

Navigating Uncertainty

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Abstract

Navigating Uncertainty

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Uncertainty can be considered one of the defining features of modern life. This thesis explores uncertainty through the development of studio work. There is a connection between uncertainty and the anxiety I feel as a person living in the contemporary world. Uncertainty and anxiety are both the subjects of this thesis as well as the fuel for my creativity. However, it is the positioning of the viewer in relation to the work that is central to its completion. In this thesis, there will be a focus on the ways in which the subjective experience of the artist leads to the creation of highly personal artworks which can be objectively experienced by a viewer. In order to explore this connection between artist and viewer, this thesis exhibition will include an installation, *Performance Anxiety*, which will engage viewers in an interactive artwork that incorporates the principles of relational aesthetics.

Keywords: Uncertainty, anxiety, worry, relational aesthetics.

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Dedication

To Luther

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The world is not a solid continent of facts sprinkled by a few lakes of uncertainties, but a vast ocean of uncertainties speckled by a few islands of calibrated and stabilized forms.

Bruno Latour (Reassembling the Social 245).

Introduction

I am a storyteller, and I construct narrative about the uncertainty, anxiety and worry in our lives and in the world around us. My goal is to provide an opportunity for viewers to reflect on everyday life through their engagement with the fundamental elements of my practice. Within this visual/textual framework, I construct narrative in which I recount my experiences and my memories. In this context, the methods that I use to connect viewers to my work include the use of text, lists, prints, drawings, and installations with found objects. I use humour to draw the viewer into my personal point of view. I use the objective to talk about the subjective by using the language of physics as a way to describe human experience. I set up contrasts by, for instance, juxtaposing hard- edged printed letters with hesitant hand-drawn text to demonstrate the idea of uncertainty in our understanding of science. These contrasts function in my art by revealing an uncertain, vulnerable aspect of my identity as an artist and as a person.

I became interested in the word 'uncertainty' because I was surprised to hear this word, which I had considered to be a personal quality, being used in conjunction with a concept in physics, specifically Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle. It has been agreed upon by many

contemporary physicists that this principle was one of the foundations of quantum mechanics, which is the physics that describes the behaviour of particles in time and space. Referring to the Uncertainty Principle, physicist and author Brian Greene says that unlike Sir Isaac Newton's framework in which a particle may be described by its position and velocity, "now quantum mechanics shows that, at an atomic level, you cannot know both of these features with total precision" (Greene 114). This profound scientific truth has far reaching implications for us. As psychologist Kerry Gordon says, before these new developments in quantum mechanics, science assured us that the universe was constant and deterministic. However, now science speaks of uncertainty and unpredictability. "Where so recently we looked out on a stable and knowable universe, we are now drawn to the encounter on the narrow ridge between chaos and order" (Gordon 102). Gordon's description of uncertainty in the universe goes to the heart of my practice. When I first heard about Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle, I noticed how the word 'uncertainty' resonated with my sense of the uncertainty in my own life and in my experience of the world around me. Since then, I have discovered the evocative language of quantum mechanics, and I have become intrigued by the possibility of using it to speak about our relationships as well as the manner in which we live. To give form to this language, I write stories about the lack of certainty and predictability in modern life. I live in

the uncertain universe that these tiny particles inhabit, and these tiny particles, with their inherent uncertainties, definitely live in me.

My feelings of anxiety and worry in response to uncertainty are rooted in the years after World War II. In the 1940s and 1950s, advances in quantum mechanics were instrumental to the creation of the atomic bomb. The subsequent nuclear arms race between Russia and the United States escalated the tensions in what was generally known as the Cold War ("Cuban Missile Crisis"), which led to the start of my 'Age of Uncertainty'. My father had been a fighter pilot in World War II, and had brought home his gas mask which we kept in our toy cupboard. At school we were to walk to the basement if we heard an air-raid siren. The horrifying idea of being obliterated by bombs hit home with me when a neighbour, the artist William Kurelek, built one of the first bomb shelters in Toronto in his basement. My heart raced as I walked past his house on the way to my piano lesson. The possibility of World War III was a topic at our dinner table, and, at the age of ten, I did not sleep on the night that the Cuban Missile Crisis came to a head in 1962.¹ I remember where I was, and the anxiety I felt, when I heard that President Kennedy had been shot.

¹. "When the missiles were deployed, it brought the world closer than ever before - or since - to a nuclear war, a period now remembered in the West as the Cuban Missile Crisis. The crisis peaked on Oct. 27, 'Black Saturday,' when a series of startling events, including the shooting down of an American U-2 spy plane over Cuba, suggested that neither Khrushchev nor Kennedy fully controlled their own military machines." ("Cuban Missile Crisis" *New York Times*).

“What will happen next?” I remember asking myself. “Who is in charge now?”

I have since learned that I was not alone in this experience. For those of us who were children in the 1950s, we knew that the Korean and Vietnam Wars were in far-away countries, but we also realized that nuclear bombs might be dropped in our own backyards. Even the TV shows and movies that we watched reflected this uneasy time. These movies included *Dr. Strangelove; Or, How I learned to Stop Worrying And Love The Bomb* (Kubrick), something I never managed to do. Now my worries in my life have intensified because of events that I could not have foreseen. The nuclear bomb continues to worry me, and I still struggle with the technology. The attack on the Twin Towers threw New Yorkers, as well as many of us around the world, into a nightmare of anxiety. Anemana Hartocolis writes in *The New York Times*, “...at least 10,000 firefighters, police officers and civilians exposed to the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center have been found to have post-traumatic stress disorder” (Hartocolis). The 'Ebola Virus' has breeched our shores.² I am anxious about the dangers of the internet - I worry about credit card and identity theft. Few of the children of family and friends have job security,

². The World Health Organization "has declared the outbreak of Ebola virus disease in West Africa a public health emergency. There have been a small number of cases and deaths associated with this outbreak reported in Mali and the United States. ("Government of Canada Traveling Health-Safety").

and they may have to 'reinvent' themselves several times over the course of their lives. As mathematician and statistics professor William Byers says, "there have been times in the past when the dominant culture was strong enough to ignore uncertainty, but this is not true today. We live in challenging times, and uncertainty is at the heart of the challenge" (Byers 56).

While researching the concept of uncertainty and its role in my practice, I have realized that the position of the viewer in my work is central to my creative process. Therefore, I have begun to investigate the ways in which my subjective experience as an artist leads to the creation of highly personal work that can be objectively experienced by the viewer. In my practice, by making studio work about uncertainty, and the anxiety and worry that arise from it, I explore the ways in which I can approach the viewer through our mutual experience of modern life.

