through touch. Faint whispers might be heard and, upon leaning in, turn to a clearer conversation one may listen to.

Purring Table carries ideas of language, translation, interpretation, the collective, and the gaps in the middle. It further evokes choreographies through posture, touch, and submission. Designated spots bring about a different experience for the listener based on where they are situated as they encounter the work.

People congregate at a point to perform and listen even if they're unable to understand.

The conversation that flows through the table is in Arabic. I was investigating the sacred relationship that people have formed with the language in Pakistan. Growing up, I heard the call to prayer five times a day and learned how to read the Quran. Yet, I do not speak Arabic nor understand it. Its association with religion has molded the relationship in a way that the language itself has become sacred. Curse words in Arabic are unimaginable.

I interviewed Rami, an Arab grad student from Lebanon, who has an Islamic upbringing, has read the Quran and speaks Arabic as his first language. I asked him questions in English, he would respond in Arabic and then translate himself. Only the parts in Arabic play through the table.

Themes of translation and interpretation were embedded in the format of the interview. We talked about language (the old and the new), slangs, gendered aspect in religion and in Arabic. I asked him to translate Frank Ocean for me and he introduced me to Arabic hip hop.

To convene at a point
(the table as a dot from an aerial perspective).

To collectively act on the desire
to listen and perform.

To move as the table demands.

To rely on a unreliable narrator.

To have information withheld.

To submit.

how do you hug?

My friend is installing a film in a gallery room. The space inside the room is perfectly cuboid like a dice. It is as wide as it is high. I ask them how they are installing it and they say with a projector. I ask them how again and they repeat both the details. Words are funny.

In my how, I was trying to articulate

How big is the projection?

How far from or close to the screen do people sit?

How does the audience hear the sound, individual headphones or multi channel speakers?

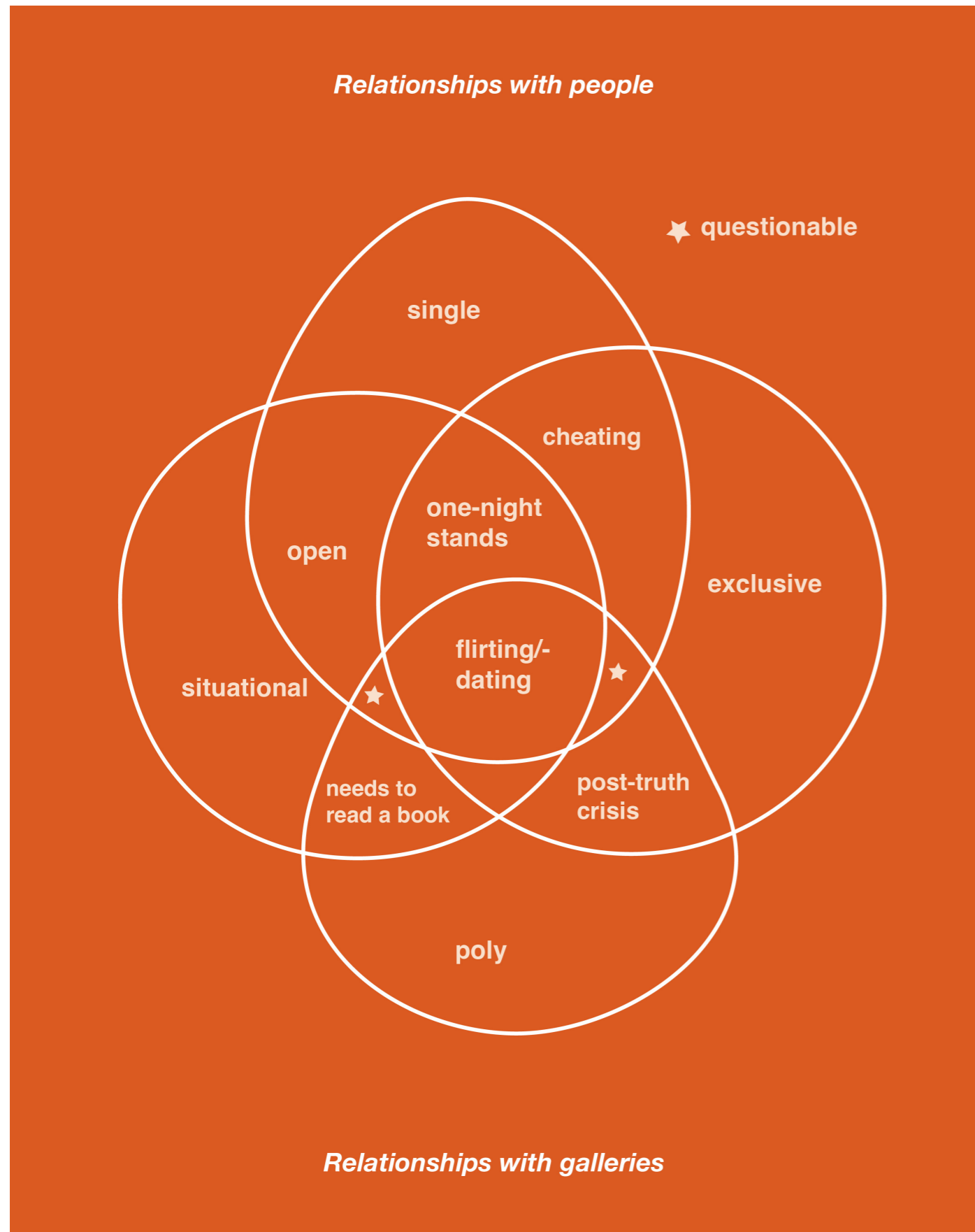
How do people place their bodies? Are they almost laying down or sitting upright? Do they see other people in rows of benches in front of them or do they view the film through a singular long bench?

