

Interference:
Living in a Modern Rape Culture



Laura Thompson
Integrative Project
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“According to the U.S. Department of Justice’s National Crime Victimization Survey—the country’s largest and most reliable crime study—there were 248,300 sexual assaults in 2007 (the most recent data available) [...] That comes out to 1 sexual assault every 127 seconds, or about 1 every 2 minutes” (Get Info | RAINN).

00:00;00-02:07;00: Constructing the Universe: The Brain & Memory

The universe was blank, an unmarred white. Now small patches of delicate grass peer out in between nothingness, whipping back and forth on the snow plain; they remain static, each a singular rooted point in the vast expanse. The warmth of flesh becomes apparent as a gust of wind tears at feet—left and right, they are running without knowing why—but the beach sits silently in the fragile cocoon of winter’s dawn.

Skin is cold and pale in this weather, turning a slight pink from the bitter chill of the air. Its breath spreads across cheeks and burns clean in the lungs, whipping away any words that are left. The body faces a desolate endlessness of clouded memories, the pieces it has chosen to forget. The space in the mind where the warning should have been has frozen over with ice.

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The human brain is made up of approximately 100 billion neurons that communicate using electrochemical signals via millions of dendrites and axons; it is just three pounds of fat and protein but also the epicenter of the body (Brain Information). The brain stores and translates the data that forms all of existence; it drives our complex machinery—physically and emotionally—while also acting as storage for memory and learned information. And yet, the brain is fallible and ever changing. We forget that “memory is a ceaseless process, not a repository of inert information [...] every time we remember anything, the neuronal structure of the memory is delicately transformed, or reconsolidated” (Lehrer).

Everyone is calibrated to experience the world in a slightly different way. Human history is distorted by the imperfections of memory. In spite of this, there is a truth that finds its way out in one form or another. Louise Bourgeois said, “Art is the experiencing—or rather—the re-experiencing of trauma.” I once tried to trick my own mind into changing a memory. I tried to block out the parts I didn’t want to remember. I tried to change the mood by laughing about it, by making it into something positive, but my mouth was out of tune with my physical memories, and all it took was the tears in a friend’s eyes to snap the memories of my own sexual assault back into place:

We have hopelessly lost the memory of a world heard, seen, perceived, experienced joyfully by a body naked of language. This forgotten, unknown animal has become speaking man, and the word has petrified his flesh, not merely his collective flesh of exchange, perception, custom and power, but also and above all his corporeal flesh: thighs, feet, chest and throat vibrate, dense with words. (Serres)

Those were the tears I had never cried. I had never given myself permission to do any such thing, but when the physical and emotional reunited, I finally realized that it wasn’t okay, that I wasn’t okay.

As an artist, I needed to abandon verbal language because it was the first thing to inhibit my ability to remember. It is physicality that brings back truths my lips have denied, physicality that sets off alarm bells in my brain, and a muscle memory kicks in, telling my entire being to shut down so I don’t have to deal with the parts of myself that I don’t care to face. Through dance and a heightened awareness of my corporeal presence, I could reconnect to my experiences without the need to exchange words. I approached my work viscerally, without a clear idea of what the final piece would look like. Instead, I focused on small scenes, bite-sized pieces of work that I could chew and process without the need to verbalize.

It became clear that all of the brain’s functions were involved—emotional, physical, memorial—and the piece had to be constructed in a way that alluded to each in its own right. In the end, I created a ten-screen installation that covered a large wall-space in the gallery (see fig 1). Sometimes, the screens work together to form one image, and sometimes they explode into the tiny pieces of ten distinct memories. Often, movements flail out of order in small cuts, blurred and unintelligible, but something larger is happening. A rhythm and structure begin to form, and stories and emotions emerge. Memory is still present in spite of this interference that time and

revision have caused. The five continuously looping cycles—each 127 seconds—explore something new; every cycle is its own part of the whole that drops abruptly into an empty moment before moving on to the next scene.