Research Questions:

Can the language of quantum mechanics illuminate uncertainty in everyday life?

How can the position of the viewer in relation to my work affect me as an artist and as a person?

Can my art practice mitigate the effects of uncertainty and anxiety in my life?

Since I consider uncertainty to be inevitable in contemporary life, in what ways do I see this uncertainty imbedded in my self-reflective practice?

Definition of Terms

For use in this paper, defining the difference between the concepts of uncertainty, anxiety and worry is challenging because, in general usage, these words can be used differently in many contexts, often interchangeably. In my practice, the definitions that I use for these words are very specific. The New Oxford English Dictionary (referred to here as the NOED) states that 'uncertainty' "refers to a state of being not certain, not completely confident or sure of something, not to be relied on" (NOED 2011). This definition makes me think of two people on a back road, looking at a road map, wondering where they are, one not wanting to alarm the other. This sense of looming alarm points to the NOED's definition of anxiety, which it describes as being "a feeling of worry, nervousness or unease typically about an imminent event or something with an uncertain outcome" (NOED 74). I note that the word 'uncertain' has appeared in this definition. Uncertainty often gives rise to anxiety, and someone who is anxious is usually characterized as being intolerant of uncertainty.

Anxiety is a feeling, a noun, whereas 'worry' can be a verb, an action taken in response to anxiety. The NOED says that to worry is to "give way to anxiety or unease; allow one's mind to dwell on difficulty or troubles" (NOED 74). When used as a noun, it is "a state of anxiety and uncertainty over actual or potential problems" (NOED 74). The key here is that worry often refers to uncertainty about the future, the what-if's. I see a process developing, uncertainty giving over to anxiety, giving over to worry.

Psychiatric definitions of anxiety fill chapters in psychology textbooks and manuals such as the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (referred to here as the DSM), but their fine and much debated nuances are not necessary for this thesis document. Anxiety was central to Sigmund Freud's work, and his general use of 'neurotic' anxiety', in particular, is a definition that fits the usage of anxiety in this paper. Allan V. Horwitz in his book *A Short History Of Anxiety* states that Freud specified neurotic anxiety as "anxiety in regard to a danger which we do not know" (16), speaking of people who are anxious when they have nothing to fear, as opposed to those who are justifiably anxious when there actually *is* something to fear. For the purposes of my practice, I have settled on a definition for the word 'anxiety' that ranges from the uneasy to just this side of the neurotic. I agree with Freud on the subject of the importance of examining anxiety. Horwitz quotes Freud as saying, "there

is no question that the problem of anxiety is a nodal point at which the most various and important questions converge, a riddle whose solutions would be bound to throw a flood of light on our whole mental existence" (qtd. in Horwitz 118).

Literature

In this section I talk about the ways in which several writers have influenced my research on uncertainty and anxiety, and also my thinking about the language of physics. During my exhibition, I will be creating an artwork, *Performance Anxiety*, that draws on the ideas of Relational Aesthetics, and I will discuss this concept in my section describing my exhibition and in the addendum to this thesis document.

During a class in February 2012 at OCAD University, artist Ian Carr Harris spoke about uncertainty in contemporary life. Carr Harris suggested that Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle had become a metaphor for our experience of uncertainty in modern life. He said that quantum mechanics has introduced randomness and chance into our perception of the world and that this worldview has supplanted determinism as the framework within which we now must live our lives (Carr Harris lecture). It was of particular interest to me when he said that "we have to have a willingness to work with the uncertainties and constantly evolving experience that we have in the world" (Carr Harris lecture). When I thought about this

statement, it resonated with my own sense of the fragmentation and ambivalence that I felt, both in my experience of life, and also as a consequence of living in the contemporary world. As a result, I saw possibilities in exploring Carr Harris' ideas about uncertainty, and considered investigating these ideas in my practice.

Because I do not have a science background, I hunted for books that described physics in ways that I could easily understand. I was surprised to find that there was great interest in this, given the number of books that I found on the subject. Brian Greene's book *The Elegant Universe* was recommended to me by physics professor Ana Joffre who is currently in my IAMD cohort, and Greene's book quickly became my primary source for learning about quantum mechanics. He explains that we used to consider the fundamental laws of nature as being so basic as to be beyond question, however the idea that particles have definite positions and speeds, as well as energy that can be measured at definite moments, is thrown into uncertainty (Greene 114). As he says, when referring to The Theory of Special Relativity, "in the hands of Einstein, with his imaginings of observers chasing after light beams, there are profound implications to grasping fully how even the most mundane situations appear to individuals in relative motion" (Greene 24). Greene captivated me with his poetic descriptions of scientific principles, and, because of

this, I began to consider using storytelling in my practice as a way to draw people into my work.

Due to my interest in using the language of quantum mechanics in my art practice, I have thought about what the disciplines of art and science can offer each other. The idea of exploring the intersection of art and science is not new to me. For thirty-nine years I have been married to Luther, an engineering-scientist. As an English student at The University of Toronto, I had always considered my husband's work to be inaccessible to me. At a moment when he was working on equations for his own Master's thesis, which was on Control Systems Theory, he mentioned that equations could be elegant solutions to mathematical problems. Using a word such as 'elegant' to describe a scientific concept caught my attention. I discovered that language can be a gateway into another world, and that even some mathematical concepts might be understood in layman's terms. In an article in *Scientific American*, John Maeda, the former president of The Rhode Island School of Design, stated that the similarities in how scientists and artists work outweigh the stereotypical differences. "Both are dedicated to asking the big questions placed before us: What is true? Why does it matter? How can we move society forward" (Maeda)? Reading these ideas about the similarity between the methodology of artists and scientists reminded me of the discussions that Luther and I had had in the early years of our marriage. Maeda says that

"we know that the scientist's laboratory and the artist's studio are two of the last places reserved for open-ended inquiry, for failure to be a welcome part of the process, and for learning to occur by a continuous feedback loop between thinking and doing." He goes on to say that "I'm always trying to find others in my tribe, hybrids who seek to marry disparate fields as a way of life" (Maeda). This statement resonates with me because of the way I use my perception of uncertainty in physics as a way to discuss the effects of uncertainty in life.

