

# Breathing Room

Mary Ayling

Bachelor of Fine Arts, Columbus College of Art & Design, 2005

Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements of the Degree of Master of Fine Arts

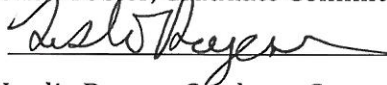
Penny W. Stamps School of Art and Design  
University of Michigan  
Ann Arbor, Michigan

April 23, 2015

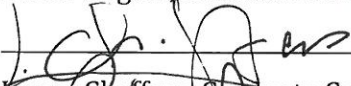
Approved by: .

  
\_\_\_\_\_

Nick Tobjer, Graduate Committee Chair

  
\_\_\_\_\_

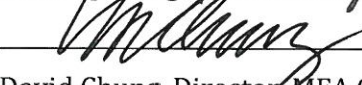
Leslie Rogers, Graduate Committee Member

  
\_\_\_\_\_

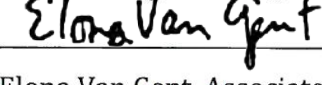
James Chaffers, Graduate Committee Member

  
\_\_\_\_\_

Peter Sparling, Graduate Committee Member

  
\_\_\_\_\_

David Chung, Director, MFA Graduate Program

  
\_\_\_\_\_

Elona Van Gent, Associate Dean of Academic Programs

  
\_\_\_\_\_

Gunalan Nadarajan, Dean, School of Art and Design

Date Degree Conferred: May 8, 2015

*BREATHING ROOM*



## **Abstract**

*Breathing Room* is a site-specific sculptural exchange set between the artist's apartment in Ypsilanti and Slusser Gallery in Ann Arbor. Drawing upon personal narrative, the work is expressed through choreography of sculptural installation, written reflection, and performance. This piece is the culmination of a three-year body of work exploring the use of art as a means personal transformation.

## **Keywords**

Transitional object, space, language, composition, articulation, ethics, performance, intimacy, time, space, distance, negotiation, collaboration, process, distillation, displacement, rebirth



**Abstract**

***Contents***

**Acknowledgements ..... 7**

**Introduction..... 13**

**Foreward..... 14**

**Works:**

*(Inhale)*

**Exist, 2013 ..... 22**

**Shaping Silence, 1988 -2014..... 28**

**Exchange, 2014..... 34**

**Forgiveness, 2014..... 42**

**Wrapped, 2014..... 48**

*(Exhale)*

**Breathing Room, 2015..... 54**

**The Journey.....60**

**Dialogue.....69**

**Time and Interaction..... 76**

**Choice + Environment.....84**

**Afterword..... 98**

**Personal Narratives..... 20, 26, 32, 40, 46, 56**

**Bibliography.....99**

**Figures ..... 100**



## Acknowledgements

During my time at in the Penny W. Stamps School of Art and Design I have had the great pleasure of being able to meet with visiting artists, critics and curators through the generous programming of the school. These meetings are a valuable addition to any graduates education and there are two pieces of advice that have stuck with me:

1. "All you need is one person to believe in you." – Janine Antoni
2. " It's easy to be afraid and I encourage you to keep allowing yourself the strength and freedom to follow your own illogical logic to its logical conclusion. " – Hamza Walker

With that in mind, I would like to acknowledge the following people for their gracious companionship traveling with me on my winding path of "illogical logic" and believing in me all along the way.

Nick Tobier , Leslie Rogers, Peter Sparling and James Chaffers have been my steadfast guides, critical eyes, engaged conversationalists and cherished supporters these past three years. Through conversations, studio visits, opportunities to collaborate between disciplines and continued examination of my practice I saw myself shed an old shell and grow into a new one. I will always be grateful for the unending patience, wisdom and humor you have all shown me.

I would like to extend a special thanks to my cohort, Laura Amtower, Math Monahan, Natasa Prljevic, Cosmo Whyte, Trevor King, Camilla Kraft, Clara McClenon , Cameron VanDyke and Mike Bianco for their support and critical dialogue over the past three years.

Rebekah Modrak, Sherri Smith, Seth Ellis, Janie Paul, Franc Nuno-Quarcoo and Robert Platt, thank you for the time working together, helpful studio visits and wonderful discussions.

I would also like to thank David Ayling for his care, intelligence and humor during some of the hardest moments in my life. I wish him the best in exploring all the freedom that true happiness brings.







## **B R E A T H I N G**

**R O O M**



## Introduction

There are no set limits or conditions which determine how much one should allow for some breathing room. It is an individual endeavor, and one which floats with the currents of each person's situation. Jellyfish move by radially expanding and contracting their bell-shaped bodies; pauses in-between expansion and contraction create a vortex of space that is necessary for forward propulsion. This is similar to what we do as humans: engaging our own environment determines the vectors and amplitudes of our movement. *Breathing Room* is the culmination of a three-year arc of works that sit in the space of personal expansion and contraction.

Setting out on a path of personal transformation, my work's primary mission became to uncover what has constituted my experience as a quieted female in the world. By studying the shape, affect, and effect of those past experiences I aimed to better understand behaviors in both myself and those around me. Through the creation of sculptural interactions, performative gestures, written reflections and cross disciplinary collaborations, I began to make space for new experiences surrounding personal issues of intimacy, sharing and power to enter into my life.

Breathing Room was a 3-week sculptural exchange in which viewers made appointments to embark on an hour-long journey, curated by the artist. On the day and time of their appointment participants retrieved a key from Slusser Gallery and were then picked up outside of the Art and Architecture building on the North Campus of the University of Michigan and transported to the artist's apartment in Ypsilanti. Upon entering the artist's home they encounter a completely empty apartment, bare of any traces of an inhabitant except for a small velvet lined hole in the middle of a room. Next to the hole lay a pair of silver tweezers and inside rests a diamond. Based on a personal narrative of the artist in which she was faced with the same choice of taking or leaving a valuable commitment, viewers are placed in an environment that gives them the freedom to assess the possibilities and risks involved with leaving or removing this tiny weighted object.

## **Foreword**

This document is an accumulation of research, reflections and personal narratives that have inspired my work leading up to and the creation of *Breathing Room*. I have divided the sections according to artworks created prior to this thesis, and have interwoven them with contextual information and lessons learned that were integral in providing a basis of knowledge for the performative journey that became my thesis exhibition. The last section of the document is an account of the journey, reflection on the work and documentation of the processes leading up to its deceptively Spartan aesthetic.

{ INHALE }



### ***Opening to the Choreographic***

“Choreography” is the art of creating and arranging a series of planned situations. (The American Heritage® Dictionary of the English Language, Fifth Edition copyright ©2014 by Houghton Mifflin Harcourt Publishing Company) Most often associated with the art of dance, theatre and performance choreography helps set movements that align a performer with the setting, stage and audience. In Jenn Joy’s book, *The Choreographic*, she investigates how choreography as a practice and concept is embedded in every action we engage with, from individual to political. This larger view of the term offers us an opportunity to rethink our positions to **space, language, composition, articulation and ethics. (Joy)**

*“ to engage choreographically is to position oneself in relation to another; to participate in a scene of address that anticipates and requires a particular mode of attention, even at times against our will.”*  
(Joy)



*SPACE*

*In 2008 I was crossing the street on a sunny day in Chicago. It was July 30<sup>th</sup> and the humid summer air was making my shirt stick to the back of my neck as I juggled two large bags filled with screen printing inks and craft materials left over from my morning spent leading kids through various art making activities. I usually glanced back and forth quickly before jogging across the street to catch the Western bus back up to Fullerton, where I would catch the next bus east to get to my second of three jobs at a coffee shop in Lakeview. But that day I decided to pause and hit the crosswalk button. As I waited for the flashing red signal to turn white I shifted the weight of my bag on my right shoulder and hoped that I had remembered to pack my Argo shirt. Looking up I saw the signal turn white, re-adjusted my grip on a screen and stepped out into the cross walk. The next thing I saw was light reflecting off the silver grill of an oncoming Mack truck and the sound of a horn coming out of the distance.*

*Who knows why I decided to pause that day rather than hurry along as usual, but the space of that pause changed the course of my life in ways that I could never have predicted. Its seemingly small duration allowed enough time for the pace of my walk to align itself with the velocity and timing of an oncoming truck, a distracted driver and their quick return of attention as they slowed down just enough to cause my collapse, but not run me over entirely. Moments are usually experienced as fleeting movements in time. Tiny gestures that accumulate into hours, days, and years but sometimes the moments extend themselves out into a pause, a space where the stillness becomes quiet enough to let you hear that it is actually breathing.*



**Figure 1. Exist, 3d printed sign, 2013.**

## ***Exist, 2013***

In 2012, right outside my first studio in the Green Rd. building was an Exit sign, placed to the top left of my doorframe. After encountering this object everyday as I entered the studio I began to take its presence personally, as a direct challenge. I was entering and it was telling me to exit. Entering implies that you are opening into something, a physical space, a different chapter of life etc. Exiting has the same implications but reversed, leaving something, someone or somewhere behind.

It was such a small object, that Exit sign, and yet it seemed to get bigger each day I encountered it. The mental space it was taking up was growing exponentially with each entrance and exit. Soon the question had grown to encompass not only my physical action of moving in and out of the studio, but how I felt about that movement. I became agitated by this sign's omnipotent presence, teasing me with its implication that I was branded as something to leave behind. It echoed of life-threatening situations encountered as both a teenager and a young adult, both similar in their circumstances involving a body, a moving truck and a collision. But one had an outcome of existence and the other an exit. My brother Scott was in an accident involving a semi truck in which he exited the world; 10 years later I was crossing the street and was hit by a semi truck but remained, still breathing.

This usually inert sign, whose original intention is to quietly and patiently let you know how to get to the nearest door as you wander through an unfamiliar space, stirred up a complex set of emotions in me, in which past anxieties mixed with present circumstances. French novelist and critic Marcel Proust wrote about this fluid nature of objects and their ability to anchor one to the past while enabling the birth of future memories in his work, *Remembrance of Things Past*, (1913 - 1927):

*"Ideas come to us as successors to griefs, and griefs at the moment when they change into ideas, lose some of their power to injure our heart." ( Pollak pg. 230 )*

So, it was from this grief over what had happened to my brother and me that I set about to change the message and turn around the directive offered by this little sign. I measured the existing sign and then designed and 3D-printed an augmented version, adding an S, transforming the word exit to exist.

Artists such as Jenny Holzer have used written language to make narrative and commentary an implicit part of public spaces. Through her public installations, *Truisms* in the 1980's and *Marquees* (fig. 1), Holzer uses text in both small and large scales to violate usual expectations of a space. Her language around ignorance and violence mixed with humor, kindness, and moral courage make the works succinct in initial public delivery, while slowly unfolding over time within each viewer.

In creating this new dialogue between myself and the physical spaces around me, I began to wonder what was encapsulated in choosing to exist. If exiting was turning away from a place, person or situation, then I had just made the commitment to turn towards it instead. What followed was a series of works lead by the personally courageous act of finally turning in to face the other spaces of grief that I had let lie silent in my life.

