

Isolated Incidents: Bed Room

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From the beginning

My senior thesis work, of rooms and intimacy, is not the product of my singular mind, nor is it the final manifestation of these creative inquiries. This work of *Isolated Incidents* began 8 or 9 months ago as a formal investigation into the T12 fluorescent light bulb as an object. This research was an extension of my formal education focused on learning the processes of industrial and graphic design with a particular interest in lamps and light objects. As I entered the fall semester of senior thesis confidently, with a passionate direction for where I was headed, I made several strongly held decisions about how I was going to constrain my project:

- (1) Use fluorescent light bulbs consistently in all objects;
- (2) Situate objects somewhere in between product design and contemporary sculpture;
- (3) Tackle charged and complicated topics (including institutional power and control).

I had spent the summer developing several working prototypes of new fluorescent light fixtures. I was eager to continue developing these fixtures into provocative and refined objects, however, I had 8 months ahead of me and a full sketchbook of ideas I could pursue. Where should I begin?

From Dialogue to Dialogue – From Critique to Critique

(The Dramaturgy)

Within the first few weeks of the semester, I presented work I completed over the summer to my faculty advisors and studiomates for their thoughts. Initially, I proposed the work as an attack on mass produced fluorescent light fixtures by making them 'cool' objects of millennial desire.

Two main points of feedback from my advisors Matt Kenyan and Adrian Deva were unignorable:

- (1) Attacking the mass produced fluorescent light fixtures, saying that yours is relevant because it's better, is a strawman argument. Arguably anything is better than the institutional fixtures you're attacking... so what are you actually investigating?
- (2) Is this art or design? At the moment, the work isn't succeeding as either. If you wish to pursue this work as art, try situating your investigation amongst artists who have worked with light in the past. (ie. Dan Flavin)

Their feedback was pointed and launched me into a new line of questions and considerations.

This critique was the first time I received honest and critical feedback about the fixtures and on how I was presenting the light fixtures (most peers were excited to see me making stuff but were reluctant to lay on the constructive feedback). As a result of this critique, I went to the university's Art & Architecture Library began pouring over books and essays on a range of topics including the boundaries and intersections of contemporary art and design, the changing fields of sculpture and architecture, and theory of phenomenological artworks. I dug into artists (such as Robert Irwin, James Turrell, and Dan Flavin), architects (including Steven Holl and Rem Koolhaas), critics, writers, and philosophers (such as Roland Barthes, Rosalind Krauss, Michael Freid, and Georg Simmel). My approach to artmaking and my overall studio practice

instantly became more theoretical, more thoughtful, and more understanding of the contexts I was attempting to work in.

Up to this point in my creative career, I had considered all of my creative work to be process-focused design exploration, but never thought of my work as artwork. As I increased my exposure to new perspectives and positions of art and architecture, I began to situate my inquiries and curiosities amongst historical art figures and movements they spawned from.

Ironically as my mind was swirling with new ideas and concepts I struggled to move my own sketches and prototypes past the mindset and constraints I began the semester with.

Retrospectively, I had made a commitment to myself that I would stick with the fluorescent light bulb come hell or high water, and as a result, the objects I was sketching and prototyping didn't initially develop to reflect my new shift of interests and curiosities.

During this time in the semester (mid-October), I met with a strong conceptual architecture professor at Taubman College of Architecture and Urban Planning, Robert Adams. I approached this meeting with only two agenda items; to get to know him in an intellectual capacity and build a connection that could enable some level of mentorship between us. I traveled to his studio on the outskirts of town and hauled with me several large boxes of fixture prototypes and a portfolio of computer driven marker drawings. These were the two most developed areas of my creative work and best represented how I was thinking about art and design at that time. He gave me a tour of his studio and proceeded to show me his recent research projects. I then presented my work to him in a clunky nervous sort of presentation, and after I was through, I asked him for his thoughts. For the next hour, we sparred back and forth about the role of the artist in an ever changing world, and what qualities characterize

successful art and design. Much of what Robert said challenged my previously held beliefs about art and the work I was creating. The following points are not his feedback verbatim, but rather how I internalized the feedback he gave me:

- (1) I don't think the work you are making is successful art. Art is not about providing answers to questions nor solutions to challenges. It is about asking questions, provoking thoughts, problematizing the everyday normal, and challenging things we hold to be self evident and true.
- (2) If you are considering the work you are producing to be "process-based work," then you must let the process have great influence on the final output of the project. If you are beginning with a vivid idea of what the output will look like and then working hard to achieve that vision, you aren't letting the process truly and organically influence the work.

His advice and feedback addressed many of the challenges and conceptual issues I had been mulling over since the beginning of my career in art and design school. The most impactful thing he said was regarding the role of the artist and the implications art can have. Most of my creative work and learning in college has always pointed towards solving problems as a designer. There was a guilt that came with attending an art & design school situated within a liberal college environment – I was aware of so many problems and injustices in our world but felt guilty that I didn't know how to solve any of them. To hear a different take on the implications of art from Robert (that the role of art is not to solve problems but to ask questions and challenge our culture) was a huge relief. (That the burden of solving wicked problems like global warming, childhood obesity, and American sexual violence was not that of an artist.) I could have told myself the same thing, but hearing this perspective from someone whom I respected, gave those ideas more weight and validation. I spent weeks dreaming up more

fluorescent light bulb compositions that actively ignored/contradicted what he had said, and because my notions of art and design were so different, I found it difficult to incorporate Robert's perspective into my fixture work.

Readings and Research

In the meantime, I was digging into the books I had checked out from the library, pulling from the history of light/space artists to investigate the values behind their artwork: how and why did they make the theoretical and aesthetic decisions that lead to their work's acclaim? Three artists stood out as key subjects for investigation amongst the many light and space artists I read about: Robert Irwin, Dan Flavin, and James Turrell. I studied their life journeys and their work through as much imagery and documentation as I could find. What were the nuances of their practices and processes leading them from creating one work to making the next work? How did they uniquely think about light as a medium to create art with? I began to use these three artists as guideposts to help me situate my own work and curiosities regarding light art:

(A) Dan Flavin: Since I was working with fluorescent light bulbs, Dan Flavin was of particular interest and curiosity. What was his work challenging, provoking, or questioning? Are the things he was investigating still relevant today (and to me) – if I were to make the work he created back in the 1960s, today, would it be celebrated and championed as it was when he began to gain traction and acclaim? Taking into account the issues, narratives, and logics Dan Flavin was investigating and fabricating with, what did he take for granted, keep consistent, or define as default in his overall creative process? This last question was most curious to me and fueled a new wave of ideas in my process.

