

1,2,3,4
An Exhibition of Performances

by

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of Master of Fine Arts
in
Studio Art

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Author's Declaration

I hereby declare that I am the sole author of this thesis. This is a true copy of the thesis, including any required final revisions, as accepted by my examiners.

I understand that my thesis may be made electronically available to the public.

Abstract

My thesis exhibition, *1,2,3,4*, consists of four performances: *Announce It!*, *A Second Hand Emotion*, *Slow Change* and *Portrait-Self-Portrait*. The performances will take place on scheduled days at the University of Waterloo Art Gallery throughout the duration of the exhibition. *1,2,3,4* is also a multidisciplinary project, as each performance produces leftovers that will remain installed in the gallery. In addition, the title, *1,2,3,4*, references the counting and chanting used in various sporting practice sessions. The installation evolved through the use of remnants of the props, materials and detritus from each performance. The act of preserving the leftovers of each performance serves as both a reminder of each action, as well as a form of documentation. I invite the audience to become witness to, and in some cases also actively participate in my performances. I ask audience members to be a witness to a juxtaposition of empowerment and vulnerabilities within the framework of how I use my body as a tool to produce works. I think of my performances as empowering, comedic, and, at times even tragic. Although these acts are intensely personal, they are open enough to allow witnesses to bring their own experiences to the performances.

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Show & Tell

I began my Master of Fine Arts degree as a painter, quickly realizing that the confines of a canvas were too restrictive for the work I wanted to produce. Performance is a natural outcome of my aesthetic interests and life experiences. Throughout my youth, I participated in a number of activities that involved public exposure: synchronized swimming, stand-up comedy, improvisation, spoken word poetry, karaoke, and public speaking. I continue to challenge myself to engage in live performances despite major stage fright such as obvious trembling and trouble speaking, which are plainly evident when I stand before an audience. My need to perform emerged early on in my childhood through the frequent acting out of my imagination alone in my bedroom. At an early age I harnessed the power of make-believe to construct roles and characters, which I brought to life through elaborate costume designs. These roles, characters and costumes were used as a way for me to entertain myself, create storylines and demand attention. Although the ubiquitous nature of child's play is not seen as anything out of the norm for a child, similar behaviours re-enacted during adulthood become strange, and demand speculation and investigation. Through my performance I re-explore past struggles within the safety of the gallery, and suddenly the imaginary becomes my new reality. In the process of constructing this new reality I expose the intimate and vulnerable details of my life. The humour I employ is self-deprecating and empowering at the same time, as it encourages the audience to feel an array of emotions. I allow intimate parts of my life to become the object of judgment, while retaining control over my work as the artist. By employing the body as a vessel for my performances I invite judgment and attention to the portrayal of my emotions and experiences. However my performance also attracts attention and commentary on my physical appearance, opening up broader feminist discourses about society's obligations and expectations of women. I am a self-

declared fourth wave feminist who deploys humour, political views and autobiographical elements to reference the current state of feminist issues.¹



Figure 1. Tess Martens, *Grade 2*, École St-Renée Goupil, Guelph, 1993

¹Fourth wave feminism is defined by feminist scholar Prudence Chamberlain as advocating for justice for women and opposition to sexual harassment and violence against women. It is associated with social media that challenge misogyny and further gender equality. This includes the #MeToo movement against sexual harassment and assault triggered by sexual misconduct allegations by Harvey Weinstein.

Performance in the Studio

I mine past experiences through the examination of personal objects and histories. For example, *Announce It!*, was the result of an extensive personal investigation of saved journal entries and notes, as well as a concerted effort to exhibit my analysis of these remnants. I take the time to identify the most fitting means of conveying a cohesive concept. Even with possible materials and concepts in mind, this process can take weeks to months. My process is meticulous as every element is extensively thought through and workshopped. With *Announce It!*, I thought of several ways of interacting with the objects and because of the personal aspects of the work, I first thought of a church confessional booth as a form. After I have had time to consider these initial ideas, I try to turn them on their head and make them my own. In the case of *Announce it!*, this included using everyday cardboard packaging box and a paper shredder to go with the personal writings. My journal entries and notes can stand on their own because they have a strong presence and personal narrative. Given this, I decided to stay anonymous and hidden from the public to be present in my words only. All my performances are influenced by and emphasize my past and present experiences.

I write lists of materials, actions and ideas before collecting materials and mapping out ideas for performances. I converse my concepts with my committee until they are prepared to be workshopped in front of an audience and video camera. I choose my objects from personal possessions as well as from online used marketplaces; used objects can bring a history through obvious wear and tear or patina on the surface. My pages of personal writing, swimsuits, and painting material have a personal connection and a past. If I cannot find the objects, I purchase them and design them to serve the needs of my performance. For example, both items for *Announce It!* and *Portrait-Self-Portrait* were purchased. The cardboard box measurements were

custom made and I had to cut holes for the slit where the journal entries could be passed through and to accommodate the paper shredder. I also added blue ribbons and handmade red pompom to the artist costumes. I workshop the performances by staging the environment and practicing with the objects. For instance, in *A Second Hand Emotion*, I turn the ceiling lights off and rely on lights on the floor to illuminate the performance and create a karaoke atmosphere. The performances are pre-conceived yet there is an element of uncertainty and risk with the involvement of an audience as well as the struggle with endurance.

