

Writing Through the Body: Boundaries, Reflection, and Trauma

By Alex McClay

B.F.A., University of Cincinnati, 2014

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Writing Through the Body: Boundaries, Reflection, and Trauma

by

Alex McClay

Approved:

Eileen Wallace

Eileen Wallace, Major Professor

April 16, 2021

Date



The University of Georgia

Franklin College of Arts and Sciences
Lamar Dodd School of Art

Dear Isabelle,

The MFA Examination Committee for Alexandra McClay met on April 13, 2021 for the oral defense of her thesis work. The committee would like to confer to Alex the honor of graduation with distinction based on her thesis work, the quality of her written thesis paper, and in recognition of the excellence of her research, participation, and engagement throughout her course of studies in the MFA program. Please accept this letter as the formal request for this designation in addition to the notes submitted with her examination form.

Thank you.

Sincerely,

Eileen Wallace
Senior Lecturer, Printmaking and Book Arts
Lamar Dodd School of Art

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Introduction

Boundaries protect us, but they are also possible sites of violation. This tension that boundaries create is at the core of my work, which explores the power dynamics that underwrite our most intimate and vulnerable spaces: our bodies, our identities, our minds, and our homes.

Using language, text, the femme body, and a variety of impersonal materials, I construct objects, videos, and experiences that call attention to the line that separates me from you and mine from yours. In my work, these materials have been taken from their original contexts and reformed to communicate through embedded language. This language, often honest and vulnerable, offers the viewer a glimpse into memories of trauma—of moments when boundaries failed me and proved permeable.

Simultaneously, my works *are* a boundary, marking a divide between myself and the viewer, creating an interstitial space between, a space where I am not so vulnerable. They do this through their physicality and by their doubling effect. By using reflective surfaces like mirrors and emergency blankets to reflect the works, as well as light and shadow to create multiples and surrogates, a space between the viewer and themselves appears. They witness their own spectatorship. Confronted by this doubling, the boundary between self and other becomes more complicated, more ambiguous, and more worthy of attention.

Hélène Cixous, in her essay, *The Laugh of the Medusa*, asserts that “women must write through their bodies, they must invent the impregnable language that will wreck partitions, classes, and rhetorics, regulations and codes.”¹ My own practice is an

¹ Cixous, Hélène, et al. “The Laugh of the Medusa.” *Signs*, vol. 1, no. 4, 1976, pp. 875–893. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/3173239. Accessed 22 Nov. 2020.

attempt to do just this: to write through my body, to break down these patriarchal barriers, to invent a language beyond the limits of discourse, a set of objects that protect me, and maintain a separation between me and myself and myself and *them*.

Here, power is always upended and questioned.

Part 1: Material

Material plays a central role in the work that I make. In my eyes, everything has a use. From traditional art materials like ink, paper, thread, and fabric, to non-traditional materials that can be found at a hardware store, in the street, or in the trunk of my car, to materials that are a part of me, to non-material things like light and shadow, I can mediate a value. The challenge to create something meaningful with something ordinary drives this constant exploration and is sustained by the possibility of uncovering imbued meaning in a work of art from an existing cultural or historical context of a material.

The way that I investigate and utilize material in my work is inspired by many artists. In particular, Ana Mendieta's performances with and documentation of her own body, as well as the earth, fire, feathers, and blood, inspired me to look beyond the traditional materials of craft.² I realized quickly that I was more interested in materials that I interacted with or noticed in my daily life: my body, my own reflection in mirrors, the weird pink flags in my neighbor's yard, the road under my feet, the emergency blanket in my first aid kit, the words coming out of my mouth, and the pixelated grid of the computer screen. I realized that all of these materials mediate my experience with the world. Just as Marshall McLuhan says in *The Medium is the Massage*, "media, by

² Mendieta, Ana, Beatrice. Merz, Olga. Gambari, Chiara. Bertola, and Castello Di Rivoli. *Ana Mendieta: She Got Love*. First ed. Milano, Italy: Skira, 2013.

altering the environment, evoke in us unique ratios of sense perceptions. The extension of any one sense alters the way we think and act—the way we perceive the world. When these ratios change, [people] change.”³ By changing the ratio of material or introducing media to a new context, meaning can be made.

Emergency Blankets

In a series of textiles, I use emergency blankets made of reflective mylar, pieced together to reveal words woven into their surfaces. Emergency blankets, otherwise known as safety blankets, space blankets, or thermal mylar, were originally developed by NASA in 1964 to protect their rockets, rovers, and satellites from the extreme temperatures in outer space. Since then, it has become a staple for any hiker or marathon runner and can be found in most first aid kits or car trunks.⁴ For the average human, the practical application for this material is to stay warm and signal for help in emergency situations.

In my work, however, the blankets represent a symbolic means to an end, a protective layer, and an emblem of survival. In the collection of wearable works titled *If Only//You Had//Listened*, (Fig. 1.1), I cut the blanket into small three-eighths inch circles using a laser cutter and pieced it back together by hand on a grid of thread. In its original form, the blanket is strong and reliable. When deconstructed, I render it permeable and fragile. Fragmented and pixelated text is then embedded in the material

³ Marshall McLuhan, *The Medium is the Massage [by] Marshall McLuhan [and] Quentin Fiore. Co-Ordinated by Jerome Agel*, ed. Quentin Fiore (New York: New York, Random House, 1967).

⁴ “Reflecting on Space Benefits: A Shining Example.” NASA, spinoff.nasa.gov/Spinoff2006/ch_9.html.

as it is reconstructed at intersections of strength and stress.

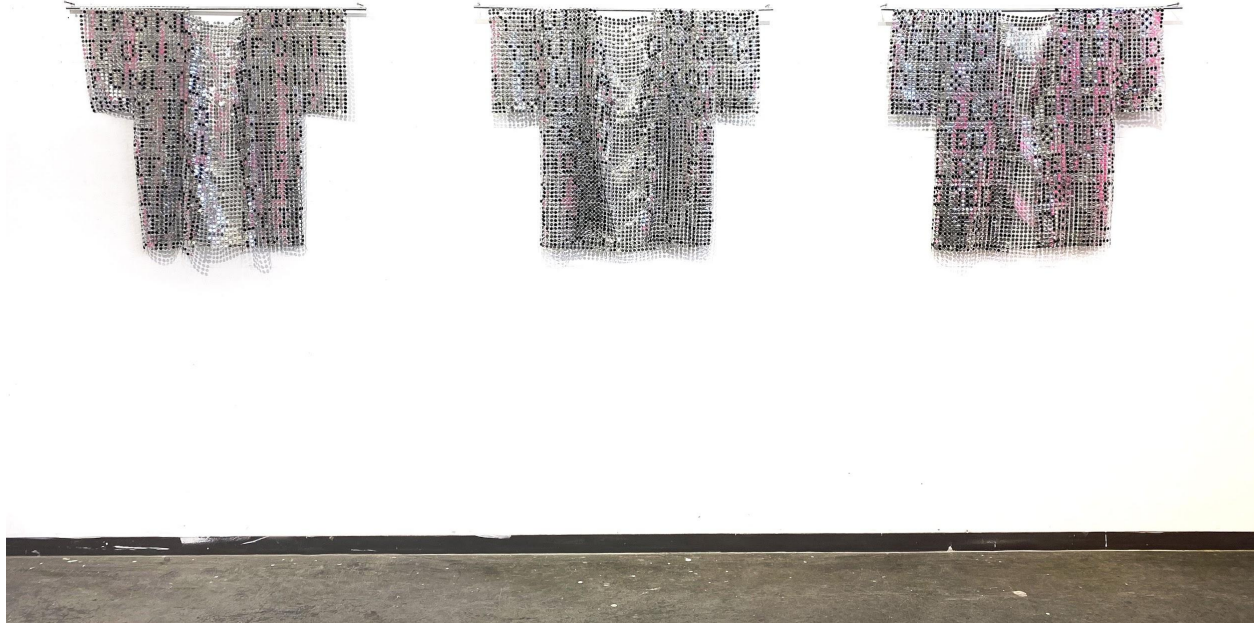


Fig 1.1: *Believe Her//Them//Us*, emergency blankets, fabric, thread, Gudy, 28" x 28", 2021

Language

Pixelated grids of dots are a common theme in my work. Whether the text is created digitally or physically, it always emerges from a grid matrix. This grid is directly related to the binary system that computers use to create text. Most of the way we communicate with others is mediated through our digital devices. There is always ambiguity in communication and this uncertainty becomes even more pronounced through digital communication. With a lack of tone, inflection, and other non-verbal communication signals, we are asked to decode messages time and time again. Similarly, my work begs the viewer to decode its message. Oftentimes, the work cannot-be fully understood unless you return and take a second or third look. For

example, in the piece, *Land Fall* (fig 1.2), the viewer must walk around the piece multiple times before understanding it fully.

