Trying to Do

Thesis

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By

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Abstract

For my thesis paper I intend to examine how my last two years of graduate school has not only allowed me to produce my final two thesis projects but also helped me to better understand the artwork I have created since attending Lawrence University. I will divide my paper into chapters that detail each of the main projects that I have been part of at The Ohio State University. I will discuss how and why a variety people, materials and readings have influenced the design of each project. I will then show how the ideas I cultivated from each project lead to a new project. Finally, I will discuss how my final thesis projects helped to define my past two years of graduate school as well as indicating the direction that my work might be heading.
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Field of Study

Major Field: Art

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My First Painting

My undergraduate work at Lawrence University was primarily oil paintings on canvas. During my senior year I created a small painting on a pre-stretched canvas using many layers of grey and red paint, building up a self-portrait in profile. I was cut off at the waste and had two large breasts with tubes attached to the nipples that stretched upwards off the canvas. I used my paint scraper to scratch the surface of my painting.

I was embarrassed about showing people this painting. I did not want them to see me cutting an image of me with breasts. It felt like painting me with breasts and cutting the images made me a sick person. A few people from the art department said that they liked my painting. I however, was embarrassed. I started to turn my painting against the wall so that I and other people could not see it.

At the end of the year, I got scared about the prospect of leaving school. I felt that school was comfortable and outside of school was scary and unpredictable. Partially because of this unpredictability and partially because I did not want to transport my paintings from school to New Hampshire I decided to throw out many of my paintings, my small self portrait included. Eventually, a friend convinced me to retrieve my paintings but I could not find my tiny painting. The only documentation of this painting I had left was a small image (about 70k) online which has also disappeared.

This was the first painting I created where I noticed that I was scared of some part of my body (addition of breasts to my body) although I did not know why. I was scared.
of this change to the point of pain. I scratched the surface of the painting with my paint scraper to express my pain. I wanted to cut myself but I used my painting to stand in for myself. I did not want other people to see me with breasts or the scratches on the surfaces to indicate my fear.

I will use my thesis to show how explored my fears and interests inside and outside of art. I will discuss how and why I created my work. I will also show how my work as well as people and materials from the last two years of graduate school have influenced the structure, themes and materials of my final thesis project. Finally, I will conjecture about the direction my work may be taking as I leave graduate school.
**From New York to Post-It**

I spent the two years between undergraduate and graduate school in New York, working in multiple jobs, a cashier in Borders Books in Manhattan, an internship at the Bronx River Art Center and a teaching assistantship at the Queens Museum among others. I was constantly tired and stressed from running around and squeezing into subways to get to each of my jobs. At night I took the 5 Train to the second to the last stop, then walk a few blocks to the apartment in the where my brother and I lived. Our neighborhood was a mix of Jamaican and Ghanaian immigrants a bit different then the small town New Hampshire that we grew up in.

I continued to create paintings in my apartment with this backdrop of scattered jobs and an unfamiliar environment. My paintings and drawings began to reflect my environment. In one of my drawings entitled, “Knights and Monsters”, I drew on a torn piece of paper with pastels to create a drawing that could fit on the small table in my apartment. (Figure 1)

Knights and Monsters is also reflective of some the things I experienced in New York. In these images, Knights ride disembodied hands. Each hand has additional fingers that resemble cuts and serrations from my undergraduate self-portrait. In the lower right corner there is a monster-like two-headed marionette that shoots something from its mouth at the knights. The knights and the monster are in the same frame but
they do not interact except for the stuff that the marionette figure spews out. Finally, I included a caption in color on the drawing that reads, “And the knight fights the monster and beats it back (no period) The monster will be back but he’ll be ready”. The monster has been beaten temporarily but the knight will beat it again. In this drawing and in earlier drawings in New York, writing had become a major component of my work. Text in my drawings and paintings is composed mainly of short pithy sentences, describing my thoughts about my relationships and people that I saw and met. I read many comic books like the American Splendor graphite novel series by “Harvey Pekar” in New York. Pekar writes through constantly reflecting about his interactions with others in a style that is similar to my own short observations.

In “Our Cancer Year”, Pekar writes about an argument with his wife and his response to it. Pekar writes, “She looks really serious and tired. I’m wearing her out, and she’s not so strong anyway. I should be helping her, and I make her tired. She has to clean up my mess.” (Pekar and Brabner. ch. 9) This and other comments that Pekar makes about his personal life mirror the comments about my life in my drawings. Comic like text continued to be a central part of my work, clarifying my thoughts about people and relationships especially the fear that I still felt in these situations.

