

**Training Videos:  
Cornering Socio-Cultural Movement**

By

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## ABSTRACT

This thesis explores how the movement, presentation and interaction of the body are learned through one's identifier; gender, culture, nationality, race, religion, and social class. Expected norms to one's mannerisms and way of being in the world is determined and controlled by each of these identifiers. Through my practice-led-research with my body as a tool, I explore social norms which limit my agency over my haptic and intuitive embodied way of moving. With my Defence work, *Subversive Training Videos*, a diptych large-screen video installation with an unconventional bench, I aim to unlearn and challenge social norms linked to social behaviours.



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My family, patiently listening to my emotional wreck each week.

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In French, there is an expression that says ‘Je lève mon chapeau’ (I raise my hat), one raises their hat out of thanks and respect.

Well Justin, ‘Je lève mon chapeau’ to you, thank you.

## 1. INTRODUCTION –

‘Je suis l’espace où je suis’ – Noel Arnaud

– I am the space where I am –

‘The Body has a Grammar of its own that cannot be fully captured in language’

–Eric Shouse

## Introduction-

The body and its identifiers—gender, nationality, culture, religion, race, and social class—leads one to navigate and move in the world in distinctive, constrained, and limited ways. From the day we are born, our bodies are produced and constructed by the social and cultural structures that surround us. Growing up, we are encouraged to conform to a set of conventional behaviours that which are determined by our body and its identifiers. Through learning and then repeating the expectations others have of our body, our movements, and the way we present ourselves, become normalized. The body's movements and behaviours are then necessarily confined by the limitations placed on us by the society and ourselves. As a result, there is a loss of agency<sup>1</sup> to ways of being. By practicing embodiment,<sup>2</sup> one regains a lost connection with the surrounding world, which otherwise is dominated by our visual and auditory senses.

In my practice, I aim to unlearn the ways I was taught to move and be in this world, and thereby my socially and culturally constructed physicality. This is the core of my practice. I engage in a practice-lead-research where the research is not materially-based but rather internally and socially embodied. As such, my thesis project is based on a series of what I consider to be subversive training videos, in which I explore unconventional bodily movements, gestures and interactions with simple architectures. I use the word subversive to challenge normative behaviours attached to specific movements within a given cultural milieu. The term “training” is deployed to signal that this unlearning is still in process. I see this as an iterative and ongoing

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<sup>1</sup> By linking agency to movement, I am thinking about the act of movement or gesture as both supported and limited by the social context in which I find myself. E.g. I could sit on a chair however I want at a job interview, but if I wish to get the job, I would very likely have to sit in a particular chair in a particular way. Rules and expectations of social conduct and, in turn, movement, frame agency.

<sup>2</sup> In my practice, I see embodiment as a return to and focus on the body's own awareness of its bodily rhythms and processes, its limitations and haptic impulses.

task, based on incremental gains that result in a potentially endless series of videos. Through the medium of video, I can analyse my actions, hesitations and expressions post the process of training, which allows me to gain knowledge of when and how moments of sociocultural learned norms overtake my intuitive and reflexive haptic navigation of the space.

### **The Corner-**

The specific spaces that I work with in this series have taken the form of corners, which I navigate as a metaphor for interactions with the world. When talking about corners I am referring to the inside of the corner not the outside point which the corner forms. This distinction is important, as my practice unfolded in these interior spaces and the literature I reference to work through these ideas also refer to these interiors, or spaces of interiority. The most common understanding of corners may suggest being cornered, or cornering, or being forced into an awkward, embarrassing, or inescapable position. The French philosopher Gaston Bachelard writes on the corner in *The Poetics of Space*, where he explores the corner as a space of introverts, a space where “old dust ... forgotten by brooms” (Bachelard 141) is found. I think of the corner as the site of being temporarily banished from another social situation, where the individual is told to sit as a form of punishment, and where one goes to hide in retreat. “The corner becomes a negation of the Universe” (Bachelard 136), the turning of ones back to the world. In contrast, my engagement with the corner is a musing on Bachelard’s corner as a site of productive ‘un-consideration’. Its design allows for realization its potential for self-exploration and as a starting point for free expression isolated from the world. I use the corner to focus in on myself as a means to reconnect with my body and my immediate world. It also allows for a framework to focus my idea. The corner allows this as it is “a sort of half-box, part walls, part



door ... [and serves] ... as an illustration of the dialectics of inside and outside” (Bachelard 137), allowing one to retreat into one’s own imagination and reflection without the fear of the judgement of a passerby. The corner is a space not of discipline but of unfettered exploration, an opportunity to face inward, and to consider oneself in relation to an immovable and unflinching partner in play.

