

## ABSTRACT

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There are two reasons I intentionally waited, for several years, before entering into an MFA program. The first being I wanted to prove to myself that I would continue being a serious artist while balancing the daily routines of job and family. I also wanted to wait until I felt as if I was making work that was completely my own voice and no longer saw influence from my undergraduate education. I was able to exhibit frequently and started to get positive reviews from different critics. At this point I recognized that I had been working seriously and that the work was my own; therefore entering an MFA program would challenge those ideas. I thought once I entered Maryland that I would be leaving a different artist. However, it is more accurate to say that I am leaving a more mature artist and have accelerated an exploration that I already began. The past two years allowed me the time and criticism to delve deeper into existing ideas. This led to a clearer understanding of specific aspects of my creative process and in turn allowed me to explore new avenues of self expression. Ultimately, this course of study informed my existing language and forced my work to a more poignant and powerful level. The value of this experience was to arrive at certain points of clarity, and through this insight,

positive changes, in my work, felt natural and informed. This component discusses these points of clarity, how they led to informed changes, within my work, and the attendant struggles inherent in the process.

MASTERS THESIS

By

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## **Chapter 1: Introduction**

There are two reasons I intentionally waited, for several years, before entering into an MFA program. The first being I wanted to prove to myself that I would continue being a serious artist while balancing the daily routines of job and family. I also wanted to wait until I felt as if I was making work that was completely my own voice and no longer saw influence from my undergraduate education. I was able to exhibit frequently and started to get positive reviews from different critics. At this point I recognized that I had been working seriously and that the work was my own; therefore entering an MFA program would challenge those ideas. I thought once I entered Maryland that I would be leaving a different artist. However, it is more accurate to say that I am leaving a more mature artist and have accelerated an exploration that I already began. The past two years allowed me the time and criticism to delve deeper into existing ideas. This led to a clearer understanding of specific aspects of my creative process and in turn allowed me to explore new avenues of self-expression. Ultimately, this course of study informed my existing language and forced my work to a more poignant and powerful level. The value of this experience was to arrive at certain points of clarity, and through this insight, positive changes, in my work, felt natural and informed. This component discusses these points of clarity, how they led to informed changes, within my work, and the attendant struggles inherent in the process.

## Chapter 2: Material

One of the most significant critiques that I experienced, while in the program, occurred with the visiting artist Billie Lynn Grace. She was one of the first people to point to performance as an obvious avenue for my work. She made several suggestions about documenting my activity in the studio. In retrospect, I fully understand that she was trying to get me to do performance pieces and without realizing it. I began documenting with video tape without witnesses. Spectators, at this point, would have felt invasive and forced. Billie also criticized my choice of materials. She pointed out that I was locked in a tradition of material that was denying the power of my ideas. This suggestion allowed me to radically alter my relationship to material. Up to that point I used found materials and I attempted to inject them with meaning. Billy's suggestion allowed for an emphasis on how the work was being made, i.e., the activity involved. It is logical to use materials that reinforce the narrative and logistics of the activity.

This was my first use of cosmetics and typically female domestic objects. Perceiving material, in a new way, frees me to see all domestic objects for their inherent expressive purpose. I used to walk through the woods and dumpsters looking for material. Now I spend time in grocery stores, dollar stores and Walmarts. My choice of material, that references domestic life is in one way more obvious. But at the same time it is much more inventive. The material reference and action of each piece adds a level of specificity that makes the work more poignant. In a sense, I was able to free myself from the control of material and began to command it by making choices that reference my specific view point. I continue with this approach,

to material, to this point. In addition, I was not capable of exploring performance immediately. I understood the logic of the suggestion, but I did not understand the language of performance. Therefore, I could not conceive of a performance of any integrity. I began exploring artists such as Vito Acconci, Ana Mendieta, Judy Chang, Chris Burden and the Feminist Movement. Within this research I discovered a “performance” lexis important to my work. That eventually evolved into actual performances. The most direct appropriation is the act of kissing discovered in my research of Vito Acconci. Also within my research, is the discovery of the inherent connection between performance and excess. The medium has a history of pieces that required punishing physical and psychological activity in order to create the piece. Chris Burden being the prime example, in pieces such as being shot and crucified on a Volkswagen car. In recent years my work has derived from personal experience and psychological turmoil. In addition, the activity in my studio was more important than the objects it was producing. The residue of a night's work was more expressive of my psyche than any of the so-called “art.” Unfortunately, I lacked the confidence to just leave the residue and claim it as my work. Instead, I would incorporate more finished looking objects with the evidence of activity and my work was overcrowded and complicated. It was difficult to decipher what my intentions were and the point of the work. However, I received strong positive and negative reactions to this work. Especially since the faculty that I respect had positive reactions, I was excited by such opposing views. I felt I was pulling something out of myself that was powerful and individual.