Mathematics and Statistics Professor, William Byers, talks about the need to embrace uncertainty in life. His book *The Blind Spot: Science and the Crisis of Uncertainty*, was the first to inspire me to think about the fact that my uncertainty and anxiety might be a necessary part of my creative process. He says that we expect science to provide certainty in a world which we perceive as being unpredictable and chaotic, but that this may not be the case. He states that science is filled with ambiguity, unpredictability and uncertainty, and that this uncertainty can become the source for creativity, freedom and wonder (Byers 56). From this I understand that uncertainty does not stop science from making great strides forward in understanding how the world works. Given my troubled relationship with uncertainty, I find it reassuring when Byers ties uncertainty to the creative process. He says that understanding how uncertainty works in our lives "involves the realization that uncertainty and

incompleteness are the price we pay for creativity - in fact, for being alive" (Byers 56).

As I said when describing my reactions to growing up during the Cold War, anxiety is ingrained in my experience of the modern era. Sociologist Allan V. Horwitz states in *Anxiety: A Short History*, that anxiety is a major aspect of Western culture in the contemporary world. Horwitz quotes Rollo May, who writes in his seminal book, *The Meaning of Anxiety*, that "every alert citizen of our society realizes on the basis of his own experience, as well as his observation of his fellowmen, that anxiety is a pervasive and profound phenomenon in the twentieth century" (qtd. in Horwitz 118). His mention of our particular society encouraged me to consider whether my practice might be universally understood. My work, particularly its humour, may only function in the specific cultural and societal context in which I live.

During my initial research into uncertainty and anxiety, I was interested in Carr Harris' statement that, when thinking about uncertainty in the modern era, one may ask about the nature of God and how one might engage in a spiritual dialogue (Carr Harris lecture 2012). In this context, Horwitz describes how expressions of anxiety are not limited to psychological symptoms, but can also be existential: "Anxiety can be experienced as concern regarding one's place in the world or universe, and may involve questions about the meaning of existence, the presence

of God, and the possibility of an afterlife" (Horwitz 5). I find that the older I get, the more these questions begin to interest me, but I find them challenging, not unsettling - existential anxiety is not on my worry list.

It seems that no matter where or how I start the process of making studio work, my core themes of uncertainty, anxiety and excessive worry inevitably surface. I had always considered them to be a negative, unproductive part of my identity. I have spent many years trying to manage what I believe is a difficult and particularly annoying way to deal with uncertainty in life - annoying to me and annoying to those around me.

After reading psychologist Kerry Gordon's article called "Impermanence of Being: Toward a Psychology of Uncertainty", which was published in *The Journal of Humanistic Psychology*, I was reminded of Byers' linking of uncertainty with creativity, and I wondered whether my anxiety, as well as my uncertainty, might be useful to me in a way in which I had not previously considered. Gordon says that "uncertainty is an inherent cosmic expression, deeply embedded within the core of reality. The deep psychic expression of this experience is anxiety which is conceived not as limit, but rather as an essential state of being emerging simultaneously with uncertainty" (Gordon 96). He suggests that anxiety, which he describes as being uncertainty's child, is a necessary consequence of a creative universe, and that uncertainty can be looked at as an "expression of the boundless creativity inherent in the Universe" (96). Having read

Gordon's article, I often think about how my anxiety may be a positive spark for my creative process, and I have returned to this article many times for inspiration and reassurance.

Relevant Practices

While researching my thesis, I discovered the work of two artists who share the same interest as I do in exploring the relationship between art and physics. Our practices are very different, but Ingrid Koenig's conceptual framework in particular is similar to mine.

Ingrid Koenig is an artist whose research-based work is grounded in physics and quantum mechanics. She shares my interest in the language of physics, including Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle, as a way to speak about the every day. Our approaches, and even our personal journeys while exploring our interest in physics have some commonality. For example, we both, at different times, experimented with our work during separate residencies at the Banff Centre. She is interested, as am I, in using the language of uncertainty in quantum mechanics to "speak to the complexity of our time" (Koenig). However, we differ in how we use our research. She makes maps, drawings and diagrams using scientific imagery. In contrast, I show how the language of physics resonates for me by weaving personal narrative within text-based

work. I share her interest in using personal experience, as well as what she refers to as the lens of science, to view the poetics of daily life.

Edward Tufte is an artist who uses his knowledge of physics to inform his artistic practice. His exhibition *Cognitive Art of Feynman Diagrams* has recently been exhibited at The Fermi Lab Art Gallery in the Fermi National Accelerator Laboratory. In *All Possible 6-Photon Scatterings (120 Space-Time Feynman Diagrams)*, (Tufte), he interprets Feynman Diagrams in stainless steel. He describes these diagrams as a type of shorthand for getting at the essence of what's going on. "These mathematically derived and empirically verified visualizations represent the space-time paths taken by all subatomic particles in the universe" (Tufte). He works with these diagrams with some of the same intentions that I have when working with formulas, which are to highlight their beauty and elegance. In fact, he describes Feynman diagrams as being "both beautiful and true" (Tufte). Our practices reflect different outlooks. His work celebrates what he calls "the precise activities of Nature at her highest resolution" (Tufte). With poetic and visual clarity, Tufte draws attention to the magnificence of the universe. My work often examines how overwhelming the universe can be, which results in my having a more introspective point of view. When thinking about this, I wondered whether it might be a relief for me if I were to step away from

my inward facing practice to embrace the power of the universe as he sees it.

There are two artists whose practices have influenced my work about uncertainty and anxiety. Nina Leo is a contemporary artist who addresses sensorial aspects of the human condition. Over the course of a year, she created *To-Do-Lists* by writing down "something not to think about" (Leo) on a daily basis. As she says, "these daily journals were kept as a means for controlling feelings of helplessness that can accompany an overload of information. She goes on to say that "what started to be revealed was that the act of writing down 'something not to think about' as a means for releasing it, actually led to a preoccupation with 'not thinking about that thing' " (Leo). Leo's work resonates with me. Her influence on my practice can be seen both thematically and methodologically, particularly in my use of text and lists to catalogue my experience of anxiety.

I am interested in the work of Lois Andison, some of which I interpret as being about worry and uncertainty. Andison is an artist "whose kinetic installations investigate the intersection of technology, nature and the body" (Olga Korper Gallery Inc.). I first saw Andison's *Heartbreaking 91* (Andison) in the home of a private collector in Toronto. After spending time with the work, I empathized with its emotional subject, and at the same time, I was entertained by its mysterious mechanisms. I have an

affinity with Andison's use of text and humour. I particularly enjoy her work *1000 Catastrophes* (Andison) - the energy in her impressive number of worries, and perhaps their secrecy, seems to power the work. I, perhaps inadvisably, specify my worries in detail in my work, leaving me in a very uncomfortable position.