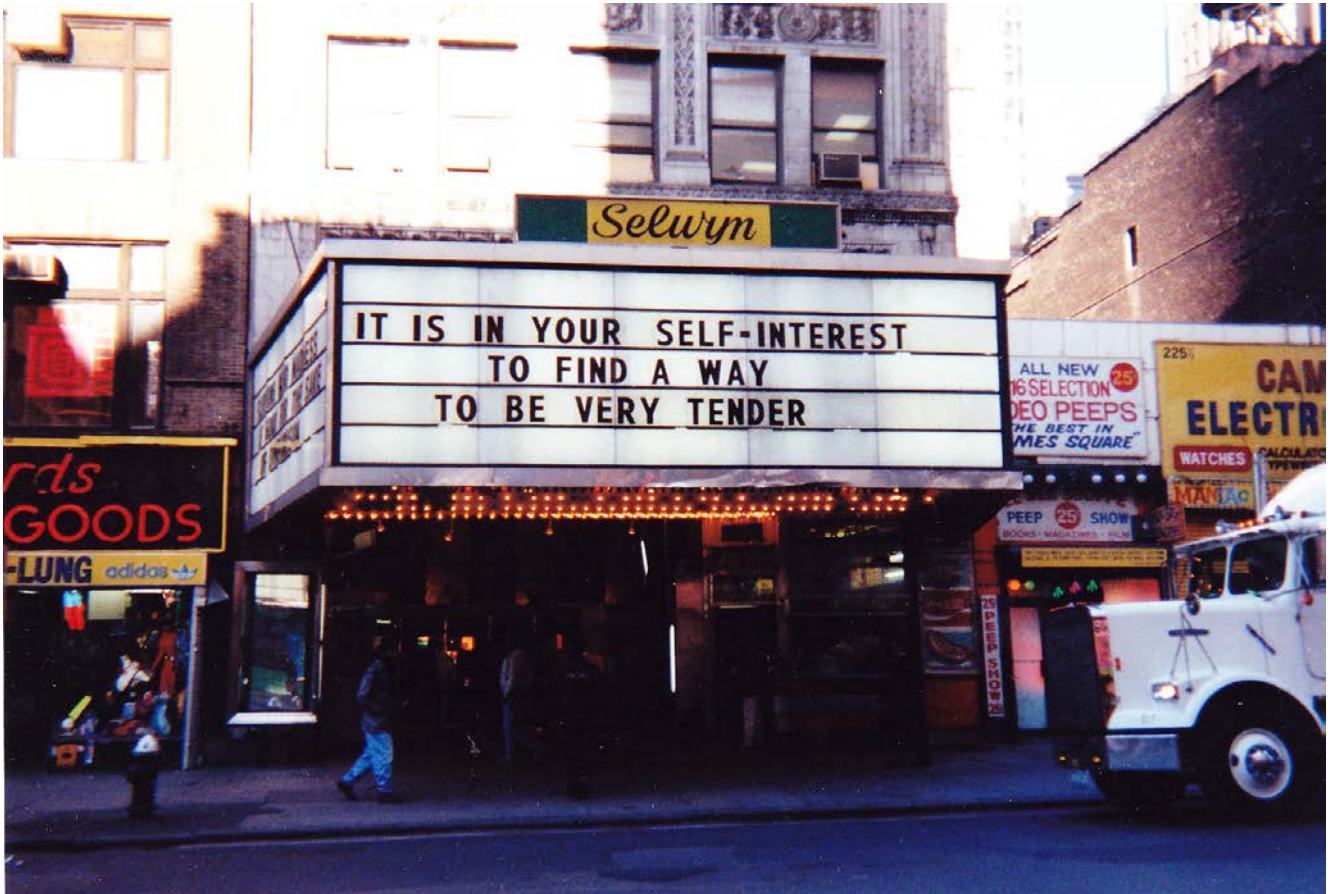


Figure 2. Jenny Holzer, "Marquees", 1993.





*L A N G U A G E*

*I had a secret to share, but no one to tell.  
No one was listening. So I tried to swallow it, but it sat there.  
Calcifying in my mouth until I decide to give it to you.  
Can you understand its shape now?*



**Figure 3. Shaping Silence, 1988 - 2014**

## ***Shaping Silence, 1988 - 2014***

In November of 2014, I began a work in which I spooned dental alginate into my mouth and began repeating a secret that had remained silent for 26 years. As I spoke, the alginate began to harden simultaneously choking and giving shape to the words I was struggling to speak. I performed this action 4 times, photographing and filming each action. The resulting mouth casts were tiny topographical maps of the violence that had occurred in their creation. After examining all four objects I chose one that I felt most embodied the secret and went about casting it in glass, giving these long-carried emotions a final resting place in translucent stillness.

D. W. Winnicott, is a 19<sup>th</sup> century English pediatrician and psychoanalyst best known for his work in developing the theories of true self/false self and the transitional object, in reference to the developmental phases of humans. Winnicott uses the term *transitional object* to denote an internal object which is the intermediate between the inner idealized world and the external world. He goes on to explain that the transitional object is not an internal object (mental concept) but rather a possession, something that carries a physical presence in the world. (Winnicott)

In his work *Sometimes Making Something Leads to Nothing*, artist Francis Alys documents the act of pushing a large block of ice down Mexico City streets for 9 hours. Eventually the ice melts into nothing and the only "proof" of his action lives in the video and photo documentation of the work, as well in the memory of people who saw him in the streets that day. Alys uses a complex combination of bodily, geological, and collective time. He juxtaposes the geological time that it will take for a block of ice to change states with the physiological act of walking a landscape and the span of collective memory that happens when we perform any action in a public space. This choreography of object and action creates a *transitional phenomenon*, where movement through time and space is integral to the transition.

In *Shaping Silence*, I began to build upon the idea of transitional objects, using grief as an action to transform itself from a weight or burden, into something that can be displaced outside of the self, examined and let go of. In Alys' *Making Something Leads to Nothing*, the ice block travels backwards, melting into its original state. I wondered if I could reverse that action of disappearing and use the time something had been traveling with me to give shape to its otherwise ephemeral nature.

*"Thinking in itself is an invisible sculptural process, which becomes visible by impression into material, into form."*

Hans Dieter Huber, *The Artwork as a System and its Aesthetic Experience. Remarks on the Art of Joseph Beuys*



Figure 4. Francis Alys, Paradox of Praxis 1: Sometimes Making Something Leads to Nothing, 1997



*C O M P O S I T I O N*



*Bill was an amateur astronomer, and high school physics teacher. He was a stepfather to my ex-husband and the biological parent to three daughters. Bill was an all-around Renaissance man. He drove muscle cars, was a volunteer firefighter, flew small planes and used his scuba license to help police in the event of plane crashes to search for wreckage. On top of all this he was a relentless eclipse chaser, flying around the globe to be in the line of totality twice a year. Yet even with all this outward community involvement he was helpless at communicating with his daughters. It was only through astronomy that he and I began a slow orbit of communication. Bill and I would sit on the Long Island beach and peer at the moon through binoculars, as he explained the various craters and movements of this quiet partner to earth. I spent a lot of time during these watchings, thinking about what binds people to one another. Sometimes it is love and desire, common goals, security, humor or adventure, and sometimes it's simply the force of gravity. The moon travels faithfully in a fixed path around the Earth, only ever showing one side of its face as it cycles around us. How many times do we do this same dance with one another, moving closer and farther away but never showing all of ourselves; constantly negotiating the space between our desire to come near and the push of moving back.*

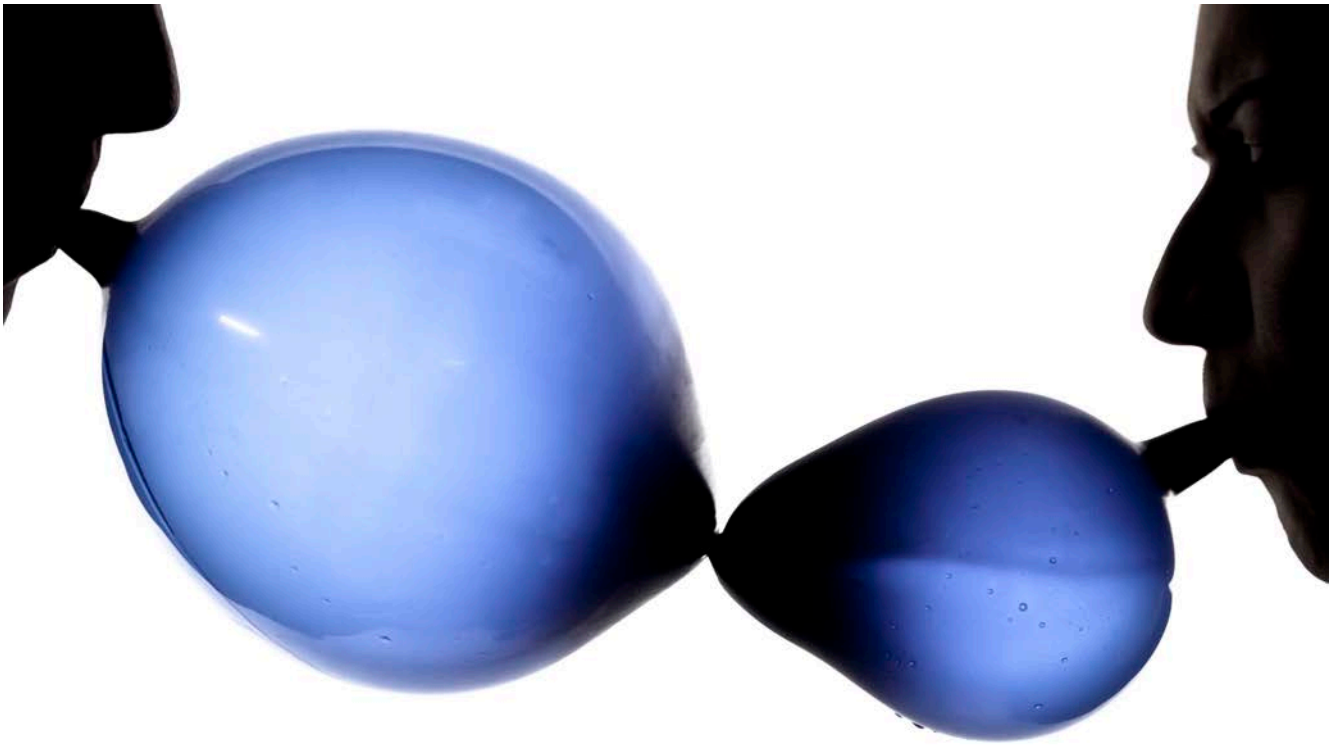


Figure 5. Exchange, 2014

## *Exchange, 2014*

For philosophers, Embodiment is the idea that knowledge comes to us more readily through our tactile senses than in verbal form. Many of my works during this period have been occupied with trying to understand the composition of language, how it is formed and shared. The act of speaking begins with an intake of breath; carrying oxygen to the lungs and passing carbon dioxide back out over the tongue. The exhale brings with it our sounds and syllables, floating on the winds of a gas that we, quite literally, need removed from our bodies in order to continue to live. That we can so smoothly carry out this act without thinking or worrying about the mixture of nourishing and poisonous gases, giving each their time and space in the shared channel of our throats made me begin to wonder if we allow the same graces in encountering the volume of another's words.

In my performance *Exchange*, two participants volley breath back and forth between a set of conjoined balloons. Air is passed through a tiny hole between them. As the air is exchanged, it slowly diminishes in oxygen and increases in carbon dioxide so that, much like an unpleasant conversation, the two parties are simultaneously moving in an effort to accommodate one another, while ultimately left to decide when one simply cannot take the dance of accommodation anymore.