The process of workshopping allows my body to feel through the motions of the performances. It allows me to explore my objects in their entirety. My actions are a matter of trial and error. Through failure, I can discover what is working well and repeat a motion that is successful and genuine. For example, the mishaps that happen when I perform, in *A Second Hand Emotion*, when I adlib because I forgot the lyrics and in *Slow Change*, when I continue to perform even though my breast has fallen out of my swimsuit. I modify and adapt my performance based on the feedback of the audience. The final performances are surrounding my decisions made before, during and after the workshopping process. The more I perform, the more I revisit my past, the more it becomes a reality and present. I do not know until I do, in this case, perform.

Exhibition

Over the two week period of my thesis show, four different live performances are scheduled to take place in University of Waterloo Art Gallery. Each performance functions as an endurance piece and will last approximately two to three hours. In the time between each performance, when I am absent from the space, the props and materials that accumulate will hold the place of each previous performance, as a form of documentation.

In the first performance entitled *Announce It!*, the audience finds a large body-size cardboard box placed on the floor, with a slot cut into its upper side; at the bottom of the box, on the floor, is a paper shredder. Next to the large box is a white table, with a black speaker, and a number of sheets of paper of varying sizes and with hand-written text. Next to the paper is also a sign instructing the audience to choose a sheet of paper and pass it into the slot on the box. The piece develops as audience members choose from disordered, torn-out pages of my private journal entries and personal writings that are scattered on the table. Audience members, or at this point participants, pass their chosen text (paper) into the box where I am waiting inside, hidden from view, to receive and read the text through a loudspeaker. My presence is established as I read the text. Once I have finished reading from the journal entry, my presence is further emphasized through the use of the shredder. I pass each sheet of paper given to me to be sliced. The paper finally snakes out across the floor but is now made impossible to read. In the second performance, *A Second Hand Emotion*, I am transformed into a singer (or possibly a burlesque entertainer,) performing on a platform situated in the corner of the gallery. Ideally, the audience members fill the space around me. Over the course of three hours I will invite individuals to come up to the platform/stage where I will serenade them with some famous pop-songs from the 1980's-2000's. *Slow Change*, the third performance in the series, is the only performance that does not actively seek the participation of an audience member. In this work, I enact

a routine from my youth, in which I prepare for synchronized swimming competitions. I sit on the floor, holding a hand-mirror in order to do my hair and make-up, and then force my, now adult, body into several childhood synchronized swimming suits. I proceed to go through the motions of water practice drills that appear as a mixture of strange dance routines and sports exercises. The fourth and final performance is entitled *Portrait-Self Portrait*, and stems from a first grade activity - 'what do you want to be when you grow up?' My childhood self chose to dress up into stereotypical artist attire—a white smock with a bow and a black French beret with a red pompon. In this work I provide an almost identical artist costumes on a rack so that audience members can wear them, while I, now the artist painter, stand nude on a platform painting the portraits of my willing participants.

Announce It!

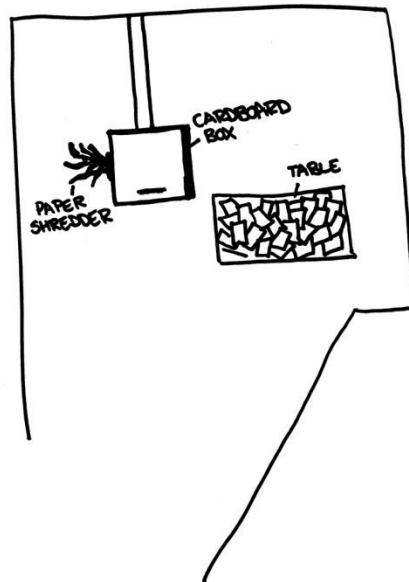


Figure 2. Tess Martens, *Diagram of Announce It!*, 2018

Announce It! unfolded as I rediscovered personal accounts and recordings of my daily life in the form of old journal entries and diary logs. My voice is amplified through a speaker as I read these depictions of my life which range from confessional to mundane. These once private confessions are made public as I read them from inside a cardboard box, where I am hidden from view. There is humour, not only in the absurdity of being hidden inside a cardboard box, but is also inherent in the writing itself; the awkwardness of reading through a speaker that is punctuated by the sound of the paper shredder. It is also tragic, as some journal entries were written during my stay at a mental health hospital in 2013; however, I encourage comedic release as I feed the shredder from my place inside the large cardboard box. As the performance progresses, the sound of the shredder, the ridiculousness of the paper pieces spewing out into an unreadable pile, until every last piece is obliterated, is what fuels the tension in the action. The sound also provides a comedic break and acts as a counterpoint to, at times, poignant and difficult journal entries. The audience members become witnesses to my

performances. It is important to note that I often use the word witness interchangeably with audience, in reference to Griselda Pollock who speaks about the aesthetic wit(h)nesses in live art:

Aesthetic wit(h)nessing fosters matrixial alliances that do not refer to sympathy or even empathy between fully formed human subjects, but indicates another level of the fragilization of parts of a partial self, opened by the aesthetic processes, to share in, to carry something of, to be a transsubjective partner in transformation, whatever the affective cost, for the trauma and jouissance of the Other. (Pollock, 14)