The cuts I made on the surface of my undergraduate painting when I saw an image of myself with breasts. The serrated, disembodied hands in “Knights and Monsters” suggest that I was feeling pain in New York as well. This is evident from the serrated marks and images of disembodied body parts: the floating hands.

For me, these battles between the knights and the marionette and similar scenes of
conflict in other drawings and paintings reflect the struggles I dealt with in New York. I was constantly stressed running between multiple jobs. I felt out of place in a huge city within an immigrant population that I did not feel a part of. Additionally, I started to be unsure of my sexuality. My questioning ranged from not being sure whether I was male or female to being unsure of the type of people (male, female transgender) that I was attracted to.

I created 4 drawings during my last month in New York in different combinations of pastel, graphite and colored pencil on paper. Each one also has multiple disembodied body parts and text referring to disconnections between two things, bodies and people.

I left New York unsure of what the colors and severed images in these drawings and painting were about or why I created them. All I knew was that these images were mentally painful to create. In my first show at the Ohio State University, the MFA First Year Show, I was unsure what work to submit. I decided to submit an adjusted version of my four drawings.

I displayed my four drawings in a row in separate panels of Plexiglas. I posted a description of these drawings to the right of my paintings in my artist statement. The statement described the fear I felt both with dealing with concerns with my changing sexuality and my loneliness. At the bottom of my statement, I asked my readers to respond to my statement and to the images in my drawings through post-it notes. I prompted viewers to write on a set of Post-It Notes installed near my statement and to place them on my drawings. The Post-It Note is a familiar office product used for writing comments and thoughts. I used Post-It Notes for my installation so that my
audience could write down their thoughts quickly.

I asked for responses to my drawings because I was confused about the meaning of the images and words that I was creating. I was also trying to understand why I was scared of the images in my work. I asked viewers to write their opinions about my work on Post-It Notes so that they could give me some incites into what the images in my work might be about.

Viewers responded with a wide range of reactions to my work. Responses ranged from three page critiques of my work by art historians, placing my work in an art historical context to the simple bathroom humor with a drawing of a tiny penis. (Figure 2) By placing my drawings in different contexts, some post-it notes made me feel like my images had a connection to something outside of myself, which I found reassuring.

Although I took pictures of my drawings before and after the first year MFA show, I did not keep the Post-It Notes that people left. I think that if I had kept them and read them thoroughly I might have had a better initial understanding of my work. Documentation, lack of documentation and the effect of documentation on the work started to become an issue with my work starting with Post-it. The effects of poor documentation became a major issue in my 2009 solo winter show, Tasty Treats in Hopkins Hall on The Ohio State University campus. Its effects caused me to change my methods of creating drawings and paintings and especially my performances.
A Winter Treat

In many of the shows I visited up to my MFA First Year Show, I made a few observations. First, I spend very little time looking at most artwork. Second, I noticed that people that go to art shows spend more time eating and talking then looking at art (these are my observations and not a survey). In response to these thoughts, I decided to put on an “art party” in the winter of 2010.

Initially, I did not set out to make an art party. I started by making work from donated materials. Artist Sara Berens gave me a box of old printer paper. Artist Susan Li O’Conner donated a pack of yellowed graph paper from the OSU geology department to my studio. My work consisted of the following: colored pencil wall drawing murals on old printer paper, colored pencil drawings on the graph paper, a wall painting with acrylic paint of a silhouetted ocean scene, and one canvas painting of Matt Dietz. Except for my one stylized portrait of Matt Dietz, each entire drawing or painting was at human scale (6 feet) or larger. Each drawing or painting also contained images of people that were cutoff, obscured or so light that a viewer would have to squint to see them. (Figure 3)

In my large wall drawing on printer paper entitled, “The Garden”, I drew a number of figures facing towards and gesturing to each other. (Figure 4) Many of the figures are obscured or cut in some way. The figures are broken up into parts through the
layers of printer paper. A figure starts in one layer and extends down and across the paper into new sheets. The figures in these images are also very light. The only way to see them is to be within a few feet of them.

Most notably, the figures lower halves are obscured with fruit and flower-like objects, making up the garden. The fruit and flowers not only obscure the lower body of all the figures. The figures’ genitalia are replaced by phallic and vaginal metaphors in the fruit and flowers. Although this is only my extrapolation of the garden’s meaning, covering a part of the body that I am scared of makes sense to me if I consider my earlier drawings, the self-portrait I threw away and the images I asked other people to react to in “Post-It Notes”.