*Exchange* began an exploration for me in the use of the intimate spaces between two bodies and led me to research contemporary dance performance. In the work *Robert and Maria* (fig. 6), audiences watch dancers Maria Hassabi and Robert Steijn engage in an emotional unfolding that occurs slowly between the tiny but aggressive frame of Maria and the gentle but looming body of Robert. The two performers enter the stage and embrace before standing parallel to the audience and facing one another. Maria's birdlike frame takes on a crouching authority as she hunches over and gazes up at Robert. Their eyes remained locked for almost the entire performance as they, move incrementally towards one another at odd angles and slowly clasp hands. Throughout the silent performance Maria's eyes water and tears fall down her face, leaving the viewer to wonder if it is emotion, memory or simply physical fatigue that is the cause of her crying.

Critic Claudia La Rocco wrote of the performance, "The work required an enormous amount of endurance and attention from both the participants and observers: like any serious relationship this one demanded a considerable, sometimes exhausting commitment."



**Figure 6. Maria Hassabi and Robert Steijn, "Robert and Maria" 2010**

Andrew Hewitt's book *Social Choreography* looks at human activity as it reciprocally transforms itself and the world it participates in, through the frames by which we organize our perceptions and give form to our actions. Hewitt argues for the use of "*choreography in terms of 'rehearsal'; that is, as the working out and working through of utopian, nevertheless 'real', social relations.*" (Hewitt) Both *Exchange* and *Robert and Maria* engage in this type of 'rehearsal' where power dynamics of gaze, and voice are tested between performers.

*Exchange* was originally performed as an act between three people and one balloon. The first person inhaled from an inflated balloon, exhaled back into the same balloon and passed it off to the next person to do the same; the cycle of inhaling and exhaling continued. The work was documented with still photographs and written reflection. Looking at the photos, the actions felt too separate from one another, and too removed from the push and pull of verbal interactions. I began to augment the balloons by making a tiny incision at the tip and then sewing them together to make one conjoined balloon that would allow air to pass back and forth between them.

This improvement in my *Exchange* object allowed me to have the kind of choreographic movement that I was looking for, one whose physicality was at times both mesmerizing and unsettling. I performed *Exchange* several times with a willing participant, resulting in a subsequent version in which I gave two performers a set of instructions to be enacted over 3- hour duration. Many of my works up to this point had been solo actions--pieces enacted through solitary gestures and in response to my own desires and movements. The resulting pieces lived in artifacts, documentation, and written reflections. As I explored the boundaries and shapes of my emerging voice, I was simultaneously mining the creative language I wanted to work within. *Exchange* brought another person into the equation, forcing me to think about collaboration and how to share the rules of an artwork with someone else. The scope of collaboration became not only the realm and roles of performers in the pieces, but also those I was working with to document the works. This work helped strengthen my interest and confidence in working with others to collaborate on an action.

*"I can think of no more fitting image for the ideal of social conduct than that of the English dance. Composed of many complicated figures and perfectly executed. A spectator on the gallery sees innumerable movements intersecting in the most chaotic fashion, changing direction swiftly and without rhyme or reason, yet never **colliding**. Everything is so ordered that one has already yielded his place when the other arrives; it is all so skillfully, and yet so artlessly integrated into a form, that each seems to be only following his own inclination, yet without ever getting in the way of anybody else. **It is the most perfectly appropriate symbol of the assertion of one's own freedom and regard for the freedom of others.**"*

*- Schiller on the Aesthetics of an Educated Man*



*A R T I C U L A T I O N*



*I have only a few memories of my mother and father as a married couple, and the majority of the ones that have stayed with me seem to revolve around the table and proper behaviors for considering others. In my memories, my mother would cook and serve every meal in the proper sequence of courses. Salads could not move onto entrees until each person at the table had given the signal that they were finished. And once dinner was complete there was always desert and coffee for the adults. My Aunt Sue is fond of talking about my mother's unusual penchant for placing an extra setting at the table for the unexpected guest. Having grown up in a working class family, my mother's desire for etiquette stemmed not from a childhood steeped in formal dinners and expensive surroundings, but rather from a need to control and order the situation. Everyone had a role and place in these social agreements. As we gathered around the table and ate next to an eternally empty plate, we were left waiting for the arrival of someone who never showed up.*



**Figure 7. Forgiveness, 2014**

## ***Forgiveness, 2014***

*Forgiveness, an unaccomplished pursuit* was a sculptural exchange in which two participants share the task of peeling and eating 20 oranges. Using only one hand, each performer struggled to peel the oranges together. After consuming all twenty, they washed one another's hands in a small basin. This intimate articulation was compounded by the repetition of the task, slowly growing more and more difficult as they ingested orange after orange. The gestures of each participant began to slow, and chewing became a more exaggerated exertion. As the pile of oranges began to wane and the discarded peels mounded higher, long breaths were released in an effort to expand the space of the stomach and the two participants looked wearily into one another's eyes. Hands sticky with juice and covered with pulp, they tore into the last orange.

This work, like *Exchange*, was performed in multiple versions, first enacted by a group of eight and later by a pair of two. After engaging the larger group performance, I realized that the work was in fact meant for a specific person. The intimate pairing of two was ultimately reduced even further to a specific two.

After participating in the performance, I became aware that while this piece could operate for others in their own specific ways but in order for it to be complete for me as a transitional phenomenon it would need to be performed with the specific partner I had in mind. I extended an invitation to them to co-perform this work with me. This invitation is, as of yet, unanswered and so the piece currently lives as stilled photographs and slowly rotting oranges, perpetually waiting for an invitee who, like my mother's table guest, may or may not ever show up.

To forgive is to grant relief from a burden, be it a person, situation or event. The act of forgiveness hinges on being able to articulate that space in which the seemingly rigid parts of a situation are suddenly connected by a flexible and yet tenuous understanding between two people. Sometimes this happens in words and sometimes it is expressed silently through our senses and actions towards one another.

Felix Gonzalez Torres, an American artist known for his poetic minimal installations and sculptures, created a portrait symbolizing his deceased lover, Ross Laycock with piles of multicolored candies exhibited on the floor. The combined weight of the candies was 175lb, corresponding to Ross's ideal weight prior to his battle with AIDS. As viewers take the candies, the pile diminishes incrementally, just as Ross's weight did. Torres insisted that the piles should be replenished continually in a symbolic gesture of granting perpetual life. In this work, Torres, uses a simple material to speak about the fluctuating scale of hope and loss, and shares those feelings in such a way that the value of the work comes not in the skill that it takes to pile the candy, but rather in Torres' sacrifice of the privacy of his most intimate pain. (Elder) This ability to be vulnerable with oneself, with a material, and with another person is the crux of my current practice. It is in this space of vulnerability that an artwork can open up and become something which is not only being looked at, but which actively looks back.

In Torres' work, the viewer has the space to decide whether or not to take a candy, and in doing so they accept the responsibility of sharing in his pain. This shared weight together is symbolized in the unwrapping of the candy. It takes two hands to twirl open the sides and release the bittersweet treat. In that space of reciprocal hesitation, where one vulnerability (the participants weighing of the choice) recognizes another (the pain of Torres) is the articulation of helping to release and honor another's burden.



**Figure 8. Torres Untitled (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)**



*ETHICS*

*My mother has not slept in her bed since she and my father divorced almost 30 years ago. In conjunction with this avoidance, both she and my stepmother live amongst boxes and packed up things from those who were close to them and are no longer here or are currently ill and in their care. In this space of perpetual moving, the boxes never change position. My mother in particular held onto many things from her married life and continues taking on the things of family members who have passed, or whom she has moved to Sylvania, OH, to care for. Her house is literally a place of tense waiting. One has to navigate through boxes that are piled up in the house and the garage. The overwhelming accumulation of objects keeps her trapped in a space occupied by the past and current lives of those she is caring for. I wondered if taking on all of this is was a way not to have to clear out her own sorrow.*



Figure 9. Wrapped, 2014



## ***Wrapped. 2014***

In *Wrapped* I was simultaneously working through two questions; one about my relationship to my mother and how we each decide to cope with a set of shared personal tragedies, and the other my own questions of why I was holding on to an earlier identity as a former wife and subverted artist.

With my mother and I's set of identity questions in mind, I decided to pack up the physical space of my bedroom. Using plastic moving wrap and tape I covered all of the built structures I had erected with my former husband as well as sources of power in the room (all of the lights, electrical outlets and architectural features such as the fireplace). In this act of packing up, I rendered my room unusable in its habitual functions. I was displaced, sleeping on the couch and thinking about my mother sleeping on her couch miles away. I wondered how long it would take for me to know when it was time to unpack and start over. I slept on my couch for 2.5 months. As the time went on, I began to empathize with the difficulty my mother must have faced when struggling with the same question.

In the Cabinet magazine article "A Decent Interval," author Greg Siegel discusses the Leaning Tower of Pisa experiment. A pivotal moment in which Galileo upends Aristotelian physics by dropping two lead spheres from the top of the tower. Aristotelian physics operated under the belief that the "velocity of free falling bodies moving through the same medium vary in direct proportion to their weights."

Yet when Galileo dropped the two spheres from the tower they landed at the same time, proving that heavier objects do not fall faster than lighter ones. Stiegel goes on to say, "In a veritable instant those old certainties, all those dusty apriorisms of ancient and medieval inheritance, were upended. Science and knowledge had at last entered the modern era." (Stiegel)

The article continues to discuss the strange paradox that this "moment of supreme scientific rectitude, of manifest epistemic righteousness and correctness in which reason and nature finally come into proper alignment" (Stiegel) has taken place "atop such a *deviant* and crooked structure" as the tower of Pisa. This brings the attention away from the achievement for a moment and begs a question that also has to do with falling bodies.... eventually.

The unanswerable question that seems to hang in the air is, how can something that upended an entire way of looking at the world have been supported by such a risky and unsettling structure? And, when exactly will that structure fall?

This type of gravid question enters into our own lives all the time. My mother took on the weight of caring for people based not only on her love for them but also as a sense of duty. The right thing to do, as prescribed by social expectations of being a reliable and caring person. In this accumulation of moral weight she slowly lost access to herself, inch by inch, to the towering physical and emotional baggage of others. Eventually you wonder if she is still underneath all those precarious boxes and what will happen when they fall. Will it be a relief or a disaster?

L.A.-based artist China Adams asks a similar question about the burden of having too many things in her work *The Official Stitch and Hide Project*, in which she created a three-point criteria system for evaluating objects that have achieved, in her terms, “Official Burden Status”. Objects received this status by meeting one or more of the following three categories:

1. China Adams has kept possession for sentimental reasons only.
2. China Adams has not had any physical contact with possession for the last 30 days.
3. China Adams believes possession to be potential high-risk maintenance problem: possession represents a possible financial threat due to current unreliable functioning and the subsequent threat of requiring the services of a skilled technician.

From here, Adams goes on to evaluate her possessions and discovered that 77% of her current objects had fallen under “Official Burden Status”. From there, she embarked on the process of concealment and disposal of these objects by sewing white covers for each possession and placing them in sculptural stacks encased within a glass vitrine. ( Fig 8 )

The glass vitrines encase these amorphous objects in another space of gravid waiting. The stacks feel stable and yet slightly askew as if they might tip if not for the glass wall surrounding them. We know that their collapse would be contained and we are in no real physical danger, unlike the Tower of Pisa, or the inevitable emotional collapse of my mother’s stacks.



