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This body of work recognizes the incremental process of change and growth. It is slow, it is uncomfortable, it is clumsy and imperfect, and we are pursued and propelled in turn by the people we move through it with. ten feet at a time is an invitation to exist in this space as a different person for a few minutes and inhabit new ways of being a body among other bodies. It is meant as a chance to question:

Where do we go from here? What do we owe each other? How do we move forward together? What do we miss when we choose to go alone?

TEN FEET AT A TIME

by

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Approved by

Dr. Sunny Spillane
Committee Chair

DEDICATION

For Gilly, for Sadie, for Shugg, for Dr. Pickles, for Relentless. This work would not exist without women's flat track roller derby – the place where I learned that everything is political, and that that is a gift.

APPROVAL PAGE

This Thesis written by Sam Machia has been approved by the following committee of the Faculty of The Graduate School at The University of North Carolina at Greensboro.

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MY SISTER'S SISTER

My sister was the middle child, the first of our parents' creative thinkers, which manifested in her questioning everything and trying everything, to my conservative and reserved evangelical family's discomfiture. The benefits to being her younger sister included her providing a model of what would and would not incur our parents' wrath, and her providing our family with a learning curve of how to navigate emotionally volatile girlhood and loosening their expectations and restrictions. She went before me, held unwillingly to a demure walk, and I, an eager follower, ran easily past her. We spent our childhood at the kitchen table, manufacturing parameters for drawing or writing "contests". Together we plant morning glories and sunflowers around the yard, experiment with outdoor cooking and make dandelion "tea," fold giant leaves into bowls to collect rainwater, dig for trash that we revere as archaeological treasure. We work through a "How to Draw Anything" book, cut Barbie's hair, learn to crochet, and make yarn dolls and American Girl crafts.

We stay up late in our shared room, reenacting our favorite movies word-for-word - unspoken, she falls into the women's roles and I into the men's - and we sneak down at 5 or 6 each morning to occupy the living room before everyone else wakes up, for the sole purpose of learning to swing dance from a set of pirated VHS tapes we had bought down the street. I again fill the "men's" role of leading until it comes to flips, during which my marginally taller and stronger sister steps in to toss my little frame around. This was a constant point of contention for us, as I desperately wanted to be strong enough to throw her, and she wanted the joy of floating for a moment. We fill our afternoons imagining divergent plots of the few shows that play in English in the courtyard outside our apartment.

At eighteen, I begin to visit her in college, where she shares an apartment with two other girls she barely knows and is suddenly full of new ideas and perspectives which she pours out to me like a confession. She talks to me about community and justice and liberation in a way that feels antithetical to our churchy upbringing – it is far off the path I’m used to, and it takes me years to get on board. We spend the hours in her tiny bedroom and begin to imagine again for the first time in years, writing songs, talking through ideas for paintings or drawings. When she spends a year texting me late at night about her abusive husband, it is because of her that I know to tell her that there are better possibilities waiting for her if she is willing to jump and wander. When she asks me to move in with her so she can afford to leave, it’s not even a question. We build a home together that is soft, that is still a struggle, but in a hopeful and wandering way. I watch her raise her child with fluidity, with dance parties, dragons, glitter, and transformers, with gentle nighttime songs. For months, I listen to his toddler voice babble along with her to their favorite lullaby:

Conceptual paths wide open, I'm scared to death
Existential weight no longer holds you back
Conceptual paths wide open, I'm scared to death
I'm ready for the future, I'm ready for what happens next.

I am convinced that she is doing something revolutionary, raising a better boy, the boy I would have liked to be.

I have always felt hyper aware of “rightness” - an anxious sort of attention to the rules of being, a discomfort in environments where the right thing to do isn’t explicitly laid out for me. My early undergrad work was marked by a strangled fixation on perfection that manifested in tight observational watercolor paintings that I labored over for days, and drawing classes that ended with me holding back tears anytime my work was seen by anyone. Things softened after a

conversation with Jen Meanley about drawing as the translation of the thing, and not the thing itself - I went home that day and cried and sat at my kitchen table and began to sit with a way of working led by uncertainty, tender and uncaring in turn. I moved into making paintings of the light sitting at the edges of things, to drawings that collected the world in overlapping fragments. I began cutting apart and reassembling paintings, making work that spilled out of its frame or pushed into the world. I leaned on the realness of material, indulged in the roughness of jarring colors and textures. I think of this era of my practice as a record of me trying to be “wrong”, in one place of my life.

