

RETRACING THE TRACE

A Thesis presented to the faculty of the Graduate School of
Western Carolina University in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of Master of Fine Arts.

By

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October 2012

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my committee for their encouragement and support. I appreciate that every member of my committee gave carefully considered feedback to me throughout this process. Each of them brought a unique viewpoint and scholarship to discussions which enabled me to gain a better understanding of my motivations and goals for this work.

I want to acknowledge my daughter, Samantha Page McDaniel, for her loving, passionate encouragement to live life in my own way.

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ABSTRACT

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Silence shrouds the experience of sexual assault. A woman is often strangled to silence and control her and the aftermath is characterized by a different kind of enveloping disquiet.

Retracing the Trace presented an imprint of rape and exposition of the number of unreported sexual assaults that occur within a twenty-four hour period in the United States. The foundation for this work derived from the original marks of my own trauma and was realized by inserting myself (my body) into the process of making an imprint, as well as my presence in the gallery each day.

This installation had three components. Numbers, indicating each hour in a day, were stenciled in a line around the gallery walls. Material volume, knotted cords, was pooled on the floor around the outline of my body and re-presented the traces of violence left in the leaves and mud where I was attacked. Each cord signified a specific number between one and 3,780, the estimated number of unreported rapes that occur in the United States each day. I borrowed principles of the Inka *kipu*, an ancient cord knotting system used for accounting and storytelling, to count and give voice to those women who remain silent. The third element was my daily ritual of moving a portion of the cords from the floor to the walls. These three parts merged into one visual image by the end of

the exhibit. The body trace of violence slowly diminished, then disappeared, through my ritual. The counting cords that had been on the floor encircled the gallery walls in a unified, reckoning *retrace* of the marks left on my neck.

Among contemporary artists who have employed similar methodologies, or addressed similar issues, Ana Mendieta's earth-body prints, Ann Hamilton and Wolfgang Laib's use of non-art materials and ritual in installations, along with Suzanne Lacy's use of art for social activism were most relevant to this work. Marina Abramovic influenced me to explore performance, in order to change the dynamic of the materials and the spatial energy.

PROLOGUE

On January 4, 1994 I was attacked, beaten and raped, in Piedmont Park in Atlanta. Rape is not about sex, it's about power and rage. A woman is made powerless and she is silenced. The rapist grabbed me from behind by the hood of my jacket and strangled me with the cords tied around my neck. Those traces of violence remained on my neck for six months. I thought they would be there forever, constant reminders of the assault, permanent reminders of being silenced.

INTRODUCTION

In recent drawings and installations I addressed the issue of violence toward women in an abstract and personally detached way. *Retracing the Trace* marked a shift in my approach to making work about this issue. Each aspect of this work reflected my identity and involvement, from making the body imprint to removing the last cord from the floor and attaching it to the wall. The gallery was a metaphor for my body, as I drew attention to the number of sexual assaults that go unreported, and renounced the traces of my own trauma.

As a Native American woman I often reference Pre-Conquest culture in my work. The *kipu* was pertinent to this work, as a device made from cords, and as an endangered Native American language. I metaphorically connected the silencing I experienced when I was raped to the silencing of Native American culture and voices.

INSTALLATION

Retracing the Trace surrounded the viewer with material volume to provoke engagement, with the work and with the issue of sexual assault. It placed the visitor between the material on the floor and the material on the walls; (s)he was *in* the work, rather than standing apart from it looking on. I expressed the temporal nature of installation art through my daily relocation of the knotted cords, presenting the gallery visitor with a momentary presence and experience. Three installation artists, Ann Hamilton, Wolfgang Laib and Marina Abramovic have influenced the way I approached this work. Hamilton is concerned with physical immersion, process, material, and time (Simon 11). Laib's installations are spare but rich with substance, which I believe comes out of simplicity. He distills a visual essence down to the simplest components, for example, a rectangle of sifted pollen. Laib believes, "The more you complicate things, the more you lose" (Diehl 94). The focus of *Retracing the Trace* is simple; material volume and its relocation through ritual.

Although ritualized action was not in my mind when I began this work, it became an important part of it. Both Hamilton and Laib create a level of intensity through the use of simple materials, as well as through ritual and repetition. Ritual is also a central part of Marina Abramovic's installations and performances. She has "... aimed to make the audience an active participant in her explorations of the body and the power of shared vital energy. Her ritualized actions, which often challenge the limits of her endurance both physically and psychologically, force an uncomfortable acknowledgement of human vulnerability" (Adler 209). All three of these artists are concerned with their own energy, and how the overall energy of the space is affected. The energy of Hamilton and

Laib is cool and controlled, even austere in Laib's case. Abramovic, in contrast, creates heat through the intensity of her strong physicality. In my use of ritual (relocation of material volume) I sought to maintain a quality of unrelenting, repetitive energy; less endurance driven than Abramovic, less structured and controlled than Hamilton or Laib.

