

STRAZZINSKI, ASH M. M.F.A. Eat Your Ear: The Fallibility, Futility, and Fun of Never Knowing What Your Taste Sounds Like. (2022)
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Eat Your Ear is a contemplation of gender, sex, and the body. Utilizing photography, video, sculptural assemblage, installation, and tediously handmade objects, it is an exploration of correctness, empowering exhibitionism, self-surveillance, and surrender. It is about the futility of never fully knowing yourself and the acceptance of fallibility. This work is about play as a means of learning and developing strategies for mental, physical, and spiritual support and survival.

EAT YOUR EAR:
THE FALLIBILITY, FUTILITY, AND FUN OF NEVER KNOWING
WHAT YOUR TASTE SOUNDS LIKE

by

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Approved by

Professor Chris Cassidy
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DEDICATION

This is for us.

APPROVAL PAGE

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CHAPTER I: WOMAN TO WOMAN

“The idea that the others saw me as one who was not I as I knew myself, one whom they could know only through watching me from outside with eyes that weren’t mine...” —Luigi Pirandello

I am a multimedia visual artist who is deeply invested in exploring materials and processes; wildly curious about my body; mystified by femininity and masculinity; ever fascinated with sex and sexuality; and confused about gender. I am interested in how we perceive ourselves and how we perceive others—more specifically, how identity is a complex construction that is crafted through relation.

As a young, undergraduate student artist, I tracked the feminist art strategies, materials, and processes of Carolee Schneemann, Janine Antoni, Lorna Simpson, and Sarah Lucas. They used their bodies to establish both contradictions and confirmations, their work was visceral and intimate. They expressed unique sensitivities to language and smart combinations of material, form, and concept. These artists led me to question gender stereotypes; to understand and accept my physical body in new ways; and became more aware of, and more productively critical of oppressive systems and institutions.

Figure 1. An Audience; 2011



My curiosity grew around notions of public and private, my corporeal body, gender, and art itself from the perspective of institutional critique. Frequently throughout my work, I used my

likeness but was often dismissive about its meaning—I was just using my body as a tool that was both known and available to me. The work I created as an undergraduate, was rarely about my specific experience of perceiving and being perceived and more so, an expression of general ideas about the world at-large.

As I reflected on the past two years in the graduate program and the trajectory of my creative practice, I came across an altered book I made in 2012 that foreshadows my continued interest in understanding the notion of self. The original book was a hardcover edition of *Woman to Woman* by Eugenia Price. First published in 1959, this sixth printing from 1961 is a religious, self-help text where Price (a woman) communicates to other women about how to live a “Christ-centered” life. The table of contents reads:

1. *The Difference It Makes When a Woman’s Personality is Christ-controlled*

The Difference Christ Makes—

1. —*IN YOUR DISPOSITION*
2. —*IN YOUR CONSCIOUS MIND*
3. —*IN YOUR SUBCONSCIOUS MIND*
4. —*IN YOUR REPUTATION*
5. —*IN YOUR WORK*
6. —*IN YOUR APPEARANCE*
7. —*IN YOUR MARRIED LIFE*
8. —*IN YOUR HOME*
9. —*IN THE LIVES OF YOUR CHILDREN*
10. —*IN YOUR UNMARRIED LIFE*
11. —*IN YOUR FRIENDSHIPS*
12. —*IN YOUR REBELLIONS*
13. —*IN YOUR SPIRITUAL LIFE*
14. —*IN YOUR UNDERSTANDING OF HUMAN NATURE*
15. —*IN THE WAY YOU FACE LIFE*
16. —*IN THE WAY YOU FACE DEATH*

I chose this book because I wanted to subvert it. I wanted to pull its teeth—to disrupt its message of control and transform the text into something meaningful for myself. I attached embossed labels on the front of the book that read “Woman to Woman” and “2012”, as if to mark it as a container for storage or an artifact to be categorized. Throughout the book, each chapter is indexed with a self-portrait printed on a sheet of transparent acetate. The index

markers are hanging folder tabs with stamp pad lettering. All of the book's original text, save punctuation and one sentence per chapter, has been redacted with correction fluid. When I was finished, a new, defiant, and questioning tone took hold of the book. Its dedication page now read: "Who is showing me more and more the value of a -controlled personality".