When I applied to grad school, I was living in a home with my fiancé, now wife, driving across town any time my parents called in order to feel safe enough to call them back. I entered grad school a few months into being fairly publicly trans-nonbinary, and yet decidedly not that in the privacy of my childhood home. Waiting for an anvil to fall out of the sky, carrying my wrongness as gently as I could. I spent the first year of this program making assemblage-type sculptures that pulled together bits of studio detritus into colorful, absurd bodies. I amassed a collection of them, shapeshifting Frankensteins, lining shelves on the wall of my studio – small, precious, and wrong.

Figure 1 - Shapeshifters



NOISE, COLOR, BODY CONTACT

Women's flat track roller derby is a DIY venture at its core - an improvisatory cocreation, relentlessly reaching for more. It is not perfect, in most places remaining overwhelmingly white and beholden to the urgency, expectation, and prohibitive cost of anything too vested in capitalism. The longer I am in, the more I see that most people are happy to let it remain that way, and the rest of us are stretched thin, going as far as we can and frustrated that it is not farther. But as someone who entered it as the closeted queer "daughter" of an evangelical pastor and theologian, it is the first place I ever encountered that tried to move forward at all.

In June of 2022, my sister, two of our best friends, and I started a new roller derby league with the goals of being radically accessible, less white, and highly competitive. Over the next three months we wrote guiding documents to lay the groundwork for the last two years (and the ongoing future) of learning to lead and to challenge from a place of care. In August of 2022, I started this program, and continued doing my tasks of structured organization care more than making "artwork" as I understood it. The conversations being had in the hallways and in art history with my cohort were where the growth was happening. But the studio did not feel relevant, no matter how much I wanted (and still want) it to. The suicide of a derby friend in the last week of my second semester unpleasantly jolted me into fixating on the amount of care missing in the world, even within spaces that care so radically. The first few weeks of that summer were filled with that care - my wife spent 6 weeks unable to walk unassisted after a hip surgery, my dad fell off a roof and punctured a lung and we all truly believed he was going to die, and my mom went into renal failure - twice. And all I could really think about was staying

alive and trying to keep everyone I love alive as all my physical energy went into being present and helping.

Missing my cohort's summer study trip to Mexico City on top of that – because I was delaying getting my passport until I could do so with a new name and gender marker - was deflating, and all I wanted to do was to redirect that money into running away for a week to skate and paint on my own. Instead, I reached out to friends and strangers in skating communities and redirected that money into setting up a very small, weeklong artist's residency for queer artists that skate, at the longest running indoor skatepark in America, and spent a week running around and taking care of us. And for a week I was standing on a bridge between what is and what could be.

The conceptual framework that underpins this work's central idea of going "ten feet at a time" is pulled from the field of play in roller derby, which I like to describe as 1. slowly progressing, and 2. elastic. Play always moves forwards, for both teams at once, in a continuous loop, but progress is constrained by the spatial relationships of players, and coordinated movement allows them to continuously reshape this boundary. The center of the field of play is always the area with the most populous number of players from both teams, uninterrupted by gaps larger than ten feet. The ends of the field of play are twenty feet in front of, and behind, that central area. If that sounds incredibly convoluted and hard to keep track of, that's because it is. Theoretically, a field of play could be 40ish-ft, or it could be stretched to 90ft. See? Elastic.

t. Ten feet at a time.

For eleven years now, the most important thing for me has been the community of work in roller derby. In a seminar with Lee Walton, and through conversations with Caitlyn Schrader, I began to question whether this work might be the work, the mattering. Entering my second

year of grad school, the question percolating was how community organization can be the center of a rigorous, genuine creative practice.

STITCHES

In an undergrad drawing class Barbara Campbell Thomas asked us to write out our artistic lineage, thinking about what the artists that came before us gave us permission to do. So that is the model I am using for this chapter, as a way to map out the guideposts that kept me going through the process of making this work.

Mierle Ukeles Laderman was one of the earliest artists introduced to me in this program, by Nicole Scalissi, and her Maintenance Manifesto gave me permission to value something (maintaining/sustaining) over production (the thing I had viewed as the only job of the artist).

Nolan Hanson, a social practice artist out of New York City and Portland State University, has a project called TransBoxing, a boxing club-cum-relational art project centering trans people in need of an athletic home. His accounts of the work of building and sustaining this space resonated with my own experience of building and sustaining a space for others. Finding his work shifted my split between “derby work” and “art work” and gave me permission to just call it all “work.”

Tom Marioni’s work *FREE BEER (The Act of Drinking Beer With Friends is the Highest Form of Art)* gave me permission to view people being together socially as a creative exercise, and to frame what I was doing in that way.

Priya Parker’s “The Art of Gathering” gave me permission to set rules and restraints, for myself and others.