### **Biographical context-**

Before I focus on the thesis work, I would like to provide some context for my artistic process, informed in many ways by the challenges and gaps in other parts of my intellectual and social life. I was never good at communicating, at least not in the ‘normative’ modes of linear talking or writing. Phone calls, or letters, and papers from school were the most uncomfortable and frightening things for me as a child. Even now, I continue to be anxious not knowing if others can understand me, if I am understanding them, or if I will be able to find my words. Will I pronounce things correctly? Will I blank in the middle of a conversation? When face-to-face with other people, I can more readily navigate through the visual social cues and subtleties of reactions, which tell me if I am communicating ‘normally’ enough to be understood, or if I am being experienced as being dyslexic. Communicating in person has become more viable as I’ve grown up, but any form of communication which has a separation between the speaker and listener remains particularly challenging for me. In person, I can adjust myself in real-time, responding dynamically to the expressions of my dyslexia as they filter through the conversation at hand. To be clear, though, I am always being dyslexic. I have been ‘formally’ dyslexic since I was diagnosed when I was eight years-old.

## Dyslexia-

Dyslexia is categorized as a learning disability often displayed as a person mixing up their 'p' and 'q', their 'b' and 'd', or it is embraced as the special talent of being able to read a book upside down.<sup>3</sup> Though this is true at times, the reality is considerably more complex. Every dyslexic person is different; some will struggle with different aspects of language, but one thing most have in common is that their way of learning and understanding does not fit within the educational structures in place at most conventional institutions. In the way I understand my dyslexia, I tend to be challenged by a disconnection in the brain when communication occurs through verbal and written language. Other complications arise with difficulty memorizing words and names; I have no trouble with images or embodied memories but when the alphabet is involved, only short-term memory works. As I mentioned, over time I have adapted to knowing how to communicate as a response to others' bodies and gestures. I know if my sentence structure, my words, my pronunciation and so on are correct as a result of people's reactions. This produces an unending contingency on other people's 'read' of my actions; my ability to be understood is a continuous feedback loop of being iteratively disciplined, narrowed, and normalized. I would compare it to an act of translation; the 'mother tongue' of the way I think is dyslexic and so I invariably feel both lost in translation and exhausted by continually translating myself to others. In other words, dyslexia effects the way I process information, most specifically in processes of communication, which impact how I understand the world around me

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<sup>3</sup> In the English Antidote Dictionary application, Dyslexia is described as a disorder in which one has difficulty distinguishing, identifying and writing letters where the individual has difficulty attaching words to their proper meanings in writing or speech. (Antidote9) Growing up, I was told that eventually everything falls into place as you find your own way of being and learning.

and how I interact with other. This shapes the ways in which my artistic process occurs and develops.

## **TCK –**

To further complicate my communication and language use, I am a Third Culture Kid (TCK).<sup>4</sup> I grew up in the Middle East but I have a Canadian passport. This created a cultural identity that is neither Canadian nor Emirati. The confusion of this cultural identity is also compounded by a body with particular racial and gendered expressions that signal different things in different cultures. When I was a child, I could speak French, Arabic and English, and I had taken Spanish, Italian and German as optional languages at different schools. As much as it was a privilege having had the opportunity to know different languages, because of my dyslexia, I wasn't always comfortable enough in any of those languages to accurately express my emotions or ideas. Further, when I was able to draw together my thoughts, I found I didn't have the vocabulary to do so, as I only had a colloquial understanding of each language. Even today I

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<sup>4</sup> The Third Culture Kid is a globalization phenomenon which is often linked with children of missionaries, military families, and expatriates but may be other exceptions. My family were expatriates to the United Arab Emirates. Many move to multiple different countries in short period of time due to their parents' work. In 'Third Culture Kids': Migration narratives on belongings, Identity and Place' (2015), Rachel May Cason who is herself a TCK elaborates on the term looking at the term from the point of view of the child and the grown up TCK in the future. In her writing, she indicates that the child "achieve belonging through marginality" (Cason 18) as they are always in-between cultures of the different countries they move to, in-between their parents' culture and the culture they grow up in. This has a lasting effect of the way a child develops their identity, their understanding of 'home' and creates a disassociation with a singular culture. The TCK, "In short, globalization processes serve to blur the boundaries of both physical and social senses of belonging, and reformulate new ways of embedding one's identity...independently from the nation state" (Cason 21 and 23). As a result, the TCK has a different way of interacting with the world, building relationships and never truly fit into one cultural identity.

find myself at times knowing words in only one language, I mix languages, write sentence structures in the wrong language, offer an expression that cannot be understood when translated, and I think in multiple languages. Each language comes with a different set of memories of where I was living at the time and each feels like a differently embodied cultural identity simultaneously. I act and interact differently in each language, as each language and culture have different expectations and norms. This creates overlaps and folds in my manners of interacting which like my dyslexia is a cyclical complication of finding the ‘correct way’ to communicate in the world for others to understand not only my verbal cues my body language cues as well.

### **Embodied Communication–**

The troubles that I encountered with language from a young age led me to explore the world and express myself through more intuitive embodied methods. My hands, facial expressions, and subtle impulses from within my body have become crucial articulations in everyday communication. Like a deaf person would rely on lip reading, I rely on body reading, translated and understood in relation to my own body’s gestures to process communication. My connections with the world are experienced through the senses and embodied experiences rather than books, or conversations. However, this embodied ontology is not always welcomed. Over time, in fact, this embodied ontology becomes increasingly limited, disciplined into normative expressions that map neatly onto my gender and the socio-cultural expectations that come to impose themselves on my body.