### **Chapter 3: Struggle and Input**

In the summer I wanted to continue with the momentum I had felt and the clarity I had discovered. However, I became too cerebral for most of the work generated and this made the work less interesting. I attempted to provoke the audience and make social commentary, the work became less authentic. At the end of the summer I did create one of the most successful pieces made since being in the program. It is titled "I caught myself a good swimmer." It was the only piece I did that truly oriented around an activity, and the rest of the piece evolved out of that moment. The "performance" part of the work was me swimming in white paint, mimicking the motions of a sperm. I also swam in blue paint mimicking the motions of competitive swimming strokes. This piece spoke to the concept of sex and violence. After completing the "swimming"

I tried to follow the logic of the piece and made many modifications. I eventually used men and women's underwear, clothes pins, rope, swimming trophies and nets. These elements were strung through the space and completed an installation.

Although I worked hard to resolve this piece, I was somehow able to remain playful and fresh in my choices. I then began to struggle. In my third semester most of the work was overdone or over thought. I again found myself being too cerebral and not playful enough. In addition I could not let go of installation. I created several ambitious pieces that went undocumented. I inordinately pressured myself and could not keep my hands off the materials. I resorted to my old relationship to materials, trying to inject meaning into things that happened to be in my studio. The poignancy

was lost. I ultimately diluted my thoughts by relying again on inappropriate materials. This was the result of my inherent impatience. However, in my sincere desire to perform I felt physical productivity was necessary. At that time, perhaps I should have stood back and allowed my thoughts to evolve. I began to look for suggestions as and became overwhelmed with responses. I lost touch with my own voice even further. This was a necessary and great learning experience. It is fortuitous that at this time Petah Coyne arrived as a visiting artist. In her lecture and within my critique, she talked at length about finding your own voice and thoughts. Through her words and my current struggle I lost clarity and realized there was a problem. Until this point it was more obvious as to how I should be directed as a student. But now I had begun a direction that could go infinite directions. I alone have to commit to the work and follow it through. Moreover, stand by it, if it is to mean anything. The ideas at that time were not that interesting, but out of fear I would not let them go or slow down to evaluate them. I was now uncomfortable with my work in the negative sense, I was forcing it rather than playing with it. I was involved with the work physically but not psychologically. Instead of reinventing an initial idea, I just kept engaging iterations of ideas that were already dead. The night before my semester review I decided I was going to do one more piece. I was not confident in the work I planned on presenting. I cooked three hundred grilled cheese sandwiches and left all of its evidence. I accentuated it with a picnic blanket, green astro-turf and painted my studio sky blue. I held this in my head for weeks but continually ignored it. I finally worked through the other pieces enough that I could allow myself to proceed. The response was overwhelmingly positive. This piece was

highly inventive and articulate but at the same time universal in its meaning. It was one of the few pieces that unified, material, activity and experience in a poetic visual expression. This was also the most focused piece produced in a long time. Although technically an installation, it was a mature step in the development of my work. I used only the necessary elements and they were not spread around the entire space. They were isolated and specific, even down to the type of bread (in Red, White and Blue packaging). In addition, I began to feel confident in letting an idea evolve in my head without killing it. Instead of being too organic in my thought process, I learned to be specific and eliminate unnecessary aspects. This has carried over into my thesis semester where I have spent large amounts of time researching and experimenting on smaller scales. Making small, informal, pieces allows me to process ideas appropriately, without making commitments to large scale works. Through writing, experimentation and some drawing I now decide upon necessary and called for structure. Then improvise allowing for informed spontaneity.

## Chapter 4: Performance

At the beginning of my thesis semester I staged my first performance piece in a public gallery. It was a liberating experience. I began to understand my language within the medium of performance. As mentioned earlier, there is an inherent connection between performance and excess. The medium lends itself to physical and psychological extremes. My creative voice lies within expressing psychological turmoil by means of physical action. A poetry exists in this relationship and I am interested in its creative possibilities. This requires a process of constant editing. The editing starts from my initial impulse for an expressive action. Generally I do not physically act upon my initial impulses for several weeks. During this time I will question my intentions and why I feel it must be staged. (When I could execute it in private and leave its residue.) Also, during this time the piece begins to push towards a natural extreme. For example, the amount of times I do something will multiply, like cooking 300 sandwiches as opposed to one; or the initial idea for an action may be replaced with one that is more intense, like branding my skin as opposed to having it tattooed. If I am still interested in an idea after this mental editing, I will film a raw version of the performance. Writing a script can also function in the same manner if the performance can only be done once. I then watch the video (or read the script) many times. This helps me to evolve ideas into a structured performance. This process also helps me to edit further. Documenting the raw performances allows me to experience both the performance and the left over residue individually. This is my best editing tool and gives me the most objective perception.

I have no doubt that the medium of performance holds the most creative possibilities for my work right now. I have come to a philosophical understanding of its language. There is an integrity to performance that must be present in any successful work. The performer can not be self-conscious or doubt any aspect of the work. If that skepticism exists it will infect a performance and cause it to be read as theater or public spectacle. Performance work demands that every aspect be considered giving the work a context. At the same time this context is familiar to viewers because they are watching, but at the same time the language is very abstract. In a sense keeping the viewers one step removed from the heart of the work. The autobiographical nature of my work demands an objectification or the poignancy of my experience is diluted. The subject of my work is based upon domestic life, it's external appearance and internal psyche. The activity of my work is generated from generic domestic life but instilled with obsessive doubt and pain. There is an absurdity that masks and reveals the truth of my experience. My performance work has best expressed that absurdity and torment.

