The Spider, the Monster, the Mother, and the Homemaking Queen

By

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Abstract

This thesis essay is an account of an auto-ethnographic research about how personal identity is formed, performed and represented. Its structure is experimental and it uses various and overlapping discursive strategies to engage the reader. It is informed by affect, queer and feminist theory, especially the writings of Judith Jack Halberstam on failure. It also draws from conceptions of identity encountered in postcolonial theory, critical pedagogy, girl studies and fat studies. I look into my working method through an examination of material and immaterial works. Playful artistic gestures, improvisation and messy installations are envisioned as acts of casual rebellion, or transgressive ways of making that deliberately register my work outside of the mainstream. I introduce several recent projects and contextualize them by means of storytelling. I also address my interest in attraction and repulsion, personal history and hierarchies of value.

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Dedication

For Agathe

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Foreword

This thesis paper presents the results of two years of practice-based research that investigated aspects of personal identity through an autobiographical perspective. My research questions were the following: what narratives, images, affects and sensations contribute to shaping my sense of self? How do I enact the characters and the stories that I tell myself about myself on a daily basis? Why do I feel a gap between my own experience of femalehood and the representations of gender that are reflected back at me? By making, thinking and writing, I have recorded and analyzed my own experience of a transforming self, which enriched my understanding of how personal identity is formed, performed and represented. The body of work produced over the course of this process is heterogeneous. My practice shifted back and forth from material-based making to performative, ephemeral and furtive interventions. I used a great diversity of media, from traditional pastels, paints and inks to mouldy food and installations made of scavenged cardboard. At a glance, it seems that all of these projects have very little in common. The thread that links the work together is the autobiographical narrative from which they stem.

For the thesis paper to reflect that diversity, I used a variety of approaches to writing. The introduction is written in the third person, to create an exaggerated sense of distance from the subject. In contrast, the rest of the paper uses an informal and more personal tone, and is written in the first person. Writing an academic paper with an alternative approach is becoming more common, and a growing number of graduate students include graphic novel components in their thesis dissertation. For instance, Johanne Hui at Concordia University, or Nick Sousannis at Columbia University who wrote his entire doctoral dissertation as a graphic novel.

My research method starts with the improvisation of working situations, gathering materials found in the immediate environment and experimenting with ways of making, both familiar, or in which I'm skilled, (such as drawing or arranging) or not (cooking, knitting, taking pictures). Then, I retrospectively think about the outcome of that work session to see if it is relevant to my research, that is, if it provided new knowledge that could contribute to answering my research questions. This knowledge is intuitive, it presents itself mostly under the shape of narratives that it brings up, and affects that are attached to it. These narratives are then put on paper and connected with other ideas: readings, work of other artists, theories from other fields. Among these, I found the most kinship in what is known as queer affect studies. The writings of Sarah Ahmed, Lauren Berlant, Judith Jack Halberstam and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick opened new and critical ways of thinking that take into consideration personal experience and emotions. While I prefer Sedgwick's definition of affect as "the primary innate biological motivating mechanism, more urgent than drive deprivation

and pleasure, and more urgent than physical pain[1]", in the thesis essay this word is used in a broader sense, one that also encompasses *feelings* and *emotions*.

In the *Queer Art of Failure*, Halberstam writes: "Under certain circumstances failing, losing, forgetting, unmaking, undoing, unbecoming, not knowing may in fact offer more creative, more cooperative, more surprising ways of being in the world[2]." In this paper, I use the word failure to describe situations, behaviours and objects that don't fit or fulfill what they are expected to. They do not meet the expectations based on social standards, they miss the target. I especially relate to the notion of gender failure, described by Halberstam as a potent situation of ambiguity: "Where feminine success is always measured by male standards and gender failure often means being relieved of the pressure to measure up to patriarchal ideals, not succeeding at womanhood can offer unexpected pleasures[3]." Not succeeding at being defined by other people's expectations means that we have to define ourselves, and that project is both empowering and terrifying. After assessing my inability to perform my gender on society's terms, I can reinvent myself completely through my work. The projects presented in the thesis essay tell stories of failure: they are un-glorious, un-monumental, the antithesis of classical architecture — perishable, uneven, asymmetrical, small, delicate, fragile, and mutable. This character of impermanence is what makes them stir: they are reminiscent of human fragility, of the inevitability of change, decay, death.

The heterogeneous character of my practice comes from a few different factors, however the most relevant explanation comes from the fact that it is rooted in improvisation and experimentation. I find that using elements from the environment in which I work is a playful and fruitful constraint. When playing a game, we set a goal and find our way toward this goal by composing with constraints and by following rules. In my research-practice, my goal was to produce works that could be interpreted in a way that informs my thinking about identity, and especially about how I perceive and present myself, as a woman and as an artist. During the two years of my research, the constraints that I experienced were related to the lack of an organized structure to produce my work: the lack of time, the lack of space and the lack of immediate availability of specific materials. I experienced this absence of strict guidelines as an excess of freedom, and this absolute liberty drove my creative process and pushed me to come up with new works in an almost obsessive way. This way of making resulted in visually heterogeneous body of work, ranging from furtive interventions in the public space to domestic installations, food experiments and video-performances, as well as autobiographical comics. The making of the art is so much embedded in my daily life that it is has become infused with its complexity.

Introduction

This thesis essay examines the artistic practice of Valérie Tremblay Blouin. It investigates the gaps and bridges between her sense of self (personal identity or ipséité[4]) and the representations of that self. To articulate these two ideas, she conducts an auto-ethnographic research that consists of art making by means of trial, play and improvisation, as well as writing about that process and the personal memories it brings up. It is also an attempt at taking an inventory of what constitutes her personal identity: narratives, images, affects and sensations.

Autoethnography is a form of research that was first talked about in the 70s. It differs from autobiography in that "Autoethnography is an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze personal experience in order to understand cultural experience[5]." while an autobiography is a self-written account of someone's life. In the case of Tremblay Blouin, the research focuses on the experiences of gender identity formation by examining the mechanisms of transmission in a Québécois middle-class family with a strong Catholic past, as well as by assessing the embodied experience of maternity and the association with traditional femininity that it causes.

This essay itself is a self-representation: it is written in the first person and is autobiographical. It alternates between interior-monologue fragments that record and contextualize her artistic practice, and comics that showcase some of the narratives that are brought up in the process. However, it is not only a self-reflection: it is an imagined conversation, an attempt at reaching another like-minded being. Throughout the essay, the artist speaks to that imaginary reader using an informal and sometimes confessional voice, in order to convey a feeling of closeness and intimacy. This rather colloquial way of writing a thesis is unorthodox and is informed by queer theory and affect theory. Scholars Donna Haraway and Judith Jack Halberstam provide a theoretical framework that advocates subjectivity and affect as empowering tools to challenge hegemonic, discriminatory views in academia. The artist is especially indebted to Halberstam whose ideas of low theory and the silly archive allowed her to reference personal history and pop culture alongside literature and French philosophy. In *The Queer Art of Failure*, Halberstam describes low theory "… as a mode of accessibility, but we might also think about it as a kind of theoretical model that flies below the radar, that is assembled from eccentric texts and examples and that refuses to confirm the hierarchies of knowing that maintain the *high* in high theory.[6]" Tremblay Blouin's research material is drawn from personal experience and memories, from the narratives that were

passed on to her by family, from pop culture and social media platforms, as well as from poetry, and autobiographical graphic novels.

Indeed, the artist's work is informed by feminist comix artists such as Julie Doucet, Lynda Barry and Aline Kominsky-Crumb. Like them, Tremblay Blouin chooses to disclose intimate details of her life, and to represent herself in a non-idealized way. The three-eyed monster depicted in the comix sections is intended to personify a third state outside the binary notion of prettiness and ugliness. By representing herself in that way, the author wishes to indicate her rejection of the cult of beauty as well as a refusal to be determined by the gaze of others. It also translates well her feeling of not fitting in — of being a freak.

Autobiographical writing has been essential in the shaping of Québécois identity, and especially among women. Authors with voices as diverse as Claire Martin, Gabrielle Roy, Denise Bombardier, Julie Doucet, and Nelly Arcand have all written about themselves in what is regarded as an empowering revisitation of past experiences. In *De Marie de l'Incarnation à Nelly Arcan*, Patricia Smart writes about the importance of an intimate writing in the development and affirmation of Québécoise women's identity. In this thesis essay, Tremblay Blouin also uses intimate autobiographical writing as the source material and an autoethnographic methodology to survey the different theories, ideas, images, affects and narratives that inform her work. What is brought up through this process is an impressionist collage of self-reflections, a patchwork of stories, descriptions, critical thinking and contextualization that allow the reader to taste the essence of her work. In *Hold It Against Me*, Jennifer Doyle argues, "Because emotion itself has been associated in art criticism with a self-indulgent and naïve practice, it has been absorbed into the category of things one ought not take seriously. The serious art critic steers clear of anything resembling "a private history, a personal history.[7]" Tremblay Blouin believes, like Judith Jack Halberstam affirms, that "Terms like *serious* and *rigorous* tend to be code words, in academia as well as other contexts, for disciplinary correctness; they signal a form of training and learning that confirms what is already known according to approved methods of knowing, but they do not allow for visionary insights or flights of fancy.[8]" In both her writing and her work, Tremblay Blouin values affect, playfulness and humour as forces and strategies that disrupt the precedence of seriousness. In an equally political effort to counterbalance the tendency to favour male artists in theoretical discourse, she contextualizes her work by referencing almost exclusively female artists and writers.