MATERIAL VOLUME – THE CORDS

In developing *Retracing the Trace* I returned again and again to the idea of cords. The original cords on my jacket had silenced me and traces of that silencing haunted me each day as I looked in the mirror. The streaks on my neck were the visual evidence of being strangled, silenced and controlled. I wanted to turn that around and use cords for tracing a voice that would break the silence. The *kipu* gave me a device to do that.

Each of the knotted cords in my installation was a specific number designation, one through 3,780. Only 16% of sexual assaults are reported in the United States. Statistically, these reported assaults occur every two minutes or 720 times a day (United States Department of Justice Web). If 720 represents the reported rapes, the unreported number of assaults would be 3,780. According to the Rape, Abuse and Incest National Network, sexual assault is the most underreported violent crime (RAINN Web). Shock, denial, fear of reprisal, shame and guilt that somehow the victim could have prevented the attack, all contribute to this underreporting (Murray 103). My goal was not to create replicas of the *kipu*, but to use that system of counting to represent each woman who would be attacked, and remain silent, during a twenty-four hour period.

I used three diameters of satin cord, which were similar to the size of the cords that strangled me. These commercially-dyed cords were two shades of medium red and shiny. I wanted a deep, dark red that suggested blood. Staining and dying the cords gave more depth of color and a matte finish. I began what would become a four-month process of making the knotted cords. After knotting, I dyed the cords, soaking them in combinations of ink, acrylic paint, tea and walnut stain. Sometimes I dyed and dried a

batch (40 or 50 cords) two or three times in order to get added depth and variation in shades.

At the beginning of this production, I carefully hung each knotted cord on a rack, so that it remained straight (fig.1). My initial idea was to have all the cords hanging in an orderly display, possibly even in sequential order.



Fig. 1. *Straight Cords*

As the number of knotted cords waiting to be dyed and dried mounted, I began to take a handful of cords from the dye bath and pile them over the drying racks (fig. 2). I looked at those clumps with ragged, bent tendrils hanging down for several weeks. The twisted, irregular cords were more expressive than the neat, straight ones, as they denoted the damage and abjection of sexual violation.



Fig. 2. *Cords Drying*

In the *kipu* system there are three basic counting knots: (1) a simple overhand knot, (2) a knot tied to create a figure-eight pattern, (3) a *long* knot, made by wrapping the cord around itself from two to nine times (Brokaw 2). The knotted cords I created followed that system in order to make each cord unique, specific and countable (fig. 3).

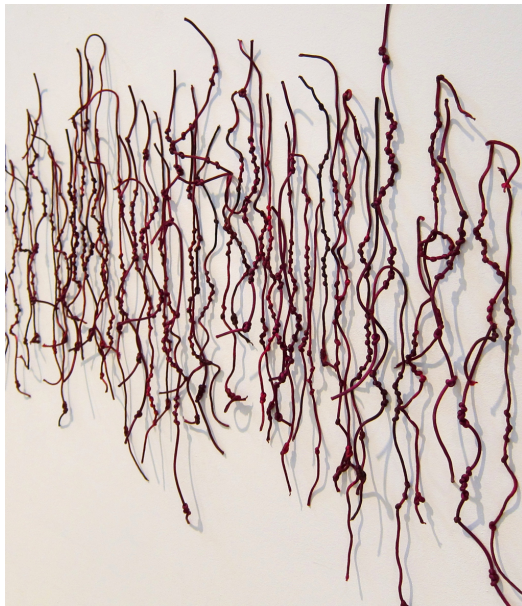


Fig. 3. *Knotted Cords in Gallery*

History of the *Khipu*

When I began to research *khipu*, I discovered new theories pointing to a narrative language within this system, previously considered to have been used only for accounting. Sixteenth century documents give credence to current theories that the Inka, and even earlier people in South America, did indeed have a method of communication equivalent to a *written* language and that it was suppressed by their Spanish colonial overlords (Assadourian 134). Ignorance and fear dictated destruction, as one group assumed power over another through the systematic silencing of language and culture.



Fig. 4. *Khipu* Peabody Museum (Urton Web).