The Role of the Viewer

The following narrative focuses on how uncertainty became central to my work. It elaborates on my interest in the relationship of the artist to the viewer, as well as the part that storytelling plays in my practice, and my interest in the implications of the idea of truth versus fiction.

Before my current thesis work, I created an installation, *Quantum Mechanics*, which was my first experiment with using the language of physics in my practice. I wrote a story that referenced Heisenberg's Uncertainty Principle as a metaphor for the uncertainty of memory, a theme that continues to interest me. In this story, the metaphor triggers a memory of a childhood train trip that I took with my father, and in the narrative I suggest that I have some questions about whether the trip had actually taken place, or whether it was a fantasy.

During this exhibition, several viewers asked me whether I was uneasy about the uncertainty surrounding that memory. One viewer asked me if I had ever discovered whether the train trip had actually happened.

In some situations I bend the truth to make my work more accessible, and in this case the entire story was a fabrication. This particular viewer was annoyed when he discovered that it was fiction, feeling that I had betrayed him. "Lindsay," he said, "you make installations, you draw us into your story, and then you lie to us." It seemed that the uncertainty that was the subject of the work was mirrored in this uncertain experience for the viewer.

Some effects of the use of truth versus fiction had become evident, as did the implications of my being an unreliable narrator. During the exhibition, my own father asked me why I felt it was necessary to tell people about this confusion, feeling that he was implicated in it in some way, which made him feel uncomfortable. I was a bit anxious as well about the fact that my work had inspired some antipathy directed toward me personally. I thought about the methods that I had used to encourage the viewer to engage with my work - the dramatic and intimate nature of the story, the juxtaposition of the scientific and the personal, mystery, light, sound, movement, and voice-over narration. In particular, I began to realize how much power there is in storytelling in relation to the dynamic between the artist and the viewer, and I decided that it would be interesting to explore this dynamic in my practice.

Methodology

Storytelling is central to my self-reflective studio practice. The role of the storyteller is a comfortable one for me. I draw on its ancient aura of authority to give power to my narrative. Walter Benjamin in *The Storyteller* describes storytelling as something which has always been our inalienable right, "the securest of our possessions...the ability to exchange experience" (Benjamin I). Benjamin says that "half the art is to keep the story free from explanation as one reproduces it...it is left up to him to interpret things the way he understands them" (VI).

Graeme Sullivan in *Art Practice As Research* describes the power of storytelling in the context of visual arts research practices. "There is something intensely personal about narrative, as we have a propensity for storytelling as it renders certain human complexities in a human form" (Sullivan 199). In my practice I use a combination of the visual and the written, an interdisciplinary approach which allows me to explore the evolution of my own and the viewer's identity. Sullivan describes this type of approach as using "a visual narrative as an interpretive method to construct and critique phenomena" (199).

Containers and Containment: All the Bottles In My Cupboard

To establish my methodology for my thesis, I participated in an independent study with Nina Leo during which I explored the medium of drawing even though I had little experience with it. I chose to draw the

bottles in my kitchen cupboard which referenced a domestic aspect to my work. To create a focus, Leo and I discussed my interest in making lists, and the implications of their ability to control and contain, which was echoed in the function of the bottle as container. Umberto Eco describes visual list-making in the context of art: "How does one use the visual list...to make infinity comprehensible...and how, as a human being does one face infinity? How does one attempt to grasp the incomprehensible? Through lists and through catalogues" (qtd.in Beyer). Since drawing was new to me, I was surprised to discover that no matter how hard I tried to simply replicate the bottles, something of myself was being revealed in the process. As Leo wrote during an email exchange, "giving over to your own uncertainties and inability to control or contain the medium, and, therefore, the inability to control the drawings, led to more conceptual pieces created around what that meant" (Leo). The depictions of the bottles shifted from being attempts at replication, to being more philosophical in content.

In her book *Pro Forma*, Jessica Wyman, a professor at OCAD University, describes the use of text in art:

"The use of language, in art or in any other mode, is meant to address a reader or viewer as a receiver (and creator) of meaning; while the artist chooses her words and their framing device, those categories have no meaning without their reception and apprehension. As such, it is the reader/hearer/viewer who ultimately decides the meaning, if not the intention, of the words set before her, and this meaning can never be determinate - it is always suspended above the real, never allowing singularity of meaning or location" (Wyman 14).

By choosing kitchen bottles as subjects in my drawing series *Containers and Containment: All The Bottles In My Cupboard*, I point to traditional women's subjects and themes, particularly those that focus on the domestic realm. The bottles themselves are 'containers', an aspect of them which is often used as a symbolic reference to the female. Despite this connection to the feminine, the themes that my work discusses move beyond the domestic sphere into a larger context, particularly when speaking about the difficult feelings that often surface in relationships regardless of gender. My work pivots around the concept of uncertainty rather than around an overtly feminist message and, significantly, the stories that I tell tend to be universal in nature. Nevertheless, I recognize that feminist themes which reference a domestic realm could be present in my work, particularly because I am an artist who is a woman and a mother, and whose work is often self-reflective and materially home-sourced.

As an older woman and artist, I am inspired by Louise Bourgeois who, like me, flourished at a later stage in life. Bourgeois worked with everyday domestic objects in order to use them as a counterpoint for her sculptures. This included "perfume bottles, spools of thread, mirrors, lanterns, tables, chairs, stools and beds which, when placed near her sculptures, added an additional resonance to her work" (Louise Bourgeois). Although I do not feel isolated in the way that I sense

Bourgeois did, I do recognize her courage and strength in the face of a challenging situation. As she says, "to alleviate anxiety we retreat from the world to the comfort of the object, and to this object we attribute great power and aura" (Louise Bourgeois).

As an artist who uses domestic objects in her work, Mary Pratt finds her inspiration in the domestic realm. I find her depiction of every day objects both moving and thought provoking. In an article in *Canadian Art*, Lisa Moore describes Pratt's work as radiant, with its quality of light shining "within the ordinary domestic objects that make up much of her subject matter: a glass jar of preserves, the flesh of raw cod, a platter of cooked fish, a bowl of fruit" (Moore). Moore continues: "These objects are often wrapped in the reflective, transparent or translucent materials that cover and protect: aluminum foil, wax paper, saran wrap, Tupperware and patterned glass" (Moore). Moore references Pratt's use of the symbolism inherent in the use of these wrappings, saying that "they seal, partially obscure, or hide what they hold because they are reflective, and also because they are the everyday fabric of domestic life and, as such, they have become invisible to us" (Moore). I appreciate Pratt's interpretation of these home-centred objects. She uses her depictions of them to tell her stories and to visually symbolize her thoughts and feelings in regards to everyday life. While I also depict everyday objects, I tell my stories explicitly with text written over the drawings.