Figure 2. Woman to Woman; 2012



This book was an attempt to sort through the complexities of identity and the feeling of living with a “controlled personality”—a personality controlled and determined, primarily by gender, and later I would learn, by sexuality and monogamy—all in pursuit of perceived “correctness” or “usefulness” to society. I am still interested in this book because ten years later, I maintain the same feelings of being defined and controlled by the world around me. I continue to use similar aesthetic and conceptual strategies such as self-surveillance, language, layers, redaction, and a sort of obsessive and incessant quality in the way my work is often tediously constructed.

CHAPTER II: FUTILE EFFORT

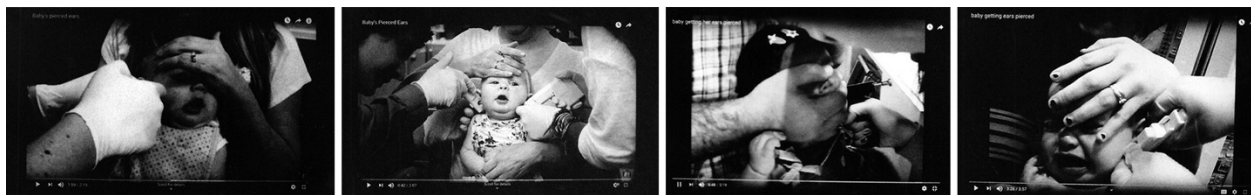
"Feeling incomplete is an ancient delusion." —Diane Ackerman

Much of the work I made before I entered the graduate program circled around the notion of definition and control. Many of these works were disillusioned expressions of concern for women and young girls who may feel limited, incomplete, or wrong in the way they lived their lives or expressed their gender and femininity. Works like *Come On, Back Off* (2018) and *More Holes* (2019)¹, were general expressions of the tyrannical reality of identity and how identity, though we think it is "ours", is defined by others, and is *given* to us. As Andrea Long Chu states in *Females*, "gender exists, if it is to exist at all, only in the structural generosity of strangers" (38).

Figure 3. Come On, Back Off; 2018



Figure 4. More Holes; 2019



¹ *Come On, Back Off* was an attempt to reconcile femme sexual desires, objectification, and the male gaze, while *More Holes* was a dark compilation of screenshots from YouTube videos that depict infants getting their ears pierced so they would look like girls.

Thus, the work in *Eat Your Ear* is a hopelessly playful attempt to be more aware of my truth and potential with respect to gender, sexuality, and my relationship to femininity, all the while knowing there is no static, definitive understanding of self. If gender, or specific aspects of my identity is *given* to me by others in what ways can I assert control of who I am, and in what ways can I surrender? The title of the exhibition is derived from a poem I wrote in 2017:

eat your ear
clever collision, comfortable
gone tragic
starts with scab
cereal
and ends with the protagonist eating her own
scabs out
of desperation for
a logical plot
a nourishing
narrative
—the place where our tree lies

Initially, the sentiment “eat your ear” was a criticism of a former partner. The implication was that this person would rather impossibly eat their ear before they begin to hear or attempt to understand and empathize. Many years later I have come to recognize that this was my first queer relationship and that possibly, I was ignorantly eating my own ear as a means of denying myself truth—truth with respect to my performance of gender within a cis-, seemingly heteronormative, monogamous relationship that was plagued with shame and guilt.

Now, several years later, as I continue to grapple with my gender, sexuality, and femininity, I proceed with tempered acceptance and find myself adopting the sentiment, “eat your ear” with a playfully hopeless attitude. It is less a criticism, and more an expression of the futile effort to fully know oneself—to know your entire truth—and to have control of a truth that is both plural and dynamic.

CHAPTER III: PLAYTIME

During my time in graduate school, I have experienced a significant transformation in my creative practice. My relationship to play and process has been (at times, painfully) redefined and reinvigorated. I now find myself in an attempt to embrace a sense of immediacy through my new understanding of drawing², and a deepened trust within myself as I accept the struggle of delayed gratification in deciphering interpretations and intentions. During my first year, I was unwavering in the sentiment that “photography is at core of my work” and that I had a “create by any means” approach. While I still respect photography and often find myself in the darkroom when I feel conceptually or materially adrift, I now accept what has always been at the core of my work: curiosity and play.