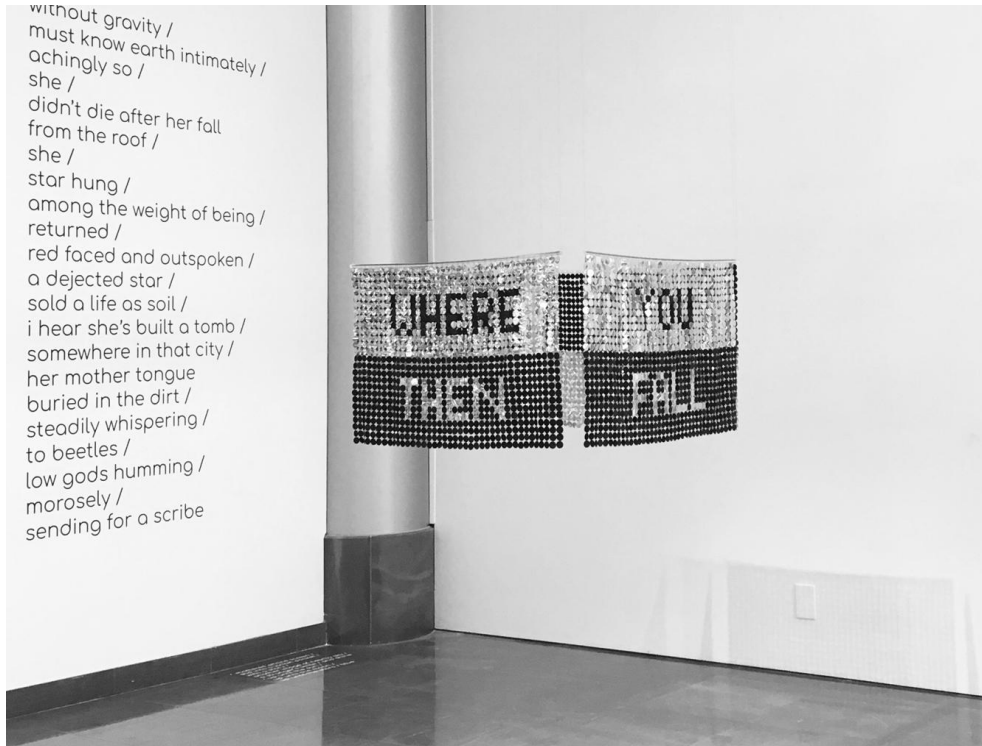


Figure 1.2: *Land Fall*, emergency blankets, thread, fabric, 24" x 36" x 36", 2019

Requiring the viewer to move their body in space, this work acknowledges that new meaning is derived from physically engaging with a text and its margins. The piece *Your Power is See Through* (fig 1.3), asks the viewer to walk through the piece in order to derive its full meaning. I think about this work as an expanded book; a book that can't sit in your lap, is bigger than you, and that you must engage with in a much different way than holding something in the palms of your hands. The question arises; how does one's perception, presence, or reality change when walking through a book? How does illegibility/legibility of the text change your spatial and self-awareness?

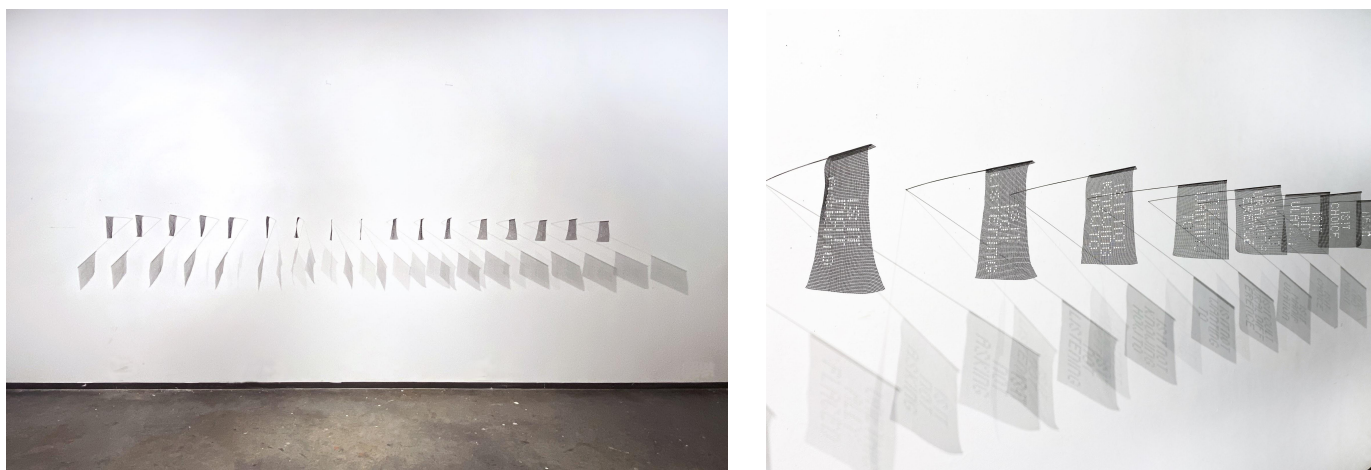


Figure 1.3: *Your Power is See Through*, window screen, insulation supports, emergency blankets, installation, 2020

The language in my work is there to challenge the viewer both physically and spatially, but also emotionally. If the viewer takes the time to read the text, they will find glimpses of honesty and vulnerability. Language becomes a portal into the inner workings of my mind and emotions in the aftermath of experiencing trauma.

Survey Flags

In a number of pieces, I use survey flags and survey tape originally used to mark and measure land. According to the American Public Works Association, the color pink specifically signifies a measuring, or a surveying, of the land (other colors, like blue and yellow, signify water and gas, respectively). These specific pink marking flags are used to mark boundaries (which are inherently abstracted) where they otherwise wouldn't be visible in space. In a series of textiles and installations, these materials are reappropriated to serve as representations of the invisible barriers that guide our everyday lives.

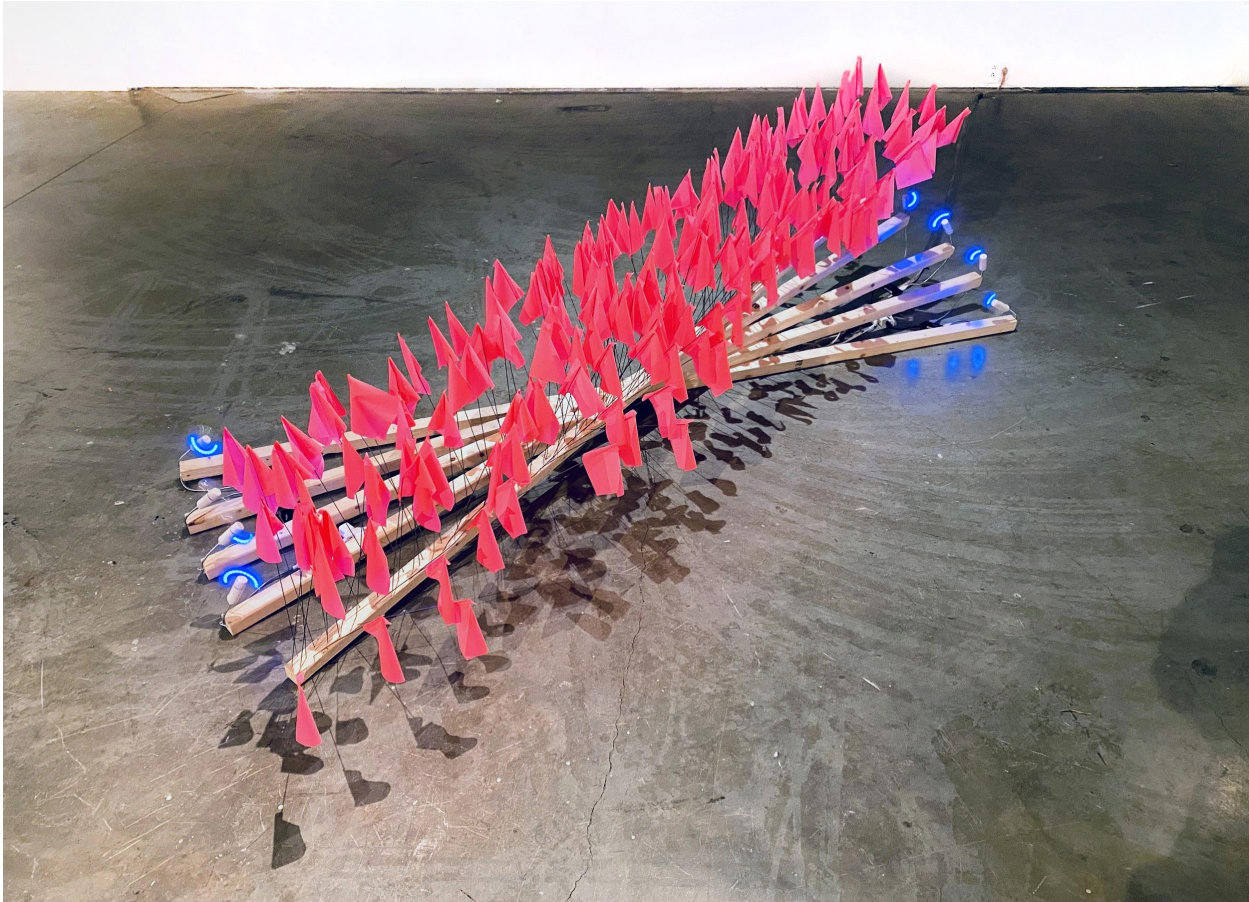


Figure 1.5: *Line in the Sand*, survey flags, LED fans, wood, 3' x 8' x 4', 2020

Cement

The use of cement is a more recent material choice. This industrial material, used as a mediator between humans and the natural world, is cast into small pieces in a series of wearable works and video installations.

With an influx in information and number sharing, especially on media platforms, the cast cement beads in *The Weight of (in)Action Accumulates* (fig 1.6) count and show information similarly to an abacus, a counting tool that has been in use since the 14th century.⁵ Seen in this way, the volume holds a phenomenological weight that

⁵ "Definition of ABACUS," accessed Mar 14, 2021, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/abacus>.

cannot be captured by a number on a screen. Not only does this piece hold visual weight, but, worn as a necklace, it holds actual weight, calling into question the difference between feeling an experience and seeing an experience. When worn, this piece allows for collective feeling and understanding.



Figure 1.6: *The Weight of (in)Action Accumulates*, cast cement beads, 30" x 18" x 4", 2020

In *Night Terrors* (fig 1.7), the text is created by 1,184 cast cement beads that are pinned to the wall. This number represents the number of sexual assaults that occur every 24 hours in the United States.⁶ The cement, and the words it writes, is a testament to the weight of that number, as well as the heaviness of the trauma that both causes and is created by these horrible acts of violation and violence.

