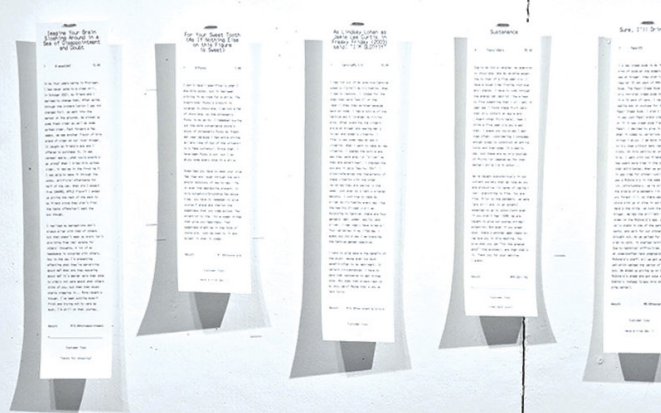


Waste Avatar: Boxed In

How the Box Figure was Born

Shalin Berman
IP Section 4
BFA 2022



Problem Statement

I created an installation of a geometric, abstract human form composed of recycled materials to demonstrate the relationship between my past self and my current self as it reflects my thoughts, ideas, and identity over the last year. The sculpture is accompanied by textual elements that add context to the aforementioned past/present relationship, which also highlights the tensions between how one presents oneself versus how one is perceived by others.



Fig 1 (Previous Page): Photo looking down on the figure in the final exhibition space.

Fig 2 (Left): Photo of entire exhibition space (the three white walls and brown/grey floor) with the figure and the eight receipts pinned to the wall.

Chronology

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Artist/Designer Statement

Waste Avatar: Boxed In is a sculpture composed of recycled materials that serves as a physical manifestation of what I consumed and what has consumed me during the 2021-2022 school year. The figure is accompanied by textual anecdotes about the boxes and their contents to explore what this figure says about me, and society more broadly. The combination of sculptural and textual elements forced into the same context highlights the tensions I felt during this time of anger, dread, fear, anxiety, and uncertainty. Body position and other perceptible cues create connotations about identity for the figure and viewer. Everyone is made of boxes, but they can feel restrictive or even demoralizing at times, especially when they are forced upon you, or if you feel unable to grow out of them over time. I have felt forced into metaphorical boxes based on my [perceived] identities. Will I consume in the same way in the future as I continue to grow, change, and attempt to embrace the fluidity of my salient identities while acknowledging how they're affected by what items and media I consume? I feel stagnant right now, but I'm interested in how I can break through these boxes over time.

I wanted to set myself up for success in IP before I was even in the class. My planning process began in the Winter 2021 semester. I didn't know what I wanted to make (this will be a throughline during this process), but I did know I wanted my project to be about gender. I was interested in taking Intro to Transgender Studies anyway, but I thought the readings from the course would inspire and/or supplement my IP project. As I looked through the syllabus, I saw that we would be reading an excerpt from the book *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility*. I had read excerpts from this book for my Black Queer Theory class junior year (which I also pulled some inspiration from those readings for IP), and my Identity Politics in Art and Design class sophomore year. I thought since this text had come up so many times in my academic career, I decided to purchase it and read it this coming Summer.

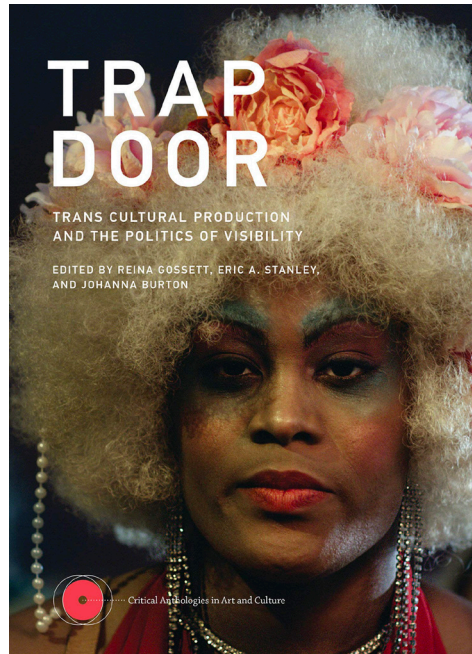


Fig 3: *Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility*, edited by Tourmaline, Eric A. Stanley, and Johanna Burton. It is a collection of twenty-one essays, interviews, articles, etc. about trans visibility and trans cultural production. The readings address what it means to be visible and whether or not it is beneficial or a hindrance. The notion of visibility itself is kind of a paradox; one's identity being represented in the media (accurate or not) can be validating, but that "representation" comes with a cost—trans people, more specifically black trans women, have faced increased threats of violence every year. This book brings up many questions; what constitutes good representation? Is there good representation? How differently does one navigate the world when one is "visible" versus "invisible"? What role does art play in trans life?