In the ancient *khipu* variations of knots, color of thread, and the position of the knots on the cord further distinguish value (fig. 4). Those variations may also indicate more than numbers or mnemonic prompts (Quilter xvi). A written language usually existed in a society that had socio-political hierarchies, complex architecture, and organized territorial control. The Inka qualified in all areas except a written language (Brokaw 1), or so it was presumed, based on the research of anthropologist Leland

Locke. In the 1920's Locke pronounced that the *kipu* were solely numerical files (Brokaw 3). Locke's solution to the mystery code of the *kipu* stood for seventy years, until researchers in the 1990's hypothesized these devices may well have been used in the same way other civilizations used marks written or inscribed onto flat surfaces. Robert Ascher refers to the *kipu* as a "medium of expression" (Ascher v). However, these theories may never be proven, because most of the *kipu*, like Aztec codices, were destroyed 500 years ago.

THE IMPRINT

The floor piece of scattered, knotted cords holding an imprint of my body, encompassed one quarter of the gallery space. This was positioned in the back third of the gallery, off-center and toward the far corner (fig. 5).



Fig. 5. *Floor Piece*

The impetus for making this trace came from my exploration of bodywork printmaking and was influenced by the work of Ana Mendieta. Body as an art-making tool, in the manner of Mendieta, is how I approached the floor piece in this installation. In 1974, Ana Mendieta recalled Yves Klein's work in her *Body Tracks* paintings (Viso 163). Klein viewed the body as an art-making tool and he moved art out of the studio and into performance (Charlet, n.p.). His method was to use the bodies of models, not his own, as the art tool. Becoming the tool, Mendieta smeared her arms with red paint and dragged them down a fabric banner attached to the wall to create traces of her action (Viso, 163). Mendieta's direct and personal process in making *Body Tracks* reminded me of the red-smeared drawings and paintings I had made, then destroyed, in the months

immediately after being raped. As curator Ira Licht wrote about the 1975 exhibit “Bodyworks” at Chicago’s Museum of Contemporary Art, “Bodyworks is primarily personal and private. It’s content is autobiographical and the body is used as the very body of a particular person rather than as an abstract entity or in a role.” (Licht n.p.).

My goal was not to create a permanent image through photography, as Mendieta had done in her signature series, the *Siluetas* of 1973-77 (Duncan 111). Most of those female silhouettes were made by pressing her body into mud, leaves, flowers, sand and other soft surfaces in nature and photographing the imprints. I wanted to re-present a trace of violence that I would transform through ritual action. A few of the *Siluetas* involved Mendieta being covered with flowers, grasses or snow. I used that model to create the floor piece by lying on the floor and having the 3,780 knotted cords scattered on and around me. I then got up, allowing the cords on top of me to fall around the space. After repeating this process, in different positions, the result was an image of the cords pooling around the imprint of my body slumped on the ground (fig. 6).



Fig. 6. *Being covered*

My initial response to Mendieta's work had been personal and literal, rather than symbolic. The *Siluetas* brought back memories of the crime scene and the ensuing days when the police failed to catch the rapist. Only three per cent of rapists ever spend a day in prison (RAINN Web). The day after I was attacked, I returned to the scene of the crime. Rape Trauma Syndrome explains the counterintuitive actions that victims often exhibit after being sexually assaulted. Returning to the scene of the crime is one such action, as well as non reporting, late reporting and rape denial (Murray 101). By returning I was attempting to gain back the power I had lost at that place. Recreating that scene by imprinting the cords with my own body empowered me, over the scene and over the trauma.

Trauma

I had not planned this work to be so focused on my personal experience. But, through the evolution of the art-making process, I realized this work *is* about my experience. I resisted this because I thought making work about my personal trauma would put it in the category of confessional/victim art. I had once been dismissive of Tracey Emin, who made art that exposed intimate details of her sex life (Ward 155). I felt she exploited the art world by exploiting herself. Through my research for *Retracing the Trace*, I discovered Emin's early life was filled with people exploiting her, especially her sexuality (Murray 164). My way of examining a very private experience had previously been in personally detached terms, using images of dolls and paper dolls that were damaged and scarred. Emin expressed her personal trauma in direct, sometimes shocking and offensive, ways. Although I came to appreciate Emin's work, it was

important for me to express image and ritual in an elegant and subtle way, in contrast to the chaotic violence of sexual assault.

I was introduced to Jacques Lacan's ideas about trauma in *The Return of the Real*. Lacan defined the traumatic as a "missed encounter with the real . . . as missed, the real cannot be represented, it can only be repeated, indeed it *must* be repeated" (Foster 132). Lacan was making an observation about compulsive repetition related to past trauma. My reaction to Lacan's idea was to repeat my trauma by making new traces of the violence, using my body as the art making tool.