In the first chapter, the artist writes about two projects: *Feeding Sugar to Spiders,* a furtive gesture, and the ongoing process piece *J'ai fait ça pour rien*, which explores the feelings related to the experience of public, useless crafting and the accumulation of material that results. She introduces the concept of informal rebellion. This idea consists of small, barely noticeable and seemingly innocent gestures that defy common sense. They are micro-transgressions: although far from radical actions, they have the similar aim to resist control. The work of Nina Katchadourian is presented as an example of similar, playful and furtive interventions in nature. The ongoing process piece *J'ai fait ça pour rien* explores the feelings related to the experience of public, useless crafting and the accumulation of material that results.

The second chapter is a presentation of the *Food Experiments*, a series rooted in reflections about food and that explores how the gestures of eating, cooking and feeding are intricately tied with feelings of desire, pleasure, disgust, and shame. It is informed by affect theory, psychology and food studies theory. The performative work of Nadège Grebmeier Forget and the banquets of Claudie Gagnon are put in parallel with the work. It also discusses the video-performance *Cake Queen* and reflects upon the relationship between feminine identity, body image and domestic labour, as well as the transmission of values and narratives from mother to daughter.

The third chapter describes the installation called *Downstairs* and contextualizes it within a recollection of memories related to religion, national identity and familial history. It investigates the feelings of attraction and repulsion. The work of Claudie Gagnon is referred to again, this time to highlight the influence of her commonalities with Tremblay Blouin, including an interest for the domestic, a propensity to use found material in accumulation, as well as a background in scenography. It also discusses the work presented during the thesis exhibition, the installation *Homemaking*.

Tremblay Blouin concludes this thesis essay with a letter to Monique Régimbald-Zeiber, a feminist artist and a former teacher. In this letter, she reintroduces her methodology, preoccupations and theoretical framework, and furthers the contextualization of her practice.

1. Dematerialization

Feeding sugar to spiders

The things that bother me the most on a daily basis are the expectations and assumptions people have or make based on the fact that I am a woman. This ordinary sexism that plagues the society I live in has upset me since childhood. Growing up as a girl and raising my daughter have confronted me with the popular opinion that there is one right way to be female. If you fail to internalize this model, to reproduce the prescribed behaviour and comply to the rules, your fate is to elicit contempt and experience shame. Many of these criteria are still based on Catholic ideology. First of all, there is this contemptuous idea that you are put in this world to be a man's partner and to bear his children. You should never show signs of masculinity yourself. The ideal woman is completely disincarnated, and therefore efforts should be put into erasing all signs of desire, of appetite, into concealing signs of animality (hair), of aging, of disease, of disability or malfunction. For the generation of my grandmother, this also meant that your presence in the world should be as small and silent as possible. Ideally, you shouldn't be noticed at all. If you insist on making something, it should be useful (like clothes) or decorative (embroidering a cushion), so as to not draw attention to yourself but rather improve what is already there. For the generation of my mother, second-wave feminism thought – very strong in Quebec in the seventies – brought expectations of professional success and personal accomplishment. Those criteria still apply today, especially among the people of the church of Lulu Lemon and the likes: to be a good woman you should be happy, confident and strong. I don't want to simply obey, and I don't see the point in taking up the thousands of little gestures that it requires to be nice, be pretty, be thin (or apologetic), make everyone feel comfortable (but myself), be grateful for unsolicited compliments/advice/sexual allusions (or worse), keep a clean house, feed everyone (but myself) and shut up.

I was acquainted with feminist theory and literature during my studies in art education in a university that has left-leaning political alignment. I discovered bell hooks and critical pedagogy, and read about Judy Chicago's teaching methods. Spending long hours in the department's library, I introduced myself to intersectional feminism, Linda Nochlin and the work of the Guerilla Girls. I became aware of the flaws of an art world I always had wanted to be part of. I started to think about alternatives and to hang out with self-identified outcasts and outsiders.

Even when I'm upset I usually remain empathic and gentle. The artists and activists I rub shoulders with are often aggressive and loud in their actions and they have every right to

be. Their voices need to be heard and their strategy is to yell and organize actions, and I admire them for their courage, and the amount of energy they invest in activism. My own strategy is one of resistance and negativity. I follow Judith Jack Halberstam's proposition that "… feminists refuse the choices as offered – freedom in liberal terms or death – in order to think about a shadow archive of resistance, one that does not speak in the language of action and momentum but instead articulates itself in terms of evacuation, refusal, passivity, unbecoming, unbeing. This could be called an *anti-social feminism*, a form of feminism preoccupied with negativity and negation." In response to ordinary sexism, I make gestures of casual rebellion[9] everyday. I show off my stretch marks and my fatness in a bikini at the beach. I wear pajamas to work. I let my facial hair grow. I pull faces at strangers who stare. I let strawberries mould on the counter. I don't remove the cobwebs but beautify them. I feed sugar to spiders.

To most people, spiders are gross[10]. To pathologically anxious people like me, they're unbearable[11]. Their webs are unnoticeable until I accidentally catch one with my face, which makes my heart skip a beat and which makes me shriek. I scream because maybe, maybe the spider is entangled in my hair, or maybe it's crawling under my shirt, and maybe it's going to find its way inside of me, up my nose, in my ears, or maybe I'll inadvertently eat it. Spiders are spooky and they make me lose my cool.

I wish it wasn't so, because spiders are also beautiful. Their bodies look like minuscule sculptures, adorned with the most intricate patterns. Their webs are magnificent and amazingly functional. They are tireless workers. I read that every morning the spider eats its web and then weaves a new one every night. I wonder if there are any lazy spiders, who don't see the point of repeating the same invisible work everyday, who would rather sleep one more hour. I feel for them.

September 2014. It's the last few warm weeks of fall. I go for a stroller walk everyday, sometimes a few times a day. I can't help but to think of the freezing months that are ahead of us. Birds are leaving, leaves are falling, plants are drying and spiders are dying. I look for their corpses on the ground but they're not there. I wonder where they hide to die. There are only a few left around the house. I'm relieved, I'm sad. I want to do something special for them, I want to celebrate, to acknowledge their presence before they pass. I sprinkle cake decorations in their webs. The spiders seem to appreciate the crumb-sized colourful candies: every time they get their legs on one they suck on it for a while and then wrap the leftovers in silk[12].

