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Disruptions of Normalcy: Subverting Discomfort and Expanding Social Perceptions of Art Through Process-based Experiences

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DISRUPTIONS OF NORMALCY: SUBVERTING DISCOMFORT AND EXPANDING

SOCIAL PERCEPTIONS OF ART THROUGH PROCESS-BASED EXPERIENCES

by

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Artwork can exist both as a piece of art as well as a service or interaction and when it successfully practices this duality it can stretch social perceptions of art, enabling more accessibility in the art sphere. Expanded definitions of art also help encourage the practical implementations of art in society. Social practice and the discourse that surrounds it provides a solid foundation for exploring art that exists outside of the finite physical space of galleries and moves towards an insistence on engagement. Concepts of art therapy also help guide discussions of the ways art can be implemented outside of the gallery space and used to derive meaningful relationships or accomplish personal goals. I have examined ideas and theories about social practice and art therapy and looked at them alongside concepts of comfort and the work of artists who have implemented strategies of social practice. From these foundations, I have built a project which focuses how to begin subverting the discomfort of life through a process that disrupts the routine of normalcy while building upon interpersonal intimacy, creating art that is therapeutic for both myself and my subjects.

In order to create a theoretical foundation for this project, I examined the social functions and participatory strategies of social practice, an artistic genre which "appropriate[s] social forms as a way to bring art closer to everyday life" (Bishop 10), actively involving the audience in the creation of the work, making it more about the experience and the relationships between people than the simple act of engagement. Bishop also discusses the connections and differences between social practice and performance art, noting that "[while] the photographic documentation of these projects implies a relationship to performance art, they differ in striving to collapse the distinction between performer and audience...Their emphasis is on collaboration, and the collective dimension of social experience" (10). Social practices has ties to strategies employed in more contemporarily defined public art and the two seem to influence each other,

sharing in conversations about the functions art should serve. Public art has been defined by different people with fairly differing viewpoints on what it should consist of and the purpose it should serve. Moving beyond the antiquated definition of being merely art in a public place, Cher Krause Knight offers insight on some of the qualities of 'populist' public art, noting that these artworks "share at least one if not all of the following three qualities:...they create immersive, experiential environments...each engenders highly proactive relationships with visitors...[and] they are frequently private ventures" (1). At least the first two of these are components that clearly align with the artistic strategies outlined by Bishop, enabling this definition of public art to expand upon our definitions and employment of social practice in the context of this project.

It was crucial for the implementation of this project to also examine the ways that social practice aims to function in more broad social and cultural ways. Elaborating on these functions, philosopher Guy Debord supported the idea of 'constructed situations' which "aimed to produce new social relationships and thus new social realities" (Bishop 13). Social practice works to inform new social relations, pushing those engaging towards a new perspective through its format that is so distinguishably different from the narrow scope of traditional art which is typically considered the default. Seeing a shift in the perceptions of art and the rules of the art world is significant, a claim supported by philosopher and author Umberto Eco who explains that "in every century, the way that artistic forms are structured reflects the way in which science or contemporary culture views reality" (31). This means that if social practice has the ability to change the structure of the art world, it could influence greater change across society, opening doors for more collaboration and community building throughout an array of different groups.

These writings about social practice and participation in art helped create a theoretical framework for my work, but the content I was interested in focusing on centered more around ways to find and share comfort. The world is a generally uncomfortable place and many of us live in a state of at least some discomfort most of the time. Especially regarding mental health; so many people go untreated for their mental health problems for a wide variety of reasons, many of which have to do with accessibility. Getting treatment is time-consuming and financially burdensome, forcing too many people to go without the care they need. Art therapy is "a form of therapy in which creating images and objects plays a central role in the psychotherapeutic relationship established between the art therapist and client" (Edwards 2) and is a pleasant addition to the world of therapeutic practice as it offers an alternative to traditional practices and therefore opens up new routes of treatment for some people. Through interactions which promote relationship building and open dialogue, pieces of art are created that are as much, or more about the interpersonal process that it took to create it as they are about the finished product. This means it could be argued that art therapy is itself a form of social practice. However, it can only do so much as it is conducted with a professional and usually incorporates more than just the physical making of art, requiring training on the part of the acting therapist. However, the mere existence of such a form of therapy is indicative of the vast potential of art, and points towards the general benefits of art on the brain. Additionally, my own personal experiences with art have been largely therapeutic and this was something I needed to incorporate into this project in order to find my own places of comfort.

I first looked to other artists for models of work that functioned at the intersection of comfort, art and accessibility and discovered Michael Rakowitz, an artist whose project *paraSITE*, which has been ongoing since 1997, provides custom-built inflatable shelters for

homeless people in urban areas. The shelters run off of expelled HVAC air which provides

structure and warmth for their inhabitants. Rakowitz does not self-describe this project or his

work in general as social practice, but *paraSITE* has been described as "a conspicuous social

protest" ("Michael Rakowitz"), something not unlike the work done by artists engaging with

social practice. He also seeks input from the people he makes the shelters for, involving them

perhaps not in the same ways as most participatory types of artworks, but in a way that is

certainly instrumental to the creation of the work. Additionally, this is art made specifically for

the homeless, a group that is often ostracized from art communities and made to feel

uncomfortable within traditional art spaces. This combined with the unusual nature of his project

work to expand perceptions of art and open up for more people the possibility for interaction

with art. I found myself inspired by the portable nature of Rakowitz's work and the way it

engaged with issues of accessibility, but was interested in developing work that had a more of a

process to it involving more human connection.