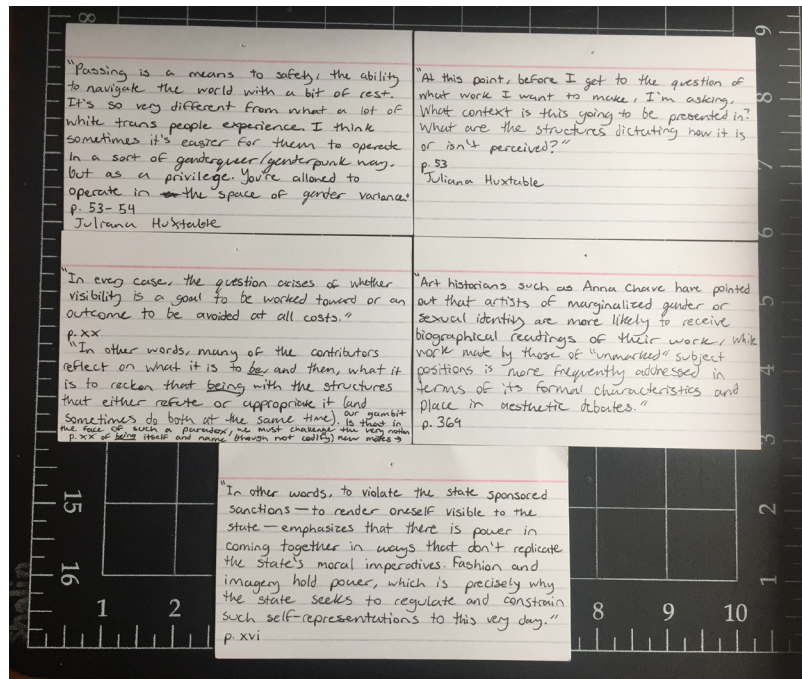


Fig 4: Some of the many quotes from *Trap Door* that resonated with me. I wrote these pull quotes on index cards and pinned them up in my IP studio at the beginning of last semester. The bottom quote is replicated on the facing page, as it had a really lasting impact on me.

"In other words, to violate the state sponsored sanctions—to render oneself visible to the state—emphasizes that there is power in coming together in ways that don't replicate the state's moral imperatives. Fashion and imagery hold power, which is precisely why the state seeks to regulate and constrain such self-representations to this very day" (xvi).

—*Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility*

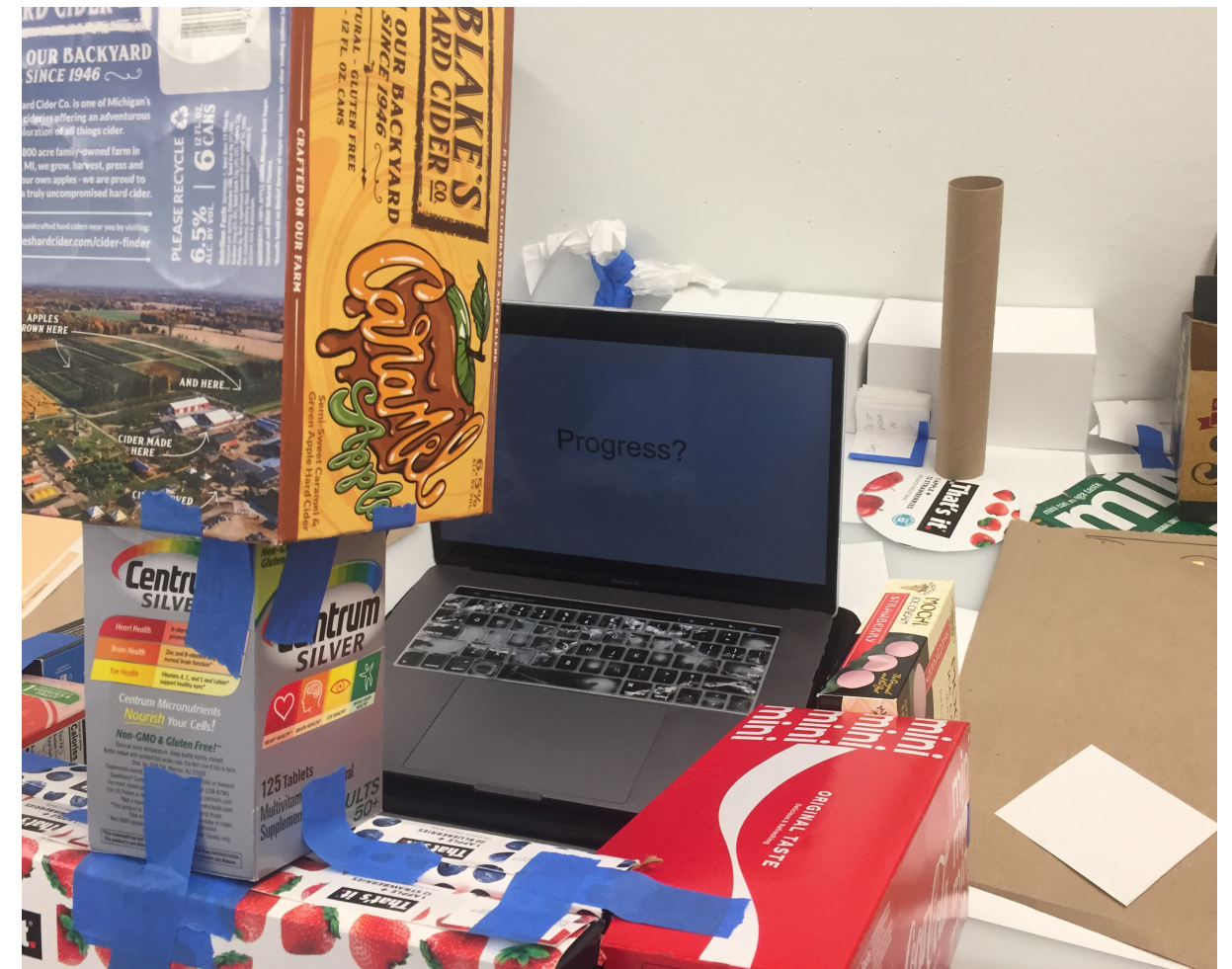


Fig 5: Box Figure at a laptop that has the word "Progress?" on the screen.



Fig 10: Gender Project. Yishay Garbasz (2002).

