

NAVIGATING THIS CRAZY WORLD: Making Art Helps.

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ABSTRACT

In this thesis, I discuss feminist acts of resistance and the politics of location, relating this to my own artwork and to that of other performance artists. Taking this as a point of departure, I further position my creative practice in relation to other artists who explore identity and self-imaging and who deploy strategies such as camouflage to discuss aspects of the human condition. The artwork leads to a tangible personal transformation in the final performance at the end of the program. Nomadic thought helps to situate the final piece on a trajectory that makes nomadic acts of counter-actualization a viable path forward as a feminist artist. In the following pages, using an autoethnographic approach, I share personal stories that relate to the artwork, weaving together events and situations that took place over a lifetime and synthesised into my current art practice.

As an interdisciplinary performance artist, I create wearable, performative art for the camera. I applied for the Master's program at Emily Carr to step fully into live performance. I began the Master's in June 2020, when the Covid-19 pandemic had begun, making a live audience impossible - and would not become possible - until the end of the program two years later. Being 'performative' - sewing wearable art and documenting it on film and video - was my way of adapting to the pandemic restrictions and was a new direction in my practice. In addition to performance/performative art, I write and perform original music, paint, and create video, conceptual and installation art. I will focus this writing on the art that was made during my time at Emily Carr, where I performed for the camera and was eventually able to perform for a live audience at the final grad show in July 2022.

This thesis will also discuss the use of humour in feminist art. Humour is often present in my art, but I employ absurdity when levity isn't possible. By employing absurdity, for example making a beautiful dress with huge 25 foot long sleeves, a sense of humour is evident even if the work isn't funny. Hence: absurdity strives to reach through this serious moment in time as a reminder that one day, we can laugh about this too. I will position the 'funniest' art I have made with other feminist artists who use humour in their work.

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Acknowledging the Land: Locations Past and Present

Where I am - I am a cis-gendered, white, female-identifying artist who is currently sewing wearable, performative pieces of artwork, some of which interact with the wind found in the prairie and mountain landscapes of the province of Alberta, Canada. I acknowledge that this land is known as Treaty 7 and that it belongs to the Blackfoot Confederacy which comprises the Siksika, Kainai and Piikani nations, the Tsuut'ina, the Îyâxe Nakoda Nations and the Métis Nation of Region 3. I know that I am lucky to live, work and play here.

Where I have spent time - I acknowledge the land where Emily Carr University resides is situated on the unceded traditional territories of the x̱w̱məθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), Sḵwx̱wú7mesh (Squamish), and səliłwətał (Tsleil-Waututh) Nations. I was fortunate to have joined my peers and instructors at Emily Carr in July 2021 and July 2022. The wisdom of that land has informed my practice.

Where I come from - I was born in Sudbury, Ontario in 1973. I acknowledge that the land I grew up on is the traditional territory of the Atikameksheng Anishnaabeg, within lands protected by the Robinson Huron Treaty of 1850, including the Wahnapiatae First Nation. I am blessed to be from this beautiful place.

Where I am Going is Inextricable From Where I'm From

This document will share some of my most personal stories and vulnerable truths with you, the reader, so that you understand the art that I made during the Master's Program at Emily Carr University.

Please be aware that I will share an account of sexual assault for this purpose: to explain the art in relation to the personal history behind it. I will share only the details needed to put the work in context with past events, as well as with other contemporary artists whose work is in conversation with my own.

Some of the "A-Ha" moments that occurred during the Master's Program were also "Oh Shit" moments: I didn't even know I was a feminist. And then there is the uncomfortable process of discovering my own past trauma just by having to really look at my own art. I didn't realize a lot of things - it's all in here, and there's a happy ending: the self-discovery process leads to positive change, empowerment and to finding a path forward.

I feel lucky to be able to share this process, my stories, the research and the artwork that synthesized it all into this thesis paper. To help navigate between the academic

research and the sharing of stories from my past I will occasionally format personal asides differently from the main body of text: with a three inch tab from the left hand side, using a serif font, as opposed to sans serif. The humour I use in my art - the humour I use to deal with life - balances the gravitas throughout. This has been a challenging and rewarding journey. Grab a snack, let's do this.



Figure 1. Karylin Smith *The Spirit of Loneliness Dress* (2020.) Mixed media.
Photograph used with permission from Emily Kapcsos ©

INTUITIVE METHODOLOGY and an AUTOETHNOGRAPHIC APPROACH

The Master's program has been a process of self-discovery guided by the art I've made. I realize now that my art practice is cyclical, made up of a series of unplanned and intuitive events followed by oral and written reflections (done both solo and with others) that enable me to understand some of the implications of my artwork. This progression is like the cycles of life that produce the art itself. Below are some patterns that have emerged:

- Past events that shaped my life and personality
- Moments of balance in life often bring inspiration: such as jogging in nature with perfect weather
- An idea of artwork I can make occurs to me that I partially know how to do, but has something about it I've never tried to do or make (usually something absurd or funny)
- I imagine performative scenarios while sewing and fitting
- I call together friends to help (fig. 2 and 3): we organize documentation and sites to film
- Critiques and verbal feedback guide me to find the deeper meaning in the work
- Writing about the work and reflecting on it brings deeper understandings
- Researching authors and theorists bring my understanding of the work into context with other artists and critical theory



Figure 2. Details of a friend helping make this dangerous photo shoot possible. Photograph used with permission from: Frances Jablonca ©



Figure 3. Details of a friend helping make a different photo shoot possible.
Photograph used with permission from: Emily Kapcsos ©

All of the artwork completed during the program uses an intuitive methodology. My intent is to share my process of discovery that has unfolded throughout the course of this program. In this document, I describe three performative wearable artworks, and one performance video and the methods I employed to make the works. In the last section, I describe the methodology for my final live performance piece, and position this work within the context of other contemporary artists who address the topic of sexual assault. I share the intuitive actions that culminated into the final performance as bullet points (in the Appendix at the end of the document) to reveal how the piece came to fruition. I also include a short description of the performance to provide context and why I have an affinity to nomadic theory in the artwork.

I include personal stories because they are connected to my art and showcase how acts of art making have led me to write using an autoethnographic format. The goal is to expose, share and articulate some of the choices and meaning of my work. Throughout this process, I have come to realize that the nature of my artmaking is deeply personal, often pointing towards obstacles that I am not always fully aware of. The significance of this has unravelled slowly throughout the process of the Masters program at Emily Carr University (ECU) through my artmaking and reflective writing. This also with a great deal of patience from my supervisor, my instructors, and with insight from a professional therapist.

As mentioned above, I take an autoethnographic approach because it helps me convey the personal moments and events that are important to my creative practice.

Autoethnographic writing that uses personal experiences to examine culture gained popularity in the 90's. The term itself was developed in the 1970's and it evolved from the growing awareness that ethnographers, those who study and describe the culture of a particular group or society, could not separate their own worldview, bias and agenda from their writing about the "other" cultural group. (Adams, 2). The combination of autobiography and the ethnographic study of the cultural systems we live in enables me to untangle my experiences and interpretations. As Carolyn Ellis and colleagues state:

Autoethnography is an approach to research and writing that seeks to describe and systematically analyze personal experience in order to understand cultural experience. This approach challenges canonical ways of doing research and representing others and treats research as a political, socially-just and socially-conscious act. A researcher uses tenets of autobiography and ethnography to do and write autoethnography. Thus, as a method, autoethnography is both process and product (Ellis, Abstract from "Autoethnography: An Overview").

HESITANT FEMINISM

Although initially I was hesitant to assert my stance as a feminist artist, I understand now that this is integral to my creative practice.

I am single. I am 49. I am reminded daily that this combination of relational status and age is an unusual one in the place where I live; Calgary, Alberta, Canada. As my 30's have progressed through to middle age, I've observed a higher level of heteronormative expectations here in Calgary, specifically: career, marriage, mortgage and kids. My various friends-groups here are adventurous and/or creative types: artists, musicians, outdoor enthusiasts, ravers and Burners. Although the outings and dance parties are less frequent as friends have their first and second children, I have gained an appreciation for my single status. I am lucky to be a part of a wider community of friends, connected through this amazing city, all sharing in an appreciation of this land and a desire to better ourselves, and to try to make the world a better place. Although the first artwork I created at Emily Carr is about loneliness, discussed in the following section, I am always connected to good friends here. In fact, I could not have made any of this art without them.

The first art piece I made at Emily Carr was *The Spirit of Loneliness Dress* (2020) (see Fig. 1,3,4,7,31,32 and 41). Set on the Canadian prairie, whipped about by the wind, the *Spirit of Loneliness Dress* (2020) features me dressed in a dramatic turquoise-coloured dress with extremely long sleeves, a headpiece and a long lace train. Initially, I did not notice that this dress shares several similarities with a wedding gown. In fact, the wedding allusion of this dress and the situation I had cooked up was not obvious to me until I was stuck in the thing with my arms rendered useless in the long sleeves whipping around in the wind, trying to stand still to be filmed. If I had subconsciously created my own wedding dress, my performative photo shoot could then mirror my underlying beliefs and experiences with relationships - *The Spirit of Loneliness Dress* (2020) serving as a summary of my own love life: I felt tugged to and fro, it was not comfortable. I felt stuck.

I had been totally oblivious to the symbolism. In hindsight I am aware that an alternate visual read of *The Spirit of Loneliness Dress* (2020) is available - the wind animated sleeves, moving majestically and colourfully through the air, are a celebration of an alternative solo ritual, making this performative artwork into an attempt to create a different kind of ceremony. With this read the performance is understood as a means of connecting the wearer of the dress to some new form of "significant otherness" (Barlett 140) to reference Donna Haraway's concept. Invariably, you could read the whole

scenario described above as a case of antithetical, mixed messages - an event - trying to figure out what it all means. The state - also - of initially being disinclined to take a public stance.

In an interview between Fluxus artist Yvonne Rainer with Lucy R. Lippard, Rainer reveals that she is reluctant to consider herself a feminist. In response, Lippard reflects on feminism and the work we do as female artists. She begins by saying that making art as a women offers us “a real consciousness of what it is to be a woman for you and for other women. What there is in common. How you use that awareness... and that becomes political, even if the art itself isn’t directly political in subject matter. Making other people aware is a political act” (Lippard 8).

Rainer replies, “Well then, you’ve convinced me that I’m a feminist” (Lippard 8). Coming across this dialogue between Rainer and Lippard was heartwarming and reassuring. For example, reading these words from another feminist artist who, like me, wasn’t completely vocal about taking a feminist stance resonated with me. I would continue to broaden my understanding of what it is to be a feminist artist by reading theory from Adrienne Rich, Rosi Braidotti and others.