In the early *Icons* work of Dan Flavin, "...he liberated himself from his hitherto

image-based oeuvre and turned the space of a room as the backdrop for and also a part of his work.... it should be considered in the context of the overcoming of image-based painting as the medium for narration and also of illusionism as the central narrative of the neo-avant-garde in the late nineteen-fifties and the sixties.”¹ Later on in his career, he created three dimensional light space compositions that were accompanied by culturally charged titles challenging his Catholic upbringing as well as titles referencing specific people in his life like architect Vladimir Tatlin and artist Piet Mondrian. A constant variable throughout all of Dan Flavin’s work was his decision to use commercially available fluorescent lights and light fixtures. He altered the color of light bulbs and the position of the fixtures (in relation to one another and in relation to the gallery space) but for the most part, he left the fixtures themselves unaltered. I felt that this aspect of his work is an area was left unexplored by Flavin. The fluorescent light **fixture** was ripe for investigation, inquiry, and public reconsideration, and this is where I decided to focus my energy. I began by deconstructing the idea of fixture (linguistically and philosophically) and the fixture as a physical electrical component in fluorescent lighting technology. I wasn’t sure in what directions this inquiry was headed, so I kept an open mind and treated all sketches and early ideas as potentially viable.

(B) James Turrell

Another important figure in the history of Light + Space Art is James Turrell who creates works of phenomenological installation art. Compared to Dan Flavin whose work is inarguably object oriented and woven with personal narrative, James Turrell is interested in the physicality of light and says “the role of an artist is suggesting or drawing attention to a situation rather than a personal experience. You create something from which each

¹ Corinna Thierolf and Johannes Vogt, *Dan Flavin: Icons* (Schirmer/Mosel, 2009), 7.

can take their own.”² He works with light as an environmental medium rather than an object. In an effort to never break the veiling his work uses to immerse the audience into suspended phenomenological experience, Turrell goes to great lengths to hide the seams of his work. One aspect of his work that I found particularly unique is his employment of certain obstacles for the audience to conquer before they could enter the work; with Roden Crater, the audience has to travel into the middle of Arizona’s Painted Desert to experience the work first hand; in his 1991 exhibition Heavy Water, the audience must completely disrobe and adorn a 1920s striped bathingsuit designed by Turrell himself before entering the pool-like installation. He used these obstacles as a tool to draw a separation between the outside world and inside his work, and they challenge the audience to invest in the journey to his work so that their travels become part of the experience of the work. This is a practice that I wanted to employ somehow in the work I was making, although I wasn’t sure how.

(C) Robert Irwin

Much of his work, similar to Turrell, Irwin’s work is about pushing the boundaries of the viewer’s perception. In recent years, Robert Irwin transitioned his phenomenological painting practice into a phenomenological Light and Space Art practice. I initially began reading about Robert Irwin because a studiomate lended me the book titled *Seeing is forgetting the name of the thing one sees* (Lawrence Weschler, 1982). This book excels at breaking down understandings and definitions of phenomenological work, and it served as my path to better understanding this realm of artistic pursuits and investigations. I was interested in leveraging certain aspects of physiological phenomenology (physical experience) of artwork I was making, but even more so, I

² Luis Monreal, *James Turrell* (Hatje Cantz, 1992), 61.

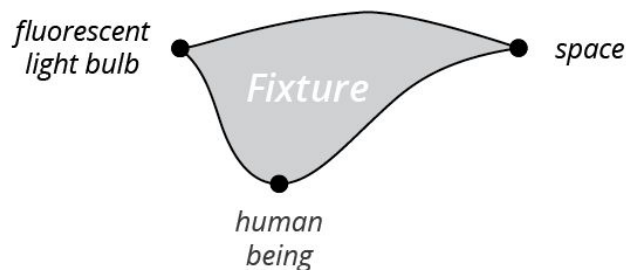
wanted to explore and employ a realm of socio-psychological phenomenology (sociological and psychological experience) in my artwork. How this curiosity in phenomenology would manifest itself in my work, but the idea of pushing the viewer into a state of social, physical, and psychological hyperconsciousness was highly compelling to me.

Early Methodology of Fixture

Most of my early light fixture exploration happened in my sketchbook. I began with a long fluorescent light bulb, one you can find at your local hardware store. I drew the bulb as a thin long rectangle, and surrounded it (on the paper) with odd contexts, placing it in different visual scenarios (ex: drawing the lower half of a school girl's body/uniform, then replacing her legs with light bulbs). I drew these visual scenarios for months because the possibilities that could erupt from a single bulb (rectangle) on a page in my sketchbook really excited me. In some of the drawings, I treated the bulb anthropomorphically as legs or arms; in other drawings, I treated the bulb as a purely formal object – a glowing, long cylinder emitting cool white light. Some of these drawn scenarios contained multiple bulbs where I treated each bulb as embodying an individual persona with their own quirks, desires, and values – like a child would with dolls or action figures, arranging them amongst a landscape of furniture and other toys. I enjoyed working on both a life sized metaphorical scale (how the bulbs are situated in space and what that might mean for the viewer) and on the small mechanical and technical scale (how each of these fixtures and scenarios could be engineered and designed to work properly).