Garbasz used lighting, costuming, performance, and negative space to explore gender visually. She wanted to look into how much visual information is needed to determine gender. What is the least amount? I was most drawn to the first photo in the series because it had two distinguishable figures, and they were in dialogue with each other. There is enough visual information present for one to draw conclusions about the identities of the figures, but there's no "proof" of knowing the truth. The lighting is so dramatic that the left side of the figure in the skirt disappears into the black background, so there is one leg that is coming out of the darkness; that leg could potentially belong to the other figure. Now I'm thinking about how this could be one figure, or at least could be intended to be one figure. I think that's the point of the piece—we are conditioned to think that since there are two different aesthetics present (masculine and feminine), there must be two different figures. I want to explore this "contradictory" visual messaging in my project, considering gendered signifiers.



Fig 11: Up to and Including Their Limits. Cassils (2020).

Up to and Including Their Limits is a performance and sculptural piece created by Cassils. I was inspired by the idea of curating what the audience sees and when they see it. I was interested in the idea of obfuscating visual information, at least temporarily and seeing how peoples' reactions change over time. What is the bigger picture? Will audience members be able to see through lines and make connections to said bigger picture? Maybe I can construct a thing that the audience can look into and then have different bits of it reveal themselves over time?

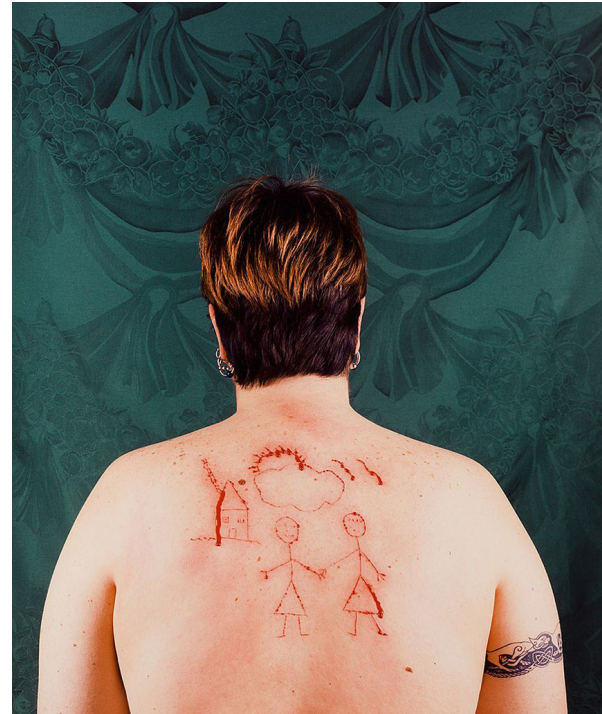


Fig 12: Self Portrait/Cutting. Catherine Opie (1993).

An Attempt Was Made

Taking into consideration the previously noted academic research (and other readings), and my preliminary art precedent research, it was decided that I had to start making something. I was reflecting on what "gendered" cues I exhibit on a day to day, and recorded notable interactions with people about how they perceived me, and projected their comments physically onto myself. One of these interactions was when I was on duty for my ResStaff role. I had on my M-Housing shirt, gray sweatpants, black socks, black and blue sandals, a paper facemask, and a navy UMich mask. Some residents were talking about me as I passed on my rounds. I heard one of them say "she's the RA?" For my first iteration, I put on the same outfit I wore that night, wrote that quote on my skin, and took photos, pictured below.



Fig 13: Body in an MHousing shirt with "She's the RA?" written on their arm.

Fig 14: Cropped/zoomed in photo of the previous arm with "She's the RA?" written.

Fig 15: Profile of Shalin with their head tilted back, eyes closed, in their UMICH housing shirt and UMICH mask with text reading "She's the RA?" on their neck.

After reflecting on iteration one, and taking into consideration more of my research, I was disappointed in the result. I had used my body as a way to convey a message. In doing this exercise, I realized that I do not feel comfortable centering myself in that way for future iterations. Trans bodies are sites of violence, and I do not want to add to that pain, or set myself up for that pain. I will do what I feel comfortable doing. Using myself as a way to convey information is not in the cards, at least not in this moment.

Pivoting

Portrait of Ross in L.A. inspired me to make my own “grouping of inanimate objects to represent bodies” piece. That took the shape of cardboard plants/trees. These plants were very simplified 3D versions. I used what materials I had available, which was one large piece of cardboard and some cardboard food containers (for shadowing).



Fig 16: Untitled (Portrait of Ross in L.A.). Felix Gonzalez-Torres (1991).

Felix Gonzalez-Torres's “Untitled” (Portrait of Ross in L.A.) serves to commemorate his deceased partner who passed away from AIDS complications. I appreciate how this piece invokes Ross’s body (through weight) without showing (or even needing to show) his body. The symbolism in the pile of candy is so strong, it is not necessary to show a body—the candy is the body. I am also interested in the interactive aspect of this piece. How can I get audience members to interact with whatever I come up with?

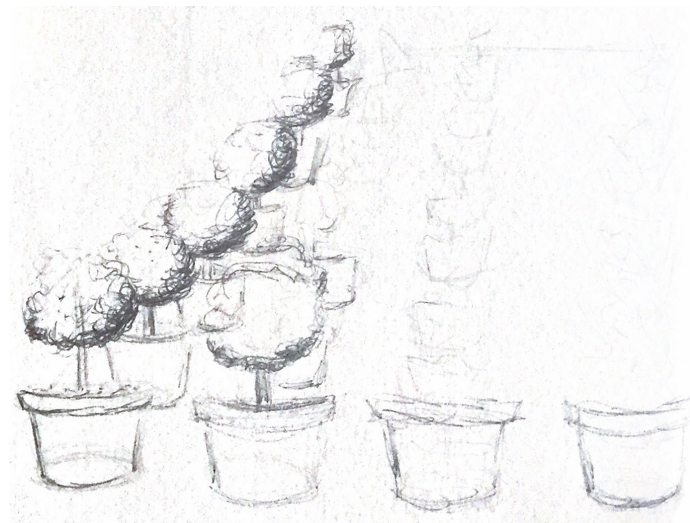


Fig 17: Potted plants/trees sketch.