Gail Weiss, the Dean’s Research Professor of Philosophy at the George Washington University has written significantly on the philosophy of embodiment and the body. In her essay, *The Normal, the Natural, and the Normative: A Merleau-Pontian Legacy to Feminist Theory*,

*Critical Race Theory, and Disability Studies*, Weiss writes that, “Merleau-Ponty's insistence that our bodies (rather than our consciousness) are the means by which we directly engage with the world, I suggest, encourages us to be attentive to how an individual's or group's gender, race, and bodily abilities differentially affect how their bodies are responded to by other bodies. The responses of others, in turn, directly influences the significance of an individual's (inter) actions within that situation”. My movements, interactions and presentation were taught to fit the category of a white, female, Canadian, living in the Middle East, with parents situated in the Upper Middle Class. In this context, I did not fit into the socially accepted behaviours expected of me among the peers of the community in which I lived, or my parents. I couldn't please either culture, and so my comfort with movement and self-expression was far from fitting the social expectations of conversations or social interactions in the societies I encountered. As a child, I quickly understood that there was ‘correct’ and ‘incorrect’ way for me to move and present myself in the world. That correctness differed depending on the country I was in, the community in which I lived, the school in which I was educated, and all the standards and norms for how I was recognized - above all as a white female - in those given contexts. All this affected the way I was taught to act, move and be in a conscious relationship to the immediate world around me.

These circumstances (gender, culture, nationality, class...) determines how one is taught to work towards becoming an adult. As a girl, I was taught to keep my legs closed together when sitting, this was regarded as the ‘correct’ way for a young lady to sit in the culture I grew up in. My brother, on the other hand, wasn't asked to sit with his legs closed. It is not just the mannerism of sitting ect. but the small movement based and expectations that impose a manner of interacting in the world that is gendered. One might say that my training began on the 2nd of August 1991, when my sex and gender were both assigned as female. As Simone de Beauvoir

states, “One is not born a woman, but rather becomes one” (Beauvoir). The becoming is the state by which others train you to be a woman. American philosopher and renowned gender theorist Judith Butler, elaborate on the state of becoming by writing that “gender is constructed through social norms and rituals” which impacts social expectations of movement and interactions (Butler, *On Performativity*, 1990). The child starts off with only one definition of movement: it is the ability the body has for movement within its surroundings. The day a child is born, others start determining and placing expectations to its freedom to move: “[all] bodies are gendered from the beginning of their social existence” (Salih, p. 55). Their gender assigned to them is the beginning of their education of how they will need to present themselves to the world to be part of the ‘normal’ society. Shawn Gallagher an Irish-American philosopher who works on embodied cognition, social cognition and agency, suggests that our movements are shaped the day we are born by our ability to mimic gestures and physicality, stating:

“In the beginning, that is, at the time of our birth, our human capacities for perception and behaviour have already been shaped by our movement. Prenatal bodily movement has already been organized along the lines of our own human shape, in proprioceptive and cross-modal registrations, in ways that provide a capacity for experiencing a basic distinction between our own embodied existence and everything else. As a result, when we first open our eyes, not only can we see, but also our vision, imperfect as it is, is already attuned to those shapes that resemble our own shape. More precisely and quite literally, we can see our own possibilities in the faces of others. The infant, minutes after birth, is capable of imitating the gesture that it sees on the face of another person. It is thus capable of

a certain kind of movement that foreshadows intentional action, and that propels it into a human world” (Gallagher p. 1).

Following Gallagher, from the day I was born, and therefore gendered, I had already started mimicking, in this instance, my mother’s feminine gestures and physicalizing.

### **Self-Surveillance; the ‘Panopticon-Like’ Control-**

As an outcome of my movement being impacted by social and cultural norms, the way I present myself, and interact with others and the world, is disciplined. I cannot fully explore my body because my movements are controlled, careful, and performed for an anticipated audience and environment, allowing very little impulsive, haptic, or embodied expression. Michel Foucault, the French philosopher and social theorist, wrote extensively on modes of social control, which aligns with why my body’s movements have been taught to interact and move in a normalized way. In *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison*, he wrote that citizens are disciplined with the help of surveillance and ‘normalizing judgements’. By being in ‘panopticon-like’<sup>5</sup> systems each individual is in “a state of conscious and permanent visibility that assures the automatic functioning of power.” (Foucault, 201) This visibility and consciousness functions as training platform for surveillance and conformity. We are trained to watch our neighbours, report misconduct and are constantly reminded that we ourselves are being surveilled. Corrective punishment is part of discipline surveillance, it is an incentive and reminder to one to conduct

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<sup>5</sup> The Panopticon is an architectural idea for a system of control designed by Jeremy Bentham. The structure would divide inmates in separate cells circulating the guards station which would be located at the centre. Each inmate would have been completely visible to the guard at any given moment, yet the inmate wouldn’t be able to tell when they were being watched. The idea was that the inmates would conduct themselves as they would be constantly reminded of the presence of the gaze of the guard with the visibility of “the tall outline of the central tower” (Foucault, 201)

themselves as “the non-conforming is punishable” (Foucault, 179). Further the control isn’t only based on the external expectations of others, it is also based on the practice of disciplining ourselves by following these expectations.