The audience members are therefore often placed into a position of “*wit(h)nesses*” to my performances because they are experiencing it *with* me, the performer, that results in both present re-living of mine and their own experiences. Because the art is live, the witnesses are also seen as members of the public, and in this way as Tami Spry states “I” becomes “we” and “the personal becomes political” (Spry, 52-53). In other words, the witness not only views the performance, but also becomes intimately involved with me, the performer except in the performance, *Announce it!*. Thus, the audience is ‘with me’. Judith Butler also states that there is no “I” that can stand apart from the social conditions of the performer’s emergence (Spry, 61); therefore, the audience activates the performance, and it subsequently becomes a social act. Through performance that invites participation, I am placing my audience into a situation in which they have the power to influence its outcome and the atmosphere. For example, if no one feeds a page through the box opening to be read and then shredded, my isolation in the cardboard box is emphasized. As a performer, I try to laugh at myself while revealing my deepest, darkest secrets. This laughter comes from a place of acceptance and love rather than one from self-anger and fear (Barreca, 67). Inherent in *Announce It!* (and other performances), therefore, are acts that are simultaneously comedic and confessional. Within performance art, comedy is often used to express female experience and disseminate the pain of it (Barreca, 1991). Within the selected writings I provide from my personal journals, many are upsetting, but at the same time there are dark humorous undertones that allow a viewer to connect their own

experience to my own. In the catalogue to the exhibition *Bad Girls*, curator Marcia Tucker describes humour as “an exercise in mutual experience and empathy; when you laugh, it means that you’ve understood or “gotten” the joke, that you’ve been able to see a new set of relationships in a given situation” (Tucker, 24). I attempt to give the audience a new perspective on various personal issues by offering them a space in which they will feel both discomfort as well as permission to emotionally open up to the feminist and other narratives that I deal with.

Announce It! makes reference to American feminist performance artist, Carolee Schneeman’s use of her nude body, journaling and autobiography. I use similar methodologies to Schneeman as we both use feminist writing. For example, her piece, *Interior Scroll*, she read a scroll that she pulled from her vagina. She climbed onto a long table and read the text while assuming a series of life-model poses, balancing a book, slowly extracted a scroll from her vagina and reads the inscription on it, which were taken from a text she had written for a previous work— all of her actions referred to the female body as framed by the particular social and/or discursive context. (Schneeman & McPherson, 235) Schneemann’s body is blatantly exposed, however, in my case, I am covered by a cardboard box at first and slowly move towards fully exposing myself. In my fourth performance *Portrait-Self-Portrait*, I also comment on the role in the position of the artist and a life-model which is similar to Schneemann’s performance. My performances are therefore evidently feminist but diverge from Schneeman in my overt use humour that is balanced with painful and difficult aspects of my life.

Barecca discusses humour used by a woman:

Whether you choose to call it feminist humor or feminine humor, or “just” humor, if you’re a woman, then you’re making a woman’s joke, laughing a woman’s laugh. I would say that nearly all women’s humor is in some way feminist humor (with the exception of those early, self-deprecating “I’m so ugly...” jokes associated with the very earliest comedians). I’d say that women’s humor is almost by definition feminist because, in the same way that we can’t help but speak as women, we can’t help but be funny as women. We’re inevitably informed by our gender. (Barreca, 182)

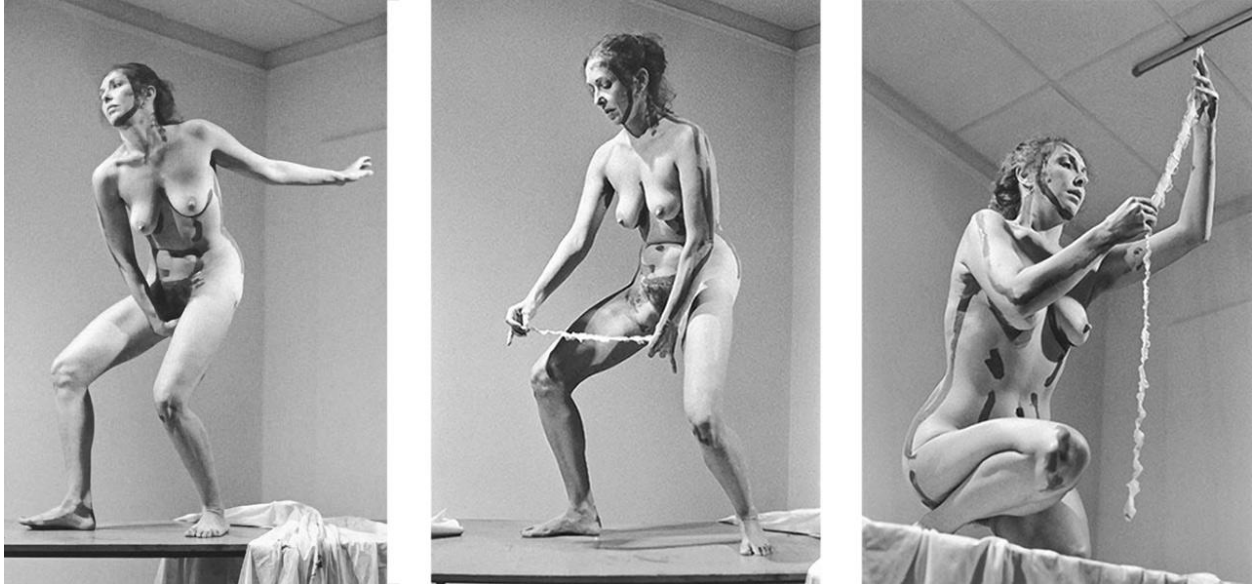


Figure 3: *Interior Scroll*, Carolee Schneeman, 1975

The humour in my performances is innately feminist, as I read my writing about female experiences, sexual encounters, as well as, advocating for myself as a woman with a mental health diagnosis. Using humour, my performances test my emotional and physical limits as well as disrupt the audience's comfort levels. I purposefully employ the character of the 'bad girl,' of an agent provocateur who does not leave any stone unturned. According to Marcia Tucker, the figure of the 'bad girl' is a powerful feminist voice employing 'dialogical' mode of representation:

The dialogical voice is perfectly suited to the humourous and subversive tactics of bad girls, partly because it is impolite and aggressive, saying what cannot otherwise be articulated; making the private all too public is one of the humorist's greatest skills. In that sense, the dialogical voice is welcomed. But it's also the voice that tells the truth, that breaks taboos, and is most apt to be feared, "cured" or silenced. It's the voice of the ventriloquist's dummy, the uninhibited child, the court jester and the hysteric. (Tucker, 31)

Bad girl and New York City performance artist, Penny Arcade, stated the importance of humour in feminist work to simply tell the truth and not hold back. Arcade toured internationally in the 1990's and her show was a commentary on sexuality and censorship. It featured a chorus of amateur reverse strippers (Ventura, 4). I am not afraid to speak honesty through humour to unhinge taboos

surrounding being female. I cannot be silenced, even placed in a box and hidden from view. I make my voice heard and play the fool. I attempt to give the audience a way of seeing issues relating to women.

While I chose all the journal entries that have been selected, I have no idea what will be placed in the box, but nevertheless I have committed to reading it out loud. These pieces of myself are broadcast through a speaker that sits on the table beside the cardboard box. Every piece of writing is peeled away like an onion and sometimes it is very painful to revisit the past. “I explore common themes in performance art, such as exile, isolation, rejection, and restraint” (Ritter, 116). Yet, performing painful memories has a therapeutic effect. Like life, my performances demonstrate loss and healing, they are also autoethnographic (Spry, 20). As a result, writing and performing loss can bring hope and beauty (Spry, 22). Spry suggests, that, “if autoethnography is epistemic then the evidence of how we know must reside in the aesthetic crafting of critical reflexion upon the body as evidence” (Spry, 19). In *Announce It!*, my past is translated verbally but as the performances progress, each becomes less about verbal communication and more about my bodily dialogue and connection. My relationship with the audience begins with them connecting with me from solely reading my torn out pages on the table. It intensifies when I put a voice to the pages and project emotion through encountering my past again. It is an emotional release that travels from me in my personal space, to the gallery table, to the gallery visitors, to myself again and back to the gallery visitors. My story becomes a shared experience. I announce my painful memories in an honest act. There is a brief and genuine dialogue that occurs between me and the audience but it is ephemeral as pieces of my past are destroyed through the shredder. Each experience is unique and in a sense, I am daring the audience to accept me for who I am while I dictate my personal journal notes. At the same, time introducing humour, as each revelation is punctuated by the sound of a shredder. Feminist theorist, Hilary Robinson articulates this relation between female author and written word as, “I am a woman. I write

with who I am” (Robinson, 44). I write about the struggles as a female, intimate encounters with male and my female friendships. I see myself as a loud, opinionated woman. According to Barreca, I am a “bad girl” not a “good girl”:

Good Girls didn’t make trouble for anybody. They did what they were told, whether that was keeping their rooms clean, watching tv while they baby-sat on Saturday nights, or buying all the current Cover Girl merchandise. They never questioned why women weren’t allowed to be priests or rabbis, always handed homework on time, and did not draw attention to themselves or their ideas. (Barreca, 4)

Announce It! allows me to boldly share my journal entries and notes. These pieces of writing are revealing and I share them unapologetically. As the writing suggests, growing up, I rebelled against authority. I did the opposite of what I was told. My room was, and still is a mess. I wreaked havoc in public on Saturday nights. I did not wear makeup on a regular basis. I was a “bad girl” and proud of it! “Bad Girls” in art challenge the status quo as Tanya Mars argues (Mars, 27). The term, “bad girls” has gained a positive connotation as a term of affection used in music (i.e. 1990’s rap group TLC, the first CD I bought as a child) and entertainment (i.e. Bette Midler and Madonna) as well as art (Tucker, 4). Marcia Tucker, describes “bad girls” as, “[female performers] who challenge audiences to see women as they have been, as they are, and as they want to be” (5). As I perform, I am only a persona of my past and present self and it is sincere, sincere and genuine. I am exposed as my past self, present self and the self I want to continue to be. Tucker continues:

In the visual arts, increasing numbers of women artists, photographers, cartoonists, performers, video and filmmakers are defying the conventions and properties of traditional femininity to define themselves according to their own terms, their own pleasures, their own interests, in their own way. But they’re doing it by using delicious and outrageous sense of humor to make sure not only that everyone gets it, but really give it to them as well. That’s what we mean by “bad girls. (5)

I am a performer who is not afraid to define myself, 'my way' with humour. Barreca explains the link between a girl who takes risks (i.e. the "Bad Girl") and the importance of making jokes as a woman:

The woman who is unable either to joke or to appreciate a joke is a woman who has not learned to trust herself. The woman who presents herself as humorless also appears to be unwilling to take risks, assert herself, or initiate change. For a woman to be afraid of risk, self-assertion, or change translates, in professional terms, to a woman who is afraid of, or at least unwilling to pursue, success. (Barreca, 125)