Fig 18: Potted plants/trees executed from cardboard pieces.

The Army

During the tree iteration, I was still researching (shocker). One reading in particular changed my project’s trajectory: “EXTERMINATION OF THE JOYAS: Gendercide in Spanish California” by Deborah A. Miranda. I was drawn to the section of the article that talks about the power that comes from a name and the act of naming. I wanted to explore the power of naming and the power of language in my project. I wanted to explore the limitations of our language and see where I can pick up using a new language. If people feel as though the words we have in English can fully encapsulate their identities, I would like to have that conversation. If people feel as though English cannot fully grasp the intricacies of their identities, I want to have that conversation.

This also aligned with class discussions about post-identitarianism: the belief that we should move beyond strict identity categories, and see identification as a spectrum, because the existing categories are limiting. This can also include the idea that established identity categories (language) cannot fully articulate identities and experiences, specifically with regards to gender

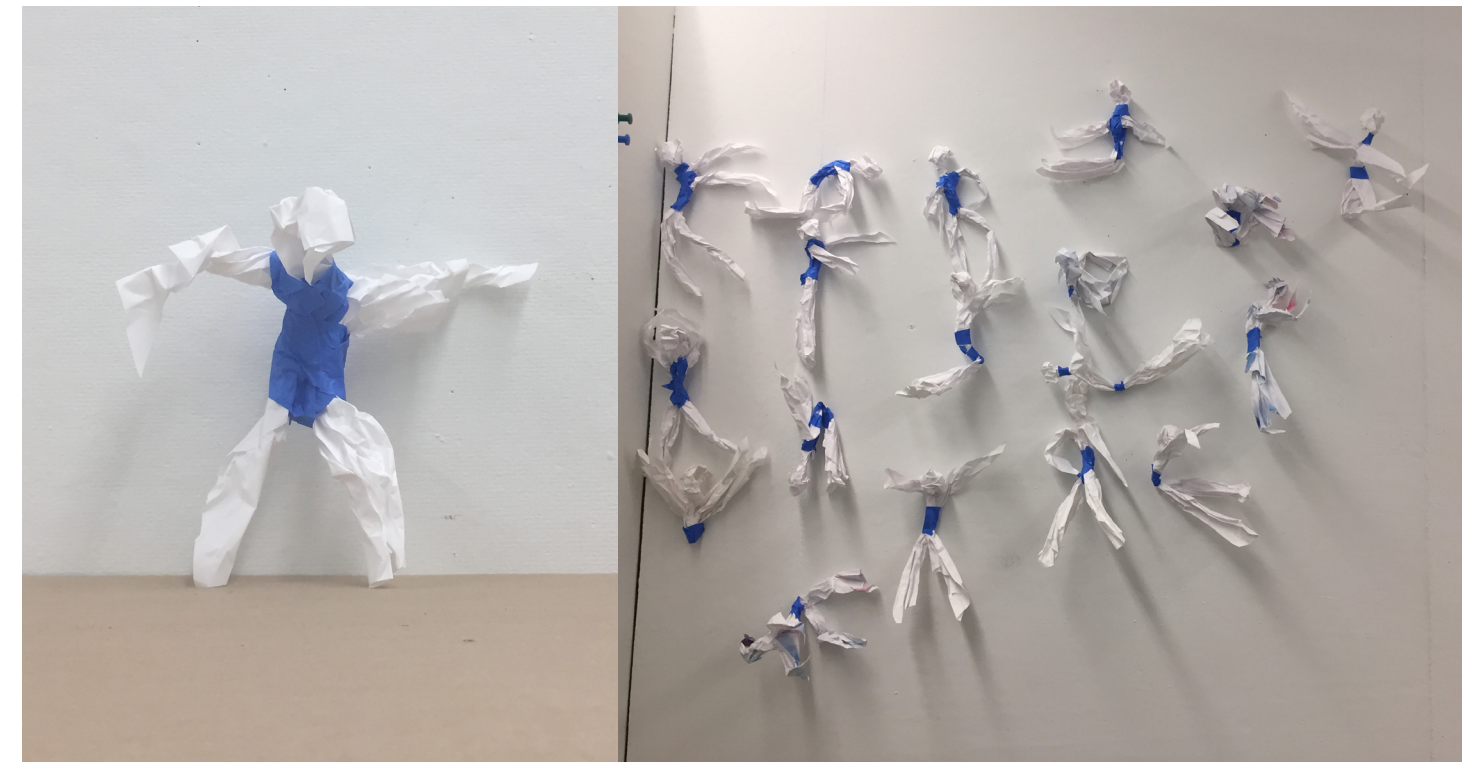


Fig 19: Original paper figure.

Fig 20: Majority of the paper figure alphabet pinned to the wall.

This led me to brainstorm how/if I could make a new alphabet for trans and gender non-conforming people to more accurately name and describe themselves. I started this process by making human-like figures out of paper based on English alphabet letterforms. I did this for all 26 letters. And then I was going to make new letter symbols based off of body positions (also influenced by that section in Gender Outlaw). I was going to reverse engineer them. They would be a section of a living, continuous archive where people can add more symbols as they see fit.

Back to Square One?