Fables of Identity: Everything in my Wallet

In order to continue experimenting with drawing, I drew the contents of my wallet because it allowed me to explore the use of text in my practice. The shapes of the credit and identity cards seemed easier to draw than those of the bottles because the cards were two dimensional, and did not vary - they were all rectangles. As with the bottles, I soon realized that despite their simplicity, they were difficult to replicate, particularly the ones that had my picture on them. As I worked, each item in my wallet triggered a memory which I layered onto each image. They became a catalogue, my present juxtaposed with my past. For instance, my driver's license reminded me of a bizarre childhood car ride with my parents. As the project progressed, I became uneasy about the uncertainty of memory, and I began to doubt myself - was the car green or red? Was the car ride just a fantasy? Sadly, there is no one left to verify this.

I am worried about putting my drawings in an exhibition for fear that someone will steal my personal information, even though I have changed almost every number on every card. Even in this document, I have included my drawing of money rather than, for instance, my health card because this paper will eventually be on the internet. Paranoia is exhausting.

Uncertainty Principle

During my residency in Banff I focused on the concepts of worry and physics. Before I went there, I had been exploring how the language of physics resonates for me as a way of looking at the world. I had begun a series of small drawings in which I reproduced formulas, eventually matching them with stories. They describe a relationship in which an anxious woman speaks about doubt and uncertainty in an affair. The formula used on the last print is *Escape Velocity*, which is the speed that would be needed for particles to escape from a massive object. Echoing that idea of escape, the story ends with the narrator having these worries confirmed - when she wakes up she discovers that her lover has gone.

Once I started working in my assigned studio in Banff, I discovered that its size had an impact on my artwork. In my house in Hamilton, I usually work in a small studio or in my kitchen. There, in my house, I make drawings on notebook paper, often documenting my domestic life. When I arrived in Banff, I was given an enormous studio overlooking the mountains, and my series of small drawings evolved into very large prints which were scaled to the limits of the size of the printer and paper available, 44 inches wide. Because of their size, I had to handwrite the stories on to the prints after they had been hung on the walls of the gallery. Handwriting the story on to the prints was nerve-wracking because of the angle of the writing and the chance for error - I had only one copy of

each print, and because the files were improperly saved to the computer, there was little possibility of making more. I worried about what would happen if I made a mistake, and, as with most of my worries, the worst did not happen.

I was painfully aware that my uncertainty and anxiety had surfaced in this artwork, and once my Banff cohort saw it I was teased good-naturedly about my worrying for the rest of the time I was there.

Interestingly, I learned that although I had been identified as an excessive worrier, I was not as uncomfortable about its being known as I thought I might have been. This was an important lesson, and it encouraged me to make my next work, an artwork that, in the end, left me far more vulnerable and uncomfortable, and even now I question my decision to create it.

Worry Lines

As I described above, I was overwhelmed by the size of my studio and the enormity of the mountain setting. In an effort to manage my growing anxiety, I moved to a smaller studio. I worried about what artistic direction I should take in order to develop studio work for my thesis. *Worry Lines* began with an obsessive but contemplative action - winding a piece of string around a stick. As I wound the string, I thought about how much I enjoyed using text and lists in my practice. I gathered up some small blocks of wood that I found scattered in the wood shop, thinking that using

random found objects would help to demonstrate the uncertainty and fragmentation I was feeling. I worried whether the creative process would fail me. "I'm worried that I will never have another good idea," "I'm worried that worrying is interfering with my creativity." And then, "I'm worried that I'm too old to start something new."

I was uneasy when I exhibited these blocks in the Banff Centre Gallery, but my comfort level grew as the exhibition continued, and I became curious about the variety of responses I received. Some viewers just read them and moved on, others laughed, which I pleased me since some of the worries I wrote were ridiculous, even to me. It surprised me that some people even told me their own worries. It seemed that I might not be alone in my worry and uncertainty.

The Artist as Viewer

In Banff, I experienced being in the role of the viewer during a critique of *Worry Lines* by a Parisian curator, Monique Lacoste. On one of the blocks I had written that 'I worry about leaving the stove on'. The reason why this particular worry is funny is that it is a cliché for people who worry. "What is it with worrying about the stove?" Lacoste asked disdainfully. As it turns out she had just seen an artwork by Leah Byrne, another artist participating in the residency. To address her own worry about leaving the stove on, Byrne had taken a picture of her stove, off,

every day for a month as she left her house, and these photos were displayed in a grid on her studio wall.

I found the work hilarious, and I smile even as I write this. Being able to laugh at Byrne's work made me feel as if I were not the only one with this worry. It gave me a new, humourous perspective on my own anxiety. I felt we were kindred spirits.

Lacoste was dismissive of both Byrne's and my work. It may have been a cultural issue. What may be funny to a Canadian female conceptual artist may not amuse a young female curator from France. Lacoste's male Canadian escort explained to her that leaving the stove on was a common worry, "but not for me" he hastened to add, making me wonder whether anxiety about the stove might be gender based as well as culturally based. He said, "when I wonder whether I have left the stove on, I think 'so what' and move on." As it turns out, Lacoste was also ready to move on, skipping reading the rest of my worries. The humour in both Byrne's and my work was lost on Lacoste. Apparently it was lost on Byrne too, because it turned out that she did not intend for her work to be funny. I realized then how subjective humour is, and that the viewer brings her own point of view to her work, which may resonate in ways that the artist did not intend.

Exhibition

I chose The Graduate Gallery as the site for my exhibition because it has the necessary amount of wall space to hang my drawings. I will organize my work chronologically to show how my comfort level rises through the process of revealing myself to others, particularly in regards to my feelings of uncertainty and anxiety. At the same time, this approach demonstrates how the role of the viewer in my work evolves as my work progresses.

As I have mentioned, when I exhibited *Worry Lines* in Banff, I was interested to discover that some people responded to it by telling me their own worries. However, when viewers came to my studio to tell their worries to me outside a gallery context, it made me feel anxious, uncomfortable and a bit overwhelmed. It was as if I were being asked to fill the role of a therapist, something I had not intended. For my thesis exhibition I have decided to explore this dynamic by experimenting with the viewers' responses to each other, to the artwork and to me as the artist by using the subject of worry as a focus.

