

SAFE

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Master of Fine Arts, Thesis
UC Santa Barbara, Department of Fine Arts
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Abstract

This thesis will be equal parts self-reflection regarding my current and past art projects and external reflection of the theory and research that has informed my practice while studying at the University of California, Santa Barbara (UCSB). Most of these themes and motifs have been consistent in my art examinations for many years, and subsequently, I will trace an arc between some of my older projects, work that I completed while at UCSB, and the work of other artists and thinkers that have inspired my work.

Since 1999, I have been using my jobs as research to inform my art practice. Having completed bodies of work regarding my professional careers as a cabinet maker, fine-dining busboy, locksmith, and yoga instructor, I most recently—from 2011-2018—worked behind the scenes helping to produce adult bondage and fetish movies as a full-time hourly employee. As a worker in this industry, my job title is often referred to as an “engineer” or a “rigger.” This entailed constructing or assembling the bondage in which models would be restrained during the filming of the movies. This role encompassed many different tasks; however, my most important responsibility—and the topical concern of this thesis—was to create and fabricate *safety* for everyone on set, with the primary emphasis being placed on the safety of the model who would be in bondage.

My primary goal for graduate school has been to determine if and how I might be able to ethically make art inspired by this research as a laborer in pornography—as I have done in my other employment experiences—in ways that didn’t objectify anyone. To begin this process, I spent a lot of time reflecting, researching, and defining how to

situate my role as a worker in this very complicated context. To do this, I created the term “sex laborer.” By authoring this term, I was able to make a distinction between my job responsibilities and that of “sex workers.” Sex work is an identity and a form of employment for which I have tremendous respect, and I will dissect my role as a sex laborer in an upcoming chapter.

After situating myself as a sex laborer, I was able to make decisions about how I wanted to compose the art examinations that were informed by my work and research as a laborer in pornography. On a basic level, I decided to point the camera only at myself as opposed to pointing it outward and filming other people’s bodies and representations. There is a long history of artists who have pointed the camera only at themselves and my work builds on this tradition. For the purposes of this thesis, I will refer to this process as *self-objectification*. This was crucial distinction for me to make because my role as a sex laborer in pornography required me to objectify other people as a routine part of the job requirements and expectations. This could be as simple as being required to point a camera at a model and record their likeness, or it could manifest in more complicated ways, such as using a model's body in conjunction with custom-made bondage gear. In light of this, I realized that whatever art that I made about my experiences in adult films needed to contain my own body and likeness. In a conceptual sense, I needed to objectify myself.

I brought this process of self-objectification into practice by crafting three video examinations. In the first, I deconstructed the uniform that I would often wear on set while producing these movies, consisting of a black zip-up jumpsuit, black orthopedic shoes, and black nitrile gloves. In the second video series, I examined and

re-contextualized the power tools that I used in the production of these movies—or in previous jobs—and documented the corresponding effect that those tools had on my body. In the final video series, I re-edited and re-contextualized video footage derived from pornography that contained my image and representation as either a model, a character actor, or as a laborer performing my job responsibilities. All three of these examinations allowed me to gain some control over my physical representation in both literal and metaphorical ways. In a literal sense, I was able to change how my representation is consumed by a viewer through the process of re-editing the footage. In a metaphorical sense, I was able to challenge some of the embedded cultural perceptions that are fostered in the United States regarding people who are involved in process of making pornography by re-contextualizing the movies.

Through these projects, I was able to explore the three main conceptual arcs of my thesis: the fetishization of safety, using tools outside of their intended purpose, and the intimacy of self (as opposed to the creation of intimacy for others as I previously did as a worker who helped to produce adult movies.) In the next sections of this thesis, I will discuss these three conceptual arcs in conjunction with the art installations I have completed during my time at UCSB, while also juxtaposing them with older works from my portfolio. However, before I discuss my artwork, I will give a brief introduction that outlines how the politics and practices that inform Bondage, Discipline, Sadism, and Masochism (BDSM) became relevant to my artistic projects prior to working in pornography, a history of artistic self-objectification, and also what my employment as a sex laborer in adult bondage and fetish films specifically entailed.

Lastly, it should be noted that I have made a conscious decision to exclude the names of the companies, websites, and people—stage names, pronouns, or otherwise—for whom I have worked. Anonymity is the cornerstone of sex work and although much of what I discuss in this thesis is publicly available, I feel that it is paramount to focus on my own representation and experiences. By focusing on myself, I seek to minimize the exposure of other people out of respect for their privacy, while honoring the opportunity that I was gifted when I was allowed to work in the adult film industry.

Introduction

As an artist, I often am asked about the specific history of some of my art projects, in particular, about my decision-making process. While making decisions, my reasons are at times very deliberate and apparent to me, while at other times I am following the instincts I have derived from my education, training, and lived experiences. Sometimes I know exactly what I am doing and chase ideas with focused determination. However, there are other times that I am following threads, without being sure of where they are going to lead me. Often when I am following threads, the path that got me to my present moment is only apparent to me in hindsight and retrospect. How I ended up working in the adult bondage and fetish film industry is a perfect example of this manifestation. I came to the practice and politics of Bondage, Discipline, Sadism, and Masochism (BDSM) not as a practitioner or enthusiast; in fact prior to working in adult films, I had never participated in any BDSM activities. Instead my involvement in the world of fetish films arose as a natural derivative of my art research and art practice. For the past twenty years, I have been using my employment as research to inform my art practice.

Often my work manifests as performances, installations, videos, photographic documentation, viewer interactions, or social practice. Regardless of the medium, I endeavor to create situations that provide audience members the opportunity to experience very private moments in very public situations. Thematically, my projects address ideas of service, perception, liberation, privacy, power, and labor by utilizing the under-appreciated aspects and roles of human existence—such as furniture, locks, teachers, and service professionals—as raw material to craft my artistic experiences. I

have worked professionally in roles such as a cabinet maker, fine-dining busboy, and yoga teacher, and I mined these job skills and situations as a platform from which to produce artistic work. This includes my best-known body of work, *The Locksmithing Institute* (2005-present), produced out of the nine years that I spent working as a professional locksmith (see Image 1).



Image 1

The artwork that arises as the result of my different employment/research projects changes, but my time spent working as a locksmith was the influence for a

conceptual project called *The Locksmithing Institute*. This “school” traveled to different public places and aimed to teach anyone interested concepts and skills related to locksmithing. Initially, the lessons were a derivative of the physical activities that I executed while working as a locksmith, such as picking locks or making keys. Each class consisted of both a mechanical lesson—for instance, “How to pick a lock”—and also an embedded conceptual lesson. For example, in order to pick a lock, a person needs to use “pressure” and “manipulation” in order to coax the device open. It is not without coincidence that those words—with powerful cultural histories—are used in conjunction with that lockpicking process. It was up to participants whether they wanted to discuss this connection between theory and practice or just to learn how to pick a lock. I would develop the lessons in four or five parts and let participants dictate how much or how little they got out of the experience. This multi-tiered approach allowed me to cater to children, adults, art-experts, and art-novices simultaneously in a seamless fashion.

Mobilizing these theories and attempting to put them into the hands of *The Locksmithing Institute* participants as a practice that they could utilize in their daily lives became the ultimate drive of my research. A process such as this is sometimes described as a marriage between “theory” and “practice.” However, over the years I have come to define this dyad in a different way. Instead, I see this dynamic as a combination of “theory” with “skill-sets.” And—if approached from the right angle—this union of theory and skill-sets can create an “art practice.” Although I used this process to specifically create *The Locksmithing Institute*, it could be implemented to explore any skill set from washing dishes to automotive transmission repair. The possibilities are limitless and anyone can do it.

In 2006, after doing three different lessons, the classes quickly moved away from being about anything directly related to locks or keys and began to focus on the psychological conditions that I noticed in the people that I was hired to help during my daily locksmithing jobs. I shifted the focus of the classes away from practice and more towards a theoretical analysis that centered around the following question that I authored: What happens to people when they become separated from places that make them feel safe and secure like their home or their car?

From this point forward, the lessons of *The Locksmithing Institute* focused on escorting participants into situations that gave them the opportunity to change their relationships to keys by fostering an inner sense of safety and security. This allowed them to create their own feelings of security without the mediation of keys to facilitate the experience. To do so, I broadened my definition of “the key” to become largely symbolic, encompassing people, places, things, ideas, as well as traditional physical keys. A key became anything that allows a person to enter or exit a physical, intellectual, or emotional space. I made situations that allowed people the opportunity to experience the creation of their own sense of security without a key to trigger their response. To do this, I started moving people into and out of different confined situations, while asking them to compare the sensations that arose while feeling “stuck” and then “unstuck.” For instance, in 2006, I asked people at a public park in Frey Bentos, Uruguay to purposely lose their keys as an act of agency as opposed to carelessness (see Images 2 and 3). I then brought their keys back to the United States and “lost” them on their behalf.



Image 2



Image 3

In 2007, I constructed another class in which I invited individual participants to take turns sitting for five minutes inside of a noise-canceling isolation chamber made from chalkboards. While one person was inside, other participants waited outside for their own turn in the chamber and joined me in a discussion about how we each construct our personal sense of security and mental fortitude (see Image 4).



Image 4

After seeing this exhibition, artist and educator Jennifer Locke initiated a conversation with me regarding the embedded power dynamics that I was mobilizing in my lessons. It was from this conversation that I really began to make the connection between what I was studying as a locksmith and the relationships that are constructed

and implemented between dominants and submissives in BDSM relationships. Much of my initial thinking regarding locksmithing had been inspired by Michel Foucault's seminal work, *Discipline and Punish* (1975). Like many young thinkers, when I first read the book as an undergraduate, I was most inspired by his analysis of the systematic observational models that have been implemented within all of our institutions—schools, hospitals, prisons—to fluidly maintain power. Years later, after my conversation with Locke, I realized that although those initial ideas were powerful eye-openers for me, what I was actually most drawn to was how these institutions *conceal* power. In Foucault's own words, "The punishment must proceed from the crime; the law must appear to be a necessity of things, and power must act while concealing itself beneath the gentle force of nature."¹ It occurred to me that the ability to make a power structure—which in my opinion is a temporary condition of our shared social structure—appear as if it was a permanent condition that has always always existed in the natural world, could be an incredibly powerful tool if wrenched from the hands of the dominant discourse.

From this realization, a second arc of research emerged in my art practice. In 2002—simultaneously with locksmithing—I also started to practice yoga. I did this to compare how we lock and guard our spaces, compared to how we lock and guard our bodies. As my time working as a locksmith drew to a close, I transitioned into working as a yoga teacher. The politics of BDSM only became increasingly apparent while I was teaching yoga and were reflected in the art projects that I made about this employment/research. I found the intense power dynamic in a yoga classroom to be very unnerving. Helping people into and out of painful and challenging situations

created a power vacuum, which while acting as “the authority” struck me as problematic. This is ironic because I have no problem going to a class as a student and working with a teacher I really trust. In the end, I do not think I was ready for the responsibility and only worked as an instructor for a couple of years. The artwork that came out of this experience focused on intense power exchanges between myself and—mostly—unaware participants. An example of this is a project entitled *9/10* (2009), in which I locked myself inside a rolling cabinet’s hidden compartment. The cabinet—and myself—were then left on a sidewalk in New York City. I didn’t exit the cabinet until someone unknowingly brought me from a public space into a private space. I will detail the physical and conceptual power dynamics of this piece later in this thesis (see Image 5).



Image 5

Influences

When I started to recognize the patterns of dominant/submissive relationships which I was exploring within locks/keys and student/teacher dynamics, I began to reflect on the research and my personal history that had informed my decisions about this topic. It started long before I became a locksmith or learned about yoga while I was still working on my undergraduate degree at the San Francisco Art Institute. At the time, I was deeply invested in the first body of work that centered around my previous career as a woodworker in small furniture factories. Around this time artist and educator Pam Martin introduced me to a book called *The Poetics of Space* (1958) by Gaston Bachelard. In its pages, I dove deep into all the things I found magical about furniture, cabinets, corners, and cellars. As Bachelard asserts in the book, these are the spaces in which a child first learns to dream.² The book was very inspiring and it is still something I skim through every so often when I want to dream. In the book's introduction, Bachelard talks about a type of psychoanalytical investigation in which, "...we are able to isolate a sphere of *pure sublimation*; of a sublimation which sublimates nothing, which is relieved of the burden of passion, and freed from the pressure of desire."³ I didn't understand the quote at the time, but I kept thinking about it. Years later, while I was trying to help people during locksmithing jobs, it kept popping into my head as I'd be physically kneeling on the ground trying to open locks for customers who—while standing above me—were mentally incapable of creating a sensation of security when denied access to the spaces that escorted them to those feelings. In a simple sense, they were high above me and I was beneath them on the ground. The physicality of my body in relation to the people that I was paid to help became crucial in

the development of almost all of my artistic viewer interactions. I realized that simply moving a body through a public space was deeply political.