After my semester review, I was advised to discontinue the alphabet because I was apparently forcing the project in a design direction. I felt lost. At that point I fell back into the only constant part of this project: research. I looked into the topics and references my panel suggested, hoping I could come up with something soon. I was told to look into discussions revolving around subject, object, and abject. In doing so, I stumbled upon a webpage from 2002 discussing Julia Kristeva's **Powers of Horror**. I thought about the examples of abject that were given, stuff that was once a part of you that was no longer a part of you like vomit or feces. This, combined with a quote I found towards the end of **Gender Outlaw** (as the book had been purchased and read cover to cover by this time) had me thinking about past selves as it pertains to one's younger self.

““Somewhere, over the last seven years, I left behind me all the cells that add up to a body out there that looked remarkably like this one, like the one I built with the food I would eat and the alcohol I would drink in order to avoid dealing with my life” (283).

—*Gender Outlaw: On Men, Women, and the Rest of Us*

Many of my other sources noted the temporality of gender, but the quote above really got me thinking about how Transgender and Gender Non-Conforming people view their younger selves versus cisgender people. I wanted to reflect how my identity had changed (or my perception of my identity) changed over the course of the year.

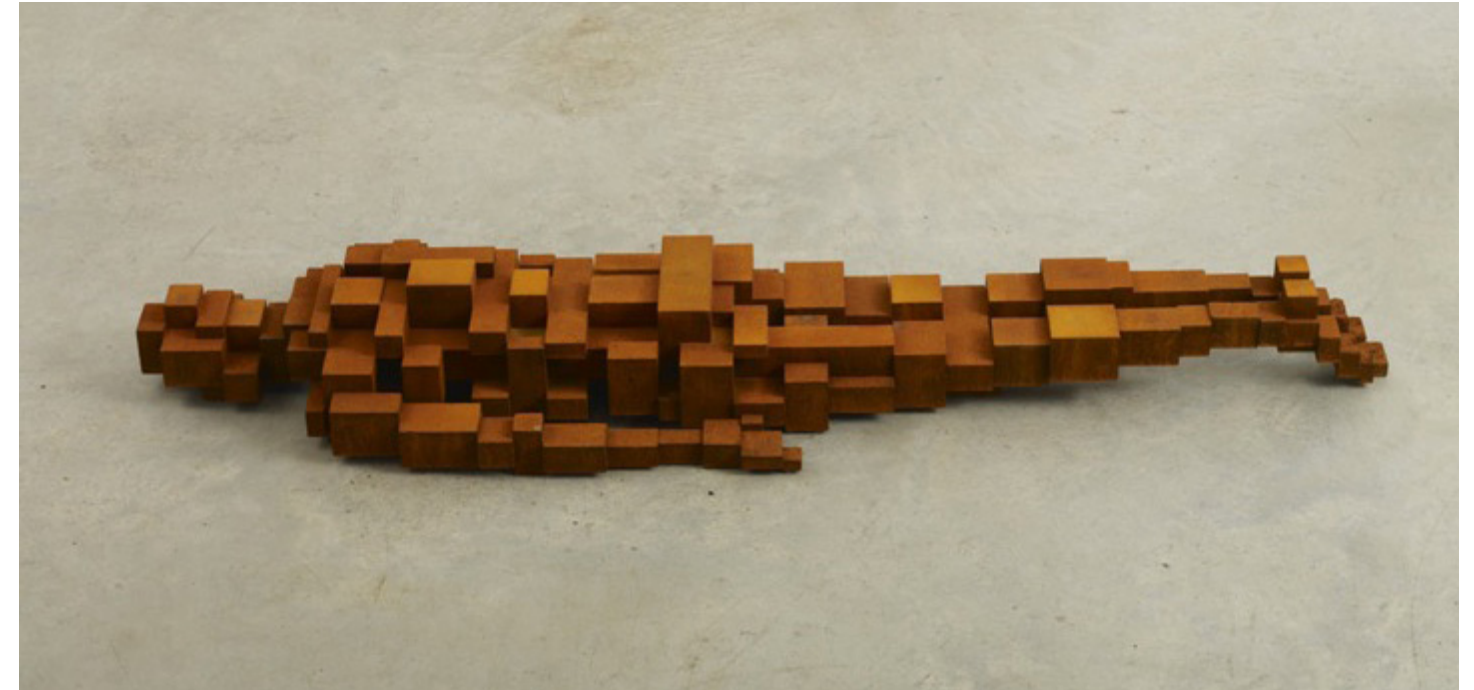


Fig 21: Hermitage Blockworks Series. Antony Gormley (2010-2011).

Gormley made many of these geometric sculptures of human figures in different positions. Each one evoked different emotions. Some of them were made at human sized scale, and others were giant.

I didn't have the expertise or materials Gormley used, but I had been hoarding all of the recycled cardboard boxes from (mostly) food and drink containers from this school year. I held onto these materials because I didn't know if I would have access to materials as I had in other studio courses (flashback to the trees). This was a connection to the literal notions of the abject: these were items that I consumed that became a part of me at one point, and that were no longer a part of me.



Fig 22: One box leg constructed with the popular blue tape. Fig 23: Box Figure sitting on a chair, on the computer at my table.



Fig 24: Box Figure sitting in the fetal position on the ground (forshadowing).



Fig 25: Box Figure in lying, reclined position on the ground.



Fig 26: Box Figure in lying, spread eagle, face-down on the ground.



Fig 27: Another angle of Box Figure in lying, reclined position on the ground to emphasize that this angle just looks like a pile of boxes.



Fig 28: Box Figure doing a plank.

Haha Now What?

Once the figure was constructed, I wanted to explore different body positions. I realized that in these various positions, the inanimate construction of boxes could emote, like Gormley's figures.

During these weeks of exploration, I again felt lost: ok the figure can go in these positions and represent certain emotions, now what. I reflected on what these boxes meant to me and what they could represent in terms of identity. It was in these reflections that I began writing. The writing provided me with a grounding of sorts. I felt re-rooted, and had some new found inspiration for how to finish this project.