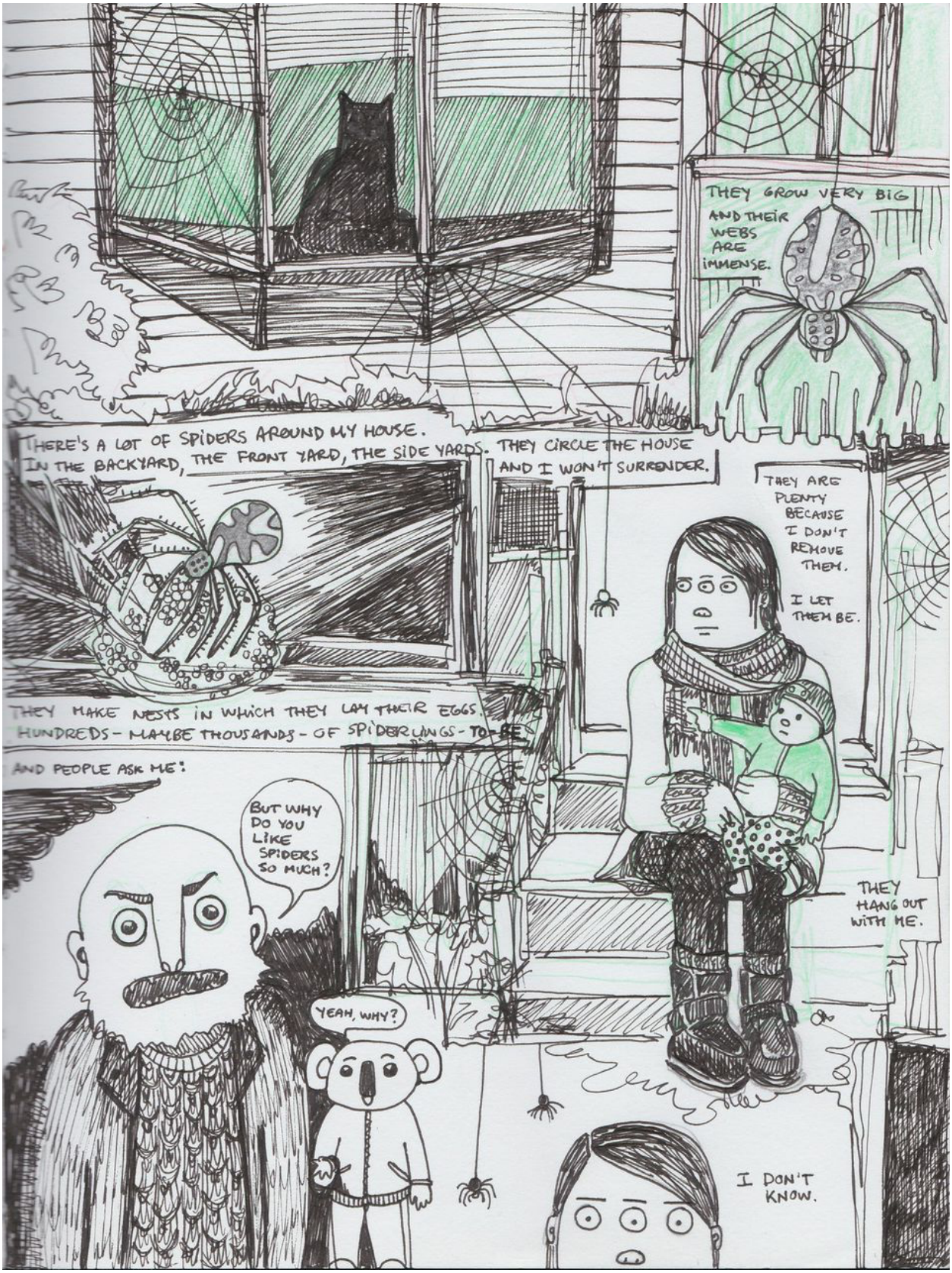

Fig. 1: Valérie Tremblay Blouin, *Spiders,* 2015. 9” x 10”. Mixed Media. Used by permission of the artist.

I learn that spiders love and need fructose, and so in an attempt to do good, I throw Jell-o powder in a web. The spider leaves and never comes back. I make a note to myself: spiders don't like Jell-o. I feel sorry for expropriating the poor thing out of its home. When I express feelings of guilt to my partner, he reminds me that most people just kill them without remorse, which for a moment makes me feel better about myself.

There are a handful of women artists who are frequently associated with the figure of the spider, such as Louise Bourgeois and Eva Hesse. Nina Katchadourian is a multidisciplinary artist that also worked with actual spiders, as well as other animals such as caterpillars. During a stay in Porto, Portugal, in 1998, she mended broken spiderwebs with red thread. On her website, the project is categorized under both labels "photography" and "uninvited collaborations with nature". She and I share a common interest for understated, humorous and playful gestures. While she considers her work as photography, I prefer to think that my practice is part of what Patrice Loubier labeled as *Art furtif*, a certain kind of intervention or performance, most often in an urban setting, that is so understated that it often goes unnoticed. In, *Les Commensaux* he writes: "Furtive work is first noticed only by chance, while strolling for instance (...); it is understood as an anomaly that breaks with the familiarity of a place, however discreetly.[13]" The discretion inherent to the gesture of feeding spiders and the small size of the material traces it leaves makes it easy to miss.

I think that most people who saw the sprinkles in the webs didn't see them. Or maybe they saw them and didn't know that it was art. Or maybe they saw them and they knew that it was art. Or maybe they ceased to be art when I stopped looking at them. And maybe art is in the eye of the beholder. In the article "How to Recognize a Furtive Practice: A User's Guide", Kathleen Ritter writes: "The furtive is risky because, like irony, there is the chance that it will not be noticed. But this chance of misrecognition is what makes the discovery of the furtive act rewarding. It underscores the possibility that furtive actions may be performed around us everyday, yet go unnoticed.[14]" There is indeed some kind of comforting feeling that can be found in knowing that art has the power to infiltrate and disrupt the everyday. It makes us pay more attention to our surroundings and be on the lookout for absurd, playful and poetic situations.

I relish the admittedly romantic idea that my work doesn't need to be supported or disseminated by a legitimate organization in order to reach an audience. However, I must find ways to make it accessible in order to receive the feedback that will allow my practice to evolve. For that reason, I like to experiment with alternative channels of dissemination, such as posting content on the internet or self-publishing small zines that document my furtive

projects. These strategies allow me to be autonomous and avoid being dependent on the very system that I'm critical of, the so-called "art world". Producing zines from scratch and selling them for next-to-nothing is a widely spread practice among grassroots activists and underground artists. From the Riot Grrrl movement in the 90s to today's comic artists who can't get a book deal and yet can't stop making comics, making zines is an effective dissemination strategy. For me, it proves to be an empowering practice, allowing me to do-it-myself and initiate the circulation of my ideas, words and work. Although I believe these strategies have the potential to be transgressive, I'm aware that they do not strictly belong to counterculture anymore. Zines are now embraced by the art world and are being sold in some artist-run-centres as well as art book stores and fairs.

J'ai fait ça pour rien

My maternal grandmother, Lili, was a queen of the DIY. She was in her twenties during the Second World War and she fully internalized the government invitation to "make-do and mend". My mother tells me stories of how nothing was allowed to go to waste, and how even the water used to boil vegetables had to be upcycled into tomorrow's soup. Lili sewed, knitted, embroidered and weaved. She was a skilled and tidy maker of useful things: garments, blankets, home textiles. I inherited her crafting supplies: her jewelry, buttons, yarn and thread, as well as her small *Encyclopédie des ouvrages de dames,* but I did not inherit of her skills. For a while I really tried to walk in her footsteps. I failed over and over again. I made half a dress and abandoned when I realized that I had sewn the armhole closed. I made ugly jewelry, half-assed embroidery, and endless "scarves". One day I decided that I had wasted enough time trying to make useful things. However I did not entirely give up on crafts. I am fascinated by handmade objects that circulate outside the market, handed down or offered as gift. I am emotionally attached to the pretty cushions, the rag dolls and the heavy woven blankets that Lili spent hours making at the same time as she was working as a teacher and raising four children. Although I am wary of the idea that a woman's work is never done, I admire her strength, the energy that she put into labour without expecting it to bring in money or praise. It is a kind of labour that often goes unnoticed, like the meticulous, beautiful, invisible spiderwebs.

Probably because I used to be a costume designer and a fashion history teacher, I have a textile fetish. I am drawn to materials such as felt, fabric, yarn, and I tend to accumulate them in boxes. Sometime last year, I started to crochet with my fingers after finding a bag of colourful yarn remnants in my studio. Do you know that you can crochet with almost anything? I had this beautiful yarn in my hands, and I didn't have any chopsticks or crochet needles, or

pens, or paintbrushes within my reach, and I had the urge to do something with that gorgeous, soft, shiny yarn, so I just started to use my fingers. Within minutes a long string of loops was shaping up. The sequence of gestures — loop, pull, cross, drop, loop, pull, cross, drop — was more satisfying than a game of Candy Crush Saga. I was captivated by the repetition and couldn't leave the work alone. The variations were even more pleasurable: change of stitch, of fibre content, of colour, of thickness. I soon became obsessed with the work and I began to bring it with me everywhere. I crochet with my hands in the metro, in meetings at work, while watching TV, while walking on the streets. I like it when people watch me doing it, strangers, co-workers, students of mine. They look at the chain of stitches dangling from my fingers, reaching and brushing the dirty floor, and slowly piling up in a shapeless bunch on the ground. I'm performing the crocheting for them, even if they don't know that I'm performing. They ask me: Qu'est-ce que tu fais? and I answer "C'est rien. Je fais ça pour rien." Ritter writes that "The furtive action is also characterized by a kind of resistance, as it runs against the stream of acceptable or expected behaviour in public. It is by nature political, that is, it is concerned with the complexity of relations between people living in society. The furtive act offers a proposition for an alternative way of living, opening up possibilities in how we imagine public space.[15]" The material outcome of the work is unimportant. In an attempt to describe it, I write: accumulation of nothing, dead skins of art making, art shedding.

Fig. 2: Valérie Tremblay Blouin, *J'ai fait ça pour rien* (with cat for scale), 2015. Dimensions variable. Durational performance, Mixed Yarns. Used by permission of the artist.

I do it for the pleasure of the repeated gesture and the satisfaction of producing aimlessly, for the surprisingly liberating feeling of doing something slightly off, of wasting rather than saving, of taking up space. I do it to fail at being correct, serious, and productive. In the words of Judith Jack Halberstam: "… failure allows us to escape the punishing norms that discipline behaviour and manage human development with the goal of delivering us from unruly childhoods to orderly and predictable adulthoods. Failure preserves some of the wondrous anarchy of childhood and disturbs the supposedly clean boundaries between adults and children, winners and losers.[16]" Like a child playing a made-up game, making up rules as she goes, I invent a new way to be in public, one that is slightly abnormal. Resisting the unspoken rules commanding that I act like everyone else so as not to draw attention to myself, I fail to act like an adult. *J'ai fait ça pour rien* takes place in the public sphere, but does not participate in capitalism: *J'ai fait ça pour rien* resists the ethics of productivity that was reinforced on me by my mother, whose mother would give her mending to do as soon as she would sit down to rest.