I placed “The Garden” and my other drawings along the wall in room 443 in Hopkins Hall at The Ohio State University. In addition to my drawings, I created approximately 50 masks made out of cardboard, cereal boxes, and assorted trash materials and attached a popsicle stick to each of the masks so that they could be held. I also baked éclairs, placed them on platters and put them in the middle of the room on cloth covered pedestals. I gave the masks and éclairs to visitors while wearing latex gloves. Finally, approximately a half an hour through the show my friend Janet and I played folk songs that we had been practicing for the past few weeks. We played duets and then one song individually. I handed out food, gifts and sang songs in order to create a party atmosphere embellishing the opening.

I handed out my masks and éclairs both because I wanted to give people party favors. However, I used latex gloves to hand out these objects. Latex gloves are used to
protect hands during medical examinations and can be used in various ways during sex. I thought that using subversive baggage for gift giving was a funny if perverted interaction. I found that including subversive humor in my work was a good way for me to express my interests in my work while including additional meaning for my audience.

People accepted my gifts of masks and éclairs although there were a few people who either did not have either or turned them down entirely. In general though, most people laughed and smiled throughout the show. Audience expressing interest to borderline wonder in response to artwork made me feel that my method of working, creating a surprising and interactive event, was the best method for me to continue making work.
In the Spring Semester of 2009 I took a Seminar on the concept of “Wonder” with Professor Sean Foley. In the beginning of this class, we discussed how wonder is an instantaneous event, where a reaction to a situation occurs once and then cannot be recaptured because we are now used to that particular situation.

In response to this statement I asked if there was a method of continuing to experience when placed in contact with a previously experienced situation or object. I am not sure how we answered this question in class, but I created my own answer. I decided that one can experience wonder in a situation one has already experienced by approaching that situation from multiple angles and by allowing each angle to be just as correct and feasible as the next.

To test my idea, I decided to make curiosity cabinets for the 17 students and one professor in my class for a class presentation that addressed the concept of “wonder”. I thought that curiosity cabinets, a room or container containing weird and wonderful objects, represent the interests of the person who created it. In addition, I thought that by creating cabinets for other people, I might be able to have the cabinet’s recipients wonder why I created and how it represents them. (Figure 5)

I created each curiosity cabinet out of a combination of cardboard, cereal boxes, acrylic paint, graphite and thread, all materials that can be easily found and easily discarded. I used these materials because I was wanted to see how other people would
value objects designed for them as gifts but made out of inexpensive materials. I also found that these materials were easy to cut and adjust, allowing me to create each cabinet quickly.

On the day of my presentation, I filled a black roly cart with the curiosity cabinets and covered the cart with black cloth. I did this to try to create an immediate sense of surprise from my recipients when I removed the cloth. I gave cabinets to each student individually then took a picture of each artist with their cabinet. Each artist’s was generally enthusiastic from receiving a gift, although a few had a fake overacting enthusiasm. (Figure 6, Figure 7)

Professor Foley gave each of his students a long list of movies, books and artwork that in some way related to “wonder”. Sean suggested I read one of the books, Rabalais and His World, by Mikhail Bakhtine, as he felt that a study of medieval and Renaissance carnivals would relate closely to my interests in creating colorful, whimsical drawings and performances.

“Rabalais and His World” describes how the Medieval Church created isolated celebrations that allowed people to briefly speak words, perform mock and real sexual acts and break other taboos that were not usually allowed by the church during the rest of the year. (Bakhtine and Iswolsky) I felt that this description of church’s control over the things that people could say and the ways that they could act related closely to my view of art as it is currently created and displayed. An art space, like a museum or art center is a place specifically designed to contain art. If a space is delineated as an art space, then areas outside of the art space are not areas that contain art.
I began to think of “art spaces” as places that functioned like a medieval carnival:
the only place that an action or object that may run against the norms of a society is permitted to occur without scrutiny. I started to feel that the most effective use of art is outside of an art related context, where the questioning and wonder in art making started to become more present in everyday lives.
Squatting for One

During the month that I created my curiosity cabinets, I had a studio visit with Professor Michael Mercil that reconfirmed my thoughts about the place of art in society. Mercil appeared to enjoy the different ways I played with materials as well as the images I created in my drawings. However, Michael also posed a question about the audience for my work. He asked me how I would apply my work outside of a university setting, since I would be leaving in one year. I realized that Michael had a good point. In school I have a captive audience who is interested in many of the same things that I am and know a lot about my background. How could I create a project that could affect people with different interests to my own and no knowledge of who I was?

Spring Quarter ended and I still felt that needed some way of answering Michael’s question. For the summer group independent study with Professor Malcolm Cochrane, we decided to create artwork in buildings for lease in downtown Columbus, Ohio entitled “Art Squatters”. For Art Squatters I decided to create a one-person performance broken into three skits entitled “Out”. Each skit was based on my interests including a spoof on Harry Potter, an “Art Movements Song” and a gift giving activity.