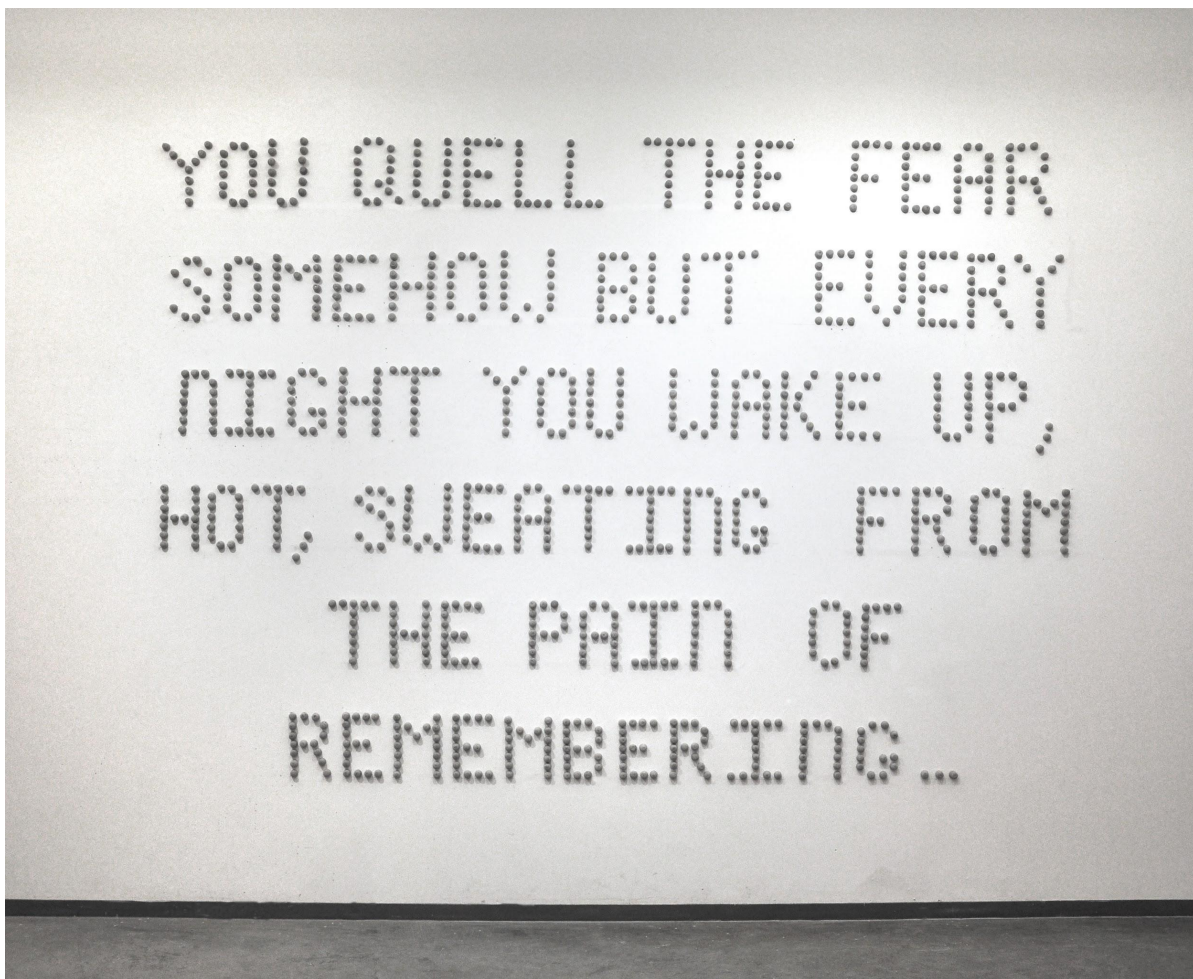


Figure 1.7: *Night Terrors*, 1,184 cast cement beads, 80' x 100' x 1", 2020

⁶ "Statistics." *RAINN*, www.rainn.org/statistics.

The Body

I use my body to make my work and the body is secondarily present in all of the other materials listed above as it mediates their production. The body has shown itself as a leading character in much of my work. It is most pronounced in the performative video works I started making in 2019, the first of which appeared in the show *Turbulent Femme*. [Bite Me](#) (fig. 1.8) is an 8-minute video in which a silhouette bites, eats, and licks a spinning text that reads: “this is my body.” The silhouette seems to be playing with the text with her mouth: consuming it, spitting it back out, and moving it with her tongue. The silhouette, through her actions, negotiates and complicates the meaning and longitude of the phrase.



Figure 1.8: *Bite Me*, projected video, 8:35, 2019

The materials listed above (emergency blankets, survey flags, cement and language) are symbolic of physical and abstract boundaries that we set between each other and of the things we use to signify space and arbitrary ownership. I wondered: what would it look like to use these materials to create boundaries for myself and my body? I began thinking about these boundaries as things that simultaneously constrain us and set us free, things that protect us, but can also reveal us. The performative video pieces *Suck, Spit, Flick, Stick* (fig 1.9) and *Hide and Seek* (fig 1.10) are meditations on these paradoxes.



Figure 1.9: *Suck, Spit, Flick, Stick*, 4-channel video, 11:06, 2019



Figure 1.10: *Hide and Seek*, 2-channel video, 13:56, 2020

Part 2: Mythical and Contemporary Sexual Trauma

Christine Blasey Ford

In Fall of 2018, I was beginning my first semester of graduate school. At the same time, another monumental thing was happening in the larger social and cultural sphere: the #MeToo movement and the *Christine Blasey Ford vs. Brett Kavanaugh* hearing. To say this was triggering and traumatic is an understatement. All over the world, millions of people who have been sexually assaulted sat and watched a woman recite the memory of what happened to her. The question the country wanted to know

was: if this man sexually assaulted this woman 40 years ago, was he fit to serve on the Supreme Court of the United States of America?

Despite Ford's heart-wrenching and brutally honest words, Kavanaugh was appointed to the Supreme Court. Ford was bombarded by people who questioned her experience and her memory. She received death threats, was unable to be out in public, and was further traumatized alongside countless survivors by the way the media presented her story.

The two pieces, *What Does it Feel Like to Be* (fig. 2.1) and *Indelible in the Hippocampus* (fig 2.2) were outcomes of that moment in history. They were created while listening to the hearings and thinking about the way our society views victims of sexual assault and trauma. #IBelieveChristineBlaseyFord was seen all over social media, but the government agreed on a very different sentiment when they appointed the man who said he did not believe her, even though he was there.⁷

⁷ Edwards, Haley Sweetland. "How Christine Blasey Ford's Testimony Changed America." *Time*, 4 Oct. 2018, time.com/5415027/christine-blasey-ford-testimony/.



Figure 2.1: *What Does it Feel Like to Be*, emergency blanket, acrylic, monofilament, 8' x 8', 2018



Figure 2.2: *Indelible in the Hippocampus*, emergency blanket, acrylic, monofilament, 10' x 5' x 5', 2018

Medusa, Marie Adler, and Me

Watching the documentary *Unbelievable*, the story of Marie Adler, I could not help but draw comparisons to the Christine Blasey Ford hearings, as well as the myth of Medusa. Adler became an outsider in her own life incredibly quickly after a man broke into her apartment, tied her up, raped her, and photographed her, after which she called the police. The police made her relive her trauma by making at least four different statements. In the end, the police concluded that her statements didn't add up and began questioning her story. *They didn't believe her. They thought she made it up.* After bullying her into questioning herself and eventually saying she made it up just to make them go away, they charged her with false reporting. She paid a \$500 fine and was put on probation. The media found out and her name was all over the small town. Not only did she lose almost everything: her friends, her support system, her housing, and her job, but she also lost trust in almost everyone around her. The world demonized her for reporting her story. They made her an outsider, a monster.⁸

Similarly, Medusa was cast off and turned into a monster after Poseidon raped her in Athena's temple. Athena, angry that her temple was desecrated, turned Medusa into a gorgon—a winged monster with snakes for hair and eyes that turned anyone who gazed into them into stone. The most well-known part of this mythology is that Medusa was a monster who lived in a cave and turned people into stone. The story says that the gods wished for someone to go to her cave, cut off her head, and bring it back to them. Many men turned to stone trying to slay the monster, until Perseus, armed with Athena's

⁸ *Unbelievable*, directed by Lisa Cholodenko, written by Susannah Grant, featuring Toni Collette, Merritt Wever, and Kaitlyn Dever, aired September 13th, 2019, <https://www.netflix.com/watch/80153509>.

reflective shield, finally succeeded by deflecting her gaze with his shield. Medusa was blamed for being the victim of a gruesome rape and eventually murdered for this “act of desecration.” After her death, her head was used as a weapon by Perseus, and eventually mounted to Athena’s reflective shield. Medusa, in life and death, petrifies and thus silences those she encounters, just as she was petrified and silenced.⁹

The stories of Adler and Medusa, although very different and centuries apart, have hauntingly similar storylines. It is difficult not to compare my own story to these survivors. After I was raped, my therapist said *I got myself* into a bad situation. My friend asked *how I could* let it happen. Another said *I shouldn’t have trusted* him in the first place. No one said anything about the man who offered to walk me home because he did not want me walking home by myself. No one said anything about what he did to me. No one said anything about how horrible he is, or how no man should ever do that to a person. Somehow it was *my fault*.

Why is this the reaction of so many? Why do we blame the victim? Why do we not believe them? Is it because often, they are the only ones left to blame? Is it the easier way out? The most comfortable way to think about it? Is it just hard to understand if you yourself have not been the victim of abuse? Is that how far our compassion goes? Is this where our empathy leads us?

It is no surprise that three in four people who are sexually assaulted do not report their assault, because they are afraid that the police will not help them and no one will believe them. Considering both Adler and Ford’s stories, one could see how reporting a rape could ruin a life more than the rape itself. I did not even report my rape. The most

⁹ Richardson, Vanessa. “Medusa.” Recorded November 24, 2019. Episode 9 on *Mythical Monsters*. Parcast, podcast.

upsetting part about this is that it perpetuates horrendous acts of sexual violence. It gives more power to the abusers, to the rapists, to the people who already believe they have the power. As stated previously, every 73 seconds, a person is sexually assaulted in America. That is 1,184 assaults every 24 hours. I believe that this number is higher; that it happens more frequently, but no one knows about it, and we might never know. Survivors are left to carry this burden themselves, for fear that the burden will be tossed aside if left in someone else's hands. "People only believe what is easy for them to believe," Kaitlyn Dever, the character that plays Marie Adler says in *Unbelievable*.¹⁰

Throats Sore (fig. 2.3) questions this phenomenon. If we spoke louder, would they believe us? Is there anything we can do to change the outcome?