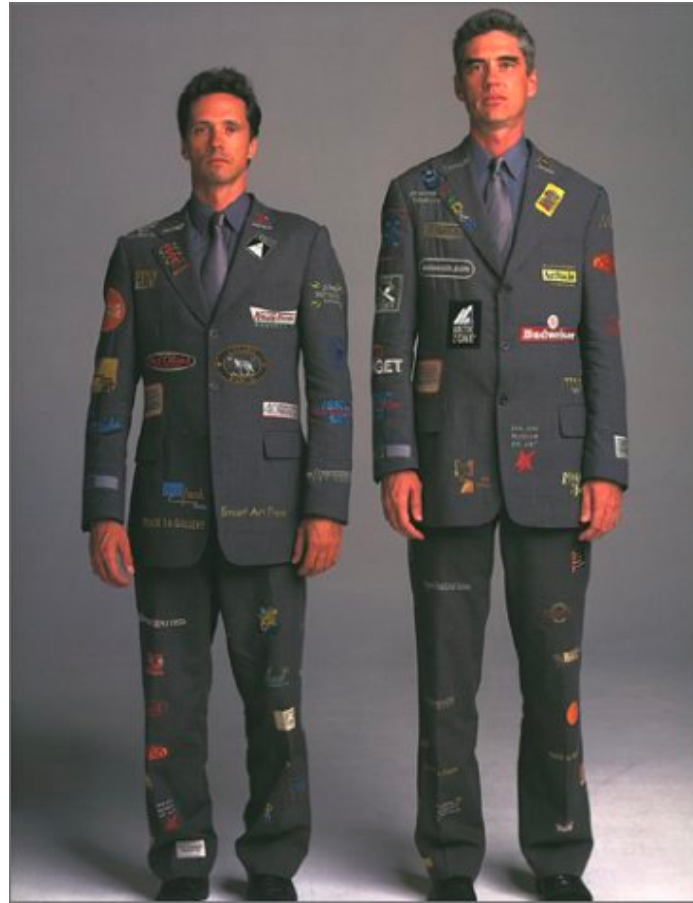


Fig 29: SUITS: The Clothes Make the Man. The Art Guys (1998).

Two men in suits covered in logos. This piece made me think of how and if brands accurately represent the person wearing them. Do these brands and logos represent the wearer's brand or identity?



Fig 30: Brillo Soap Pads Box. Andy Warhol (1964).

The infamous Brillo Box by Warhol, which made people question if it was in fact art. Since my Box Figure is made of (branded) boxes, whose forms were not altered, it was apt for me to refer to one of the most iconic readymade works. Can readymades reflect a specific individual's identity?