And finally, most obliquely, Jason Lord, my closest cohort member, gifted me a print of Andrew Kozilawski’s *that feeling (to be a stitch)*, saying it made him think of me: this short

comic hangs in my kitchen, giving me permission each day to not try to be or do all the things.

“You are a part of it | And your job isn’t to stitch it all together | Your job | Is to be a stitch.”

TEN FEET AT A TIME

ten feet at a time is staged as a progression through the four rooms of Greensboro Project Space, taking the visitor through an arc reflecting on (1) the singular identity of the self within a community space; (2) the design, intention, and tension that binds the spaces we inhabit together; (3) working with and against the people we inhabit a space with; and (4) the ways we seek and offer rest and comfort in the presence of these same people.

Room One: The Self

In the furthest corner, a lithograph from 2018 is pinned above a sketchbook that is propped open to an entry written in conjunction with its making, describing the ritual of building and erasing myself weekly through the act of writing on and scrubbing off my uniform numbers on game and scrimmage days. It talks about the comfort of knowing that just as traces of someone else's numbers have transferred to my shoulders or face, traces of my number, traces of myself, exist somewhere in the world. I reclaimed this print just days before installing this work, from where I had abandoned it the printmaking studio in my junior year of undergrad – realizing in the middle of the night that this work and writing was the first spark of where my work in this program ended up.

When you enter the first room at GPS, one wall has a projected video of me, struggling for thirty minutes to physically topple a five-foot tower of bricks, the only sound my own breathy grunts of exertion and rock sliding on rock. Another wall is taken up by large chenille letters spelling out a list of ways to arrive and engage in this (and any) space – ways to be strong and brave and intentional. The room's central pole is transformed into a community bulletin

board, a layer of my own misprinted risographs forming the base, with an invitation on top to add to the board.

But the meat of this room is in the activity of people in it, setting visitors up for the engaged activities that are to follow with this small-stakes moment of learning a new thing. A card game is laid out on a bar - it invites people to play, think a little less seriously, and leave the game with a new name to wear for the night. This is directly drawn from processes of developing “derby names” but also exists as a window to the very queer phenomenon of choosing one’s own name. The challenge in naming is always that we are trying to pin something down. Naming is how we locate things, and in choosing our names we mostly want to know where we belong. It is easy, and common, for people to get bogged down in trying to find The Perfect Name. This game tries to reroute that tendency, by forcing both a linguistic and temporal frame, and by making it a social activity. Players end up with a list of options, none of which will be perfect but one of which will fit better than the rest, and the advice to “wear it for the night” in a reminder that an aspect of who you are is not who you are forever.

Room Two: Inhabiting Space Together

A duffel bag sits on a pedestal, with a panel of LED lights scrolling through text proclaiming commitments to action. Adapted from a code of conduct written by myself, my sister, and my best friend, *we carry this with us to carry us through* is meant as a framework for how we could build spaces with the intention to support and make room for everyone. A framework for how we approach the world with the intention of being in it together. Just past this bag, a simple exercise machine, two foot pieces on a curved metal rail, attaches two people at the feet and disallows them from moving on their own. A sign prompts them only to play and talk, to move together. The minimal information asks them to figure it out together, success allowing people to share a small moment of excitement over the achievement, and as they move together, something loosens and invites them to talk a little about the oddity of what they are doing, and sometimes leads into talking about more.

In the other half of the room, three videos play audio of private conversations between two people over video of them engaged in an unrelated, shared physical activity. A close friend and I attempt to hold our balance on stability balls while connected at the waist with a belt that breaks apart if we go too far apart. We talk about growing up, about losing friends, about getting better and worse. In another, my sister and I spar in a loose version of blocking drills from years of playing roller derby together. We are clearly not equals – a professor watching it asked me “is your sister kicking your ass right now?” I am trying very hard, throwing myself at her as she holds her ground. This conversation is more abrasive, touching on approaches to care and anger, and the hurt of me trying to keep up, and the things thrown at her as an older sister. In the final video, my wife and I roam the halls of a building (the Gatewood Studio Building, where I have spent most of our married life) on skates, lifting and pushing furniture together. We talk about

the things we share between us, the imbalances we feel, and the hope of being together. The physical presentation of the videos (staged with seating for two people at each screen, and headphones for two people) suggests experiencing the work with another person, just as it was made.

Figure 4 - Installation view of Negotiation in Play videos



Room Three: Work, Together and Against

I, in the character of a coach, greet and welcome visitors into the third gallery. “Welcome to *Open Practice!*” For those that want to participate, I provide prompts to engage with a “teammate” in various exercises meant to tread the line between competition and comfort. The prompts vary in physical and affective intensity, and are chosen based on my subjective impression of the person – how eager they are to participate, how quiet or talkative they are, if they are there alone, their general “vibe.”