How would the viewing influence the experience of the film?

My how is sculptural. It explores the point of contact - in which the room hugs the light, the film hugs the wall, the image hugs the eye, the chair hugs the body, the sound hugs the breath,

each a little different, some firmer, some warmer.

Desire-Praxis-Relationships



A studio visit as a date:

Once in a while, you connect with the other person and it can be a great time.

Sometimes, you have no connection but you can appreciate the person from a distance.

Most times, you don't know what their intentions are.

Announced positionality brings vulnerability.

My projections build a space of interrelations in which objects communicate with one another. In *modular_refusals_2*, a viewer enters a dark space - an unfamiliar one. Objects occupy the space in a semi circular formation. A curved bench against the farthest wall becomes visible as the viewer's eyes adjust to the darkness, inviting them to sit. They walk across this space to the other side of the room. The viewer that places themselves on the bench completes the circle of objects. This implicates them in the work.

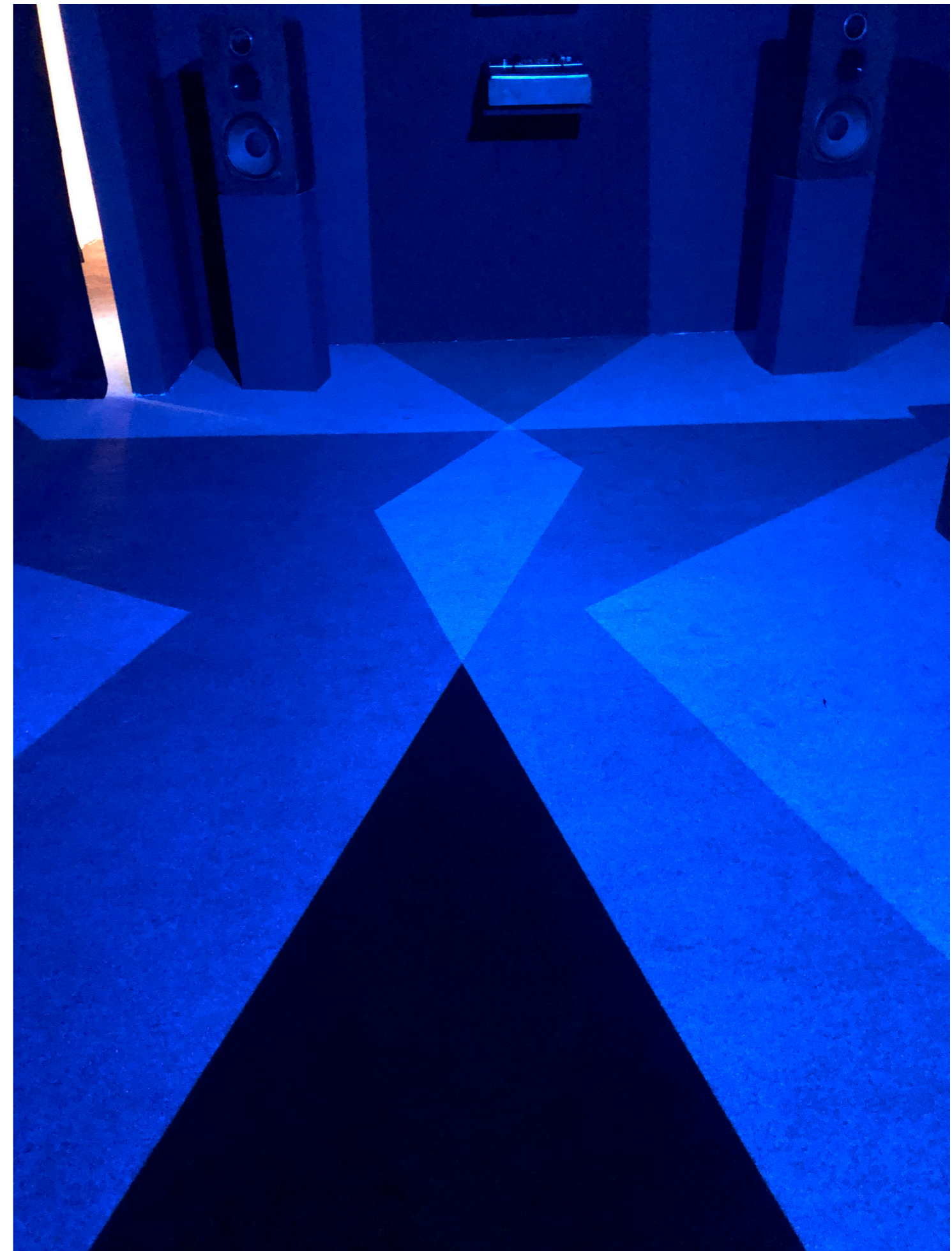
Power's invisibility points to its existence when people want answers. In my projection pieces, the projector that projects becomes the mediary of power.

