

Test First in a Discrete Area

by

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## Abstract

This document is twofold:

A monograph focuses on a series of investigations into collaboratively generated narrative structures. My collaborators are my friends, human and otherwise, including the cats I live with, Marty, Nalah, Oliver, and Pikkul, and my fellow artists, designers, and tinkerers, Florence, Andalah, Atanas, and Craig. Using strategies of classification, categorization, repetition and improvisation, narrative structures are expanded with varying degrees of legibility. The investigation takes the form of a series of case studies of writing including beading and works on paper (stacks, pages, books) that engage with the questions: What personal narrative possibilities emerge from writing and making at the edge of narrative? How can these narratives be used to surface, shape and depict understandings of mundane experience? And how do these narrative possibilities emerge and change when primarily working collaboratively? I frame this investigation through the narrative theories of Ursula K. Le Guin, Trinh T. Minh-Ha and Peggy Phalen. Le Guin's "carrier bag" narrative proposes a non-linear, esoteric, and personal accumulation of the everyday which my collaborators and I approach through photographic collection and organization. In creating this work, it became necessary to write of intangible experiences, while maintaining privacy and subjectivity. I repurpose Trinh T. Minh Ha's "speaking nearby" as a way to write about intangible experience without claiming knowledge or expression of it, and Peggy Phalen's performative "writing towards disappearance" to emphasize privacy and subjectivity in written experience.

The work is transformed and contextualized within fifteen exhibitions and numerous collaborative projects produced over the past year with my friends and frequent collaborators, Craig Rodmore, Florence Yee and Atanas Bozdarov. Expansive appendices, which are by no means secondary to the monograph, document and develop this larger collaborative project.

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## Some Thoughts (Trouble)

“Things don’t mean one thing and sometimes words aren’t very good.”

—Andalah Ali<sup>i</sup>

I came to the work in this thesis from a personal place of having difficulty speaking—of having a fraught relationship with words and narratives as they relate to myself as a social political being. I also came to it from a frustration with limitations of expression in the narrative forms I was most familiar with. Using strategies of collection, organization, repetition and improvisation in a collaborative framework, I aimed to expand my understanding of experience and communication and develop narrative strategies that communicated in a way that felt honest to me. The work made was made with my friends and collaborators who include cats and people. In the first section, Cats, I develop a collaborative framework and present several incomplete experiments in interspecies collaboration with Marty, Nalah, Oliver, and Pikkul (cats). In the second section, Books, I expand my collaborative framework to several projects with fellow artists, designers and tinkerers, Florence, Andalah, Atanas, and Craig.

The studio work discussed here includes a variety of writing and publications in the form of beading, works on paper (stacks, pages, books), and a collaborative project of many shows seen by very few people. This written document takes the form of a series of case studies each of which raises its own theoretical and methodical questions but which constellate around issues of language, narrative, and collaboration and are unified by the questions: What personal narrative possibilities emerge from writing and making at the edge of narrative? How can these narratives be used to surface, shape and depict understandings of mundane experience? And how do these narrative possibilities emerge and change when primarily working collaboratively?

I approach these questions personally and intuitively, enthusiastically engaging with impulse and irrationality. For me, speaking and writing at the edge of narrative means reducing linearity or suggesting multiple linearities, paring down language, and embracing chance and coincidence. In exploring these qualities, I draw on the narrative theories of Ursula K. Le Guin, Trinh T. Minh-Ha, and Peggy  
i        Sister, friend.

Phelan.

The feminist theorist Donna Haraway argues “it matters what stories we tell to tell other stories with.”<sup>1</sup> The structure a story takes on has far-reaching implications for what can be thought and felt, as well as who is included. The author Ursula K. Le Guin, most warm in my mind for her children’s series Cat Wings, where winged cats flee, wander, learn, and at last, find homes, proposes a “carrier bag theory of fiction.”<sup>2</sup> She defines this in opposition to a narrative of hero and conflict,<sup>3</sup> a common narrative that moves, spear-like, from point A to B, focusing on a central protagonist and their quest,<sup>4</sup> like Odysseus in The Odyssey, fighting the world to get home. Hero narratives are sensational stories of the unusual, the unexpected—a battle, a hunt, an adventure. This form of narrative tells a story of humanity rife with conflict, goal-oriented domination, central protagonists with supporting actors, and, if this story is used to tell more stories, it has the potential to shape a reality in its own likeness—linear, based on conflict, destructive.<sup>5</sup> The hero narrative is ancient. But, Le Guin argues, we could as easily be telling a story just as old, if not older, which takes on the form of a carrier bag, a sack for collecting, rather than a spear. A “carrier bag” narrative is one of collectivity, of the everyday rather than the remarkable, the meandering and non-linear rather than the linearly directed.<sup>6</sup> There is still space for conflict in such a narrative, but it is no longer central.<sup>7</sup> For me, the carrier bag narrative frames a way to write and create, without conflict and plot, about very small everyday things which serve as gestures, interventions and critiques of narrative constructs.