I may be watched; therefore, I will conduct myself in the ways which I am expected to, become hyper self-aware and create self-surveillance. This is precisely how growing up in a ‘panopticon-like’ system influences one’s interactions in the world. I find that the city is a construction of observation, a constant reminder to the citizen within it - through its windowed buildings, the reflective glass and the mirrors - is constantly being surveilled, and thus must constantly surveil one’s self. At its basis, “self-surveillance is a form of obedience to patriarchy” (Bartky, 42), it signifies a power shift from my body’s agency to the agency of the perceived observer. My awareness of this enforced self-observation is my core rationale for the need to ‘unlearn’ movement and interaction norms that are projected on my body and its movement in, and in relation to the world.

### **Thesis Project Context-**

My thesis project first started with me sitting in a chair staring at a small table in front of me, curious to know if my body could fit under the table. I didn’t understand my curiosity, I sat for quite some time thinking through the idea. Ultimately, I didn’t try. I didn’t try to fit my body under the table because logically it did not make sense; I couldn’t see any point in it and it, in turn, seemed strangely inappropriate. The absurdity of this process was that, of course, during that whole time of sitting and thinking, it would have taken me five minutes to attempt to just get under the table, to explore the idea intuitively. This, of course, suggests that I allow myself a manner of thinking about my body only in a logical alignment with my body’s actual movement



and exploration in space. Now, what is the logic in that? What harm could a simple silly gesture have caused? How is it that I can think my way through the entirety of a gesture but not convince my body to work its way through it? The truth is that my learned norms are quick to tell me that something isn't normal or it's not something I want anyone to see. That I risked being judged or misunderstood is something that often goes hand in hand with punishment.<sup>6</sup> I could hear echoes of my teacher or my mother scolding me: what on earth are you doing? Further, any explanation could only map onto an exceptional circumstance, being intoxicated, or 'acting out.'

So, while I never tried fitting my body under that one table, I was introduced into a new set of questions. What exactly was stopping me from trying to fit under that table? Why was I so drawn to doing this action? Why would it be such a big deal in me intervening and breaking the norms in this way? How many times have I stopped myself from listening to my body's impulses? As I started thinking about this, it became clear that this sort of scenario occurred daily. Nearly everything relating to my body and the way it moves, interacts with others and objects, is curated, revised and performed. The fact that I will stop myself from doing something because of the possibility of being watched makes me feel uncomfortable, manipulated and powerless although I also realize that I have been well trained to surveil myself, to engage in a pre-emptive censoring, to enact and re-enact a learned and disciplined behavior of my body. Unfortunately, these learned norms that I have repeated over the years have become comfortable and normal.

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<sup>6</sup> Regarding punishment, when one does the presentation of their identity expectation wrong, such as one's gender, "penalties that range from physical violence and emotional abuse to social ostracism and profound humiliation [can occur]" (Weiss, *Body Image*, p.2) As a child one may be grounded, restricted from favourite objects or forced into doing extra chores. An adult on the other hand punishment may outcome in higher risk, such as losing one's job.

I see my practice as a site for re-evaluating, questioning, and challenging these expectations. I am unlearning my body's physical routines to learn about my body and how it can move if I allow it to challenge these norms. I am cultivating<sup>7</sup> a process that can create a new sense of agency for myself in the world.

### **Mapping My Practice-**

My work is interdisciplinary: it takes up many forms including but not limited to video, performance, text-based installation, and social media interventions. I am particularly interested in exploring the body, the way it interacts and is expected to interact with the world, and finding opportunities to unlearn normative structures. I consider the body's presence and physicality, its haptic relations to the world, and its (learned) limitations. These limitations may be either physical or social, standards placed on oneself by virtue of, or by lack of, strength or dexterity, or the external forces of oneself which create direct and indirect limitations on the body. I engage in embodied subjective research, using my own body as a tool of exploration. Although the knowledge I gain is necessarily subjective and internal, it is framed through video documentation, live performance, or ephemeral works for further consideration by and through an audience and their experiences in the world.

Over the past two years at Emily Carr University of Art + Design (ECUAD), I have gradually honed my research and process to create a new substantial body of work for my thesis.

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<sup>7</sup> I use the word "cultivating" is used to acknowledge that in the process of unlearning I am also learning new way and therefore creating new norms. Though this is what I wish to break in the first place, my hope is to create new norms that would allow for a more opportunity, a wider range of ways of being in the world. By the process of this practice being an ongoing practice these new norms created for myself will be continually challenged which in this case the cultivation becomes not fixed.

While it has taken the shape of video performance, I would like to acknowledge that a variety of processes and projects have shaped where my work is today. Further, I would like to trace a lineage of practices that have informed various aspects of my process and of this final thesis project.