Performance Anxiety - Giving Up Control

During the exhibition, a work will be created to start a conversation between the artist and the viewer. Even though there will be a concrete result, my intention is that the conversation itself will be the medium of the work. Worry can be based on a fear of lack of control, a response to

uncertainty in the world and in the future. In the context of the exhibition, *Performance Anxiety* will be an experiment in embracing uncertainty by my giving up some control over the outcome of the work. *Performance Anxiety* asks the question 'Am I alone in my worries?' and requires the participation of the viewer to complete it. I have never done anything like this before and I do not know what to expect, but, as Carr Harris says, "we have to have a willingness to work with the uncertainties and constantly evolving experience that we have in the world" (Carr Harris 2012, lecture).

My plan is to make a work of art that will be assembled on a pillar in the gallery. It will be composed entirely of worries posted by me and by the viewers. My methodology is designed to situate myself as performer, artist, catalyst and participant in the work, and to set the parameters in order to encourage viewer interaction with me and with each other. This is a way to literally insert myself into the work, which I see as the next step in the trajectory of my practice. I will personally invite people to reveal their worries as a thematic response to my exhibition. I have limited myself to one invitation per person to avoid nervous nagging. A chair will be set up in front of a secretary desk. Inside the desk there will be pens, as well as different sizes and colours of post-it notes for small, big or extensive worries. My question will be written there - "Am I alone in my worries?" and the response can be anything - yes or no, a worry of mine that viewers share or a worry of their own. Instructions will be listed on the

inside of the desk - there is no limit to the number of notes, they can be signed or anonymous, or even left blank for people who want to show that they worry but not actually specify what the worries are. When ready, participants can post their worries anywhere on the pillar, and read the other worries if they would like to. My hope is that viewers will place their worries deliberately, perhaps next to another worry with which they have an affinity so that the worries will read as a conversation.

At the same time, I will be reading the notes too, constantly adding more of my own worries in response. This is where my control issues come in. Apart from issuing invitations and adding my own worries, I have no control over the end result of the work. Even though I have tested them, I worry that the post-it notes will not stick. My chief worry is that no one will participate, even though it has been my experience that people generally welcome the opportunity to express their worries. There is the possibility that viewers might have a cathartic experience from externalizing their worries. Viewers might participate in order to have the chance to be part of making a work of art, or even simply to be supportive of me. Viewers may be encouraged to interact because they identify with worry and anxiety as a common, everyday experience. However, I question whether it can be called a work of art if no one else participates, and only my worries are posted. In the context of relational aesthetics, the

answer would be no, because there would not have been a conversation or communication, no tribe of worriers would have appeared.

Theoretical Framework - Relational Aesthetics

Relational Aesthetics provides a theoretical framework for the work.

It is a term coined by Nicolas Bourriaud, a writer and curator who is currently the director of École Nationale Supérieure des Beaux-Arts. As critic Roberta Smith says, the focus of this concept is in building a community to re-sensitize people to one another in a time when "so much - technology, stress, shopping - conspires against human connection (Smith). While in the planning stages, I realized that it is essential to the work that I provide the possibility for human connection - community building will be a process. The first step will be the viewers' interaction with me when I ask them to be part of the work. Assuming they accept the invitation, the next step will be adding their worries to the pillar. There could be a type of interaction even if viewers are by themselves - reading other peoples' notes will give them context. Each type of encounter will change the meaning of the work. Writer and critic Claire Bishop says, "Relational art works seek to establish intersubjective encounters (be these literal or potential) in which meaning is elaborated collectively rather than in the privatized space of individual consumption" (Bishop *Antagonism* 54). How meaning evolves is of particular interest to me - I

am the artist, but I am also the subject, and the artwork has a context within my body of work. The viewers' worries may have an emotional effect on me - they may surprise, shock, sadden or amuse me. All of these reactions become part of the work.

Bourriaud describes the community as being "formed in relation to and inside the work" (Bourriaud qtd. in Bishop *Participation* 162). I see an oscillation in this, with the positions of the artist, the viewers and the work of art being fluid. The art is moving, it is a performance, and both the viewers and I are put into uncertain positions with our identities in flux as the work evolves. People are viewers, participants, individuals, members of a community, and a component of the art. The artwork exists on the pillar, but also between us and around us. These facets of ourselves resonate within the process and become layered in the work.

Bourriaud says that "a work can function as a relational device in which there is a degree of randomness. It can be a machine for provoking and managing individual or collective encounters" (qtd.in Bishop *Participation* 163). This is true of this work - the performance will evolve in an unpredictable way as viewers add their worries to the collection during the course of the exhibition. The demographic of the audience may have an effect on the outcome. Viewers will be part of a gallery-going group, most will be well-educated, some specifically art students at the graduate level. Most, possibly all, will be younger than I am. Most will know me,

some more than others. My feeling is that these factors will make people more inclined to participate in the Gallery than they would in a public space.

It is important to consider what will happen to the notes at the end of the exhibition. The fate of the written worries is tied to the meaning of the work, and it is not meant to be deadly serious. For instance, the fact that the work uses post-it notes is meant to be humorous. They have an office connotation, as if they are memos from a meeting. Their function is to make a point and then be taken down because, in the context of the work, the worries themselves are unimportant. The act of writing the note and sticking it to the pillar is where the meaning resides. I have considered several options for dealing with the notes after the exhibition which reflect these connotations. I could put them up on my studio wall to remind me that I am not alone in my worries, but for me they do not function outside of their role in the original process. For the same reason, it seems inappropriate to use them in another artwork. My decision is that they will disappear when the exhibition is over. I will burn them in the way that the notes are when they are removed from the Wailing Wall in Jerusalem. For me, as a person who is trying to let go of control, this act will also signal that I am not a worry doll, that I am not going to take on other people's worries.

Conclusion

Performance Anxiety addresses my research questions about whether the position of the viewer in relation to my work can affect me as an artist and as a person. In creating this work, I also explore whether making art about anxiety can mitigate it for me, and I believe that both of these questions will be answered when I experience the artwork. I am committed to carrying through with making *Performance Anxiety*, but I find that even just thinking about it makes me feel anxious. I am uncomfortable about giving up some control of the work to the viewer, particularly in the context of my thesis exhibition. However, I suspect that it may be a relief to give up some of the responsibility I feel for the responses of others.

Through the evolution of *Performance Anxiety*, I hope to provide the viewer with an experience that will be like my own experience of self-revelation. By telling participants my own worries, I hope to give them permission to say that they worry too. We may discover that we can know something about each other because of the process itself, not just because of the subject. I expect that my suspicion of not worrying alone may be confirmed.