BEING SITUATED AS ‘ON THE RUN’

The art I have made in the Master’s program has shown me that, previously, I have been in a state of ‘running away’ from the painful truth about my own past and the role it plays in how I relate to others in relationships. When we are young, we don’t always have the skills or understanding to face our circumstances in healthy or productive ways. Instead we find ways to get through that aren’t necessarily good for us. Reflecting on my past, I now realize I would shut down emotionally rather than have to face deep sadness, or the emotions of frustration or anger that are usually a part of unfolding life events that cause us pain. This was a survival technique when I was young, however it no longer serves me as an adult. There are a messy number of decades and relationships in between my youth and this present state of awareness. This insight is important for understanding my own situated state as an individual and as an artist, as well as the significance of the locations that I chose to perform and document my artwork. *The Spirit of Loneliness Dress* (2020) in figure 4, *The Duotard* (2021) in figure 5 and *My Camouflaged Heart* (2022) in figure 6 are performed and documented in different outdoor locations in Alberta and B.C., however they were all performed under similar conditions:

- without my full understanding of the meaning behind the artwork I was performing
- working under pandemic restrictions that made performing for an audience illegal

-working intuitively; not planning the performance rather using the film shoot as an opportunity to experiment with the wearable artwork and see what it could do in different places and conditions

The piece that I performed for an audience at the final grad show differed from the previous artwork not just because it took place indoors, in the gallery space, but also because many things had changed by the time the final exhibition occurred. Specifically, the following factors were at play:

-by this time I had gained an awareness of the meaning of my artwork and the unseen trauma from my past

-I was able to perform for a live audience since the pandemic restrictions were finally lifted

-I completed formal, concrete planning ahead for this performance; I identified a specific oppressive event from my past (a sexual assault) that I addressed, I created a simple set for the performance, and I prepared a script and sequence of action ahead of time. Similar to the other three wearable artworks that I performed in outdoor locations, I did engage in an intuitive process that spanned several decades leading up to the final grad show performance as described in the *Appendix*, located at the end of this paper.

Images of the Performative, Wearable Artwork



Figure 4. Karylin Smith *The Spirit of Loneliness Dress*, (2020.) Mixed media.
Photograph used with permission from Emily Kapcsos ©



Figure 5. Karylin Smith, Video still from *The Duotard Video #1* (2021.)
Video still image used with permission from Emily Kapcsos ©



Figure 6. Karylin Smith *My Camouflaged Heart* (2022). Assorted fabric, mixed media.
Photographs used with permission from Frances Jablonca ©

BEING SITUATED AS ‘RUNNING AWAY’

In all three outdoor performative filmshoots my work is continuing to try to make what is invisible *visible* from my own subconscious, which creates a visceral sense of tension in the work. I can see now that I was running from these subconscious messages simply to avoid pain. The locations chosen for each piece trace the circuitous route I embarked upon to avoid this pain. At the beginning of the Master's program on the windy prairie bluff in *The Spirit of Loneliness Dress* (2020) in Figure 1 and 4, I feel stuck without the use of my own arms as the wind moves the sleeves and knocks me off balance. I wasn't yet conscious of how unresolved trauma from my past was keeping me stuck in failed relationships. In this location, I am far from my home in Ontario, but the vast prairie is beautiful. I can pretend I am just making beautiful art; there is no need to openly discuss the loneliness that I sense the work is about. I initially named the piece *The Spirit Dress* and avoided discussing the loneliness that inspired the piece in class critiques with my cohort and instructors. It felt too vulnerable until much later in the program when I had time to process the diagnosis of trauma in my past. In the rainforest wearing *The Duotard* (2021) in Figure 5, I play with this feeling of being stuck and attached to another to create humour. I'm in another beautiful, lush outdoor location. The desire to create a humorous performance and to engage people in laughter gives me the drive to complete the piece. I'm much further from home, on the west coast of B.C. I just remember being so very tired during that Summer Intensive. The stress of full time grad school, full time working and living through the pandemic are pressing in on me at this time which prompts me to take a short stress leave from work. I don't have the time or space to see the painful truth of my past. My subconscious will have to wait, I'm not yet ready to see the full meaning of the work.

The following spring, on top of the wind-scourged mountain summit, only the steep cliff drops off ahead of me - where can I hide now? I have run to yet another stunningly beautiful place. I can not remain oblivious to the meaning of the art I've made for very much longer as only a few months remain in the two year program. The tension - of not knowing what the artwork is about- is literally mounting as I climb Ha Ling to document the bodysuit with tassels. Even the seasons portrayed in the photos create a sense of running out of time beginning with the summery images of the long sleeved dress and the two person unitard the following summer, culminating with the inhospitable wintery conditions in *My Camouflaged Heart* (2022). The warm summer days are gone.

Not only time can be seen as running out in these images, there is also a diminishing amount of space documented in the photos when viewed chronologically. *The Spirit of Loneliness Dress* (2020), Fig. 1,3,4,7,31,32 and 41 take place in wide open prairies. *The Duotard* (2021) video in Fig. 23 and the video stills in Fig. 5, 21, 22 and 24 reveal a

more intimate framing of space with the two central figures located in a thick forest, situated closer to the camera. The viewer is brought even closer to the central figure in *My Camouflaged Heart* (2022) in Figures 6, and 12 through 14 as they are framed tightly out of necessity with a limited amount of terrain to safely move around on the summit's edge. Reading time as passing and space as diminishing by looking at these images chronologically illustrates the circuitous route I followed to avoid my own past, reading the summit peak as a final stop, or a dead end. There is nowhere else to go but through. And this is what I did!

In the final performance, in front of a live audience at Emily Carr, I was no longer separated from my audience by the camera and the pandemic restrictions, and most importantly, I was fully aware and able to articulate the meaning behind my work. The script and action that I planned ahead created an opportunity to take an oppressive and traumatic event from my past and re-create it as an act of healing. By re-inventing a gynecologist's office and inviting my audience to come with me on this healing journey, I am no longer running away. I'm facing past trauma and transcending it as a public act. The audience provides witnesses and become part of the healing; they offer connection by being present. They energize the event with their presence and their participation as they are invited to cheer on the proceedings, to symbolically come with me on this healing journey, and to be a part of the ending of the performance. The audience is transformed with me. This final piece could not have come to be without the artwork leading up to it, pushing important messages from my subconscious into the light. No longer avoiding the pain from my past, I don't have anything to run away from. Instead, I've got healing work to do. I'm at home in my own body, I'm at home with my audience, I am home, wherever I go. By the end of the program things have shifted and grown: I am now situated in a transcended state, transforming trauma into healing, learning and empowerment. Still embodied, but moving forward instead of running away. I offer this description of the locations I chose to perform in as a sort of map. By considering the locations of the artwork, it is possible to trace the progress through the Master's program, to track the weakening resistance I maintained in fully understanding the art, and also to acknowledge the changes in my own politics of location at the start of the program as opposed to at the end of it. I will fully elaborate on a feminist politics of location in the following section, what it is and how my artwork is in conversation with this feminist critical theory, as well as throughout the paper and in relation to the work of other contemporary artists.

POLITICS OF LOCATION:

Realizing and becoming increasingly aware of the connections and implications of the moves I make as a performative/ performance artist have been part of my journey. It extends to an important aspect of feminist theory and art; the Politics of Location.

In *Thinking through the Boundary: The Politics of Location, Subjects, and Space* author Kathleen M. Kirby discusses the essay *Notes on a Politics of Location* written by the feminist poet, scholar and critic, Adrienne Rich. Kirby observes that:

“Space is our environment, it links us to our environment and seems to fortify a distinction between self and environment, girding (and guarding) an interiority. As a metaphorical substrate, space provides the very medium for measuring interconnection and difference, similarity and distance-markers that become important in evaluating the possibilities of coalition or the desirability of separatism” (Kirby, 174).

This citation reveals how location has been increasingly ascribed meaning and power in feminist theory. The ideas behind the significance of location begin with the body, or the self, as a powerful starting place, as Adrienne Rich coined in her 1984 speech-turned-essay *Notes on a Politics of Location*. In this text, Rich asserts that true feminism needs to begin from a place that acknowledges race and class, and that white feminists have predominantly failed to do so (223). In the article *Adrienne Rich, Location and the Body* (2000), Mary Eagleton quotes the contemporary philosopher and theoretician Rosi Braidotti's assertions on the politics of location in regards to her concept of *transversality*, synonymous with *intersectional feminism*:

Women may have common situations and experiences, but they are not, in any way, the same. In this respect, the idea of the politics of location is very important. This idea, developed into a theory of recognition of the multiple differences that exist among women, stresses the importance of rejecting global statements about all women and of attempting instead to be as aware as possible of the place from which one is speaking. Attention to the situated as opposed to the universalistic nature of statements is the key idea. (Eagleton, 300)

Braidotti references critical theorist Donna Haraway's concept of being *situated*. The subject - embodied, located in a specific place, or, a subject that is *situated*. Adrienne Rich herself, in her famous speech asks us to “Begin though, not with a continent or a country or a house, but with the geography closest in - the body” (225). The politics of

location is one foundational concept that is important in the growing field of feminist critical theory. I will use the ideas of the power, or politics of location and space to find meaning in the art created during the Master's program.

Kirby discusses how a location and the space that makes up that particular location reveal aspects of identity. She discusses how space reveals distance, it implies interconnection or a lack thereof, and that space can represent “the psyche as volume” or “the body as container” (Kirby, 174). It is interesting to view my work through this lens. For example, the concept of distance is tangibly visible in the pieces where I have used extremely long stretches of fabric (see Fig. 19 and 33: *The Duotard* [2021] and Fig. 6, 12 - 14 and 34: *My Camouflaged Heart* [2022]). In the case of *The Spirit of Loneliness Dress* (2020) in figure 4 and 7, the vast open prairies provide an immeasurable sense of space around the lone figure in the dress. If the space in the image is used to measure interconnection and distance, the calculation is a vast or seemingly infinite degree of loneliness. This volume of loneliness provides insight into the subject's psyche. And yet the images of *The Spirit of Loneliness Dress* (2020) hold a sense of purpose, or celebration.



Figure 7. Karylin Smith *The Spirit of Loneliness Dress*, (2020). Mixed media. Photograph used with permission from Emily Kapcsos ©

MY EXPERIENCES with an INTUITIVE METHODOLOGY

Throughout my time at Emily Carr, I have been asked frequently to state and share the research questions guiding my art practice. Not an easy task, my first meaningful research question was “Can art bring healing?”. While it served as a starting point, I shifted away from this framing early in the program as I gained awareness of some of the uncomfortable truths about my white, settler status and the New Age practices I have used personally for self-growth and healing. The Spiritual New Age movement is predominantly followed by white folk who often culturally appropriate sacred traditions and customs. The original practices are frequently misrepresented and mishandled or misunderstood. Realizing this and not wanting to cause more harm, I continued to search for new research questions to guide my practice. Towards the 2nd year in the program, I focussed on humour and asked: “Can humour in art bring healing?” This question coincided with an awkward process of identifying myself as a *feminist* who uses humour. At this juncture, I position myself as a performative, feminist artist who uses humour in embodied artwork. However, the general pandemic in 2021 and the steady pace of grad school began to make it difficult to continually recognize the comedy in my work. Research questions fell out of focus. I lost my sense of humour and my research questions and my interest in the links between art and healing faded into the background. Although covid restrictions in Alberta allowed some work locations to be in-person, occasional outbreaks had us pivoting to working online throughout the year. Covid routines opened up my access and time spent outdoors. I have always enjoyed hiking in the Rocky Mountains, but now I began climbing increasingly challenging summits, hiking further into the shoulder seasons in the late fall of 2021, and the early spring of 2022 than I had ever done previously. For me, the intense physical activity of hiking to a summit balanced the stress levels the world was operating under. I was just doing whatever I had to do to make it through the intense workload of teaching teenagers full-time while going to grad school. Aside from the majestic mountain summit views, that period of time is a blur. Suddenly, the Final Exhibit was approaching. As usual, I had no formal plan.

This intuitive approach at the heart of my practice caused me a certain amount of grief when trying to explain my work to others. I could not answer even the most obvious of questions during regular studio critiques. “What is the significance of the colours you used?” “What about the significance of the outdoor locations you photograph your work in?” My cohort would helpfully offer different insights and inroads to other artists and theorists, but nothing was clear. Initially, I began my research looking for artwork that visually resembled my own. Using *The Duotard* (2021) as my template, I looked for any artists who were making articles of clothing for two or more people. This was interesting, however without a full understanding of why I had made the work, I was lost.