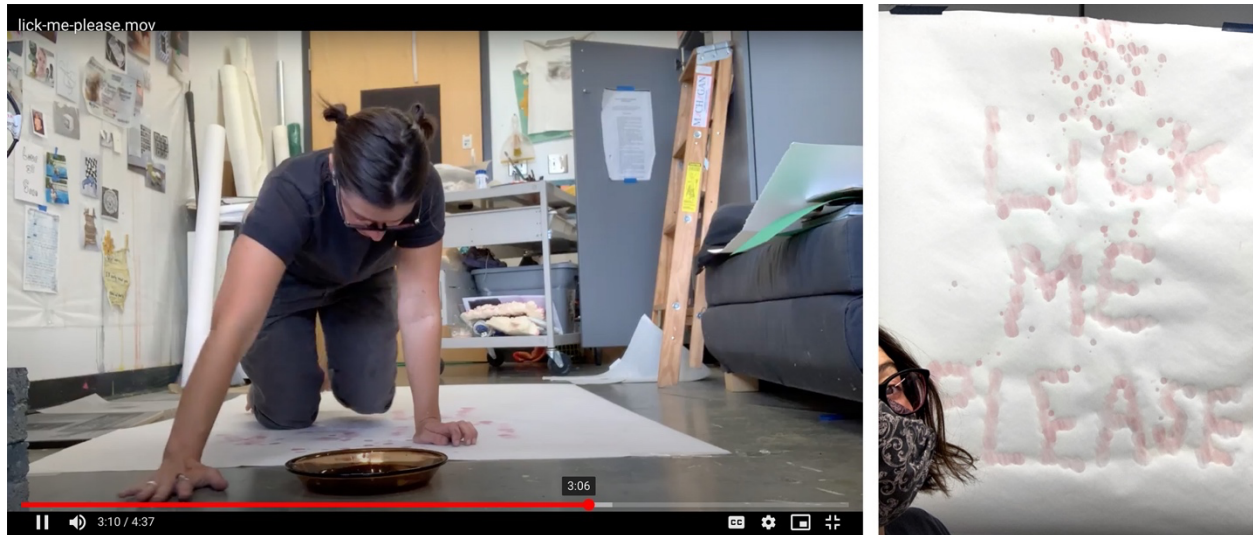
I have come to learn that play isn’t always fun, but it can be. Play requires freedom from expectation and perfection; it’s a state of being, not an activity; and play involves feelings of tension and exaltation. Both humans and animals evolved through play—it is integral to survival. In *Deep Play*, Diane Ackerman asserts “[play] invites problem-solving, allowing a creature to test its limits and develop strategies.

Another aspect of play is that it is performative and invites experimentation with roles. As my creative practice evolved, I began challenging the power dynamic of artist and audience, the power of looking and being looked at, through a form of exhibitionism and surveillance. One example, *Lick Me Please* (2021) is a video that depicts me on the floor, on my hands and knees, crawling towards a shallow dish near the camera (also on the ground) to lap pinkish, red

² Taught by Professor Mariam Stephan in 2021, Drawing Marathon, an intensive studio course that is four weeks long, two days per week, for six hours per day, and has completely transformed my relationship to drawing. The course prioritizes quantity over quality as a means of purging ideas and exhausting usual modes of thinking and making it to the point of solving old “problems” in new ways. I now understand drawing to be less about making marks and more about quickly translating, recording, and documenting ideas. It’s about immediacy, iteration, and invention.

liquid like a dog. I then crawl backwards, at times making eye contact with the camera, and inherently the viewer, as I gently, yet feverishly lick the words, “lick me please” onto a large sheet of paper.

Figure 5. Lick Me Please; 2021



Exhibitionism and surveillance are both presumed to be a negative act. They both challenge the notion of consent, are often considered a perversion of morals, and require some form of “seeing”. Exhibitionism implies exposing and seeing, while surveillance implies seeing and exposing. I have come to understand the ways I document myself and utilize my body and my likeness as a form of *empowering* exhibitionism and *self-surveillance*. By exposing and seeing, and seeing and exposing, myself I am attempting to disrupt the power dynamics of perception and representation. I gain agency by providing a closed loop opportunity for the viewer to watch, but not engage. I gain agency and pleasure in the power to construct an image of myself even if the way it is perceived is beyond my control.