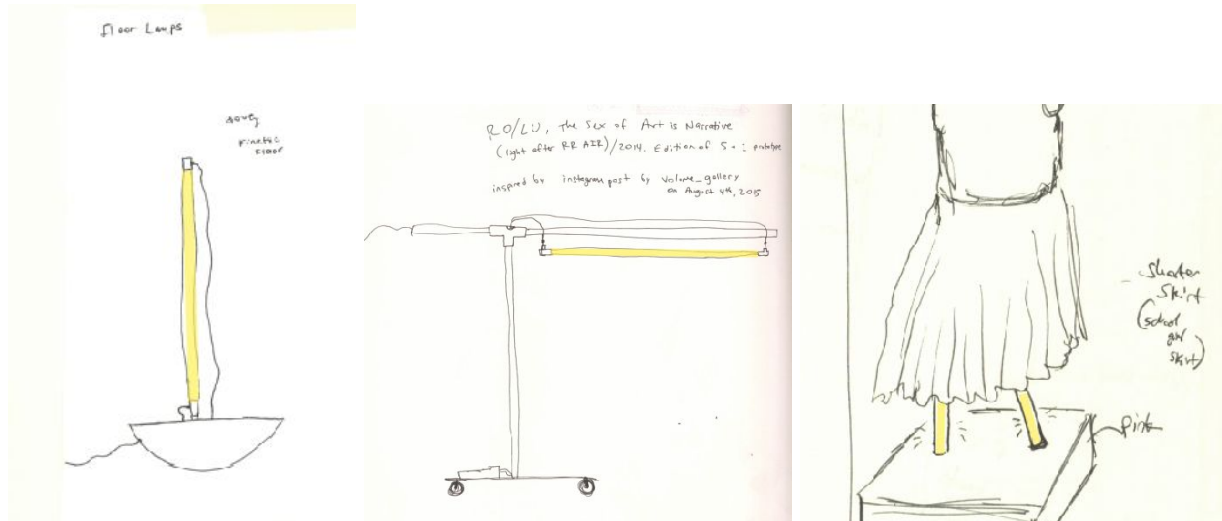
During the middle of the semester, I developed a diagram that helped me think about the meanings and relationships involving the fluorescent light bulb helped me develop more critical

and ambitious ideas of fixture. It was a triangular diagram with one of the three following terms written at each of the triangle's vertices: *Space/Site*, *Light Bulb (technology)*, and *Person/Viewer*. The word *fixture* was written in the middle of the triangle representing the conceptual relationship between the three terms. The origins of this diagram come from the artists mentioned and discussed earlier in this writing. All three of the artists (Turrell, Irwin, and Flavin) seemed to strongly consider the light source, environment, and the viewer in their works. In my readings, Flavin considered the viewer in a more traditional sense where the work is read by the viewer, however, Turrell and Irwin thought of the viewer as an essential component of the artwork's impact – each person's unique physiological perception of the work was important to the artists. Flavin's light work was more physical and object-based compared to Turrell who treated light as an environmental factor of perception.



This diagram served as a cognitive tool to help me assign meaning to and make sense of my many drawings. To generate new ideas, I would challenge the relationships between the three terms: what if the relationship between the person and the bulb was kinetic, or what if the light's relationship to the space was of nomadic nature? In some ways, I felt like I was playing a slot

machine, inputting in a few general variable criteria, and seeing what random results I would land on. I was able to generate many ideas with this diagram, but I noticed that I had little passion for or attachment to any of them. They were all interesting within the boundaries of the diagram, but on their own, they struck me as only mediocre.



Trimming the Fat

There came a time in the semester where I needed to begin trimming the fat and deciding on a handful of ideas to move forward with into physical prototypes. Initially I felt very intimidated by this, but after discussing my dilemma with instructor Katie Rubin, we devised a plan that might get me where I wanted to go. Since I have been digitally archiving my sketchbooks for the past few years, I went through my archives and printed out any sketch relating to light or ideas of fixture. A grid of 175 printed sketches sat in front of me, pinned to a giant white wall, and it was time to make some tough decisions. I developed a set of initial criteria for what ideas should

advance to the next round, and which ones should be shelved. The first round of criteria came in the form of four questions:

- Does the idea speak to something more than the components that it is constructed with? (does $1+1 = 3$ or more?)
- Does the idea evoke an emotion, response, or action from the viewer(s)?
- Is the idea complex? Does it provide a multi-level read for the viewer(s)?
- Is the idea more than a purely formal, symbolic, or technical fixture?

I solicited a few peers to look over the matrix of ideas and mark which ones they found, based on the criteria I established, worthy of moving on to the next round of conversation. After 5 hours of conversation, marking, sorting, and critiquing, I had reduced the 175 down to a remaining 40 sketches (grouped by a handful of common themes). I then put everything away for a few days to let my brain relax and absorb all of the ideas and conversations from the first round of elimination.



When I took the sketches out again, I narrowed the cluster down to 15 ideas and began to elaborate on each idea. The process of writing elaborately about each idea helped me better understand the specifics and nuances I was envisioning. Throughout the process of trimming the fat and concentrating my ideas, I relied heavily on my network of like-minded peers to help sort through the clutter and sharpen my concepts. In a way, it is similar to the way

dramaturgists work within a theater company to research and develop new plays. In my case, I am doing the majority of research and development and relying on my network of dramaturgists to provide feedback, critique, and suggestions on a regular basis.

A Conversation about Sexual Assault

In the midst of generating and refining all of these fixture concepts, I had a conversation that (1) challenged me to think about the quality and ambitions of my current work and (2) made me question the impact I wanted to have on my audience. It was Fall 2015; I sat down for lunch with a friend and intellectual peer whose interests and identities position her in the thick of several communities and conversations I have limited exposure to. On this afternoon, she shared with me several of her friends' recent stories of surviving sexual assault – two different incidents experienced by two different women in the week prior to this conversation. In our past conversations, we sparred back and forth with challenging inquires and pragmatic propositions, however this was different. There was no witty answer or college educated solution I could respond with, although I tried. And in that moment, I was looking for and hypothesizing about trends of sexual assault, causes and effects, asking why didn't these women leave, and several other unconsidered responses to her pain and confusion. As our lunch continued, she appeared increasingly sad, frustrated, and confused, and I couldn't understand why. Retrospectively, she was looking for someone to listen and confide in, but nothing more.

I had no knowledge or prior experience with these types of conversations nor any exposure to this subject matter on an academic level. This friend felt too insulted with my reactions to tell me what I was missing, but it was obvious that I had some learning to do. I reached out to

another close friend who majors in Women's Studies at the University of Michigan to ask for help – if she could help get me started on pursuing more awareness and perspectives regarding feminism, sexual violence, and women's experiences of gender-based adversity. Within an hour of my request, my inbox was full of resources: setting the framework and establishing the language around gendered violence, providing the statistical state of gendered violence in America and around the globe, and feminist theories regarding the roots of sexual violence. These documents included the Center For Disease Control's National Intimate Partner and Sexual Violence Survey, Geraldine Stahly's 2003 seminal article *Battered Women: Why Don't They Just Leave?*, and Lindsey Crider's *Rape as a War Crime and Crime Against Humanity*. The material was immensely frustrating and humbling to read. I had no idea how high the rape statistics are and how many people I know who likely have been subject to this kind of violence and who survived. As the semester continued, I began attending events such as SAPAC Speakout (where survivors would tell their stories in a safe space), reading more narratives of sexual violence, and watching documentaries about sexual violence regarding people of all ages and backgrounds. The more I learned, the more concerned and curious I became; I had many more questions than I did answers. And as selfish as it may be, my first question was how can I take ownership of some of these issues within my creative practice? As someone who is a straight, white male who has never been subject to any sexual violence as a child or as an adult, how could I approach this conversation without insulting survivors of sexual assault or taking advantage of their experiences for the production of my art? These two questions still challenge me today and have been present in my mind throughout the process of making and refining my thesis work. The best answer I was given while doing my research about approaching this topic is to listen humbly and to assume nothing, and that is what I did.