I acted in the persona of “Harry” for my performance. Harry was twice as skittish but more openly honest version of myself. Harry was able to say anything that came to his mind and hardly ever filtered his thoughts.

Harry’s costume reflected the honest ways he acted. Harry had white face paint
with green splotches over different areas of his face. I included this face paint to label Harry as both the awkwardness of a mime and the slapstick humor of the clown while not having to consistently be either. Harry also wore a white button down shirt, black tights and ballet slippers. This outfit allowed me to move easily and adjust to improve situations in my performance. This portion allowed me to identify with the loose clothing of dancers. (Figure 8)

I created an apron to wear on top of the rest of my costume. The apron has two sides. The front side has a series of images in color pencil and acrylic paint. There are many colorful and partially obscured figures across the surface of the apron. A large green, detachable trunk or penis-like appendage covered in stars is in the middle. The back side of the costume has two black pockets shaped like vaginas. Each black vagina was filled with tiny white flowers. More characters surround the vaginas. (Figure 9, Figure 10)

Harry functioned in two ways: through improvisation in response to audience reactions and through the three skits themselves. The skits are three depictions of how I feel about different subjects but expressed through the character Harry, the extreme version of myself.

The first skit, a brief story about the interactions between Harry and his arch nemesis Voldersquirt, is a parody of the relationship between “Harry Potter and Voldermort” in the Harry Potter Books. I tell the story of how I as Harry fly around and try to avoid contact with Voldersquirt.

I then change my costume (in either a closet or behind a screen), taking off my
apron. For the second skit I made an improvisational dance while singing a song about a series of art movements. I end this skit by bowing and going back into the closet or behind the curtain.

For the final skit I put on my apron backwards with my vaginas facing out. I tell the audience that we will do a call and response skit about giving. During the skit, I give each person flowers from my black vaginas as a present. I end the skit by bowing and thanking my audience for coming.

Audience reactions to “Out” ranged from outright fear to amazement at the strangeness of my act. I talked to a few of the people, including friends, who were afraid of my performance. Their fear stemmed from the awkwardness of my character, his jarring voice and his clown/mine-like face paint. Some of the amazement reactions came from hearing the strange words and skits I was speaking the unfiltered reactions I had to my audience’s questions.

I performed “Out” approximately 14 times on three days between October and September 2009. I found that performing in character this time became simultaneously boring and frightening. I was bored by the sheer number of times I performed and was more likely to fall out of character in my final show. I also found that performing as a constantly skittish and very open character affected my mental state outside of the performance. I felt more depressed and self-conscious of my interests and perceived problems.

I decided that although “Out” was a successful performance both through audience reactions and as a survey of the interests and problems I dealt with, it only
depicted my interests, it did not act them out. I portrayed a person who awkwardly dealt with sexuality in Harry Blotter, a dislike/parody of art movements in “Art Movements Song” and giving the audience flowers from my vaginas in the final performance. Talking about and performing these different acts made me uncomfortable. I wanted to create a performance where I could start to figure out how to embrace these interests.
mostly “Bundles of Joy”

I thought that I could embrace my interests by taking the focus of the performance off me through including additional performers. I thought that by designing a performance where other people performed acts that interested me I might be able to feel less alienated. I asked artists Hannah Givler and Sara Gallo, whose work and personalities I considered both whimsical and fun, to help me create this new performance.

Our group developed a performance designed around the framework of a children’s television shows like Sesame Street or The Muppet Show and audience participation. Unlike a children’s show though, we planned on including adults along with children as audience. We thought that this format would be familiar to most people and easy to understand for children as well as nostalgic for adults.

Our show, entitled: Bundles of Joy, was based on the interactions of three creature characters: Squirrelly the Midwestern Shrew, Hugs and Wizz. We involved the audience in three performances. We began with an introductory monologue by the Midwestern Shrew. During the monologue, Hugs and Wizz hand out pieces of paper with instructions. These instructions ask audience to respond in a particular way to different words or phrases with specific actions or sounds. The audience continues to make noises in response to dialogue throughout the performance.

The audience is not prepped with the actors on their responses. The actors were
unsure of how and when the audience would respond to the performance. This uncertainty created random and uncontrollable changes in the performance and dialogue. I as the shrew for example, had to continuously pause in my monologue due to noise interruptions that the audience made.

At the end of the monologue we sang a small song to the audience, saying that “we’ve got something for them” while instructing them to standup and participate in three skits. Each audience member was prompted to wear an ad hoc costume made out of materials like old sheets, clothes and stuffed animals to dress the part of a traveling character. We gave each audience member one stuffed animal to act as their traveling character in our skits. The skits are based on children’s stories and choose your own adventure novels and concerned an imagined journey that our three characters went on. We use friendship, helping and problem solving as our central themes for our skits because they all stemmed from children’s stories.