With the mundanity of a carrier bag narrative in mind, I chose to let my writing emerge from everyday experiences. My version of the carrier bag narrative is cumulative and takes on the form of lists and personal taxonomies, of impulsive but obsessive and highly structured writing, collections of photographs and objects. For me, the carrier bag narrative opens up possibilities for a passionate engagement with surroundings based on collecting the mundane and everyday. Through detecting patterns, categorization, and classification, my work functions as a personal and esoteric attempt to understand space and experience where successes and failures both serve as rich territories for research. In the section Carrier Bag / Collection / Index / Hotel Sign Photographs I will discuss this in relation to the possibilities of creating rather than using categories and

classification in collecting.

Writing about my everyday experiences poses difficulties because so much of it is viscerally felt rather than verbally expressed, raising the question of how one discusses the undiscussable. The filmmaker and literary theorist Trinh T. Minh-Ha suggests that it is important to not see objects as outside of oneself and instead recognize “the importance of constantly having contact with what is actually within ourselves out,”<sup>8</sup>—that it is important to remember that the world is always processed internally and subjectively—even with a collective and social framework. In order to do this, she proposes a political act of “speaking nearby”<sup>9</sup> as a way to speak without speaking. It is “speaking that does not objectify, does not point to an object as if it is distant from the speaking subject or absent from speaking place.”<sup>10</sup> It recognizes that objects are experienced temporally, spatially and subjectively. Such speaking moves between boundaries, allowing it to come very close to subjects without residing fully in them. In the section on Speaking Nearby / Writing / Hotel-Sign-Writing / / / /, I will discuss this in terms of a series of illegible writings about hotel signs but also not.

The work my collaborators and I have created, in its rigorous engagement with rules and systems and its pared down, quietly expressive (though not unexpressive) visuality, resonates with the approaches and work of Conceptual artists such as Hanne Darboven and Sol Lewitt. In Strict Rules but not Too Many, I will discuss their methods in relation to my own working methods as well as in relation to concepts of “going on”<sup>11</sup> brought up by Darboven and Lewitt. In his essay on Conceptual Art, Serial Art, Systems, Solipsism, Mel Bochner argues “If...we bracket-out all questions that, due to the nature of language, are undiscussable (such as why did this or that come to exist, or what does it mean?) it will then be possible to say that the entire being of an object, in this case an art object, is in its appearance.”<sup>12</sup> I suggest that, in systematic work that draws on the processes and visual language of Conceptual art, it is generative to not always take a formalist approach to discussing the work, while still recognizing the undiscussability of it. Minh-Ha’s “speaking nearby” is useful here, allowing, again the intangible to be discussed without pretending to know or actually express it.



I often obscure myself in my writing and making, disappear into collaborative work, write things that don't make sense, and I wonder if that ends up being seen as being apolitical or reactionary, that by silencing myself as a queer person, as a racialized person, I am making myself complicit with or re-enacting colonial violence. I am a reserved person, unwilling to give myself or my work up to clear interpretation or legibility. I find power in making statements when necessary, but knowing when to willingly disappear in my work. Through a feminist psychoanalytic lens, Peggy Phelan identifies the state of being visible with a risk of loss of subjectivity. Phelan proposes a feminist aesthetic grounded in absence rather than presence—intentional, willful disappearance that enables one to experience their own subjectivity,<sup>13</sup> allowing for “the security of belief in one’s self-image.”<sup>14</sup>

Particularly potent at this form of disappearance is performance because, “poised at the threshold of the present,”<sup>15</sup> it is always in the state of disappearing. Phelan proposes an expanded understanding of the performative that can include other forms of representation. She proposes a performative “writing toward disappearance.”<sup>16</sup> This is in contrast to a “writing toward preservation”<sup>17</sup> which describes as though it knows and is accurately recording a moment. Structurally, I interpret this writing toward disappearance as making efforts to not describe events or create an image of it. In Writing Toward Disappearance / Binding / Florence Observed I will discuss this in relation to compiling previously handwritten work and personal correspondences into a typeset book of mostly forward slashes.

Taken together with my dispositional reserve and exuberantly structured and intuitive way of making work, these narrative structures articulate a way of writing and making that is quiet, circuitous, internally logical and varyingly legible. They reveal, conceal, explore and shape deeply and productively peculiar ways of navigating space and experience alone and collaboratively.

Here: An Alphabetical List of Collaborators

The work presented in this thesis is mostly collaborative. Most of my collaborators are my friends, human and otherwise.