Transition from Meanings to Experiences

As I approached the end of the Fall 2015 semester, I reflected on how my ideas and concepts revolved around fluorescent light bulbs and their fixtures, but I realized that they had failed to branch out in response to many of the conversations I engaged in over the semester. The concepts I was generating were about form, metaphor, and suggestive meaning, and I strived to give these formal object explorations meaning for the viewer, but these fixtures were much more for my enjoyment than they were for any audience. Attempting to refine and validate the fixture diagram I had been using to problematize fluorescent lighting, I visited architect, designer, and design researcher Thom Moran to receive some feedback and critique on my developments.

His responses to my sketches were sharp with candor:

“Meaning is so unstable – when you talk about meaning, you seem to be talking about what it means to someone who is a white, midwestern, college educated male with a certain range of experiences. When you talk about meaning, you are actually talking about what certain things mean to you and people like you. It’s dangerous thinking because it doesn’t challenge your own context..”

“I am interested in the effects (interactions and emotions) we can catalog and understand, account for and design (that are beyond context) but that don’t rely on a narrow or potentially unexamined notion of context for their effect.”

“What you’re doing is nominating it (the fluorescent bulb) as a thing to inspect and see anew... by producing new relationships to it, we can unthink what we

know about the fluorescent bulb. Getting anyone to unthink anything in their life, getting people to destabilize their relationship to something familiar, is a really powerful effect.”

This feedback from Thom sparked a new stage in the work and the conceptual conversations around the work. The audience and their experience of the work was to be a central consideration of all concepts. Additionally, I stopped focusing on the meaning I was attempting to embed in light fixtures and started focusing on how to evoke and catalog emotions within viewers and interactions between viewers. Several weeks after this meeting with Thom, I asked two Stamps Professors whose ways of thinking I have much respect for, Osman Khan and John Marshall, to join me for a review of my 15 remaining sketches. Through this conversation, I hoped to further narrow my focus to one or two final themes to pursue for the thesis exhibition.

We assembled on a Friday morning and without delay, I started by pitching each of my ideas and they began to cut and cluster my ideas into thematic groups. After fifteen minutes of pitching, it became clear that most of my ideas were discussing, relating to, or depicting sex in some fashion – this became the underlying theme of the conversation and the catalyst for pursuing a piece (The Bed Room) about sexual intimacy and bystander culture. John pointed to a specific sketch and asked me to explain it. I proceeded:

“It is a room with four walls, the walls are lined with glowing red buttons. There is a fluorescent light bulb hanging in the middle of the room. The bulb’s brightness is directly affected by how many buttons are pressed simultaneously: if no buttons are pressed, the bulb is at its brightest; each button that is pressed

decreases the light bulb's brightness until all buttons are pressed and the room becomes pitch black. The piece is inspired by the film *Spotlight* (a film about the Boston Catholic Church abuse scandal in 2002) – there's a quote in the movie that says: *if it takes a village to raise a child, it takes a village to abuse one.*³ I am using this interactive installation to signify that each of us plays a role as a citizen or community member, and to amplify the power of that relationship as a visible, interactive experience.”

John was more responsive to this sketch than any of the others, explaining that this idea is about something deeper than formal exploration and basic mechanics of lights fixture – it was about relationships and bringing a troubling issue into the open through a shared visual and and physical experience. They suggested I make the experience visceral and warned that experiential work can easily become tepid if the artist doesn't push the experience far enough into an uncomfortable realm. I wanted to make the work subtle and strong, and to avoid making it tacky and overt. This critique and the ideas gleaned from it built upon the earlier conversation with Thom Moran to serve as a conceptual criteria for the work moving forward. The work must be:

- accessible to wide ranging audiences & elicits each person individually (specific to this time and space)
- interactive and experiential: requires people to voluntarily enter the work and engage
- implicates the audience (evokes curiosity and uneasiness)

³ Garabedian, Mitch, *Spotlight*. Anonymous Content, First Look Media, Participant Media, Rocklin \ Faust, 2015.

This conversation marks a critical turning point in the type of work I was considering for my thesis. I transitioned from pursuing object-oriented speculative design to exploring and investigating my ideas through live experimental and theatrical installations. Without initially realizing it, the three criteria above set the guides for how my work would ideally reach its audience. This transition also required that I return to the library to research the history, strategies, and best practices for this realm of artwork. But what realm of art was this? Was it closer to theater, or performance art, or sociological case study which is arguably not artwork at all? Was it architectural or sculptural, or both? And since it would require computational technology to become interactive, did the work fall into the new media art and interactive installations category? Because I was unsure of what realm of art this was, I picked up several books on each subject and filtered through them to see what I could learn. As I began reading these books and catalogs, deadlines were quickly approaching so I decided to begin brainstorming and fabricating the first installation with limited historical context or precedence for the work I was making.

The Bed Room

Initially, my goal was to create a room that highlighted and interrogated the bystander culture in our modern American society. My plan was to create a room intended for people to have sex in, inside the gallery - to create an intimate enough environment for regular (albeit ambitious and exhibitionistic) people to have sex in, without hiring actors to consummate. I wanted to create a gallery setting where people on the outside of the room were unquestionably aware that something questionable was occurring inside the room. I wanted the people on the outside to never know exactly what was happening inside the room for two reasons: (1) that's not how the overwhelming majority of passersby encounter people having sex, whether consensual or not,

(2) I wanted the people on the outside to struggle to truly and clearly understand what was occurring inside the room. I wanted the people on the outside of the room to question whether or not what was happening inside the room should continue or if these acts required some type of intervention. I had an experience several years back where I encountered the sounds of a man violently terrorizing a woman in the confines of their own home. I stood on the sidewalk, listening to the tussle, frozen, not sure what to do or how to intervene, or if intervention could make things worse rather than better. In this moment, I began to consider several things: (1) although the sounds of violence and terror were obvious, I had no training on how to intervene with this act of partner violence I was encountering (2) violence in intimate partner relationships aren't always unwanted, S&M for example (3) acts of unwanted sexual contact aren't always obviously violent or dangerous – and this intricacy makes bystander intervening even more difficult. I wanted to foster a scenario for people where there were actual intimate acts occurring within earshot behind a thin wall. I wanted to embed a challenging level of uncertainty within the gallery visitors experience as to make the decision (to intervene or not to intervene, or rather how to intervene) incredibly difficult, as it can be when faced with a questionable situation.