(fig 1.) A photograph of *Interference* playing in Slusser Gallery (cycle 4)

The sound, created by a close friend and fellow survivor Maxwell Shults, also drives the piece in an unusual way. It is written in layers, each a distinct 10:35 piece of music that also functions as part of a greater whole. Ten layers of audio are linked to ten different scenes, rising into the mix as their visual counterpart is revealed within the larger composition. Through various metaphors and aural sound cues, *Interference* explores the different emotional cycles I have encountered in the aftermath of my own experiences with sexual assault.

Cycle 1 begins with a snow-covered beach by Lake Michigan, three blocks away from the house where I grew up. It moves back and forth between one image that consumes all ten screens and a variety of images that use anywhere from one to six screens (see fig 2). While the 127 seconds mostly focus on a small figure running through an alien-like space, there are also fragmented, blurry pieces of scenes yet to come. After returning to the beach, the audience is dropped into a moment of both visual and auditory silence.



(fig.2) Photograph of cycle 1

02:07;00-04:14;00: Why Rape Occurs

I am convinced that darkness follows me because I am keenly sensitive to its tides. The moment I allow myself to remember, a flood of memories and emotions washes over me. I am finally capable of beginning to separate myself from the unseen weight that has steadily dragged me down, but the resounding question that bubbles up over and over again is why, why did this happen to me?

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Cycle 2 is a solo that I choreographed and performed in a white space. It uses the three horizontal rows of screens as a way of breaking the body into parts. The uppermost row shows the space from just above my head to just below my shoulders, the middle row shows from my shoulders to just above my waist, and the bottom row shows from just below my knees to the floor (see fig. 3). The choreography is intermixed with video portraits of me sitting in a chair. There are portraits of sixteen different people throughout the entire work, but cycle 2 focuses on the singularity of just one body moving through space.



(fig. 3) Photograph of cycle 2

Sexual assault has been studied from many different perspectives in an attempt to explain why it is so rampant in many cultures and why it occurs at all. The FBI ranks rape as the second most violent crime after only murder (Get Info | RAINN). It's hard to come to terms with rape statistics in a tangible way because we find sex to be a very intimate and taboo topic in the United States. When something is that hard to talk about, it's even harder to fix. A really good way to understand why sexual assault occurs at such an alarming rate, and has been occurring for all of human history, is to look at it from an evolutionary perspective.

Even though we operate at much more self-conscious levels of thinking than most animals, we demonstrate evolutionary patterns just like any other population. Men and women approach mating and sexuality in very different ways—men tend to expend more energy and put more effort into mating (Lalumière 65) while females have more parental effort, which is cause for competition amongst males (Thornhill 34). Darwin's evolutionary theory “proposed that sexually selected traits either gave a male advantages in competition with other males for sexual access to females or increased a male's likelihood of being chosen as a mate by a female” (Thornhill 33). Rape arises when a woman's choice is ignored, and through sexual coercion—“access by intimidation, harassment, and/or physical force” (Thornhill 34)—a man achieves sexually in spite of his not being chosen or having certain traits:

Depending on the species, forced copulation is more likely when there is a shortage of receptive females, when successfully mated males have

opportunities to mate with additional and easily accessible fertile females, when males are unsuccessful in competition for fertile females, and when a mate is suspected of copulating or has copulated with other males. (Lalumière 156)

In addition, sexual activity involves more risk for women (Thornhill 35), which inherently creates a disparity in sexual interest, aggression, and activity. A woman cannot detach herself from a pregnancy, while a man can easily end his physical and/or emotional relation to a woman or their unborn child immediately after the act of sex.