At this stage of my life, I am able to look back and reflect and invite the public in through accepting, confrontation, and destruction so that I can let go of the past and move forward. By enacting and using my experience in performance such as *Announce It!* I point to both false, warped claims of 'goodness,' as well as artificial social constructs around moral failings ascribed to women who do not fit the patriarchal/societal models. In doing so I attempt to challenge the status quo of problematic existing notions of how women are viewed in a negative sexualized context in society and politics where they are discouraged to take ownership of their body and sexuality. I practice challenging this status quo by bravely, boldly and unapologetically expressing my sexual experiences to the public. According to performance artist, Colette Urban states "the bad girl refuses to be quiet, tidy, pretty, or nice" (Mars, 40). Urban focus was on consumer culture and the everyday with a disarming and humorous tone (Fischer, 406). I am interested in links between barriers, and humour. Through, enacting my performance, *Announce It!*, I hope to trust and understand myself better and initiate change.



Figure 4. Tess Martens, *Cardboard box and paper shreds of Announce It!*, 2018

A Second Hand Emotion



Figure 5. Tess Martens, *Diagram of A Second Hand Emotion*, 2018

The title, *A Second Hand Emotion* is taken from the lyrics of Tina Turner's iconic song *What's Love Got to do with It?* It is my go-to song at karaoke. That Tina Turner song and my other chosen songs come from my childhood, (from the 90's and 2000's) and I sing them in a really poor, amateur way. I use exaggerated dance moves and stumble with my words, adlibbing when there is an instrumental break, or when I forget the lyrics.

I challenge notions of society's standards that women cannot be sexual and also respectable. I wear a black velvet power pantsuit and I wear nipple tassels. My black sequined, velvet and fringed jacket, exposes my cleavage and my breasts. I wear black velvet tights and five inch high velvet heels.

In this performance, I not only assert my sexuality - I flaunt it. As previously discussed, I use feminist humour to bring the public together. In the conclusion to Barrecca's critiques of the book, *The Search for Signs of Intelligent Life in the Universe* by Jane Wagner, which is an

adaptation of one-woman stage show, “When women laugh together—like the hooker, socialite, and bag lady at the end of *The Search for Signs of Intelligent Life in the Universe*—we recognize our similarities instead of focusing on our differences.” (Barreca, 187) This example illustrates that humour persuades people to become closer, despite economical backgrounds, because people share similar comedic dialogues. A common understanding of my humour in *Announce It!* can assist in accepting my difficult subject matters.



Figure 6: The Feminist poster from *The Search for Signs of Intelligent Life in the Universe*

I impersonate my childhood idols through karaoke in *and as* Barreca discusses, taking a risk with the use of humour:

Humor is a show of both strength and vulnerability—you are willing to make the first move but you are trusting in the response of your listener. Making a generously funny comment, pointing to the absurdity of a situation, turning embarrassment or unease into something shared instead of repressed is risky, but it is also often exactly what is needed (Barreca, 201).

In *A Second Hand Emotion* and *Slow Change*, I relate to Dragu and Harrison’s definition of a Burlesque Queen: “This type fulfills everyone’s idea of a classic, old-time stripper. She

possesses trunk loads of vaudeville-style costumes replete with sequins, ostrich plumes, maribu trims, and rhinestone-studded chiffon” (Dragu & Harrison, 24). Dragu is a Canadian dancer, writer, performance artist and feminist (Dragu & Harrison, 1). I wear somewhat outrageous costumes in my performances including sequined a black velvet pantsuit and glittery swimsuits, I am often referencing sexuality, striptease, and burlesque, although more so *in A Second Hand Emotion* than in *Slow Change*.

I sing karaoke for leisure and play but it also evolves into pathos as I am left, often, on the stage alone with no one to sing to or with. I rely on witnesses to participate and when they do it can lift the performance from one of extreme discomfort and isolation to one of humour and fun. This is an important aspect of my work, that balance between humor/tragedy; sad/happy; play/work. Tucker discusses the significance of play:

But “mere” play is also a form of entertainment, so that the symbolic inversions of the powerful and the powerless, male and female, old and young, rich and poor, or “high” and “low” provide a pleasurable, relatively inexpensive tasting menu of potential social change. (Tucker 29)

My thesis explores aspects of being a woman through not only body image or to be provocative by not being afraid to be naked - both physically and emotionally but to attempt to challenge and make visible societal taboos.