I was lucky to have had the same instructor, Lauren Marsden, three times in the program; at the start, in the middle and most fortunately, again near the end of the program. She knew my methodology and was familiar with my lack of clarity about it. In the most professional way, she was able to firmly state that I needed to know the answers. It was the gentle push that I needed.

Making art generated by intuitive impulses means that my guiding ideas are usually informed by what I see, things in my lived environment, the physical, the situational, and therefore - what I can make with whatever is available. Working in this highly responsive state, the general impetus for the idea is there, but I am primarily concerned with the act of making it. I often work at a frenetic pace (newly diagnosed as an ADHD hyper-focussed state, I now understand the reason for this state of being). The full meaning behind my work eludes me in the moment. However, following the threads of my creative making back through time to the significant life events they reach for, has become a turning point and an opportunity for personal growth and awareness.

PERSONAL HISTORY at the HEART OF MY WORK

As a feminist, I share my most private and personal stories as an act of feminism; let them be tools for consciousness-raising. And if words can indeed cast spells; I share my stories to empower readers who might share similar experiences. I want them to know they aren't alone and to inspire the kind of awareness that eventually brings healing.

Aside

When I was a teenager, between the years of 1986 and 1991, my mom worked at the N'Swakamok Native Friendship Centre in Sudbury, Ontario, as a life skills and career coach. In the summer after grade 9, I was able to attend a Pow Wow celebration that my mom was invited to. We piled into the family car and attended the Wiikwemkoong Pow Wow, the traditional celebration of the Anishinaabek people. (The Wiikwemkoong Reserve is located on unceded territory held by the Wiikwemkoong First Nation, composed of the Ojibwe, Odawa and Potawatomi peoples.) That day was a special one for me. I remember buying myself a hand-carved necklace pendant that depicted a shaman. The word shaman was new to me: this was part of my early introduction to Indigenous wisdom, medicine, science and technology - though these colonial words were not commonly used then, when speaking of Indigenous practices. I learned - from my parents who were doing their best to answer my questions - that shamans held a sacred role in Indigenous culture, and could heal others using plants and

spiritual means. I was transfixed - I wanted to be a shaman when I grew up. I recall feeling a painful sense of longing as I walked through the Pow Wow grounds, taking in the beautiful, and vibrant hand-sewn and hand-beaded regalia, the precision and beauty of the dancers movements, the singing and the drumming, and the best tacos - Indian tacos - that I've ever been lucky enough to taste. That day and in the years that followed, the affinity towards a way of being that was not of my ancestors was very strong. Through those years that my mom worked at the N'Swakamok Native Friendship Centre she was taught how to smudge using sweetgrass, and so she passed this practice on to me. Because of her career, I gathered pieces of an Indigenous worldview which greatly influenced me then and continues to, to this day. I was told that in an Indigenous worldview, all living things have a spirit, including the water, the rocks and even the land. I remember wondering, if everything I see before me is part of their culture; so rich and vibrant, what was my culture? I could not find anything in my Canadian/ colonial culture that could compare to the beauty of the Indigenous culture before me. I now know that the longing I felt so deeply back then, was a longing for this visceral connection that was vibrantly tangible all around us: connection to the land, to music, to making things with our hands, to beauty itself; connection to spirit and ultimately, the connection to each other and the celebration of all of these things. Longing for connection is a theme in my artwork. Now, as an adult, I pass through moments of connection: to the land when I hike in the mountains as often as I can get to them, to my community when we gather, to music and art when I create, to spirit when I silently acknowledge it. By understanding and working through my own past, I am currently strengthening my own connection and relationship to self, so as to strengthen and deepen all of my relationships. I share this personal aside to help the reader understand my past, this writing and the artwork discussed in these pages.

I was raised with all my needs met, in a middle-class home with two loving parents who always did their best, never used violence, drugs or alcohol and protected us from such things with strict rules and expectations. It never occurred to me that when my brother moved out and my parents separated twice, I experienced (emotional) neglect, in fact I needed a therapist to point this out. She called this “relational trauma” or “reactionary attachment”. When I asked my therapist how one heals such a trauma, she said “It is a lifetime of healing” (Grace, Angela. Personal communication. 7 April 2022.) It was easy to see this diagnosis resonating through my practice. The reams and stretches of fabric extruding from the wearable art that I make is always reaching for connection. But these fabric lengths, when extended, are also a measure of the distance that I keep others from me.

My teenage years were book-ended by the two separations my parents went through. The first separation was also my first year of high school in Sudbury, Ontario; grade 9. It was as if my brother and father moved out at the same time, though I'm sure these moves were a few months apart. My dad moved back some time later to try again (unsuccessfully) to make it work... I spent most of that time at my boyfriend's house; eating meals at his house with their family where everyone was together and happy. My house was quiet and dark - I was rarely home.

Aside

In 2003, I took on a teaching position on a reserve in Northern Saskatchewan. In 2004, I was able to attend a professional development day with Dr. Martin Brokenleg, who wrote "Reclaiming Youth & Children." At that time, Dr. Brokenleg was establishing the foundations for The Circle of Courage; a model of positive youth development that is discussed in his books and publications from 2005 until the present. I was later given a copy of one of his books, Reclaiming Youth At Risk co-authored by Larry Brendtro, Martin Brokenleg, and Steve Van Bockern (2009), from my principal in one of the schools I taught in here in Calgary.

That day, back in 2003, Dr. Brokenleg spoke about belonging, one of the four foundational values (along with generosity, independence and mastery) that is advocated and used in the Circle of Courage. It was twenty years ago, but I remember him telling us that young people often start having sex because sex feels like love. I remember the day, in senior high, when I informed my parents that I was going on the birth control pill. At that time, there was no way of knowing I was replacing the love scattered around in the heartbreaking process of my parent's struggles, depression and double separation. Kids make things up to make sense of the world. I am fairly sure that my read on my family's situation included drawing some conclusions that led me to carry internalized shame, somehow blaming myself for the sadness in the house. In hindsight - many years later - I can see that this self-blame is how I made sense of the formative teenage years that existed in the quiet sadness and heartbreak of my twice broken family.

PERSONAL HISTORY Cont'd: TORONTO 1994 - 1997

In 1994, I learned about Annie Sprinkle's art after transferring to York University in Toronto from Brock, in St. Catharines, Ontario. Annie Sprinkle was a porn star who started incorporating performance art in the early 80's. She has written books, starred in, directed and written many films. She also has a PhD in sexology and is a practicing certified sexologist and advocate for sex work and healthcare ([anniesprinkle.org\[asm\]](http://anniesprinkle.org[asm]), n.d.). In *A Public Cervix Announcement* (1990), Fig. 9, Sprinkle staged a live performance at the New York Harmony Theatre that invited spectators to view her cervix by setting up a speculum and flashlight. People lined-up to look in and simultaneously celebrate the feminine. Sprinkle performed her original *Post Porn Modernist* (1989-95) show in Toronto at the "Buddies in Bad Times Theatre" in their 1991 - 1992 season. Although I didn't attend the live performance, her shocking performance art expanded my understanding of what this - and any artform - could look like. Moving to Toronto opened up new educational and artistic horizons; learning about Annie Sprinkle was an important event that has positively influenced me as an artist.

My transfer to York University was a purposeful move. I was intent on new experiences and eager to take on the possibilities afforded by the extensive and elaborate visual arts studio culture at the University. The transfer requirements were that I had to repeat a year, but it was worth it. Brock University had offered a sink, a broom and a hammer that kept getting stolen. I was 21 years old and moving to the largest city in my vicinity was exciting. Soon after arriving, I located and set up a routine pap exam at Mount Sinai Hospital. Even the hospital sounded famous to me, as I had heard my family speak of this highly reputable institution. I was sexually assaulted by the male gynecologist who performed my pap test. In a rushed, but authoritative manner, he explained his method of not using a speculum or gloves but that the examination was the same and asked me if that was ok. I had complete trust in this institution and naively agreed. I didn't realize what he had done until the examination was over. I had re-dressed and he returned; flushed, red in the face, sweaty and trying not to be out of breath. I realized with shame and dismay that he was turned on. How did I handle it? I told my girlfriends about it, we collectively expressed our disgust and we didn't think about it again.

WHY I STEAL SPECULUMS: The Wounding of the Feminine



Figure 8. Karylin Smith *Detail of the crown of stolen speculums* (2022.) Mixed media.
Photographs used with permission from Emily Kapcsos ©

Several years later, when I first moved away from Ontario, I started stealing speculums, still in the package, anytime I had a routine pap test. When the doctor would leave so I could get re-dressed, I would make my move, as if to try to even the score. Did Annie Sprinkle steal her speculum(s) too? I don't know if I even asked myself this question when I first heard about *A Public Cervix Announcement* (1990), all those years ago. But here was this sex worker turned porn star turned performance artist taking matters into

her own hands, telling her own stories with her own empowered words and actions. The speculum and flashlight became part of her artistic methods. Her cervix, her body - the art. The viewing - the performance. The connection between my experience without a speculum and the significance of Sprinkle's performance art was not one I was conscious of until midway through the Master's program when my supervisor suggested I map out the timeline of my life experiences and roughly line them up with when I had been exposed to different artistic practices that resonated for me. Connecting the speculum narratives (my own and Annie Sprinkle's) was an 'aha' moment. Similar to the realization that my performative artwork is an expression of "relational trauma" (discussed in section "Personal History at the Heart of my Work") the awareness of another's critical perspectives and approaches to my own creative tactics and intuitive impulses all occurred within a week or two of one another.

In hindsight, I can marvel at the underlying motivations for my decisions that I wasn't aware of in the moment. Each time I stole a speculum from the bottom drawer of the doctor's examination table I was following that intuitive instinct. Over a span of 20 years I had collected four of them, and stored them away with my other art supplies. In the spring term of 2022 The "a-ha" moment of connecting my stolen speculums with Annie Sprinkle's *A Public Cervix Announcement* (1990) was not yet complete: I dug out the speculums and set them aside, wondering still - why I had them, and if they could be of use in the Master's program. It wouldn't become clear to me until ... months later, and ...days before the final presentation of my work in the exhibition that marks the end of the MFA Low res program.