CHAPTER IV: EAT YOUR EAR

Eat Your Ear utilizes video, sculptural assemblage, installation, and laboriously handmade objects. It is an exploration of correctness, empowering exhibitionism, self-surveillance, and surrender. In questioning what it means to be “correct” and “useful”, works like *Computer Control Slug Dream*, *Feedback Flower Puddle*, and *Reaching* employ glitch as a means of disrupting the image or establishing some sort of error. Disruptions manifest as censorship, redaction, or digital cloaking through solarized color or unpredictable and reactive errors as a result of video feedback loops that create spectral colors and ethereal, intangible digital textures. Works like the signs and towels (both untitled) use language in flux and question control, perception, and self-determinacy.

Computer Control Slug Dream

Computer Control Slug Dream is a technological, 3-dimensional, manifestation of an intimate, psychological dreamscape. This work is made up of three parts: a quarter-sheet of painted and wallpapered drywall that stands upright on two metal clamps; a wheeled office chair base with a tube TV playing a video of myself working on my computer in bed; and a projector that rests on the floor, which depicts a video of two canoodling slugs projected onto the drywall.

The drywall has been recycled from a previous project titled *Playhouse*, an oversized artist book. Once the book was disassembled, just the rigid, gypsum pages remained. Aligning with my original intent for *Playhouse*, the drywall page now serves as a backdrop for a scene or a performance. It’s simultaneously architectural in its material and vertical positioning, yet its short, inadequate, precarious, partition does little to contain or define the scene. The upper half of the drywall is painted a soft, dusty rose, pink with thin wobbly cobalt blue lines creating a 4”x4” grid pattern. This pink and blue grid is something I experienced in a dream several years ago.

Figure 6. Computer Control Slug Dream; 2022



I interpret the colors and pattern to represent some sort of plotting or planning grid to locate gender—a delicate structure, a masculine framework set within soft pink insides. The lower half of the drywall is wallpapered with larger than life-size, brightly colored yellow and orange flowers. The scale, bright color, and repeating pattern of the flowers in combination with their thick black outlines, is reminiscent of a cartoon-like drawing. They float in white space—there’s nothing to ground them or create a sense of realism, which enhances the effect of the imaginary.

Positioned in front of the drywall, is the tube TV sitting atop the wheeled office chair base. Playing on the TV is a video recording of my naked body, sitting in bed, working on a laptop. The video is cloaked in a solarized glitch, which pulls the scene into another dimension. The TV and the office chair base are all made of similar black and dark gray plastics which unify the two objects as one “body”. The TV screen appears as a sort of window into time and space, or possibly a wide eye, or head. In the video, my physical inactivity, combined with a focused engagement while working on the computer creates a sense of a contained, mental field or concentrated headspace.

Also positioned in front of the drywall diagonally across from the tv is a projector with a dark-green vinyl coated wire springing from its back, up and over the projector. The wire holds a piece of yellow-painted paper with a flower cut into it. The flower shaped hole in the paper mimics the flowers in the wallpaper and serves as a mask to round and soften the projection. The projector, wire, and paper also create a body, one that is bug- or plant-like. Projected onto the wallpapered portion of the drywall is a one-minute video of two slugs, their glistening bodies intertwined and gently writhing together. Forty-five seconds into the video, the slugs part and glide off in separate directions. The projection loops in a soft cloud-like shape reminiscent of a thought bubble or dream cloud.