Without hesitation, I began building the room. I drew up a set of architectural drawings, tallied how much of each material I would need, and then spent two weeks measuring, cutting, screwing, painting, wiring, and programming.





Once it was built, I brought friends and studiomates into the space to see what they thought. I pitched the concept to a friend, and I received the following feedback: “If someone is raped inside your installation, are you responsible? Would you be alright with that?” This consideration challenged me to do more digging and thinking about the potential scenario I was setting up. I began to realize that if I charged the installation in a way that actively encouraged acts of sexual violence within the gallery, I would feel responsible for these crimes, embodying the characteristics of John Kramer (Jigsaw) in the Saw movie series. (He never actually kills anyone, but places characters in incredibly charged and manipulatively violent situations where characters often have to kill another character in order to save their own life.) Although not as directly charged as the Saw movies, I realized I must be incredibly judicious and intentional about the words I use to contextualize this room and the experiences within. I can’t by any means control what is to happen inside the room, however, I think it is important not to violently charge the room in any capacity. I was raised by a mother who resisted violence at every turn, and as a result, I am by all accounts, a nonviolent person. In an effort to make artwork that is

true to who I am, I am interested in charging the room sexually, intimately, and with other power dynamics, just not with violence.

Lock or no lock?

When I was asked if there will there be a lock on the door, I was presented with a set of variables I hadn't yet tackled. One of my main goals was to create an intimate setting inside the room when the door is closed, to a level where people would voluntarily enter the room and engage in intimate or sexual acts. Since these acts of sexuality and intimacy usually occur in bedrooms, hotels, motels, sex dungeons, and other seemingly private spaces, I needed for this room to have a certain level of privacy. Although I had darkness and physical enclosure already accounted for, without a lock on the door, the room lacked a sense of security and certainty of privacy that many of our bedrooms, hotels, motels, and sex dungeons possess. Adding a lock to the door could be the element that affords people that feeling of security required to enter a stated of shared vulnerability inside the bed room. However, there is another element to each situation that is a constantly changing variable and one that is amplified when a lock is added to the door – familiarity.

If the two or more people who enter the room know each other (and/or are attracted to one another), the lock serves a specific purpose – to keep strangers out of their shared intimate and private space. To lock the door or not, is something that may be easily agreed upon by people who are familiar with (or clearly attracted to) one another. Conversely, if the two or more people who enter the bed room are complete strangers who are not familiar with one another (or who are familiar with, but not attracted to one another), the lock can potentially take on very different roles – to keep other strangers out of the bed room, or to keep one or more of the people inside the bed room, potentially against their own will. In this condition, the lock is a

highly charged mechanism that has the potential to create or uphold a strong power dynamic between the people who enter the bed room. He or she who enters the bed room first is not in the position to immediately lock the door, only the second (or last) person to enter the bed room is. This means that whoever enters the bed room second (last) has the power to lock the door and therefore immediately gains a role of dominance within the room's shared dynamic. This isn't inherently a bad thing, but it could inform how people experience the bed room and each other while inside the bed room.

Additionally, since the room can't force anyone to enter it, requiring everyone to enter voluntarily and by one's own choice, the lock could serve as a filter for people who wish not to place themselves in a potentially uncomfortable or unwanted intimate situation with someone who they are not familiar with (nor attracted to). Some peers have called the idea of adding a lock to the door "creepy" or "scary" which has challenged me to ask what is the value in making work that pushes boundaries and that cause discomfort for an audience.

On a visit to the University of Michigan during January 2016, playwright Young Jean Lee was interviewed on her work on the heels of a first ever, back-to-back presentation of her plays *Untitled Feminist Show & Straight White Men*. Something she said during her interview struck me and helped support my decision to make work that pushed the audience towards certain discomforts, "exploring contradiction and conflict brings us closer to the truth."⁴ After the interview, I did some digging and found the mission statement of her theater company on their website:

"When starting a play, I ask myself, 'What's the last show in the world I would ever want to make?' Then I force myself to make it. I do this because going out of my comfort zone compels me to challenge my assumptions and find value in

⁴ Yung Lee, Jean. "A Conversation." University of Michigan, Michigan Theater, Ann Arbor, MI January 21, 2016. Live Interview with Patricia Ybarra.

unexpected places. Our goal is to find ways to get past our audience's' defenses against uncomfortable subjects and open people up to confronting difficult questions by keeping them disoriented and laughing. My work is about struggling to achieve something in the face of failure, incompetence and not-knowing. The discomfort and discovery involved in watching this struggle reflects the truth of my experience.”⁵

In many ways, this mission statement resonates with why I am making the work I am making. In full disclosure, I am a sexual person who enjoys intimacy in its many forms. In contrast, conversations of sexual assault and bystander culture are not enjoyable nor are they glamorous. Art isn't always enjoyable or glamorous, and through this thesis process, I have realized the fulfillment and emotional toll of pursuing work that attempts to foster emotions and interactions of intimacy in others. To me, this work (and this line of inquiry) lies at the heart of intimacy and the fabric of our human relationships. It asks the viewer to temporarily become hyper-aware of their actions, motivations, reactions, and emotions.

What objects should be in the room and why?

I began envisioning this bed room concept under the title *Behind Closed Doors*. I was considering two scenarios that occur behind closed doors: acts of sexual intimacy and businessmen making corrupt deals. As the room developed, the question of what objects will exist inside the room became a recurring curiosity by those with whom I discussed the work. Two chairs? A stool? A mattress? To go about this decision making process in a more thoughtful way, I sought out a new perspective that Thom Moran had suggested I look into. The Theory of Affordances by J.J. Gibson, an influential American Psychologist of the 20th century,

⁵ "Mission." Young Jean Lee's Theater Company. N.p., n.d. Web. 20 Apr. 2016.

discusses the affordances of surfaces, objects, substances, and environments in “what [each surface] offers the animal, what it provides or furnishes, either for good or ill.” Gibson discusses affordance as physical and visual, and affordances are always relative and unique to each animal.