- Andalah.....artist, sister, friend, writer
- Atanas.....artist, designer, friend, writer
- Craig.....artist, designer, friend, writer
- Florence.....artist, friend, writer
- Marty.....artist, cat, friend, writer
- Nalah.....artist, cat, friend, performer, writer
- Oliver.....artist, cat, friend, writer
- Pikkul.....artist, cat, friend, writer
- Susan.....artist, friend, mom, writer

## Cats

### I. The Cat is Not a Metaphor (This is a Collaborative Thesis)

In exploring the boundaries of collaboration, I wanted to create work with my friends. Some of the closest and longest-lasting bonds I have are with the cats I live with. I've lived with Nalah, Marty and Oliver since I was twelve or thirteen. Marty and Oliver were dropped in our backyard in a box as kittens. Nalah we bought for a great deal of money because we thought she was pretty, which bothers me. Pikkul, we rescued from a neighbor's roof and hung onto while his person was searching for a house. He was an interloper, but now it seems he's here to stay. I don't understand him as well.

Given the exchanges of material, of labour, and of systems of support that go into creating, I would argue that all work can be considered collaborative. That said, I here define collaboration more narrowly as emerging from conscious partnerships where individuals engage in working together, a definition taken from Maria Lind's "The Collaborative Turn."<sup>18</sup> I define "working together" broadly to include space for play as well as focused work, that can yield physical outputs, but doesn't have to. Working together implies consent and some form of common goal or activity.

My understanding of collaboration is partially informed by theories of the self as socially shaped and mutable. This understanding emerges from my background in psychology, particularly social psychology. The social psychologists Susan Anderson and Serena Chen argue that the self is inherently relational.<sup>19</sup> They frame this through transference, seeing the individual as a constellation of learned and inherited patterns of acting, activated by those around them.<sup>20</sup> The key is that there is no kernel or essence of self, but rather a diffusion of selves within an individual, that become more or less prominent based on who they are around.<sup>21</sup> In exploring narrative, writing collaboratively serves as a way to break down clear boundaries between self and others through collective authorship. It allows also for more diverse knowledge in creating. In this understanding, collaboration results in collectively developed selves, not just collectively developed work. Anderson and Chen are talking specifically about human-human relationships. I would suggest this transference can be expanded to relationships with other living

beings as well as objects and locations.



Figure 1: Aisha Ali, and Nalah, Reading Poetry with Nalah,  
stills from video recording of performance, 2019

## II. Reading Poetry with Nalah

“We are training each other in acts of communication we barely understand.”

—Donna Haraway, The Companion Species Manifesto

I see collaboration as requiring consent and mutual interest in a goal or activity. Therefore, creating work with cats presents challenges of language barriers and potentials for miscommunication. Further, I recognize inequality of power in such work—I love the cats I live with deeply and like to believe that they have some fondness for me, but recognize the imbalance of power in our relationship, where I can come and go and eat as I like and they cannot.

In When Species Meet, Donna Haraway asks “Can animals play? Or work? And even, can I learn to play with this cat?”<sup>22</sup> Part of a successful collaboration here is recognizing the non-human animals I live with as individuals with whom I have deep interpersonal bonds and mutually developed patterns of acting. I have lived with my cats for over ten years. I like to believe we have developed ways of communicating our needs and wants to one another. In developing a mutual language of distinct meows and trills, as well as finger snaps, posture, jabs (with or without claws), height, voice, ear flicks, some of which are universal, but many of which appear to be local to our interactions, I like to think that we can tell if interactions are being enjoyed, tolerated, or detested.

As a very intimate form of collaboration, Donna Haraway talks about the exchange of materials between humans and companion animals through germs, fur, saliva.<sup>23</sup> This is discussed as “becoming with”<sup>24</sup> one another as companion species, united on a molecular level with one another. The artist, Lisa Visser, who created work with her cat, Sushi, suggests an additional “being with”<sup>25</sup>—existing in a space beyond species boundaries. In Reading Poetry with Nalah, Nalah and I performed together. I focused on interacting with Nalah as two animals, responding to her as she responded to me, covered in her hair, skin (and saliva) as she was covered in mine.

I chose to perform the work in my kitchen where Nalah spent a great deal of her time. I decided that in the performance I would read poetry to her, but waited until she approached me to begin. Over the course of several hours, I read Nalah

poetry. While initially varied in her actions, Nalah quickly initiated and developed a pattern of acting and responding with me: to begin the poem, we touched foreheads, and continued until a few stanzas in, when Nalah would choose to lie on the books, sometimes obscuring the words. When the poem was finished, she would get up and we would touch foreheads and begin again. I did not enter our performance with any intentions of specific actions beyond reading, but instead attempted to remain open and responsive to Nalah. As we shared no collective aims in making it, I would not call the video documentation of this work a collaboration. However, I believe that the development of a collective pattern of interacting, as I focused on being with Nalah and she seemed to focus on being with me, could be deemed collaboration.