We ended our skits by asking the audience to return to their seats on the floor. We followed by singing a short song and dance thanking the audience for coming to end the show. An ending song or dance is a common part of children’s shows or movies. Again, we thought that both adults and children were familiar with these actions and would find them reassuring and familiar. (Figure 11)

We performed “Bundles of Joy” twice, each time to a different demographic. There mainly high school students and their parents in the first group. The second group mostly consisted of friends and graduate students. The audiences in both performances reacted fairly equally to the monologue, skits and show finale. Most people interrupted
our performance and played along in our skits as we thought that they would. Even more than the actual act of creating a performance, I found that Bundles of Joy was an opportunity to have fun with friends and our community. Sara, Hannah and me worked for three months to create our performance. We met once a week for lunch, dinner or coffee, discussing and refining our performance but also laughing, being goofy and getting to know each other a bit better. In our performance we danced, sang and played games with our audience all while acting as strange characters and wearing silly costumes. Unlike my summer performance, I genuinely enjoyed myself during Bundles of Joy. In “Out”, I became disinterested in my performance due to the large number of times that I performed and due to the narrowness of the performance’s subject matter, myself. In Bundles of Joy, we only performed twice. The performance’s subject matter was also a combination of Sara’s, Hannah’s and my ideas as well as the varied reactions of our audience. Working on Bundles of Joy made me feel as if my ideas could be accepted by my friends and people from my community. Both of these reactions made me feel more validated as an artist.

There were a few aspects of Bundles of Joy that I felt could have been better prepared. Bundles of Joy was well attended and seemed to be well liked. However, I was disappointed in the lack of time that each performer spent developing our individual characters. Even if we did not develop our characters together, each of us still needed to know how to react in character convincingly and consistently with other performers and an audience of unknown people.

We also did not consider how we would document Bundles of Joy. We began to
talk about how we would document our work a few days before the performance. We did not discuss the random movements of the audience or ourselves and how they could obscure the camera footage.

Additionally, aside from capturing footage of our performance, I felt that filming our performance did not show anything other than an overview of our event. It did not enhance our performance or have a cohesive focus. For my Thesis Project “Try Your Hand”, I wanted to create something where the documentation was as meticulous and strong as the work itself.
Tries, “Try Your Hand”

I began my thesis project with my documentary and organizational concerns from “Bundles of Joy”. Additionally, space became a concern. We were required to create our thesis projects for a group show with 26 artists in the Urban Arts Space in downtown Columbus, Ohio. I decided to respond to these different concerns by making a project that did not compete with any of the other projects in the show. I concluded that in my new performance, “Try Your Hand”, I would make a performance that could sneak up on you or you might stumble upon. To make my audience “stumble” I decided to make a show where my performers only performed actions that they would perform on an everyday basis. I also still found simple familiar actions, like the familiar children’s show from “Bundles of Joy” as an easy method of drawing an audience into a performance.

I also wanted to continue to have the same comradely in “Try Your Hand” that I had in “Bundles of Joy”. I wanted to be responsible for not only creating a cohesive group that performed during productions but as a group outside of performances as well.

For the first 2 weeks of my thesis show, the only objects I had in the gallery were a wicker basket and a pedestal to its left with a placard on its top. The placard reads “other side” on the front and “May 8 2010, 6:15pm” on its back. I created this sign with the intent of creating a sense of anticipation of “some event” occurring. (Figure 12) On
the morning of the performance, I change the date portion of the placard to “Try Your Hand”. I also placed a container of used crayons, sharpener, empty baby food container with crayon shavings, and a plaque with “or try me” written on it with a pile of cards on top of the pedestal. Each card includes three different methods of submitting questions and pictures about the show. Audience members were able to text me images or comments for an immediate response, email me later or visit facebook.com.

The coloring book reads, “Try Your Hand” on its front and includes a cutout image of a large hand that points inside the book. The first page of the book shows two simple methods of drawing hands (turkey method and rectangle with nubbins method). I provide used crayons so that visitors can draw their own hands. The crayons are used because I want my drawing station to feel like it is accessible, as if someone else like a child has already used it. (Figure 12)

I made a coloring book station because I wanted to create a place where my audience would be comfortable enough to invest themselves in drawing a picture. I think that drawing is initially a private act. I designed the coloring book station as a child’s coloring area that I thought might be familiar enough to make people feel comfortable and respond to my work honestly. The coloring book was also the only object that priced for sale in the show. I thought that it would be funny to sell pictures that I did not draw in an inexpensive format; a coloring book.