“If a terrestrial surface is nearly horizontal (instead of slanted), nearly flat (instead of convex or concave), and sufficiently extended (relative to the size of the animal) and if its substance is rigid (relative to the weight of the animal), then the surface affords support. It is a surface of support, and we call it a substratum, ground, or floor. It is stand-on-able, permitting an upright posture for quadrupeds and bipeds. It is therefore walk-on-able and run-over-able. It is not sink-into-able like a surface of water or a swamp, that is, not for heavy terrestrial animals.

Support for water bugs is different.”⁶

The method of his approach, to dissect and distill the affordances of certain things in order to understand how they act and relate to each animal, has enabled me to think about the question of objects in the room more intentionally than before. My initial question was now split into two questions:

1. what interactions and emotions do I want to catalog as part of this work
2. what objects within the room will afford such interactions and emotions

Without getting into a spiral of self-doubt and narcissism, I answered the first question rather briskly. When the door is open, I want the room to afford a perception of clarity

⁶ Gibson, James J. *The Ecological Approach to Visual Perception*. Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1979. Print.

and brightness, certainty and openness for all who are in its vicinity. When the door is closed, I want the room to afford different emotions and interactions for those on the inside and those on the outside. On the inside, I want the space to afford darkness and intimacy, as well as a quieter sonic environment than the one outside the room. I want the space to afford some sound to travel from inside to those outside the room, but no visual information to travel through the walls.

The second question is one that I believe has a number of potential effective answers, and objects. I only tried a couple different objects and pieces of furniture before I stumbled upon a dirty mattress sitting in a back corner of the thesis studios. When I placed the mattress inside, it fit perfectly, snugly between the three walls with about a 12 inches of space at the foot of the mattress. The mattress transformed this room into a space borderlining intimate and cozy, but eerily austere as the entire room was bleach white, rid of any imagery or color.

For the first exhibition of the Bed Room, I have placed the following objects inside of the room: a well used twin-sized mattress of medium hardness, a soft and slightly lumpy pillow covered with a thin white pillowcase, a white fitted sheet that hugs the mattress tightly, and a thicker white sheet that is pilling on its surface. I chose to use all white linens to create a field of purity and whiteness that can be seen in institutional spaces like hospitals, psychiatric institutions, and laboratories. These institutional spaces (their physical and visual environments) can exert an unexplainable level of looming control and influence on the people within; when the door is open, I want people to experience

the room and feel as if they are subjects to a looming institutional presence, and that they are the subjects of a larger institution, culture, and conversation.



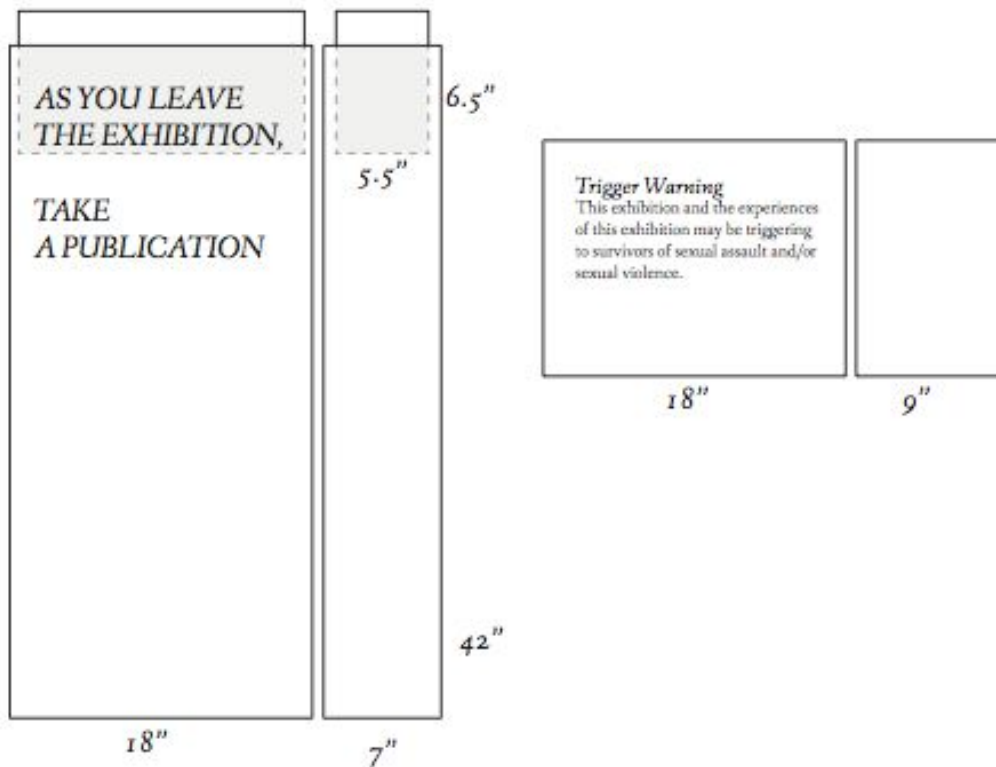
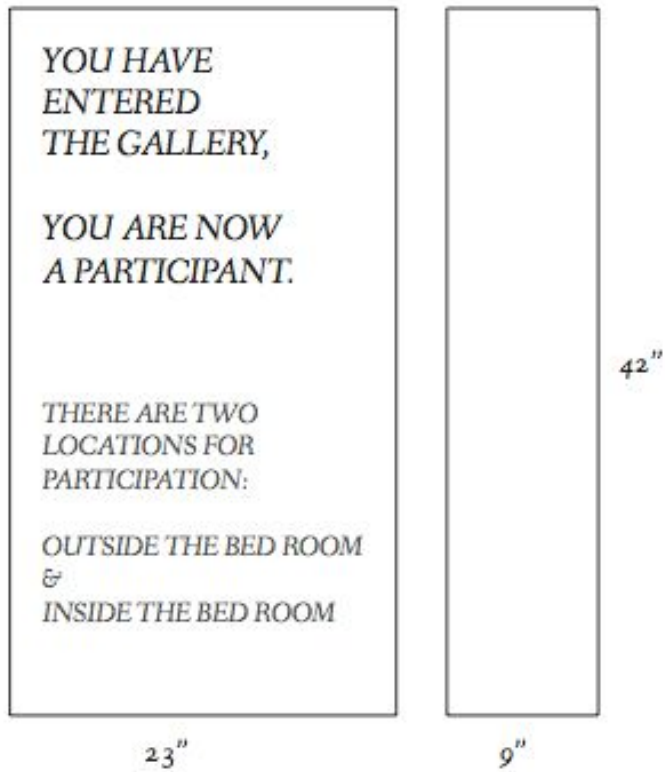
SETTING THE STAGE