### III. Strict Rules, But Not Too Many

“To forge for oneself iron laws, if only in order to obey or disobey them with difficulty”

—Robert Bresson, Notes on the Cinematographer

In writing this document, I was interested in being as honest as possible about the motivations behind decisions in my work. Protocols and rules in my practice arose partially out of necessity. Protocols allow me to create work, which otherwise sometimes doesn't happen. The protocols help determine when and how the work will get done through their clear logic, and reduce anxiety about the work being good, because, once the rules are followed completely and logically, the desired result, whether interesting or not, has come into existence. I find, even when utterly exhausted or overwhelmingly anxious, I can effectively follow rules.

I see my collaborative and intuitive practice as the primary site of knowledge production in this thesis<sup>ii</sup> where rules and protocols initiate and guide research, often yielding unanticipated results.<sup>iii</sup> Theoretical framing emerges alongside and after the work is made. I allow the work to actively shape the theoretical framework that emerges around it. Initially, and still sometimes, the rules I use are very rigid, echoing the systematic methodologies used in Conceptual Art. The Conceptual artist Mel Bochner characterizes a systematic methodology as one predominated by “regularity, thoroughness, and repetition in execution.”<sup>26</sup> In his Sentences on Conceptual Art, Sol Lewitt further develops such a methodology as one which is set into motion and allowed to mechanically progress to logical conclusions without interference by the artist.<sup>27</sup> There is space for intuition in such a methodology.<sup>28</sup>

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ii Mäkelä would characterize this as practice-led research—research where “making is conceived to be the driving force behind the research and in certain modes of practice also the creator of ideas.” (Mäkelä 2006, 22).

iii There is an intentional echoing here of the Conceptual artist Sol Lewitt's “Notes on Conceptual Art:” “28—Once the idea of the piece is established in the artist's mind and the final form is decided, the process is carried out blindly. There are many side effects that the artist cannot imagine. These may be used as ideas for new works; 29—The process is mechanical and should not be tampered with.” (Lewitt 1969).



Rules and patterns are interesting to me because they let things happen which are not under my control even if I set them. The Conceptual artist Hanne Darboven writes using pre-determined rules. Her rules are often numerical, mathematical in nature. On her systematic methodology, she once wrote to Lucy Lippard: “The system became necessary; how else could I see more concentratedly, find some interest, continue at all? Contemplation had to be interrupted by action as a means of accepting anything among everything.”<sup>29</sup> Darboven’s “continue at all” echoes my own engagement with rules as a necessity. Similarly, Lewitt says “I have found that [a systematic methodology] has worked well for me while other ways have not”.<sup>30</sup> The rules allow decisions to be made and take matters out of my hands, while still allowing my hands to create. These rules are personal and change depending on who else is involved in making them. Someone else faced with the same tasks would not arrive at the same rules.

In terms of collaboration, rules allow for more equal collaboration where power of determining outcomes is taken somewhat out of all actors’ hands. They allow focus and surprise and for something to emerge that makes sense, not necessarily rationally, but in some kind of felt way. They allow for experiences to be organized and understood.

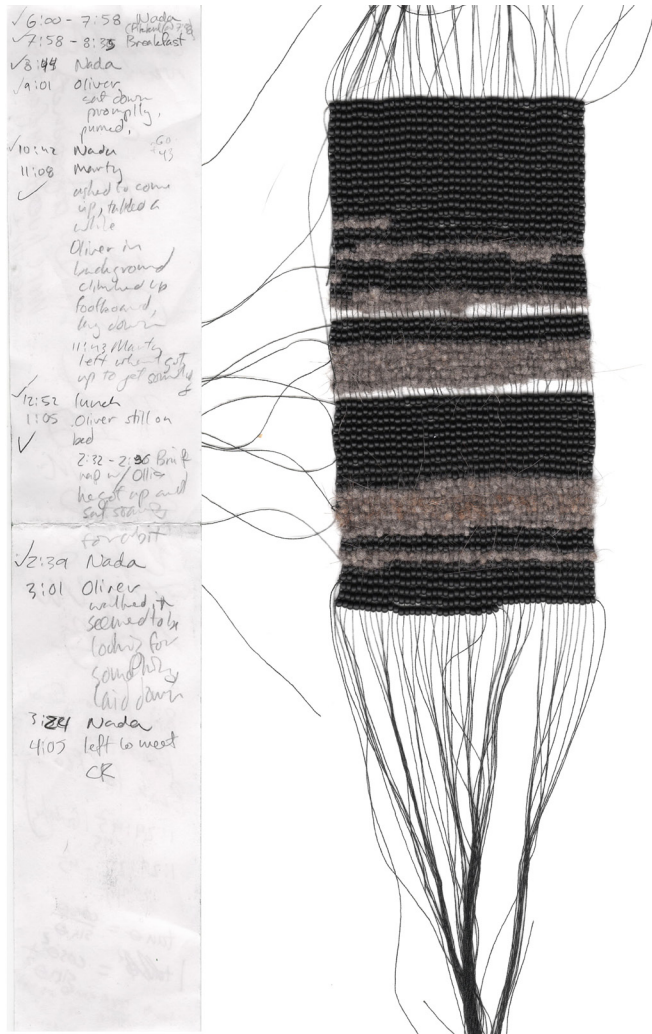


Figure 2: Aisha Ali, Marty, Oliver, and Pikkul, Beading with Cats, glass beads, cat fur, paper, 2019