On the ground—while laying under the steering column of a person's car I was dismantling to make a key—I was low. Standing in the rain—miserable, exhausted, and waiting for me to finish—they were high above me. None of it made sense, but I dove deeply into the paradox. I was the one with knowledge and skills that could help them and they were the ones that were vulnerable and exposed. From these observations, I noticed that conceptually the physical hierarchy of the experience between myself and the customer was being inverted. I was the authority, however lowly, with dirt on my knees from crouching before the people who desperately needed my expertise. I was assuming a submissive position on my knees, but was still the person in charge. In terms of the politics that define BDSM—or Bachelard's sphere of pure sublimation—this paradigm is sometimes described as “topping from the bottom.” Such a term describes a special and unique role that a “submissive” might assume while play-acting with a “dominant” in a BDSM relationship.

While “topping from the bottom,” the submissive retains the authority during the role play, because they set the rules and limits about what they specifically consent and submit to. This includes the use of a “safe word”—one of the major contributions the BDSM community has made to increase awareness for mutually determined play (i.e., safe, sane, consensual)—in which the submissive can stop everything that is happening by simply saying a negotiated word, “RED,” for example. In these scenarios, the submissive consents to the dominant; however the dominant often has to do a

tremendous amount of labor and work to bring the fantasy to life and to keep the submissive safe.

Much of my early thinking regarding the intersection of power, locks, BDSM, and access was directly inspired by the line from *The United States Declaration of Independence* (US 1776) which states, "Governments are instituted among Men, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed..."⁴ I paraphrased this often quoted passage as "power is derived from consent" and began to dissect in minute detail what the exact mechanism by which this axiom functioned. I soon came to question whether the idea of "power" was a permanent condition that pervades the universe or if it was a social contract that we often assume to be all encompassing, but in reality is nothing more than a conscious (or unconscious) form of *consent*. This contextual and subjective understanding of power as a temporary condition that people consent to seemed to be further reinforced by Foucault's writings, in which power is situated as a temporary and ever changing condition of our shared social structure that we must constantly negotiate and compromise to maintain.

As I studied the intersection of power and consent in greater detail, I began to notice a recognizable and consistent archetype of locksmithing customers and/or yoga students that I was regularly interacting with. I often found myself helping a person that was unable to create or access their own sense of safety and was looking to hire me to help them restore it or create it. However, unlike hiring a therapist, my customers were unaware of their emotional needs when hiring me as a laborer/authority in these scenarios. Admittedly, I may be projecting myself onto my customers in an unfair way and I could simply be seeing myself reflected in the people that I was tasked to help.

However, regardless of how much or how little objectivity I was maintaining while observing my customers, what I saw were panicking people that didn't know it. I saw people separated from their sense of security and unable to describe what they were experiencing. I saw people who were unaware of their bodies and didn't know how to make themselves feel safe. When faced with the reality of a lost key, they didn't even know they were experiencing something new. This new sensation was so foreign and ill-fitting that they itched for it to end and often took their frustrations out on me. However, I came to realize that what they were experiencing was "freedom" for the first time in their life. Being separated from our unconscious sensations of normality, regularity, and consistency creates unease. This unmediated sense of unease is freedom. And it is terrifying to people—and myself—because it turns out that true freedom is complicated, messy, and ugly. Which, in my opinion, is why we *consent* and relinquish power to authorities that we believe will *act in our best interest*.

While developing the curriculum for the first iteration of *The Locksmithing Institute*, I needed to come up with a working definition of "freedom" in order to contextualize why I was asking participants to do certain things. As a white, cis-gendered, hetro-sexual, male locksmith in the United States, the definition of "freedom" that seemed best reflected in my personal subjective experiences and within the observed experiences of my customers was the ability to move about the world and experience it with one's own senses. This privileged vantage point equated freedom with "mobility" in terms of ableism, social hierarchies, social capital, and incarceration status. But regardless of those many nuanced experiences of mobility, they were facilitated by my body's need to use its senses to experience the things around me. It

turns out that this type of freedom feels like a damp, ill-fitting suit that offers little protection from the elements, nor does it conceal one's inner nakedness. Once I started to see this complicated contextual experience of freedom—and fall out from its access or denial—I started to augment the locksmithing lessons to address these issues head on.

It was at this point that I stopped being interested in perfecting the art of locksmithing. It held little interest to me despite the fact that I was good at it. Instead, I spent all of my time trying to give up the process of picking locks or making keys. I found that, although the unease that arises from true unmediated freedom was terrible, it was better than having the illusion of freedom that is fostered by “choice,” “mobility,” lock manipulation, or by exploiting flawed engineering designs to create keys. I began to wrestle with the idea that locks do not actually bind anything if one chooses to not open them.

It occurred to me that a truly astute locksmith would know how to find the place that missing keys go when they are lost. This mythical locksmith would have lock picks constructed of inaction and would provide a customer with the opportunity to leave a door closed on their own terms as opposed to forcing it open on someone else's. This became the fourth lesson of *The Locksmithing Institute* in which I attempted to help a person find their lost keys as opposed to making them a new one (see Image 6).



Image 6

Although this was a fascinating exercise in futility—it turns out that I am terrible at finding keys—it is also the derivative of an incredibly privileged vantage point and does not work if one is being detained against their will. However, the spirit of the assertion lives on in our popular culture as represented by the often-repeated phrase, “One is only a prisoner if one chooses to see themselves as a prisoner.” I often thought to myself, is it possible for this trite axiom to be little more than lip service? If so, how could I put it into action?

“Choosing” to be out of control is another way that the idea of “topping from the bottom” began to infiltrate my practice. Earlier in this thesis, I discussed a project in

which I constructed and hid inside a wheeled cabinet that was left on a New York City sidewalk (see Image 8). This piece began as an unofficial “part two” of Vito Acconci’s intense critique of private space, *Following Piece* (1969), in which he followed people from public spaces until they went into private spaces, all while being tailed by a photographic documentor (see Image 7). Unlike Acconci—who followed people without their knowledge or consent—I allowed people to let me follow them. They gave me unknown permission to do so, which was facilitated by their assumptions and by the unofficial rules that govern the shared use of public space in the United States.



Image 7⁵



Image 8

In my piece, *9/10* (2009), I assumed the most submissive position I possibly could because I could not control where the cabinet was pushed once a person decided that they wanted it. After all, in the United States, if something is left unguarded and unclaimed in public then it is considered up for grabs. However, despite the apparent submissive position that I assumed and the apparent “abandoned” appearance of the cabinet, it was still “occupied” and I was still in charge. The people who decided to take the cabinet had no idea that I was in there nor did they know what my intentions were. This docile consent allowed me to assume a position that was so vulnerable that I usurped power back to myself. I chose to be out of control on my own terms, as opposed to submitting to someone else’s needs or desires. For me, this was a radical

exploration of “topping from the bottom,” or in Bachelard’s words, I was able to sublimate while sublimating nothing.

With *The Locksmithing Institute*, I attempted to bring these skill sets and theories to life with lessons of subtle and not-so-subtle power exchanges between myself—“the authority”—and the participants. I would create situations in which the power would switch from them to me and vice versa. Sometimes I was vulnerable to the tools, materials, and ideas of the lesson, while at other times, the participants would be exposed. Sometimes my body would be low, and theirs would be high. I would be in control, but exposed, and they would be out of control, but safe. For example, I taught people how to cut the chain that binds handcuffs together with an electric grinder as opposed to teaching them how to pick the lock (see Image 9). I knelt before them without safety gear and guided their wrists over the grinder. They remained standing—shrouded and anonymous—in protective gear, safe from the experience, but restrained by the handcuffs.



Image 9

In another iteration of this project, I first taught people on a New York City sidewalk how to pick the locks of standard handcuffs. I then gave participants the option of sitting with their wrists zip-tied together for five minutes while isolated in a black hood. In the first part, they actively chose to fight against the lock by picking it. In the second part, they actively chose to *not* pick the lock by sitting with the sensation. I then asked them to compare and contrast the two sensations (see Image 10).



Image 10⁶

Although I have been exploring these motifs since 2005, the most recent example of this gesture was done in 2019. I erected a large white wall in the gallery of a Southern Californian art organization called the *Grand Central Art Center* (see Image 11). This wall separated their main gallery from the entrance. In order to enter the gallery and see the art exhibition, I first had to teach participants to manipulate and open a secret door hidden within the wall. We were both on our knees.



Image 11

In all of these projects, I hoped to create a more egalitarian, subtle—while at the same time—very complicated scenario. These scenarios looked innocuous and playful on a surface level, but upon inspection were layered with complicated power shifts of human bodies moving through public spaces while performing actions with symbolic overtones. The sociologist Pierre Bourdieu created a term called “social capital” which I have found very helpful in the creation of my viewer interactions. Social capital refers to the non-material resources possessed by educated individuals from upper class families that are not based on literal money. Social capital describes how a person's physical deportment and composure while maneuvering through the public sphere is one of the crucial—and hidden—ways that wealthy individuals navigate upward mobility. Some

examples of this are: a person's choice of words, speech accent, social graces, physical composure, eye gaze, and “sense of ease.”

These are the forms of “wealth” that are silently passed down to children who are born into the upper echelons of capitalist cultures.⁷ This “sense of ease” is often referred to as *noblesse oblige*⁸ and is very difficult—if not almost impossible—to learn consciously if one is not born into the privilege of wealth and power. Bourdieu insists that this type of knowledge is hidden within the structure of our educational systems, which on a surface level are presented as “merit-based” and “democratic.”⁹ A person will not be directly “taught” social capital while attending a top tier elementary school, but that person will “learn” it because they have been educated within that context. This echoes Foucault’s observations about how institutions conceal power under the guise of social norms and the natural order. Navigating the complicated bureaucracies and social networks that decide who gets to access the best jobs and resources becomes very difficult for a person that does not know how to say the “right” words, in the “right” way, to the “right” person, at the “right” time. I detest this notion—even if Bourdieu's assessment is right, *and he is right*—and prefer to show people the back door whenever possible. Sometimes I needed to get down on my knees to show people how to do that.

Sex Laborer

To make a distinction between myself and “sex workers” and to better describe my role, I created the term “sex laborer.” Sex work is a job and an identity that I deeply respect and has been adopted and championed by a lot of people that I love. I make this important distinction between sex worker and sex laborer because although some people in the world view my role in the production of fetish movies as sex work, others in the sex-industry disagree with that notion as I kept my clothes on and rarely appeared on camera. However, there have been other times in my life that my work in pornography has been treated with judgment by people outside of the industry in similar ways to the judgment that is sometimes placed upon sex workers. This left me in a complicated situation that I needed to come to terms with and to find a safe place from which to situate and contextualize my experiences. Complicating this matter, I—unlike almost all of my co-workers—never assumed a stage-name or “porn-name” in an attempt to shelter my identity. I did this because it felt disingenuous to participate and examine adult films as “research” and then try to hide the fact that I was doing it. Although I stand by the ethics of this decision, this transparency places me in a precarious social position that required me to define an identity as a worker that seemed honest, while also firmly situating myself in solidarity with sex workers all over the world. After reconciling my role as a “sex laborer,” I was able to start examining ways that I could make art about my time working in adult films.

By 2009, I was well aware of the power dynamics I was experiencing as a locksmith and yoga teacher and I was intentionally constructing art experiences that specifically addressed these nuanced power exchanges. Around this time a good friend

of mine saw one of my art exhibitions and offered to put me in contact with their boss, who was a director at an adult BDSM film company. This company made a lot of different types of movies, but the ones my friend helped make were based on the idea of a machine-powered shaft with a dildo on the end of it—usually referred to in the industry as a “fucking machine”—that would sexually penetrate a female (or occasionally male) model. What the company needed were new fucking-machines. Although I had never practiced any BDSM activities in my personal life and didn’t have any professional experience as a machinist or electrical engineer, I had enough knowledge of fabrication to give it a go, and over the course of a year, I made two fucking machines as an independent contractor.

The process of making these machines poses several unique engineering challenges that I learned the hard way as I began the design process. The first is that the machines cannot be very loud. The person viewing the movies wants to be able to hear the model, not the loud gyrations of a powerfully oscillating machine. The second problem is that the machine cannot be very large. If the machine is too large, the videographer will not be able to get their camera into positions to show the dynamic shots of the models' experience. Again, the representation of the model is paramount. Third, the machines need to be relatively strong. If the machines are underpowered, a human orifice can easily clench hard enough to seize the motor. The final—and perhaps the most crucial—is that machines need to be easily adjustable on four axis-planes: Up/Down, Left/Right, Forward/Back, and Tilt-Up/Tilt-Down. The fucking machines are not “intelligent” and are only capable of thrusting forward and backward. They do not know to wiggle a little to the left or right if their “partner’s” pelvis tilts slightly to the side in

the heat of the moment. If a machine cannot be quickly adjusted to adapt to the subtle movements of a human's body, then it will not be able to consistently penetrate the model. Successful movies are dependent upon safe, pleasurable, and consistent penetration. Ironically, this aspect of the design process was reinforced by my father who was a very skilled electrical engineer. When I asked him about some technical problems I was having at the beginning of my design process, his email response began with, "Due to the medical application of your engineering problem, I suggest you try..." To my father, who was eminently pragmatic, it was an opportunity to make money and just another engineering riddle to solve. However, he was quick to notice that a human body was working in relation to the machine, so extra care needed to be taken during the design process. When all those engineering requirements are taken into account, a designer winds up making the same machine over and over again. I quickly realized that there was little room for technical innovation.