I wonder what Lili would think of such gestures. She probably would have been shocked. As she writes about the faith of Quebecoises authors such as Nelly Arcand, Patricia Smart describes how Catholicism has shaped our sense of self, from mother to daughter: "Whether she agrees or not, woman is condemned to incarnate the body, which Catholic patriarchal society sees as the root of all evil. Meanwhile, she is invited to transcend that body in becoming the angel of the house, doomed to pass on the malaise and commandments to future generations." Was it to achieve this impossible disembodiment that Lili became a laic nun? According to the stories my mother told me, she was pious, vain, controlling and dedicated to the transmission of these traits. Even if I only knew her for six years, I remember her in a different way. I remember a sweet grandmother who would laugh at her love handles calling them her "tires", prank my little cousin by asking her to pull on her fake teeth and her fake breast, and spoil us with a lot of sugar. Looking back on my research, I believe that parts of my identity have been shaped both in opposition to her strictness and in accordance with her playfulness. Thinking about my own daughter, I wish that these gestures effectively stop the transmission of shame.

2. Incarnation

Food Experiments

I like food. I love to eat, to smell, taste, sip, suck, taste, chew, swallow and digest it.

I don't like to cook. Cooking makes me anxious, it requires too much energy and so many precautions. I don't like that it's regarded as a feminine responsibility and as a mother's duty. I don't want to enact the heteronormative narrative that underlies it. It's also too much pressure for me to handle, making sure that everyone is pleased with the appearance and the taste of the food, and has enough of all the nutrients they need, and not too much of the bad stuff: sodium, bad fats, refined sugar. Food can so easily turn from desirable to disgusting[17]. Growing up, while she was teaching me how things work in the home, my mother urged me to only cook in a kitchen that has just been thoroughly cleaned. She also demanded that I wear an apron and a headband and that I tie up my hair. I learned that it doesn't take much to spoil food, and that even something as small as an eyelash can elicit disgust and cause shame to the guilty cook. I have memories of cooking with my mother, cooking with my aunts, cooking with a mother-in-law, of being supervised and judged. Of feeling tested and failing the test.

Fig. 3: Valérie Tremblay Blouin, *Ruining the Whipped Cream,* 2015. 5" x 5". Pen on index card. Used by permission of the artist.

My body responds strongly to ideas related to food. I'm easily gastronomically aroused. Thinking about tangy and acidic tastes like vinegar and lemon makes me drool. Dreaming of a *crème brûlée* inevitably makes me hungry. I enjoy imagining the cracking sound of the caramel crust when I tap it with my spoon, shoving it in the silky, creamy *flan* and putting it in my mouth. I like the feel of unusual textures against my tongue, my gums, my palate, and how some things resist while other squish when I crush them with my jaw. I remember the crunchiness of fresh carrots and cucumbers that we would pick from my grandfather's vegetable patch when I was just a little kid. We would rinse them with the water from the hose that had a mineral taste. In that same garden there were bushes where I would forage for sour gooseberries and sweet raspberries. They were red and shiny and looked like little jewels in the green foliage.

I enjoy eating raw meat. I call it tartare, sushi, ceviche, carpaccio. When I use foreign words to talk about it, it sounds fancy and delicious. The truth is, I like to consume uncooked flesh, raw fat and blood. I eat dead animals that were bred, killed and sold for human consumption, concealed under condiments and a sprig of fresh parsley. When I put it this way, it is horrific and disgusting[18]. I'm baffled by the contradictions inherent to my relationship with food, and by how my notion of what is and isn't edible was shaped by my sociocultural background[19]. For instance, while the idea of eating bugs is strongly revolting to me, I consider honey a treat. I would never eat a piece of mozzarella that has even the slightest sign of going bad – I cannot stand a tiny bit of green fuzz, even if it is removed and cut away – yet I enjoy eating blue cheese. It seems obvious to me that one's socioeconomic status plays an important part in what they eat[20], but it is less acknowledged that it also determines what food will be rejected. I grew up in a middle class household where we always had more than enough to eat, where a wrinkled tomato or a blackened banana could be discarded and not necessarily used in a recipe, where we could afford our disdain of imperfect food. Thinking about food in relation to social hierarchies has made me aware of how much disgust and shame are at play in relations of power.

Take for instance processed meat. Growing up, my parents seldom let me eat hot-dogs, and always told me that if I knew what was in it I wouldn't want to have it anyway. This idea that there is something abject in luncheon meats and the likes seems to be common knowledge. In the episode "Lisa the Vegetarian" of the TV show *The Simpsons*, Lisa pictures hot-dog meat as a combination of rat, pigeon, raccoon and an old boot[21], which to me are symbolic of pests and disease carriers, and the opposite of food[22]. The first time I had a fried baloney sandwich was in my teenage years, at a friend's place, and it was delicious. It was

salty, crunchy, and eating it felt like transgressing a taboo. For my friend it was just a regular lunch. It was what his family could afford, and they weren't making a fuss about what was or wasn't in it. Thinking about it nowadays, I am afraid that there is not much of a stretch between showing disdain for a kind of food and having contempt for the people who it eat. Could there be a political project in learning how to tame feelings of repulsion and disgust?

Fig. 4: Valérie Tremblay Blouin, *Baloney Sandwich,* 2014. Dimensions variable. Baloney and mustard on white bread. Used by permission of the artist.

The complexity of food is why I wanted to work with it in the first place. The power it has to be strongly attractive or repulsive, its potential to trigger a political reflection, as well as its ephemerality are the main aspects that I wanted to address. The use of food as an artistic medium and the interest for cooking and feeding and eating as artistic gestures are not new. Among the artists who served meals as art were Marinetti and the Futurists in the 1910s, surrealist artist Meret Oppenheim in 1959, George Maciunas and Fluxus in the 1960s and 1970s, and a growing number of contemporary artists including Claudie Gagnon, Massimo Guerrera and Iwona Majdan. Like them, I want to make food and call it art. But when I cook, what exactly will make it art rather than just food, other than my own claim? I know for sure that it doesn't have to do with the beauty of the end result. I don't think that it would fit in an art collection, and so I can't argue that it has a place within the art market. If I serve it in a gallery, and if artists and curator are aware of it, will it make it be art in a stronger way than if I leave it

in my backyard? Philosopher of art Fabienne Brugère would disagree. In her article "The Disappearance of the Artwork", she describes artistic practices that don't focus on the production of material: "Art does not deploy itself only as a succession of productions offered to the veneration of the public in museums or in galleries, but equally as an artistic path or trajectory. (…) Ensuring that the trajectory is the equivalent of the work, that the work is nothing other than an artistic experience (including the experience of not making), may be the paradoxical signature of the contemporary artist.[23]" She argues for a theoretical framework "that leads to the idea that in art the experience is of greater value than the work, the artistic proposition is worth more than the art object, and the journey is more meaningful than the result.[24]" In this case, both the artistic proposition – playing with food and serving playful food in order to to foster a reflection about affect and identity – and the exploratory process register in my artistic research.

I slowly heat marshmallows with a spoonful of butter in a big pot on the stove. As they melt they become sweaty, gooey, and then they fuse together to become a big white blob of foam. A sweet smell of fake vanilla fills the kitchen. I stir the mass with a metal spoon and it soon becomes sticky and stringy. I get excited by the texture and I imagine pouring the sugary magma on the table of my home studio, covering cardboards boxes and old sculptures, putting my hands in it, pulling marshmallow strings and sticking them to the floor, the walls, the ceiling, making a marshmallow web and watch the bugs getting caught in it. Without thinking about it I grab a bottle of blue food colouring and squeeze it into the marshmallow that immediately turns turquoise. I pour a bag of Rice Krispies and mix to the sound of the snapping, crackling, and popping. That doesn't look like food, but it's very pretty. In a deep pan I lay a bed of muticoloured sprinkles before adding the warm preparation. Unsatisfied, I make a second batch of melted marshmallows, pink this time, in which I incorporate Cheerios. I add it as a second layer to my work in progress. After it cools down and almost turns to plastic, I remove it from the pan. I'm happy with the way that the two layers contrast: blue-green against pink, the crumbly against the loopy. It almost works as a sculpture, but it will be cut and eaten, or discarded. I believe its ephemerality makes it more poetic, because its *raison d'être* is ambiguous, and because its absurd nature makes it escape easy commodification.

There are many Pinterest moms who bake and make ridiculously beautiful desserts. And then there are those who, like me, feel dysfunctional when they browse through pictures of perfect cakes, perfect birthday party decorations, perfect matching outfits, perfect illusions of flawless lives. I create a board that I label *Fuck You Pinterest* where I keep these pictures. I share pictures of my mess, but no one *likes* them. Suddenly inspired and fuelled by my

frustration in front of these ludicrous expectations, I cook like a five-year-old child without supervision. I make colourful, imperfect *parfaits* by layering rice noodles dyed in green, pink icing, blue Jell-o, white whipped topping and enoki mushrooms in a glass cup. They are each delicious in their own, but the use of unusual ingredients and textures make them repulsive. I put them in my garden as an offering to friendly ants and flies.