Conditions of Entrance

As I was testing and refining the bed room between January 2016 and April 2016, it became apparent that the experience of the bed room could be greatly aided by some supplementary text on or near the room. If people don't take off their shoes before entering, the room will get filthy. If people enter by themselves, they could just fall asleep or meditate, both of which are valid but not interesting to me nor supporting my inquiry. The Rules of Engagement (later renamed the Conditions of Entrance) were established first. These Conditions of Entrance are as follows:

1. Remove your shoes
2. Do not enter alone
3. Enter Voluntarily

Their main purpose was to create a sense of order with this otherwise skeptically built room with a mattress inside. The third condition came from the idea that all people entering the room must enter on their own accord. From looking at someone, we can't always tell whether what they're doing or feeling is voluntary or involuntary. The third condition served more as a tenet of the work rather than a rule that would be or could be enforced. Beyond the Conditions of Entrance, there were several other text-based prompts placed within the space.



**CONDITIONS OF
ENTRANCE**

1. *Remove your shoes*
2. *Do not enter alone**
3. *Enter voluntarily*

*** HOW TO NOT ENTER
THE BED ROOM ALONE**

1. Look around the gallery and find a person you would like to spend time with in the bed room (This could be a person you know or a person you don't know yet.)
2. Approach this person and ask if they would like to enter the bed room with you:

<p>If this person says yes,</p> <p>together, approach the bed room and ask the attendant for further instructions. (The attendant will likely ask you to wait in line if people are already inside.)</p>	<p>If this person says no,</p> <p>that's okay. Don't take it personally. Look around for another person you would like to spend time with in the bed room. Try again.</p>
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While crafting these conditions and text-based prompts, I began to read about the fluxus movement and the scores that they used to bring art to the masses. In one book titled *do it*, a catalog of instructions for museums and audience members to execute as part of a transnational traveling exhibition, Hans Ulrich Obrist the book's editor states, "Boltanski thought of the instructions for his installations as analogous to music scores, like a piece of music, go through countless realizations as they are interpreted and performed by others."⁷ In a way, the conditions and text based prompts I had been thinking about had a lot in common with how Obrist and Boltanski thought about instructions within artworks. I was creating these text-based

⁷ Obrist, Hans Ulrich, Christian Boltanski, and Bertrand Lavier. *Do It: The Compendium*. Print.

prompts and instructions with the hope that participants in the gallery would interpret them and act upon them (while also hoping participants would push back and resist the institutionality of the prompts) in a sort of live improvisational theater.

The stage that this theater lives on is as much a physical context for the situation as is a suggestive script for the situations themselves. The Bed Room receives the input (actions) of the participants and produce certain output that further informs the input of other participants. In this way, the Bed Room and the participants are in an active theater with one another. Each possess their own motivational forces (or programing) informing how each other reacts and interacts to the stimuli presented by the opposing participants. The actors' (site and the participants) relationships between one another thickens as each act reflects and informs truths about one another's motivating forces. One example of this type of work that I gained inspiration from was Marina Abramović's Rhythm-0 piece performed in 1974 where she assigned herself a passive role, with the public prompted to act upon her with 72 objects people were allowed to use in any way they chose. These included a feather, scissors, a loaf of bread, and a loaded gun. Her written instructions were as follows:

Instructions.

There are 72 objects on the table that one can use on me as desired.

Performance.

I am the object.

During this period I take full responsibility.

Duration: 6 hours (8 pm – 2 am)⁸

⁸ Frazer Ward, *No Innocent Bystanders: Performance Art and Audience*, University Press of New England, 2012, p. 119.

Throughout the six hour performance, the audience acted on her with increasing violence – the performance resulting in Marina bloody, clothes cut off, and her body manipulated in all sorts of ways. She unfroze from her passive role at the six hour mark and walked towards the audience she had been subject to. This type of interactivity and audience ownership is what I was aiming for as I envisioned the potential performative nature of the Bed Room. Initially, I planned to have an attendant present near the room at all times in case something dangerous happened that required intervention, but as I continued along in the planning process, the role of the attendant became much more poetic.

The Role of the Attendant

Throughout the process of creating the Bed Room and envisioning this situational work, I became increasingly aware of the work's potential to simulate scenarios, create impact, and even manipulate the audience. This was to be, in many ways, a work of live theater – complete with characters, motivations, and a stage. Many questions of theatricality and play arose: who are the players, what bounds the stage, how clear is the script, are there non-scripted characters, is there a structure to the plot, how is time involved in altering character motivations, and what are the motives leading each of these situations and their respective players?

The first question is the one that challenged me to define my boundaries as the creator of the work and brought my values to the forefront of my decision making. Who are the players within this work of theater? I am not an actor and although I play many different roles on a regular basis, I wanted to be physically separate from the work I was producing. I wanted to be the designer and playwright of this situation but not an active player within the situation. I didn't want my experiencing of the work to negatively affect the experiences of other participants.

With the help of studiomate Nic Williams, I connected with a local performer by the name of Harison (Hari) Zamperla. I wanted the role of the attendant to be played by someone who none (or almost none) of the audience recognized – I wanted the attendant to be a new character without any baggage (only character's script, uniform, and demeanor). For several weeks leading up to the live instantiations of the work, Hari and I met to discuss the goals of the work and to write the script and develop this attendant character. Over all other agenda, the attendant's main role was to give the bed room enough legitimacy for people to eagerly enter the Bed Room and engage with one another inside. The attendant was a representative of the imaginary bed room institution we created through the work, and the attendant was to be a wise, trustworthy, and non-judgemental character. To establish this characterization, I studied shoppe clerks, airline attendants, policemen, and lifeguards, all of whom have certain responsibilities and who play a character when they are behind the counter or behind the uniform. We expect and can predict certain reactions and interactions with these characters because their scripts have been legally and/or culturally defined. After a few moments, I wanted the attendant to be that predictable and static as a character, so that the participants in the work could focus on their participation rather than the legitimacy of this performer's character and by association, the legitimacy of this entire work of theater.