This narrow window for innovation, coupled with my limited machining and electrical skills, posed a tricky set of circumstances for me to begin with. But drawing on my experiences as an artist, I decided to work with what I knew and kept things simple. There are very few products in the open market that feature a motor that creates a linear thrust. Most tools readily available for purchase create a circular motion. Of the products that do create a linear thrust, most are small and underpowered. However, there is one exception: "Sawzalls." These large handheld tools are designed to cut through almost anything with a long serrated blade that thrusts back and forth. They are powerful and fast. So I went to a pawn shop and bought a couple of used, but high-quality Sawzalls that I could repurpose to make into a fucking machine.

Since there was little room for engineering innovation, I decided to foster conceptual innovation and designed a machine that had more “organic” qualities. To do this, I gave it animal-like characteristics, hoping to create a more empathetic experience for the viewer. My first machine vaguely resembled the size and shape of a large dog or an ambiguous insect from science fiction. I stripped the Sawzall down to its bare components and fashioned a simple three-part container that resembled the aspects of an insect's body to house the motor. The legs were long and spindly, assembled from a type of camera mounting system called a “magic arm” which allows a rigger to quickly contort one-foot arm segments into any basic geometry. I rerouted the trigger control of the Sawzall to be operated by an external sliding power switch that fed into the machine via shielded wires. Protruding from the “head” of this creature was the shaft to which the dildo would be mounted. When new machines were debuted, the fans of the website would always get to suggest and then vote on its name. They quickly christened my new machine with the name “Dr. Thumper” (see Image 12).



Image 12

Several weeks after I delivered Dr. Thumper, one of the other directors at the company saw the machine and was impressed. We got to talking at a party one night and I told them about my various skill sets. I know a lot about fabrication, having worked in cabinet factories for many years. I am pretty good at quickly manufacturing things out of wood and metal. My experience as a yoga teacher also became relevant. The type of yoga that I practiced and taught was not necessarily geared toward people who were naturally flexible. My practice was helpful for people who were older, injured, limited, or not naturally mobile. We used props and apparatuses to guide people's bodies into geometries that they wouldn't be able to attain without assistance or support, which—as it turns out—is not all that different from bondage. Additionally, from my years working as a locksmith, I am well versed in locks, keys, binding, and the psychology of people in

regards to their notions of security. I know a tremendous amount about how a person can either panic or be at peace when their body is allowed or denied access to mobility. After telling the director about these skill sets, they immediately saw an opportunity for me to fill a role on their set as a full-time employee.

This director produced content for a website that focused on a cis female submissive being dominated by a cis male. The female model would be restrained in bondage fabricated out of rigid materials, such as metal pipes, leather, or chains (as opposed to flexible materials such as rope). In order to do this sort of work, a person needs to have a thorough background in metal and wood fabrication. One also needs to know a lot about body mechanics and how to create support, while completely immobilizing a body without hurting or damaging a model's joints, circulation, or nerves. One also needs to understand how to put a person into a stressful situation to make them feel helpless, and then be able to get them out of that situation and make them feel safe again. All of this means having to work very quickly. Strangely enough, all of the disparate skill sets that I had been developing over the first 35 years of my life converged structurally within this one unique job.

As a worker in this context, I had three primary job responsibilities, but my main role is often referred to as an “engineer” or a “rigger.” This role required me to make the bondage in which the models would be restrained. I would fabricate the bondage, put the model into it, and then when filming was over, take the model out and provide aftercare—which consists of making sure that the model hasn’t lost feeling anywhere in their body, ensuring that they feel safe and supported, and confirming they have enough energy and desire to continue with the next scenes.

To facilitate this process, I almost always worked for a director who was my manager and the decision-maker within the context of my employment as an hourly worker. My job was to facilitate the director's vision, but my most important job responsibility as an "engineer" was the safety and well-being of everyone on the film set, most importantly that of the model. As part of this safety process, I would also do most of the cleaning and sanitizing after shoots were done.

The second role that was part of my job was to serve as a photographer, videographer, or director while the movies were being filmed. I took thousands of photographs, shot hundreds of hours of video, directed 12 movies, and assistant directed a full-length feature. Finally, my third job requirement was to edit the movies and photographs and to compose the written descriptions of the movies in preparation for them to be sold via monthly subscriptions on the internet.

When I was hired as a full-time employee in the fall of 2011, the next seven years of my life followed a very consistent routine that entailed: 1. filming porn, 2. cleaning up after porn, 3. editing porn, and 4. publishing porn to the web. A typical day would go something like this: arrive on set around 10 AM and prepare basic things such as getting water bottles and snacks. The model shows up around 11:30 AM dressed in wardrobe and make-up. Meet the model and take measurements of their body, see how they are able to bend and move, determine what is stiff and what is flexible for them. Subsequently, the director decides what positions they want the model in and then I begin making the bondage. I would have done some rough prep work the day before, comprising our best guess as to what the model can do and what will make them look their best. Hopefully, those rough drafts can be utilized and further developed

specifically for the model when they are on set. If not, I need to start from scratch. Either way, we need to start shooting no later than 1 PM. Before beginning the first scene, we first film an entrance interview with the model. These were shot as candid conversations between the model and director to establish boundaries, safe words, and consent. After filming the entrance interview, the director and I put the model into the bondage and then shoot the first scene.

While the scene is being filmed, I would usually shoot photographs or sometimes video. Ideally, the model is in bondage for no more than 20 minutes. Afterward, we carefully take the model out of bondage, make sure they are ok, and give them a break. Break down the first scene. Prep the next scene. Put the model into bondage. Shoot the scene. Rinse and repeat for 3 total scenes. Film an exit interview and get the model to the shower room. Everyone leaves, and then I am left alone to clean and sanitize the set. Repeat the process two or three times a week for seven years. My job was to help make the same movie over and over and over and over again. The model changed. The bondage changed. But everything else was always the same. We produced a very specific product for customers that were looking for a very specific experience.

In light of this fast-paced schedule, the number of pornos that I helped produce skyrocketed quickly. For example, I helped make on average 2.5 pornos a week for about seven years, which yields a conservative net result of about 910 pornos. But honestly, I have absolutely no idea how many movies I have helped to produce and I remember almost none of them. Using the same mathematical model means that I have also worked with thousands of models. Thousands of people, personalities, identities, issues, flaws, beauties, smiles, excrement, sweat, make-up, tears, and laughter. I

remember the people that I worked with far more than actually producing the movies. My experience being on-set to create bondage and fetish movies is difficult to describe to people. The first thing to understand is that the movies were never about my sexuality, my sexual needs, or my desires. This boundary was crucial to maintain because the power dynamics needed to produce this demanding content had to be kept clear. I needed to be present but invisible, attentive but absent, vigilantly active but appear passive. It was not unlike my experience of being a busboy in fine-dining restaurants: I needed to be neither “here nor there.” And to fulfill these roles as a sex laborer required me to expend a lot of unseen emotional labor.

Heather Berg’s ground breaking book entitled *Porn Work* (2021) studies the intersection of sex workers, pornography, and labor studies. In it, Berg makes the very accurate observation that the labor porn performers exert is used to “manufacture a feeling.”¹⁰ This manufacturing process often requires the porn performer to utilize a tremendous amount of unseen emotional energy to manifest a “feeling” as a tangible commodity. In a related sense, my job as sex laborer was to fabricate a context in which porn performers could manufacture a temporary, on-camera relationship. They needed to feel “safe” in order for this to happen, and consequently, I needed to use a lot of my own unseen emotional energy to manufacture this safe context. If I was performing my job at a high level, all of this effort and emotional labor went unspoken and unseen.

On the first page of *Porn Work* (2021), Berg asserts, “Every porn scene is a record of people at work.”¹¹ She positions the sex work that goes into producing porn to be no different than the physical labor that, for example, a carpenter exerts to build a house. However, the representation of a porn performer’s body as mediated by the

camera marks a clear and important differentiation between work of the carpenter and porn performer. Rarely would the image of the carpenter be embedded into the house that they have been paid to build. However, an objectified representation of the porn performer is always permanently entwined within every adult film that gets produced as a commodity. Later in the book, Berg builds on her initial quote and states, "Every porn scene is a record of people at work, and yet the work of porn is invisible."¹² What Berg is asserting is that the "real" work of pornography is unseen emotional labor that goes into preparing and executing a shoot. What I found unique about my role as a sex laborer was that it placed my work somewhere between that of a sex worker and that of the carpenter. Rarely would anyone see my presence as a sex laborer represented in the final product of the pornographic movie that I helped produce; however, my emotional labor was deeply entrenched and unseen within the commodity that we produced.

In light of this invisible labor required to produce adult films, it cannot be overstated how complicated bondage porn sets are to work on. It took me a while to learn my place on set and I definitely made a lot of mistakes in the process. At first, I found it complicated to be present as a laborer in a highly sexualized work environment, while also maintaining the professional distance required to do my job and maintain safety. I had never had an employment experience that could prepare me for this aspect of the job, and it took me some time to learn how to do this correctly. As I said, my job was to use my physical and emotional labor to facilitate and fabricate intimate experiences for other people. I became very good at my job when I learned to see the models that I was working with as another raw material. Oftentimes, working on the porn sets felt more like an engineering problem than filming a movie. Although this

perspective may seem cold and objectifying to women, it allowed me to see my employment as a sex laborer in a non-sexual way. Berg points out that professional distance is difficult to maintain when intimacy is used as a means of production.¹³ However, if a production worker is not careful they can easily become too disassociated from the sexuality of the experience and view the models that they are working as “meat”¹⁴ to be consumed or objectified for the day. This must be avoided at all costs because the models are putting themselves on the line and the physical acts that they must perform to complete their job requirements affect them emotionally.¹⁵ But creating a healthy detachment from the experience is really necessary if one wants to have a long term career in pornography. And finding the balance in the “dialectics of detachment and investment, trouble any neat boundaries among strategies for managing emotional labor.”¹⁶ It was challenging to engage just enough while filming to be present and attentive, but at the same time dispassionate enough to create safe spaces for the performers to work and to protect my emotional well being.

This may seem like a thing that any worker must wrestle with; however, it was amplified within the context of work as a sex laborer since the type of porn that we were creating was based on intense dominant/submissive power exchanges. It was very important for me to help maintain the authority of the director who was not only the boss of the production crew, but was also the boss of the submissive model during the role play that would take place on camera. It is easy to take for granted how delicate the power balance is on a bondage porn set if you have never experienced it. My job was to help maintain a clear power dynamic so we could efficiently and safely get through our workday.

With all that said—in the simplest sense—I was a laborer who always needed to remember my place not just within the power dynamics of the film set, but also within the complicated politics of a relatively large company that tried to run itself like a Dot-Com. Despite the risqué product that we produced, the company tried to create a work environment that was similar to the tech companies that surrounded us—such as Twitter, Salesforce, and Facebook—and sought to “normalize” their employees’ work experience. This was achieved by generously providing resources/amenities/perks such as health benefits, 401K plans, team-building days, maternity/paternity leave, and—among other things—company picnics. When historians look back on this time, they will see one of the first companies to ever provide sex workers with the same basic benefits that are routinely afforded to many other employees in the United States.

Within the distribution of power and authority of the company, I was at the second-tier from the bottom. After several initial years of constant managerial shifts, I was eventually placed on a stable team led by a wonderful director, who treated me with a lot of respect and did what they could to protect my interests within the complicated corporate power structure of the company. Berg is one of the few academics who studies pornography and acknowledges the role of the production workers within the process. She recognizes that it takes its toll not just on performers but on crew members as well.¹⁷ Berg points out that performers and crew members alike are usually paid a flat day rate and are expected to work however long it takes to get the job done. Although my situation was different because I was a paid hourly employee, the long hours made it very challenging to make plans or to maintain a second night job since I was never sure what time the shoot would be over. At the company that I worked for,

the crew members like myself were paid well, but not nearly enough to survive in an expensive city. Subsequently, for most of the time that I worked in porn, I also worked two or three nights a week as a bartender to make ends meet.