When more than one projector orchestrates the projections, the reach of each unit becomes blurry. The point at which one's contact ends and the others' begins is unknown. This plurality complicates the relationship between viewers, objects and mediary sources of power.

When multiple projectors work together, they create a system of overlapping. Halfway through *modular_refusals_2*, light floods the entire room. Overlapping boundaries become visible, offering a moment of disclosure. It is a revealing moment - a vulnerable circumstance - not only for the viewer who is immersed in that light but also for the work that holds the viewer within it.

Butler writes, "We are used to thinking of power as what presses on the subject from the outside, as what subordinates, sets underneath, and relegates to a lower order."

But if, following Foucault, we understand power as forming the subject as well as providing the very condition of its existence and the trajectory of its desire, then power is not simply what we oppose but also, in a strong sense, what we depend on for our existence and what we harbor and preserve in the beings that we are."⁶



Still from *modular_refusals_2*



Still from modular_refusals_2
Image by Fanxi Sun



Still from modular_refusals_2
Image by Fanxi Sun

Two pianos lie on their backs, affixed in one another, separated by the width of the room - refusing function. The pair sings the opening section from Debussy's Clair de Lune, alternating between each line. As the keys light up and sound moves, a viewer moves their face left to right, right to left and over again. An unbeknownst head shake acts as an anchor for participation in a conversation shared between two lovers.

While the projectors project, direct and control they also help the objects take up space, communicate and become.

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Steyerl⁷ refers to the concept of verticality politics discussed by Eyal Weizman. In his article,⁸ he discusses geopolitical complexities while analyzing Israel's control of the West Bank and its power over other Palestinian territories. Weizman offers a deep dive into the inadequacy of maps to understand borders that extend to sub-terrain and airspace. I am borrowing the lens that both Weizman and Steyerl, respectively, employ to observe cities and their landscapes.

Politics of verticality can be applied to cities that we live in. An aerial point of view paired with high rise development modifies the visual depiction of power and where it is situated.

In an architectural plan, a horizontally wide building - representing a corporation/company/anything - would hold more potential for us to distinguish between sections of varying power over one that rises vertically.

In contemporary societies, we have set verticality as the default condition. Furthermore, power is split, divided and rationed across departments. This hinders a potential complainant from knowing the right avenues to address a complaint.

The school has to reimburse me a certain amount of money. I learned that my query needs to be processed by a person of contact from the payroll department. Their offices are situated on the 3rd floor of a building that is exclusively accessed via a personnel card. Through glass doors, I look inside to find a tiny space that serves as an elevator lobby, and no reception desk. I cannot enter the space unless I have an appointment. I cannot have an appointment if they ignore my emails.

The payroll department transfers my case to the accounting department associated with the school of the arts which is located in another building. Whether it is processed or not is not communicated back to payroll. This means that there will be no case follow-up by either party.

My case of reimbursement started a year ago. Over the span of a year, even payroll did not remember my initial case.

Most of my time and energy was spent in explaining my case, that I was owed money, helping remember and locate. I have still not received the refund and grad school is over.

While this serves as a great example for labyrinths of bureaucracy, it also points to the diffusion of power that accompanies verticality.

Who do you call when you have questions?