Photo by Ember Henderson (April 16, 2016)

Performance Texts: To be read before, during, and after your participation in the work

Because the Bed Room, the attendant, and the supporting conditions/instructions and prompts around the gallery were aimed at creating a live theatrical experience, each participant would inevitably glean different perceptions and emotions from the work. The work's conditions/instructions served both a logistical purpose as well as a psychological one. On the logistical level, the instructions were about demystifying how participants could or should enter inside the Bed Room. On a psychological level, the texts served as primers to elicit and incite

certain emotions and interactions from and between characters within the gallery space. Nonetheless, everything text-based that was in the gallery was instructional or conditional in what it communicated – they told you how to do something or what the status of something or someone was in the space, but they never told you why or revealed the ideas behind the work. I didn't want the theory of the work to influence each person's experience of the work as a participant. I wanted the theory to only influence people's memories and ideas of the work after you experienced the work.

To accomplish this post-experience rumination of the work, I assembled a zine publication to catalog the thoughts and curiosities I had while creating this work. The zine is organized into the following sections: **Instructions** (To Be Read While You Are A Participant In The Gallery), **Didactic Questions & Others** (To Be Read Once You Leave The Gallery And Leave Your Role As Participant), **Observations & Anticipations** (To Be Read Once You Leave The Gallery And Leave Your Role As Participant), and **Misc. Schematics** (To Be Read Once You Leave The Gallery And Leave Your Role As Participant). Although different sections were written to be read at different points in the experience of the exhibition, I plan to give the publications to participants as they leave the exhibition. We often don't know how to play a game correctly, what the importance of playing a game is, or how the game works until after we are done playing the game – that is true of this game too.

Reflection On The First Instantiation

The moment I am writing this section, the first instantiation of the Bed Room is complete and the next instantiation of the Bed Room is one week away. I have been debriefing with a handful of the participants and dramaturgists on what their experiences were like. The attendant and I

have met and have agreed to change several things to make the work more interesting, provocative, and dynamic. This is a small excerpt from my written reflection of the first instantiation of the Bed Room:

Hari and I began inside the Bed Room at 5:57pm and chose to wind the kitchen timer to 3 minutes. Our conversation was logistical – I wanted things to go well. Then it was showtime. Hari took his role as the Attendant and the work was instantiated. People entered the gallery, read the text prompts posted on boxes and walls, removed their shoes and confronted the Attendant. The Attendant likely asked the couple if they were ready to enter, and if their shoes were removed. Lastly, he'd ask them if they would like to spend 2, 5, or 9 minutes inside the Bed Room. After looking at one another, then at the Attendant, and maybe at the line of people that had formed behind them also awaiting their entrance into the room, the participants decided their duration and entered the Bed Room. Hari, the Attendant, then wound the kitchen timer (mounted to the outside of the Bed Room) all the way to 60 minutes and back to their chosen duration so that when the timer rang, it would ring for an extended ring. People waited up to 45 minutes to enter the room. Some participants took off their shoes tens of minutes before entering, and many of them thanked the attendant and/or myself as they left. They waited in line for the attraction, and the attraction turned out to be themselves: alone in a room together, on a bed in a dark room.⁹

I think the work was both successful and also has areas for improvement. Different aspects of the work had different levels of success. The room was almost always occupied by either the

⁹ Rosner, Matt. "Reflection on April 16, 2016." Notebook Entry. April 18, 2016.

participants or by the Attendant resetting the room (changing the sheets). A line formed in front of the room and kept up for the entirety of the 3 hour instantiation (performance). There was intrigue, and people were curious and eager to enter the room – I think this aspect of the work was a success. As the kitchen time rang and participants left the room, they frequently thanked the Attendant. Several participants also approached me afterwards to thank me and to discuss the experiences they had inside the Bed Room. The shared experiences within the bed room from all accounts, seems to have been intimate and I have heard several accounts where partners and groups, of friends and strangers, were catalyzed to act out of their normal character once they were inside the room. I do not think everyone had the same experience, however, I will never quite know what experience each participant had as is the nature of the installations isolation of its participants. This level of intimacy within the room was also a success.

Before instantiating the work, I worried that the room and exhibition lacked legitimacy and that people wouldn't take the Bed Room or Attendant seriously. I hypothesized that if participants wouldn't eagerly embody their role and choose to not enter the Bed Room. However, during the exhibition the exact opposite happened – participants passively followed all the rules and treated the Bed Room, the text-based prompts, and the Attendant as respected institutions within the gallery space. Participants even waited patiently in a voluntarily formed line (no ropes or tape to specify that there should be a line) for up to 45 minutes just to enter the Bed Room. In my opinion, the participants' theater outside the room was boring, anticlimactic, and lacked the awareness that the entire exhibition was a performance and that they were part of the theatrical situation wherever they were in the gallery. Their passive waiting-in-line is something that I want to question and break apart for the next instantiation of the Bed Room – potentially

by making entrance into the Bed Room a raffle, or by changing the way people exist and interact outside the room with charged objects and confrontational prompts. I have invented a hypothetical world with hundreds, if not thousands or variables, and now I have the opportunity to tweak and refine the work to create the perfect balance of enjoyment and uneasiness in the audience.

Conclusion

When I turned the corner with my thesis work in January 2016, I established the three criteria that would guide my work for the remainder of the semester:

- accessible to wide ranging audiences & elicits each person individually (specific to this time and space)
- interactive and experiential: requires people to voluntarily enter the work and engage
- implicates the audience (evokes curiosity and uneasiness)

I feel compelled to come back to these criteria as a way of analyzing if and how the Bed Room measured up to this set of criteria. However these criteria are all relating to the mechanics of engagement rather than the subject matter that initially catalyzed this direction of artwork and inquiry, sexual violence. Although the subject matter of the work is experiential and never discussed within the work itself, this paper is probably the best site to discuss the subject matter.

Was the Bed Room effective in challenging the audience to become more aware and conscious of the roles they play in the presence of others? Did the Bed Room foster dynamics of power, control, intimacy, agency, vulnerability, and awareness when experienced by the participants in the exhibition? Does this work make any positive contributions to conversations regarding

sexual violence? If so, to whom does this work impact most, and whom does this work impact least? If not, does that invalidate the shared experiences of those who entered and spent time in the Bed Room?

These questions are what I will be considering as I move forward into the next performance of the Bed Room and beyond graduation as I further develop this work as a body of social and spatial inquiries. Throughout the year, I have come to realize that the variables of this work are endlessly malleable. I find both hope and despair in that fact. Onward and up.