In addition to the evolutionary causes of rape, pornography and prostitution prove that female sexuality is valuable to men, who are interested in “sexual variety without commitment” (Thornhill 40), something that the porn industry readily provides. Many studies have sought to find correlations between pornography and sexual violence. It has been found that “viewing nudity alone *reduced* aggression, whereas exposure to nonviolent but coercive or violent pornography *increased* aggression” (Lalumière 148). Porn objectifies women and promotes sexual violence while allowing viewers to become detached and desensitized (Dines). Instead of a personal and emotional encounter, sex is turned into a show:

That’s how sex is presented to boys—it’s not intimacy; it’s not the loving, egalitarian [part] that we get something out of, it’s something we do to the other. We raise women to survive in a rape culture, because we raise women to know these things. We do nothing to talk to men about not raping. But we do talk to women about how to protect themselves, which is further why we place the blame on women when something happens. (*The Line*)

Today’s visual overstimulation pounds sexual stereotypes and ideals into our heads: “Unfortunately for women, the two worlds collapse into each other, and we have to deal with men whose notions of sexuality, femininity, and masculinity are constructed through the cultural images they see” (Dines). This discrepancy is something women must constantly face because the societal ideal is unappealing or simply unattainable.

Rape is not just an act of physical violence. It has lasting psychological effects as well. Victims are twenty-six times more likely to abuse drugs, thirteen times more likely to abuse alcohol, and four times more likely to contemplate suicide (Get Info | RAINN). The lasting effects of such an experience are not always apparent, but they are present:

Women who have been raped may experience anxiety disorders, depression, somatic disorders, sexual dysfunction, obsessive-compulsive disorders, addictions, loss of self-esteem, financial problems, and many of the symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder, and they do so to a greater extent than victims of other violent crimes. (Lalumière 3)

Often, victims of sexual assault don't seek help for long periods of time because they are ashamed or think that what happened to them is normal and that they should deal with such psychological interference in their daily lives quietly and on their own.

04:14;00-06:21;00: The Social Constructs of Gender

As a child I had a reoccurring dream in which rocks came and moved my body while I slept. They placed me on my back and weighted my arms and legs down so that I couldn't move. The sheet covering my limbs was a smooth sea that both protected and hid me from the all of the dark things in the universe, but it couldn't stop my eyes from taking in the secret world before me with an unfaltering fascination.

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Cycle 3 is a stop motion depiction of a body tossing and turning under bed sheets mixed with erratic views of the ceiling, floor, and rocks. The rocks move the body and weight limbs down in place. The video covers all ten screens for the entire 127 seconds, but the image is still

disjointed by the spaces in between the individual screens (see fig. 4). Because different storylines of stop motion are intermixed, it gives off an intense flickering of light that pulsates on the actual gallery space.



(fig. 4) Photograph of cycle 3

From birth, we are categorized and sorted by our genetic makeup. Boys and girls are treated differently and raised with different expectations, many of which put pressure on men and women to fulfill archetypal roles that clash with modern society's goals for equality. Children learn from an early age that sexual harassment is a fact of life; pulling on clothing, groping, lewd language, and degrading bathroom graffiti are common behaviors in K-12 schools (Stein). Sports often generate strong heterosexual, erotic bonds for boys, which encourages a need to "score" in order to brag with peers (Messner). The behavior is universal, an inherent part of high school locker rooms in movies and real life. A Hostile Hallways Study showed that 83% of girls and 79% of boys in grades 8-11 have experienced sexual harassment in school (Stein).

The English language and general diction of Americans also supports rape culture. Over 220 words exist for a sexually promiscuous woman while around twenty apply to her male counterpart (Benedict). We speak of men and women with different adjectives and nouns, each carrying its own connotation:

What's the worst possible thing you can call a woman? Don't hold back, now. You're probably thinking of words like slut, whore, bitch, cunt (I told you not to hold back!), skank. Okay, now, what are the worst things you can call a guy? Fag, girl, bitch, pussy. I've even heard the term "mangina". Notice anything? The worst thing you can call a girl is a girl. The worst thing you can call a guy is a girl. Being a woman is the ultimate insult. Now tell me that's not royally fucked up. (Valenti)

Women are caught in a conundrum: they are either seen as the Virgin Mary or as a filthy whore (Benedict), there is no in between. Even insults—blow me, you suck, fuck you—have sexually degrading and domineering implications (Benedict). In such a world, women automatically orient themselves to their surroundings in a different way from men.