The teammates presented are representations of my cohort members - I am always thinking lately about the ways we have leant on and pushed against one another over the past two

year to get each other to where we are today. Participants do not know this, of course, they know only that they are choosing a figure with a name, and the name serves to humanize the object. I sit, or sometimes squat or pace, offering feedback and support at times, but mostly I observe until the end of their task when I ask questions about what was happening for them in those moments. This was most successful when I remembered not to guide the conversation towards an outcome that felt resolved, but to engage as equal conversant with them. Sometimes this conversation led me to offer an alternate prompt, and sometimes we let the interaction settle where it was.

Embodying the give and take nature of learning and teaching, I don't know any more if this work was a way to give people a chance to learn something about each other, or me creating a chance for myself to be taught about others. I felt often an oscillation in the roles of the performance, a steady back and forth of who was observer and who was performer. In those moments I found myself feeling as if I was the one intruding on a private moment in witnessing participants in their humanness (clumsy, sweaty, uncertain), and I was pushing down the need to apologize or look away.

Open Practice ends with a chalk wall that prompts people to write what they have learned from or about their teammates. This wall, an unplanned response to a comment by a visitor about one of the blocking dummies, is in retrospect a response to Dr. Emily Voelker's question to me: what does queering the structure of an archive look like? It looks (in one iteration) like notes and doodles and conversations scrawled on a bathroom stall.

Figure 5 - Open Practice



Being in the space post-installation allowed me to learn through occupying what was needed here. It took me several days to figure out that the quiet, uncomfortable observation I was doing was the critical component that created tension and space for introspection. Being seen in our uncertainty is far more uncomfortable than being uncertain in privacy. Discomfort prompts reflection, as we try to reconcile our reality with whatever has just ruptured it. My instinct was to fill the silence, to make people comfortable, and it took a concerted effort to remind myself that discomfort is part of the work. It returned me continually to a question how much in the world I can and should choreograph for other people, and how much people need to improvise, and how do I learn to walk that line.

Room Four: Breathing Together

The final room is closed off with a gauzy, safety orange curtain – it is dimly lit, but sounds filter through the curtain inviting you to come further in. A brief recorded meditation, the show’s titular work, plays through a single speaker: a warmly ardent voice interspersed with the

sounds of movement, support, communication, competition. There are comfy seats spread throughout, facing a hazy projection that plays in the corner, slowly marking the circuitous accumulation of paths taken together and separately within a roller derby game. The entire effect is a space that undulates, allows you to breathe in time with it, while also feeling like what is around you is not entirely there.

The meditation itself pulls from text written by my old coach, transformed into text written by myself and my wife (my current coach), read by one of my best friends and teammates, and cut together with sounds of my team. It was a collective exercise in presenting the ways we offer comfort and strength to each other.

Figure 6 - Installation view of *ten feet at a time* projection



WRONGNESS

My sister was one of the last people I told when I changed my pronouns. Technically, I didn't even tell her. We were in the midst of establishing our new roller derby league together, meeting multiple times a week in each others' living rooms to discuss various details, bylaws, procedures, etc., and she texted me one night to say she noticed our friends correcting themselves on my pronouns. To ask, and to apologize for not knowing sooner. But like, how would she know? I just didn't want her to think of me differently, and all the love she showed me throughout our life could not erase my own tendencies to follow narrow paths as I tried not to be thought of as wrong. She asked me if she needed to change what she referred to me as – her “sister,” her son's “aunt.” A sister is, after all, a sibling who is a woman - a word that makes me gag and overflow with physical discomfort. I am not a woman. But I am my sister's sister. I don't know how to separate myself from the experience of being her little sister. I don't know how to separate myself, or the work I do, from the experience of my roles in my communities. I am at my best, my most creative, my most expressive, with other people. We are all at our best when everyone has the support they need, when everyone is granted grace and space to imagine and grow.

There is familiarity, if not always safety or ease, in the path through the field that has been worn in by people and systems that came before us, and in treading the path in recognizable ways. But we find new paths that let us move more easy and new ways of being safe only when we go as far as we can, regardless of if we are doing it right. To question anything, to try anything, is to lay down a bridge for someone else to cross later. To seek out our wrongness is to clear a place for someone else's wrongness to rest. If it means that everyone has room for more,

then I am willing to let go of my need to be recognized by others as being the most right. I am going slowly, clumsily, looking for more chances to wonder if I'm doing it wrong.