**Figure 10. China Adams, The Official Stitch and Hide Project, Box #7, 1995**



{ EXHALE }

### **Choreographing the Action**

“choreographic is a value that rises and falls ..... crests and receives”; a mode of dancing composed not only of movement but also light, sensation, sound, stillness.” (Gutierrez, 2011) Trespassing into the discourses and disciplines of visual-sculptural-audial-philosophical practice *the* choreographic works against linguistic signification and virtuosic representation; it is about **contact that touches even across distances.**” (Joy)

*B R E A T H I N G      R O O M*





*I never really thought it was for me, she said. I always had a feeling that I was your father's second choice and that ring was meant for someone else... It never looked like me. But she wore it anyway, the metal skin of another life that was almost, but not. I never wanted this for you, she said. I wanted you to be strong and independent and never need anyone. But I did, more than she knew. I had spent so many years collapsing into smaller and smaller containers and never being sure whether or not to look into the next box I was being stuffed into. I'll try and make it right she said, I don't want you to have the same questions I did. But no one can prevent the landslide of their past from careening down the mountain of their present life. Old injuries colliding in an explosion of pain so acute that its depths seem unfathomable.*



Figure 11. hole detail, *Breathing Room*, 2015

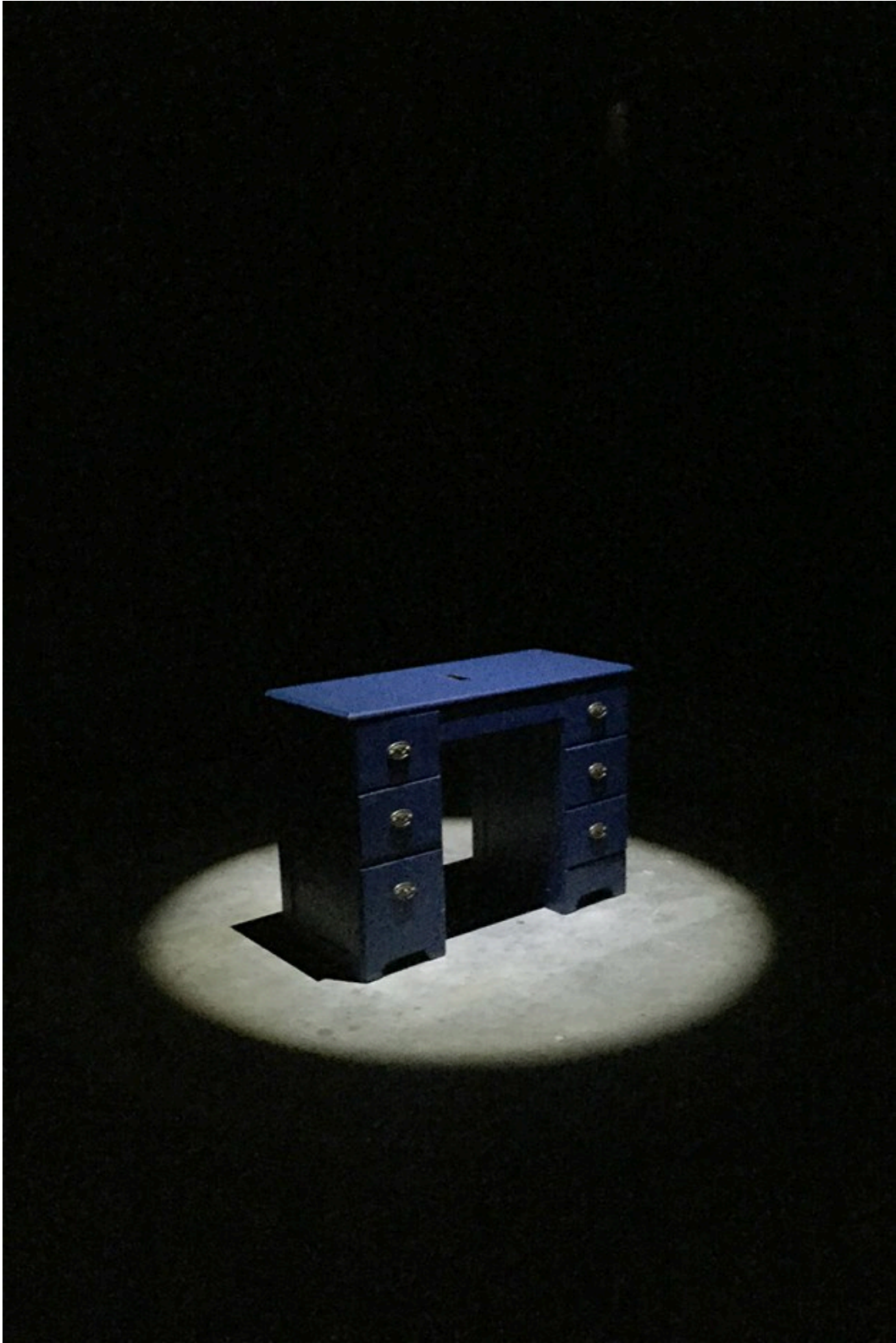


Figure 11. Desk, *Breathing Room*, 2015



Figure 12. Apartment, *Breathing Room*, 2015

## *Breathing Room*

*Commitment, value, trust, engagement, diamond, weight, possibility, burden, confusion, control, division, space, time, reflection, The Living Road, quiet, regret, unknown, worry, care, home, displacement, decision, driver, individual, journey, letters, key, desk, contemplation, action, memory, return.*

*Date of Creation: A Lifetime.*

Throughout my works I have been exploring the space needed to share between people. It was through my previous pieces that I built the foundation of the critical elements to include in *Breathing Room*. In *Exist*, I explored the way that introducing a subtle shift in perspective to the usual way of reading something can open new spaces of dialogue both internally and with those around you. *Shaping Silence*, like the Francis Alys' ice block, highlighted the need to consider how the time spent with a work can transform how we see, hold and feel about it. In the mouth cast, the longevity of carrying that burden had closed in my ability to communicate my needs with others, as it slowly closed off airways in both a physical and metaphorical sense. *Exchange* allowed me to really consider how to move with another person and choreograph our interactions so that it is not just a set of rules, but also a fluid dance of response to one another. *Forgiveness* gave me the sense of how important audience choice is and that even when you have an ideal outcome in mind, allowing space for another to enter and exit in their own way is important for building trust in a work. And through *Wrapped*, I fine-tuned the desire to create an immersive experience that can be entered into by altering an existing environment.

Through my artistic investigations of space, language, composition, articulation and ethics I was able to distill the key elements in my works to be ***dialogue, time, interaction, choice and environment***. It was from there that I decided to enter into *Breathing Room* with the intention of bringing these elements together into a larger choreographed piece that would sit somewhere between sculptural installation, theatre and life.

THE JOURNEY

On March 13<sup>th</sup>, visitors entered Slusser Gallery located in the Art & Architecture Building on the North Campus of the University of Michigan. To the left of the main entrance stood two 10-foot tall doors, one slightly ajar revealing a set of black curtains, and the words "Breathing Room" in simple black vinyl lettering on the other. Below the title was the following sign:

*Breathing room is a sculptural exchange designed for an individual experience. Set between Slusser Gallery and the artist's apartment in Ypsilanti, viewers are invited to enter this room and make an appointment for a future viewing session. Scheduled engagements will consist of an hour-long journey that begin and end here, in Slusser Gallery, with transportation between sites provided.*

*Times available once a day  
March 16<sup>th</sup> - April 4<sup>th</sup> 2015*

Behind the black curtain, inside a darkened room, sat a blue desk with two white chairs on either side, facing one another. At 5:30pm, I entered the room and sat in the chair that faced the curtained entrance to the space; at 5:32pm, the first person sat down and filled the empty seat across from me.

Following the arrival of my guest I greeted them, thanked them for their time and began to recite a series of guidelines that vaguely outlined what would be available to and expected of them, should they choose to sign up for an appointment:

- 1. *Breathing Room* was an hour-long journey meant for one individual at a time. It would begin in Slusser Gallery, travel to Ypsilanti, and then return to Slusser Gallery. Transportation between sites would be provided.**
- 2. Participants could choose a date and time from the 20 available spots between March 16<sup>th</sup> –April 4<sup>th</sup>. Only one spot was available per day but all 24 hours were open to them for choosing an hour that felt best for taking the journey. Times chosen ranged anywhere from 2-3pm in the evening, to 1-2am in the morning.**
- 3. Once a time and date was chosen, I spoke aloud as I wrote out their appointment cards asking them to:**

*Please be prompt for your time slot and on the (insert date/ time) please come to the Slusser Gallery to pick up the key and meet the car out in front of the building by the large column on Bonisteel Blvd.*

*Please return the key back to Slusser when you arrive back in Ann Arbor, as it is the only copy that I have.*

My delivery was deliberately casual and friendly, in a conscious effort to ease the possible discomfort of being in such a focused space. All that was visible in the room were the items on the desk, the chairs and the two participants. The periphery of the space was deliberately blacked-out, so that attention was given only to the desk directly in front of you.

Even with the minimal information provided about what they were agreeing to, and with the available days dwindling as more appointments filled, not a single person declined the offer to participate. As they decided on a day and time for their journey, our conversations revealed how they felt waiting in line, the buildup of anticipation during the wait, and the excitement of the unknown nature of what would be discovered behind the curtain. In a more habitual artist/ viewer scenario, anticipation is mostly borne by the artist, as they prepare their work for public viewing. Here, the artist and participant shared in the rising expectations as I waited blindly for you, and you for me.

On the date and time of their appointment participants returned to Slusser Gallery:

- 1. They pick up the key, an MP3 player with headphones, and a card instructing them to meet the car out front and listen to Track 1 on the way there and Track 2 on the return.**
- 2. Once outside they enter a black town car and are greeted by the driver. The car starts up and begins its journey towards Ypsilanti winding along back roads. 20 minutes later they pull up to a large green and red Victorian house with a blue door, the same indigo blue as the desk where they made their appointment.**
- 3. The driver points to where to enter and tells them that he will be back in 20 minutes.**
- 4. The viewer walks up the path and unlocks the door, as the driver pulls away. Upon entering they "breach a weird stilled emptiness:" an empty apartment, stripped bare of any traces of inhabitation except for a single spotlight in the middle of the front room highlighting a pair of silver tweezers laying next to a small black hole in the wooden floor containing a diamond.**
- 5. Through the kitchen into the next room is another large empty space with diffused light coming through the windows.**
- 6. After 20 minutes the driver returns and the viewer begins their travel back to Slusser. When they arrive back in the gallery to return the key and MP3 player, there is a printer, computer and blue envelope containing a personalized letter addressed to them.**