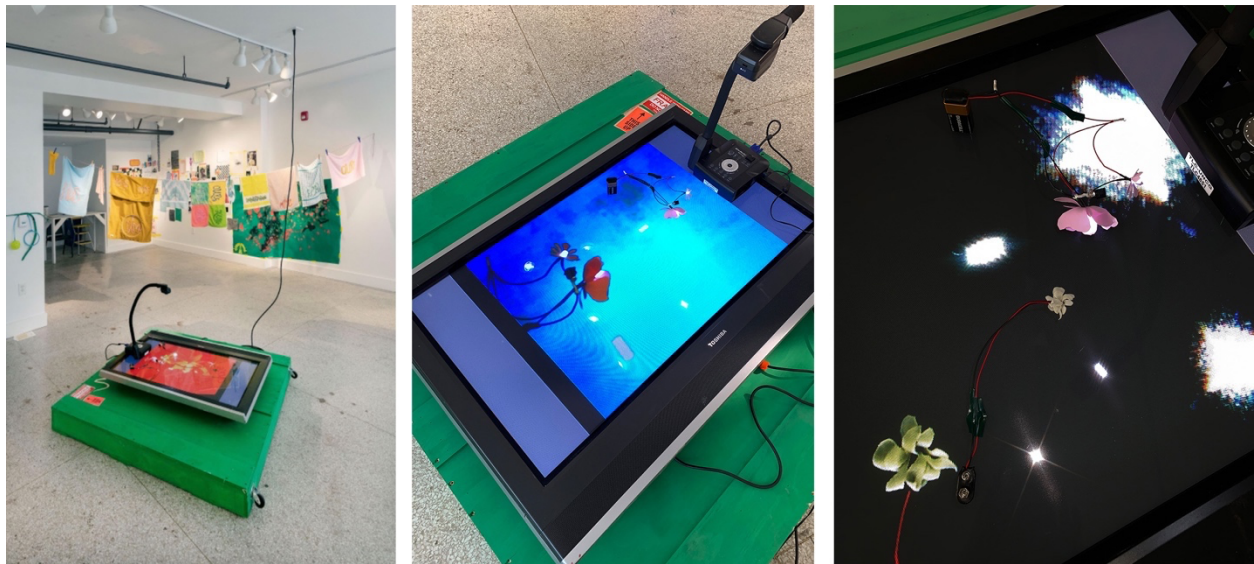
Cords are strewn across the floor and connect to an outlet in the ceiling. The space that the cords occupy expands the artwork's overall presence and creates a sense of volume and connection between the three parts. *Computer Control Slug Dream* is the manifestation of unconscious thought, and subconscious desires. On the TV, a banal, solitary, inactive scene depicts some sort of focused orchestration, all the while, I am seemingly unaware of the animal intimacy within the mind's mind—infinately repeated contortions of wet pleasure.

Feedback Flower Puddle

Lying on its back, on the ground, a thin, wooden shipping crate, about four inches deep and three-foot square, painted a bright, healthy, lawn green color evokes a small rise of grass. Resting on top of it, is a 36-inch LCD TV monitor with a glass screen that suggests a small pool of water or a puddle. A document camera is positioned on top of the short edge of the monitor, and the lens is trained downwards to read its own playback through a line-out, live signal.

Resting between the camera and the monitor, there are two, delicate LED flowers with latex pedals: one is translucent off-white, the other opaque orchid pink. The flower stems are made of thin, 22-gauge wire that connect the LED diodes to their power source, two 9-volt batteries. The wire stems are roughly four inches long and appear soft and wilted, as if the flowers were recently plucked from the ground and tossed onto the monitor, or into the puddle.