The most challenging part of my job as a sex laborer was the repetitive nature of our filming process and emotional labor required to facilitate it. This quote from *Porn Work* really resonated with me:

Crew members, too, talk about monotony as one of porn's greatest strains. One production assistant described his job as mostly handling paperwork, setting up and taking down lights, and 'a lot of rubbing baby oil on a girl's ass. It sounds fun the first couple of times, but it gets really annoying, and you're not paid much,' he added. On-set hours are longest for crew members, who arrive first and leave last. They describe exhaustion and fatigue as significant concerns. As in other jobs, boredom is often the most painful aspect of the porn workday.¹⁸

I have found this assertion to be quite accurate. In the seven years that worked in pornography—with few exceptions—I made the least amount of money compared to everyone else on set and I would almost always be first to arrive and the last to leave. If issues regarding pay ever came up—which I would rarely discuss—the standard response was something to the effect: “If you want to make more money, take off your clothes and get in front of the camera.” This point was well taken; the models are the most at risk—physically and socially—and absolutely deserve the largest compensation for the risks that they assume. However, the emotional labor required to maintain the rigors of a shooting schedule go almost completely unseen and—in my opinion—under compensated.

My job as a sex laborer was often humbling and placed my body in precarious positions that exposed me to many bodily fluids. If there was ejaculate, lube, squirt, excrement, or urine on the floor, I was responsible for cleaning it up. Although all models went through rigorous STI testing protocols—which kept the models and production workers safe—it was still a unique position to find myself in as a worker whose job it was to push the physical—and meta-physical—“mop” to clean up the mess left behind by other people's “fun-time.” Despite the challenging and humbling aspects of the job, no one forced me to be there. I could have quit at any time. I stuck around hoping to move up in the company, make some decent money, have some control over the content that we were producing, and do research for my art practice. It didn't work out as planned. Due to worldwide changes in the porn industry and the rise of pirated porn sharing websites, the company I worked for made less and less profit, eventually stopped making original content, and like dozens of other porn companies, fired all of the sex workers, production workers, and support staff. I was one of the very few fortunate workers who were able to transition to an office position for several months before I resigned of my own accord in March 2018 in order to work as an invited artist in residence for the *Grand Central Art Center* at California State University, Fullerton. Overall, working in adult films was hard work and I was honored to be part of it.

Upon arriving at UC Santa Barbara, I truthfully was not sure where to begin and how to approach making art inspired by employment as a sex laborer. Fortunately, the Department of Art was nothing but supportive and encouraging as I began my research. In the fall of 2019, I took a class with Professor Kip Fulbeck that centered around utilizing one's life experiences as raw material for artistic experimentation, which was a

perfect setting to begin. Professor Fulbeck was very supportive, encouraging me to be honest and to take a hard look at myself and the employment. There was no judgment or placing of blame. If anything, my lead professors Kim Yasuda and Kip Fullbeck pushed me to do more; to be unafraid and challenge myself to peel back the layers, and to dig deeply into the subterranean depths of the experience. It took about two and a half months and four exhaustive pieces of writing to see the core issues at play, but I was eventually able to see how to approach the research in appropriate and ethical ways that didn't objectify anyone or place judgment. As I stated earlier, I decided to point the camera only at myself in a process of self-objectification and I will outline this process in the next chapter.

Self Objectification

As I devoted more and more time to thinking about my work as a sex laborer and “safety,” I realized that embedded with my connection to the idea was the obligation to make work about my experiences in adult films that wouldn’t objectify anyone or anything. I needed to be sure that I didn’t objectify sex workers who are already marginalized and stigmatized in the United States and elsewhere. I also needed to make sure that I didn’t create viewer interactions that subjected participants to activities that directly linked them to pornography without them being fully cognisant of it. This left me with the simple realization that though I might not have the agency to point my camera outward and capture other people’s likeness with this particular research, what I did have agency over was my body, my representation, my emotions, and my experiences. I realized that I needed to point the camera at myself and go to great lengths to make sure that I didn’t objectify anyone else. In short: I needed to objectify myself.

The process of self-objectification became intriguing to me many years ago when I was finishing my undergraduate work at the San Francisco Art Institute. Artist and educator Stephnie Ellis introduced me to some scholarship written about the early pioneering photographic work of Maxime DuCamp and the problematic objectification of his assistant, Hadji-Ishmael. An article by Julia Ballerini describes how DuCamp used Haji-Ishmael to give a sense of scale and proportion to his photographs of ancient Egyptian sites of historical significance.¹⁹ Ballerini goes on to describe how the consequences of France’s—and many other countries—colonization efforts, became literally embodied through the diminutive and dismissive representation of Hadji-Ishmeal

in the photographs as he was depicted as little more than a yard-stick by which to measure architecture. He was an object rather than a subject in the photographs.²⁰

These photos were meant to be “descriptive” so the upper class of French society could feel like they were expanding their knowledge of a context that they didn’t have direct access to (see Image 13). For them, “...the ability to visualize almost becomes synonymous with understanding.”²¹ However, despite DuCamp’s intentions to be “descriptive,” his photos instead serve as warning signs and a perfect—albeit tragic—example of how an artist can use a person as a sculptural object in a photograph and essentially erase any agency and identity that they might have. It took over one hundred years, but people eventually started to ask, “Who is that person in the photos?” Although we might never know much about the life of Hadji-Ishmeal, the importance and symbolic nature of his presence will outlast any formal qualities of Du Camp’s photos.²²



Image 13²³

I became horrified but also fascinated by the blindness of DuCamp's casual use of a person's body as an object to be manipulated within the frame of the photograph and began to wonder what the photos would have been like if DuCamp had used his *own* body in the photos instead of his assistant. Would this have just led to problematic metaphors about a colonizer “inserting” himself into a context that was not his own? I was not sure, but I thought the photos were complex on many levels and found myself thinking about them often. It was from my reflections on the problems of this work that the idea of objectifying myself first crept into my head.

For my final undergraduate senior exhibition, I made an installation and performance called *Burdens* (2002). I constructed a giant bookcase made with unsupported shelves. The whole structure sagged due to the force of gravity; however it had one straight bottom shelf and was suspended by hidden brackets to give the appearance that it was levitating one inch off of the ground while being forced down from above. My intention was to stand next to the sculpture and crouch inside of it to mimic the body of Hadji-Ishmael and to serve as my own self-objectified yardstick. The crouching action was meant to be a durational performance; however, at the time, my back was injured and I was only capable of doing the action for the photograph and this image became the centerpiece of my undergraduate senior work (see Image 14). To me, the bookcase metaphorically represented the unbearable weight that knowledge, history, and the need to “visualize and understand” exerted, and then in turn, deformed the structures that were attempting to frame, support, and contextualize them. Even in 2002, I couldn't help but wonder if these systems were on the verge of collapse.



Image 14

In an article about performance artist Skip Arnold, Dominic Johnson discusses how while performing, Arnold's body becomes nuanced, "...between performance and sculpture, subject and object, human and non-human, the living and the dead."²⁴ A great example of this can be found in one of Arnold's most famous pieces entitled *On Display*, (1993/95) in which he sealed himself in a clear plastic box and placed himself on display for six-hour shifts over the duration of a three-week gallery exhibition (see Image 15).



Image 15²⁵

Inspired by artists such as Arnold, I decided that my thesis work needed to situate my body in a similar way as my own subject-object. And to do this I realized that I needed to explore my own sense of objectivity and safety—or lack thereof—as opposed to facilitating or observing other people’s safekeeping as I would while working as a sex laborer. I hoped this would mirror back toward my viewers and allow them to see their sense of safety as the subject of my own body’s objectified experiences.

In her article, *Dirty Commerce: Art Work and Sex Work Since the 1970’s* (2012), Julia Bryan-Wilson composes some rare scholarship that attempts to link art work and sex work together. The article outlines some of most notable and important pieces in

this lineage including an early project by Charles Ginzberg entitled, *Latin American Prostitute* (1974), in which Ginzberg hired a sex worker in Antwerp, Belgium to serve as a “prop” for a performance. The sex worker was paid to sit in a gallery and hold a sign that read in French the famous quote by Charles Baudelaire, “What is Art? Prostitution” (see Image 16). Although European art history has no shortage of female figures being objectified as the centerpiece of paintings or sculptures, rarely has the action of objectification of a living human subject taken such a literal artistic incarnation. Some other early examples would be Yves Klein's use of female nude models to serve as his “living paint brushes” to create his huge paintings featuring the blue imprints of the women's bodies on the canvas (see Images 17 and 18).



Image 16²⁶



Image 17²⁷



Image 18²⁸

Bryan-Wilson goes on to outline how attitudes towards intimacy began to shift in the 1970's, "given the ever eroding lines between public and private, home and workplace."²⁹ And as privacy devolved in a professional sense, the net outcome was the beginning of the commodification of emotional labor and the commercialization of intimate labor. Bryan-Wilson draws a connection between performance artists and sex workers because both professions can be precarious, and at times, transgressive in nature. She points out, "...performance (*art) and sex work are analogously affective and precarious practices....many art workers (male and female alike) of the early 1970's vigilantly attempted to decommodify their work via conceptual and performance art. Along with the production of affect and commercialization of intimacy..."³⁰ Later in the article, Bryan-Wilson coined the term "occupational realism" to describe artists for whom, "...waged work is performed as an artistic strategy."³¹ This categorization is certainly in keeping with my long standing efforts to use my jobs as research to inform my art practice. Bryan-Wilson then uses "occupational realism" to describe projects such as *Erotic Dancers Project* (2000) by Nikki S. Lee in which Lee worked as—among other things—an erotic dancer at a strip club (see Image 19). Another example is *Untitled* (2003) by Andrea Fraser, which seems to bring this line of thinking regarding the intersection of sex work and art work to it's penultimate limit. In this project, Fraser famously had sex with an art collector for \$20,000 as facilitated by her art dealer (see Image 20).



Image 19³²



Image 20³³

In both of these projects, the artists attempted to gain agency and control over their situated objectivity by reframing and recontextualizing the narrative surrounding the commercial exchange, their bodies, and their art practice. However, they both still seem to be subjected to “the gaze” and the financial dominance of the men that have disposable income that can temporarily alleviate the precarity that a performance artist and/or sex worker might experience. Lee and Fraser might have temporarily been able to subvert the standard subject/object narrative; however, after the initial commercial sale of these ideas, they essentially become once again powerless over their representation.

As inspiring as both Lee and Fraser's work are—and to be clear, I am a huge fan of both artists—I found myself wondering if there were any counterexamples to the precarious subject/object dialog that does not simply once again reinforce the tired old structures of Western art historical power dynamics. A great example of how an artist might be able to subvert and redefine this hierarchy is a project by Jennifer Locke called *Artist/Model* (2007). In it, she created a dual channel video that documents her performing as a nude artist model, lying in repose on a classically adorned sofa, while an unnamed male artist sits at an easel and draws her portrait (see Image 21). Locke sets up one camera that records from the vantage point from behind her which records the face of the male artist. At the same time, another camera is positioned behind the male artist and records the view from over his shoulder while drawing Locke. While the artist draws, Locke uses a remote control to take photos of the artist. Who is observing who? Who is being objectified? Who is in control? There is no clear answer. The binary of subject/object is—if not subverted—at the very least becomes riddled with complexity

and “fair play.” This sort of assertion is a far cry from the arrogance that DuCamp subjected the body and representation of Hadji-Ishmael to. Locke effectively was able to turn the idea of the “male gaze” on its head.



Image 21³⁴

The work that I have done at UCSB is not my first attempt to use my employment in pornography as the basis for new artistic investigations. Starting in 2010, my initial investigations sought to subvert the websites that the fetish movies I made were being hosted on by inserting my art into the final product. This methodology has been utilized by many artists, most famously by the performance art duo *The Assholes*—consisting of Tony Labat and Bruce Pollack—when in 1978 they got onto the weekly television program, *The Gong Show*, (NBC, 1976-1980). During their nationally televised spot, the duo did a work of performance art and got “gonged” off the show (see Image 22). Their goal was to subvert national television and implant their social critique into homes of viewers all over the United States without any framing or contextualization.



Image 22²⁶

From 2010-2012, I began to explore two different series that attempted to mobilize both self-objectification and also use some of the gadgets and machines that I created for the fetish movies as props in viewer interactive art performances. For example, in the series that dealt with self-objectification, I did an eight hour performance in which I first constructed a wooden framed “safe” with two-way mirrored panels and then performed an “Anti-Harry-Houdini” routine (see Image 23). Houdini used gimmicked locks, sleight of hand, and hidden manipulation to perform his masterful escape acts. I did the opposite. After completing the construction of the safe, I was handcuffed and locked inside. Instead of quietly manipulating the locks of my handcuffs (as Houdini would), I used a loud power tool to cut the chains. Once free of the chains, I used a hand held, electric surface planer to slowly, loudly and methodically destroy the

safe from the inside out and to escape to freedom. The safe had a very bright light inside of it that activated only when one of the power tools was turned on. Because of the two-way mirrors, the audience saw a reflection of themselves when the interior light of this safe was off and was able to see directly inside the safe when the light was on. The idea was to make the process of detention (building the safe) and emancipation (escaping the safe) to be an exposed, diligent, and tedious process as opposed to a guarded, miraculous, and exclusionary process. While building the safe, I was dressed in a formal suit and my eyes, ears, and mouth were unprotected from the perils of woodworking. While destroying the safe my entire head was isolated with protective gear and the rest of my body was nude and vulnerable to the experience.