Figure 13. *Breathing Room*, Journey, 2015



Figure 13. *Breathing Room Journey*, 2015

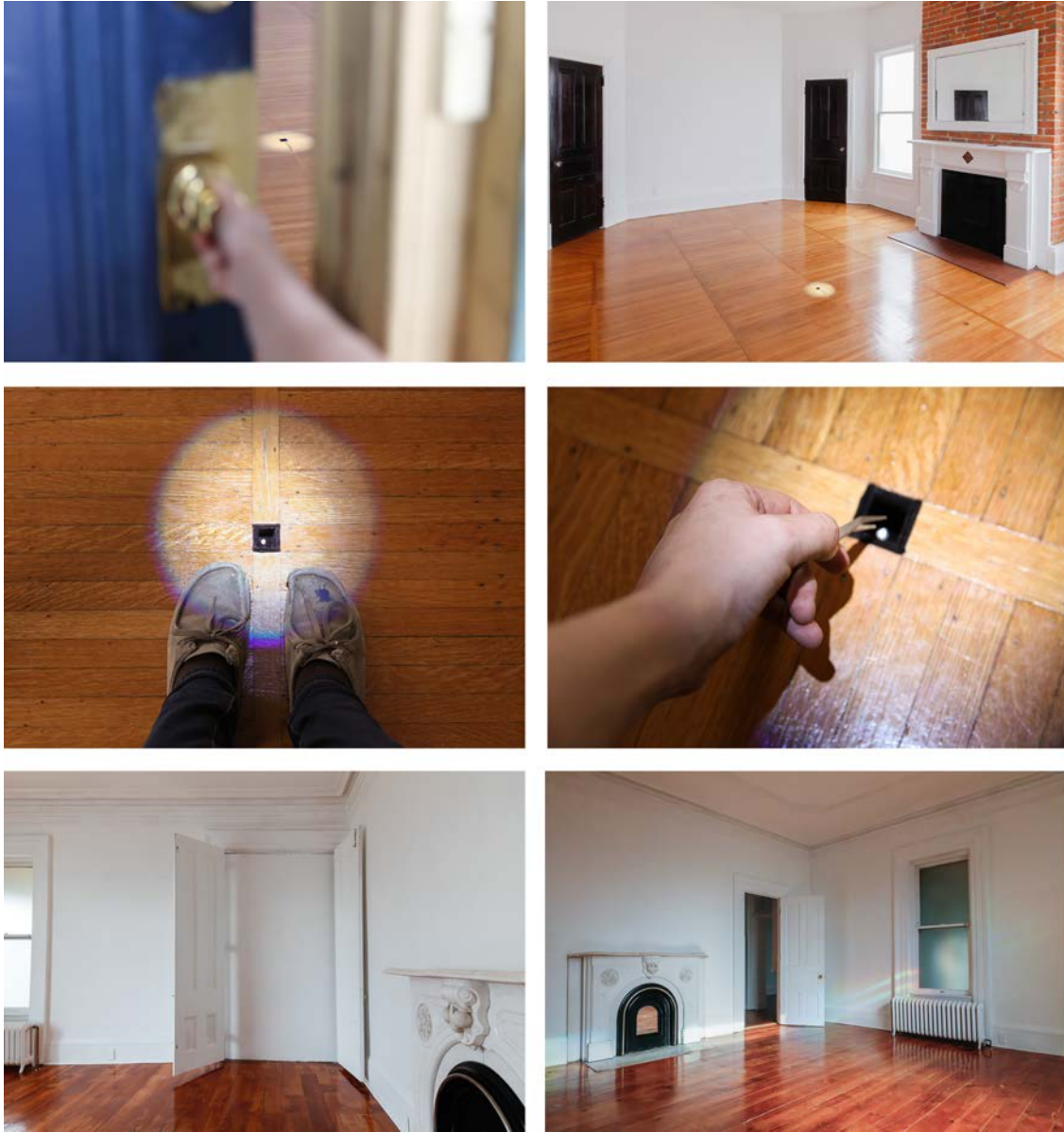


Figure 14. *Breathing Room Journey, 2015*



Figure 15. *Breathing Room Journey*, 2015



Figure 17. *Breathing Room, Letter Writing*, 2015

D I A L O G U E

*THE LETTERS*

As participants are on their journey, I perform my part of the experience:

- 1. The participant enters Slusser and picks up materials to meet car out front. After they leave I enter the gallery and sit at the desk. A sign is placed outside the door stating that an appointment is in session and to please not enter.**
- 2. The driver of the car, Mohammad, texts me on my phone when he has picked up the person and lets me know when they are heading to Ypsilanti. He then texts me upon their arrival, before their departure, and when they return to Slusser.**
- 3. During this time I have set up my personal laptop and a printer and begin writing a reflection/ thank you letter to the person on the journey. None of the letters are pre-written. They all happen in real time, corresponding to the duration that the viewer is in the house and in transit.**
- 4. After I have written the letter, I print it out and seal it in a blue envelope addressed to the participant that matches the appointment cards that they received on March 13<sup>th</sup>, when they set their time and date.**
- 5. From there I leave the laptop open to the word document, the printer and the sealed letter are left the desk for the participant to find upon their return.**
- 6. There is no sign or instruction stating that they need to write a response back, or that they have a time limit in the space when they return. Each individual took ownership of their own time in the space and once they exited, I returned to remove computer and printer and re-set up the desk with the key.**

A thank-you letter is usually written with the intention of telling someone how you appreciate a gesture, the time and space that you shared together, a gift received or given. Letters allow an intimate distance, giving someone a peek into your feelings while allowing them the time to sit with words in way that verbal communication rarely allows. Letters take time and commitment. They require you to direct your energies towards a singular contemplation and it was with this in mind that I decided the interaction I wanted with the participant was that type of focused mutual contemplation.

While you were alone in my house and wondering what had happened to all the things in the space, or what you were supposed to do, or why there was a diamond in a hole in the floor, I was sitting in a darkened room across town, with a single spotlight on a desk where I was contemplating that same space, both its past and current states and sharing my thoughts and feelings about it in a letter.

Sometimes we don't get to thank someone or something for what it has meant to us and these quiet correspondences with the viewer were part reflection for myself, part acknowledgement of the participants presence and part closure on the time spent in that space and all the weight of what it means for me to leave it. In every situation in life we have multiple versions of what is happening and being noticed. When I left the letters it was not to tell people what they were supposed to experience but rather to allow for two versions of something to happen in the same space. This project is a multi layered piece and one in which the viewer had one experience with themselves in the space, layered with my reflections of my own experiences. Below I will share a few of the letters that were left for participants upon their arrival back to Slusser.

*Time: 10:04am - 11:00am*

*Date: 3 / 25 / 2015*

*Dear Ben,*

*We built the walls together, they were right there by the double white doors. I had decided to turn the large room into an apartment gallery, a way to keep connected to those I was no longer close in proximity to location wise, but whose talents I wanted to share with my new community. So we measured once and cut twice, hammered and nailed, painted and patched, drank beers, laughed, cursed, scraped our knees and hollered in achievement when we finally erected the first wall.*

*In the end we made a corner. 2 6ft long walls that meet in the middle of the room, created 4 new surfaces, and eventually divided the space between us in half. Maybe it was lost in the measuring, that extra space that was needed to prevent this shared achievement from turning into a division of labor. How hasty we were in our calculations, but the thrill of the build was too overpowering to think about much else. When you're erecting a life, it's easy to get lost in the motions. The noise and the dust swirl around you and it seems that is all there is to the situation.*

*Once you sweep away the debris, there stands the corner you built together and you can either use it to punish or cradle one another. It's amazing the amount of space needed to think about how many people it takes to build a house and how many are left to make it a home.*



Time: 9:07am - 9:55am

Date: 3/ 26/ 2015

Dear Carolyn,

*It wasn't always this way, or maybe it was. When you drive the same way everyday it's hard to keep track of what was there and what has just appeared. That is until something feels like it shifts and then you can't remember if that funny white inflatable EMU structure was always sitting off to the right, or if it showed up overnight. And all these maps and directional guides are no real help; they only point you on a route that is supposed to be the fastest or most direct. Why don't we have GPS systems that are designed to take us the long way? To drive us right past the place where something was, and won't be tomorrow, so we can get a good hard look at it while we can.*

*But attention is a funny thing and it's so easy to lose track of it, let it wander in and out of every situation, following it's own meandering path of interest. I used to take the highway, drive straight down Washtenaw, past all the shops and restaurants, inline with all the other cars moving towards their destinations. But now I take the back roads, the long and winding way. It wasn't by choice at first, it seems that these types of detours never are. It came out of circumstance. A car that simply could not go on the highway anymore, lest its engine bottoms out and puts everyone in danger. So I began taking the slower paths, careful to avoid the potholes and the tilted paving. You can't always avoid these bumps, but when you can see them coming it's easier to travel over them without breaking down.*

*But repetition breed's familiarity and that can be a double-edged sword of both comfort and destruction. Just because you think you know all the holes on the way there doesn't mean they are the same on the way back. Maybe that is the comfort of the highway; it's maintained specifically for universal travel. To get masses of movement from here to there without much fuss, disruption or confusion. Highways are always the first to be plowed in a snow and society all keeps tabs on its efficiency and success. The winding way has less oversight and is more prone to delays, impasses, unexpected surprises and inflatable buildings that may or may not have been there the day before.*

*Time: 1:55pm*

*Date: 3/ 24/ 2015*

*Dear Nick,*

*I remember when it started. I thought it was rain. Fat drops hitting the roof and the windows. Not a hard rain, but slow lazy, warm rain. I was half asleep, in my lofted nest, 6 feet off the ground and wrapped in blankets. I thought, how nice that sound is. Keeping time for a rhythm that I was only witness to, but not in charge of setting. Soon though I wondered how it could sound so singular, like it was only raining one drop and especially for me. I climbed down the ladder of my bed and looked out the window. Sunshine splashed across the lawn. Confused, I wandered around the rooms trying to echo locate this singular beating.*

*Wouldn't it be nice if we could do this for figuring out the orientation of ourselves? Echo locate our emotions, thoughts, issues / with, to, for, the singular beat of another? I guess the problem comes in when the beats become plural and we can't seem to make any sense of their direction, force or frequency.*

*Which is exactly what happened next. The singular drop became a flood. Water poured in from the small kitchen ceiling, running down the walls and water falling off of the top of the refrigerator. I looked down at all the pools of unexpected rhythms clashing at my feet and grabbed the small dishtowel off the counter knowing full well it wouldn't be able to absorb all this rising emotion. But I dropped to my knees anyway and tried to push back the river ways snaking their way across my kitchen floor.*

*We have to wait and let it all air out of the drywall before we can patch up the holes and repaint it, said the building maintenance. But 3 weeks later it happened again, and then 7 weeks after that. Plumbing problem with your neighbors sink, they said. Just let it dry out a bit more and we'll be over to fix it right up. But the drying and re-swelling of water kept it's own unexpected rhythm, one that there was no key or beat to follow. Soon they stopped saying that they would repair the damage, and so it just remained plump and soggy looking, with rusty outlines and miscolored streaks of off white paint. The hooks that once held my pot rack pushing out of the drywall threatening to pop like buttons, unable to bear anymore weight.*

Time: 11:18am - 12:05pm

Date: 3/ 27/ 2015

Dear Michael,

*How do we recognize pressure? That invisible force that pushes the weight of something against the weight of something else. What is the shape of this resistance? If enough time and force is applied to a situation eventually it will transform. The path that transformation takes can be unpredictable though, even when all the elements are known.*

*Graphite is what we use when we are children and learning to write and draw. When our marks are made to be discoveries rather than rigid statements of who we are and where we stand. Pencils come with a built in mechanism for mistakes, the eraser allows us to move with the pressure of a situation, knowing that we can go back and try another way if one doesn't work. Each situation we encounter we might say begins with the shaky movement of a pencil, soft graphite, ebbing and flowing with each stroke. Trust coming in waves through the form of the shrinking and expanding tip.*

*Each time you try a stroke, the graphite erodes, giving a bit of itself to the page, and each time you step back there is a chance to sharpen your tool and refine the line. Where this continual refinement comes in is actually through pressure. The individual pressure of you and your hand holding the pencil and then its relation to the page. So many points of contact are happening and moving in and out of one another to create this shaky line. The funny thing about lines is that they both connect and divide at the same time. It's up to the draftsman to make the decision as to whether the line converges or splits.*

*It can be so hard to tell when to trust and to understand what that means in each situation. It's such a fragile and yet flexible membrane, easily broken, and if open enough, easily repaired. But given enough time and force, these shaky moments begin to solidify into something stronger. They say a diamond is forever, but its foundation is built from the fragile tension of graphite being squeezed and heated over and over again until it begins to lose its smoky gaze, slowly crystalizing into a clearer vision of itself.*

One of the things that I was not expecting, but that became an important part of the evolution of the work over the three-week run, was the participant correspondence back. Over the three weeks, I received text messages, emails and small material notes in which people would recount their experience or express gratitude for the journey. This is an element of the work that I found incredibly fascinating. In all of my previous pieces I had been trying to engage with a present someone, and though we were in close proximity physically, we communicated through actions and senses rather than words. Here, with physical distance, the space seemed to allow participants to fully bring themselves to the space, and in turn ignited a kind of desire to vocalize a recognition of one another and our mutual but exclusive experiences in the same space.