### Early Research-

The use of video to showcase the work was the solution for multiple problems within the work which have arisen through my time at ECUAD. I do not believe that the type of performance I engage with should occur within a specific place at a specific time and even less within an institution such as the school. This is partly as a result of improvisation and a sense of immediacy, which are not only a core part of how I interact with the world but are a driver in my process of decision-making within my practice. The presence of my body in performance and non-performance work, would often distract from the work itself. Though my body is still present in the video it is less direct, distancing the viewer and enough room for the work to breathe and for my audience to breathe and space for reflection. Some of the artists who work with movement and/or the body who have used film or video to present their works which have influenced me are Bruce Nauman, Lisa Steele, and Lucy Gunning. In *Floor/Wall Positions* (1968), Nauman uses video purely as documentation. In this work, he moves between the floor and the wall of his studio in an exploratory way. Steele with her intimate piece *Birthday Suit – with scars and defects* (1974) uses video as a mode of showcasing a performance which in person might have not been as successful as it would have not allowed space for the



Figure 1 Gunning, L. 'Climbing Around My Room' (1993)

viewer to reflect of the work. Showcasing all the scars and defects she has on her body starting with the oldest to the most recent she shares an intimacy and vulnerability with the viewer. The separation of the viewer to the artist created by the video helps for a comfortable look at the naked female body. Gunning with *Climbing Around my Room* (1993) present a performance which could have been seen no other way then through video as we watch her climb and explore the inside of her room. Though these works are influences, *Training Videos* are not a documentation of a performance, nor is it video art, they are training videos which I use in my process of unlearning and presented as a fraction of my research for this work. It is closer to *Time Reversal Symmetry* (2018) by Evann Siebens, a Vancouver-based artist, where the art isn't the installation, it isn't the performance but a collaboration from a bigger work. I like to think of my training video to be presented in a gallery space as a work as being partly humorous and partly destabilizing as it is not the expected. By saying this,



Figure 2 Siebens, E. 'Time Reversal Symmetry' (2018)

the strangeness of training videos in the white cube may resemble *Drills* (2015), a three-channel video work by Geoffrey Pugen and Tibi Tibi Neuspiel, both Toronto-based artists.

*Drills* is destabilizing as the location it is set in, a squash court, doesn't fit with the action which is taking part. The artists running are moving objects from one place to the next in series of repeated actions in drills but the nonsensical feeling of the piece becomes questionable

as each action are taken very seriously.



Figure 2 Pugen, G. and Neuspiel, T. T. 'Drills' (2015)

In one of my early works at ECUAD, I moved my allocated studio space outside of the space provided to me as a graduate student in an off-campus studio building. In the alley behind the studio, I locked my table and chair to the wall of the ECUAD studio building and spent close to two weeks leading studio visits and critiques of the work

there. A great influence on my work at the time was the Vancouver-based artist Ken Lum. Looking at some of his earlier works has helped me understand what it is that I do. One of his earliest works, *Entertainment for Surrey* (1978), I realized was based in that is similar, thematically and formally, to my own



Figure 4 'My Studio Space' (2016)

practice. In this work, young Lum stood on an embankment next to a highway heading from Surrey to Vancouver. Looking right at the traffic as it passed by, he stood there at the same spot every day for the next five days. In an article about his work, Lum expresses that his interest lies in “[destabilizing] notions of identity, objectivity and power” (Egan, D). In Lum’s gesture of standing by the highway, he destabilizes and begins to complicate the everyday normative expectation for himself and the driver has of her/his daily commute.

Staying with the idea of destabilization, later in my first year, I created a poster inviting the public to book appointments to sleep with me. The poster followed the simple guideline of a letter-sized poster that one would encounter on a bulletin board for an event or a sale. It included a headline, 'SLEEPING WITH PEOPLE' and 'CURRENTLY TAKING

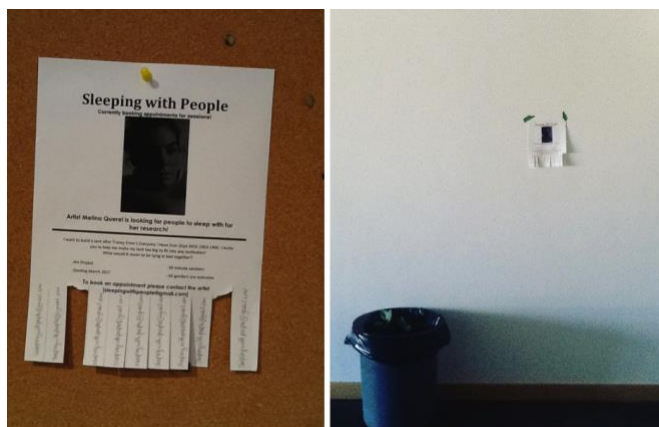


Figure 5 'Sleeping with People Poster' (2017)

APPOINTMENTS', a head shot, my name, background information and an email address.

The poster was affixed on bulletin boards, stairways, and other public spaces across ECUAD, Granville Island and Mount Pleasant. Concerns about my safety were raised regarding false impressions that may be conveyed because of my gender. This work had come out of a series projects I had done after exploring the works of Tracey Emin, and with particular attention to her work, 'Everyone I Have Slept With 1963–1995' (1995). In this work Emin has the names of everyone she had ever slept with, from 1963–1995 embroidered inside a tent. The play on words speaks to the individuals she has had sex with but also anyone she has slept next to, the work includes the name of her sister, for example. The private information shared is provocative. It jars the viewer by forcing them to encounter their expectations of female sexuality. With the *Sleeping with People Poster*, I riffed on Emin's play on words, working to undermine the viewer's not just with the idea that this invitation existed, but with a direct connection to a picture of my face and personal details.