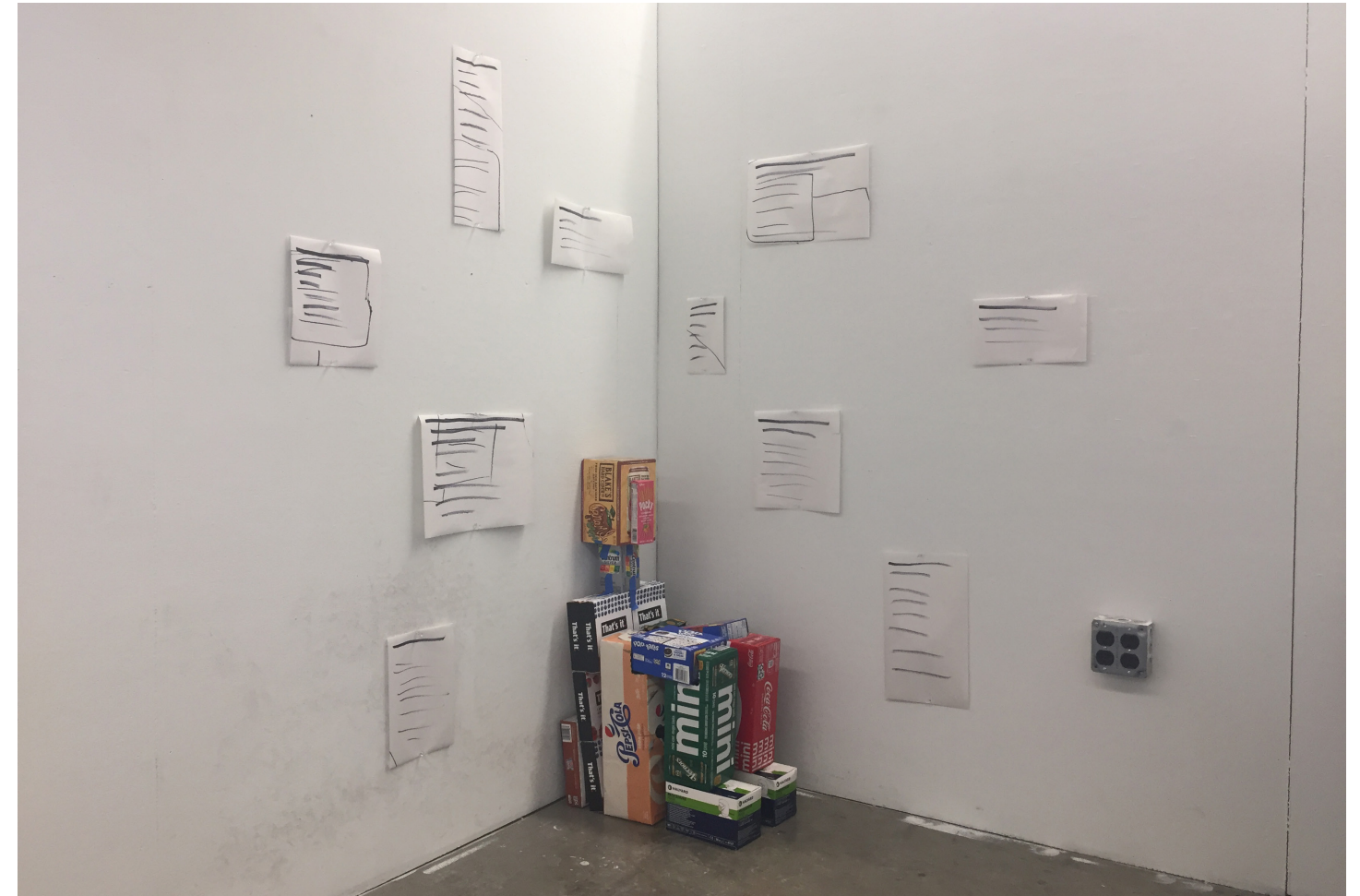


Fig 31: Box Figure sans arms sitting curled up in the corner with mockups of the text surrounding it on the wall.

After I freewrote, and wrote, and wrote, I had my text and my figure I just didn't know the best way to integrate the 3D and 2D forms into one context. I went through a few ideas (and talked to a lot of people). We came up with showcasing this information in the form of receipts, as most of these boxes were of items I purchased. Each receipt has an anecdote about when I got that box and/or memories of that item. It then evolves into a stream of consciousness about that item, and then just my own thoughts.

Imagine Your Brain Sloshing Around in a Sea of Disappointment and Doubt

1 BlakesCAHC 10,99

In my four years being in Michigan, I had never gone to a cider mill. In October 2021, my friend and I decided to change that. After going through the orchard (which I was not charged for), we went into the market on the grounds. We picked up some fresh cider as well as some spiked cider. Fast forward a few weeks, we see another flavor of this brand of cider at our local Kroger. It caught my friend's eye and I offered to purchase it. It was caramel apple...what could possibly go wrong? When I tried this spiked cider, it had me in the first half. I was able to make it through the wonky, artificial aftertaste for half of the can. What did I expect from CARAMEL APPLE flavor? I ended up giving the rest of the pack to my friend since they didn't find the taste offensive-I kept the box though.

I realized my perceptions don't always align with that of others, but that doesn't mean my brain isn't providing free real estate for others' thoughts. A lot of my headspace is occupied with others. How is the way I'm presenting affecting what they're perceiving about me? What are they assuming about me? It's easier said than done to simply not care about what others think of you, but then that doubt starts creeping in... More recently though, I've been putting myself first and trying not to care as much, I'm still on that Journey.

Amount \$10,99+disappointment

X_____

Customer Copy

Thanks for shopping!

For Your Sweet Tooth (As If Nothing Else on this Figure is Sweet)

1 STPocky 1,99

I don't recall specifically when I ate this pocky, but it had been sitting in my room for a while. The traditional Pocky's biscuit is covered in chocolate. I am not a fan of chocolate, so the strawberry Pocky is my go-to, I remember buying out the dorm convenience store's stock of strawberry Pocky my freshman year because I had extra dining dollars (one of two of the university's fake currency). Since then, I have been Pocky'd out, but I do enjoy some every once in a while.

Sometimes you have to mask your true feelings and laugh through the pain and/or monotony of day-to-day life, or even the depressing present. In this purgatory/Groundhog Day-esque time, you have to remember to give yourself grace and cherish the sweetness that you come across. Pay attention to the little sweet things that give you happiness. That sweetness might be in the form of nostalgia. Just be open to it and accept it when it comes.

Amount \$1,99+nostalgia

Customer Copy

Have a nice day :)

As Lindsay Lohan as Jamie Lee Curtis in Freaky Friday (2003) said: "I'M OLD?!!?"

1 CentrumMultiV 10,99

I had run out of my previous Centrum women's (~pink~) multivitamins. When I had to restock, I looked for the ones that said "adult" on the label-I knew they existed because back at home, I had a bottle of the Centrum adult (orange) multivitamins. After scanning the vitamin aisle at Kroger and seeing men's (blue) and women's vitamins, I finally saw some regular adult vitamins. When I went to take my new vitamins, I opened the bottle and saw they were grey (or ~silver~ as they are advertised). I checked the box and it said "Adults 50+", I cross-referenced the ingredients of these vitamins with the other varieties-they are basically the same, just ever so slightly altered amounts. I continue to take my silver multivitamins every day like the healthy 21-year old I am. According to Centrum, there are four genders: men, women, adults, and silver, I realized I have tried all four varieties in my lifetime. I guess you could say I am transing the Centrum gender spectrum.

I tend to give people the benefit of the doubt, maybe even too much benefit-often to my detriment. In certain circumstances, I have to bend over backwards to get things done. Why does that always rest on my shoulders? Maybe that's why my neck hurts.

Amount \$10,99+existentialcrisis

Customer Copy

:)

Sustenance

8 ThatsItBars 55,92

Due to my nut allergies, my aversion to chocolate, and my palette equating to that of a five year old, I have a tough time finding (non-sugary) snacks. I have to comb through the energy bar section like a hawk to find something that I will eat. A year ago I found these fruit bars that only contain an apple and [insert other fruit here]. Yeah I think a five year old would eat that. I guess you could say I eat them often...considering I consumed enough boxes to construct an entire torso and then some. It's sad to say, but these are my only sources of fruits (or vegetables for that matter) while I'm in school...

We're taught subconsciously in our current society that as long as you are productive (in terms of capitalism), everything is fine. You are fine. Prior to the pandemic, we were [and still are, to an extent] expected to go to school/work even if you didn't feel 100%. We are taught to give our bodies minimal attention. But even if you break down, there's another gear ready to replace you in this machine. You give what you can "for the greater good" (the economy), and then that's it. Thank you for your service, I guess.