Image 23

In the second series, I designed several viewer interactive art pieces that featured one of the props or devices that I used during the production of one of the fetish movies. In these projects, the audience members would interact with the prop in the exact same way as the model did during the production of the adult movie. Same object, same use, but a different context, yielding very different documentation. The goal was to juxtapose and combine the two pieces of documentation together and then display them with the object used in both experiences. For example, in *Consent* (2012), I made a Catholic prayer pew that trapped participants' hands into a prayer position when kneeling down. The only way to release the hand trap was via a string and pulley system that is triggered by wrangling a ball gag into one's mouth (see Image 24 and 25).



Image 24



Image 25

After doing a couple of these viewer interactive pieces, I decided to halt the investigations because, regardless of how transparent I was about my process, I could never be sure that audiences fully understood the comparison I was hoping to make between a pornographic experience and the viewer interactive art experience. Also, the first two objects that I made started off as props in artistic viewer interactions and then were later used as props in adult movies. Since I was still figuring out the process, it was not possible for me to tell participants at the time of the initial art installations that the objects they were interacting with would be later used in a porn movie. It felt unethical to present the two types of documentation together since I hadn't done everything I could to convey my intentions to audience members prior to the production of the adult films.

For now, the documentation lives solely as viewer interactions that were informed by my work in porn, but separate from it. With that said, there is one final, yet to be realized viewer interaction involving the fucking-machine *Dr. Thumper* that I would like to do. In this piece, I will modify the fucking machine so it can slowly and methodically feed Catholic communion wafers audience members' mouths. In order for me to do this piece, I will need to find a very specific adult audience that understands the politics and practices of BDSM. I need to be sure that participants really understand the piece and the fucking-machines usage in pornography. In light of the issues that I encountered with these initial pieces, I realized that if I was going to try again to make artwork that was informed by experiences as a sex laborer, I would need to take a drastically different approach.

After reflecting on Du Camp's mistakes, Locke's successes, and my initial short sightedness, I started to examine what elements of my job as a sex-laborer lingered with me and—for lack of a better term—seemed most “topical?” And most importantly, which ones I had true agency over that only objectified myself. The answer was very straightforward: my tools, my clothing, and my physical representation that composed the precarity of my life as a sex laborer. I have utilized uniforms and tools in almost all of the art examinations I have ever done, so to use these as my starting point felt very safe, straightforward, and natural. When Charles Baudelaire defined art as “prostitution,” he was clearly being pessimistic and dismissive to both a sex workers and art-workers alike. Perhaps a better way to frame his assertion would have been to say: art can be sex work, but it can also be just like any other legitime and precarious labor practice. It is *all* of us. Having processed all of these complicated, converging, and

conflicting ideas, I began to film the videos that would comprise the first installation that I made while at UCSB, entitled, *Safe: 1, The Fetishization of Safety*.

Safe: 1
The Fetishization of Safety

The first conceptual theme that I began to research during graduate school is what I have come to call “the fetishization of safety.” This was born as the juxtaposition of two ideas. The first is in a literal sense: I worked as a laborer whose job it was to fabricate “safety” during the production of “fetish” movies. As I outlined in the previous chapter, I had a lot of different responsibilities; however, my primary responsibility above all else was to ensure the safety and well-being of everyone on set, most importantly the safety of the model. This process of creating safety could be as noticeable and straightforward as making bondage that was appropriate and well designed to fit the specific nuances of a model's body. Or the process could be more behind-the-scenes, such as making sure everyone wore gloves when touching a model if the director or model requested that safety protocol on any given day. Regardless of how it manifested, the construction of safety was always on the mind of myself, my boss, and my coworkers.

The second source that inspired my thinking regarding the fetishization of safety came from a documentary film made by BBC director Adam Curtis called, *The Power of Nightmares* (2004). The documentary attempts to examine the world in the aftermath of the 2001 destruction of the *World Trade Center* in New York City. Curtis' main thesis dissects the conceptual outcome that permeated from the United State's subsequent “war on terror,” and how now, “Instead of delivering dreams, politicians now promise to protect us from nightmares.”³⁶ The documentary goes on to show how both neo-conservatives in the Untited States and radical Islamists in the Middle East have

weaponized the “fear of what might happen,”³⁷ as opposed to what “is happening,” as a way to consolidate power and garner public support. In another era, former President Richard Nixon spoke of the necessity to, “Reduce the level of fear by reducing the causes of fear.”³⁸ The idea utilizes a type of proactive thinking that is sometimes referred to as a “paradigm of prevention.”³⁹ This sort of rationale requires leaders to “Look into the future and imagine the worst that might happen and act ahead of time to prevent it.”⁴⁰ Since 2001, Curtis asserts that this has rapidly snowballed into policy decisions and incarcerations that are not based on what “is” and are instead based on what “if.”⁴¹ He asserts that we have come to fear the worst about things that may never exist and the leaders with the most polarizing and terrorizing visions of the future—however implausible and unsupported by data they might be—have become the most powerful.⁴²

Curtis’ documentaries are powerful and very persuasive. As I am not a historian nor an expert in political science, I cannot speak to the absolute validity of his claims. However, as an artist, I can observe the nuanced aspects of my life and see shadows of his observations reflected all around me. On a personal level, I have a desire to make safe decisions, keep the people who participate in my art projects safe, cause as little harm as possible, and keep marching towards the as yet unrealized egalitarian society that we have been promised for the past 245 years. I find that there is a question embedded within Curtis’ documentary that I cannot find an easy answer for: is safety a permanent, temporary, or non-existent condition manifested by the universe? Is there anything intrinsically “safe” about a piece of matter existing in the universe or is safety a

social contract similar to the previously discussed idea of “power” that is not actually “real?”

Within the course of Western History, it seems apparent that certain groups of people were often only able to create a certain measure of safety and stability on their own terms, by appropriating it from other groups of people or ecosystems through theft, destruction, genocide, repression, extinction, or enslavement. It would seem that things are “safe” only relative to the person or people defining what that means. If there was ever a term that was more contextually defined as “safety”, I do not know what it would be. This begs the question: what is the definition of “safety?” Is it freedom from physical harm? That I will not be beaten by the police while walking to the store? Or when I plug my desk lamp into the wall socket that I will not be killed by an electric shock? Or perhaps that I can breathe easy knowing that an apex predator like a lion is not going to eat me for dinner? Or knowing that next month I can pay for my car insurance? Or that I can put my key in the front door of my apartment and that the lock will turn? Or maybe when I go to the supermarket my preferred brand of toothpaste is on the shelf waiting for me, etc.? The point is that what I experience as “safe” always seems to be circumstantial and dependent on ideas, institutions, entities, or people external to me to escort me to that feeling of “safety.” I asked myself, what happened to the mental fortitude that I attempted to foster while working as a locksmith for nine years? How had I missed the mark so completely?

As I began to digest the idea of “fabricating safety” as my primary job responsibility while working in adult fetish movies, I saw a convergence and a conflict of ideas. On the one hand, safety does not exist. There seems to be nothing intrinsically

safe about being alive. At the same time, much of the effort that I have expended in my life and art practice has been devoted to helping myself or others to be safe, stay safe, or creating safety as a commodity while working as a locksmith, a yoga teacher, an artist, a sex laborer, or otherwise. For instance, I think the aspect of locksmithing that frustrated customers the most was not that I was capable of quantifying exactly how much their security was worth when I quoted them a price to do a job. I do not even think they were taken aback by high prices when the job demanded it. On the contrary, what I believe people found the most unnerving was that I could quantify their safety, and it turns out—in a relative sense—their safety was worth very little. A couple hundred dollars to change all the locks on a person's house is a far cry away from the “priceless” value that we often associate with the worth of a single human's life.

With all these issues in mind in February of 2020—right before the COVID 19 Pandemic began—I created an installation called *Safe: 1*, which consisted of three sculptures, two photographs, and a three-channel video installation. I decided to deconstruct the uniform that I used to wear on set while working as a sex laborer and constructed three different actions that I performed by myself and recorded with a video camera in what appears to be a controlled studio setting. The videos document the transformation of the three articles of clothing that comprised my uniform and the subsequent effect the transformation had upon my body (see Image 26).



Image 26, link to video documentation: <https://vimeo.com/535706456>

The first video is about the black nitrile gloves that I would wear to keep my hands sanitary while I was making these movies. For this video, I layered approximately 30 pairs of gloves one over the other on my hands until they were swollen and incapable of dexterity. After sitting with the final layer on for several minutes, I slowly peeled each one off one-by-one and placed them on a table in neat piles. This process took about 25 minutes to execute from start to finish and featured only myself dressed in a black jumpsuit sitting at a white table in front of a white background. For me, no amount of gloves were ever going to create the impermeable safe barrier that I fetishized, and the “safer” I made myself, the more incapable, impotent, and at-risk I became (see Image 27).

In the second video, I attached shackles to the bottoms of my orthopedic shoes, connected them to a block-and-tackle, and hoisted myself into a full-body suspension. I

elevated myself about 16 feet off the ground so only my head was still captured in the frame of the camera. I stayed upside down for about 20 minutes and then lowered myself back down to the floor. This again was a simple composition of myself in the jumpsuit, set against a white backdrop, and a standard gray-colored floor. For this piece, I wanted the shoes that keep my feet safe to become fused with the bondage that I used to produce. I became both my own captor and subsequent liberator. Subject and object. A detention and suspension on my own terms, as opposed to a negotiated experience on someone else's. As I had made my own bondage, I also fabricated my own safety (see Image 27).

For the third video, I used a hand-held blow torch to slowly and methodically burn the jumpsuit off of my body by using the fire to cut a long seam from its bottom to top. I then removed the half-burned jumpsuit, piled it on the floor, and set it on fire. Most of the video is simply me sitting naked on the floor wearing only black shoes and gloves, watching as the jumpsuit burns like a campfire. By using the wrong tool in the wrong way, I was able to remove the symbolic remnants of my labor within adult films and allow it to pass peacefully into a quiet night while no one was watching but the camera (see Image 27).



Image 27

All of the videos were executed as simple, classically styled, single point, studio performance pieces, executed for the camera, and shot within the specific and deliberate setting of what appears to be an art studio, institution, or gallery. However this was an illusion. If a viewer spent time with the piece, they would begin to notice ambient sounds in videos—such as birds, planes, and cars—that expose the “studio” setting to be nothing more than a movie set. The pieces were actually recorded outside (see Image 28). I wanted to subtly show that the prestige and importance that is often permitted to galleries and artists studios is little more than an illusion constructed out of gray floors and white walls. The lighting that I mobilized in the videos draws direct inspiration from how I would often light a porn movie. Everything is illuminated in totality.

I make no attempt to shape the subject in video with shadows, highlights, or contrast. Details are exposed and nothing is hidden or insinuated. These videos draw heavy inspiration from work such as *I Am Making Art* (1971) by John Baldessari, Bob Flanagan and Sheree Rose's *Visiting Hours* (1994), Stelarc's *Suspension Performances* (1980-Present), Bruce Nauman's early video work, and Ana Mendieta's pieces done for the camera. Each of the actions was edited into approximately 30-minute videos, projected onto three different gallery walls, and looped continuously over the duration of the exhibition.