7 Steyerl, H. (2011). 'In Free Fall: A Thought Experiment on Vertical Perspective' *e-flux Journal*, Issue 24

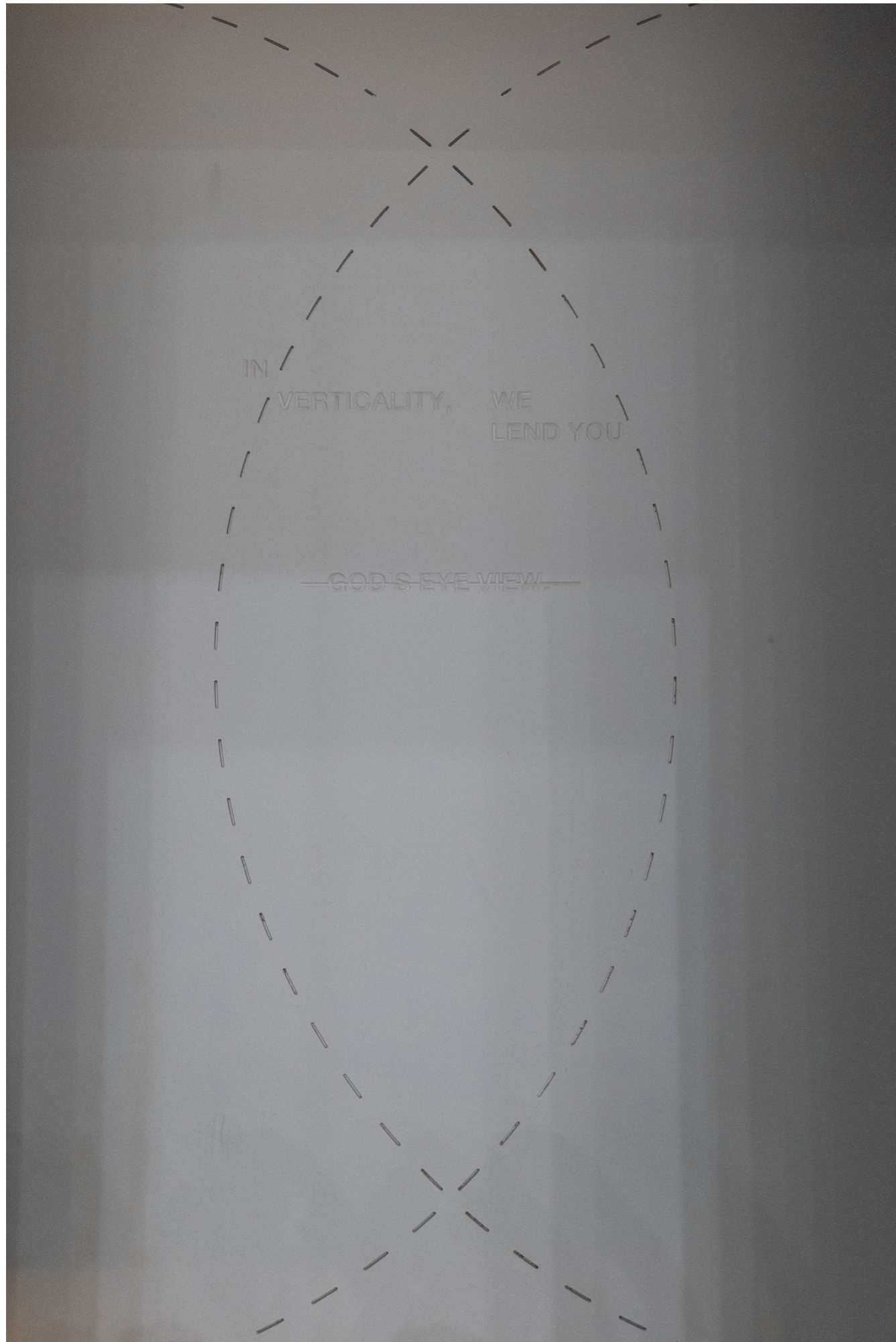
8 Weizman, E (2002). 'Politics of Verticality' *openDemocracy*, https://www.opendemocracy.net/en/article_801jsp/

the skies mirrored

in our tall demeanor:

an image of god.

*so you may
find him comfortably.*



Venn diagram on Z-axis
Image by Fanxi Sun

text:

*IN VERTICALITY,
WE LEND YOU
~~GOD'S EYE VIEW.~~*

“In the interval between reach and grasp...

the absent presence of desire comes alive.”⁹



Vita

Rabeeha Adnan (b. Lahore, Pakistan) explores themes of institutional power dynamics and examines social structures within their work - often through the help of narrative building and storytelling. This inquiry extends further through their ongoing investigation of 'choreographies of power' that emerge when people encounter their work. Through projection mapping, sound, installation, video, text and public intervention, they explore spatial semiotics in their practice, viewing each space as a distinct signifier.

Rabeeha received their MFA at Virginia Commonwealth University (2024) and their BFA at National College of Arts, Lahore (2021). They have displayed their work at various galleries and alternative spaces in Pakistan, U.S. and Nigeria. They have participated in the Lagos Biennial (2024), Lagos, Nigeria; SOMA Summer (2023), Tlaxco, México, and the Karachi Biennial (2022), Karachi, Pakistan.