ARTISTIC INFLUENCES: FEMINIST PERFORMANCE ARTISTS

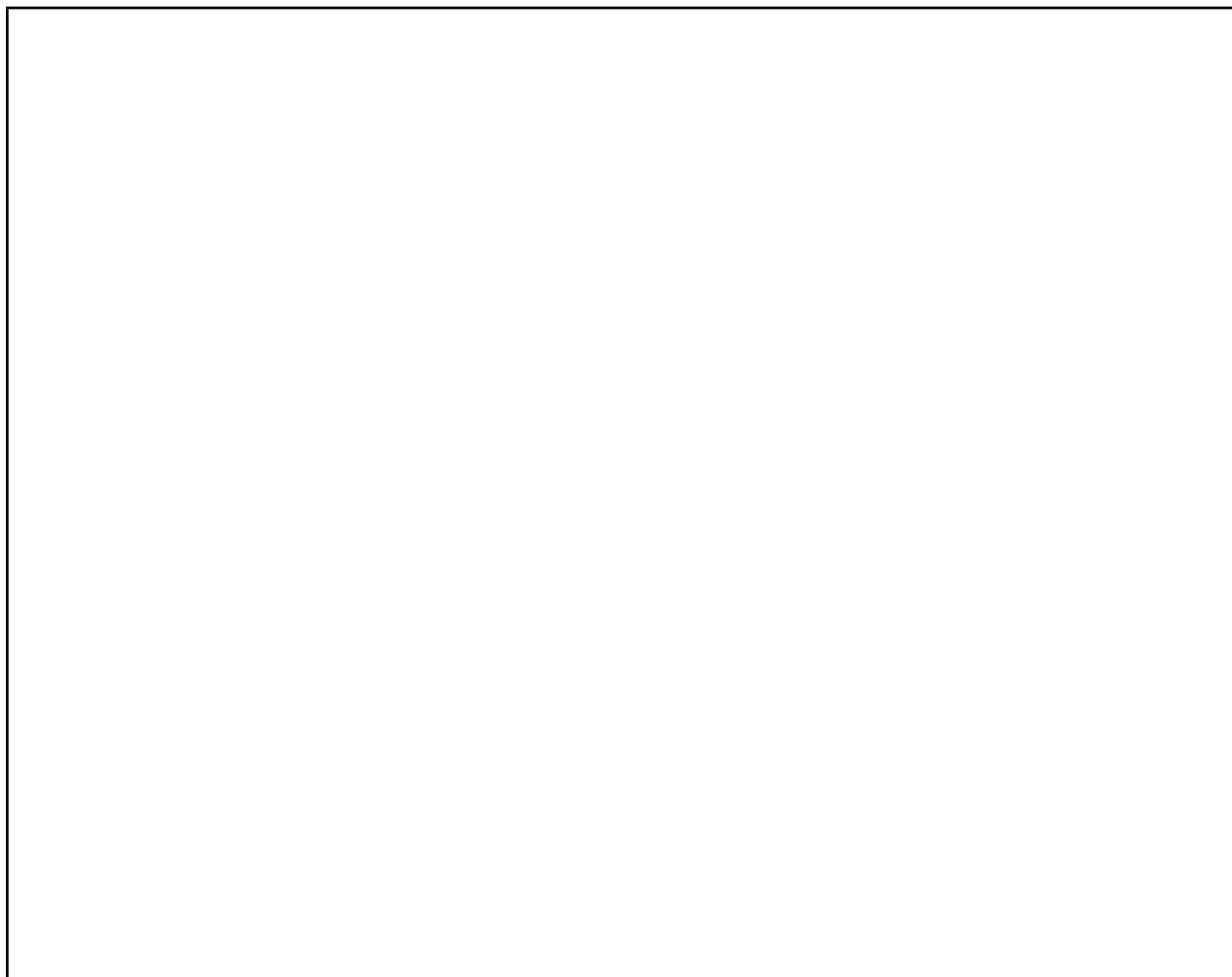


Figure 9. Annie Sprinkle *A Public Cervix Announcement*, 1990.

Figure removed due to copyright restrictions. The image removed is a photograph of Annie Sprinkle allowing audience members to view her cervix in her 1990 performance *A Public Cervix Announcement*. <https://www.cairn-int.info/journal-clio-women-gender-history-2021-2-page-185.htm>

My most significant creative influences on my practice are feminist performance artists; Annie Sprinkle, Carolee Schneemann, VALIE Export and others who have used their bodies as the sites or locations for their performances. I learned of these legendary performance artists not in art school but through conversations with artist friends. The stories about these creatives and their work were formative for me and as a consequence, I assumed that they and their work was epoch-forming. Performance art wasn't discussed very often in the Fine Arts classes I was enrolled in at York University. I wasn't present for the actual performances, nor did I find them through researching

sources with photographs or video documentation; instead, I experienced these performance acts vividly through the intimate and somewhat dramatic exchange of word-of-mouth. Learning about Schneemanns' *Interior Scrolls* (1975), Fig. 11, Export's *Tap and Touch* (1968-71) in Fig. 10, and Sprinkles' *A Public Cervix Announcement* (1990) in Fig. 9, inspired awe and reverence for these acts, from my perspective. I didn't see the humour in these performances until much later. What impressed me was the freedom of expression in their work and the courage, rebellion and empowerment that these women shared.



Figure 10. VALIE Export *Tap and Touch* (1968.)

Figure removed due to copyright restrictions. The image removed is a photograph of VALIE Export allowing passerby to touch her breasts in her 1968 performance *Tap and Touch*.

<https://actipedia.org/project/valie-export-tapp-und-tastkino-tap-and-touch-cinema-19681989>

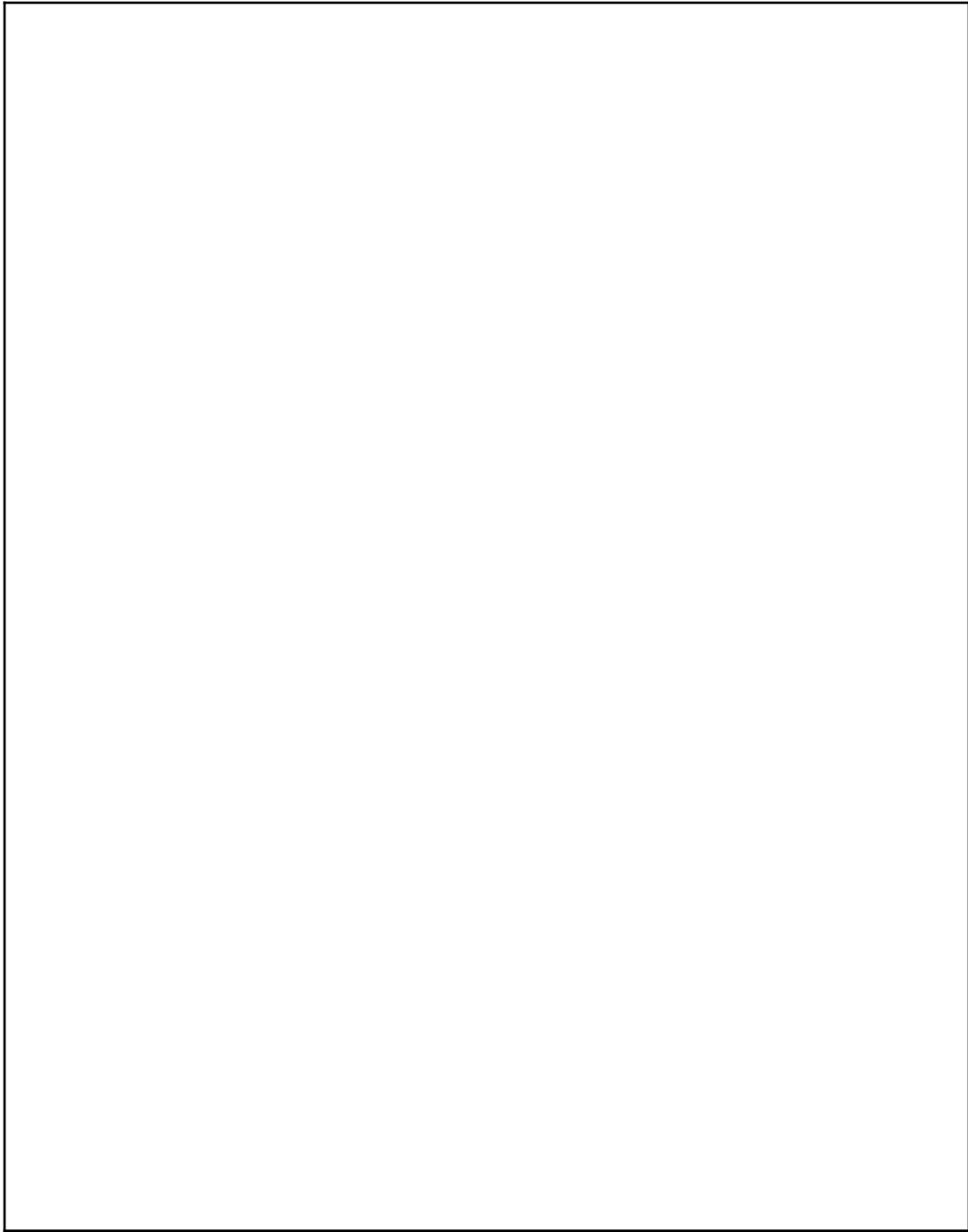


Figure 11. Carolee Schneemann *Interior Scrolls*, (1975.)

Figure removed due to copyright restrictions. The image removed is a photograph of Carolee Schneemann onstage, nude, removing a paper scroll from inside her vagina in her 1975 performance *Interior Scrolls*. Credit to Tate.org and to the author Elizabeth Manchester (2003).

<https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/schneemann-interior-scroll-p13282>

Freedom of expression to use one's body on one's own terms and convey messages to others equally. Artists like Export, Schneemann and Sprinkle have taught me that the body - my body - can be a highly charged medium. The body can become the art itself, or it can become the simultaneous location and means of communicating disruption and rebellion. The body can also be used in art to explore identity. American Poet, Adrienne Rich talks about using the female body as an act of feminism in her essay *Notes Toward a Politics of Location*. Rich writes,

For many women I knew, the need to begin with the female body -our own- was understood... as locating the grounds from which to speak with authority as women. Not to transcend this body, but to reclaim it. To reconnect our thinking and speaking with the body of this particular living human individual, a woman.(Rich, 1984, 213).

Learning of Annie Sprinkle helped me regain my own sense of empowerment and sovereignty as a woman, and to celebrate myself as a strong female. If the patriarchy perpetuates and protects crimes such as the one I had experienced at the hands of that white, male gynecologist - then strong, empowered women like Annie Sprinkle were leading me out of harm's way. Allain and Harvie, in *The Routledge Companion to Theater and Performance* state that "her work has several positive effects. Sprinkle's body may be an object in her shows, but she is also a subject: she is self-authoring, self-pleasuring; she addresses her audiences directly; she returns their gaze; and she actively invites them to explore her body" (81).

Although I can not use my nude body to create art, due to the expectations placed on public school teachers in Canada, I can use my body to *wear* the art. I acknowledge the work of these feminist artists that came before me who pushed against the patriarchal system, who made their bodies the location of resistance, and who reclaimed their bodies - reclaimed the female body - through their performance art.

It was confusing to gradually discover the through lines of my artwork and only fully at the final phase of my Master's studies. Earlier, In the first year of my studies, while routinely being questioned on my choices of site, and asked to state my stance, my lack of awareness and inability to respond with any depth could be identified as a state of denial. The persistent call from others for me to respond had an effect. As I moved forward I took steps and found ways to look at the deeper stories driving my practice. This was not an easy process. It was extremely painful and would not have been possible without the support of a therapist. Gradually returning to my past and working through dialogue, making and intervention/ photoshoots while also generating self affirmations, I have come to fully see and integrate what my art reveals about myself.

Although it was difficult to be shown the trauma from my past, and to learn that relational trauma can make it difficult to establish relationships, it was essential for my personal growth. It was a gift to be shown that I can improve my current and future relationships by doing the personal work of transcending trauma - especially since I've always felt that relationships are our true wealth. I hope that this paper and the meaning behind the art is helpful for readers and viewers on their own personal journeys.

GENRES: PERFORMATIVE SELF-IMAGING IN IDENTITY BASED PERFORMANCE ART and THE USE OF CAMOUFLAGE

Virginia Woolf once said "For most of history, Anonymous was a woman." (qtd. in Czibere 85)



Figure 12. Karylin Smith *My Camouflaged Heart*, 2022.
Photograph used with permission from Frances Jablonca ©

In 2022 I conceived and produced a 'tassel bodysuit' seen above in Fig. 12, made from half a dozen spandex dresses from Value Village. The source dresses were made of bold striped and coloured patterned fabric. To make this wearable art, I began by sewing sections from the different dresses together to create enough fabric yardage to cut out a new garment - the tassel unitard I wanted to make. Along the outer seam of the arms and legs, I sewed 48 tassels into the seams, each measuring 17' in length and about 1.5" in width. My design? To have these be animated by the wind! Once the piece was sewn and ready to wear, I organized two of my bravest friends to hike up to the 2,407m summit of Ha Ling Peak in the Alberta Kananaskis, near Canmore (located on Treaty 7 land).