Figure 2.3: *Throats Sore*, emergency blanket, survey tape, thread, 6' x 6' each, 2020

¹⁰ *Unbelievable*, directed by Lisa Cholodenko, episode 8.

The Body Keeps the Score

In psychologist Bessel Van Der Kolk's book *The Body Keeps the Score*, he explains how psychological trauma occurs. Van der Kolk, a scholar of trauma and its effects on the body explains that "if for some reason the normal response is blocked—for example, when people are held down, trapped, or otherwise prevented from taking effective action, be it in a war zone, a car accident, domestic violence, or a rape—the brain keeps secreting stress chemicals, and the brain's electrical circuits continue to fire in vain. Long after the actual event has passed, the brain may keep sending signals to the body to escape a threat that no longer exists."¹¹ This can have an incredibly negative effect on the survivor down the road. They may experience heightened stress responses to seemingly small disturbances or they might experience dissociation, which Kolk says is "the essence of trauma. The overwhelming experience is split off and fragmented, so that the emotions, sounds, images, thoughts, and physical sensations related to the trauma take on a life of their own. The sensory fragments of memory intrude into the present, where they are literally relived."¹² These responses, clinically known as post-traumatic stress disorder or PTSD, can affect survivors for the rest of their lives. Trauma "leaves traces on our minds and emotions, on our capacity for joy and intimacy, and even on our biology and immune systems."¹³

The video piece [you i//wanted//i you](#) (fig 2.4) is a work that explores the experience and effects of PTSD. A disembodied mouth repeats the words "I thought you wanted it/you thought I wanted it" in a monotone voice. The text, obscured by a mouth

¹¹ Kolk, Bessel van der. *The Body Keeps the Score: Brain, Mind, and Body in the Healing of Trauma*. Penguin, 2015, 54.

¹² Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*, 66.

¹³ Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*, 1.

opening and closing, repeats the same sentiment. The mouth, the text, and the voice are out of sync, creating even more confusion. Projected onto a ceiling, the video must be viewed while laying on a bed. “It takes tremendous energy to keep functioning while carrying the memory of terror, and the shame of utter weakness and vulnerability.”¹⁴ This work gives viewers a glimpse into this continuous expulsion of energy, the feeling of dissociation, and the shame and vulnerability that occurs with each.

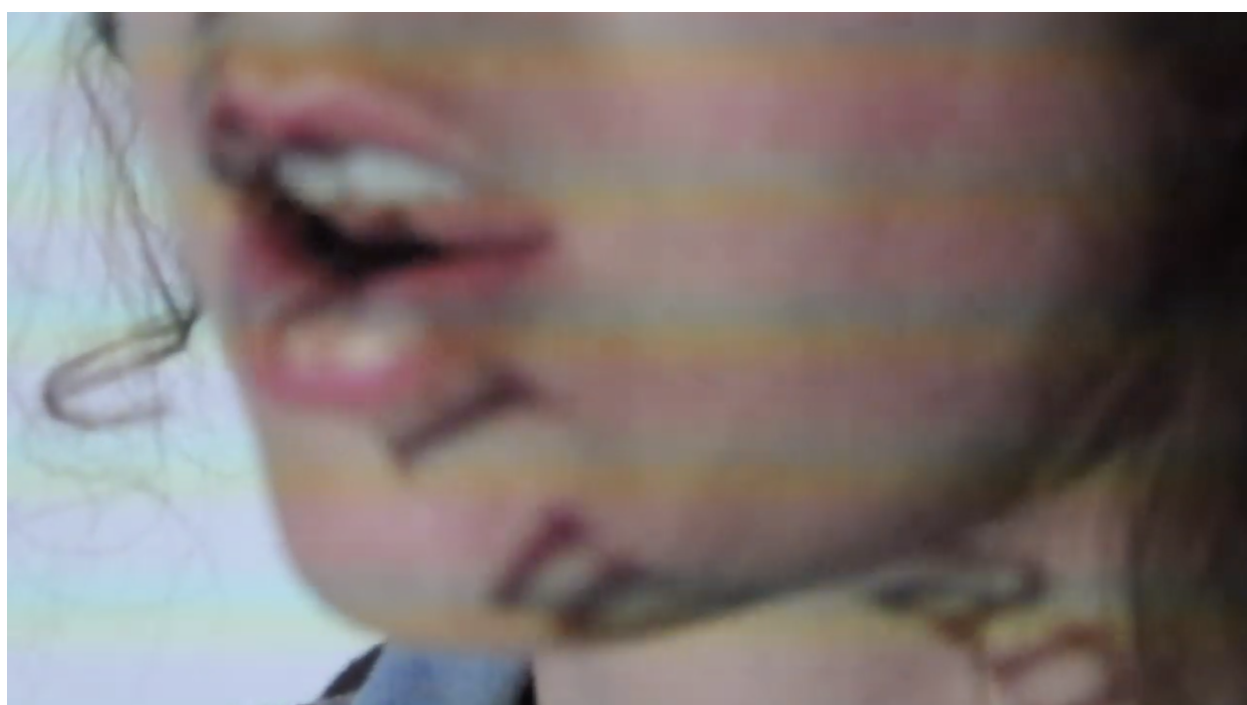


Figure 2.4: *you i//wanted//i you*, single-channel video, 2:39, 2019

¹⁴ Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*, 2.

(un)mutually exclusive

Experiencing trauma and its aftermath is complex and difficult in multiple ways. One of the most arduous aspects of post-trauma healing is dealing with the memory of the trauma itself. As a survivor, I have often questioned what really happened. Was it my fault? Did it happen in the same way that I remember it now? Trauma research shows that it is common to dissociate during and after a traumatic experience, making it more difficult to remember every detail. And then there is the problem with memory itself. “Memory, and time, both immaterial, are rivers with no banks, and constantly merging. Both escape our will, though we depend on them. Measured, but measured by whom or by what? The one is inside, the other, outside, or so it seems, but is that true?” questions writer-philosopher Etel Adnan in her book, *Night*. The piece *un(mutually) exclusive* (fig. 2.5) explores the rift between reality, memory, and truth.¹⁵

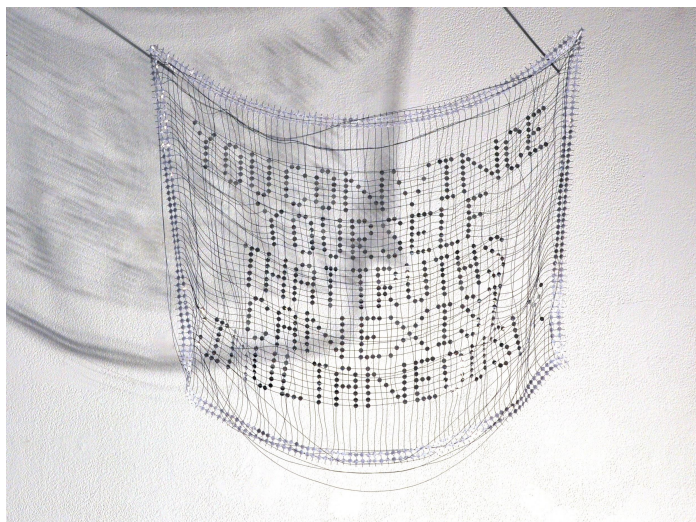


Figure 2.5: *(un)mutually exclusive*, emergency blanket, reflective tape, thread, 28" x 20", 2018

¹⁵ Adnan, Etel. *Night*. New York: Nightboat Books, 2016.

Part 3: Reflection and the In-Between

Medusa's Shield

As stated earlier, the mythical figure, Medusa, was both a survivor of sexual trauma and a victim of misplaced revenge. In the myth, it is her gaze that is her weapon. It is her gaze that is powerful and deadly. Scholar Anne DeLong, in *Mesmerism, Medusa, and the Muse*, writes that Medusa, who “would seem to paralyze agency actually enables it by providing the beholder with a choice: to look or not to look, to receive the gaze or to run in horror, to offer subjectivity to Medusa or to silence her forever, blinding her as well as decapitating her by refusing to receive (or perceive) her gaze.”¹⁶

This gift to her “beholder,” although not always recognized, gives outsiders that much more power over Medusa and her gaze. But what if Medusa had this agency? What if she had the ability to look at someone *without* turning them into stone? Would that make this “monster” more empowered? Would that make Medusa more powerful and less deadly? I ask this question in a series of four surveillance mirrors titled *Medusa's Shields (fig. 3.1)*. On the first shield, her story is rewritten:

And when he succeeded
 By diverting her gaze,
 He couldn't help but look into
 The (appropriately) rage filled eyes
 Not realizing that she
 Was still full of power
 Despite having lost herself
 To his knife.
 He was petrified
 Forever silenced.

¹⁶ DeLong, Anne. *Mesmerism, Medusa, and the Muse: The Romantic Discourse of Spontaneous Creativity*, Lexington Books, 2012, 99-100.

It didn't take long
 For the snakes to slither
 Back to their body.
 Her blood mended her wound
 And she sat up, awake,
 Now armed with a shield
 That would allow her to see
 Her subject
 Before turning it to stone;
 Finally able to decide
 If she will harm or heal
 Those who seek her.