Figure 7. Feedback Flower Puddle; 2022



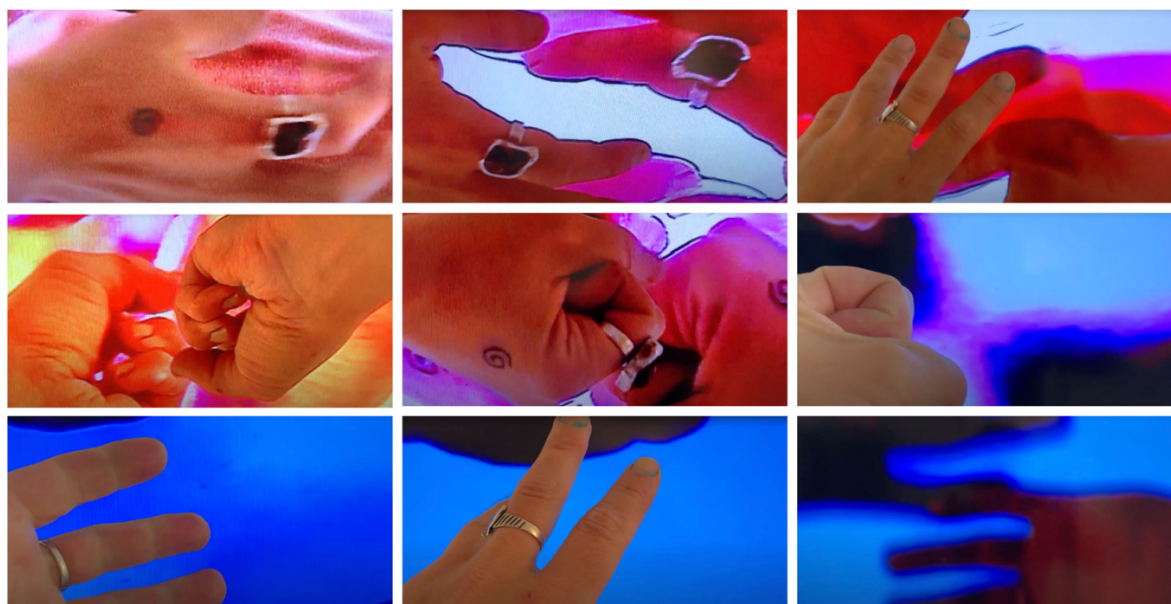
The camera recording the screen is creating both input and output—an optical feedback loop that is affected by changes in light and color. If a person walks by the puddle or engages the camera by putting their hand underneath, the light shifts as a result of their body in space by creating temporary darkness or introducing new color to the feedback. This shift activates the puddle with rippling colors and digital textures as the input and output reconcile the changes. The *Feedback Flower Puddle* does little to hide its technology. Much like *Computer Control Slug Dream*, this artwork's main power cord also occupies vertical space, and the frame of the monitor and source of the image are apparent.

This artwork is an honest assemblage with mysterious interactivity. It is serene and calm until the environment changes, it reacts with erratic glitch. Glitch, thought to be an error, acts as a catalyst for investigation or desire to understand. The reactivity of the feedback loop subtly draws attention to itself, which rewards a curious observer and initiates a sense of awe and play. Ackerman describes play as something that is beyond the means of everyday life and happens outside the sphere of necessity and material utility—there is no expected outcome despite intention.

Reaching

Reaching is a one minute and thirty-nine second video that is played on a continuous loop on an LED TV monitor. The monitor is hung lower than usual artworks, about thirty inches above the ground—my pelvic height. This video is placeless and the only aspect that keeps it from spiraling into abstract obscurity are two hands, which extend from the outer left and right edges of the monitor. The two hands are actually one, singular hand, that is a symmetrical digital reflection that is created by a video and monitor feedback loop that has been re-recorded.

Figure 8. Reaching; 2021



The hands reach and extend towards each other in an attempt to grasp one another, stretching, trying to pull each other in one direction or simply to make contact. At times, the hands get close and appear to touch, but there is only an image to grasp, not a physical form. Later, the hands become fists and they gently bounce in a deep spectral colorscape as the placeless background reverberates with vibrating lines indicating borders and edges of former gestures that trace the attempt to connect.

The glitch created through feedback establishes an image of a singular body or possibly two bodies, in an unsuccessful attempt to unite. In *Glitch Feminism*, Legacy Russell states:

“glitch is anti-body, resisting the body as a coercive social and cultural architecture. We use body to give form to something that has no form, that is abstract, cosmic.” (91) In the same way, I cannot turn and eat my own ear, I cannot know what my taste sounds like, I cannot grasp an objective understanding. *Reaching* articulates an intangible self, an intangible body, and the inevitable attempt to assume control, grasp meaning, and understanding through futile effort.

Untitled (towels)

Language and relationships have long played an important role in my work. Inspired by “his” and “hers” monogrammed towels, this work examines possession and ownership within relationships and various configurations of relation and interconnectedness. Originally conceived as an expression of the complexity of my experience of polyamory, this work has evolved to be inclusive of different types of relationships including family, friends, and even one’s own relation to gender and the multiplicity of self.