For the performance aspect of “Try Your Hand” I asked five of my friends Emi, Lauren, Zack and Caroline if I could make a glove for them, which they could keep. I asked them if in exchange for their glove, they could be part of a performance. I chose
these people because they are part of my everyday journey from studio to studio and for my “coffee break from the studio” coffee. I also chose each of these people because they each have a very distinct body type and personality. Zack is short, stocky and pretty wild, Caroline tall thin and honest, Emi short silly and kind and Lauren medium height, medium build but a goofy slightly jarring, I am tall, skinny and awkward but usually kind.

I created 5 gloves (or sets of gloves) based on each of our personalities/builds. The gloves conceal our hands, can limit or enhance or at least change our actions. (Figure 13) As such, I created 5 actions that each performer took turns performing during the opening. Each action is based on the personality of one of the performers and was performed at the Urban Arts Space during the reception. Each performer performs the following action:

Zack: Playing a game of jacks by himself. If someone at the reception appears interested, he can ask them to join. I created this action for Zack because I thought that the sporadic movements as well as the players close proximity to the ground in a game of jacks, reflects the ways that Zack moves. I wanted to give Zack the initial opportunity to work in a potentially dirty area like he would in his studio.

Emi: Picking up objects at the touch box, a container filled with objects from the show that people can touch, rotating them and giving them to another person. She could also set them back in the box. I have her at this position because of my perception of her personality, questioning, curious and giving.

Lauren: Starts at the opposite side of the box as Emi. Has a similarly giving and curious
personality as Emi with additional awkwardness.

Caroline: Works at Brennens coffee shop as a barista. Caroline starts at the food reception table. There are four toothpick containers placed throughout the food table during the reception. Toothpicks have small paper images of hands, fingers or penis’s attached to their tops. Text on the drawings includes 3 methods of sending comments or posting images including my phone number for texting, and an email address and a facebook.com event location. I intended for the toothpicks to advertise the performance and be a gift for visitors. Caroline places one toothpick in pieces of food. She serves the food as well as drinks to herself, other performers and visitors.

Dan: I start in the bathroom. I go through a series of bathroom actions including, taking off and hanging up my glove and hanging it up, sitting on the toilet, flushing the toilet, standing up, washing hands, drying hands, putting glove back on. I do this because I am uncomfortable with bodily functions. I like the combination of personal bodily functions placed in a pseudo public place, the public bathroom. (Figure 14)

Each performer performed at each other’s station once for a total of five stations per performer. Each performer then deposited their gloves in the small wicker basket at the back of the gallery in 20-second increments. Performers then joined the reception and looked at everyone else’s work.

As a finished performance, “Try Your Hand” had mixed results. The performance with gloves seemed most successful. Each performer appeared comfortable in each position, not seeming to overact or to be unsure. I wanted everyone to act as close as they normally do everyday, except with the addition of a few specific actions. Everyone
seemed to stick within this framework.

I filmed our performance with two cameras because I thought that their might be an interesting different between the moving camera following an actor and a still camera following the movements of the audience. I wanted film the movements of a person through a camera that moved. I wanted to film people looking at and considering food through a still video camera. I followed Zack with the moving camera. I found that the moving camera worked well to capture Zack’s quiet intensity and his journey from station to station. I also found that it worked well capturing his ability to play with objects. He did this by using objects past the point that I intended, for example using his long glove to twist objects from the touch box into balls and then let them go. Zack’s actions at each station and between stations actually connected to the spontaneous, energetic ways that he acts in daily life. I believe that outside of our individual stations, everyone (outside of Zack), did not include or emphasize daily actions into our performance. (Figure 15)

The cards and toothpicks that I set out and distributed so that visitors could contact me do not seem to be successful so far. During the show, performers distributed the toothpicks in food as gifts. The toothpicks included contact information where recipients were supposed to contact me with comments or pictures from the show. I have received no questions or pictures from people that I do not already know. (Figure 16, Figure 17)

I spent the Sunday morning after the show cleaning up after our MFA show party. While I was cleaning the stairs, I found one of my toothpick images on the ground and
covered in beer. Although it is only one incident where one of my images was left
behind, it seems that each toothpick was too small and inconspicuous to keep track of. I
think that later gifts that require my audience to respond need to either be larger or made
out of material that more people value (cloth, canvas, etc.).

No one seemed to have any problems using the coloring book station. As my
brother commented the night of the performance, “People walk up to your coloring book
and look like they’re hesitant about drawing. Eventually they jump in. Its too bad you
didn’t have anyone recording their reactions”. It is too bad but this quote will suffice. I
even checked the coloring book the Tuesday after the show. Each page is filled with
some variation of a hand.