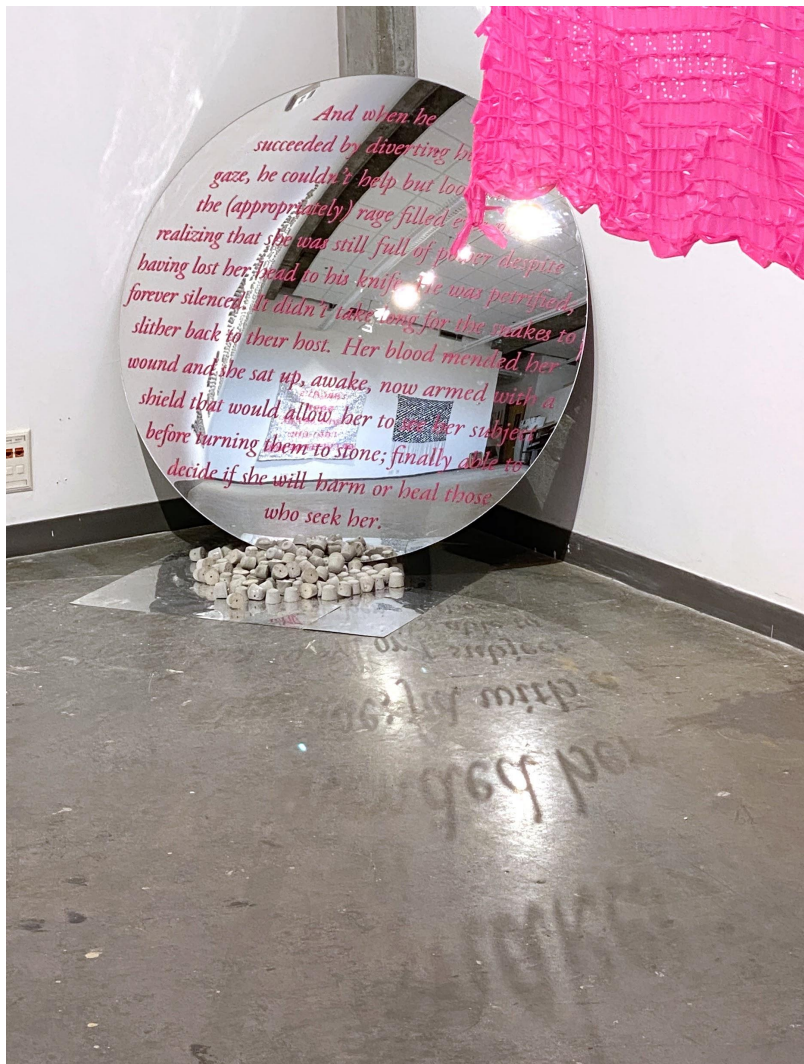


Figure 3.1: Medusa's Shield, surveillance mirror, vinyl lettering, 36" x 36", 2021

With Medusa's agency restored, these mirrors become a boundary between her and her viewer, a space where she has the opportunity to decide who she harms. That is what we all want, right? As psychiatrist Bessel Van der Kolk summarized: trauma occurs when someone is forced to do something they do not want to do, when their agency is taken away and they are not given a choice.¹⁷ In this story, the reflective shield acts as a mediator, a space in-between that finally gives Medusa a choice.

Woman and Reflection: Irigaray's *The Sex Which is Not One*

Medusa's Shields present reflection as a mediator between Medusa and the rest of the world. The reflective mirrors are convex and offer Medusa a broader, wider range of sight. Luce Irigaray, a French feminist, scholar and writer, speaks of the curved mirror as an object which "disturbs the staging of representation according to too-exclusively masculine parameters." Irigaray speaks of the flat mirror as a tool that is used as the "self-reflection of masculine subjects in language." She argues that if women only look into a flat mirror, they will always "come into being as the inverted mother of the masculine subject."¹⁸

Women's representation in both language and Freud's psychoanalysis is always regarded in relation to man. Throughout [his]tory, women have been inextricably linked to the male gender. Writer Anne Carson considers this in her poem *Pronoun Envy*:

¹⁷ Kolk, *The Body Keeps the Score*, 54.

¹⁸ Luce Irigaray, *This Sex which is Not One / Luce Irigaray; Translated by Catherine Porter with Carolyn Burke*, ed. Carolyn Burke. Ithaca, New York: Cornell University Press, 1985, 129.

“A binary system.
Which regards masculine at the unmarked gender. As if all
the creatures in the world
were either zippers
or olives,
except
way back in the Indus Valley
in 5000 BC we decided
to call them zippers
and non-zippers.”¹⁹

In order for a woman to finally see herself as *herself*, she must look into “a curved mirror” and/or a mirror “folded back onto itself.” Disrupting this relationship and severing the link between male and female via reflection through a mirror is to also disrupt the “self-reflecting organization of the subject in discourse....an organization that maintains...the break between what is perceptible and what is intelligible, and thus maintains the submission, subordination, and exploitation of the ‘feminine.’”²⁰ To reflect is to break down this organization. The piece *Antithesis* (fig. 3.2) creates such a space. Reflective material is woven together to create a curved, wobbly, surface. Placed on the floor but impossible to see clearly into, this mirror is the antithesis of the masculine flat mirror—a mirror that might be used to look up a women’s skirt, for example. This piece provides a platform for feminine reflection.

¹⁹ Anne Carson, *Float / Anne Carson*, First edition. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2016.

²⁰ Irigaray, *The Sex which is Not One*, 155.



Figure 3.2: *Antithesis*, paper, mirror, adhesive, 2021

Courage in Retrospect

Congresswoman Alexandria Ocasio-Cortez, reflecting on past trauma, once referred to “fear as fuel”. When asked how she gets the courage to do things, she said that “it doesn’t feel like courage to me. It’s fear. I’m scared all the time too. These moments are not about ignoring your fear...what you do with fear is that...you turn it into

fuel...courage is just something you see when you play the tape back."²¹ A collection of three weavings entitled *Courage in Retrospect* (fig. 3.3) investigates this sentiment and sheds light on another mediator: time.

Time can cause reflecting back on past memories to be more difficult and the truth to become more ambiguous. However, it can also give us space to reframe our thoughts after an event. For Ocasio-Cortez, it is only *after* an intense experience that she realizes that her actions were brave. Time, as well as reflection, can further complicate or demarcate the space between you and yourself and you and others.



Figure 3.3: *Courage in Retrospect*, emergency blanket, survey tape, bamboo yarn, 6' x 6', 2020

²¹ Ocasio-Cortez, Alexandria. "What Do We Do?," September 18, 2020, Instagram Live, Video, 41:11, <https://www.instagram.com/tv/CFTXq9BHi2r/?igshid=tbpiyf1zrt0z>.

The Moirai

The Moirai, or Fates of Greek Mythology, are three old women who are in charge of the destinies of all living things (fig. 3.4). When considering time, reflection, and reframing, it is easy to think about fate, destiny, or the common phrase “everything happens for a reason.” According to the myth, Clotho, the spinner, spins the thread that represents each person’s life. Lachesis, the allotter, measures the length of each thread to determine the length of each life, and Atropos, the inflexible, cuts the string, signifying the end of the life.²² As I weave tapestries that contain memories of past actions and unspoken thoughts, it is eerie to consider the Moirai spinning, measuring, and cutting thread to determine the events and lengths of our lives. To believe that my weavings could change something outside of myself is to believe that I have a similar power to the Moirai. It is a fantasy—and an alluring one at that. However, I do hope that these woven texts inspire viewers to feel a solidarity in their experiences of pain and suffering. According to the myth of the Moirai, a life lived is a life of suffering.



Figure 3.3: The Three Fates, early 16th century tapestry from the Netherlands, maker unknown

²² Museum, Victoria a. A. "The Three Fates | Unknown | V&A Explore the Collections." Accessed Mar 14, 2021.

Part 4: The Boundary & The Future

Donna Haraway's Cyborgs

Donna Haraway, in her work *The Cyborg Manifesto*, speaks of humans who are transformed into post-human beings. I believe Haraway would consider Medusa a cyborg, for example. I also believe, with the development of technology, she would consider everyone who uses a smartphone a cyborg, as well. In her myth, cyborgs “articulate questions of boundaries and definitions, testing and redefining the limits of kinship, community, and identity. Akin to the Amazons and Centaurs, the cyborgs are imagined to destabilize traditional dichotomies and force us to rethink the possible conditions for unified subjectivity. Cyborgs it seems, like the monsters of ancient Greek myth, embody otherness and pollute boundaries yet also evoke affinity and reinscribe margins.”²³ This cyborg myth allows for our “pleasure in the confusion of boundaries, but also demands our responsibility in their construction.”²⁴

In Haraway's eyes, cyborgs create a slippage that existing humans did not have the opportunity to enjoy. Suddenly, relying on things outside of ourselves, outside of our human bodies, is not only accepted, but blurs the lines between “normal” and “abnormal.” Cyborgs can blur things like time, memory, reflection, even psychology, and use them to their advantage.

In the 9-channel video piece [The Weight of an Action Accumulates](#) (figure 4.1), performers use cement beads as tools for understanding the collective mental weight of daily violence. The same 1,184 beads that appeared in *Night Terrors* (fig 1.7) are now

²³ Lively, Genevieve. “Science Fictions and Cyber Myths: or, Do Cyborgs Dream of Dolly the Sheep?” *Laughing with Medusa*, 275-294.

²⁴ Haraway, Donna Jeanne. *Manifestly Haraway*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota, 2016. Print. *Posthumanities*, 37.

strung together to create an abacus, but also a wearable object, that each performer gently places upon themselves. Suddenly, their bodies have changed. They have gained weight. They have become another kind of cyborg. When worn, the subject holds the weight of 1,184 acts of violation, 43.3 pounds in total, taking on some of the weight that each survivor might feel. The performers take care of the objects, holding each one with the same gentleness and attention that a survivor would need. "I wanted to care for each of the beads," one of the performers said, "I didn't want to take them off, but I couldn't hold all of them." In this ritual, the weight is transferred, it is spread out across bodies. It is then shed, individually by each performer, and collectively as the cement endlessly disintegrates through movement and contact with the femme body. These cement beads allow each person to hold and feel collective trauma. The ceremonial wearing of the beads facilitates a community healing experience across the boundaries of time, space, body, and weight.



Figure 4.1: *The Weight of an Action Accumulates* (stills), 9-channel video, 2021



Figure 4.1: *The Weight of an Action Accumulates*, 9-channel video, 2021

The Boundary Object

In *The Art of Cruelty*, Maggie Nelson mentions Ranciere's theory on mediators. She says that "they relate people to each other, with *relation* signifying the process of being brought together and given a measure of space from each other at the same time." This is essentially a spatial construct, she says, "that constructs both distance and association. Its construction demarcates some sort of boundary, but it does not follow that the function of that boundary needs to be a constrictive or restrictive one."²⁵ In my work, and in my life, boundaries take on many roles. At worst, they are restrictive

²⁵ Nelson, Maggie. *The Art of Cruelty: A Reckoning*, 2011.

and isolating, created out of fear and trauma. At best, they are tools that aid communication, translation, relationships, healing, fluidity, and flexibility.