Figure 9. Untitled (towels); 2021-ongoing



Possessive pronouns are embroidered onto terry cloth towels, washcloths, and rags of various sizes and colors, some of which are stitched together to create a unit where relation can be contemplated. Some cloths are embroidered with a singular possessive such as “yours” while others are embroidered with three, four, or more possessives (yours, mine, theirs, hers), which locate a more complex relational structure within a larger framework. The use of possessive pronouns is relatively ambiguous, and the language of this work is in a constant

state of flux and transference. The viewer oscillates between active and passive ownership. For example: it is yours, I give it to you (it was mine, but now it is yours) vs. you receive something, someone tells you, this is yours.

The varying sizes and overlapped sections further complicate relationship conformity and heterogeneity. The bright, child-like colors evoke a sense of lightheartedness and play. The colors work to subvert the seriousness and maturity of monogrammed towels, which are often gifted during milestone life events such as birthdays, graduations, and weddings. The varying sizes and quality of the fabrics are used to juxtapose old-looking cleaning rags with newer full-body towels and cues the viewer into the “uses” and potential hierarchies of specific relations. The embroidered letters are stylized: they are thin, wonky, and have an inconsistent structure, which evokes the body and imperfections through the intimate and caring act of handmade embroidery.

Untitled (signs)

Inspired by cartoons I would watch as a child like *Berenstain Bears* and *Wile E. Coyote and Roadrunner*, the signs are another way I have used language. They are dynamic and communicative in their potential to obstruct, control, and direct, in both their language and placement. When they are grouped together, they can be loud and when they are interspersed throughout space individually, they are subtle and quiet. The signs can be physical barriers blocking the way, or objects that indicate a clear path forward. They are a poetic and subversive guide that maps emotional terrain with words like: “mutual stretching”, “imitate laughter to see through” and “with an empathetic limp”. Similarly, as with the *Untitled (towels)*, the language of the signs can contain multiple meanings. For example, the sign, “only you”, conveys a sense of singular possession. It can address someone: “only you—you—are my one and only”, or conversely, it can be read to address oneself: “you only have yourself”, or “I only have myself—it’s only you (me)”.

Figure 10. Untitled (signs); 2021-ongoing



The signs are an ongoing project, in which I will continue to create a cacophony of sentiments, directions, and obscure bits of text for contemplation. The signs elicit a sense of play in their mutable meaning and as the language, colors, and shapes accumulate, the work becomes ambiguous, iterative, and imaginative.

CHAPTER V: YOU CAN'T PRE-LEARN

*There is something I don't know
that I am supposed to know.
I don't know what it is that I don't know,
and yet am supposed to know,
and I feel I look stupid
if I seem both not to know it
and not know what it is I don't know.
Therefore I pretend to know it.
This is nerve-racking
since I don't know what I must pretend to know.
Therefore I pretend to know everything.*

*I feel you know what I am supposed to know
but you can't tell me what it is
because you don't know that I don't know what it is.*

*You may know what I don't know, but not
that I don't know it,
and I can't tell you. So you will have to tell me everything.*

—R.D. Laing

My intent to attend graduate school was to be challenged in my thoughts and processes, to expand (to hold more) and to reflect and improve. I was restless to learn and eager for the opportunity to dedicate myself to discovery and experimentation. A couple weeks before classes began, I found myself trying to “pre-learn”. I wasn’t sure how I was going to do this, but possibly through a combination of reading random, challenging articles and starting conversations that were philosophically over my head I could arrive with great enthusiasm and be useful to others with my skills, knowledge and opinions. I attribute this attempt to “pre-learn” a symptom of my particular brand of femaleness in combination with a Catholic, military, white, Mid-Western upbringing. Through my creative practice and the rigors of graduate school, I have come to understand you can’t pre-learn as a means of mitigating error. You just learn.

I no longer dismiss the use of my body and my image. I recognize and embrace its usefulness, its capacity to embody complexities that are unseen or have yet to be realized. I

have a distinct albeit green philosophy of play and how play is a strategy for learning and growth. I have a tender tolerance for trusting the process: immediacy, iteration, innovation, and delayed understanding of meaning. I (although at times, not readily) accept error and fallibility as a strategy for refusal and redefinition. I have a deepened respect for material and form, and how those elements can further complicate language and meaning.

I understand that I am not incomplete, and I understand I cannot fully know my “completeness” as it is forever in flux. In the same way, I cannot turn and eat my own ear, I cannot know what my taste sounds like... I cannot fully grasp my whole self... all the while, I am whole.

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