Like my Post-It Note project from my first year at The Ohio State University, I
created the coloring book so that people could draw something immediately in a format
that they were familiar, the coloring book. Familiarity and ease seem to be two catalysts
for audience response. However, since the book is already filled, I do wish that I created
multiple books to replace it throughout the show.

I used everyday experiences in each of my three projects with the objective of
more easily connecting my work to visitors who came to the MFA show opening. It was
interesting seeing which portions of the performance worked and which appear to have
fallen flat. Spontaneous, familiar and subversive actions (coloring book and glove
performance) seem to me most effective in garnering a response from an audience.
These portions also required an investment from my performers and me (glove
performance) and from my audience (putting their hands in the coloring book). I do not
think that the toothpick drawings required a similar investment from my audience or myself. I made all of them quickly and easily. Additionally, they were small and easily overlooked. Finally, they required the audience to do something large (post images outside of the show) when the object they received did not seem to have much investment in it. I think changing the size or at least the materials in the toothpicks might have created more responses.
Dan Sucks Orally

My committee required that I make a solo show highlighting my drawings and preliminary cutouts from my thesis performance and a second meeting to finish my Oral Review. They wanted to see a larger selection of work that better reflected my last two years of graduate school. One statement in particular from my Graduate Oral Review, really pinpointed for me the main problem with my project. During my review, one of my committee members, Laura Lisbon, spoke about my thesis project as a mime or a parody. She talked about the performance as creating facsimiles of actions and the whole project itself as almost a “Fluxus” happening.

After my oral review I was first sad, then angry then spacey. I needed some way of focusing my emotions so I went back to studio and started painting. A few days before my review, I had found a photograph of a woman on a bike next to a dog in a large bricked over roadway. I painted over this photograph over two hours, populating the photographic landscape with colorful characters in acrylic paint and sharpie marker. (Figure 18) These characters are messy and volatile, reflecting my messy emotional state after my review.

After I made this painting, I went over to a friend’s house, primarily with the intention of whining while drinking away my sadness through a few Black Russians. After some awkward conversation on my part, we ended up making out. I finished the evening by sleeping over at her place.
My oral review turned into a day of sadness, anger and frustration from the review, relief from creating the painting and awkward enjoyment while making out and then sleeping over with my friend. Put together, my day felt refreshingly honest in its sadness, relief and awkwardness. All of these emotions made me strangely happy and made me want them to continue. I thought that creating a new show that not only incorporated cutouts and sketches from “Try Your Hand” but also showed the range of my reactions to the performance and the events surrounding the MFA show itself would be the best way to capture the directness I was interested in continuing to feel.

Two days after my review I took a greyhound bus to my cousin’s wedding in Pittsburgh. I had four hours to waste on the bus, so I took out my sketchbook and started drawing. I began by drawing random characters but I soon started sketching objects for a new show. The objects in this new show started to reflect the frustrations that I had with the thesis show as well as my desire to depict my reactions to the people and events surrounding the thesis show.

I drew child-like images of all of my friends that performed in the thesis show. I drew them talking and interacting with each other, with paper cutouts and with video footage from our performance. Each sketch represented a separate wall or area on the floor in the Clean Space, a gallery space in Sherman Hall at The Ohio State University. I intended to draw all of these images of my friends in colored pencil and graphite except Caroline who planned to represent through a paper cutout.

I also reread this thesis paper, which I had already written most of. I found that my introduction, discussing my fear associated with my first painting about my body,
was still very important to me. I realized that for the past 4 years, I have hidden the fear and disgust that I associate with that first painting. I decided to make a performance for my new show in which I would revisit my first painting about my body to go along with my drawings, videos and collages.

When I sketched out my ideas for the Clean Space, I based my images on how large I remembered the space to be. I visited the space and found that it was much bigger than I originally thought it was. As a result, I decided to accompany the large drawings of my friends with smaller drawings and objects that represented my interpretation and reactions to the other artists, visitors and artwork in the MFA show. To best represent the multitude of art forms in this new show, I will discuss one example from each medium: a colored pencil wall drawing, video, collages as well as my performance.

Two days before I installed my show in the Clean Space, I went down to Hoyt L. Sherman Studio Art Center to create a collage for the doorway. My collage has two parts. In the top section I cut out multiple house-like objects out of red and orange paper. These “houses” had crepe paper shooting out of their openings that both curled out in space and connected to other houses. All of the houses sat in areas of black and white paper.