Days after photographing the piece, my studio instructor pointed out that the clashing sections of black and white zigzags and stripes resembled the 'Dazzle' camouflage used on ships' sails at war and I soon named the piece *My Camouflaged Heart* (2022) as seen in Fig. 6, 12 - 14, and 34. My inadvertent landing on the title for this piece was appropriate in more ways than I was initially aware of. I found great relief in being documented in this wearable because my identity was completely concealed. In addition to the camouflage qualities of the patterns on the unitard, the situational context that came with hiking up to the top of a mountain in the extreme cold and wind of March meant that I also wore a helmet, boots, goggles and mitts (all spray painted silver), and a warm, fuzzy face mask. Unlike previous work my concealed identity offered up more possibilities - an openness to perform and share my work more publically, and a solution to my hesitancy to have an online presence as an artist.

The positive experience of accidentally having my identity concealed made me look for other artists who might do the same, as I contemplated this as a potential practice to adopt. I found that Serbian conceptual artist Marina Abramović similarly covered her head with a black cloth bag and danced nude for six hours in her piece entitled *Freeing the Body* (1976). Thirty years later, artist Anne Juren re-enacted the performance in her collaborative show *Magical* (2010). Theorist Miriam Felton-Dansky discusses how these two feminist artists concealed their faces in her essay "The New Politics of Identification in *Magical* and *Untitled Feminist Show*". Felton-Dansky writes "Abramović's implication, which Juren reprises, is that the female body can be "free" when - maybe only when - the female face is concealed" (254).

Although I did consider finding a means to conceal my face as an artist, I decided not to. I hope to build up enough courage to share my work on the internet, but I prefer to simply have shows and perform live, where I can read the crowd, shake their hand or at least smile at the viewers in attendance. Proceeding forward as an artist with concealed identity does offer freedom from these concerns, however it is also restrictive in itself; I

don't always want to wear a mask. I will embrace concealing my identity when the work at hand leads to it, but I am not pursuing this as a constant part of my practice. The experience of having my face concealed in *My Camouflaged Heart* (2022) was educational however, and will help me navigate my concerns as an artist moving forward.



Figure 13. Karylin Smith *My Camouflaged Heart* (2022). Assorted fabric, mixed media. Photographs used with permission from Frances Jablonca ©



Figure 14. Karylin Smith *My Camouflaged Heart* (2022). Assorted fabric, mixed media. Photographs used with permission from Frances Jablonca ©

When I am not performing for an audience, I perform for the camera. *The Spirit of Loneliness Dress* (2020), *The Duotard* (2021) and *My Camouflaged Heart* (2022) are all examples of performative self-images that are identity-based and are in conversation with the work of Janieta Eyre, Cindy Sherman, Merle McMaster and other performative contemporary artists. “Performativity” Levin notes “stands in for, on the one hand, the self as a cultural construct, and on the other, for a sense of free will and choice in the way that identity is enacted”(Levin 31).

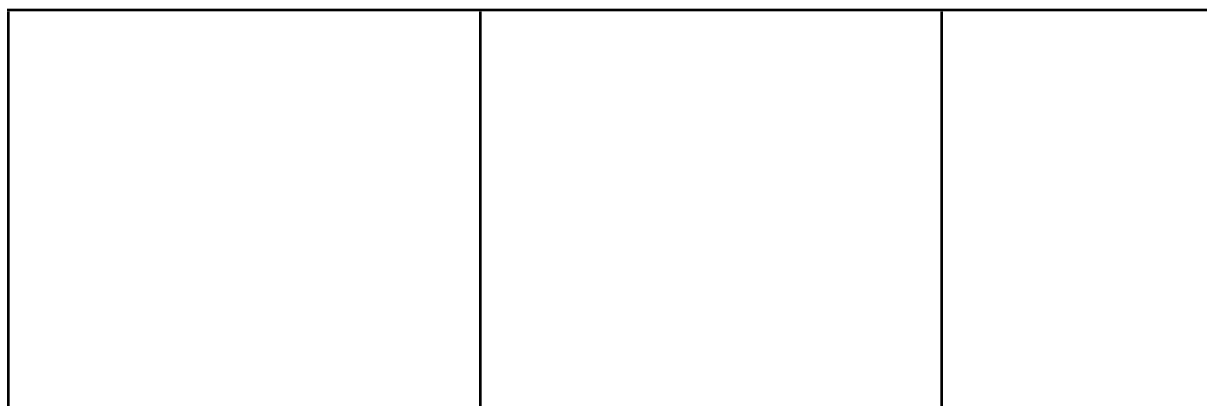


Figure 15-17, Janieta Eyre *Mute Book #4*, *Mute Book #6*, *Mute Book #12*, (2009-2010).

These figures were removed due to copyright restrictions. The three images removed are photographs of Janieta Eyre performing for the camera in her performative self-imaging series titled *Mute Book* created between 2009 and 2010.

<https://canadianart.ca/reviews/janieta-eyre/>

In Laura Levin's book *Performing Ground: Space, Camouflage and the Art of Blending* the author defines camouflage as a genre or subgenre of art (Levin 27). Levin describes Janieta Eyre and other camouflage artists as performative artists working in identity-based art. By deliberately creating background environments with similar patterns to the clothes she wears, she is "performing ground" instead of assuming only the traditional role of 'figure'. Levin talks about "the political possibilities of 'performing ground': a performance strategy in which the human body commingles with or is presented as a direct extension of its setting" (Levin 13).

I relate my work to this line of inquiry, specifically *My Camouflaged Heart* (2022). The razzle-dazzle of the patterns, as seen in Fig.12, can be read as camouflage. On another level, I recognize the long tassels blowing in the wind as an extension of my setting. I'm commingling with the place that I ran away to. I'm in the hardest-to-reach location - the summit of a steep mountain - where hardly anyone I know could even try to follow. This can be viewed as *performing ground*, in line with the work of Janieta Eyre.

This dangerous summit location also informs identity in the image, to view the work through the lens of where one is situated, as discussed by Rich, Kirby and Braidotti (under the section titled "Politics of Location").

Aside

This is the point in the Master's program when I needed to be gently, but firmly pushed by an instructor who had observed that I had not been answering the questions about the deeper meaning of my work to date. This was the impetus that turned my gaze inwards while examining my own work, and dissolved the resistance I had to seeing (and feeling) the pain and trauma that motivated the work.

The location can be read as symbolic of my having nowhere else to go, or nowhere left to hide from these personal revelations of past trauma. The whipping cold wind that animates the tassels comprises the space around the subject as beautiful yet brutally cold; a bittersweet moment in time. The subject hides their identity with one last attempt to avoid confronting their own past. Even the position of the arms suggest a futile attempt at hiding: one arm flopped over the helmet and another hidden behind the back. Stuck, while pulled to and fro by the wind in *The Spirit of Loneliness Dress* (2020), uncomfortably tied to another in *The Duotard* (2021), the subject in *My Camouflaged Heart* (2022) has nowhere left to go but to take the deep dive into psychotherapy assisted truth telling.

Like *My Camouflaged Heart* (2022), *The Spirit of Loneliness Dress* (2020) also interacts with its surroundings, co-existing with the wind that animates the sleeves thereby

becoming an extension of the setting. The background wind becomes part of the figure. Like Eyre, I am *performing ground* in both of these identity based self-images. Both pieces also reveal identity through analysis of their respective locations. In both situations, I'm out in nature with friends. Year round, it is my personal weekly goal to try to get out into nature with friends for exercise, entertainment, connection and the overall well-being that these combined factors bring. Exercising in nature also burns cortisol, the stress hormone, and so helps bring balance to the busy pace of life.

HOW *THE DUOTARD* (2021) CAME TO BE



Figure 18. Karylin Smith *The Duotard* (2021.)

Photograph used with permission from Emily Kapcsos ©



Figure 19. Karylin Smith *The Duo-tard* (2021.)
Photograph used with permission from Michael Love ©

Figure 20. *The Duotard Monologue* (soundtrack from *The Duotard Video #1* [2021])

The Duotard Monologue

Tah dah!

Here we are!

In *the thing* we agreed to get into

To delineate our lives by

To define ourselves with

To create a life together in.

We said

“Let’s Get through this together”

And here we are. In the thing

....we agreed to get into!

We thought, you know “Let’s Move forward together in life!”

Tah Dah! This is our plan to survive.

If we jump into this, we can handle it all! **Tah Dah!**

We can survive **EN-EE-THING** with this...

It’s like a **BOMB shelter** in here...

THIS is commitment.

It’s like a thing that fits us, yet - it gives us freedoms

But not too much...

This is what it’s like.

With you.

With me.

Together.

Tah dah!



Figure 21. Karylin Smith, Video still from *The Duotard Video #1* (2021.)
Video still image used with permission from Emily Kapcsos ©



Figure 22. Karylin Smith, Video still from *The Duotard Video #1* (2021.)
Video still image used with permission from Emily Kapcsos ©

Figure 23. Karylin Smith, *The Duotard Video #1* (2021) video link:
Video footage used with permission from Emily Kapcsos ©

<https://youtu.be/CZ1a2ZyLsjs>

The Duotard (2021) was made as a direct response to experiences I had through the covid winter lockdown of 2020 and 2021. Being unable to fly home to my family in Ontario for the winter holidays put my psyche in a pressure cooker. My dad has dementia and our days with him remembering who we are, are few. I also experienced a painful, slow-motion breakup that stretched over this time period. On top of this, everyone working online meant zooming seven hours a day, Monday to Friday. I didn't understand why I was falling asleep at the computer and feeling so unwell; apparently, this is due to stress and is common for adults with ADHD when they make the switch to full-time work online. I had moved in with friends to survive the quarantines. Despite our best efforts, that long, cold winter lockdown was not always fun, and this tested our friendships. When the absurd image of two figures attached by a ream of stretchy fabric popped into my head, I knew I had to make it, and later - perform it. Making fun of the rough months that were not funny at all holds a sweetness and a medicinal appeal. Once the sewing was complete, I realized that two unitards adjoined earned the funny title *The Duotard* (2021) - anything to cheer myself up during the pandemic.

In July of 2021, I organized a video shoot to perform and document *The Duotard* (2021), as seen in Fig. 5, 18, 21 - 25. I brought two circus performers with me whom I met through a friend in Vancouver. My photographer Emily Kapcsos joined me and we set off to the Malamute as well as to the bridge located on Ring Creek, both of which are located on the traditional, ancestral and unceded territory of the Coast Salish peoples – Skwxwú7mesh (Squamish). Later during split screen editing, I recorded a voiceover story for one of the videos we shot, and a multi-layered vocal track to accompany the second video, both of which feature the contortions brought on by lengths of cloth sewn together in *The Duotard*- my attempt at tackling absurd times through an absurd wearable.

The Duotard (2021) is an embodied enactment of social distancing protocols, of breakups - the resistance to commitment - to being tied down by a personal relationship - the connections with another human. There is another layer of meaning for me here - a surprise realization thanks to a therapist's perspective. For me, it also has links to my own choice to move 3000 km (from one side of the country to the other) away from my family. Through gesture and the absurd nature of the garment, humour is built-in to its performance. The humour serves to soften the blow and bring levity to the challenges that inspired it.