Further Work

I plan to continue experimenting with Relational Aesthetics in my practice, linking it to my interest in uncertainty, anxiety and worry. Having

spent the last seven years working toward two degrees at OCAD University, I expect the change in my life after graduation may be dramatic, and I worry about it. In Hamilton where I live there has been a renaissance in the art scene which has seen the addition of many new galleries on James Street North. In the summer of 2015, I would like to have an exhibition at the You Me Gallery in which I will install a series of drawings, *All The Electronics In My House*. At the same time I plan an interactive performance about 'transitions' that will evolve during the course of the exhibition.

Summary

If uncertainty is one of the defining features of modern life, and also a focus for the physics that describes our place in the universe, is it any wonder that I feel uncertain too? Viewers are implicated - they are people inhabiting this unpredictable universe, and they too live in these uncertain times. By determining and expressing the role of uncertainty and anxiety in my work, I was not initially looking for these feelings to be mitigated. However, by exploring my research questions and expressing them through the development of my studio practice, I have discovered that manifesting these feelings in my art can alleviate some of my anxiety. It connects me to viewers through the resonances in our common experience. I suspect that anxiety will always be a part of my identity. My

life might be more comfortable without anxiety, however since I consider it to be a spark for my creativity, I am hesitant to think about what my life would be without it. "Whoever has learned to be anxious in the right way has learned the ultimate" (Kierkegaard 155). Through my research and my studio practice, I have put my uncertainty, anxiety and worry to work, and I believe they contain enough energy to fuel my creative process for some time to come.

Addendum

In creating *Performance Anxiety*, I planned to merge it thematically with my practice through its exploration of uncertainty, worry and identity. By arranging my work chronologically, I was able to reveal different aspects of my identity as it emerged from within the artwork in the exhibition. This strategy allowed me to use storytelling to draw viewers into a relationship with me and my work; as my stories became more personal, viewers grew to know me better.

In *Containers and Containment* I wrote somewhat guardedly about my philosophical ideas, and about the futility of trying to control the precariousness that can accompany anxious feelings. Following on through *Fables of Identity*, I became more visible in my work by means of talking about who I am and whether my identity resides in the official records that document my life. In *Uncertainty Principle*, I continued to explore my sensitivities, this time by describing a difficult relationship and the heartbreak that goes along with it. *Worry Lines* highlighted my increasing vulnerability as I revealed my anxiety and uncertainty even further. At this point in the exhibition, I felt very exposed, and it was difficult to imagine what might come next in the trajectory of my work as my process of self-revelation evolved. However, by staging *Performance Anxiety*, I was able to address this question by inserting myself directly into my work, which provided a forum for viewers to speak directly to me

and to each other about our worries. In the end, this gave me the chance to observe whether my anxiety was mitigated through the discovery that I was not alone in my worries. It also allowed me to address my stated question about whether I worried alone.

Performance Anxiety was installed for the duration of my thesis exhibition. There were some decisions and adjustments that had to be made in response to the circumstances that evolved over the course of the week. My intention was to create an artwork by experimenting with using the principles of relational aesthetics. My original plan involved encouraging people to respond to my worries which were written on the blocks in my near-by installation *Worry Lines*. Participants would be asked to write their own worries on notes and to then attach them to the pillar which was centred on the west wall between the windows of the gallery. The assumption was that this interaction would foster a feeling of community among participants, and, in the spirit of relational aesthetics, that this interaction would be the focus and central part of the artwork rather than the notes that were posted on the pillar.

My first challenge was to find a way to motivate people to participate. It became obvious from the beginning that people were not clear about whether they were being asked to interact with the artwork. I considered making a sign to explain this, but I did not feel that this was aesthetically desirable. I thought about making a performance out of

asking people whether I worried alone, hoping that they would take that as a cue to write their worries on the notes. Another option was for me, or someone else, to hand people notepads and a pen when they entered the gallery. However, I thought that this might be confusing because the exhibition was designed as a thematic process which builds to the creation of *Performance Anxiety*. I decided that directing people to this artwork at the outset of their visit to the exhibition would upset this process. In the end, the best way to solve this problem turned out to be waiting until people approached the work and then simply asking them to write their worries in response to mine. Artist Miranda July addresses this problem of how to direct people to interact with her work. July creates lists of instructions that describe the way that her artwork should be constructed without her being present, and, in the process, transform her audience into her co-collaborators. She describes the effect of this process by suggesting that sometimes it can be a relief to follow instructions (academia.edu.). This subject of 'letting go of control' by allowing circumstances to unfold on their own is a process that I explore in my thesis. For example, during the creation of *Contain And Containment*, I abandoned my attempt to exactly replicate the bottles that were the subjects of my drawings. At that point, I realized that my subsequent drawings were evolving into a reflection of my thought process, which was more interesting to me than were my attempts at trying to exactly copy the

bottles. On this topic, July says that "sometimes the moment that we let go of trying to be original, we actually feel something new" (academia.edu).

Claire Bishop notes some possible shortcomings in Bourriaud's concept of relational aesthetics. Bourriaud describes this type of art as one that provides an opportunity for the formation of a community in which the democratic interactions of the participants are the focus of the artwork. However, as Bishop points out, gallery curators often promote the artist as being more of a designer than a participant. The artist then gets more credit for stage-managing the experience than Bourriaud had envisioned. Bishop concludes that this results in the artist becoming the focus and star of the experience rather than having equal status in the democratic community-building that takes place among the participants (Bishop 65).

The next challenge I had with staging *Performance Anxiety* was arranging the physical setting to effectively motivate people to participate in the work in the way that I had planned. Originally, a desk had been placed in the South West corner of the gallery, with the open side facing the corner so that people writing their worries would face into the room. I believed that this would make people more comfortable than they would be if their backs were to the room. The problem with this positioning was that people were not inclined to walk around the desk and sit down because it was not clear that this was the desk's function in the artwork. To address this confusion, I turned the desk around so that the notes and

pens in the desk were visible. To make it clear where the notes were supposed to go after participants had written on them, I moved the desk out of the corner and over beside the pillar. Finally, I set up *Worry Lines* as near to the desk and pillar as I could so that the connection between the two artworks would be as obvious as possible.

At the beginning of the exhibition, I had a problem with my own shyness. I did not ask the first two people who entered the gallery to write their worries. The next person to enter the gallery was a classmate, Miranda Whist. I did not ask her specifically to write her worries because she already knew about the work and its theoretical basis, and because of this I was surprised that she was hesitant to participate. However, I became uncomfortable when she took her red note and stuck it to the wall next to my black and white drawings. When she saw my reaction, she realized that I wanted her note to go on the pillar, and she moved the note to that position before she left the gallery. This problem of where to put notes solved itself the next day during the opening of the exhibition because the large number of notes that eventually accumulated on the pillar made their placement obvious to participants.