I made a number of prints which were executed by lying down on my ink-smeared back and then peeling myself off the paper to get a clear imprint. I progressed to making some prints in which I mimicked actions of struggling. Although these initial body prints were not included in this installation, they were important to my development of this work. These prints were the result of a conscious decision to insert myself, as art tool, into work that addressed the physical violation of women, and specifically, the sexual violation of my own body. I identified with the process and the resulting artifact. In those prints I was claiming, for the first time, both the trauma and my expression of it.

As my thinking about the expression of trauma shifted, I searched for other contemporary female artists addressing the issue of sexual assault, but found few. The most notable artists addressing rape or abuse seem to fall into two or three categories: those who approach the topic as activists (Suzanne Lacy), those who place rape in a broader context of racial oppression (Kara Walker), and those who express personal experiences in a confessional way (Tracey Emin).

My approach to this work is most similar to Lacy's. She has addressed social issues throughout her career, from prostitution and the commercial sale of body organs to rape and murder. Her project, *Three Weeks in May*, was performance art in protest of rampant sexual assaults taking place around Los Angeles in 1977. That work included public performance, rituals, readings, workshops, self-defense demonstrations, meetings with politicians and law enforcement officials. "Her early examinations of the body and its vulnerability have expanded into an interest in the vulnerability of the social body." (Butler 258). She took an individual experience (her own or someone else's) and pushed it into a broader social context without losing the intensity of the personal experience.

RITUAL

My action/ritual in the gallery gradually diminished the imprint on the floor, as it increased the volume of material encircling the walls. On the first day the empty walls, with subtle hour numbers stenciled with grey pastel, suggested an expectation of something about to happen (fig. 7).



Fig. 7. *Day 1*



Fig. 8. *First cords on the wall*

I placed the first group of knotted cords on the wall between the 7:00 and 8:00 hours because that is the time of day I was attacked (fig. 8). After those first cords, my placement of the cords each day was made instinctively, but always returning to that morning hour. As I relocated more of the knotted cords, the space between the hours became filled with red “marks” and with shadows of the hanging cords tracing behind them. The increasing number of cords on the wall, and layer of shadows, implied even larger numbers of assaults that remain in the background, unreported (fig. 9).



Fig. 9. *Shadows*

I had anticipated that my daily time in the gallery, relocating the cords, would take about two hours each day for the ten days of the exhibit. I underestimated the time required for this process, due to the time I spent talking with visitors, and because I performed the relocation in a much slower and more deliberate way than I had planned. Preparing the knotted cords, making the imprint and stenciling the numbers set the stage and provided the props. The execution of the performance/ritual was open to variations, in response to visitor activity in the gallery and to my energy/intent. By the midway

point, the cords on the walls were slowly gaining importance as the floor piece diminished (fig. 10).



Fig. 10. *Day 5*

By the last two or three days of the exhibit the floor imprint had been diminished in depth and volume. The remaining individual cords were more scattered and separated. Each cord configuration and knot pattern was more apparent and the imprint displayed an increasingly delicate figure (fig. 11).



Fig. 11. *Day 9*

By the tenth day the walls were encircled with a solid and intense trace, above the vacant gallery floor (fig. 12, fig. 13).