     I found German artist Carmen Loch in the search for work that engaged people in

personal and intimate ways while employing other aspects of social practice. Loch makes work

which focuses on how art is arranged and consumed in gallery and exhibition spaces and which

functions to alter traditional perceptions of art. Her work is definitely performative at it's core,

but she employs concepts used in social practice to engage with her audience on a more nuanced

level than with many performance art pieces. The Vesselroom Project, a Berlin gallery which

hosted her work speaks to this, noting that "her work develops an immersive multi-sensory

practice in order to explore individual aspects in human relations and their social context"

("Stendhal Labor"). Loch relies on the involvement of her audience and her art would not exist

without the choices they make, but Loch does not do much to subvert the distinction between

artist and audience. People such as artist Allan Kaprow have argued for the elimination of the audience in functional participatory art, suggesting that if audiences are eliminated entirely in these works, "all the elements – people, space, the particular materials and character of the environment, time – can...be integrated" (103). Regardless of this idea and whether or not Loch's work can be defined as such, her pieces reflect a deep understanding of social practice as she works utilizing art to disrupt the routine of the gallery space, focusing on building meaningful relationships with her audience. She also employs concepts of therapy in her work, building the aesthetic of her installations upon formal clinical aesthetics, and structuring her interactions in a similarly calculated and clinical way.

Loch's installation *Stendhal Labor* was a multi-day installation that took place over two gallery spaces in Berlin during the Berlin Art Week and worked "to create a muted and relaxed atmosphere. Optional interactions with the artist [were] predominantly related to and in support of relieving the audience from their physical and mental strain from digesting and processing the high quantity of exhibited artworks" ("Stendhal Labor"). Loch created this space as a part of the Berlin Art Week, acting in response to the overwhelming nature of the event. This laboratory style environment was intended to provide a refreshing space in the chaos of this mainstream art world. The importance of this work is supported by research done on Stendhal Syndrome, a psychosomatic disorder that causes physical symptoms of overwhelmedness, specifically when viewing art. This installation served as a therapeutic space to escape the possibility of such an experience, the probability of which was heightened by the nature of the art week. The work Loch has done in this installation to break up the monotony of the gallery space is significant to building expanded definitions of art which may open channels of accessibility into the art world.

However, Loch's sterile and clinical approach did not necessarily engage with the concepts of comfort I was interested in exploring in my work.

I have been enchanted by the work Ernesto Neto has done to break up the defined regularity of the gallery space in a way that seems more rooted in aesthetics of comfort than Loch. Neto has created a variety of installations that encourage the interaction of his audience with his artwork in very physical ways. Some of his large installations such as *O Bicho Suspenso na PaisaGem* fill the entire gallery, literally transforming it into a multi-dimensional space, begging the viewer to explore it thoroughly. This piece changes aesthetically when it is full of human bodies discovering it, and seems comparatively incomplete in photos where there are no people present. This installation works to remind the viewer that the gallery space can be contested and that art can be playful and engaging for a multitude of viewers. While this large-scale installation is impressive and does quite a bit to disrupt the gallery space, it does not demand human interaction in the same way that his piece *Humanoids Family* does. While *O Bicho Suspenso na PaisaGem* seems just less complete without the presence of people, the objects in *Humanoids Family* take on a completely different aesthetic value when people are not interacting with them. The abstract sculptures are clean, white and certainly meant for scrutinizing viewing, certainly not the type of piece that would allow touching. However, when you see another person involved in one, their arms and legs fitted through the holes of the sculpture, perfectly cradled into themselves and into the art, the structure of the piece makes sense and it becomes so inviting. Without the existence of human interaction, these pieces seem cold and traditional, but as soon as the indoctrinated fear of touching art is overcome by the audience, they are able to retreat into a state of unimagined comfort in the gallery space, an

important thing considering the inherent discomfort of a traditional gallery space for many people.

Connecting these concepts of social practice with the work done by Rakowitz, Loch and Neto, I developed a project that moved further away from the traditional art spaces that Loch and Neto have inhabited, and incorporated more of the personal human connection I felt was lacking in *paraSITE*. I developed a process that involved the swaddling of adult participants in locations of their choosing, creating a unique environment of comfort which I documented via photography, creating images which conveyed these feelings of comfort.