When I was planning *Performance Anxiety*, I took into consideration my experience of having people tell me their more personal worries during my previous exhibition at the Banff Centre. Therefore I was surprised to discover at my thesis exhibition that the act of writing their notes tended to

make people describe their less personal worries. It was only when participants spoke to me personally that they told me their more intimate worries. As well, people were more comfortable telling me our shared worries in this situation. I was truly surprised that so many people have the same worries as I do. For instance, I was amazed at the number of people who worry about Homeland Security and problems at the border. It also turned out that two people had actually put the wrong gas in their cars. Because of their telling me this, I was able to see that it would not be the end of the world if this happened.

These interactions during the creation of *Performance Anxiety* made me realize that I did not worry alone. However, finding out that other people worry too did not make me feel less anxious in general, which addressed my research question concerning whether my anxiety can be mitigated by externalizing and sharing my worries.

By using the principles of relational aesthetics to create the artwork, I had intended to set up a situation in which participants' interactions while putting up the notes would complete the work. In order to gauge whether the work was a success on this level, I asked myself several questions:

Would the artwork be complete if no one at all had participated? I believe that the answer would be 'no' because the theory associated with relational aesthetics suggests that communal activity needs to occur during the performance of the work.

Would the artwork be complete if I were not present to encourage viewers in the gallery to interact with the work? Would a set of written instructions work just as well to guide participants? From the point of view of relational aesthetics the work would be complete without my being present when people are writing and posting their notes. This would still answer my question about whether I worry alone. However, from my own point of view, I would have missed the personal interaction that I had with the participants. I needed to insert myself physically into the work and to be part of the communal interaction in order for the work to be successful for me personally.

Would the artwork be complete if participants were alone when they posted their worries and did not interact with any other participant at that time? Theoretically, noticing that they are part of a group effort by seeing other notes on the wall would indicate to them that they are participating in a group activity, and according to Bourriaud this would make the artwork complete.

As an experiment in relational aesthetics I believe that these results indicate that *Performance Anxiety* was a theoretical success because it fulfilled the parameters I created for it. From the point of view of myself as an artist, the artwork succeeded because it allowed me to insert myself directly into the work. This demonstrated the trajectory of my process of self-revelation in my work. From my personal point of view, *Performance*

Anxiety succeeded because most people enjoyed the experience of participating in it. Critically, I discovered that I do not worry alone. This did not make me worry any less, but it made me feel less isolated while doing so.

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In: ***Containers And Containment: All The Bottles In My Cupboard***

"Paradox is the language of uncertainty." "Does the work of art have to articulate the question, or can it be a metaphor, or can it just be itself? A question in the end may be answered by another question." "The principle of life may be to reveal uncertainty."

Carr Harris, Ian. OCAD University, Toronto, ON. February 2012. Lecture.

"Ambivalence: simultaneous desire. Ambivalence and cynicism come with post modern thinking."

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"The List: a series of names or other items written or drawn to make visible order out of chaos. The list is fluid, and changes, and we should know more about it's every metamorphosis - or, the converse, - if you have had something on this list mowed down in the blink of an eye, we should know about that too."

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"Luminous: brilliant intellectually. Enlightened or enlightening. Radiating or reflecting light. In fact, planetary nebulae have nothing to do with planets - they are luminous clouds thrown off by dying stars."

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"Sublime: whatever dwarfs our efforts to tame or encompass it, the noble the splendid, the sublime."

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"Infinity: And how does one face infinity? How does one attempt to grasp the incomprehensible? Through lists, catalogues, collections, encyclopedias, dictionaries." "Culture: The list is the origin of culture. What does culture want? To make infinity comprehensible."
 Beyer, Susanne, and Gorris, Lothar. "Spiegel Online Interview With Umberto Eco." *Spiegel Online*. November 11, 2009. Web. July 5, 2013.

In: ***Uncertainty Principle***

"I thought that it would last forever. I was wrong."
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"There are profound implications for bodies in relative motion." Paraphrased from: Greene, Brian. T. *The Elegant Universe*. p. 24. New York: Vintage Books, 2003. Print.

Illustrations



fig. 1. Desire



fig. 2. Pine Nut Oil

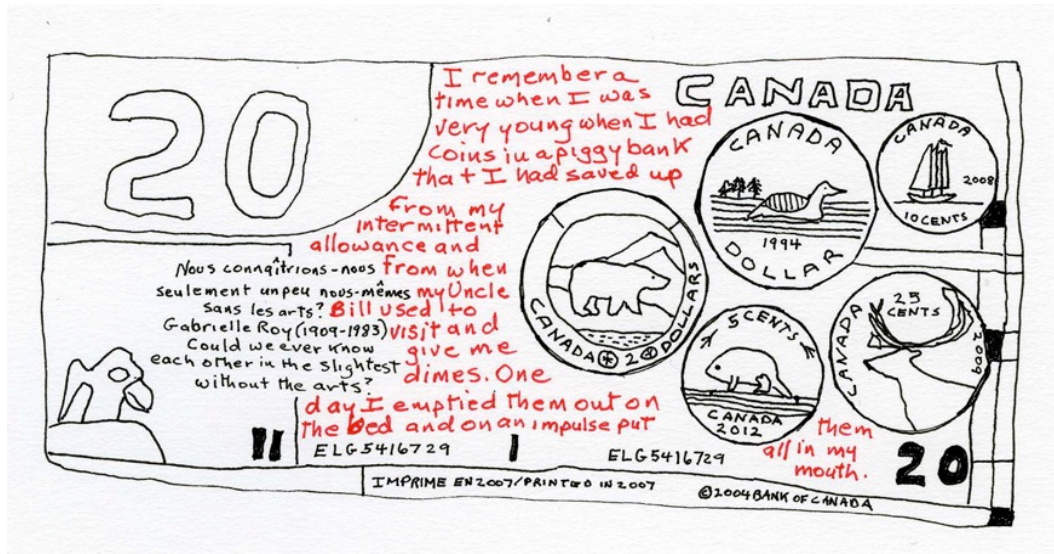


fig. 3. Twenty Dollar Bill

$$v_e = \sqrt{\frac{2GM}{r}}$$

Escape Velocity

The speed at which the kinetic energy plus gravitational potential energy of an object is zero. It is the speed needed to break free from the gravitational attraction of a massive body without further propulsion.

When I woke up you were gone.

fig. 5. Escape Velocity



fig. 6. Performance Anxiety