This space of recognition was the type of empathic resolution I realize I had been looking for in *Exchange* and *Forgiveness*, and while I have not had the time to fully reflect on this intimate artist and audience relationship, I know that this is an area that I will mine further in my next iterations.

T I M E   A N D   I N T E R A C T I O N

*DISTILLING*

## ***Relationship Studies:***

*Explorations of a moment, a material and a body to another.*

All year I had been packing up and clearing out my apartment in order to prepare it for your arrival. It needed to be cleared out in order to bring you in. I had been packing, patching and painting, finding living arrangements for my cat, giving away furniture, assessing what was needed and what was not. Much of my practice up to this point has vacillated between expansion and retraction; materials that inflate and collapse, animated desires that pause but never become still, questions that are raised, deliberated and raised again. And so the last 6 months spent in the studio were working through the creation of glass breath shares; trying to hold onto plastic bubbles; mapping the movement of my breath; watching the slow implosion of a balloon as tension creates sharp corners and edges; inflating socks and stilling them in moments of positioned care; cataloging mouth shapes as I spoke lips pressed across a paper, trying to make physical a memory as I sharpened colored pencils in all the shades I could remember from a Chilean sunset and then photographing the resulting color streaks across my hands; taking videos of sand slowly disintegrating back into a pile after I tried to hold it. Through all of these material explorations I reconfirmed that the heart of the works lay in their actions and the choices made during their creation and destruction, rather than the resulting forms.

Brazilian artist Lygia Clark was part of the Latin American Constructivists and co-founded the NeoConcretists, a group of artists who believed that a work of art was similar to that of a living organism. They advocated for art to be integrated into life so that people could become a natural part of the piece. By establishing relationships and carrying out exchanges, the individual would continually create and recreate the artwork. (Brito)

Clark began her career as a painter and went on to make sculptures and relational works that placed the viewer as a willing participant in their creation. In her seminal work *Caminhando Walking (1964)*, Clark invited people to cut a Mobius strip to the thinnest width possible using paper and scissors. Participants were asked to cut lengthways along the paper strip without splitting it in two. When the scissors returned to where they had begun, the participants had to choose whether to move to the right or to the left of the existing cut, and then keep cutting. This choice is central to Clark's reflections on the piece and her shift in perspective of the work from object to action.

“ This idea of choice is decisive – within it lies the experiments only meaning. The work is in its enactment. As the strip is cut it gets finer and is unfolded in intertwining's. In The end, the path is so narrow that it can no longer be cut. It is the end of the shortcut.

[...]

Each *Caminhando* is an immanent reality that is revealed in its totality during the period of the spectator – creator's expression.

Initially the *Caminhando* is only a potential. You and it will form a reality that will be unique, total.”



"Take a pair of scissors, stick one point into the surface and cut continuously along the length of the strip. Take care not to converge with the preexisting cut - which will cause the band to separate into two pieces. When you have gone completely round the circuit of the Moebius strip, it's up to you whether to cut to the left or to the right of the cut you've already made. The idea of choice is capital. The unique meaning of this experience is in the act of doing it. The work is your act alone. To the extent that you cut the strip, it refines and redoubles itself into interlacings. At the end, the path is so narrow that you can't open it further. It's the end of the trail.

Try not to know - while you are cutting - what you are going to cut and what you have already cut.

If I use a Moebius strip for this experiment it is because it breaks our spatial habits; right-left, front and reverse, etc. It makes us live the experience of a time without limit and of a continuous space.

Even if this proposition is not considered as a work of art, and even if one remains skeptical in relation to what it implies, it is necessary to do it.

There is only one type of duration: the act. The act is that which produces the Caminhando. Nothing exists before and nothing afterwards."

---Lygia Clark, *Caminhando* (Walking), 1964

Figure 18. Lygia Clark, *Caminhando* (Walking), 1964

In the same way, I use accumulations in my studio as a way to think through issues. In Winter 2015, my issue was to look at my gallery site (my apartment) and ponder how to get people there, how to inverse the scale of an object through the abundance or lack of volume in a space and how to communicate with someone the emotional and physical intensity of rebirthing a life. Below I focus on three explorations whose results helped in shaping the structure and content of the final piece.

### ***Distilling Glass Breath Shares, Imploding Thoughts and Physical Memories***

Building off of *Exchange*, I decided to explore the use of glass bubbles in much the same way as the balloons, but with the addition of a solid artifact, that could be studied to trace the movements of pressure after the performance was complete. In addition to the object I was using, this opportunity to collaborate with numerous people and test out the verbal communication of my intentions that envisioned a sequence of events for creating a shared work and seeing the translations.

I created a series of *breath shares* with artists in Toledo and Columbus, OH. Each time we began a work, there was a conversation about the rules that would be in place and how we would move and choreograph our time together. Discussions centered around how many gathers of glass we would use, the distance we would stand apart, and the angle of impact we would come in from when we began to inhale and exhale, breaking our bubbles into one another. Each individual had a completely different energy and way of entering the dance. Not all of the conversations or attempts were successful in a formally aesthetic way, but the lessons I gleaned in how to coordinate an action with multiple people was an integral part of the groundwork for later choreographing the transportation and pacing of people participating in *Breathing Room*.





**Figure 19. Creation of Glass Breath Shares, Mary Ayling and Leonard Marty, 2014**



**Figure 20.** *Imploding Thoughts*, 2015

I began thinking about the effects of the inhalation in the glass breath works and saw that, unsurprisingly, exhaling always opens and expands space, while inhaling shrinks everything back into itself. This recognition led me to consider what aspects of my project could be located as the inhale and which the exhale. Packing up space and clearing it out certainly created a personal exhale. And, as more and more space cleared and I considered what needed to be left in the space, I began a series of sculptural gestures called *Imploding Thoughts*. I filled latex balloons with a thin coat of plaster, rolling them in a constant motion between my hands as a slim eggshell of plaster hardened on the inside of the balloons. While this seemed to give extra structure to an otherwise vulnerable latex skin, I wondered what would happen if I popped it. Taking a small pin, I inserted a hole into the surface and was amazed as I watched the tension of this tiny prick slowly create a battle between inner and outer pressure. The resulting shapes were records of an action recorded in stilled objects, photo and video.



Figure 21. *Physical Memory*, 2015

At the same time that I was making objects, I was packing up and cleaning out the space. During the packing, memories of the past flooded back, through unexpected surprises of finding an object that had rolled away and wedged itself under a cupboard, or a mark on the wall that served as a mental roadmap back to where I was standing when the beam from the loft we were building fell and almost took out my foot, but missed and instead gouged out the floor. This melding of present action with past memories lead me to think about how to share these unexpected layering's with a viewer. I eventually came to the letters but first explored making physical memory in my studio through a series of gestures.

I began with an exercise based on the memory of a sunset. I had traveled to Chile in the summer of 2013. Every night I would photograph and film the skies. The colors that spread out across the horizon were more saturated than any I had ever encountered before, and so it was with great pleasure that I took in a new performance every night. I had never been as relaxed in my life as I was during my South American adventure. While reflecting on this, I realized I was in quite a different position now. Time and obligations had taken place of the open feeling of those evenings. In thinking about an action that might give me the same kind of release and possible reciprocal release for whomever I was working with, I went through my large box of colored pencils and, choosing as best I could, all the colors that felt as if they represented the skies I remembered. I then set about sharpening them, one by one, with a small silver pencil sharpener. As the colorful shavings curled out in long streaks onto my desk, the residue of their shavings began to paint the sides of my left fingers. I kept shaving each pencil until I felt I had gotten the correct shading and mixture of colors that felt right for the interpretation. Looking at my hand, I had physically layered my past pleasure with my present and merged them on the skin of one of my most valuable tools for communication.

There was a kind of formal beauty to the shaved remnants, their residual painting on my fingers, and the action of sharpening them had held that space of opportunity in which something is both created and destroyed. It was through this that I began to formalize the space of the apartment itself. Using its existing shapes and textures to help highlight the formal aspects of setting a stage for a viewer to encounter the diamond.

C H O I C E   A N D   E N V I R O N M E N T

*(UN) CONTROLLABLE*

### ***Formation and Carving out the Void***

Studying the strange geological forms that resulted from the *Balloon Implosions*, I thought about the things in my life that had similar kinds of inner and outer pressure battles, and how I could use the space of the house as both a carrier of those pressures and a releaser of them. Floorboards take on the weight of those who walk over them while simultaneously supporting the walls of the room and keeping the structure intact. In this place where outside pressure meets the strength of inner pressure was where I decided that the cradle of the diamond should rest.

Diamonds form over time from intense heat and force, starting as fragile carbon and slowly hardening into a more crystalized structure. Homes, relationships and agreements are all formed in this same way: Shaky and loose until a framework begins to bind them together and erect itself.

Artist Gordon Matta-Clark was known for his temporal architectural sculptures in which he would cut out sections of buildings that were abandoned or slated for demolition in order to reveal their structures and shift perspectives on how to experience the space. In his work *Splitting* (1974) Clark carved through the floors of a Suburban American home, literally splitting it in two. This work spoke of the disintegration of the American family and to more personal traumas of his tenuous relationship with his own father, the Chilean surrealist painter Matta. (Moure)

These site specific works expose viewers not only to new perspectives through views into and out of the space, but also makes them aware of the usually invisible structural glue that holds our built environment together. The cuts expose the physical studs, joints, plaster etc. and their raw unfinished edges speak of the violence that happens when both constructing and removing space.

In my own life and apartment excavation, unlike many of my material explorations, I decided to cover the violence of the act of drilling the hole in the floor. One never knows if an opportunity will lead you to seeing a birth of something new or the death of something existing. I wanted to highlight these two choices in the formal shapes of the cutouts. One containing the diamond was embedded in the floor of my apartment, and its 1.5 x 1.5 " square was lined with black velvet, resembling in size and presentation the type of black jewelry box that an engagement ring would come in. This shape is one typically associated with opportunity.

Meanwhile, the second cutout is embedded within my blue desk sitting in Slusser Gallery. Inside this velvet-lined rectangle lies a gold key, and the walls, proportionally sized to the body of the key, are reminiscent of a coffin. This desk was the first piece of furniture I moved into my home, and eventually my studio, when I began grad school. It was purchased with the intention that it would be my place of reflection as I worked through writing about ideas and works in my practice and cleared out the drawers of my personal life.