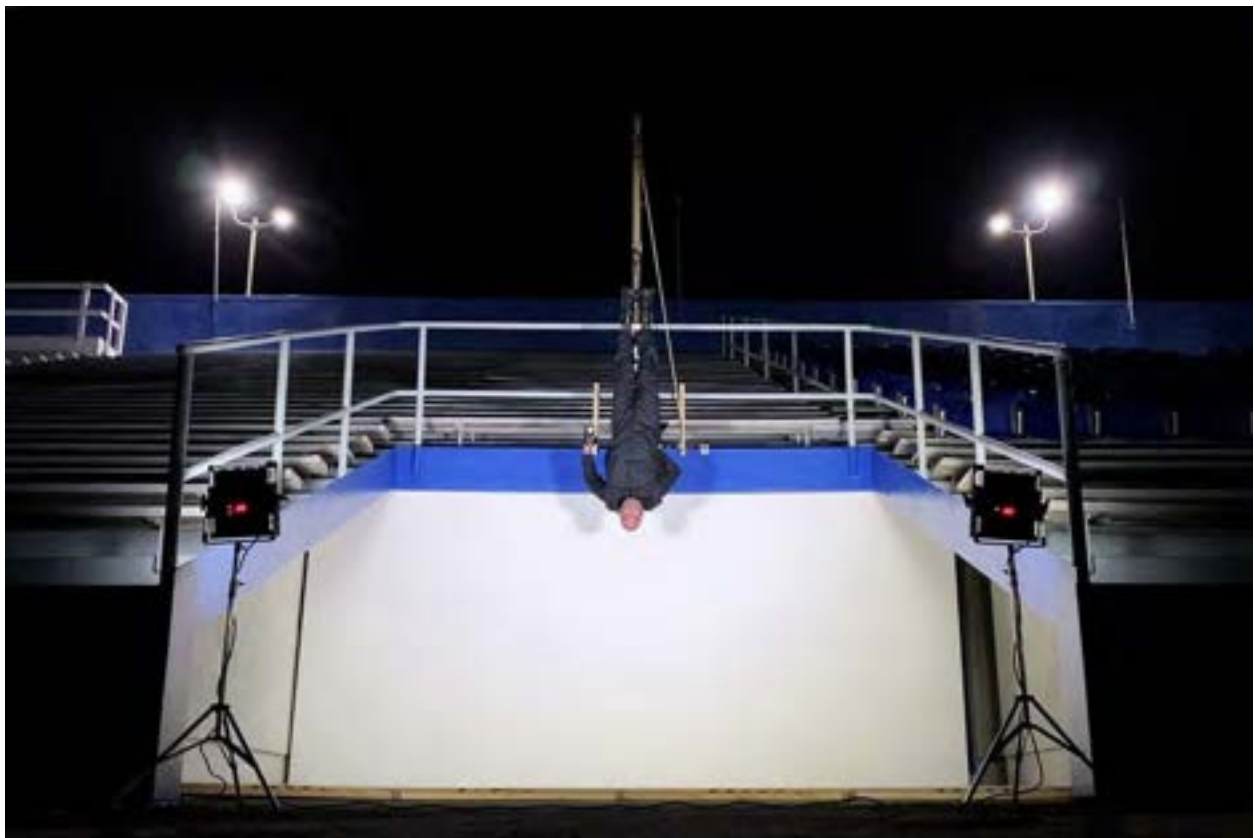


Image 28

In another room, there were three wall-mounted sculptures on display that housed the remnants of the uniform that remained after I filmed the videos. The sculptures were housed in formal, black, gallery shadow boxes with glass fronts. One was approximately the size and shape of a rectangular box that the nitrile gloves would come in when purchased from a store and had a hole cut out of the top so if viewers wanted to, they could take some gloves (see Image 29). The second box contained the shoes suspended upside down via a rope that extended through holes that I had cut in the top of the box. The rope extended all the way to the top of the wall where I had rigged a bracket. The entire shadow box could swing like a pendulum if a viewer chose to push it. As it swung against the wall, it left a black mark along the arc of its travel (see Image 29). The third shadow box was long and narrow and was full of the ashes that remained after the jumpsuit was completely burned. At the bottom of the box, there was a hole that had been stopped with a large white plug. If a viewer removed the plug, ash would spill out the bottom until they put the plug back in (see Image 29). All three of the sculptures appeared as if they were escaping from the sterile and contained structure of the formal shadow box. And, as the inside of the boxes escaped to the outside, their contents then had an effect on walls and floor, thus tainting a gallery's often misplaced perception of neutrality. This process brought a viewer into direct contact with tactile objects that they at first were only able to indirectly experience while watching the videos.



Image 29

Lastly, there was one photograph displayed in the room with the shadow-boxes capturing the pile of ash that remained after the suit completely burned (see Image 30) and one behind-the-scenes photograph in the video room of myself working on a porn set, holding a lit blowtorch while wearing the black uniform (see Image 31).



Image 30



Image 31

Safe: 2
Using Tools Outside of their Intended Purpose

In February of 2021—as the world began to recover from the shutdown caused by COVID-19—the graduate students of the Department of Art were able to get some limited access to the school's facilities. At this time, I was briefly able to set up and document a new installation that centered around the second conceptual theme of my research: the use of tools outside of their intended purpose, entitled *Safe: 2* (2021). Although I am using this theme as part of my current thesis, I have been examining this motif for many years. My fascination with this concept began when I was 17 years old and read Paul Auster's short story, *City of Glass* (1985), for the first time. There is a character in the story that wanders around New York City collecting and cataloging broken items, such as umbrellas, documenting how they are broken, and giving them new names. The character's assertion is that an object is defined by its use, and if the object is broken and can no longer execute its function, then it can no longer be considered an “umbrella.” This idea stuck in my young mind because at that point in my life objects and ideas had “purpose.” It seems unlikely that the idea of “purpose” is a permanent condition that applies to the entire universe; however, at that young age, it seemed to describe the affairs of humans and the unseen social contracts that govern how we have agreed to experience the world. Years later, when I was an undergraduate, I was shown documentation of Joseph Kosuth's seminal work *One and Three Chairs* (1965) (see Image 32).



Image 32⁴³

This piece changed the way I thought about my practice and also the documentation of art in general. In the piece, Kosuth presents three artistic gestures in close proximity to one another: a physical chair (an object), a photograph of the same chair (a picture of the object), and a printed dictionary description of the word “chair” (the definition of the object). This piece is still very important to me; however, I have always had a problem with it. In my opinion, Kosuth neglected to display a chair's fourth and most important descriptive characteristic: its use in action, *its purpose*. In my reductionist brain, a chair is only a chair if it is used and sat upon. I then asked myself what happens if a chair is used in a way that is outside of its standard definition and

purpose? Is it still a chair? For me—and countless other artists—this led to an explosion of possibilities to create new meanings by subverting the accepted purpose of an object.

To explicate this point, in the early 2000's, I did a series in which I took the clothes that I would wear while working as a busboy in fine dining restaurants and did public performative actions in which each article of clothing was used or recontextualized outside of its intended purpose. This new use would have a corresponding effect on my body. Sometimes I would modify each article of clothing and other times I left them unmodified. However, the context and usage of the article of clothing would have subtle and not-so-subtle effects on my body. For example, I cut the soles out of the bottom of my shoes and walked around San Francisco for 12 hours. Almost no one noticed that my shoes had no soles and certainly no one knew that I was attempting to make art. To show this work in its completed form, I displayed a formal photograph of the shoes set against a white background and juxtaposed it with a photograph of my dirty and damaged feet taken immediately after I finished my walk. I placed the physical shoes I walked in between the two photographs, along with a small piece of text that looked like a dictionary definition of the word "walk," but was instead re-contextualized the photographs, object, and action in order to not only create a new definition but to make a new contextual *meaning* (See images 33 and 34).



Image 33

walk wòk), v. [OE. wealcan (ME. wakke), < L. ambulare: see ambulare.] 1. To move for the purpose of avoiding displacement. 2. To cut the soles out of shoes and walk around San Francisco from 9 PM - 9 AM on a Thursday night. 2002, CE.

Image 34

Keeping this in mind, the installation that comprised *Safe 2*, consisted of three videos that I shot during the COVID shutdown. They are each approximately 30 minutes long and consist of a single shot of me wearing the black jump jumpsuit, sitting at a white table, and “using” a yellow tool. Large versions of the videos were looped and projected onto three separate walls in the gallery (see Image 35).



Image 35, link to video documentation: <https://vimeo.com/522585889>

The first video, *Touch*, begins with the camera fading into a scene of a yellow table saw blade extended through the top of the white table and set in front of a white wall. The table saw is turned on and the blade begins spinning. I then enter the scene and slowly extend my left index finger to touch the middle of the spinning saw blade. My finger remains in contact with the blade for about 25 minutes. I then withdraw my hand, exit the frame, the machine turns off, and the camera fades out. As my finger withdraws

from the frame, the viewer is able to see a yellow mark and blister on my finger caused by the abrasion of the saw's contact with my body (see Image 36). The second video is called *Suck*. The camera fades into a similar scene consisting of a yellow industrial-style vacuum on top of a white table. The machine turns on, I enter the frame, and I take the end of the vacuum's tube and place it on the front part of my right neck. I remain still for about 25 minutes and then pull the tube away revealing a round purple hickey on my neck. I then exit the frame, the machine turns off, and the camera fades to black (see Image 36). The final video is similar in structure and is called *Kiss*. This time there's a yellow battery-powered drill with a long drill bit inserted into its head on the white table. I enter the frame, pick up the drill, and maneuver its trigger into my mouth. Then using my lips, tongue, and teeth, I activate the trigger, setting the drill into motion while the drill bit spins next to my left ear. I remain like this for about 25 minutes until the battery of the drill dies. I then place the drill back on the table, exit the frame, and the camera fades to black. The result of this action leaves a pool of drool and saliva on the surface of the table and covering the bottom half of the drill (see Image 36). Aside from the three video projections, the only other object in the room was a behind-the-scenes photograph of myself working as a sex laborer, on my knees in front of a standing male dominant and a reclined female submissive. The physical posturing of my body is literally "in-between" that of dominant and the submissive. The yellow drill used in the video can be seen in the foreground of the frame (see Image 37).

Like the videos that I made to deconstruct my old uniform, all of these tool pieces are shot in the same classically styled, completely illuminated, single point, studio-based, performance-shot-for-the-camera fashion. Like before, this was an illusion

and the videos were shot outdoors in front of a faked studio set. If given a careful examination viewers will begin to notice ambient noises only found in outdoor settings (see Image 38).



Image 36



Image 37



Image 38

In a separate glassed enclosed room, I constructed a live isolated performance called *Safe: Air* that could only be viewed from the outside by peering through the gallery's two large glass walls. Inside of the room, I again set up a white table and placed a yellow air compressor on top. The compressor was turned on, I sat down at the table, and proceeded to use the compressor's nozzle to blow air into my mouth and expand my cheeks for about 25 minutes. I then left the table and the compressor was turned off (see Images 39 and 40).



Image 39



Image 40

In a third room, there were three wall mounted sculptures on display that showcased the tools used in the videos. Similar to objects that I made to house my articles of clothing, these sculptures were housed in formal, black, gallery shadow boxes with glass fronts. The first shadow box contained the vacuum with the end of its hose sticking out of a holed drilled into the side of the box. The vacuum was activated via a motion sensor whenever a person was within three feet of the shadow box. If a viewer wanted to, they could press their hand or neck against the hose and feel its suction (see Image 41). The second box contained the drill and had a long rod extending from the inside of the box to the outside. Underneath was an open trough containing large rubber balls with metal hexagonal bolts sticking out of one of their sides. If a viewer chose to, they could remove one of the balls and attach it via the hexagonal bolt to a magnetic bit that extended from the drill's trigger inside of the box.

The viewer could then put their mouth on the ball, press in, and activate the drill. Each participant got to keep their ball as a signed souvenir of the experience (see Image 41). Housed within the third shadow box, the viewer could see a yellow, circular saw blade protruding from a white background. The motor controlling the sawblade was hidden in the back of the shadowbox and would activate via a motion sensor whenever a person was within three feet of the box. This way an audience member was aware that the machine was on before they were in close proximity to the device. If a person chose to, they could touch the spinning saw blade via thick clear plastic tube that extended from the center of the blade through a hole that had been drilled into the side of the shadow box. Due to the design of the and placement of the tube, a person's finger was never in any danger of being cut by the saw (see Image 41). Like the sculptures made about my uniform, these three of the sculptures again appeared as if they were escaping from the sterile and safe confines of the shadow box. As before, this process brought a viewer into direct contact with tactile objects that they at first were only able to indirectly experience while watching the videos.



Image 41

All of the videos, performances, sculptures, and photographs that comprise *Safe: 2*, attempt to recontextualize my experience with the tools that I used in both my work as a sex laborer and also within my art practice. In each, I sought to show the secret unseen intimacy that I shared with these tools that allowed me to create a context in which intimacy could be transformed into a physical commodity during the production of fetish movies. These projects reify emotional labor and allow it to be transformed into tangible experiences that I can share with an audience through the mediation of video and sculptures. However, I am certainly not the first person to experience intimacy with their tools. Workers all over the world have been doing this for generations.

In his fascinating study of the history of Luddites, Gavin Mueller, points out that machines—and technology in general—reduce the autonomy of individual workers and

“...robs people of the feeling that they can control their own lives, that they can set the terms of their world.”⁴⁴ He goes on to point out that the early Luddites of the Industrial Revolution were not opposed to machines, tools, or technological advances in a broader sense. On the contrary, workers have almost always relied on state of the art tools and technology (relative to the time they lived in) that they personally owned in order to do their jobs.⁴⁵ What the Luddites were opposed to was how industrial society took away the independence of their individual home business, or cottage industries, and required them, “...to succumb to forces beyond their control.”⁴⁶ He posits that any future society that is sufficiently advanced must find a way to see advancement and technology “...as an *assemblage* of technology and people...a relationship between worker and machine in which the worker as consciousness agency.”⁴⁷ In my videos, I wanted to create a dynamic between myself and the tools that does not easily depict one being dominant over the other, but instead presents an opportunity for us to both maintain our own agency while also working together.