The breaking of the everyday and of social and cultural expectations placed on one's body has in these ways become important to me. Generally, there is an odd sort of dark humour

which occurs when one does something that isn't the everyday norm but acts as though it is which I enjoy. Whereas Emin's work sat somewhat insulting within the gallery context, Chris Burden's work has often entered into more banal spaces. In 'Through the Night Softly' (1973), a 10-second advertisement/artwork, Burden is seen crawling slowly towards the camera, chest on the floor full of broken glass, in what seems to be a black underwear. The advertisement was aired on network television between normal advertisements of the time, an example of an immediate advertisement following his work was on the beautifying of the American Dream Lifestyle. The advertisement at the time created a disturbance, this short unexpected and uncomfortable sight made its audience uncertain as to what they had just encountered. I relish work of this sort as the destabilization it initiates permits one to question their everyday such as in this case what gets aired on television, just like me intervening with how I was taught to move allows me to question the correctness attached to the way I was taught to move in a 'correct way' of moving.

Reflecting on the range of work, that I created in the first year of the MFA program and the many artists that I am interested in, the body of works I am inclined to produce are often not produced for, or meant to occur in, the gallery space. I am more interested in looking at everyday platforms to showcase for the possibility of work to occur. I have struggled for a long time with this: how do I showcase my work when the 'art' isn't the documentation? How do I work within an institution such as the university without having to be in the institution? I had never worked with video before this year except for personal documentation of my work, but this is the medium that I have come to answer these specific questions through.

## Thesis Project–

*Training Videos*, my Thesis Defense work, is a body of video performance presented as a diptych on two large screens. On the left screen, a video series called *Haptic Improvisation*, showcases videos which contain continuous movements. On the right screen, *Technical Training* loops through a series of held positions. Both series are filmed in the same manner and aesthetic. The videos are steady and



Figure 3 Documentation of 'Haptic Improvisation'(2018) process.

filmed on a tripod. The camera is positioned at chest height and has a wide angle which captures space above my body when standing straight while also the bottom when lying flat towards the camera. The videos all start off as an empty frame showing the grey floor and white walls with a corner. Within a few seconds, I am walking into the frame and begin my training. The repetition of the body re-entering the frame in each video is used as an indicator towards the duplication of the process of repetition which occurs in learning. The monitors mounted on the wall side by side show two techniques employed in the process of learning, and unlearning about bodily limitations in the manner of interacting and moving in space. The set-up of the two monitors is kept simple as the project isn't meant to be experienced as an installation but rather is a method of showing video documentation and the process of researching the conditioned movements of the body.

*Haptic Improvisation*, is a series of explorations of unconventional movements of the entire body within a corner. In these training sessions, my moving body will at times pause for moments of reflection and contemplation. It is in this way a continuous improvisational experimentation of movements in which I try to follow and listen to my body's internal



alignment and locomotive curiosity. These trainings, I hope will function over time to allow me to improvise and transition, as I begin to intervene faster when re-encountering the world. As I start off in the corner, I examine my surroundings and then intuitively begin to move. I let this bodily intuition lead me from one movement to the next. I do this by consciously resisting the ingrained expectations of interaction and movement that are trying to prevent abnormal or unexplored motions of embodied movement that I am imbibing. Nothing is planned or staged, this results in awkward and raw moments such as me losing balance and falling or coming very close to hurting myself unintentionally. The way I explore the corner, the two walls, and the floor with my body has a similar rhythm to Bruce Nauman's play and exploration with his body in his *Wall/Floor Positions* (1968) video. As I become more comfortable and familiar in my surroundings, which generally set in around the three-minute mark, a relationship starts to emerge between the body and the space which is more complex and truer to my internal instincts of movement.

In the second video series, *Technical Training*, I hold a series of still positions held for three minutes at a stretch. With these videos, I aim to develop flexibility and strength, while also working to ground my body in stillness. In stillness, I work to understand how each part of my body is connected and feeling, and this is helping me in becoming my awareness of my body. It is important for each stance to be held for a minimum of three minutes for it to be beneficial for the body, and to get a sense of how the position is affecting the body. It also allows for the body to recalculate the gravity for the position, to renegotiate and unbalance itself. The position being held for the three minutes may at times be confused with a still image depending on the difficulty of the position which would increase the movements as my body struggles and shakes. In

exploring the form of sustained or held positions, *Technical Training* takes influence from New York-based artist and choreographer Maria Hassabi's live-installation, *Plastic* (2015–2016).