Figure 22. Gordon Matta-Clark, *Splitting*, 1974



Figure 23. Gordon Matta-Clark, *Splitting*, inside house detail, 1974



Figure 24. *Breathing Room*, floor cut out details and process, 2015



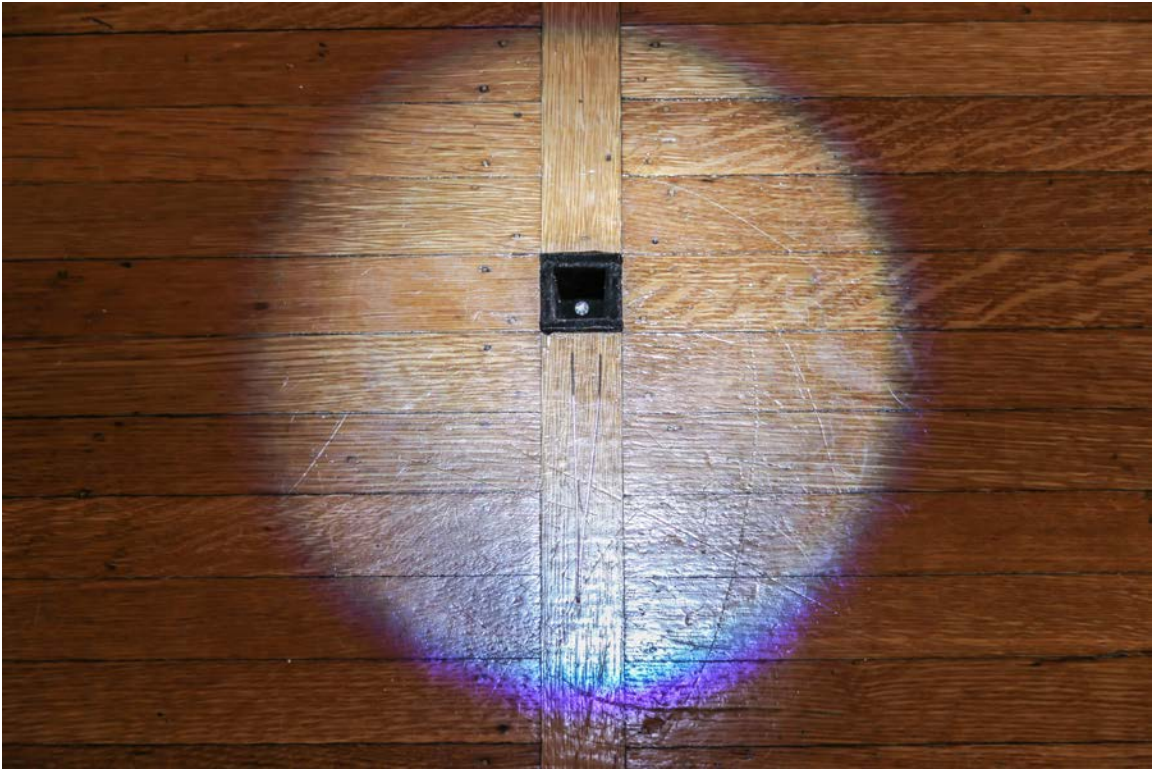


Figure 25 and 26. floor cut out and desk cut out details, *Breathing Room*, 2015

## **(Un) Controllable**

There are so many components that went into making this work that I feel the piece will continually unfold for me for a long time to come. I am only a few weeks removed from its completion and so a full comprehension of the experience is not available yet. What I can touch on, briefly, are some of the aspects of control and where introducing the element of chance through viewer participation made the work come alive for me and cause unforeseen roadblocks.

### ***Anticipation + Transportation***

This seemingly logistical part of the work, how to gather appointments and then physically move participants from one location to another, turned out to be one of the most crucial parts of the piece. Usually when one goes to see a piece of art, they remain in the same location. The time before they see the work and after are not controlled by the artist, and so all the tangential thoughts they bring along, about work or life, travel with them into the space and are vying for attention right alongside the artwork. In *Breathing Room*, I had the opportunity to try and eliminate as much outside noise as possible before you encountered the space where you took the work to be residing. It's hard to let go of everything at once, which is why snakes don't shed all their skin in one sitting; it is a process of slowly sloughing off layer after layer.

The first layer began with the build-up, the appointment. In galleries we usually have access to work whenever we want it. Artwork likes to be seen in most conventional settings and the expectation is that viewers come in, they spend as much time or as little as they would like to with a piece. There is no space between their desire to consume it and its availability for consumption. In *Breathing Room*, I inverted these assumptions and made the work exclusive and the desire public. At the opening I had only 20 spots available.

One of my questions around artworks has to do with sharing. How do we decide with whom, how and when we share something, especially when it is of such a personal nature as my work has been these past three years. We so often give up control in our lives, feeling that we have to follow prescribed systems and modes of how things have been done. Here I wanted to take control of how I wanted to share—so I made the audience wait. Each participant had to wait in line at the opening, as one by one people would go in and make an appointment time with me at the desk. I was told later how the line became a kind of work in itself. People unsure of what was behind the curtain started conversations with one another, while they waited blindly to go into a room where they don't know what will happen. The mystery and anticipation building up to their turn primed them for accepting whatever would come next. Once inside, I did not offer any information about what they would be doing when they went to my house, or specifics about who would be driving them other than the color the vehicle and where to meet it. This kind of blind trust was built from stripping away habitual expectations and by elongating the interaction with a work. As soon as the viewer stood in line, they entered the piece. Their experience with it will not end until they cease to think about the letter received at the end of the journey, or about the overall experience. On both ends of this spectrum, they have entered the agreement. It was their choice to continue to wait in line, and to show up at the

stated location at their allotted time.

To be totally honest, I had been expecting that people would not fill the available spots, and that they would miss or cancel appointments. In this, I was completely wrong about an audience's willingness to be entrusted with honoring their part in the creation of something. Where things shifted in unforeseen ways were on my end of the bargain.

The driver was named Mohammad. He was polite and eager to please, nodding his head repeatedly when I explained the sequence of events that were important to follow with picking up the scheduled appointee. I had emailed instructions to the office, and spoken on the phone with both Mohammad and his boss, explaining that this was an artwork and that the drive to the apartment was an important element. I then reprinted instructions and spoke in person with Mohammad before the first few appointments. He was given the instructions to please keep the ride as quiet as possible and to please play an audio track that I had provided to create an ambiance in the car. (Lhasa, *The Living Road*.) I emphasized that quiet was an important part of the work and that I wanted to give the viewer a chance to un-burden themselves in the car of any racing thoughts about where to be etc. Mohammad was also given a specific route, the very same one that I take to and from my home to the school everyday. The route is along the back roads, and I hoped that the absence of busy highways and main streets would aid in quieting one's inner dialogue. I asked that Mohammad text me when he was leaving and arriving at each location, and explained that timing was crucial in the successful completion of the work, and that when he arrived at the house it was important that he drove away, returning 20 minutes later to ensure each participant had the full time in the house by themselves. All of this seemed to be agreed upon; what followed were a series of fortunate mishaps and sometimes frustrating evolutions to the original vision.

1. Mohammad would forget to put in the CD, or put it in halfway through the ride. When the music was playing he would turn it down very low so that it was not audible and began to talk over it, starting conversations with the passengers mostly about his family and life in Somalia.
2. He would forget to text me when he had left or arrived, which resulted in some missed timings for viewers returning to an empty space with just the letter—instead they encountered me at the desk. Another time it resulted in a viewer being locked out of the gallery, unable to return the key.
3. There were a few instances in which he did not pull away from the house after dropping the viewer off and instead waited in front of the house. When the viewer came out early he simply told them that they could not leave yet, then both he and the appointee sat in the car watching YouTube videos together.

*This resulted in me augmenting the original idea of having the music as a background soundtrack that may be noticed or not, but whose presence would set a slower pace and minimize talking. When Mohammad forgot to put in the CD and then announced that he forgot to the passenger, he added an element in which the viewer had to be unsure what was scripted and what was not. Eventually, I felt his persistent conversation was not giving someone the option of a quieter ride. In response, I introduced an MP3 player and headphones as a way of enabling that quietness to enter into the ride. This shift focused more attention on the songs, and, instead of it being part of the atmosphere, it became another directed dialogue with the viewer. So instead of the entire album I chose two tracks "Small Song" and*

*“Soon this Space Will Be Too Small” to be the arrival and departure ballads. The only instruction given was to listen to track 1 on the way there and track 2 on the way back. People then had the choice of whether or not they listened to the tracks repeatedly or not at all etc. It turns out though, that in a few instances, Mohammad continued to talk to people even with the headphones. I can understand his desire to converse and realized that he added a type of wild card element. This was a good lesson in communication for me in relaying to someone the importance of certain aspects of their role in a work while also recognizing that collaboration means allowing space for unexpected elements.*

### ***Aberrations***

There were many changes that happened over the course of the three weeks. As each person acted and reacted to the experience in their own ways I responded to the shifting elements of a collaborative creation. Two major moments really highlighted the unexpected in creating a space for chance and co-creation. In one, a participant named Matt had chosen 1am as his appointment time on March 23d. Following this selection, was the confusion over whether or not that meant it was Monday the 23rd going into Tuesday the 24<sup>th</sup>, or Sunday the 22<sup>nd</sup> going into Monday the 23rd. Below I will share the letters I wrote him during his first appointment, his email response to me, and then the following week’s second attempt.

In the first scenario, Matt showed up Sunday into Monday and was unable to get into Slusser to retrieve a key. Mohammad was there in the black car, and so thinking that perhaps this was part of the mystery, Matt got in the car with Mohammad and traveled to a locked home in Ypsi, while I had the times wrong and was expecting his arrival the next day. I awoke to texts from Mohammad and, with lead in my stomach, realized that someone had gone on the journey unable to get in to the house. As part of the work was about trusting one another, I never took anyone’s contact information other than their first name. So when Matt looked me up and emailed me about his experience and asked if he was in fact supposed to get a key, I had the unique opportunity of giving someone two versions of the work as we set up another appointment the following week at the same time, in which he would pick up the key and then drive himself.

Time: 12:48am / 8:04am

Date: 3/ 23/ 2015

Dear Matt ,

*I am here. **12:48am***

*I am leaving now. **1:04am***

*We are arriving now. **1:20am***

*I am leaving now. **1:40am***

*We are back now. **1:54am***

*You never came in to get the key. I was going to write to you about the power being out, about what it means when there is no power, but here I have failed you. This is the part of commitment that I am bad at. I missed you, I thought it was tomorrow; I wasn't paying enough attention to the details. How strange it must have been to be picked up so late, driven to a neighborhood you have never been to and then dropped off to wait on a porch for twenty minutes. How much this one revealed for me. I had been thinking about it so much, wanting to make sure that I did not miss the time of this one late adventure, and then I do. Mohammad texted me, many times, but my phone has been on silent. And I missed you. This must be what happens when you look at something too much and then instead of really committing to it, you worry about it. Worry is always what seems to kill things. It's hard to care in the real sense. To share yourself in all the ways that are inconvenient for you, but strong for someone else. The devil is in the details. Nothing can be truer than that statement. What you have helped me see and the thing that makes me sick to my stomach is that you trusted me, and you followed through, on this weird time, to this weird place and I let you down. People are fond of saying that no one is willing to help, to do things, but I am finding that people are willing and looking for a reason to be trusted. You had no idea what was going to happen, so for all you know, this was the plan. You would be picked up, dropped off and then picked up and dropped off again with nothing else. But I know what was missing, what was gone, and I will have to live with that guilt. People keep asking if I am worried that someone will steal the diamond, but I took something deeper than the monetary value of a diamond from you, I may have stolen some of your trust and nothing is worse than that.*

Part 1:

What is the meaning of art? I was given no key, this door is locked, and I have no way to discern between whether this is the purpose or just an offshoot an intended experience.

1:20 AM I knock, no reply

1:22 AM I knock, no reply

1:23-1:30 AM I pound on the door, still, no reply

Where is the line between innocent bystander and home invader?  
Where do I fall on that scale in this moment?