In *The Duotard* (2020) video in Fig. 23, a split screen presents two different settings; the hilltop of the Malamute, and drone footage of the Ring Creek bridge and ravine. On the left hand side video, the camera-drone shows two figures trying to cross the bridge, but in opposite directions. The absurd struggle is revealed through overhead aerial footage as well as closer long shots, while harmonious vocals sing overtop. On the right hand side video we see two performers on either end of *The Duotard* with 20 feet of fabric attaching them in a forest. The garment itself is represented as the agreement to be together in an intimate relationship, revealed through the text that is narrated. The narration reads "Here we are, in a commitment. Like we wanted to be!" while the two figures struggle to move with autonomy on the screen, getting tangled around a tree, and clowning around about it.



Figure 24. Karylin Smith, Video still from *The Duotard Video #1* (2021.)
Video still image used with permission from Emily Kapcsos ©



Figure 25. Karylin Smith *The Duotard* (2021). Spandex.
Photographs used with permission from Emily Kapcsos

HUMOUR AND ART: Feminist art with a spoonful of sugar



Figure 26. Karylin Smith *Pain Fondant* (2021.)

Video still image used with permission from Paula Crozier ©

Figure 27. Karylin Smith *Introducing: Pain Fondant* (2022) video link:

Video footage used with permission from Paula Crozier ©

<https://youtu.be/i49QWwsGNNs>

Pain Fondant (Fig. 26) is a fictional character, an interdisciplinary artist, that I created and introduced on video in January of 2021, the second year of the pandemic (see Fig. 27). A form of absurd resistance, *Pain Fondant* (2021) allowed me to explore a tactic taken on by the Melbourne based artists, The Hotham Street Ladies (see Fig. 28 and

29). Through the use of sweet, sticky icing, her main art medium, *Pain Fondant* (2021) claims to have found a means to deal with life's challenges. She explains this to the viewer as she prepares a batch of icing on camera, speaking about her career while casually name-dropping celebrities that she has used fondant with. *Pain Fondant* (2021) is campy, and over the top, a persona with quirky mannerisms and an abundant desire to share her wisdom. *Pain Fondant* (2021), situated in her kitchen, declares that she uses fondant for its sweetness, which brings a balance to the bitterness in life.

The Hotham Street Ladies (H.S.L.)

The Hotham Street Ladies (H.S.L.), go out into the streets with icing pipette bags to create graffiti made out of neatly arranged icing rosettes that often spell out "H.S.L.", their street tag. H.S.L. create huge installations in public spaces using icing that depict provocative images such as the menstruating uterus called *You Beaut* (2013), created in a public washroom stall. Another example of H.S.L.'s work is the breast made of cake and icing entitled *Flesh AftEr Fifty* (2021). H.S.L.'s work openly and graphically discusses taboo issues of the body, from the often untold perspective of the lived middle-aged female's experience (and anyone identifying as female). The icing is the medium in H.S.L.'s work, as well as in (the fictional) work of *Pain Fondant*.

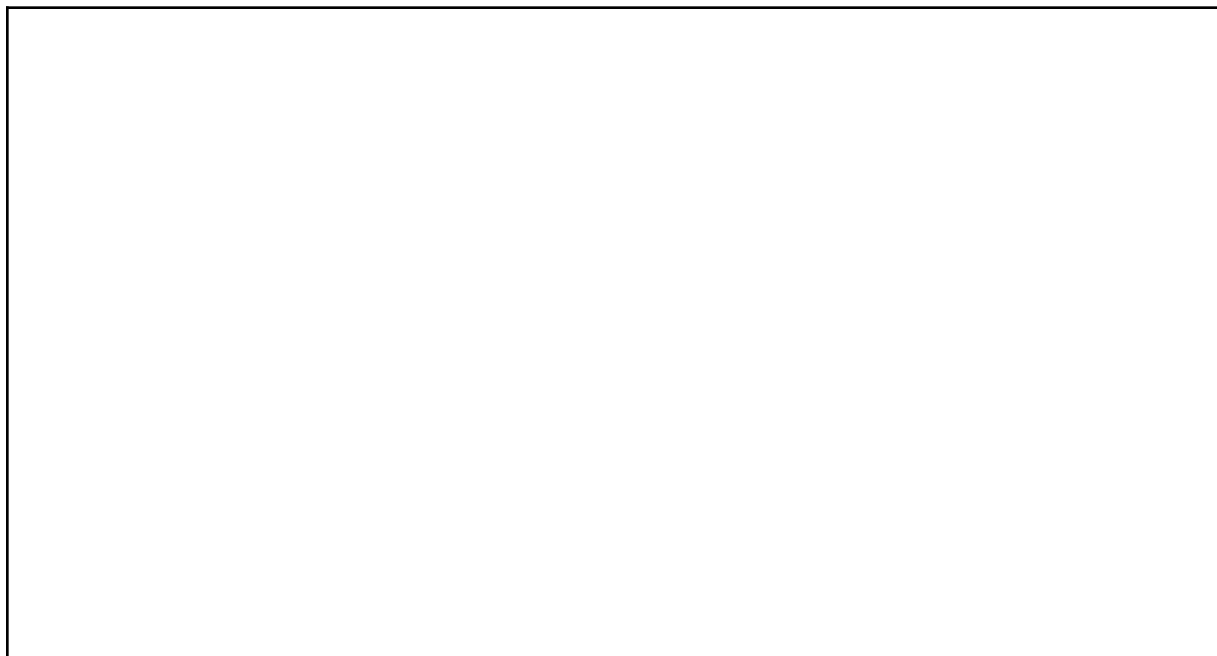


Figure 28. The Hotham Street Ladies, *Age Defying Treasure Slice with Hidden Nutrient Particles*. (2012.) Figure removed due to copyright restrictions. The image removed is a photograph of the artists who comprise the The Hotham Street Ladies, standing behind a table featuring the artwork titled *Age Defying Treasure Slice with Hidden Nutrient Particles* created in 2012.

<https://www.hothamstreetladies.com/age-defying-treasure-slice-with-hidden-nutrient-particles>

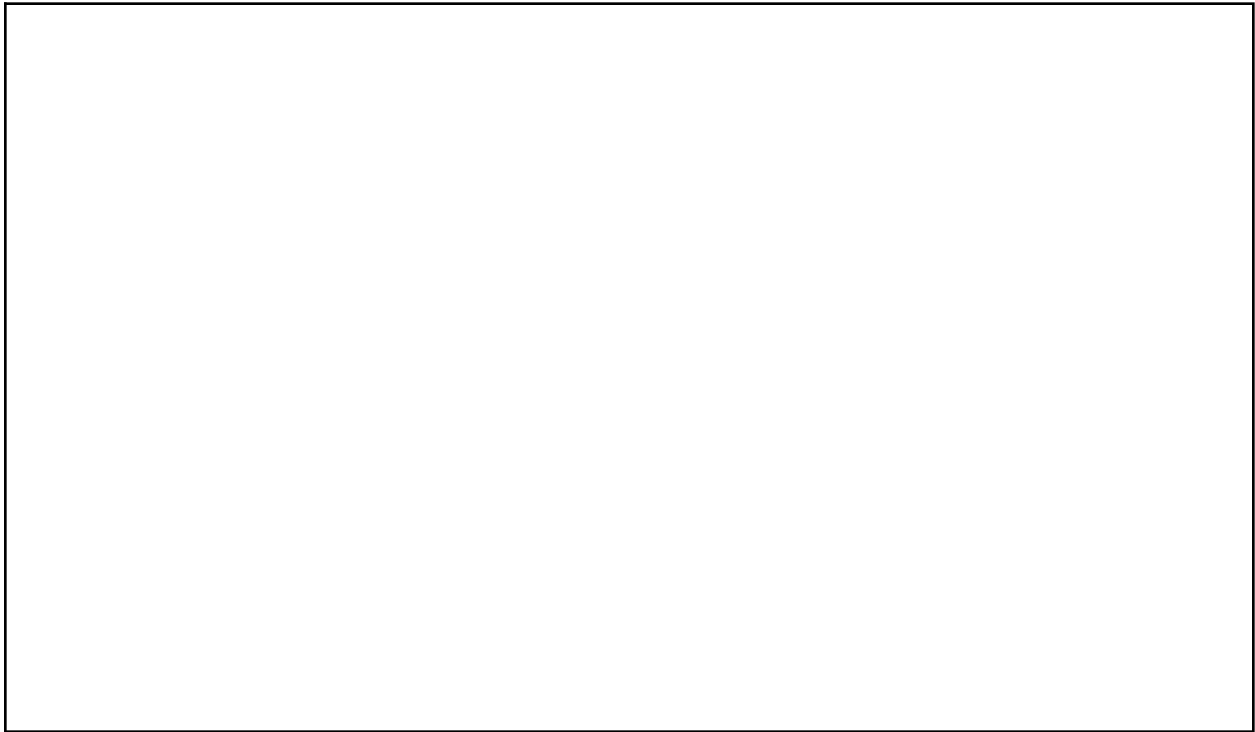


Figure 29. Hotham Street Ladies *Flesh After Fifty* detail (2021.)

Figure removed due to copyright restrictions. The image removed is a photograph of a cake shaped like a female breast created with very detailed icing rosettes. This artwork, created in 2021, is titled *Flesh After Fifty*.

<https://www.yarracity.vic.gov.au/events/2021/03/19/hotham-street-ladies-workshop>

In the *Pain Fondant* (2021) video itself, the icing *Fondant* holds in her hands in front of the camera is like a salve, or a remedy for life's harshness. As she scoops the freshly made batch of fondant out of the stand-up mixer and kneads it in the air, she reveals to the audience that her lover is socially distancing from her through the winter holidays, a time that is traditionally reserved for loved ones to be together. (This actually happened to me that winter; I created *Pain Fondant* (2021) in January - after the holidays - to use humour as a means of dealing with this harsh, cold reality). The sweetness of the icing is meant to remedy the bitterness of her current life experience. The intention is to use humour and absurdity to disarm the viewer and open up the unique possibility to discuss an uncomfortable topic, or, in H.S.L.'s work, topics that have been previously considered taboo. The Hotham Street Ladies discuss the effects of aging on the body after 50, menstruation, and raise awareness for women's health issues-such as endometriosis- through their public and gallery installations.

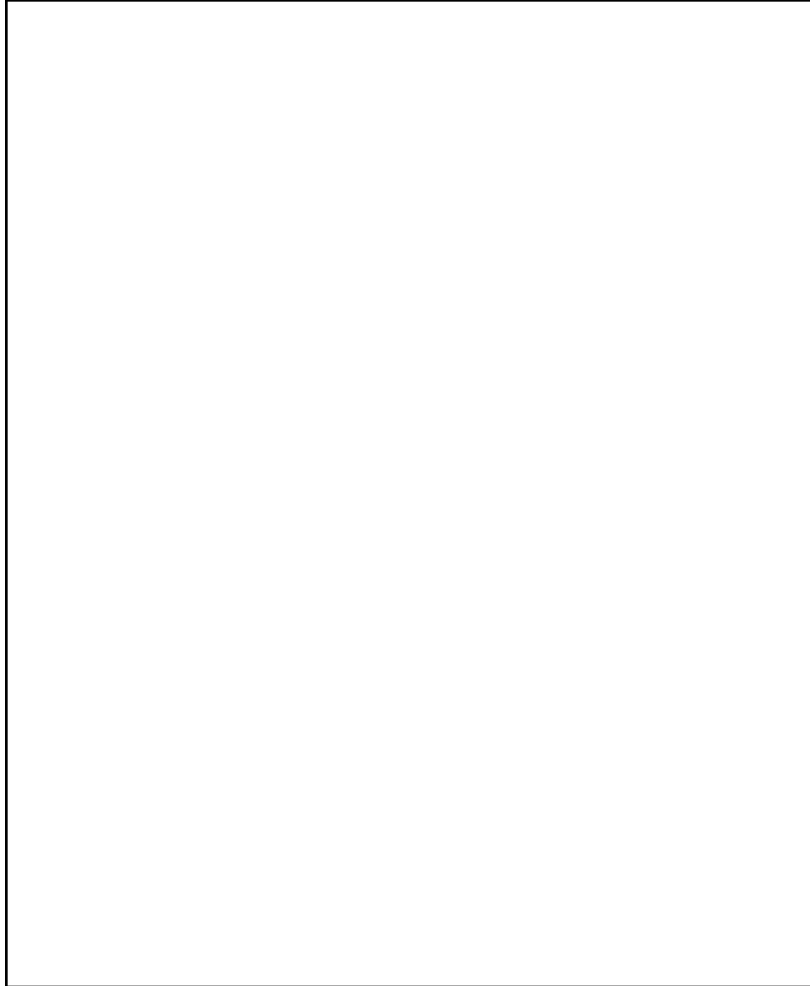


Figure 30. Martha Rosler, *Semiotics in the Kitchen* 1975.