#### IV. Beading with Cats

In her performance work with her cat Sushi, Lisa Visser discusses a research design under which “constructed limits become limitless, invisible, irrelevant.”<sup>31</sup> In her writing on interspecies collaboration, Lisa Jevbratt similarly recommends protocols as a way to produce tangible outcomes from work with animals.<sup>32</sup> These rules allow for the creation of work with non-human participants while maintaining their ability to exist as independent actors. Overcoming issues of consent often found in human-animal work allows them to (ideally) have as much agency over outcomes as I do.

As an experiment in collaborative writing, I beaded with my cats. The rules were very structured: bead for 12 consecutive hours; when cats were in the room, create beads out of their fur and bead with those; when the cats were not in the room, bead with glass beads. Through beading my interactions with cats, I hoped to pay attention, in a focused manner, to the ways my cats actually interacted with me. Throughout the process, I found my expectations frustrated. The beaded pieces did not reflect how I expected the cats to interact with me. I had assumed they spent more time with me than they did.

Over time, the pieces progressed toward being more practical and comfortable to execute. The initial 12 hour piece was beaded without break, making it extremely uncomfortable to execute without justification for the discomfort. In keeping with my commitment to seeing processes through to completion before assessing them, I completed the piece, but revised the process in subsequent iterations to allow for breaks, made visible by gaps in the looming. In order to make decipherable the rules used in creating the work, without spelling it out entirely, I included handwritten notes of the cats’ comings and goings.

In contrast to Jevbratt, who sees any “aesthetically driven project”<sup>33</sup> with non-human animals as interspecies collaboration, I would argue that collaboration requires collective goals. As I beaded with the cats, I was distinctly aware that they had very little interest in the beading process, and even less interest in the outcome. Therefore, I concluded that, while these pieces function as documents of our interactions, and, while they are work created with cats, they cannot be justified as collaboration. In a (pathetic, forced) attempt to return it to the

realm of collaboration, I gave the textiles to my cats to play with, but they were uninterested in even that.

Project appendix:

There is a rupture here. Nalah died in the summer. I have a very good video of being with her after she died, but that's for me only.

Additionally, for a variety of reasons, I ended up spending less time at home over the course of this degree, and the cats became distant. Before more collaborative work could be undertaken with them, I would have to rebuild our relationship.<sup>iv</sup>

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iv For much of the time I have been writing this paper, Marty and sometimes Oliver and Pikkul have sat with me.



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R0011100



P1390755





R0010451



R0010454

Figure 3–Figure 8. (pp. 16–21) Excerpts from Index, Aisha Ali, Atanas Bozdarov, and Craig Rodmore, bookwork, 2019

Figure 3. Cover

Figure 4. Excerpt from “Discursive Index” (pp. 10)

Figure 5. Excerpt from “Index by Alternate Main headings” (pp. 18)

Figure 6. Photograph under “Band (hedge, artificial); Flora; Satisfactory Images; Hands Hurting” (pp. 67)

Figure 7. Photograph indexed under “Abandoned; Colour, green; Conifer; Family; Form, rectangular; Ground, paved; Holiday, Indignity; Multiple; Prisoner; Prone (Supine?); Refuse; Reject; Ruined; Sorry state; Spring; Supine (Prone?); Support, plant; Tree; Wood; Satisfactory Images; A bit cold.” (pp. 104)

Figure 8. Photograph indexed under “Prokopow, Michael” (pp. 106)