Writer and researcher Susan Leigh Star is known for theorizing *boundary objects*. In her research as a sociologist and scientist, she posits that there are “objects that both inhabit several communities of practice and satisfy the informational requirements of each of them. Boundary objects are thus both plastic enough to adapt to the local needs and constraints of the several parties employing them, yet robust enough to maintain a common identity across sites...these objects may be abstract or concrete...but their structure is common enough to more than one world to make them recognizable, a means of translation.”²⁶ Although I do not claim to create “boundary objects” in this sense, I do think that Star identified something that, if created well, could have lasting impacts on communities that use a boundary object. It is this productive and positive outlook on the boundary that I wish to inhabit. And although my work is not there yet, “the boundary object” is a guiding principle for further exploration and creation.

Conclusion

The words of Helene Cixous have played out in my head ever since I first read her essay *The Laugh of the Medusa*. She asserts that women have “been turned away from our bodies, shamefully taught to ignore them, to strike them with that stupid sexual modesty...Women must write through their bodies, they must invent the impregnable language that will wreck partitions, classes, and rhetorics, regulations and codes, they

²⁶ Loveless, “Haraway’s dog.” *How to Make Art at the End of the World*, 297.

must submerge, cut through, get beyond the ultimate reserve-discourse, including the one that laughs at the very idea of pronouncing the word 'silence.'" ²⁷

Through the breaking down, questioning, and re-construction of boundaries, mediators, and objects, I have written through my body to break the silence through material, language, and form. I write for myself. But I also write for those that have experienced trauma, silencing, and marginalization. I write to create a space for collective healing and empowerment. I write to complicate and question those inherent truths we so rely on: time, weight, space, reality, memory, and truth.

²⁷ Cixous. "The Laugh of the Medusa," 633.

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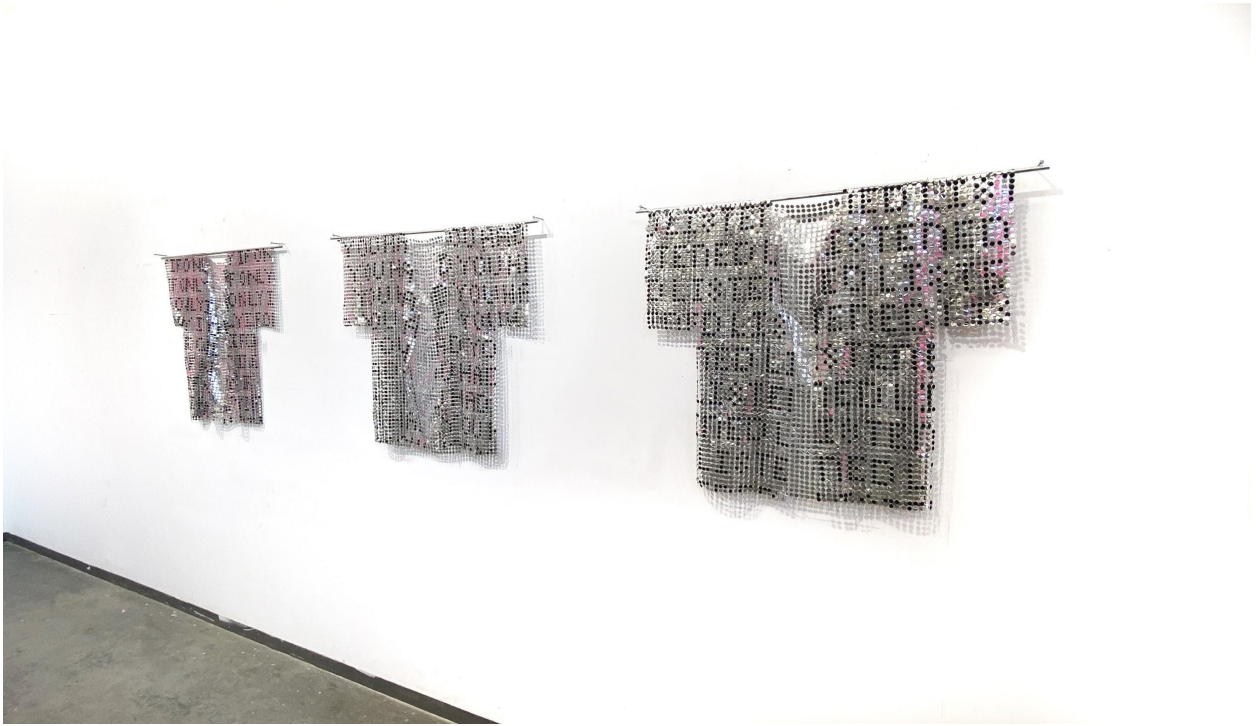
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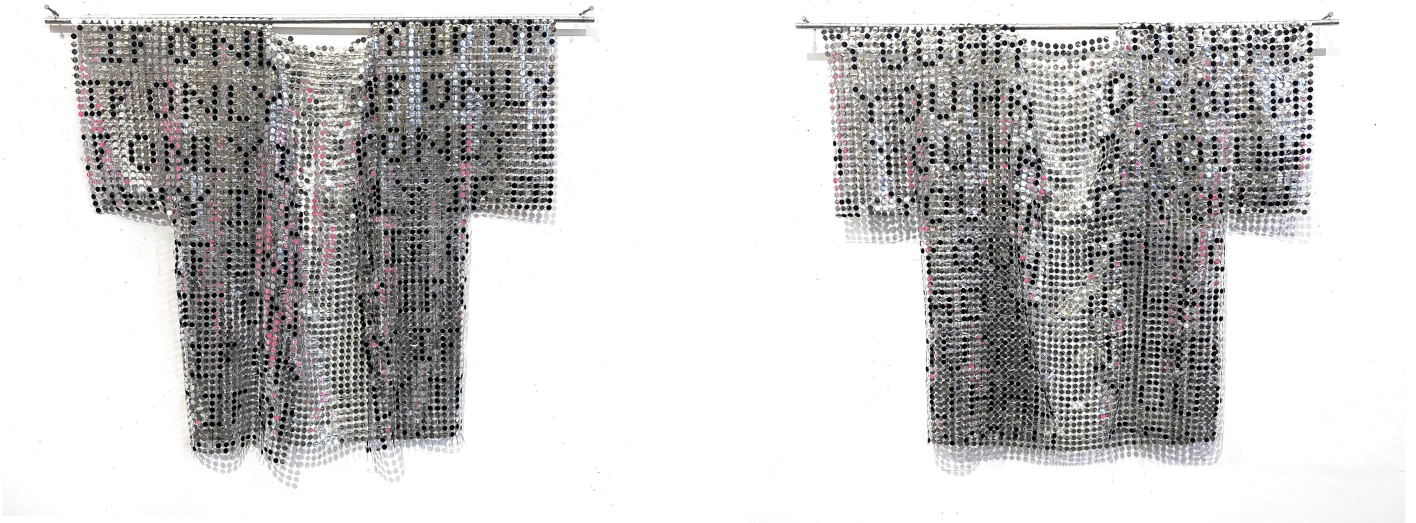
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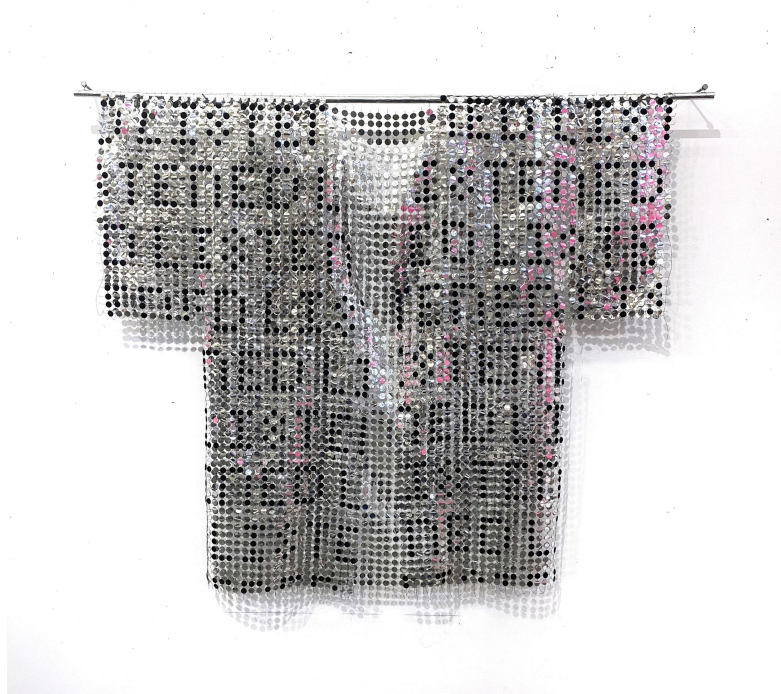
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Supplemental Images



Believer Her//Them//Us (detail), emergency blankets, fabric, thread 28" x 28" each, 2021