Figure removed due to copyright restrictions. The image(s) are film-still photographs of Martha Rosler, facing the camera, holding a large knife and other kitchen utensils while she stands in a kitchen. The moment is captured during her 1975 performance entitled *Semiotics in the Kitchen*. Credit to Tate.org, (no author listed.)

<https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/rosler-semiotics-of-the-kitchen-h00018>

Martha Rosler

Martha Rosler's *Semiotics in the Kitchen* (1975) also mixes humour with the use of the familiar setting and implements of domesticity, but in unexpected ways, so that the knife, the bowl, the icing - become tools of resistance to traditional domestic customs and rituals. Margot Berrill wrote her dissertation examining domestic humour created by women and how the use of the kitchen as a locale, or the everyday acts of food prep

become powerful in the video art of Rosler, as well as popular culture media. Berrill discusses *Semiotics in the Kitchen* (1975): “The articulation of kitchen humour developed here complicates the locus of domestic space and provides women a vehicle for self-determination as well as a political agenda for radical change within a patriarchal system” (Berrill, 20).

A feminist politics of location is evident in Rosler’s and *Pain Fondant*’s kitchen, as well as in H.S.L.’s public washroom stall and in their street graffiti locales. These settings are transformed from the familiar and the domestic into locations of feminist acts of resistance. What *Pain Fondant* does not share with the audience is that her relationship challenges are in part created by the societal systems that are in place around her: the patriarchy, colonialism, the nuclear family and late capitalism in addition to the worldwide covid-19 protocols. In *Pain Fondant*, I created a character that takes a feminist stance (though she may not be vocal about it.)

Pain Fondant can also be seen as a form of camouflage –the alias, or disguise. Creating a disguise makes me feel more comfortable in front of the camera, but not comfortable enough to continue to perform this character. For example, I purchased a palette of stage makeup in order to create shadows that would alter my facial structure, nose shape, etc. After seeing the video - I was still recognizable, and I lost interest in the persona. Relating back to Laura Levin’s discussion of camouflage and performing ground, wherein the human body is seen as a direct extension of its setting (Levin, 13), Rosler and *Pain Fondant* become direct extensions of their own kitchens. Camouflaged as docile, subservient women, they are cooking up feminist resistance with every batch of sweet, sticky icing.

WHAT IT'S LIKE TO WEAR MY PERFORMATIVE ART FOR THE CAMERA



Figure 31. Karylin Smith *The Spirit of Loneliness Dress* (2020.) Mixed Media.
Photographs used with permission from Emily Kapcsos ©

The performative artworks: *The Spirit Dress* (2020), *The Duotard* (2021) and *My Camouflaged Heart* (2022) involve long stretches of fabric spanning. For example, I use 17' of fabric with the tassels and roughly 25' of fabric joining two unitards in *The Duotard* (2021), as well as 25' long sleeves in *The Spirit Dress* (2020). Each of these outfits are difficult to wear, all three are definite trip hazards, they are often uncomfortable and sometimes dangerous.

The first: *The Spirit Dress* (2020), Fig. 31, was worn barefoot on the grassy prairie in Alberta. I remember stepping on these sharp but curly, dried weeds that loved to hitch rides in the holes of the lace train. The colours of the dress came to life under the slightly stormy sky: turquoise blue and red smooth spandex and lace, expansive cloth, set against corn coloured rolling prairie hills and an expansive, cloudy sky. This dress was made with the intention of being animated by helpers and the wind, and to therefore have a life of its own. While wearing it, this work evoked a complete sense of helplessness, while the wind and the helpers in the sleeves pulled me off center and

from side to side. The sleeves were far more heavy than I had anticipated. The dense fabric made movement impossible without assistance.



Figure 32. Karylin Smith *The Spirit of Loneliness Dress* (2020.) Mixed Media.
Photographs used with permission from Emily Kapcsos ©

The second: *The Duotard* (2021) as seen in Fig. 19 - 25 as well as in Figure 33 is two full body unitards, worn with another performer with a 17' long, fairly wide band of turquoise and pink knit attaching them. Conceived initially as a way to make fun of challenging times, in reality, we had to carry it all between us in order to avoid tripping and falling. We were attached and, therefore, dependent on one another. We needed wide open spaces to move around in the fully outstretched *Duotard* (2021) and the Malamute as well as the Ring Creek Bridge locations provided this, where the art videos were filmed. Emily Carr's professional photographer, Michael Love, provided photography for the MFA students during the July summer term. Figure 33 below, taken in the gallery and commons area at Emily Carr, is provided for the clearest view of the garment, and how it is constructed. The intention was to have fun and clown around while wearing this piece, and the two circus performers made this easy. Despite having the thickest brain fog and the highest levels of anxiety and stress that I've ever experienced in my life (mainly due to the pandemic), we had fun playing around in *The Duotard* (2021), bringing it to life for the camera.



Figure 33. Karylin Smith *The Duotard* (2021). Spandex.
Photograph used with permission from Michael Love ©

The third: *My Camouflaged Heart* (2022) as seen in Fig. 12. A tight, brightly coloured spandex outfit with long tassels running the length of my arms and down my legs, worn with winter boots, a helmet, goggles, mask and gloves to withstand the bitter, gale force winds. The bright red, blue and black stripes and patterns against the white spandex, combined with the silver spray-painted winter gear made this wearable feel like an Olympic or superhero outfit. This was my most dangerous photo shoot, set at the end of April, when the freezing cold winds and deep snow remain intact at higher altitudes in the Rocky Mountains. This was a full blown winter hike. We chose to climb Ha Ling Peak because all three of us knew the terrain very well, and knew the direction that the wind would be blowing, due to the formation of the summit ridges surrounding the area. It is a 3.5 km hike to the peak, with a 700 metre gain in elevation making it steep most of the way, taking roughly 3 hours to climb if you take breaks. We walked through waist deep snow before reaching the wind-scoured summit. The wind atop Ha Ling Peak was a calculated blessing: it kept the ground clear for easy walking and it animated the 17' tassels in the bodysuit. But it was viciously cold. In addition, the spaghetti bowl mess of the forty-eight tangled-up long tassels made the piece difficult to manage. My hands had gotten wet while I was trying to set up some hand warmer packets and they had gone completely numb for the first 5 or 10 minutes of the shoot, leaving the task of untangling the fabric and setting up the camera to my friends. We collectively knew about mountain summit cornices - snow that collects and hangs over the mountain summit but appears to be solid ground - so we only stood where we could see exposed rock along the summit ridge. The wind was so strong we could barely hear each other and could only withstand the cold for 20 or 30 minutes at the most. I only know a handful of people who would dare to do the hike in winter conditions, so I remain amazed that I even managed to complete that photo shoot.



Figure 34. Karylin Smith *My Camouflaged Heart* (2022.)
 Photograph used with permission from Frances Jablonca ©

When I wear the art I make, I usually feel vulnerable and helpless, dependent upon the friends I've gathered to help me shoot, and unable to move. Feeling stuck and unable to help myself reflects the underlying psychological messages that intuitively led to the work. I literally can not perform my artwork without help. If I were to try, *The Spirit Dress* (2020) sleeves would not inflate in the wind and would lie flat and lifeless on the ground. *The Duotard* (2021) would have me in one end and 25' of flat, lifeless fabric dragging behind me. *My Camouflage Heart* (2022) would be a mess of tassels tangled underfoot. By gathering friends around to help, I can perform and bring the work to life. The heart of the vulnerability of the work lies in the act of wearing it. If the images and stretches of fabric reach for connection, so does the cumulative experience of performing it in the photo shoots.

The Spirit of Loneliness Dress (2020) was reaching for connection, while measuring the seemingly infinite loneliness around the central figure. *The Duotard* (2021) brought humour to the conversation while continuing to delineate the distance between self and others in relationships. Humour is embraced and a feminist stance is confidently taken. *My Camouflaged Heart* (2022) articulates relational distance by incorporating camouflage through anonymity and performing ground. At this point, it becomes clear that relational trauma is the impetus behind the work, reaching to be made visible through the reams and stretches of fabric. Recognizing that the sexual assault I encountered in youth is another form of relational trauma, I look around and see that I have been preparing to address it without realizing it: I have four stolen speculums and beautiful translations of the word vagina, embroidered in gold onto dark, blue denim. The embroidery and the speculums were a part of the natural flow that led to the creation of the final performance piece, discussed in the next sections.

It is Time to Prepare: THE GYNECOLOGICAL SLIP N' SLIDE!



Figure 35. Detail of two friends preparing for my next performance.
Photograph used with permission from Emily Kapcsos ©



Figure 36. Karylin Smith details from *The Gynecological Slip N' Slide* (2022) performance. Photographs used with permission from Emily Kapcsos ©

Figure 37. Karylin Smith speech from *The Gynecological Slip N' Slide* (2022)

I have on my shoulders
 A golden robe with golden threads
 Embroidering 102 Google translations of the word vagina
 In honour of the feminine
 In honour of everyone with a vagina
 And honouring anyone who loves anyone with a vagina
 And today, I reclaim my innocence
 I reclaim my innocence that was taken from me by a gynecologist
 And I have stolen the speculums
 From my crown
 To try to even the score
 But i need to do a little more
 The systems that we are a part of
 The systems that we participate in
 The systems that we want to change
 White supremacy, colonialism, capitalism - these systems were created at the hands of
 the patriarchy
 At the hands of the patriarchy
 But what I didn't realize, what I didn't see
 Is that We are the patriarchy - you and me
 Even me? Even me. Accidentally propagating misogyny
 So i have made a runway
 I have made a place to move from point A to point B
 I have made this place to transcend trauma
 To heal with you, my audience,
 With you my cohort, my teachers, my classmates
 With you my friends, my chosen family
 I will take you with me
 Let every word I say, let every step I take today
 be a feminist political act.
 Are you ready? (cheers)
 Are you ready? (more cheering from the crowd)
 I have a few helpers in the audience
 Oh I forgot to tell you!
 All doctors store these (pointing to speculums in the crown) in the same place
 The bottom drawer of the medical exam table - Just so you know
 The helpers in the audience will prepare - THE GYNECOLOGICAL SLIP N SLIDE!!!