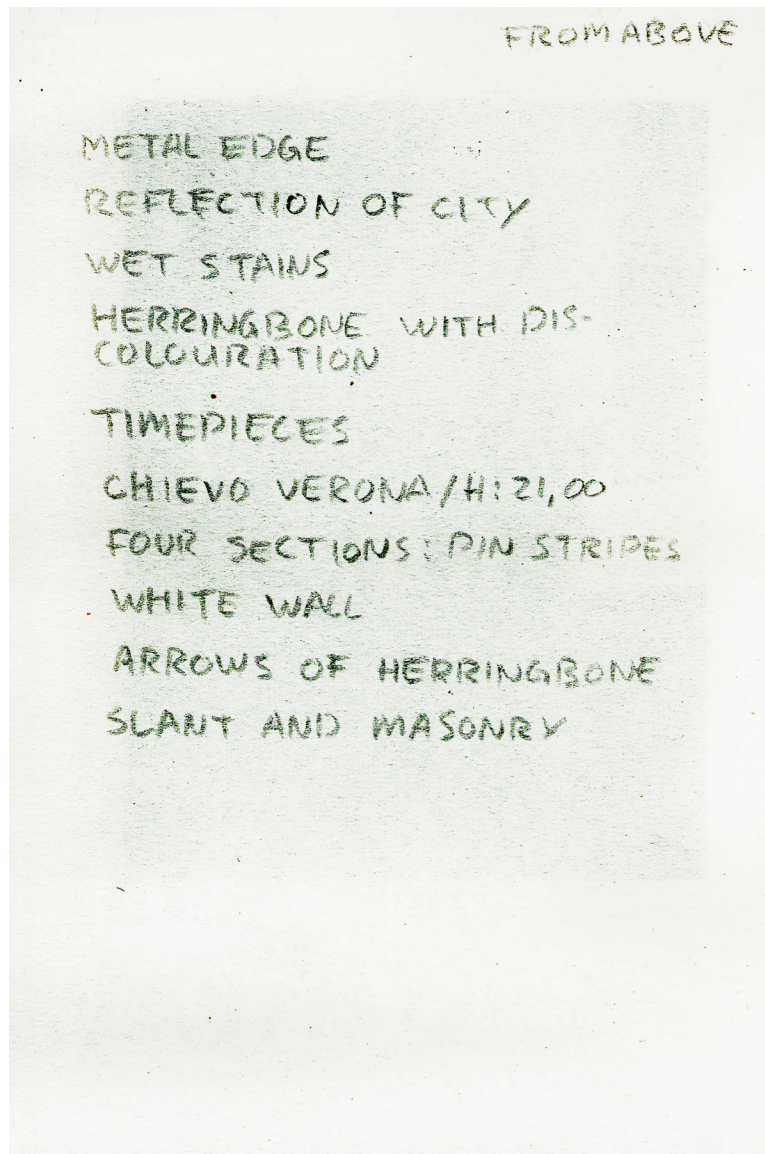


Figure 9. Aisha, cover for Topiary,  
pencil on paper, 2019



Figure 10. Aisha, excerpts from Topiary, 2019

## Books

### I. Carrier Bag / Collecting / Index / Topiary

AA: I used to collect extremely boring and very beautiful pebbles when I was by water that had any. I stopped because it felt like I had no business taking such pebbles away from the ocean or Lake Superior or the like which are obscenely large and beyond my comprehension anyhow.

It seemed horrible to take a pebble out of the continuity of being part of a lake that's very old and can tear trees off of cliffs. But then any time spent with me would be so minute for a rock and eventually it would end up back in the water that maybe I could collect them again if I wanted.

CR: "It has been there always: we only had to find our ways into its presence."<sup>v</sup> I still prefer to leave things in place.<sup>vi</sup>

This section begins in Toronto with Index, a collaborative photography project and book with Craig and Atanas. It then follows the continuation of the project with me in Florence, Italy and uncharacteristically on my own. Through it, I will outline shifts in narrative I observed working at a distance versus working together, changing from familiar to an unfamiliar location.

As a methodology, Le Guin's carrier bag narrative, discussed earlier, is one of collecting and wandering, bringing together small, often normal things that are personally interesting—"tiny grains of things smaller than a mustard seed, and intricately woven nets which, when laboriously unknotted, are seen to contain one blue pebble."<sup>34</sup> Georges Perec, the early twentieth century OuLiPo writer, asked "How should we take account of, question, describe what happens every day and recurs every day?"<sup>35</sup> For him, as well as for us, the solution was to collect and describe through rigorous personal taxonomies. It is questions of observing and describing the ordinary that often underlined (and underline) our collaborative

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v Quote from Roger Caillois' The Writing of Stones (1970) which we'd been discussing.

vi Excerpts of text conversation between me and Craig.

photographic investigations.<sup>vii</sup>

Index began with a plan to photograph three areas of interest related to our research (flora and fauna, typography, ramps) with the idea that we would research by walking through the city rather than researching through books. We would collect what we thought the others would like. We did this alone sometimes, while thinking of each other, but also, and more frequently, together. As we did, categories of interest emerged, differentiated, and expanded.

In reference to Perec's writing, Boyne argues that there is a difference between using and making categories, where using categories presumes a certain "absolute classificatory veracity"<sup>36</sup>—that things can be described in some comprehensive way without the need for justification. Perec's work, on the other hand, through making rather than using classifications, creates a personal, necessarily incomplete categorization reflective of personal experience, interest and whim, even if rigorously focused.<sup>37</sup> Our book took the form of several indices followed by the photographs taken and maps that included but did not identify our route. The indices were of categories of interest that emerged through walking.