Below the “houses” I cut out a series of objects that resembled penises and vaginas. I drew on these genitalia with colored pencil and graphite. I connected some of the genitalia with red and white crepe paper, similar to the “doorways” on the top section of my collage. (Figure 19)

I intended to create an entrance for my show that represented the images that
viewers would see inside. I ended up creating a collage that represents some of the central images that I have revisited since attending Lawrence University. The holes, vaginas and penis’s that intersect each other are on the border between inside and outside of the body. Switching the position of inside and outside has been central to my artwork during the past few years and is an apt entrance to my final show that summarizes my work.

On the back wall of the Clean Space I created an image of my thesis meeting. I made overlapping colored pencil and graphite drawings of Professors Laura Lisbon, Pheoris West and Malcolm Cochran juxtaposed to a drawing of me. Each of my committee members has text coming from their mouths complaining about my thesis project. There is a tall image of me in colored pencil and graphite above my committee that spews moans and groans from its mouth. I placed the painting I created in response to my first oral defense to the left of my committee and me. I intended these images to be an overblown, larger than life description of my oral defense. (Figure 20)

I placed one of artist and MFA art student Matt Keida’s pedestals and projector from the MFA Thesis show to the left of the image of my thesis committee. I projected a short section of my “Try Your Hand” performance of me playing jacks onto the wall. I placed this video clip on a short loop as a parody of Matt Keida’s films, which also repeated. (Figure 21)

To the left of the video clip of me playing jacks, I drew a series of picture frames with colored pencil and graphite. I drew these frames on the wall with my committee and me and around the Clean Space as my interpretation of MFA art student
Elizabeth Wilson’s installation that also incorporated picture frames. I used these frames as the end product of a performance that I began with my second oral review and continued throughout the show’s opening. For this performance I wore a set of consignment store foam breasts with three-foot tubes coming out of the nipples. I sucked crème filling from small glass jars from one of the tubes than spat it back out into another glass jar or onto the floor. Whenever someone asked me why I was wearing my breasts with tubes during my second oral review or during my opening I would recite the story behind my painting of me with breasts. During my story I redrew an image of me in profile with breasts in the picture frames around Zack and in the frames around the rest of the room.

My intention for this project was three fold. I wanted to recreate the painting that I made of me in profile during my senior year at Lawrence University by wearing the breasts with tubes. I also wanted to connect to some of my earlier work as a graduate student by using the crème filling from éclairs that I used in my “Tasty Treats” project to reference the sperm like material from that show.

My performance was also another instance where I reinterpreted the work of one of the artist’s from the MFA thesis show. MFA student Paula Gaetano Adi created a machine that pumped milk from a curtained off area into a bucket. Paula took the milk from one side of the machine and put in back in the machine from the other side. I used my own lowbrow materials (fake breasts, crème filling and plastic tubing) to remake her performance as easily as possible. (Figure 22)
Whenever someone asked me why I was wearing my breasts with tubes during my second oral review or during my opening I would recite the story behind my painting of me with breasts. During my story I redrew an image of me in profile with breasts in the picture frames around the room. My committee as well as visitors to my show were enthusiastic all aspects of my show. People felt that this show was represented the variety of materials and art making techniques that I used during the last two years at graduate school. My committee in particular felt that “Sucks Orally” represented the ways I actually create art in my studio, by alternating from drawing to painting to video to performance, generally finding which images worked best next to each other.
where am I now?

I consider “Try Your Hand” and “Sucks Orally” as one complete show. In “Try Your Hand”, I worked with four friends to create a performance. I got to know each of these four people better, their little kinks and loves during this process. I also found out how difficult it is to create a performance that not only functions but is also compelling. “Try Your Hands” was successful as far as we performed our actions during the MFA show opening, but making every one of these actions interesting and consistent proved difficult.

In “Sucks Orally” I used my understanding of the range of people and events I experienced before, during and after performing “Try Your Hand” as the material for my show. Writing my thesis paper allowed me see the connections between my work over last past two years, prompting me to create a performance alongside the rest of my installation in the Clean Space.

Some time after performing “Try Your Hand” in the MFA thesis show, I had a conversation with by brother Ted about my performance. Ted told me that he had looked online for some way of defining the work I created. He told me that he thought that “relational art”; a set of practices that use the entire human experience and relationships as its basis, most closely defines my work.

Writing this thesis has shown me that I do make work that is increasingly about
human interaction and less about creating something for people to look at. However, I also enjoy making objects, especially to use as a medium to connect to other people. I do not know what will happen to my art after leaving graduate school. I however, am fine to define my current practice with the following quote from The College of Fine Arts at UNM article about relational art. In my work I prefer to, “…respond or relate, the “art” lies in wait to say: “Happy to meet you, I’ve been waiting for you.”(Loften)
References


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