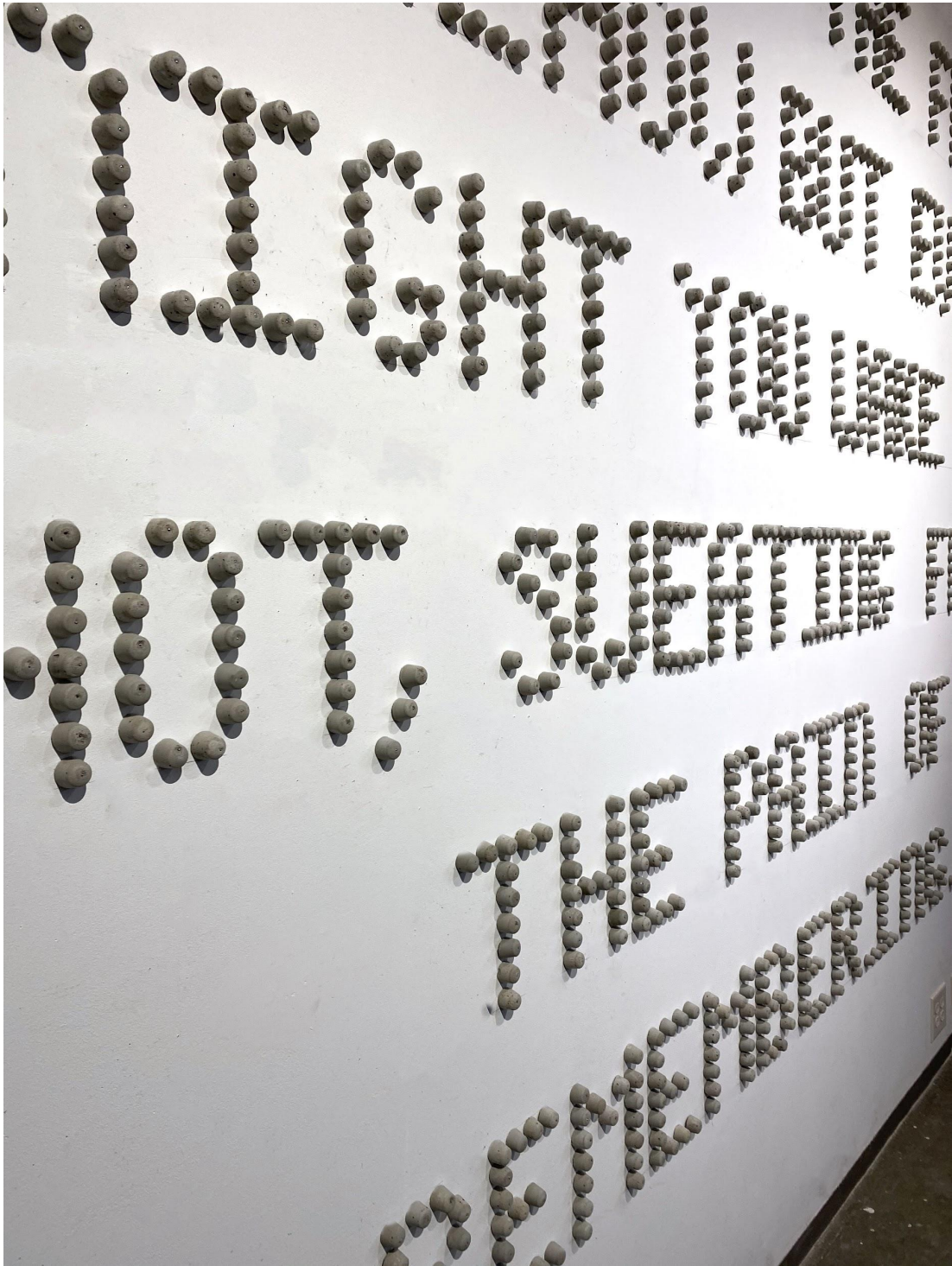




Believe Her//Them//Us (details), emergency blankets, fabric, thread 28" x 28" each, 2021



Believe Her//Them//Us (worn), emergency blankets, fabric, thread 28" x 28" each, 2021



Night Terrors (detail), 1,184 cast cement beads, 80' x 100' x 1", 2020



Courage in Retrospect (details), emergency blanket, survey tape, bamboo yarn, 6' x 6', 2020





The Weight of an Action Accumulates (still), 9-channel video, 2021



The Weight of an Action Accumulates (still), 9-channel video, 2021



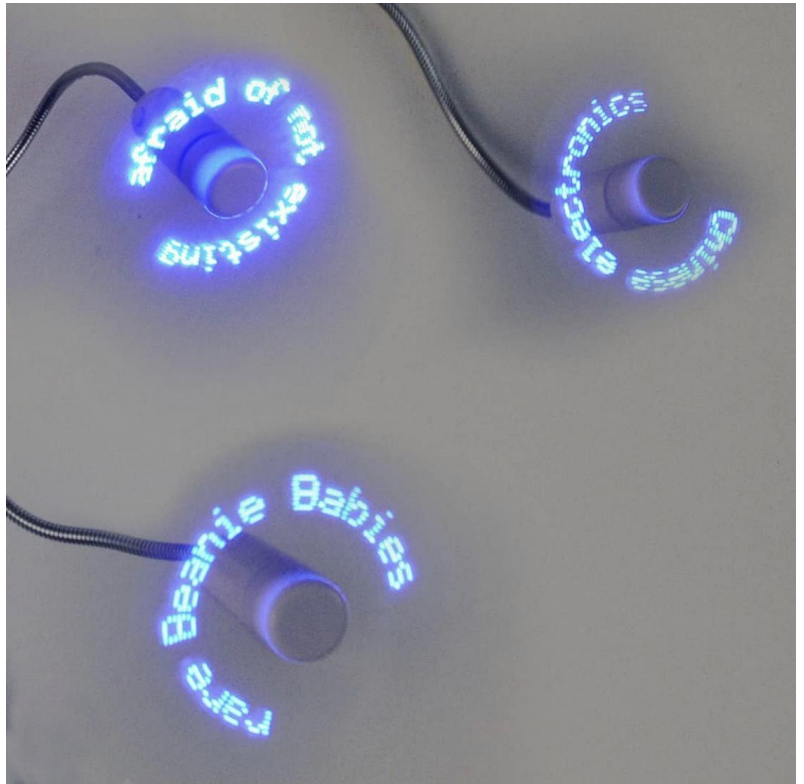
An Offering (still), 1-channel video, 2020