While the taxonomies developed were based on whim, they were focused and comprehensive in their execution. As Anna-Sophie Springer and Etienne Turpin write in Fantasies of the Library, "Fantasies are not—as is so often imagined—the product of spontaneous invention; they require care, cultivation, and discipline to truly disrupt their systems of containment."<sup>38</sup> For Index to make, not just use, classification systems, we needed to develop focused parameters in the developing of categories. The first was that they were based on what we thought the others would like. The second was that, in developing the Indexing, images included in each entry should be determined by what a lover of that category might want to see. The third was that things that could not be seen in the photographs should still be included (e.g. the photos are in black and white but many colours are indexed).

The process of categorizing not only revealed our habits and interests but played

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vii An example of Perec's (1975) three-day attempt at describing what he sees in a place in Paris, listing things he can see while recognizing that he can never see everything.

an active role in shaping them. During and after making the book I could not help moving things I saw into the categories of the book (“dog, grey, walking”; “twins, fraternal”; “indignity” etc). This result gives insight into how the process of making categories differs from that of using them. By telling the story through collections and indices, we developed a generous, collaborative process of meaning-making, creating merged areas of collective interest.

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Soon after this project, I spent a month in Florence, Italy, where I continued photographing, but this time on my own. Still seeing the world in the categories from Index, I photographed the ordinary objects around me, many the same as those in Toronto (pylons, ramps, potted plants...). However, faced with an unfamiliar city, these objects took on new meaning. Suddenly they were more representative of general trends in the more course-grained meaning making of unfamiliarity (e.g. “this plant indicates that people in Florence do this with their plants”). The strange, inexplicable, and surprising in the ordinary became ever more present. I found myself fixating on spherical topiary (also found in Toronto), strange, round, sometimes fake plants, often subjected to indignities (one had a crown of forks, another was festooned with flowers). It was in collecting them that their individual features became more visible. It is in the “realm of similarities”<sup>39</sup> which a collection of similar objects creates, that each’s specificity can emerge.

The way collecting functioned in Italy seemed to be more about finding a place in unfamiliarity than in Index, which categorized what we were already familiar with, but perhaps hadn’t noticed yet. The books that emerged from this photographic process were collections of topiary, unbound and thematically organized and titled. The titles were developed with my sister, Anda, over WhatsApp with the rules that the titles could not describe the topiary but only what was around it. They were written on the cover with a blunt 2H pencil, so that the words felt (while writing) and looked like they were part of the page. The books are unbound meaning that it is the images of topiary rather than or as well as the reader that are mobile, making a narrative structure that implicated the reader in an active meaning-making.



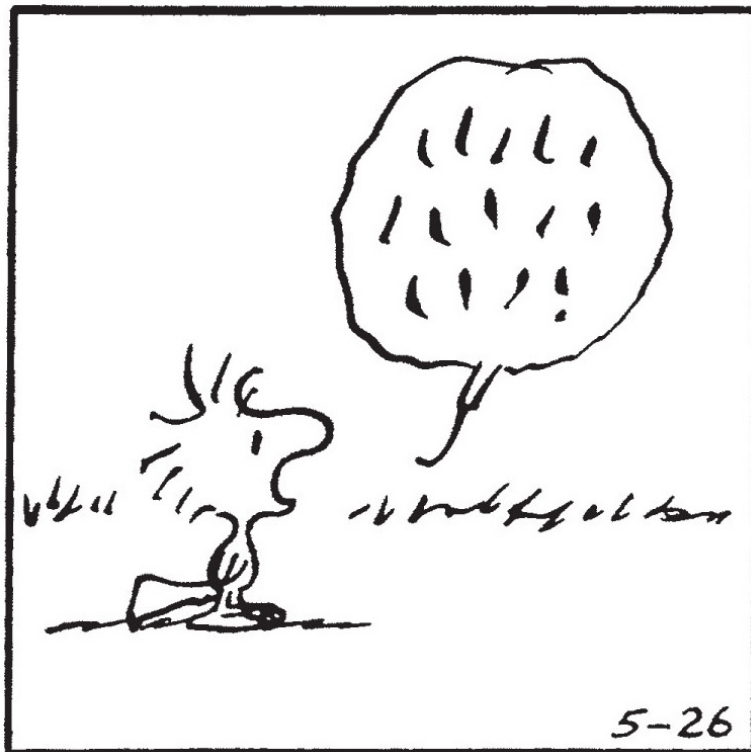


Figure 11. Charles Schulz, detail of Woodstock shouting  
"Come back, Shane!" from Peanuts,  
ink on paper, 26 May, 1981





Figure 13. Sara A. Tremblay, There Are Some Things You Need to Know, stills from performance, 2011