At colleges and universities across the country, rape is an especially rampant problem. College-aged women are four times more likely to be sexually assaulted (Get Info | RAINN). Much of this has to do with all-male groups like fraternities or sports teams, which "share certain characteristics—strong loyalty to the group, secrecy, intergroup competitiveness, emphasis on dominance and stereotyped masculinity, and a general attitude of male superiority and

antagonism toward women” (Lalumière 153). Such a group, mixed with an aggressor like alcohol, is a recipe for disaster.

06:21;00-8:28;00: The Legal History of Rape

I have bottled up pieces of myself for safekeeping and stored them close to my heart. Each time they are revealed to another, a part of me washes away in his wake, and I am left to hide behind the thin lens of an emptied vessel.

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Cycle 4 is a static shot of six mason jars filled with water sitting on a wood floor. The water and glass distort the naked form behind it as it moves (see fig. 5). One hand penetrates and explores the space inside each jar, moving in and out of view as water spills onto the wood floor that appears in focus in the foreground.



(fig. 5) Photograph of cycle 4

Even though rape has been around for thousands of years, it took a long time for societies to recognize it as a criminal problem. By understanding how sexual assault has been treated legally, we can trace the history of gender inequality and get an idea of how our perceptions have changed on a cultural level: “Rape is conceived of in legal practice and in the minds of many in society as a *violent* assault by a *stranger*” (McGregor 1). In actuality, approximately two thirds of rapes are perpetrated by someone who is familiar to the victim (Get Info I RAINN). This inconsistency between the perceived and actual statistics is reflected clearly by the delay present in the process each time the legal definitions of sexual assault is changed or amended.

Rape was initially seen as an offense to a woman’s father, brother, or husband because women were seen as property. During the 18th Century, the legal definition of sexual assault did not include the possibility of a husband raping his wife (McGregor). By the 1950s, laws began to change so that the definition of rape was no longer based on utmost resistance but instead stated that a woman must demonstrate “reasonable resistance” to such an attack (McGregor). However, sexual assault was still widely recognized as a violent and unexpected crime committed by a stranger.

In the 1960s, women in America began to abandon the role of housewife and mother to enter the workforce. Gender equality became a focus of the women’s movement and gave rise to the second wave of feminism. As women sought a new-found freedom and broke away from

stereotypical gender roles, it became more and more apparent that most societies in the Western World were built around male-centric values:

All legal and cultural disputes about women being pregnant or nursing at work, or nursing in public, derive from the fact that all workspace, all public space, in the West is defined in terms of the noncyclic male body. Women cannot “enter the workforce,” or “enter public life,” unless they agree to act as though their bodies were functionally male also. (Sjöö)

By the 1970s, women had begun to speak out, stating that laws pertaining to rape should focus on whether or not the victim gave consent as opposed to nonconsent; there was also a push towards gender neutrality in legal definitions (McGregor).

Legally, it would probably be better to separate sexual assault into two different categories: violent, forceful sex and sex without consent. In doing this, both violent rapes committed by strangers as well as acquaintance rape would be recognized and treated by the law. This might encourage more victims to report rape, which will in turn allow the law to hold more perpetrators accountable for their actions. Historically, the legal system has not provided support for victims, leading them to believe that they will be blamed, that they could have controlled it, or that it isn't rape because they knew the person.

Consent and *mens rea*—knowingly committing a crime—are the two issues that drive the debate on how sexual assault should be processed in the courts. In one in three sexual assaults, the perpetrator was intoxicated: 30% with alcohol, 4% with drugs (Get Info I RAINN). Such mental states make it hard to prove that the defendant knowingly committed a crime. Whether this is the case or not, we must remember that a lack of consent is the basis of rape:

Consent is also the mechanism by which we treat each other as equals, by asking for consent before crossing another's border or taking what is rightfully theirs, whether it is their property or their body. Asking someone for consent for a sexual relationship is a prerequisite for treating them as an equal. (McGregor107)

Eleven percent of rapes in 2001 involved the use of a weapon (Get Info I RAINN). The most important thing that should be remembered is that consent is not consent if it is induced by fear or force.

08:28:00-10:35:00: What Individuals and Organizations Are Doing to End Rape

A chorus of voices screams silently. We stand together to sing our sad anthem, a reprisal for hope.