Figure 38. Karylin Smith *The Gynecological Slip N' Slide* (2022) performance.
Photograph used with permission from Emily Kapcsos ©



Figure 39. Karylin Smith forming the group hug after *The Gynecological Slip N' Slide* (2022) performance.
Photograph used with permission from Emily Kapcsos ©

ART AS RESISTANCE: WOMEN'S ART THAT ADDRESSES SEXUAL VIOLENCE

The Gynecological Slip N' Slide (2022), as seen in action in Fig. 38, is in conversation with other feminist artists who address sexual violence against women. Suzanne Lacey and Ana Mendieta are conceptual and performance artists who have been addressing sexual assault since their early careers. In 1973, Ana Mendieta executed a performance called *Rape Scene* in her apartment where she created the mise en scene and performed as a rape victim. Suzanne Lacey created *Three Weeks in May* (1977) in her own community where she provided a map of the city, on which every sexual assault was marked every day, as it was reported. In her article “(Auto)Biography of Hurt: Representation and Representability of Rape in Feminist Performance Art”, Ana Fazekas discusses the art of Mendieta and Lacy as well as Tracey Emin, Yoko Ono and Emma Sulkowicz. Fazekas states:

The resistance in these works of art is in that the artists make their own platform, step onto it and resist being objectified by insisting on their position of subjectivity, on their experience as relevant, their autobiography as shareable and shared. And when resistance itself is not staged, it is in the call for action, it is in asking the audience about their position and their willingness to comply with the system and to stand by it by being merely bystanders. (Fazekas,16)

A predecessor to the #MeToo movement that went viral in 2017, Grace Brown created *Project Unbreakable* in 2011, a blog on Tumblr that invites survivors of sexual assault to post a photo with a quote from their attacker written on a poster. Grace received over 800 photo submissions and photographed over 100 people for the project. In *Discourse of Sexual Assault: Project Unbreakable and “The Art of Healing”*, Victoria Elizabeth Thomas examines rape and sexual assault survivor narratives through the images in *Project Unbreakable* (2011) in order to provide a better understanding of the lived experiences of sexual assault. Thomas describes the positive impact of *Project Unbreakable* (2011) for the survivors by giving them support through helping them to find their voice. The audience, after seeing the photographs, can “no longer ignore the implications of a society that has devalued rape and sexual assault survivor experiences. This devaluing has created a culture where someone is sexually assaulted every two minutes (Rape, Incest, & National Network, 2014).” (Brown). The article studies the images of eight survivors and notes how, through this blog project, survivors become active participants in the public discourse about sexual assault, where previously “Discourses have typically blamed individuals who have been assaulted; as a result, survivors remain silent” and that “This silence further contributes to the stigmatization... and lack of knowledge about the effects of sexual assault.” (Thomas)

The Gynecological Slip N' Slide as a Nomadic Feminist Act

The Gynecological Slip N' Slide (2022) is a disclosure of sexual assault, as well as an alternative form of justice, or it could be called a healing ritual. Shots and details from the live performance can be seen in Figures 8 and in Figures 35 through to 40. In the spirit of the work executed by feminist artists before me, the piece asks the audience to be present in solidarity and to bear witness to this disclosure. In the spirit of nomadic thought, however, I assert that *The Gynecological Slip N' Slide* (2022) is an act of posthumanist, nomadic feminism. Rosi Braidotti is cited earlier in this paper in the discussion of the politics of location with her supporting view that feminism needs to begin by acknowledging each individual's political position or location. In her book *Nomadic Theory, The Portable Rosi Braidotti* (2011), she suggests that nomadic thought can help navigate our way through the complexities of globalization, advanced capitalism (which she describes as schizophrenic), issues of gender and race, as well as feminism. She cautions that focussing resistance solely on the negative or unwanted aspects of oppression leads us to inadvertently reproducing ourselves over and over as *other* in a "Derridean deconstructionist repetition of the very terms one is rejecting" (Braidotti, 31). Braidotti posits that nomadic thought can put us on a path that "moves toward a politics of affirmation", summed up as an "active counter-actualization of the current state of affairs." Braidotti elaborates that this can be achieved "through the project of transforming negative into positive relations, encounters, and passions" (Braidotti, 31 *Nomadic Theory*).

The Gynecological Slip N' Slide can be viewed as a nomadic act of counter-actualization. The gynecologist's office, where the sexual assault occurred in my youth is the site of oppression. Braidotti furthers her explanation of how to achieve a nomadic approach to transcendence of oppression:

While acknowledging this particular location - as a wounded memory of pain, as well as a historically grounded space - nomadic political subjectivity, defines the political as the gesture that aims at transcending the present state of affairs and empowering creative "counteractualizations" or transformative alternatives. (page 30)

By creating a Slip N' Slide, a happy, summertime activity from my own childhood, I'm re-creating a safe place and time when my innocence was intact. This childhood memory might be common to others who share my relative age and socio-economic upbringing (middle class, North American). The gynecologist's office is juxtaposed onto the site when my women friends, at my command, prepare it for the transcendent journey by emptying a box of medical lubricant onto its surface. The audience watches as four women hike up their skirts and get to work emptying the metal tubes, taking

direction from the alpha female in the group. They are directed to fill any space that needs lube. An audience member told me later that only women would perform this task so thoughtfully and carefully; bent over from the waist in semi-formal attire, attending to every inch of the vinyl Slip N' Slide. (I had to stop and appreciate how wonderful my closest women friends are: I'm truly blessed with these friendships, despite everything.) I invite the audience, filled with friends, my cohort and instructors, to 'come with me' on the journey to reclaim my innocence, from point "A" to point "B". By running and sliding down *The Gynecological Slip N' Slide*, I am creating a new memory, a nomadic memory, to transform the wounding of the feminine into an empowered act of healing. As Braidotti explains, "...nomadic memories are affirmative, destabilizing forces that propel subjects actively towards change" (Braidotti, 32). The audience cheers and laughs as I run and slide down the runway, and cheers when I stand up. After removing the paper medical gown, drying my hands and being wrapped in a blanket, my friends gathered around me and other audience members joined in. Someone started humming some notes and we all started singing some melodic tones together, achieving that special feeling and sound of being in improvised harmony with over ten voices together all at once, while everyone wrapped their arms wide around us, and settled into a great, comforting, uplifting group hug. Rosi Braidotti describes nomadic memories like this one as "a creative force that gives ... a head start toward the world-historical task of envisaging alternative world orders and more humane and sustainable social systems." (Braidotti, 32 *Nomadic Theory, The Portable Rosi Braidotti*)

There has been a personal transformation that has taken place between the start of the Master's program in June 2020 and the final grad exhibition at Emily Carr in July 2022. I took a one year leave of absence for some much needed processing and integration time leading up to my thesis defence that takes place in September, 2023. During the leave of absence I was diagnosed with adult ADHD at the age of 49. Researching ADHD has revealed that people with this disability struggle with emotional regulation and impulsivity, which can create challenges forming relationships. In addition to this understanding- the art making, instruction, research and writing in the Master's program has led to self-discovery that shifts my life (and my art) in a new direction. Aside from positioning myself as an artist, my own art helped me to see the trauma in my past that escaped recognition. The identity-based self-images that I produced, and two solid years of being asked similar questions about them, finally enabled me to see what needs to be healed. I learned how to appreciate my hard-to-explain intuitive methodology, and the ebb and flow of my own art-making. I replaced hesitancy with a passion for feminism, with full awareness that I have only begun to experience the true depth of feminist art and critical theory that has been produced. Heck, before grad school, I didn't even realize my favourite feminist performance artists (Sprinkle,

Schneeman, Export) were being funny! I met the most amazing instructors, and peers in my cohort, and I have the most patient and supportive supervisor on planet earth. And best of all: I got to make people laugh. In summary, I am excited to become the person that I want to be.

So, what's next?

Aside from working on my own interpersonal relationship goals through research, courses and therapy, I plan to apply for artist's grants and residencies once I have completed the Master's program. I will begin close to home, applying in Calgary, Banff and for Alberta Foundation for the Arts individual grants. I want to research and work my way up to applying for an artist residency in Northern Ontario in hopes of creating work close to home (Sudbury, Ontario). My ultimate goal is to successfully achieve a long term artist residency in New York city.

What will the art be about, or look like? An intuitive artist might not want to answer that question. I do hope, however, that I will use less and less fabric (assuming all the long stretches of fabric are a true indication of how far away I keep people in relationships!). I can channel my resistance to my own life challenges onto the wider systems that contribute to them, while taking a nomadic approach to feminism and creating counter-actualizations of the state of affairs. Like *The Gynecological Slip N' Slide*, I want to continue turning the negatives into new positive encounters, memories and passions. I will continue making performative and/or performance art as an artist who uses humour or absurdity, with careful attention and further self re-education, to achieve nomadic feminism that considers and includes race, gender and class. I will probably continue working with self-imaging and identity based imagery, however I am interested in working towards a praxis of art that builds on its strength of activism. I will always be making art that comments on the human condition with the hope that the art speaks for those who might not have the ability, or the platform to speak for themselves. With the positionality of art-as-research, I will continue to explore relationships - or love - with a growing focus on the systems and realities that we continue to live and love in; advanced capitalist globalism, colonialism, white supremacy, the anthropocene and - of course, the patriarchy.



Figure 40. Detail of the *Gynecological Slip N' Slide* (2022)
Photograph used with permission from Emily Kapcsos ©



Figure 41. *The Spirit of Loneliness Dress* (2020)
Photograph used with permission from Emily Kapcsos ©

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APPENDIX

This bullet list is provided to share insight into the magical, unplanned flow that took place over several decades in order for *The Gynecological Slip N' Slide* (2022) to be created.

Summer Intensive 2021:

- gained Soft Shop studio access for the first time. I embroidered translations of the word vagina onto denim pant legs, pockets left intact (thought it was just an experiment to try out the Pffaf machine)
- found the speculums I had stolen and set them aside, wondering what to do with them
- gave up on planning any performance art since covid restrictions remained in place

Winter/ Spring courses 2022:

- created and documented *My Camouflaged Heart* (2022)
- was informed that the Final Grad Exhibit would be in-person
- decided to use the speculums and embroidered vagina translations to inspire a performance piece
- joked with supervisor about a gynecological slip n' slide and ran with the idea as the summer approached

Summer Intensive 2022:

- delayed the departure for Vancouver, bought a thrift shop gown and a box of medical lubricant
- packed up everything I had to create a slip n' slide into the trunk of my car, realizing as I did so that I could make a crown with the speculums and the headpiece from *The Spirit Of Loneliness Dress* (2021)
- arrived in Vancouver for the Summer Intensive with as many Soft Shop embroidering bookings as I could get
- found a long roll of black vinyl in the Soft Shop's fabric donations that fit perfectly between the two columns where my exhibit space was (to create the Slip N' Slide)
- completed the embroidery of 102 vagina translations several days before the Final Show
- in a Vancouver fabric store, realized a robe could be made to support the vagina translations when I found sturdy gold vinyl and other regal, gold fabrics
- a few days before the show, my photographer Emily Kapcsos visited the site and offered to bring a Victorian chair that resembles a throne, as well as a medical gown for the actual running and sliding
- the night before the show, made one clean, curved cut to the gold vinyl so as to create a curve to the train of the robe and saw that the leftover piece made the perfect tie-on arms and attached it to the top of the robe, along with completing the rest of the construction of the garment

- the morning of the show I woke up with these lines from the performance going through my head from a dream: "What I didn't realize, what I couldn't see is that we are the patriarchy, you and me. Even me? Even me - accidentally propagating misogyny."
- stayed home during the day and wrote the rest of the lines for the performance, reading them until memorized so that I was ready for the performance that evening
- performed "The Gynecological Slip N' Slide" at the Final Grad Show.