Figure 7 Hassabi, M. 'Plastic' (2015-2016)

In *Plastic*, Hassabi and other dancers hold positions for a durational amount of time in the public spaces of museums to explore notions of stillness around the body.<sup>8</sup> The audience being the individuals passing thru the museum at times don't even notice the were they come close to stepping on a performer lying in the middle of a staircase. The relationship between the dancer

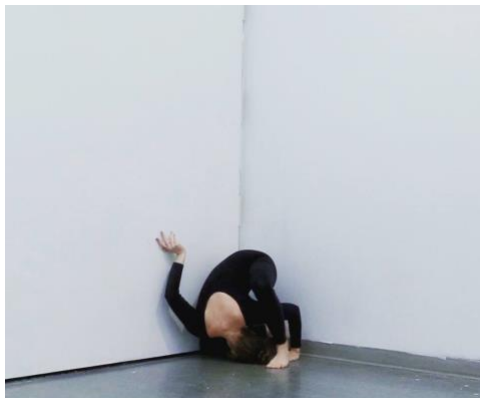


Figure 8 Documentation from training session (February 2018)

and the audience is of something different the expected norms where thinking of dance or performance. The still positions taken by the dancers are similar to my *Technical Training* positions. Stillness allows my body to break from the comfort of its normal ways of movement, repositioning it into new contexts, or allowing for its capacity or range of

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<sup>8</sup> I am interested in *Plastic* for the performer is placed at a close relationship to its viewer, breaking the separation performance normally has to the audience such as in dance or theater where there is a distinct passive audience and active performer. In *Plastic*, the performer is intertwined in the same space as the audience. The audience are the one actively moving around the performers who at first site seems still, one may even be uncertain that there is a performance occurring. (Hassabi)

motion to grow. Stillness at a stretch starts with pain but through patience and repetition it attains a new norm for the body that begins to feel comfortable.

This is my process of unlearning the bodily aspects of this project such as muscle memory<sup>9</sup>. The individual positions are an accumulation of videos with no limits to the number of positions the series may include, as each



Figure 9 'The Bench' (2018)

time I train, new movements may be added through exploration. It is important to note that some of my positions cannot yet be held for the three minutes' time, due to inefficient muscular strength or flexibility. This is normal as each movement becomes easier with practice, and more opportunities to new movements arise with greater flexibility, strength and comfort. My body through this unlearning then becomes a body with fewer limits.

Another element of my installation in *Training Videos* is the bench. The bench which was one of the most recent addition to my defence show is an extension of the idea I have been working through concerning fitting into expected norms of movement and its unlearning process.

The bench is positioned in front of the two large monitors for those who wish to sit to watch the videos. The bench has no arms or back, it has enough space for four people to sit at a time. Its structure is built from wood tinted with a dark walnut shade. Its sitting surface is made of plaster, three thick pieces of plaster, polished, sealed with



Figure 10 During show reception, audience interacting with the bench.

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<sup>9</sup> The Oxford English Dictionary identifies muscle memory as being “the ability to reproduce a particular movement without conscious thought, acquired as a result of frequent repetition of that movement”. In a way muscle memory can act as a sort of reflex and an embodied memory.

three layers of acrylic paint and finished with a layer of wax. It has all the properties of a bench except from the fact that its top surface has four indents into shapes my body created in similar positions taken from the *Training Videos*. It is important to note that through the process of performing these positions in plaster, my body came close



Figure 11 Detail of 'The Bench' in process of production.

to being immobile in the plaster as it cured due to part of my hair getting stuck in the material and having to pull it out. The centre piece includes a small chunk of my hair. The hair and these indents only become visible when approaching the bench close.

As these shapes are moulded to my body, they are gendered with bias, as not everyone has the same body in size, shape and flexibility no one can perfectly fit in the indents. Second, the part which the indents were made from sitting in exploration ways of sitting, unless trying to explore that specific way the body could sit one will be uncomfortable as the indents will not fit their body position. The positions are made specifically so that the more one tries to fit their conventional ways of sitting the more uncomfortable and aware they will become to the way they are sitting.

Other artists have worked with benches while breaking the expectation and experience of the audience through the action of sitting such as Jeppe Hein. Hein is a Danish artist who works with interactive sculptures and installation has created a series of unconventional benches with *Modified Social Benches*. His bench similarly to mine keeps a functional use and the basic of how that specific bench would be constructed, in Hein's case, his benches are reorganized structures of the traditional western park/garden benches wooden bench. Painted in white are at times higher, shorter, tilting, only partly constructed or take up a new form using the same

materials. My bench, on the other hand, resembles that of the one often use in galleries and white cube space. The bench has no back support and fits around four individuals all at once.

The bench has not been titled as I do not see it as a separate work but rather part of the installation which adds to the experience of the monitors in the first place. Through adding this extra element to the work, I hope to create a self-awareness to my audience in a similar way that the main architectural stairs to the Museum of Fine Arts in Montreal do. The stairs were designed by architect Moshe Safdie, the steps are lower than normal steps which makes one feel unbalanced has muscle memory of the body lift the leg higher than it should. The length of the steps is also too long for one to go up one step at a time forcing the visitor to pay more attention as they go up the stairs.