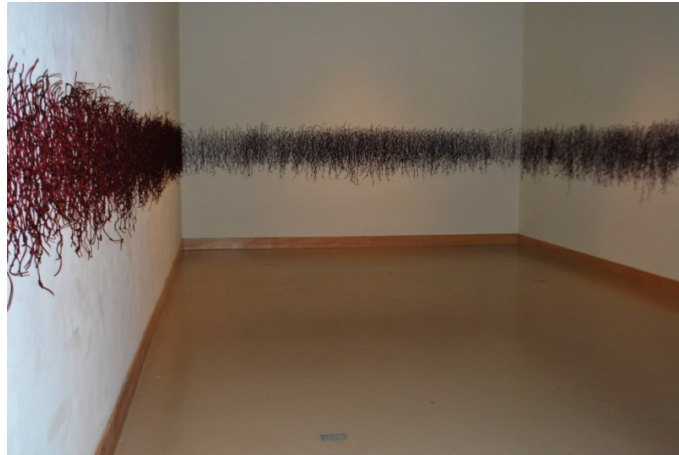


Fig. 12. *Day 10*

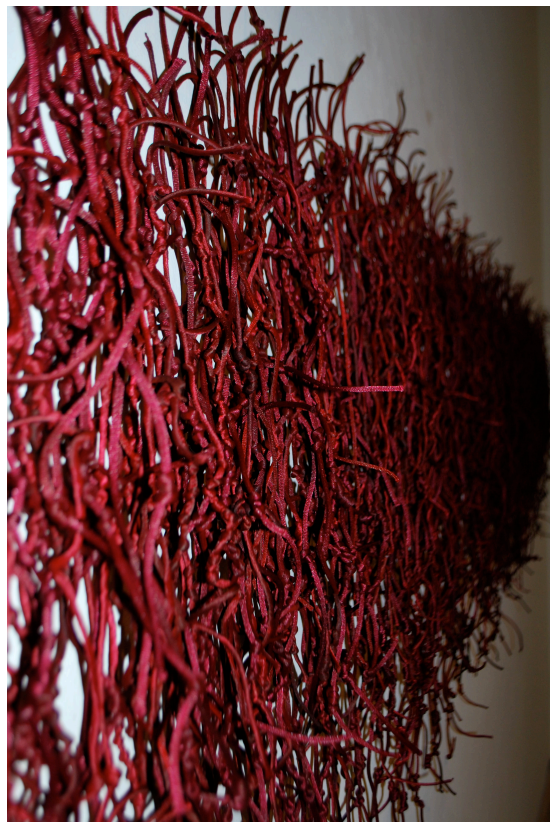


Fig. 13. *Day 10, detail*

CONCLUSION

This installation involved a new exploration for me, being in the gallery everyday and performing an action. People who came into the gallery talked with me, sometimes at length, about the issue of sexual assault, and often about their own experience. Some remarked on the impact of seeing the shifting material volume day after day. Others did not speak to me as I was working, but wrote a comment in the gallery book. At one point in the planning I worried that talking with people in the space would be disruptive or bring the atmosphere down to a “social” level. It did not. Each time I entered the space I felt a sense of quiet and calm. The lighting was subdued, and the mounting number of red cords on the walls conveyed an intense, but serene, presence.

On the last day of the exhibit, when all the cords were on the wall, the installation looked exactly as I had envisioned it. The unknown factor was my action each day in the gallery. I had hoped that action would be a ritual of acknowledging and honoring those women who remain silent. It *was* that to some extent. However, after being in the gallery moving the cords from the floor to the wall every day, I became aware of a shift in my energy and in the way I performed the action. I doubt that it was apparent to a visitor, but possibly it was. The process became very focused for me, as I felt the weight of the increasing numbers getting stronger, building the visual volume.

My movements became more emphatic, as I pressed the cords against the wall. Moving the cords off the floor became more about my own experience of having been silenced and powerless. With each cord I attached to the wall I was making my mark. I was marking, noting, announcing the increasing numbers as my visual voice became more pronounced.

I had resisted my personal experience being the primary focus because I believed it would put the spotlight on me, rather than the issue of sexual assault. Through conversations I had during this exhibit, and from comments in my gallery book, I realize that my speaking out in a personal way was important for the effectiveness of the work. My own response to Ana Mendieta's *Siluetas* had been a personal recollection of the ground where I had been attacked. I made a connection between the imprint she had made with *her* body and the imprint of *my* body I had seen on the ground. Marina Abramovic's performances provoke identification with *her* endurance and vulnerability, in relation to the viewer's own physicality.

One person wrote in my gallery book, "This makes me realize how much I've healed and helps me feel connected to others going through the same thing". Another wrote, ". . . there is one for me". Those women felt they were not alone; that other woman, *many* other women had experienced this too. They felt a connection to a larger company, and in that gallery space were empowered to write and talk about their experiences. Talking about sexual assault is not something women do readily. It is easier to remain silent, thinking no one else knows what it feels like to experience this trauma. There was action and conversation during this exhibit. The silence was broken through visual image, and through words, written and spoken.

EPILOGUE

Making this work and writing about it was far more difficult, psychologically and emotionally, than I anticipated. As a survivor of sexual assault I felt satisfaction in provoking discourse about this subject and bringing it out of the shadows. I had considered involving volunteers to assist in this ritual, as another way of engaging the public. But after a few days I realized it was important that I carry out the completion of the ritual by myself.

When I exhibit this work again I would like to include other people in the ritual to discover how their presence may affect me, my energy, as well as the impact it may have on the overall spatial energy. This experience has expanded my ideas of installation and performance art. I now view performance art less as theatrical (playing a part) action and more as an experience of reality, for the artist and the viewer. I was being myself, a survivor of sexual assault, as I transformed the image of the cords.

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