Fig. 5: Valérie Tremblay Blouin, *Parfaits*, 2014. Dimensions Variable. Mixed Foods. Used by permission of the artist.

Back in the kitchen, I make up recipes as I go, mixing everything together without any care. I pour warm, slimy Jell-o over Rice Krispies squares that then disintegrate and start floating at the surface. The Jell-o sets and is cut in chunks that look like precious stones, according to my friend Sarah. “It looks like puke to me”, I reply. “Well, maybe a little bit of both”, Sarah admits. “Food loathing is perhaps the most elementary and most archaic form of abjection.[25]”, Kristeva states. “Perhaps you’re right, Julia.” I reply in my head, “Perhaps you’re right.” Tomorrow I will feed people at an art opening with this over-sugared, brightly-coloured, and sweet-looking dish.

Fig. 6: Valérie Tremblay Blouin, *Food Experiments*, 2014. Dimension variable. Mixed Foods. Used by permission of the artist.

Among the many artists who use food in their work, there are two Québécoises whose practices I especially relate to. Claudie Gagnon collaborates with eminent chefs to create elaborate banquets that are part installation, part sensorial experiences, in line with Fluxus' happenings. She experiments with colour, textures, shapes, tastes and smells to create unusual meals with surprising associations. In Gagnon's surrealist cooking, things are not always what they look like. She calls *trompe-goûts* the repulsive edible sculptures that are enjoyable to eat[26]. The intertwinement of domestic life with artistic practice is something that we have in common, as well as a propension for accumulation and excess, and a playful approach to artmaking. However, her work is more theatrical, polished and precious than mine, and engages with different politics. For that matter, my work is more similar to the performative practice of Nadège Grebmeier Forget. She uses food in her performances that are simultaneously attractive and repulsive, erotic and grotesque. In *Creamy Deluxe*, she smears cake icing and donuts on her thighs. In *Just Looking*, performed in Berlin in 2013 for an audience of thirty-five, she shoves cakes under her stockings to create a bulgy behind and sticks sparklers in it. She is concerned with the complex and sometimes conflicting

relationships between food, beauty, sexuality and the female body. Through these transgressive and aesthetically excessive performances, Grebmeier-Forget defies diktat of female obedience and stands out as a powerful role model.

Figure 7 has been removed due to copyright restrictions.

Fig. 7: Nadège Grebmeier Forget, *Just Looking,* 2013. Dimension variable. Performance.

Cake Queen

Created with the idea of exploring deliberate gender failure as a strategy of resistance, *Cake Queen* is a video-performance in which I smear food on my face while replicating the gestures of putting on make-up. In *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler writes that gender identity is "a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being.[27]" By repeating these gendered gestures — applying foundation, knitting, icing a cake — outside of their context, I hope to reveal their deceptive character, or at least, highlight their absurdity. The urge to desecrate beauty rituals and indulge in food play comes from two different things. On the one hand, watching my daughter explore her meals with her whole body, day after day, covering herself in food from head to toe, makes me envious of her lack of self-consciousness and her instinctive, embodied way of learning about food. On the other hand, reading fat studies literature brought up the desire to transgress taboos related to the female body. As a fat woman, I'm often confronted with other people's opinion on what I should and shouldn't eat. Eating in public is always a risk: of being exposed to smirk remarks about my diet. "Do you really need to put cream in your coffee? Why not milk?" I've been asked in the past. To stand up to those who think that my BMI is a public concern, I round off *Cake Queen* by drinking cream from the carton.

Fig. 8: Valérie Tremblay Blouin, *Cake Queen*, 2015. 6:57. Video-Performance. Used by permission of the artist.

A few people who watched *Cake Queen* told me that they understood it as a gesture of bravery, and that it felt liberating to them. I was at first surprised that something that I perceived as self-absorbed and that was so enjoyable to make would first and foremost come across as courageous. Even if transgressive intentions were the starting point, performing and filming *Cake Queen* was done in a spirit of mischievous playfulness. In *Les Commensaux*, Patrice Loubier writes: “Playfulness thus leads one to take into account the pleasure this type of gesture can provide to its instigator: the enjoyment of removing oneself from the universal imperative to make sense, to hijack principle into derision, to taste a certain gratuity, to reach others unbeknownst to them.[28]” By enacting this playful and absurd routine in front of the camera, I experienced the pleasure of transgressing expectations regarding womanhood and the actions of feeding and eating. The interdiction to play with food is one of the first and strongest proscription we learn in our lives.

3. Reincarnation

Inside/Under

When I got pregnant in the spring of 2013, I started to be more aware of my own body and of its distinct, uncontrollable drives. My corporeal needs and reactions were stronger and often took over my rationality. I was so nauseated I could barely eat, I was exhausted and could not work as hard as I wanted to, I was easily overwhelmed by smells or sights. I had an episode of phobia triggered by a midge that was flying in my studio: I became uncontrollably itchy and shivery just by looking at its feathery antenna . I developed trypophobia, a strong repulsive reaction to textures that are shaped with irregular patterns of holes, such as a coral or a beehive. While I understood that these disease-avoidance sensations and reactions were programmed in my brain to protect me and my foetus, and transmitted from generation to generation since a very long time, I felt frustrated by the lack of control over my own self that it evidenced. In an attempt to understand and overcome my phobias, I started a collection of pictures of repulsive or frightening objects, textures and patterns. I would closely examine them, hoping that I would eventually stop shivering. I tried to understand the language of repulsion, and to use it in my pictorial work.

Fig. 9: Valérie Tremblay Blouin, *Inside/Under*, 2013. 23″ x 35″. Pastel on Paper. Used by permission of the artist.

Coincidentally, motherhood made me strongly aware of my body; it brought to my consciousness the fact that I'm made of biological matter. Having a developing living being inside of me, moving and squeezing my organs, made me think about my insides. Seeing my breast leaking milk for the first time was a shameful event, even if I was alone in the shower. Giving birth caused a bloodbath and made me lay clots the size of an egg, and taking care of my baby daughter meant that I had to manage human waste on a daily basis. If I had been repulsed by these biological matters before, I was becoming desensitized. Because of my growing interest for revulsion and disgust, I was encouraged to read the work of Julia Kristeva on abjection[29].

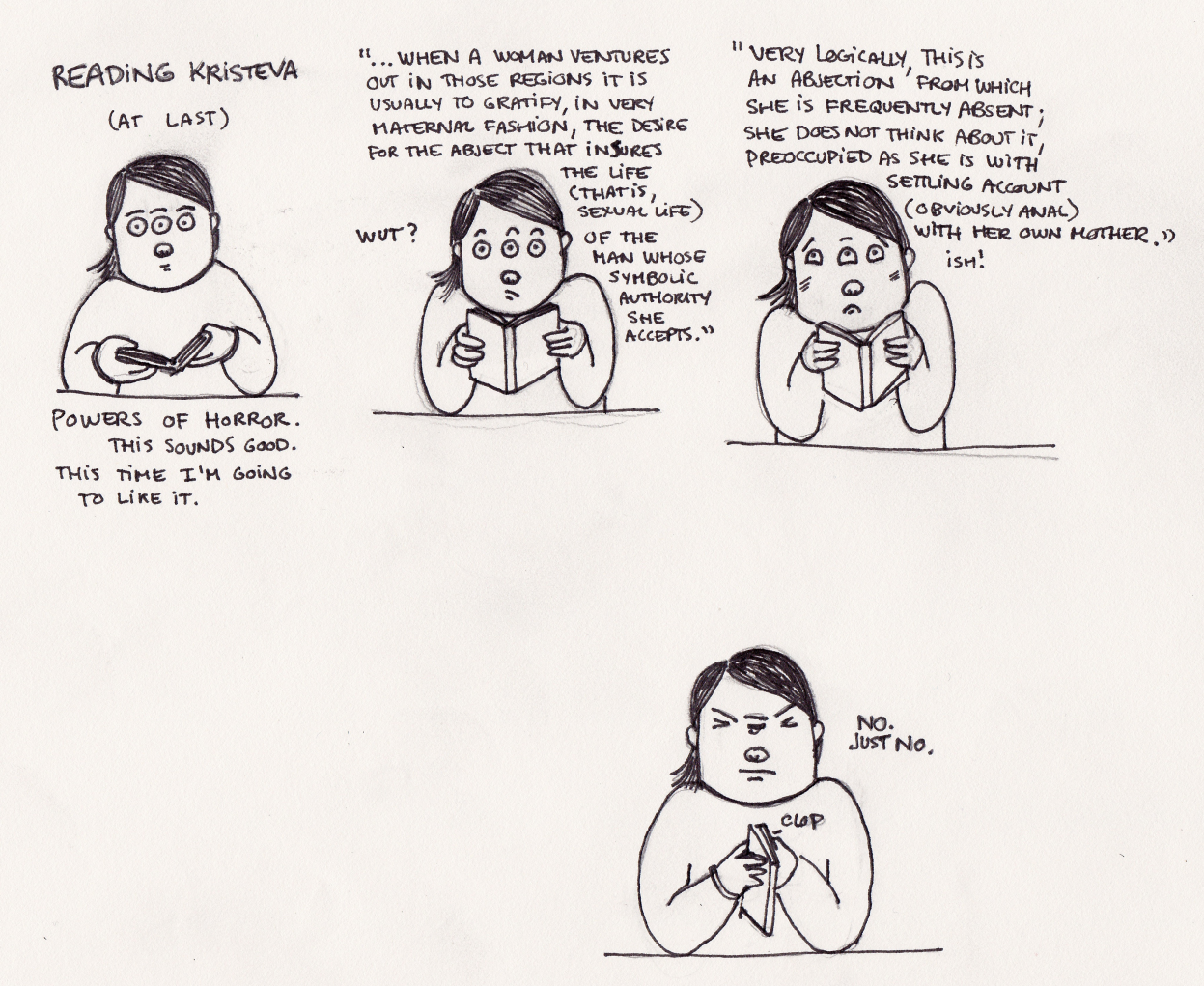

Fig. 10: Valérie Tremblay Blouin, *High Theory Comix: Kristeva,* 2015. 8" x 10". Ink on paper. Used by permission of the artist.