## **Conclusion-**

I have come to create my final thesis project, *Training Videos*, as a direct outcome of being Dyslexic and a Third Culture Kid. These important parts of who I am because of my Dyslexia and the contexts in which I grew up, and in turn, both my everyday interactions and my artistic process are equally informed by these elements of my subjectivity. My cultural Identity as a TCK, and by virtue of continually moving to new homes and trying to settle in to new communities growing up, I have developed a strategy of improvisation that maps onto my daily life and my artistic practice. My interest in un-learning comes from my own learning difficulties which dyslexia brings. As a result of difficulty with more commonly used form of communications such as verbal and written language, I was lenient while expressing and articulating myself through my body's gestures, impulses and movement. Yet my identities, my gender, nationality, culture, religion, race, and social class have through the years influence and

controlled the way I move my body, present myself and interact with the world. As most of my work involves performance, my body is my tool. This tool, I have come to realize while pursuing my Master of Fine Arts at ECUAD, is limited by the bias and expectations that comes tied up because of these identities. This understanding first came to me after reflecting on discomfort which had arisen after stopping my impulse to fit myself under a table. The realization that I had stopped myself from doing something simple as this because I was scared someone might see, because I had no logical explanation for my actions and because it wasn't the 'correct' way which I was taught to move was daunting, it made me feel powerless to my own body.

Through the process of unlearning, by becoming comfortable mentally in breaking the socially expected norm I have and perceive others have of me, and training the body's physicality, learning its physical limitations and expanding its range in movement through strength and flexibility, I hope to decrease the limitations I have placed on my body's way of movement. My hope is for the possibility of change, a way of being which I have developed through my practice at ECUAD that could permit me as an ongoing process to become more aware of reasons which motivate my actions, which as an outcome would bring a better version of myself one of reflexivity and reflection, looking from the outside-in and learning from myself.

The act of performing these exercises and the reflection from the training videos is for myself, but by presenting the project within the gallery space I hope to the audience to question similar questions relating to the body's movement, presentation and interactions or/and make them more aware of their body.

## Thesis Show and Defence Reflections-

*Training Videos* was presented in the MFA Graduate Exhibition 2018 taking place at the Michal O'Brien Exhibition Commons at Emily Carr University from the 29<sup>th</sup> of March to the 7<sup>th</sup> of April 2018. Overall the show had a good turnout. Some audience chose to interact with the bench either by trying to sit or others trying to fit their bodies into the moulds and intends formed by mine. Those that didn't interact with the bench directly, seemed engaged observing the interactions or connections between the training videos and the bench.

My defence occurred in front of the work on the 29<sup>th</sup> of March at 9:30 am. The committee was made up of Justin Langlois, my supervisor, Trish Kelly, the Associate Dean of the MFA program, Cissie Fu, the Internal

examiner, and Josh Hite, the external examiner. The defence began with a land territory acknowledgement and a few words on my part explaining my relationship to dyslexia and TCK, my work and research. The questions from the



Figure 12 Image of my defence panel, and my work. Left to right, Josh Hite, Cissie Fu, Justin Langlois, Trish Kelly and myself.

panel touched my interest to the corner, the physical presence of my body, and looking at other artists in relationship to immediacy, social norms and improvisation amongst other points.

A point on the corner which came up was looking at the relationship to the presence of the corner in my work. The corners in the videos on the monitors, installed not too far from a corner. The bench holding multiple corners. I am hesitant to hold that link to the bench's corners as they are exterior corners that are visible and as I explain in this paper earlier I talk of interior corners those which a body can fit in. The points of an exterior corner leaves one with no place to hide in order to reflect, it does not provide protection for an unlearning process I



*Figure 13 'Training Videos' (2018)*

believe it does the opposite of what I use my corners for as It places one at full visibility.

The discussion was nourishing and rich, helping me to advance some of the ideas informing my work, and providing me with even more artistic and theoretical reference points for moving forward. I was very privileged for my audience was also engaged with productive questions at the end. I believe that the defence went very well and has provided the support to further this paper.

### **Looking Forward-**

Through the process of the MFA program and more specifically the months before and week prior the show I have become extensively aware of myself, of the focus needed to bring each elements of my work together. I have learned a great deal about how myself, how I function differently in a writing state and my hands-on practice. I believe that my artistic practice has grown in its clarity by subtracting the elements to its core of its idea. I can now vocalize more



clearly my practice and answer the question ‘what is it that you do?’ when asked, which I wasn’t able to do two years ago.

As I proceed with my research and art practice, I would like to reflect further on how dyslexia and my cultural identity as a TCK influence my methods and methodology. I will continue exploring transforming everyday furniture and unlearning disciplinary normative ways of interacting, I see the element of my bench in *Training Videos* being a start to this exploration. I hope to own the forwardness and rawness of the presence of my body and identity further. I will try to do this by embracing my body in a more direct manner to the audience. I will also continue exploring, questioning and reading about control, disciplinary learning/unlearning and idiosyncrasy.

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Maria Hassabi: PLASTIC (2015-16)

Installation view at the Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY. February 21- March 20, 2016. Courtesy the artist; Koenig & Clinton, New York; The Breeder, Athens. Photo: Thomas Poravas.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> The different format to this source is different from the rest of the paper as the artist ask that I specifically cite her work in this way.

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