I realized that by making the concept of space more flexible and bringing 'space' to a person through an experiential process I could not only make my art more accessible, but also work more successfully to create comfort. Bringing the work to the space of my participant's choosing removed the potential discomfort of an unknown physical space. Reaching out to people in my community and friends I knew, I found common ideas of comfort such as warmth, security and softness and decided to use the practice of swaddling to guide this comfort experience. While swaddling babies has been debated in some circles, some "[l]aboratory experiments indicate that swaddled babies sleep more, have reduced levels of motor activity in response to stimulation, fewer startles and lower heart-rate variability" (Chisholm 1) and many people will personally attest to the power of swaddling to provide comfort to their child. The idea of tightly wrapping someone to provide comfort is also seen in the use of Deep Touch Pressure Therapy, used mostly to help calm those who have sensory processing disorders through the use of specific firm holding or squeezing (Volkmar 848). Looking at these concepts, combined with feedback I received from my peers, I decided that wrapping adults in fabric as if

they were swaddled children was the perfect sort of disruption to normalcy that could open up closer relationships between me, the participants, and their concepts of comfort.

I brought a variety of fabrics along with a large round cushion to each participant at a place that they chose, explained the process to them and allowed them to choose as many fabrics as they wanted to be swaddled in. They laid on top of the fabric and I wrapped it tightly around them, sometimes lifting them and tucking it beneath them. This part was very intimate as there was a lot of physical contact and I constantly checked with them to make sure they were comfortable, opening up dialogue between us. Once they were tightly wrapped and I ensured again that they were comfortable, I played music if they desired it. I let them lay for a moment before getting out my camera and taking care to be verbal about my actions, I took photos of them for a period of about 5-8 minutes. The majority of participants had their eyes closed throughout the process and I noted no physical reactions to the camera. I then checked in with them again and left them to be alone for another 5-8 minutes. When they confirmed they were ready, I slowly unwrapped them and asked them to sit and reflect on the experience with a piece of paper and tray of markers I provided. All participants remarked that they were very comfortable and many commented that this experience was much needed for them. The whole process took 30-45 minutes and varied with each person as they were uniquely tied to the experience and shaped its journey.

My participants noted to me that they did feel comforted and relaxed by the experience and the process also benefited me, bringing a necessary level of interpersonal intimacy to me, connecting me closer to people I already knew and providing an outlet for me to experience emotions in a capacity I am not always able to experience. This project has worked to incorporate the therapeutic characteristics of art in a way that manages to function outside of the

professional and inaccessable setting of traditional therapy. I was concerned about the use of the camera in this work as being photographed is an inherently uncomfortable thing for most people. Roland Barthes comments on this from his perspective, saying "once I feel myself observed by the lens, everything changes: I constitute myself in the process of "posing," I instantaneously make another body for myself, I transform myself in advance into an image" (10). Additionally, Susan Sontag has written about the violent nature of the camera itself, reminding us that "there is an aggression implicit in every use of the camera" (4), which can be seen through the reactions of those of us who, like Barthes, find an inherent discomfort in front of the camera and experience a desire to shape the perception of ourselves for the lens. These are unavoidable truths of photography, but I was able to subvert these foundational discomforts through specific disruptions of normalcy combined with the series of involved choices my participants were able to make. These are ideas that lie at the heart of social practice which helped me ascertain that these methods would be successful. Participatory art helps to expand perceptions of the art world and, as Debord discusses, through the use of constructed situations, creates new relationships that enable the creation of new perceptions of reality. This has a lot to do with the disruption of the normal; as we live so much of our lives in patterns and routines, disruption to these patterns of normalcy can force people to approach situations in new ways. Art therapy seems to work in this way as well, allowing patients a departure from the routine of more traditional forms of therapy and giving room for communication to occur in a new format.

The relationships formed through social practice are fundamentally different to the normal social relations formed between artist and audience. Claire Bishop speaks to this, noting that "collaborative creativity is...understood both to emerge from, and to produce, a more positive and non-hierarchical social model" (12). This supports my thoughts that the

collaborative nature of these experiences contributed to the level of comfort enjoyed by my participant and myself. We worked together to make this work exist, pushing away some of the power dynamics that tend to plague relationships in the art world and establishing an environment that could be more authentic and open. Inspired by artists who aimed to push the boundaries of traditional art, I employed these strategies of social practice, along with ideas about comfort I derived from experiences, connections and readings, and created a project that built upon existing definitions of art and provided real comfort to participants in spite of the often aggressive nature of the art world. My success is marked in the noted comfort of my participants and the similar feelings I was personally able to derive through the process. I believe that this project is incomplete and could be for the foreseeable future as this can be expanded upon in many significant ways. I would love to work with participants who I do not know as I believe the subsequent relationships formed will be different and are worth exploring. This project did manage to work around some of the inaccessible nature of the art world in its departure from the gallery space and it's portable format, but I would like to work to make it more efficient to transport and work on bringing it to communities outside of those I exist in. I think that these things would help further this project in terms of accessibility and comfort, but I do believe that the work that it has served so far has been crucial in beginning this artistic process. Focusing on this project has forced me to delve more deeply into concepts regarding comfort and consider the social impositions on my life that were causing me discomfort. I have also had the opportunity to reflect on the process that unfolds in each interaction and how they have given me a new way to consider my place in social and art spheres. I am pleased with the visual results of my work and I am thrilled with the ways that this project has connected my participants to honest feelings of comfort, engaging them with art in ways that helped shape new

perceptions of art for them. I am eager to keep working within the world of social practice and

further pushing the definitions of art and the ways in which I can be involved in the ever-

expanding realm of modern art.

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