Cycle 5 shows all sixteen video portraits, spending the first thirty seconds moving in and out of focus and from one face to the next. It then begins to intermix five iterations of a duet into its constantly changing imagery (see fig. 6). The choreography is connected, but each cut changes both the angle of the video and the screen it is shown on, creating a larger dance out of all the different videos playing at once.

Victims of sexual assault often feel as though they are completely alone, but the facts staggeringly suggest otherwise: “one out of every six American women has been the victim of an attempted or completed rape in her lifetime” (Get Info I RAINN). To put it another way, 17.7 million women and 2.78 million men in the U.S. have been victims of attempted or completed rape (Get Info I RAINN). With so many people affected, it isn't a surprise that various organizations and individuals are making strides towards changing our attitude toward rape and victims of rape.



(fig. 6) Photograph of cycle 5

On a national level, the Rape, Abuse & Incest National Network—RAINN—is the largest organization working to end sexual violence. They run the National Sexual Assault Hotline (800-656-HOPE) as well as the Online Hotline, which began in 2007 at RAINN.org (Mission Statement | RAINN). Since the free and confidential hotline was started in 1994, it has helped over 1.5 million victims across the United States (Mission Statement | RAINN). RAINN relies heavily on volunteers and works to educate Americans in an effort to end sexual violence nationwide.

At the University of Michigan, the Sexual Assault Prevention and Awareness Center, or SAPAC, is the main resource for the university community. Since its inception in 1986, the center has had two goals: “to provide services to survivors of sexual assault, dating/domestic violence, sexual harassment, stalking, and their significant others; and to provide education and prevention programs to the University community on these issues” (SAPAC). A 24-hour crisis hotline was implemented in 1988 (SAPAC), but SAPAC is also responsible for a variety of programs for students throughout the year.

This year, I had the opportunity to participate in an event in the diag at the University of Michigan called Take Back the Night. On April 7, 2011 three members of my student-run dance group, Cadence, performed solos during the TBTN rally. Cycle 2 of *Interference* is actually a video version of the choreography (and contains traces of the TBTN music, which was also written by Maxwell Shults). After the rally, we took to the campus and downtown areas of Ann Arbor and did a 1.6-mile walk (the roads were blocked courtesy of the Ann Arbor Police Department) while protesting for safer streets and an end to sexual violence.

As someone who had a hard time being comfortable with her own sexuality, I can understand the American tendency to become awkward when people talk about sex. I think that many of us are caught in a conundrum because we live in the information age where science and reason rule, but were raised in a conservative and/or religious households that treated sex negatively as a means of preventing premarital intercourse. This kind of attitude only alienates individuals from one of the most human acts in which they can participate. When I meet people who were taught to think positively and be aware of their sexuality from a young age, I can see that they are far more comfortable with themselves, and I am certain that furthering the education of the youth is a necessary part of ending sexual violence.

If you are a survivor you must know, first and foremost, it is not your fault. Remember and hold onto that fact if nothing else sticks. You did nothing to cause your assault, and it wasn't right that it happened—nor will it ever be right. Second, not everyone is going to hurt you. You will meet people who love and respect you, but not until you love and respect yourself. Björk said, “All

is full of love/Maybe not from the sources you've poured yours/Twist your head around/It's all around you/All is full of love." I firmly believe that is the truth.

Third, you must never forget your story because it is a rich part of your history, deeper than an electrical wiring in your brain. Such an event leaves a physical trace on all of your being. It can be destructive, but it ultimately makes you stronger, strong enough to eventually stand up and say something. And if you do not help educate those around you, I doubt anyone else will. So if you are in a university or college setting, please, do something. I was amazed that I found an overwhelming amount of support when I finally started talking to friends and acquaintances. If you speak out, chances are others will join in.

Finally, don't accept anything less than what you are worth. Not all men are raised to disrespect women. Be vocal about what you want and be upfront, open, and honest in everything you do. You should never have to hide who you are or your intentions in order to have a relationship or sex with another person.

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