In her article “Against abjection”, Imogen Tyler argues that Kristeva has been mislabeled as feminist and that she “never identified herself as a feminist, she has never aligned her work with any larger feminist theoretical or philosophical project, on the contrary, she has repeatedly distanced herself from feminism.[30]” She explains that Kristeva’s theorization of the abject is something that feminist scholars should distance themselves from, since it contributes to the narrative that the female body is unbearably repulsive, and reinforces the idea that it should be annihilated: “Kristeva theorises abjection in distinctly phenomenological terms, associating the abject with all that is repulsive and fascinating about bodies and, in particular, those aspects of bodily experience which unsettle singular bodily integrity. (...) The abjection of the maternal is not just a theoretical fiction, but speaks to living histories of violence towards maternal bodies.[31]” In my work, I foster the association of the repulsive with the fascinating, in an attempt to open a different perspective on what is usually considered disgusting and insupportable, one of curiosity and openness. I want to avoid at all costs the conflation – as in Kristeva– of the messy feminine body with abjection, something that must be rejected.

Still Life

I was raised to believe that sterile equals pure, and that while it is acceptable to expose ourselves to chemicals in the form of cleaning products, we should be afraid of microscopic bacteria and dust mites. In her autobiographical accounts of her childhood, my sister evidence the force with which these ideas were imposed on us.

Fig. 11: MMP, *Cray Cray,* 2015. 5,5”x9”. Ink on paper. Used by permission of the artist.

Fig. 12: MMP, *Lake,* 2015. 8,5”x14”. Ink on paper. Used by permission of the artist

I let fruits and vegetables mould and decompose, in an attempt to yield the creative power of decay, feeding microorganisms[32]. Bacteria and fungi feast on the leftovers and wrap them in delicate white cotton. I leave old apples and grapes in the backyard for anyone to munch and soon there are squirrels, bees and ants working on it. I like to watch the fruits and vegetables metamorphose over time, observing, as did Ovid[33] and Lavoisier[34], that nothing ceases to exist completely. Sometimes I think I should clean up the mess, that the neighbours must hate me. But not until next week, I want to see how much of the apples will remain. Not until next spring, I want to see how they will look after spending the winter under the snow. My fascination for natural phenomena is nearly mystical, and the observation of metamorphosis brings me to a state of contemplation.

Fig. 13: Valérie Tremblay Blouin, *Still Life*, 2013. Dimensions variable. Rotting Fruits and Vegetables. Used by permission of the artist.

I have a genuine fascination for the (super)natural and irrational forces such as what we call magic. To understand why, a quick look at my familial background is meaningful: I was born in the aftermath of the “Quiet Revolution” in Quebec, a time when people disowned the Catholic religion in a strong collective move. My parents grew up in the countryside where the

Catholic church was extremely powerful. Both my mother's parents belonged to the clergy: my grandfather was a defrocked priest and my grandmother was a laic nun, a secret that we only discovered after her death. My uncle is the Bishop of Lae in Papua New Guinea. Considering this, it's understandable that the Quiet Revolution could not entirely shake religion out of my parents. Consequently, I grew up mostly outside of church but believing in mystical forces. As a teen, I was attracted to weird cults and tiny eccentric religious groups like a moth to electric light. I attended spiritual awakening weekend retreats where they barely feed you and make sure that you don't sleep enough, because these are the best conditions to make you hallucinate and see God. I ate dal with Hare Krishna but didn't buy the book. I sat on uncomfortable chairs as motivational speakers attempted to deconstruct and reconstruct my ego. I hung out in the sun in Sydney with fasting Mormons. I listened to the stories of Sai Baba's miracles. I bought all the candles and the incense that were supposed to make me a witch. What remains from all this is a taste for places, events and things that help you recede deep inside yourself. To this day, there is nothing more akin to spiritual beatitude for me than watching a spider weave its web.

Downstairs

The basement of my house is a damp old storage space. There is a specific nook that is especially creepy. It used to be a workroom, or at least this is where the previous owners stored their tools. We know it because this is also where they left their tools. Sometimes I think that they were too scared to go in that corner to fetch them. I brought in there my ever-growing personal collection of organic matter, yummy-yucky ugly-pretty stuff and esoteric objects. These are the things that I own and that reference the natural world and its oddities. There are some natural found objects, such as corals and shells, a raccoon hide, bones, plants (some are dried and some are rotting in jars) and stones. There are some man-made objects such as figurines, decorated boxes and corrugated cardboard sections. Lastly, there are drawings, paintings and sculptures that represent monsters and organic structures. I placed them in the space, I made an installation and titled it *Downstairs*. I can argue that the making of *Downstairs* took place over many, many years, starting with the loss of my first baby tooth that my mother decided to place in a crystal case, to every single time I gathered strange-looking stones and branches, to the very recent realization that all these things could be having an interesting conversation if I placed them in a small room together.

Fig. 14: Valérie Tremblay Blouin, *Downstairs* (detail), 2015. Dimensions variable. Mixed Media Installation. Used by permission of the artist.

Fig. 15: Valérie Tremblay Blouin, *Downstairs* (detail), 2015. Dimensions variable. Mixed Media Installation. Used by permission of the artist.

Downstairs doesn't have a center you can stare at. To experience it, one has to move around. One will want to get closer to take a good look at the jars to see what's rotting in them, or examine the details of a meticulously crafted sculpture. One will find that other things, like the shells and corals for instance, are more interesting from a distance, seen in relation to each other. Maybe sometimes one will step back because they will see something repulsive (that faint smell of kelp comes from their imagination). One will keep moving back and forth in space, building a tension through a growing feeling of disgust, a fear that something alive might crawl on their skin. That tension slows them down and keeps their eyes wide open.

A few years ago I saw an exhibition that had a similar effect on its audience: *Les queues de comètes*, an installation by Claudie Gagnon. She and I share a common background in scenography, and an interest for theatrical displays. In that dimly lit installation, she suspended clutters of common, domestic materials — such as steel wool and sprouted potatoes — that moved softly when you walked around them.

Figure 16 has been removed due to copyright restrictions.

Fig. 16: Claudie Gagnon, *Les Queues de comète*, 2013. Dimensions unknown. Mixed Media Installation.

It is obvious that we both worked for the theatre : creating such an installation requires the same kind of thinking and the same operations as creating a set does. You have to think about space in terms of circulation, about light, about the different points of view of your audience. You have to think about the material and what it conveys. You have to find, choose and make a variety of things, and place them together so that they respond to each other. The difference is that installation has to be thought of as independent while the set is a support for the play. Another difference is that the installation will be experienced by the audience on an intimate level, while the set is experienced by proxy, through the characters of the play.

The installation is a different kind of narrative device, one that has to be autonomous, or be activated by the audience. I'm interested in the narrative potential of such a space, one that is devised, designed and built for no other reason than to facilitate an experience of something out of the ordinary. In her thesis about the work of Gagnon, Dominique Allard calls such

installations a “metaphorical device”: “In constant transformation, the metaphor’s efficiency lies in its continual renewability and instant meeting of the audience and the work. It unfolds in the imagination differently every time and is to be understood as a semantic event of the coincidence of “horizons of expectation” from the audience and “possible worlds” of the work.[35]”

There is an importance difference between the work of Gagnon and mine: while she’s in control of every detail, I embrace chance, chaos, and the lack of control as a creative process. My way of working requires a balance between action and non-action, between working meticulously and observing quietly. This idea reminds me of the Zen principles that encouraged John Cage and the Fluxus artists to embrace chance as an important part of their methodology.

> The Master sees things as they are,
>
> without trying to control them.
>
> She lets them go their own way,
>
> and resides at the center of the circle.[36]

In this aphorism, Laozi illustrates the concept of “wei wu wei”, or “action without action”, sometimes translated as “effortless action”. In my interpretation of this paradox, one should never to use excessive or coercive force on their environment -- on people or things -- in order to achieve their goals, but rather collaborate with them in building together. In my work I try to alternate modes of control and letting-go, and I enjoy short periods of intense labour followed by introspective moments.