In the past, workers owned their own tools and were in charge of their business and livelihood. As the Industrial Revolution progressed, workers' skill sets were replaced by jobs that required a laborer to follow an abstract set of instructions that they needed to “cognitively interpret and understand.”⁴⁸ This was and still is a huge departure from the muscle memory formed by the “embodied tasks,” that past generations of laborers honed to perfection.⁴⁹ I want to embody the tasks that myself and the machines shared. We shared the emotional labor of the experience as we fabricated intimacy and safety for others during my work as a sex laborer. Importantly, I wanted to give physical form to this unseen labor.

In their comprehensive dissection of Marxism through the lens of Queer Theory, Kevin Floyd reminds us of the "...of the importance of subjectivity in the face of deterministic, mechanistic fetishizing of the objective,"⁵⁰ and that as soon as a worker understands themselves as both subject and object within their labor, they also come to understand their manipulated role in the process.⁵¹ At a young age, I realized that the tools utilized on my job sites were often worth more monetarily and were more important to the survival of the business than value represented by my hourly labor. A big part of my job was to not mess up and break the machines. To keep them safe, I had to learn how to share space with the mechanisms of production and see them as my equal as opposed to my servants. Ironically, this allowed me to become much better at my various jobs and probably saved me from being fired many times. Years later while working porn, this process of mutual respect with tools also helped me to maintain professional distance from the overtly sexualized material that I was producing. Like my drill, I was simply there to perform a task; however, both the tool and I got to share a secret and unseen intimacy that was invisible to the performers and my managers.

I made a distinction between myself and sex workers because the circumstances of our job responsibilities was markedly different. As the years went by, I realized that I had more in common with the power tools that I worked with than the porn performers. This realization did not feel pessimistic to me, but was instead very liberating. It allowed me to be both subject and object within this labor exchange through the creation of a new faction of employment as a sex laborer. When I was able to see myself as both subject and object within this labor experience, I was then able to take a step back and observe the many nuanced power exchanges that I was consenting to as a worker and

subsequently explore alternative meanings of these situations. Quoting Satre, Floyd reminds us that we connect with tools with our whole body and feel them "...as reverberation of my flesh that I seize the objects in the world. This means that I make myself a passive relationship to them... My perception is not utilization of an object and not the transcending of the present with a view to a goal. To perceive an object, in the attitude of desire, is to caress myself with it."⁵²

There is a fine line between consent and coercion, and I lay awake at night wondering if I have done a good enough job detailing the conceptual motifs, objectives, and desires within my viewer interactive art projects. I always give a lot of choices to the audience in an attempt to create consent; however, this could lead to, as Floyd points out, "domination through coercion."⁵³ This same dilemma was always a concern for myself and my coworkers while filming the fetish movies. We somehow had to make sure that if a model said "yes" to an activity it was not out of fear of not being hired back but because they actually wanted to do it. This muddied water in any context is very difficult to see through.

As I wrestled with the technical and conceptual complexities of this work, I found myself reflecting on parts of Filippo Tommaso Marinetti's *Manifesto of Futurism* (1909.) As wacky, misogynistic, and contentious as it may be, it seems to possess the embedded assertion that one day humans in their never ending quest for speed will reject their bodies and become one with the machines of industry that they are presently worshipping.⁵⁴ I could not help but hear some of Marinetti's words rattling around in my head as I examined my tools in greater detail. I felt a great need to leave them unmodified and allow them to maintain the integrity and agency of their original design. I

attempted to give pleasure, liberation, and recontextualization to these mechanical servants; however I found that the machines simply could not be appeased or satiated. They always seemed to outlast me. They were insatiable, and like the industrial wheels of capitalism, they always wanted more. In a kind of inverted futurism, I reached towards the power tools not as a means of production, but instead as partners in an unrequited intimacy which seems not all that dissimilar from a dangerous liaison between a manager and subordinate. I attempted to show a viewer a vantage point that does not easily depict whether it is I or the tool that is the subject of the videos that is asserting dominance over the other. I wanted to display a switching of power that is subtle, meditative, and also very intimate. Within this new and ambiguous intimacy, there is enough room from the audience to feel the experiences reflected in their body while also remaining *safe*. In light of this re-contextualization, these pieces become linked conceptually by the assertion that tools are often viewed as the servants of people. They perform tasks and are defined by their purpose. In a time of global isolation, I asked my tools, “How can I serve you and how can we make a new meaning together?” By using these inanimate tools outside of their intended purpose, I was able to lay the foundation for the third conceptual arc of my research: An Intimacy of Self.

Safe: 3
An Intimacy of Self

I define “an intimacy of self” as the creation of situations that allow me to experience a feeling of safety or intimacy of, by, or for myself, as opposed to creating it for other people as part of a job responsibility as a sex laborer, service professional, or as part of a series of social expectations. As I stated before, I realized following much reflection that if I was going to make art that was inspired by my employment/research in adult films, then I needed to point the camera at myself: I needed to objectify myself. To address this idea further, I began the third artistic examination for my thesis by appropriating video footage derived from pornographic or mainstream sources that contained my image or representation as either a model, an actor playing a supporting character role, or as a laborer performing my job responsibilities. I then re-edited and re-contextualized the appropriated footage so it highlighted my presence in hopes of gaining some control over my representation. I do not own any of this footage. I obtained access to the content through various means which I will outline in the descriptions of the videos.

The first video that I made, entitled *Safe: Fail* (2019), contained source footage from a 2007 failed porn shoot that I appeared in as a model. The movie featured a dominant transsexual woman and myself as a sexually submissive cis man, restrained in various bondage positions. I was hired to do this shoot after I responded to a local newspaper advertisement placed by an adult fetish film company that was looking for new models. At the time, I was becoming more aware of and much more interested in the intense power dynamics playing out in my art pieces. I also was searching for a new job to research for my art practice. When I read the advertisement, I saw the natural

convergence of need and opportunity. Although I had no specific interest in acting as a submissive model, this was the type of model that the company was looking to hire. They told me that this was a good entry-level role to fill, and if the shoot went well, it could lead to more work in which I wouldn't need to be the submissive. This seemed reasonable, so with no experience, I decided to give it a try. Unfortunately, the shoot didn't go very well, so the footage was never released. However, the video cassette tapes that the shoot had been recorded on were saved and stored in the company's physical archive. In 2011, I started working for this same company as a full-time employee. A few years later, the managers of this company decided to destroy all of the old source tapes that their movie footage had been recorded on. However, I managed to secretly save the cassettes that my failed shoot had been recorded on before they were demagnetized and destroyed. While at UCSB, I digitized this salvaged footage and then edited it in a way that highlighted the labor that went into producing the movie. The resulting video is an amalgamation of all the jumbled shots that occur between action sequences, showcasing the view captured by the camera as it moves around while the crew, director, and performers talk and construct the scene. I edited the video in such a way that mine is the only face that is ever shown. What remains is a very kinetic real-time sculpture of the behind-the-scenes and unseen labor required to create the pornographic experience which would normally be thrown away (Image 42).



Image 42

The second video, *Safe: Face* (2020), was derived from a mainstream documentary film that was made about the company that I worked for. This movie is not pornographic and has appeared in several large film festivals and online streaming platforms such as Netflix. To get this footage, I paid to stream the film via the web, then set up a camera to record my computer's screen and audio in real-time (due to the streaming services embedded anti-pirating software, I was unable to download or screen-record the movie). I then took the documentary and re-edited it to highlight the very brief parts in which I appear in the film's background performing job responsibilities as a sex laborer. What remains is a chaotic edit of fast-forwarded sequences that slow down, zoom in, and linger on the shots in which I appear. I also went through and pixelated every face that is not my own. Only my representation is highlighted. Also, Dr.

Thumper—the first fucking-machine that I created—appears several times in the documentary. My edited video slows down and zooms in on the machine as it is working, as well (Image 43).



Image 43

The third video, *Safe: Extra* (2021), uses source footage from pornographic movies in which I appear as a character actor, playing non-sexual roles that were utilized in movies that needed stories. As I stated in a previous chapter, we worked in very small teams to produce these movies—usually consisting of a director, a videographer, and an assistant/photographer—and we each had to wear a lot of hats to get the job done. In my early years working in the industry, it was not uncommon for me to make quick cameos in the movies when character actors were needed. While at

UCSB, I paid for a monthly membership to the porn company's website and then downloaded the movies to my computer. I then created an edit which quickly fast-forwards through most of the film footage, slows down to a normal speed during the parts in which I appear, and then immediately speeds up once I am no longer on camera. Once again, I went through all the movies and pixelated every person's face that was not my own (see Image 44).



Image 44

In March of 2021, I was able to quickly create and document a new installation entitled *Safe: 3* that brought these three video pieces together. The installation featured a large projection of the video edited from the mainstream documentary. This video was flanked on the left by a small projection of my failed porno shoot and on the right by a small projection of my appearances as a character actor in pornos. Across the room, lit

by a lone spotlight, was Dr. Thumper, which I was able to salvage and save from the trash when my old company closed. During the installation, the fucking machine was calibrated to slowly extend and retract a red dildo back and forth over the duration of the exhibit. Otherwise, there were no other objects or photos in the room (see Image 45).



Image 45

In the future, I will complete the second part of this installation. A separate room will showcase another appropriated re-edit video as well as the documentation of a new performance I am working on. This final appropriated video will feature footage from a behind-the-scenes movie the company I used to work for made that highlights a day-in-the-life of my job responsibilities. It shows my boss and I planning out a typical movie and the subsequent process I go through to design and construct the custom bondage made from metal piping in which the model would be restrained. As in the

other videos, I fast-forward through parts of the movie that I am not in and then slow down to normal speed parts that I did appear in. Once again, I pixelated every person's face other than my own (see Images 46 and 47). This edit will be installed and projected with a new performance that I haven't filmed yet. For it, I will simultaneously build and restrain myself into bondage made from the same metal piping showcased in the previously described behind-the-scenes video. After remaining in the bondage for several minutes, I will free myself, and the structure that remains will hold the projectors showing the behind-the-scenes video of me working as a sex laborer along with a second video documenting the process of making and restraining myself in the bondage.



Image 46



Image 47

These videos and installations all center around a presentation of myself as the objectified subject of the projects. Part of my job responsibilities as a sex laborer was to objectify other people. Whether that was by treating a body as a raw material to be consensually contorted and restrained in bondage or by pointing a camera at them, I was expected to create an objectified representation of another human's body in order to create a fictionalized and fetishized commodity to be bought and sold. Although many of my past art projects have addressed issues related to BDSM, I felt strongly that if I was going to make artwork that specifically addressed my employment in adult films then I needed to put my own image and representation on the line in the same way that the hundreds of sex workers that I worked with in the production of porn had done. In short, my question became: what am I willing to risk?

UnWork, The Waitresses, The Otherwise, and The Future

What am I willing to risk? This question has weighed heavily upon me since the beginning of graduate school. As an academic, I am too close to the material that I am attempting to study. This insider status taints my perspective and makes it essentially impossible for me to study the idea of sex labor objectively. This reality is best described by Dr. Heather Berg in an article called *Labouring porn studies* (2014.) In it, Berg outlines the problem of privileging academic work that relies on a researcher who was—or still is—part of the culture that they are studying (in Berg’s case pornography). Berg defines herself as “otherwise” when situating their relationship to the academic study of pornography, ambiguously claiming to be neither an insider nor an outsider. In Berg’s own words:

I come to the research process as both a worker (academic and otherwise) and a student of labor seeking to understand and confront the work dynamics. I am being deliberately vague regarding what this ‘otherwise’ means, as I am wary of the tendency in much feminist research to privilege ‘insider status’ and the incitement to the labor of self-disclosure this compels. As a number of feminist researchers have noted, academics interested in social change must place special emphasis on conducting and disseminating research ethically.⁵⁵

This point is well taken; however, I am not sure what I am doing as an artist—despite the very academic context that I find myself in—can or should be considered “academic.” Although my art practice is born out of research, it is also born of the necessity of labor. More specifically, in a Marxist sense, the appropriation of my labor in exchange for currency that I can then trade to secure the resources, rent, and commodities is needed to stay alive.⁵⁶ Although it is factual that I worked behind-the-scenes in adult films, I do not think my assertions as an artist making work about my experiences

working in adult films should be viewed as “factual.” Like Berg, I feel a great desire to disseminate my work in an ethical fashion. However, for me, this means the opposite of what Berg was referring to. Unlike Berg, I feel a need to be transparent about the source that is specifically informing my research. I do not feel I can ethically refer to my role as “otherwise,” while also giving audience members the opportunity to know ahead of time that the content they are about to engage with might be problematic or triggering for them. In the simplest sense, Berg is saying that we need to maintain objectivity when doing academic research because when we do not, it creates problematic data. However, some academic work is viewed as more valid than others if the person authoring the research is part of the demographic being studied. With this assertion, Berg points out that critical objectivity is sometimes lost when only researchers who are part of the community being studied are given permission to discuss those communities in nuanced detail.