The front porch of any home is a place of comfort for those who partake in it. Porches are there to be invited onto, or to be sat on by those whose home the porch belongs to. The front porch is a place of comfort. This has always been true to me

In this moment this porch is none of those things. This porch is different. This porch is a juxtaposition between the peace of a setting and the panic of a circumstance. I am angry, I am calm. I am on a stranger's porch. I have never sat on a stranger's porch before. It is 1:30AM and I have no idea where I am. It has been years since I've truly had no idea where I was.

Setting and circumstance are two things that can cause a turmoil inside of the soul. My setting dictates memories of peaceful, quiet times. My circumstance screams uncertainty into my right ear. SETTING and circumstance. setting and CIRCUMSTANCE. The nighttime darkness separated this plot of land from the city. This space lives independently.

A light goes on in the window next to me  
I swear I hear a typewriter (is this what it is to feel too quiet?)  
I swear someone passes in front of the light inside (is this what it is to be delusional?)  
I can't see in, only the light through the frosted glass  
the light goes out

What is art really? To me, the porch was the breathing room, Each emotion, anger, anxiety, confusion, reassurance, nostalgia, and peace, was just a piece of a whole that may or may not have been intentional.

Art is none but context

On the way home, the cab driver shouted into the silence of the drive "This is an unGodly hour, NO ONE should be out at this hour!" and I've thought about that ever since.

*Time: 1:00am -1:51am*

*Date: 3/ 30/ 2015*

*Dear Matt,*

*This is a whole new kind of trust. I have no idea where you are or how long you will be gone. I have given you my key, my address and my phone number but I have no way of immediately contacting you. This is a reversal of last week's circumstances in which you put all your faith in me and the driver to take you where you needed to go. It's funny that I was asleep and still kept aware of your movements and timing. Mohammad faithfully texting me about your timetable of migration as you moved from location to location unsure of what was intended and what was not.*

*I wonder if you chose the same winding back roads or if you took the highway this time. Maybe your traveling down Washtenaw and encountering a new kind of confusion in the constant dance of stopping and going as you wonder if your on the right path. I often feel anxious and heightened awareness when I am trying to get to a location that I have not taken myself to before. Are memories of your last trip collapsing with your present experience?*

*That phenomena happens so frequently in our daily existence that we can forget how powerful it is to have expectations. The possibilities of what might carry over from one experience to another and what ends up happening is a constant negotiation of times. Past, present and future are always traveling parallel with us in every interaction. It's 1:38am and I assume you will be heading back towards Ann Arbor soon. When this began, just as I wrote in your last letter, everyone was worried that the unguarded diamond would be the fulcrum of the piece, but the truth is all my attention is pointed at you no matter what. Whether you are being carried by Mohammad or traveling by yourself, my attention is focused on hoping that you are alright, wondering what I can do to make sure you are safe or taken care of and if I gave enough information or too little. Care can be an exhausting thing and this has been an interesting test in how willing I am to care for this experience. How far one will go to make space for another, knowing that there may not be any rewards or mutual understanding at the end, but continually attempting to build the bridge and maintain it's path anyway. It's 1:47am now and I hope you are finding your way.*

Part 2:

Leading into my second experience with the breathing room my mind was fringed around the edges with damage from my most recent anxiety episode. This is non-ideal

I arrive again to the space that lives independently, though this time I have the luxury of a map. I try not to look at it.

I have a key this time, and to my relief, it turns.

A large, empty room. White walls turned a shade of quiet blue in the darkness. Hardwood floors throw the echoes of my footsteps away from me. A single spotlight in the center of the ceiling illuminates a velvet lined, square hole dug into the center of the floor. The hole is no wider than the first two joints of my pinky finger. Next to the hole, a pair of silver looking tweezers. I use the tweezers to investigate the contents of the hole, and pull out a small diamond.

I hold the diamond in the grips of the tweezers to the light, but am only able to hold it there for a moment before it drops. It bounces once in the circle of light created by the spotlight once, and then disappears somewhere into the darkness. I scour the floor. I find it, pick it up, and again repeat my actions, holding the diamond to the light. I, again, drop it. This happens three times.

*Easy to recover*

*But not easily held,*

*Carry that which is held dear in the cradle of light*

*Hold tight*

*for the consequence of a moment's falter is a consequence of darkness*

*And with eyes grown accustomed to the light*

*the dark becomes darker*

*and the lost become more lost.*

I put the diamond laid uniformly next to the box and tweezers in an orientation that leaves the diamond permanently liberated from the hole. I move to the next room, another large, open room. White walls, wood floors. There is nothing for me here. None but a diamond-looking bauble suspended by a chain from an intricately decorated chandelier skirt on the ceiling. it feels like it is almost taunting me.

I go back and sit with the diamond for a bit. I don't touch it. I sit with it until it is time for me to leave

I'll think about this for the rest of my life.



The second major shift in the work happened on the second to last appointment. Up to this point, no one had removed the diamond from the space. But on April 3<sup>rd</sup>, I returned to Slusser Gallery after my appointee had left with her letter to find the headphones, MP3 player, key *and* diamond waiting for me. I sat in the space and looked at the diamond for the next hour and half contemplating what to do. I didn't feel that I could return it back to the house. It had been liberated. I sat there and thought about how the house had usually been locked upon the visitors arrival so that when entering, it was a private space that spoke of protection for only this small valuable. The letters were individual, and everything up to that point had been about an individual experience. It was then that I decided to run the currents in reverse. I left the hole in the house empty and instead added a stack of all of the letters I had written to each participant beforehand. The door to the house was unlocked, and when the last participant came to pick up the key, they no longer had the option of the MP3 player or headphones. They simply were given a card with a matching key illustration as the one on their original appointment card whose text only reminded them to meet the car out front.

Once they reached the house, they entered a similar empty space except for the addition of a small blue table containing the letters. Back in Slusser, I was writing a final letter to myself and upon their return they found the diamond in the desk with a pair of tweezers lying next to it.



Figure 27 and 28. Letters and diamond in desk details, *Breathing Room*, 2015

## **Afterward.....**

These past three years have been an intense set of explorations for me in both growing my practice and myself personally. I began the program with the intention of creating glass objects that related to the space and time of the universe. Instead, over the course of my three years, I expanded and contracted my focus to dial in on the fragile moments of my personal universe that needed attention. Through these projects, I refined the heart of my artistic practice and bridged ways of becoming a better partner in my relationships with others, to myself and to my artwork.

## Bibliography

- BRITO, Ronaldo. Neoconcretismo. Malasartes. Rio de Janeiro: (3): 9-13, Apr./ Jun. 1976 , p. 9.
- Butler, Cornelia H., and Luis Pérez Oramas. Lygia Clark The Abandonment of Art, 1948-1988: Exhibition at The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 10.05-24.08.2014. New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2014. Print.
- Feuvre, Lisa Le. Failure: Documents of Contemporary Art. Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2010. Print.
- Hewitt, Andrew. Social Choreography: Ideology as Performance in Dance and Everyday Movement. Durham: Duke UP, 2005. Print.
- Joy, Jenn. The Choreographic. Cambridge: MIT, 2014. Print.
- Kwon, Miwon. Felix Gonzalez-Torres. Ed. Julie Ault. Göttingen: SteidlDangin, 2006. Print.
- Joselit, David, Renata Saleci, and Joan Simon. *Jenny Holzer*. London: Phaidon, 2001. Print
- Matta-Clark, Gordon, and Gloria Moure. Gordon Matta-Clark: Works and Collected Writings. Barcelona: Polígrafa, 2006. Print.
- Medina, Cuauhtémoc, Francis Alÿs, Russell Ferguson, and Jean Fisher. Francis Alÿs. London: Phaidon, 2007. Print
- Montano, Linda, and Janet Dees. Linda Mary Montano: You Too Are a Performance Artist: Art In Everyday Life. Ed. Tim Scott. Santa Fe: Site Santa Fe, 2013. Print.
- Pallasmaa, Juhani. The Eyes of the Skin: Architecture and the Senses. Chichester: Wiley-Academy, 2005. Print.
- PINTO, Regina Célia. *Four Views in Search of a Reader, Important Women, Art and Identity*). Rio de Janeiro, 1994. 415p.
- Pollak, Susan. "The Rolling Pin." *Evocative Objects: Things We Think with*. Cambridge, MA: MIT, 2007. 527 -529. Print.
- Proust, Marcel, Philippe Jullian, C. K. Scott-Moncrieff, Terence Martin, and Andreas Mayor. *Remembrance of Things past*. London: Folio Society, 1981. Print.
- Shenk, Joshua Wolf. *Powers of Two: Finding the Essence of Innovation in Creative Pairs*. London: John Murray, 2015. Print.
- Winnicott, D. W., Clare Winnicott, Ray Shepherd, and Madeleine Davis. *Psychoanalytic Explorations*. N.p.: Karnac, 1989. Print.

## Figures

- Figure 1.** Mary Ayling, *Exist*, 3D printed sign, 2013
- Figure 2.** Jenny Holzer, *Marquees*, 1993
- Figure 3.** Mary Ayling, *Shaping Silence*, cast glass, 2014
- Figure 4.** Francis Alys, *Paradox of Praxis 1: Sometimes Making Something Leads to Nothing*, performance, 1997
- Figure 5.** Mary Ayling, *Exchange*, conjoined balloons, breath, 2014
- Figure 6.** Maria Hassabi and Robert Steijn, *Robert and Maria*, performance, 2010
- Figure 7.** Mary Ayling, *Forgiveness*, photograph and performance 2014
- Figure 8.** Felix Gonzales Torres, *Untitled (Portrait of Ross in L.A.)*
- Figure 9.** Mary Ayling, *Wrapped*, photo documentation, 2014
- Figure 10.** China Adams, *The Official Stitch and Hide Project Box #7*, 1995
- Figure 11.** Mary Ayling, *Breathing Room*, floor detail, 2015
- Figure 12.** Mary Ayling, *Breathing Room*, desk, 2015
- Figure 13.** Mary Ayling, *Breathing Room*, apartment, 2015
- Figure 14.** Mary Ayling, *Breathing Room*, appointment sequence, 2015
- Figure 15.** Mary Ayling, *Breathing Room*, journey sequence, 2015
- Figure 16.** Mary Ayling, *Breathing Room*, journey sequence, 2015
- Figure 17.** Mary Ayling, *Breathing Room*, journey sequence, 2015
- Figure 18.** Mary Ayling, *Breathing Room*, writing, 2015
- Figure 19.** Lygia Clark, *Caminhando (Walking)* 1964
- Figure 20.** Mary Ayling and Leonard Marty, *Breath Shares*, glass, breath, 2014
- Figure 21.** Mary Ayling, *Imploding Thoughts*, balloon, plaster, 2015
- Figure 22.** Mary Ayling, *Physical Memory*, colored pencils, sharpener, memory, 2015
- Figure 23.** Gordon Matta Clark, *Splitting*, 1974
- Figure 24.** Mary Ayling, *Breathing Room*, floor cut out, detail and process, 2015
- Figure 25.** Mary Ayling, *Breathing Room*, floor detail, 2015
- Figure 26.** Mary Ayling, *Breathing Room*, desk detail, 2015
- Figure 27.** Mary Ayling, *Breathing Room*, letters, 2015
- Figure 28.** Mary Ayling, *Breathing Room*, desk and diamond, 2015

“ To create strong images you don’t need actors, a director or stage design. The only thing you need is the guts to look.” - Lotte van den Berg