Figure 7. Tess Martens, *A Second Hand Emotion*, Performance documentation, 2018

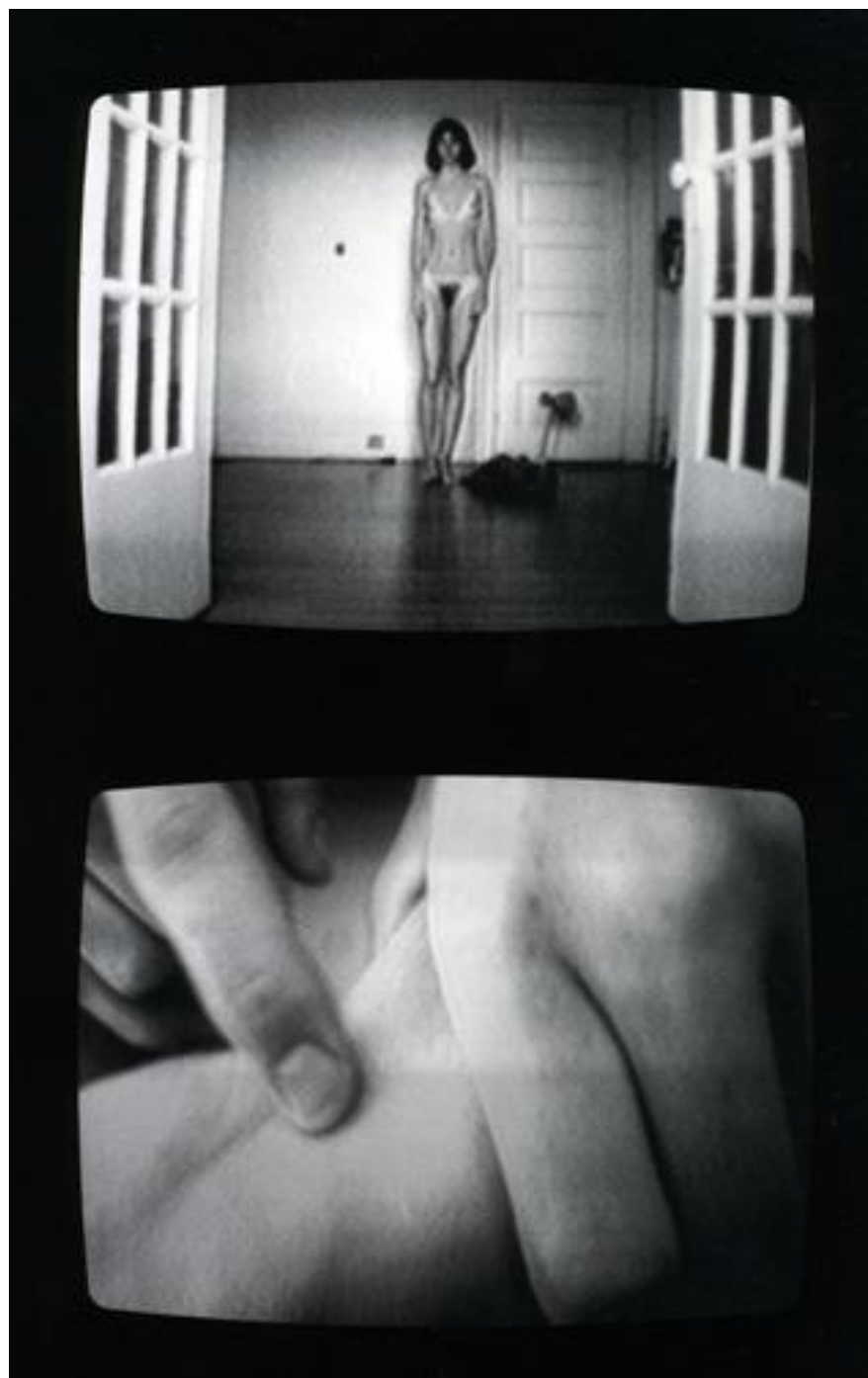


Figure 8. Lisa Steeles, *Still from Birthday Suit with Scars and Defects*, video still, 1974

Slow Change

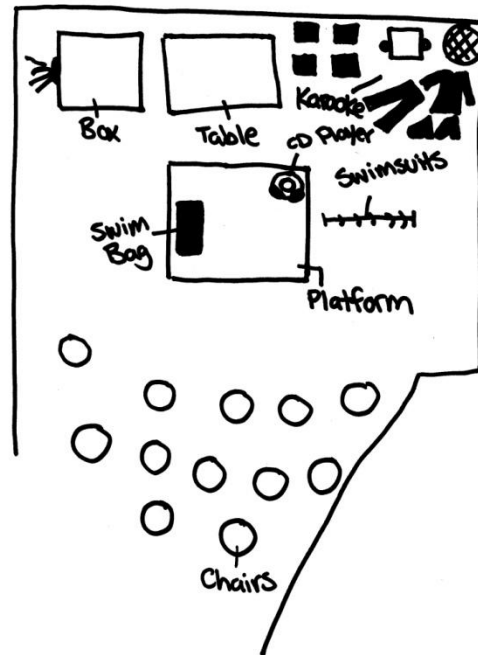


Figure 9. Tess Martens, *Diagram of Slow Change*, 2018

In *Slow Change*, I use slapstick as a strategy; as I attempt to put on synchronized swimming costumes from my youth (8-16 years old) that I have now outgrown, slapstick and discomfort have become my tools of choice from my performer's trunk. Similar, to *Announce It!* I use personal memories, but in this work I return to my athletic past. Over the years, I have become removed from the sport of synchronized swimming which had played a significant part of my life. This becomes painfully obvious as I attempt to improvise the routines, out of water and to the childish music that matches the theme of each suit I wear. I count out loud from one to eight repetitively over the music which is absurd, disruptive and uncomfortable. I chose to title my thesis exhibition, *1,2,3,4*, as it directly relates to the counting one uses in dance and sport as well as the specific number of performances that comprise my thesis. It is funny that I am in

swimsuits but out of the water the whole time. As I perform synchronized swimming routines through hours of repetition, I start to ruminate and reminisce about my experience as a swimmer that was both rewarding and challenging. I strip off my street clothes and put on embellished swimsuits that are pink, blue, purple velour, yellow with a black vine appliqué, and a blue one that is complete with a silver, sequined whale embroidered on the front. They are feminine and cute swimsuits that are also revealing as they do not fit properly and can be compared to women's lingerie. I put on exaggerated makeup as though it can be viewed from the pool bleachers. This aspect of many female sports hypersexualizes the child, exaggerating facial features, it is grotesque and not related to being an athlete. During *Slow Change*, my overtly sexualized and strained movements are sometimes disconcerting to the audience due to my current age. I do not make eye contact with the witnesses as this allows them to become voyeurs and heightens their discomfort as they are watching an adult woman, in garish makeup whose body is decidedly womanly and cannot be contained within the swimsuits I am wearing. Maud Lavin the author of *Push Comes to Shove*, describes the "pretty girl" of sports:

When I began the research for this book, I was most drawn to the "pretty girl" athlete movies about noncontact sports, which comprise the majority of today's mainstream women and sports movies-- the ones where public performances of feminine athleticism like cheerleading and gymnastics partially mask prowess and competency with smiles and rigid adherence to long standing social mores. (Lavin, 12)



Figure 10. 1950's Cheerleading

Similar to cheerleading and gymnastics, synchronized swimming involves disingenuous smiles, makeup, and sequined swimsuits that in fact hide the strength and endurance that is required for the sport. As a child synchronized swimmer, my athleticism was hidden behind social constructs of femininity, and media's false idea of "Girl Power." I question these ideas in *Slow Change*. The suits straps are too tight and the swimsuits are top constricting as my breast falls out during one of my routine, yet, I continue the routine without attempting to cover up or adjust anything. I am also physically and emotionally exacerbated throughout the duration of the performances and I appear out of place, awkward and uncomfortable. I continually question, "is it uncomfortable for me or the audience?" I attempt to control the atmosphere of the gallery through my obvious discomfort and emotional investment in the performance.

The swimsuit tops simultaneously constrict and reveal my body, as my breast breaks free of an outfit intended for a child. Despite these wardrobe malfunctions, I continue the routine without attempting to cover up or adjust anything. Female sport outfits are not made to be practical, instead they accentuate the female figure and emphasize femininity for viewing

pleasure of the audience. In my performance, I do the opposite. But I also cheerfully press on with the performance as I must smile and continue the routine to its ultimate conclusion. It is called synchronized swimming for a reason, but I am not synchronized with a team, as I do routines alone. I view this work as being similar to a series of clowns fitting inside a tiny car. The figure of a clown emphasizes failure. Through improvisation and repetition of performances, failure comes innately.

Performance artist, Sylvette Babin, is a clown, as she involves the theatrical practices of clowning, burlesque and slapstick which highlight the absurd (118). Babin used strategies and devices built around the body and absurd situations (118). *Slow Change* invites the audience to witness my past but they are not invited to participate. Some aspects of the performance reference Lisa Steele's *Birthday Suit with Defects and Scar*. In that both exposed a personal history; however my work must exist solely as a performance and not a performance to camera. My work emphasizes a personal connection that cannot be mediated by the distancing of documentation or performance to camera. Autoethnography plays a significant role in all of my performances as they are with me as I perform.



Figure 11. Tess Martens, *Swimsuits from Slow Change*, 2018



Figure 12. *Unknown Burlesque Dancer*, photograph

Portrait-Self-Portrait

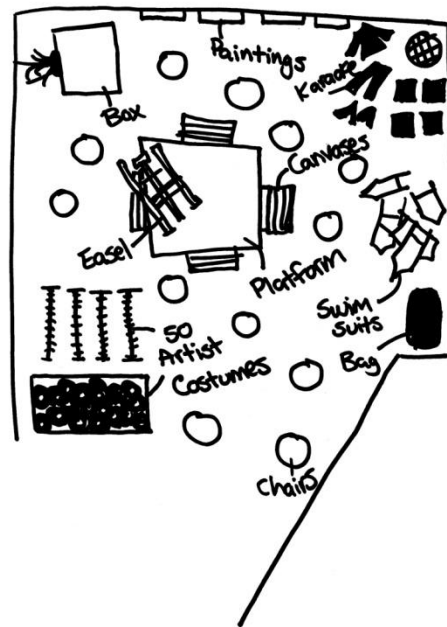


Figure 13. Tess Martens, *Diagram of Portrait-Self-Portrait*, 2018

In *Portrait-Self-Portrait*, I am on a platform with an easel and a traditional palette used for oil painting; I paint portraits, however, I am in the nude. When the public enters the space they have the option to put on a smock and a beret, thus initiating their participation in my piece. The inspiration for the artist costume stems from a childhood photograph of myself where I am dressed up as an artist. There are fifty smocks, fifty berets and fifty canvases. There is no guarantee that by putting on the costume you will get your portrait painted; I will attempt to paint as many people as possible for however long it takes, if they are willing to be patient. As this performance will unfold and I can foresee several outcomes; one can be audience members lining up to put on a costume and to get painted or one gets painted and the others only become voyeurs. This all comes down to an audience member's willingness to participate. Ideally, in their costumes, the audience surrounds and observes me. There is humour in the role reversal,

where the usually objectified female nude becomes the one in control, the one holding the brush.