In my case, there are two points that become relative to Berg’s assertion. The first is: since I was not part of a BDSM community prior to working in adult films, do I have the right to research, observe, and profit from it as a laborer and/or artist? The second point is: since I felt the ethical obligation to tell the audience prior to viewing my art about my employment as a sex laborer in pornography, does this effectively bias the audience before they can objectively engage with the work on their own terms?

As I wrestle with these questions, several more related questions rise to the surface. The first is simple: am I an insider or an outsider? Should I have been allowed to work as sex laborer since I was not part of the BDSM community prior to being hired? Is working as a laborer in this industry inherently different than working as a laborer

in, for instance, construction? Does a sex laborer have an ethical obligation to be part of the BDSM community in a way that a laborer for a construction company is not required to be part of a community of woodworking enthusiasts? Do my seven years of employment as a sex-laborer make me an insider, or does it still situate me as an outsider? I find no easy and straightforward answers to these questions; however, I feel comfortable with this ambiguity. I think in this case an answer of “both” is not a cop-out, but is instead logical and ethical. Perhaps this is what Berg truly means when she self-identified with the term, “otherwise.”

The second point is more complicated. In my opinion, objectivity is less important for an artist to maintain in the creation of their works than it is to a scholar who is studying a certain cultural demographic, however, I do not think it should be devoid of it either. Any artwork that is solely contextualized as the exclusively subjective experience of the artist without any attempt to create an experience that addresses a broader concern runs the risk of throwing up the impenetrable defense of “un-critique-ability.” By stating at the outset that these works are a derivative of my personal, physical, and emotional experiences related to my work as a sex laborer, I run the risk of giving too much information to the viewer at the outset before they have any chance to create their own meaning-making experience. This, in turn, makes it difficult for a viewer to foster an objective critical dialogue on their own terms because I—as the artist—have already told them how the work is to be understood. I find this *deeply* problematic. In my opinion, anything that is above critique is inherently dangerous and I have never approached my art practice in this fashion. If sharing this background information about my subjective experiences as a sex laborer creates—in keeping with Berg’s analysis—a tainted

“data-set” which in turn makes it teeter on the edge of “un-critique-ability,” how can I better contextualize this work while at the same time being honest with viewers about how it was derived? Can I facilitate critical, objective, observational freedom for the audience while also fostering a safe space? I can honestly say that I have succeeded at creating those parameters within some of my past projects about my other types of employment. How can I facilitate those parameters within artwork specifically derived from my labor in pornography? Even after thirty months of work at UCSB, I clearly still have more questions than answers.

In the “Cyborg Manifesto,” Donna Haraway asserts that there is no single characteristic that unifies all of the different groups devoted to the feminist agenda.⁵⁷ She says that there is not a unified female experience and famously concludes that she would rather construct herself as a cyborg on her own terms than to be worshiped as a goddess on someone else’s terms.⁵⁸ Although I do not know Haraway’s opinions on pornography, her axiom unifies anti-porn feminists such as Andrea Dworkin with pro-porn feminists such as Constance Penley. Both are feminists, yet both disagree. I certainly cannot posture my work as the reflection of a feminist agenda; however, I find a certain connection to Haraway’s writing. At the core, Haraway wants to not only control who she “is” but also how she is “perceived.” This desire to self-define was at the heart of my initial work while at UCSB. Much of my time has been spent attempting to frame my representation in a way that I was not permitted to do while executing my job responsibilities as a sex laborer. In a Marxist sense, this is an intrinsic consequence of being a laborer: the loss of self. It is not possible for me to control how my likeness—or how I am perceived—is disseminated and consumed within the context of

pornography because my representation will appear on some version of the internet so long as digital archives exist. In this sense, I would rather create myself as a sex laborer on my own terms than to be judged as a pornographer on someone else's terms.

As I digested the implicit objectification embedded within the act of producing or consuming pornography, I found myself seeing the experience in a slightly different fashion. Any person whose likeness is represented in porn is indeed objectified and the net result of that objectification is the production of a commodity. On a topical level, when another person purchases and consumes this commodity, they take possession of the entity that has been objectified. This is the implied meaning of objectification within the free-market consumption of pornography. However, there is something unique about the nature of pornography that somewhat subverts this narrative, which I struggle to define. Andrea Long Chu observes a peculiar intersection between left-wing anti-porn feminists and right-wing alt-right men who seek to break themselves from their perceived porn addictions. To these men, “Pornography is what it feels like when you think that you have an object, but really the object has *you*.”⁵⁹ Perhaps, this is simply the nature of addiction in general; however, pornography does not give a consumer what they “want,” but instead points out what they do not “have.” In that sense, porn can never fill a person’s needs in the same way the purchasing of other commodities—for instance, paper towels—might. Instead, it would seem that Chu is saying that porn as a commodity consumes the consumer. This assertion feels oddly akin to my desire to objectify myself in terms of my own representation within the narrative of porn. Through labor, I sought to become both subject and object in the production of these art projects.

In the end, the work that comprises my thesis resists a specific reading. Although a viewer might not be able to access the specific experiences that inspired the symbolic actions that I perform in the videos, I do think it possible for them to see something of themselves reflected in my representation. Many of us work, and at our best moments, hope to find some sort of meaning, intimacy, safety, or significance in the social contract of waged labor that we may find ourselves with little choice but to invest in. It is because of this that I think it is possible that there are some people—certainly not all—like myself that are all looking to connect with the objects and labor that consume the vast portion of our waking lives. In that sense, I do not think that the art that composes my thesis nullifies critique, but instead presents the possibility for a viewer to see their own labor reflected in my representation.

As I digest this work and my graduate school experience, I finally see that I was asking myself the wrong question at the outset of my investigation. These investigations were never about the question: what am I willing to risk? Instead, at the heart of the dialogue around this work, there is actually a long list of questions that I am still seeking to answer: who does the viewer need me to be as a subject-object? What do I give myself permission to study as an artist and/or academic? How do I want to situate myself in relation to my lived experiences, my research, and my art practice? Is it possible to meet the viewer on equal terms? How can I escort the viewer to a safe and respectful experience while also allowing them to objectively engage with the work on their own terms? To be honest, I have no easy answers to any of these questions. But after all this work, it feels good to have clearly defined some of these questions for myself.

So, where do I go from here? My dream job would be as a permanent artist in residence/art worker for an organization like Mierle Laderman Ukeles has done for *New York City's Department of Public Works* since 1971. Equally appealing would be a tenure track teaching position at a college or university anywhere in the world. Over the past 2021-2022 academic year, I have been a teaching fellow with UCSB's College of Creative Studies and Department of Art. During this time, I have been actively applying to and interviewing for several tenure track teaching positions across the United States. I remain hopeful that one of these will manifest; however they are all very competitive. There is a good chance that I may need to reinvent myself once again and find a new job to research and explore. However, my physical health, desire, finances, and energy to start over and find a new, low-paying, entry-level, labor position is waning. Realistically, it is also increasingly unlikely that an employer will hire me for an entry-level labor position as I get older. The point being, I am not sure how sustainable the research practice I have been using for the past 25 years will continue to be. The past seven years have left me questioning what our collective future might look like. In general, it does not seem positive and it is clear that the divisions within the United States are becoming ever more polarized. However, I cannot predict the future and remain doubtfully hopeful. After all, the line between pessimism and realism is razor thin and is only ever clarified by how the future unfolds.

Ironically, I find some solace in Valerie Solanos' *S.C.U.M. Manifesto* (1967). After sharing an early draft of my analysis regarding my research as a sex laborer, Dr. Heather Berg suggested that I look into an exhibition called, *A New Job to UnWork At* (2018), which was on display at *Participant INC* in New York City. Curated by Clara

López Menéndez and Andrew Kachel, the exhibition focused on artists who treat their employment as a site for artistic resistance. The title references a short part of the *S.C.U.M. Manifesto* (1967) in which Solanos defines the “unwork force,”⁶⁰ a force that she envisioned as a revolutionary vanguard of workers that will take on jobs for the sole purpose of stealing, not working, and generally doing whatever they can to make the business fail. They will collect their paychecks until they are fired and then proceed to find a new job to unwork, subvert, capitalize on, and destroy until it all comes crumbling down. Although Solanos was a deeply troubled individual, I find this idea not without merit. I have spent the majority of my life attempting to subvert labor by being a model employee, learning everything I possibly could about a job in order to find some sort of transcendent purpose in my labor. My goal was typically to go unnoticed, but also to work with integrity. I am not sure what the next chapter of my life will look like; however, as I watch inequity, exploitation, repression, and subjugation grow endlessly year after year, *unworking* seems perhaps like an ethical option.

This is of course a rather pessimistic projection of not just my future, but our collective future as well. If my old methodologies are becoming unrealistic, then what are my other options? Are there other artists and academics to whom I can look that can provide a different model? The convergence of issues I am examining is related to workplace labor, power, self-determination, and art. A great example of this convergence is provided by the groundbreaking work of the performance art collective, *The Waitresses*. This collective was active from 1977-1985 and worked out of the *Woman's Building* in Los Angeles, California. Their work is a deep examination of feminism and labor. Their democratic approach to art-making and do-it-yourself ethos

governed much of their early art pieces and sought to work in opposition to the established institutional art contexts and expectations. Often creating their interactive performance art experiences within the confines of the restaurants, cafes, and bars at which they labored, they hoped to engage viewers within the exact context of their actual real-life experiences. This exposed sexism, harassment, and labor inequities in real-time while also making people laugh. They used inclusivity and humor to bridge the gap between sexism and abusive labor practices. This is markedly different from my methodology. Though I do try to put levity and humor into my projects—or at least some absurdity—I am not sure how many people ever get the joke. Comedy has never been my forte but *The Waitresses* used it brilliantly.

In 1977, Jerri Allyn and Anne Gauldin formed *The Waitresses* and soon recruited an evolving cast of other women into the collective. As Marlena Doktorczyk-Donohue points out, they sought to create inclusive work that unified, "...associations with lower class, with servitude, nurturance, and most significantly with what Michel Foucault has called docile, controlled bodies that are not subjects with agency or dignity, but commodities for hire and use."⁶¹ Their assertion and insistence that a feminist agenda can not be divorced from a pro-labor agenda speak to how carefully they constructed their critique. The members each drew upon their years of labor experience as raw material to inform their art practice while clearly giving specific real-time examples of how their labor roles became the personification of the institutionalized and accepted harassment, abuse, and unequal treatment. They did all of this within the context of their actual work environments, bringing their practice outside of the patriarchal white-cube and allowing them to create a space that did not bear the weight and

expectations of art-historical references. This created an opportunity for them to enact their mission of building community as opposed to bridges.⁶² I find this distinction to be very compelling. Instead of working externally and attempting to bridge gaps that a person on the outside may *perceive* to exist, a community can affect change from within and fix problems they *know* to exist. Working from the inside out provides a group of people with the opportunity to decrease their dependency upon solutions and resources that are coming from the outside and clearly heal and define themselves on their own terms. *The Waitresses* were very effective at mobilizing this technique.

They also subverted the standard subject/object power dynamic that was embedded in their work and personal lives. In one performance, *The Great Goddess Diana, Ready to Order?* (1978), Anne Gaudin entered the restaurant/performance space wearing an apron–chest armor–that was made out of 14 full-scale latex breasts that had been cast from the members of *The Waitresses* (see Image 48). This spoof on the classic affectations of the Roman goddess Diana was transgressive and, within the framework of *The Waitresses'* mission, allowed the audience to experience a non-sexually objectified worker who was, "...complex, funny, human, (and) conflicted."⁶³ The keyword being "human": subject as opposed to object.



Image 48⁶⁴

Though I have just learned about *The Waitresses*, I cannot help feeling indebted to their work. Out of necessity, the part of my practice that has centered around viewer interactions has often occurred in public settings and attempted to disarm audiences by talking to them sincerely as equals without judgment. I look back at my earlier work and see how, more than anything else, I was just trying to talk to people, get the ideas in my head out, and see if anyone out there related. At the time, this was really empowering to me and marked a big change in my life. Like *The Waitresses*, I was continually awed by

how many people wanted to engage. In general, I found a public that was starved for authentic experiences. I tried to create situations that allowed the audience to have agency and make decisions about how and if they wanted to engage. This flexibility created the opportunity for inclusivity which I could then mobilize to subvert our unseen, culturally embedded dominant/submissive power structures.

As I wrap up my research and graduate school experience, I find myself reflecting on the previously mentioned aspect of *The Waitresses* ethos that prioritized the building community as opposed to building bridges. I see that there are aspects of my art practice that are already functioning in this capacity and that there is an opportunity for me to not completely reinvent my work, but instead, to do it better. As I move forward, embracing these ideas in a fuller sense may present a viable alternative to my previous research model that in the future may no longer serve my best interests or best interests of our global community.

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