Homemaking

This is how I created the work titled *Homemaking.* It consists in part of a large, inhabitable cardboard structure that I built by myself out of scavenged materials in preparation for my thesis exhibition. While the making of *Homemaking* was physically intense, I designed the structure in a way that would be possible for me to build it without any help, and without

completely exhausting myself. Even though I have a degree in scenography and have designed sets in the past, I had never built any large structure before. I had to experiment and teach myself how to do it. I worked on it every single day for a month, and while doing so, I thought a lot about labour, and making as an alternative way to think about power. In *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, bell hooks calls for a redefinition of power. She cites the work of Nancy Hartsock, illuminating "definitions that equate power with the ability to act, with strength and ability (…) Significantly, these understandings of power do not require the domination of others; energy and accomplishment are understood to be satisfying in themselves.[37]" It would be an important and maybe salutary shift if we, as a society, were to value dedicated labour[38], according to each one's interests, strength and skills; not as a way to promote ourselves against others but as a way to be together. Many people live their lives without thinking about the power they have to put things in the world, other than by buying more stuff. I suggest that we should value labour as a way to take part in the world, and to stop being mere spectators.

In *Homemaking*, I wanted to reconcile and represent the paradoxes that are at play in my practice: material and immaterial, control and chaos, private and public. The idea was to build a cardboard structure that I would transform over time by working every day inside of it, and that the piece would only be complete after the last day of the exhibition. Both the materiality and the process were important to me. The construction itself was an octogonal form that occupied a eight-foot-cube space. On the outside, the walls consisted of an irregular patchwork of corrugated cardboard painted in white. The inside of the structure was also blank at the beginning, but little by little it became covered in colourful drawings and paintings.

I chose to cover the outside in white in order to give it a touch of modernist seriousness, to pretend an attempt at blending in the pristine white cube. Its external looks reminded many viewers of Rachel Whiteread's sculpture, but the resemblance is only superficial. We do share an interest for the domestic made public, but her sculptures are full and massive, and focused on the density of defined spaces. In the case of Homemaking, not only the structure was hollow, but my intention in creating the empty space was to set up a place for things to happen. This work was presented in the gallery space, as it was my contribution to my cohort's thesis show. My feelings towards having to adapt to a conventional mode of exhibition and dissemination were ambiguous and contradictory. On one hand I was thrilled by the opportunity to exhibit my work in a setting that guaranteed a large and diverse audience; on the other hand, I feared that the formal character of the space would divest the work of its agency.

Fig. 17: Valérie Tremblay Blouin, *Homemaking*, 2015. 8'x8'x8'. Mixed Media Installation. Used by permission of the artist.

In order to make the most of this situation, my first idea was to introduce an element of chaos by bringing my eighteen-month-old daughter inside the space to draw and paint with me. I took an impulsive and short-sighted decision to invite participation by leaving coloured markers on the ground, and by moving away from the installation space. In a matter of minutes, people were making their marks on the cardboard walls. It did not take me long

before I regretted my decision, and considered it as an act of sabotage, because it lead to the destruction of the artwork as I had conceptualized it. But from the ashes of that defunct project was born another one, similar but with a stronger relational component, and the challenges that it brought up opened new areas of inquiry for my practice.

Fig. 18: Valérie Tremblay Blouin, *Homemaking* (detail), 2015. 8'x8'x8'. Mixed Media Installation. Used by permission of the artist.

Among the many encounters that took place in the installation, the most memorable ones for me were the intervention of children of various ages. I enjoyed their enthusiasm, their eagerness to fill up as much space as possible, and their lack of self-consciousness. On the opposite side, the most difficult experiences were with teenagers. I was shocked (although not

surprised) by their impulse to test the boundaries of what is acceptable, by using vulgar imagery and language and by drawing on the outside walls.

Fig. 19: Valérie Tremblay Blouin, *Homemaking* (detail), 2015. 8'x8'x8'. Mixed Media Installation. Used by permission of the artist.

The unplanned participative component of the work had for effect to confuse and sometimes even upset part of the audience. Understandably, the intention behind the decision to share authorship with the gallery visitors wasn't clear. To some people, public participation seemed unacceptable, ugly, unworthy of interest and almost disgusting. In *Ugly Feelings*, Sianne Ngai defines disgust as "an emotional idiom defined by its vehement exclusion of the intolerable.[39]" She tackles the question of "what can and cannot be "swallowed up" (that is, what can and cannot be tolerated, benevolently or contemptuously) (..) to reflect upon the

limited agency of art itself in a commodified society.[40]" She argues that the capacity of the art market to accept and value any form of art, and even the art that is created in reaction to it, makes it impossible to make art that has actual agency.

I believe that engaging in an artistic practice that has a strong research component has the power to make us better, more compassionate humans. I'm not sure if my work – and even artworks in general – can have an impact on our politics, on our ways of living and on how we think about togetherness, when the art market depoliticizes them and the outside world doesn't see them. The only possibility that remains is to foster a conversation inside our schools and inside our public art spaces, and we as academics have the responsibility to make sure that this conversation is selfless, accessible and inclusive of marginalized voices.

Fig. 20: Valérie Tremblay Blouin, *Homemaking* (exploded view), 2015. Mixed Media Installation. 8'x8'x8'. Used by permission of the artist.

Conclusion

A letter to Monique Régimblad-Zeiber.

Monique,

It's been almost five years since I was your student. I have never stopped thinking about your class, and the things that I experienced with you are starting to make sense and come together like the pieces of a puzzle, while I reflect on art making. I wanted to add "from a personal point of view" but isn't it always the case? In "Situated Knowledge", Donna Haraway proposes that there is a legitimate subjective way of knowing, stressing that a researcher cannot detach herself from the web of relationships in which she is embedded, and that it is more honest to foreground than to ignore them[41]. Situating ourselves as researchers in an academic context, shedding light on what is influencing, informing and driving our research, also has the merit to provide anchor points that allow our work to interlock itself with the work of others and not float indefinitely in intellectual limbo.

I showed up to your course with all my stuff and a strong desire to make art. You told me about the work of all these artists – you know so many of them – among them I remember Julie Doucet and Claire Savoie. The prior because for the first time in my life, a teacher was defending the legitimacy of raw, punk, feminist and sex-positive comix work in an academic setting. The latter because of her approach to art making: constant, diligent work that blends with the everyday and infiltrates its interstices. But most of all, their work made me feel less isolated, more confident. These women were talking about their own personal experience of life, without shame and with disarming honesty. I felt like my feelings of revolt towards a world that wanted me to blend in were validated. Suddenly I understood that we are many who seek a different way to be in the world, one that includes more play and poetry, and less shopping. I felt like they were telling me to put a stop to being passive consumers of mediocre entertainment that passes as culture, and instead be active producers of meaningful art, situations, and relations. You talked to me about feminism, the ideas that belong to what I'm now able to identify as second-wave feminism. We didn't name names then, but we talked about a shared experience of growing up and living in a world that considers and treats you a little worse because you're a woman.

Being a woman.

Now that I'm well-read in third wave feminism and queer theory, and that I hang out with gender outlaws, talking about "femininity" or "womanhood" doesn't feel as right and simple as it used to. Now I know that I can only speak from my own personal experience, that mostly fits in the gender binary narrative, and that this experience is not shared by all women. I was born in a female body, I have a functional female reproductive system, I was raised as a girl. I identify as woman and more-or-less willingly play that role. In the past two years I have experienced pregnancy, birth-giving and breastfeeding my daughter. When I stir these ideas and memories, I realize how important they were in the constitution of my own personal identity.

Most current theories on personal identity acknowledge the fact that it isn't monolithic and fixed but rather complex, fluid, changeable. To me, this seems at once contradictory and fascinating. How does something that seems so permanent as my self could not be set? Even my body is in a constant state of transformation, and most of the cells that constituted my body ten years ago have replaced themselves[42]. This perpetual metamorphosis seems to belong more to the realm of magic than to science, and this is why I wanted to investigate the question of the self in the first place. What makes me who I am? How much of it is my physical presence in the world? What about my memories, my values, my beliefs, my affects? Because it is so difficult for me to grasp, and because reading French philosophy doesn't seem to help, I chose to use autoethnography and artmaking as ways to investigate and research. This is how I make art nowadays: through play, extensive experimentation with material and free association with personal memories. This process helps me to uncover images, affects and narratives that are at the core of my personal identity. I then re-invest them in the making of installations, comix and works of furtive art that can be understood as self-portraiture, but that also tell their own narratives, whimsical and strange, naive and rebellious.

I believe that my writing and my work share a similar aesthetic: collage-like structured, accumulating to excess, indulging in self-examination, rooted in sensations and affects. They also function in the same way: by resisting expectations — by not complying — they question the hierarchies of value at play in the art world as well as in the academia. I embrace the low — cheap materials like cardboard and white glue, often acquired for free through donations or scavenging, "low" art forms such as sketchy cartoons and deliberately deskilled craft works, "low" theory harvested in pop culture such as children's TV shows — as a way to challenge elitism. To tackle issues around the commodification of art, I use different strategies that would discredit my work in regards to the art market: the use of perishable materials, collaborations with my baby daughter, private installations inside my house, and public performances documented through amateur-looking videos and journaling.