In the book, *Bad Girls*, Tucker speaks about the role reversal:

A familiar kind of symbolic inversion is that of the role reversal, a tool of a particular strand of feminist theory, as well as of women's stand-up comedy. Role reversal in has come to be called "cultural feminism" takes qualities such as intuition, spirituality and nurturance to be uniquely female and superior, leading to the establishment of a counter canon in which the formerly repressed or neglected work of women writers, artists, musicians, and so on, can be recuperated and supported. (Tucker, 28-29)

Barreca states that, "women who use humor are women who use power" (Mars, 20) In *Portrait-Self-Portrait*, I paint caricature of the audience (which is inherently comedic) and reverses the standard power relationship between the subject and the object. Women have a strong sense of control when they make others laugh. Gilda Radner states that she was so afraid of appearing like a fool; she was determined to "play" the fool to keep a level of control (Barreca, 27). I am not afraid to play the fool in *Portrait-Self-Portrait*, the fool can have the control. I am not trying to complete the portraits rather it is the initial mark, interaction and action which are significant. It is implied that once I step off the platform and nail canvas on the wall, that particular interaction has ended and it is in my control. There is more to solely addressing issues in performance.

While I do believe that naming was a useful step to address feminist issues, I see it as just that, a first step. I would argue that the ability to laugh at something allows you to finally demonstrate your control over it." (Mars, 22)

The intention for my performances, as a female, is feminist. I point out the male gaze of Western art history. Men were traditionally the painters and women were the nude models. Additionally, women were not allowed into the academy because they were not allowed to draw or paint the nude. I think that being nude is as much of a costume as any of the costumes I wear in my performances. As the act of stripping at a strip club, could not upstage the despotism of the male gaze (Dragu & Harrison, 83).

Margaret Dragu never completely enjoyed performing as a stripper because she could never control being subjected to the gaze (Dragu and Harrison, 83). I am aware of the controlling gaze in my performances and I attempt to challenge it with my performances through direct engagement and eye contact (Second Hand Emotion) or through avoiding eye contact (Slow Change). Both of these performances use the gaze as a means of controlling the emotional response and discomfort of the witnesses. I want them to feel my excessive need to connect in Second Hand Emotion as much as I want them to feel discomfort with viewing a child's/not child's body in Slow Change. The notion that the female body should not be displayed results in alienating women from our bodies and exhibiting disembodiment (Dragu & Harrison, 83). I am completely nude in *Portrait-Self-Portrait* and take ownership of my body but I do not directly engage with the subjects of my performances. I stare at them in order to make a likeness but not to connect on an emotional level. In this regard, my facial expression is neutral and analytical.

Dragu's work has shown me that flaunting my female body and sexuality gives me control and power over the gaze. I am confident and comfortable exhibiting my tall and curvy body full of tattoos, cellulite and stretch marks. Tucker addresses the grotesque body:

The grotesque body is frightening to most people. It stands in opposition to the ideal of the serene, closed, symmetrical and centered classical form sanctioned by high or official culture (particularly the fashion magazines). Actually, the grotesque body could hardly be said to "stand," since it's more apt to be all over the place, bulging, multiple, excessive, and constantly changing. The grotesque body, by virtue of its lack of stable boundaries, its ingestions and excretions, its openings and orifices, breaks the confines between the body and the world. It is engaged and interactive. And it is indisputably female. (Tucker, 32)

I reject the idea of advertising the ideal female body as I expose and highlight my imperfections and my natural body on a platform to celebrate being a woman. In the book, *Angry*

Women, Annie Sprinkle who was an exotic dancer, pornography film star and prostitute transitioned to performance art.

Since then Annie has performed all over the world as a “Post-Porn Modernist,” breaking taboos and pushing limits- in a number of shows she invited the audience to “demystify the female body” by inspecting her cervix with a speculum and flashlight. (Juno, 23)



Figure 14: *Public Cervix Announcement*, Annie Sprinkle, Documentation of Performance, 1992

I inevitably reference Annie Sprinkle’s cervix performance while putting my nude body up on a platform to be investigated by the audience members while I confront and challenge their gaze. My performances are similar to Sprinkle’s performances as we both involve a monologue (*Announce It!*), a one woman sexualized show (*A Second Hand Emotion*) and a play or interaction with the audience who are invited to participate and a sense of healing; all while providing our vision of New Age Sexuality which is defined as women shaping our society to grow sexually. (23) I have painted the platform that I stand on in the majority of my performances a matte white similar to a canvas and as the performance extends; the platform gets more marked by footprints and paint. In all four of my performances, my tragic past experiences are performed to the audience at my own comedic expense, but in performing them live I also

feel empowered. In all four of my performances, my tragic past experiences are performed to the audience at my own comedic expense, but in performing them live I also feel empowered.



Figure 15. Tess Martens, *Nude Model Pose for Portrait-Self-Portrait*, 2018

Conclusion

Although my thesis work uses humour, it also emphasizes vulnerability, control and pathos as I seek to establish strength and a deep understanding of my past struggles as a female performance artist. Through my body, I retell a tragic and comedic autoethnography. The origins of my interest in using performance art are informed by female performance artists such as, Louise Steinman and Margaret Dragu. My body becomes more revealed as I perform my endurance pieces, allowing for and encouraging the possibility of failure. I am exposed physically and emotionally to the audience which is the nature of performance. The red curtains never close. Instead, throughout my four performances, I get more and more naked through “costume” changes. I share my history with performing and now I perform my private history. Whether it be announcing my past journal entries and notes, singing nostalgic songs from my past, putting on my old synchronized swimming swimsuits or painting the audience dressed like me as a child artist. I am no longer a child at play, creating performances privately in my bedroom. As I stand on the 4x4 foot platform, I am a woman performing my past childhood experiences publicly through my MFA thesis exhibition, *1,2,3,4*.

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