50 Foolproof Ways to Say No (from *Turbulent Femme*), cast abaca, thread, lace, 2019

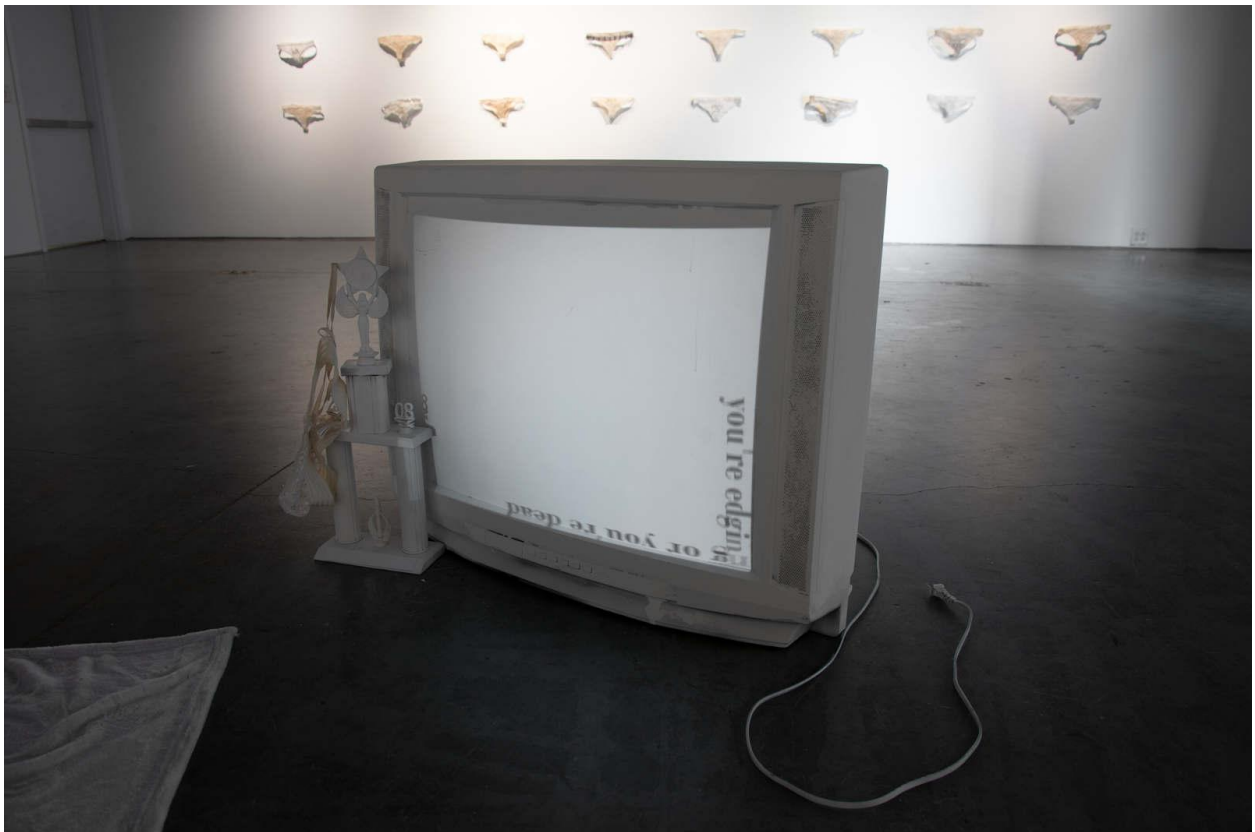


50 Foolproof Ways to Say No (detail), cast abaca, thread, lace, 2019

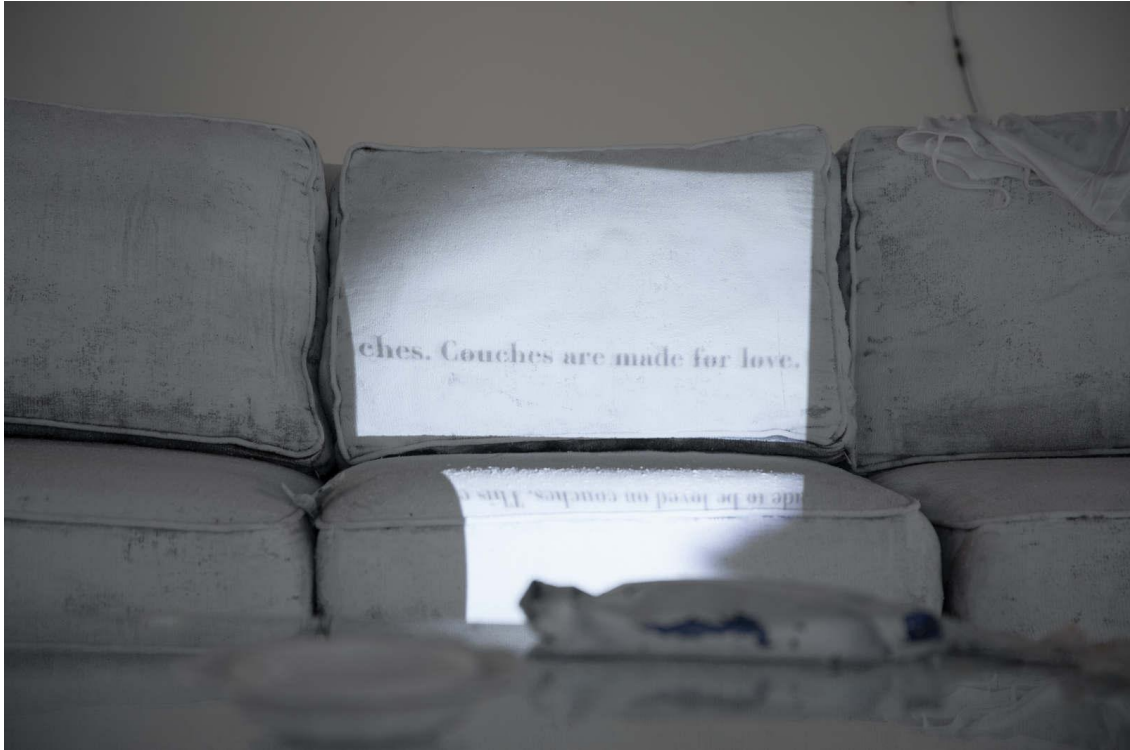


To Junk (from Turbulent Femme), in collaboration with Sam Regal, LED fans, 2019





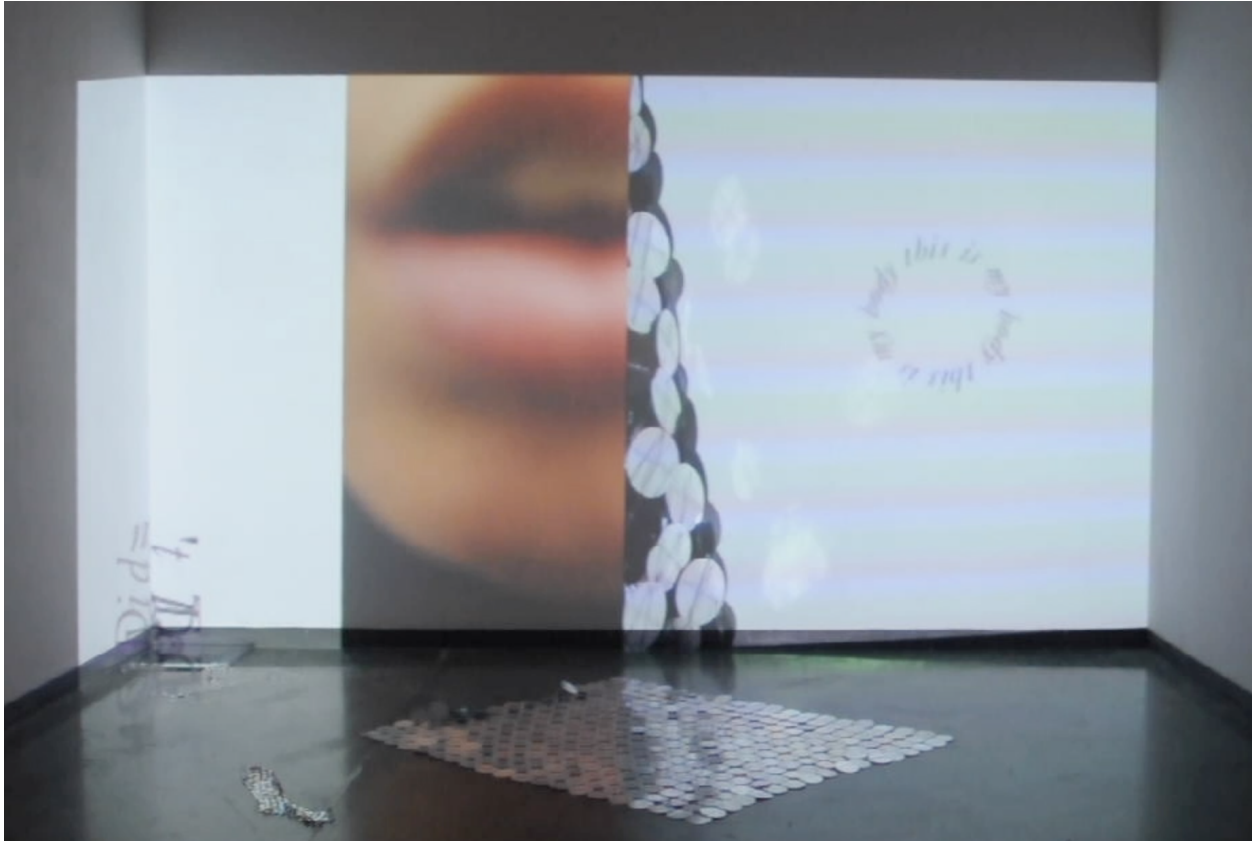
Living Room (from Turbulent Femme), in collaboraiton with Sam Regal, found objects, projected video, 2019



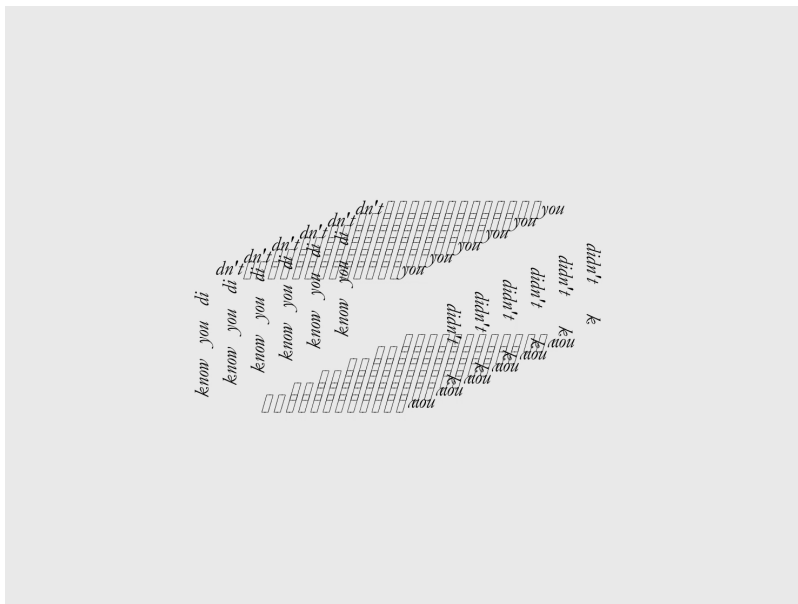
Living Room (from Turbulent Femme), in collaboraiton with Sam Regal, found objects, projected video, 2019



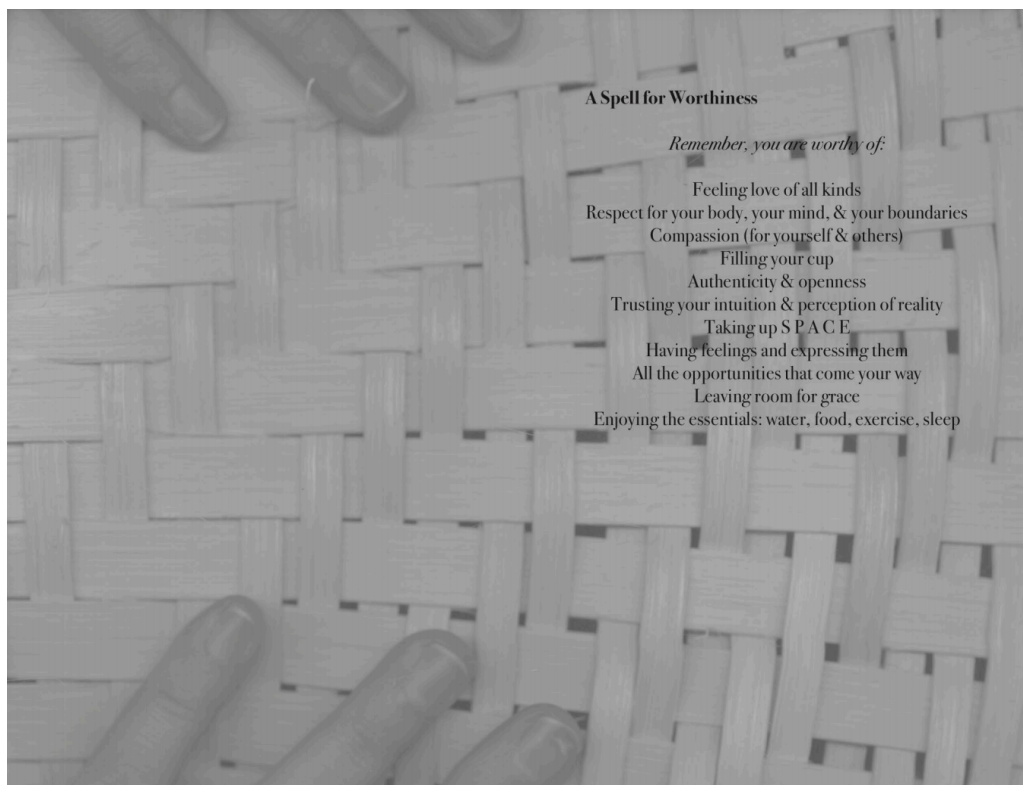
Turbulent Femme (installation view), in collaboration with Sam Regal, 2019



Bite Me (installation view), 2-channel video, acrylic, emergency blanket, monofilament, 2019



Know You Didn't, text animation, 2019



Book for Cooperation, inkjet prints, 2019