Amount \$55,92+life

X_____

Customer Copy

Come back soon!

Sure, I'll Drink This

1 PepsiCS 6,99

I'd say cream soda is my favorite kind of soda at the moment. When I was at Kroger, they didn't have the regular 12 can pack of A&W Cream Soda. The Pepsi Cream Soda was the only non-diet cream soda that came in a 12 pack of cans. I recalled seeing ads on youtube for this new Pepsi Cream Soda. I didn't know if it was Just Pepsi brand cream soda, or if it was cream soda flavored Pepsi. I decided to give it a try. When it comes to variations of things I enjoy, I am more inclined to try them without many reservations. On this particular shopping trip, I went with two friends. We had spent more time in the store than anticipated. When we got out, it was time for dinner-luckily there was a McDonald's in the same parking lot. Unfortunately, we're still in the middle of a pandemic (in case you forgot :)), so there was no in store pick up or dine in options. Here's the thing, we took the bus to Kroger. We had the brilliant idea to order on the McDonald's app, physically stand in one of the parking spots, and wait for our dinner to be brought out. As we waited for our plan to work, it started raining. Due to technical difficulties, and an understaffed (and underpaid) McDonald's staff, all we got was wet-which warped the carton of the box. We ended up giving up on the McDonald's dream and got boba and Domino's instead (bless this shopping center).

Amount \$6,99+adventure

Customer Copy

Have a nice day :)

When in Michigan...

1 VernorsMini 5,99

If cream soda is my favorite soda right now, ginger ale is my runner up. It tastes good, and it helps with indigestion-a win-win. Back at home, Canada Dry is my favorite brand of ginger ale. Prior to coming to Michigan, I never had Vernors. I remember discussing ginger ale with a friend (who is from Michigan)-that was my first mistake. I said how Canada Dry is my favorite. She laughed and said how Canada Dry is nothing compared to Vernors. From there, I decided to try the infamous Vernors. Since I never tried it before, I decided to opt into the trial run: the 10 7,5 fl oz cans. They were perfectly adequate, despite not having ANY REAL GINGER. I still prefer Canada Dry, but I won't tell my friend that-if you're reading this, hi bestie. Since Vernors is not available back at home, I decided to go all in on Vernors here (while I'm still in Michigan), and then resume my Canada Dry consumption back home in Florida.

We act differently around different people, whether we want to admit it or not. It could be a facade, it could be true, it could be a combination of the two. This is a way that we function. In a way, this form of artificiality is what sustains us-it's not true artificiality, it could be a defense mechanism. Is the goal to meld these different versions of you into one true you? Are the other versions not you? Who are you really?

Amount \$5,99-ginger

Customer Copy

:)

MMM Breakfast for Dessert

1 PopTartBrunSgr 3,49

1 PopTartCookiesCr 3,49

Pop Tarts are so versatile; they can be eaten as breakfast and dessert! I feel like I treat most sweet carb items as breakfast and dessert... I don't think you can beat the classic Brown Sugar Cinnamon Pop Tarts, I always liked them better than the classic strawberry. If I do eat Pop Tarts for breakfast, it will always be the brown sugar ones. If you're wondering why I have Cookies and Cream Pop Tarts, I have a few exceptions to my chocolate aversion: oreo and oreo-like items (which includes cookies and cream flavors), and white chocolate. Cookies and Cream Pop Tarts are my substitute because I like to tell myself they are healthier than Oreos. Are they though? Debatable. Also for full transparency, I had purchased these prior to, and hoarded them through the duration of the Kellogg's strike. That was my attempt at solidarity.

While flexibility is important in this world where we must survive, it is also important to know your limits and set boundaries. Speak up when things aren't ok. But as you keep pushing yourself, you can only bend so much until you inevitably break. I guess versatility in this context is an ideal.

Amount \$6,98+)

Customer Copy

Come back soon!

...It's Something, I Guess

2 HalyardMasks 0,00

I received these through my Resstaff role. Oh thank you so much university for protecting me from covid by giving me these pieces of paper with ear loops. I would use these as filter masks underneath my main mask. 2 masks was my normal. I would wear 3 if I was working a shift or if I was in a crowded setting.

I still got covid, I'm still mad about it. My nose is just perpetually congested. Now I have shitty lungs and a shitty nose.

Protect yourself. Remove yourself from harmful situations. Carry yourself to solace. Movement. It's an attempt. Better than nothing.

Amount Covid

Customer Copy

Have a nice day :)

Fig 32: All eight receipts in the exhibit

Thanks for the Mental Anguish

This project and this class and this process were torturous for me. The whole time, I never felt like anything I was doing was “right”. The only comfort I had was in my research. I often felt like the progress I was making in research amounted to nothing because it didn’t amount to anything visual, based on the feedback I had received. This was very discouraging.

That being said, through this treacherous process, I did learn about myself and my art/design process. Most of my work is conceptual in nature. I can’t just get my hands dirty and make stuff for the sake of doing so, and feel good about what I did. There needs to be a reason why. Every step of this process, I was scrambling, arguing with myself trying to figure out the why.

Given these circumstances, I was able to put something together that I was able to back up—find the why. Because this process did such a number on me, I don’t feel as though I can truly appreciate the work I did. Maybe in the future, whether that be weeks, months, or years, I can say “Wow, you were really onto something here”.

This could potentially be made into a series of Waste Avatars... who knows? Each person’s Waste Avatar is different. Everybody can feel boxed in at some point, whether that be physically, mentally, or emotionally. It’s ok to feel that way sometimes, but just know that these boxes can break down one way or another.

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