I am told that exhibiting the work, having it exist outside the home or the studio, in the art world, is what makes you an artist. I am told that it is what makes your work evolve, when it is looked at and experienced by an audience that is interested and open to that sort of engagement, one that requires an awareness of the field, of its history and its current discourse. I am also told that the opportunities to do so are few. I don't know if and when my work to be given a shot, space, an opportunity. I can't wait and hope for it to happen. I'm working hard and sending applications to artist-run centres, as some of them participate in expanding a culture of sharing, engagement and critical thinking, in which I believe — but I'm also thinking about alternative routes. Making zines is for me a way of taking charge of the dissemination of my work. It is a DIY approach to participating in the art discourse, to gain autonomy.

Monique, it's been almost five years since I was your student. I have never stopped thinking about you, and these memories keep me going. You are a role model, a source of inspiration, and I hope that I can be like you. I will not let the indignation fade away, I will not let them drag me down, and I will continue to do my work.

Sincerely,
VTB

Endnotes

[1] Sedgwick, Eve Kosofsky, and Adam Frank. *Touching Feeling.* Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2003. Print.

[2] Halberstam, Judith. *The Queer Art Of Failure.* Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2011. Print.

[3] Ibid.

[4] Ricoeur, Paul. *Oneself as Another.* Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992 (1990).

[5] Ellis, C., Adams, T. E., & Bochner, A. P. (2011). “Autoethnography: an overview.” *Historical Social Research/Historische Sozialforschung*, 273-290.

[6] Halberstam, op. cit.

[7] Doyle, Jennifer. *Hold It Against Me.* Durham, NC: Duke UP, 2013. Print.

[8] Halberstam, op. cit.

[9] What I call *Casual Rebellion* is an informal, understated way of revolting against authority and oppression. The power of casual rebellions only comes with accumulation, when the repetition of contrarian actions becomes empowering, as it liberates the subject from feelings of shame and guilt. It is a playful approach to resistance.

[10] “Both spider distressed and nondistressed individuals reported disgust and exhibited disgust facial expressions in response to a tarantula. Disgust in response to spiders was not found to be part of a general disgust response to all negative stimuli, nor was it due to a general negative emotional response to spiders. (...) The results of this study provide evidence that spiders have a specific disgust-evoking status in both distressed and nondistressed populations.” Vernon, Laura L., and Howard Berenbaum. "Disgust and fear in response to spiders." *Cognition & Emotion* 16.6 (2002): 809-830.

[11] “Current evidence suggests that disgust is significantly related to small animal phobias (particularly spider phobia), blood–injection–injury phobia and obsessive–compulsive disorder contamination fears, and these are all disorders that have primary disgust elicitors as a significant component of their psychopathology.” Davey, Graham CL. "Disgust: the disease-avoidance emotion and its dysfunctions." *Philosophical Transactions of the Royal Society B: Biological Sciences* 366.1583 (2011): 3453-3465.

[12] “Feeding experiments showed that these spiders consumed a variety of sugars found in extrafloral nectar and honeydew. HPLC analysis of sucrose-fed spiders showed that they readily converted sucrose into its constituent monomers and rapidly assimilated fructose. Furthermore, laboratory diet studies demonstrated that consumption of sugar and other non-prey food resources could significantly improve their survival, growth, and development.”

[13] ” L’oeuvre furtive ne se remarque d’abord que par hasard, au fil de la promenade par exemple (…); elle est appréhendée comme une anomalie qui rompt avec la familiarité du lieu, quoique de façon discrete.” Loubier, Patrice, and Anne Marie Ninacs. *Les Commensaux.* Montreal, QC: Centre des Arts Actuels, 2001. Print.

[14] Ritter, Kathleen. “How to Recognize a Furtive Practice: A User’s Guide” in Babin, Sylvette, and Terrance Keller. *Lieux Et Non-Lieux De L'art Actuel.* Montréal: Éditions Esse, 2005. Print.

[15] Ibid.

[16] Halberstam, Op. cit.

[17] For instance, stirring juice with a brand new comb has been used in psychology studies on disgust, such as: Rozin, Paul, April Fallon, and MaryLynn Augustoni-Ziskind. 'The Child's Conception Of Food: The Development Of Contamination Sensitivity To "Disgusting" Substances.'. *Developmental Psychology* 21.6 (1985): 1075-1079. Web.

[18] I would like to briefly mention the work of antispecist ecofeminists such as Carol J. Adams, Marti Kheel, Élise Desaulniers and Christiane Bailey, who argue that carnism is intricately tied to capitalism and patriarchy. However, although I acknowledge that this is a crucial issue, I will not address it further within the confines of this paper, as my research in this area is still limited and my understanding of it is not yet fully developed.

[19]Rozin, Paul. "The socio-cultural context of eating and food choice." *Food choice, acceptance and consumption*. Springer US, 1996. 83-104.

[20] "Men's and women's ability to produce, provide, distribute and consume food is a key measure of their power. This ability varies according to their culture, their class and their family organization, and the overall economic structure of their society." Counihan, Carole, and Steven L Kaplan. *Food And Gender.* Amsterdam, the Netherlands: Harwood Academic Publishers, 1998. Print.

[21] "Lisa the Vegetarian." *The Simpsons: Season 7.* Writ. David S. Cohen. 20th Century Fox, 2005. DVD.

[22]I would even argue that the boot is a signifier for the lack of food in popular culture. I'm thinking about the trope of fishing up an old boot, or eating one. For instance, in Charlie Chaplin's *The Gold Rush*, the character of the Tramp is so hungry he has to boil and eat his own shoe.

[23] Brugère, Fabienne. "The Disappearance Of The Artwork". *esse* 66 (2009): n. pag. Web. 11 Sept. 2015.

[24] Ibid.

[25] Kristeva, Julia, and Leon S Roudiez. *Powers Of Horror.* New York: Columbia University Press, 1982. Print.

[26] "Des pièces pas forcément agréables à regarder agiront à titre de trompe-goûts, mais je vous assure qu'elles seront toutes délicieuses à déguster, confectionnées dans les règles strictes de salubrité et d'hygiène. Le MAPAQ [ministère de l'Agriculture, des Pêcheries et de l'Alimentation du Québec] pourrait débarquer et n'y verrait rien à redire." Ducharme, André. 'Claudie Gagnon : De L'Art Mangeable - L'actualité'. L'actualité. N. p., 2013. Web. 10 Sept. 2015.

[27] Butler, Judith. *Gender Trouble.* New York: Routledge, 1999. Print.

[28] "Le ludique amène ainsi à prendre compte du plaisir que ce type de geste peut provoquer à leur instigateur: jouissance de se soustraire à l'universel impératif de faire sens, détourner le principe en dérision, de goûter une certaine gratuité, d'atteindre autrui à son insu." Loubier, Patrice, and Anne Marie Ninacs. *Les Commensaux.* Montreal, QC: Centre des Arts Actuels, 2001. Print.

[29] Kristeva, Op. Cit.

[30] Tyler, Imogen. "Against abjection." *Feminist Theory* 10.1 (2009): 77-98.

[31] Ibid

[32] Like Sam Taylor-Wood in her 2001 video, *Still Life*, I'm interested in the transformations that occur without human intervention. Her work captures and present an accelerated decomposition of a bowl of fruits. I prefer to observe the metamorphosis in real time.

[33] “Everything changes, nothing dies” in Ovide, A. D. Melville, and Edward John Kenney. *Metamorphoses.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986. Print.

[34] “In nature nothing is created, nothing is lost, everything changes.” in Lavoisier, Antoine Laurent. *Elements Of Chemistry, In A New Systematic Order.* New York: Dover Publications, 1965. Print.

[35] Allard, Dominique. "La métaphore «renouvelée» comme modalité d'indécidabilité en art actuel: David Altmejd, Claudie Gagnon et Carsten Höller." (Thesis) Université du Québec à Montréal, 2010.

[36] Laozi., Gia-fu Feng, and Jane English. *Tao Te Ching*. New York: Vintage Books, 1972. Print.

[37] hooks, bell. *Feminist Theory From Margin To Center.* Boston, MA: South End Press, 1984. Print.

[38] Here I’m not talking about work in liberal terms — paid labour as a way to accumulate wealth and position oneself in a social hierarchy — but about physical or intellectual activity that produces new things, knowledge, narratives.

[39] Ngai, Sianne. *Ugly Feelings*. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2005. Print.

[40] Ibid

[41] Haraway, Donna. "Situated knowledges: The science question in feminism and the privilege of partial perspective." Feminist studies (1988): 575-599.

[42] “Every one of us completely regenerates our own skin every 7 days. A cut heals itself and disappears in a week or two. Every single cell in our skeleton is replaced every 7 years.” Stemcell.stanford.edu. 'Research - Stem Cell Biology And Regenerative Medicine Institute - Stanford Medicine'. N. p., 2015. Web. 12 Sept. 2015.

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