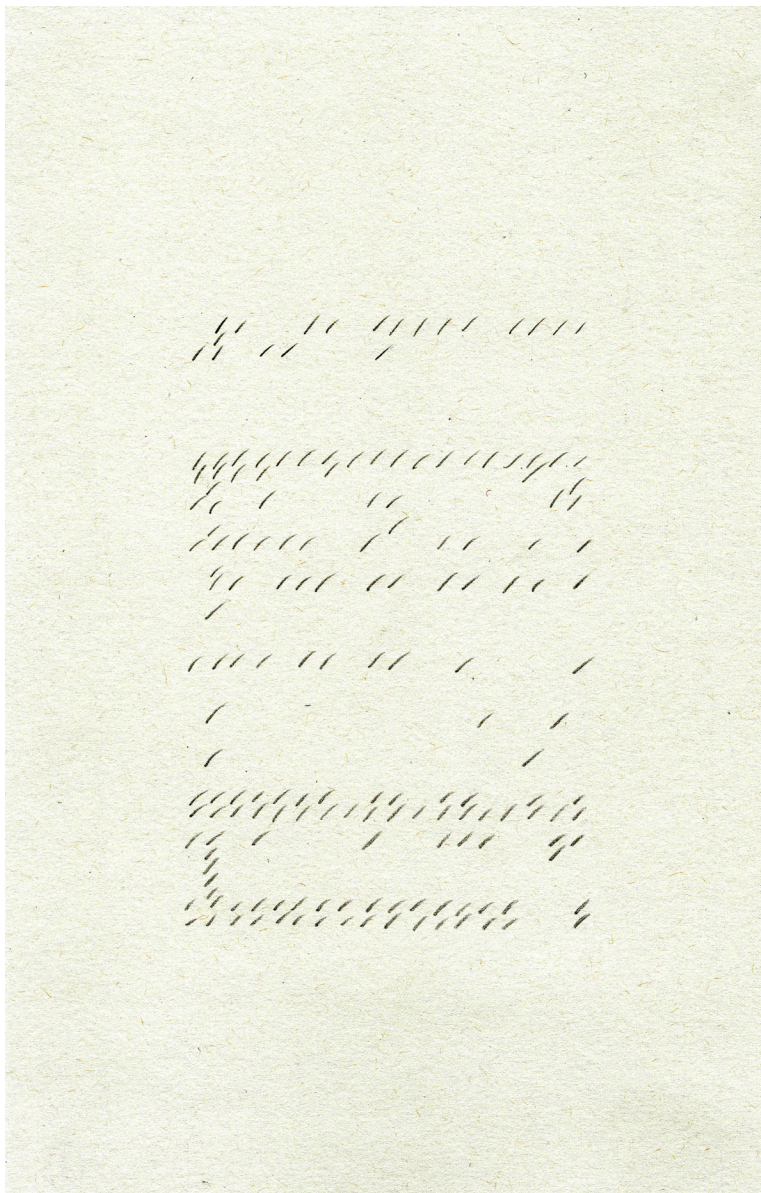


Figure 14. Aisha Ali, excerpt from Hotel-Sign-Writing,  
pencil on paper, 2019

## II. Speaking Nearby / Writing / Hotel-Sign-Writing

Returning from Florence, I found I was left with a vague but profound sense of confusion, perhaps a combination of jet-lag, burnout and nervousness about my thesis. I wanted to write about it, but I could find no words to describe it. What I did have were 46 photographs of hotel signs.

These photographs emerged from the semantic confusion caused by the fin signs<sup>viii</sup> for hotels throughout Florence. These signs were made of individual three-dimensional letters in a vertical arrangement meaning that a sign that reads “HOTEL” only reads HOTEL from one side. From the other side, the E and L are reversed. Because the H, O, and T are symmetrical, I became unable to tell which way the Es and Ls should go:

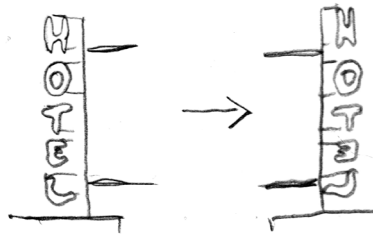


Figure 15. Aisha, Illustration of Fin Sign, pencil on paper, 2019

In Florence, I was at a loss of what to do with these photographs. I thought about mapping out reasons why the signs might be oriented the way they were (was it to be legible towards the city center? Was it in relation to the squares? Was it based on whim?), but I quickly lost interest. Back in Toronto, the photographs seemed important, and I started marking out correlations between them, which

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viii I called these signs “fin signs” in Florence Observed, a book featuring this writing, because that’s what I’d heard them called. I can find very few textual references to fin signs. According to the Santa Clara County Zoning Ordinance (2003), a fin sign is “a two-sided sign that projects out from a building or surface, intended to be viewed from the side” (261) and Treu (2012) refers to fin signs that are up to twenty-two stories tall (177). However, in the Uniform Building Code (1970) a fin sign is defined more strictly “a sign which is supported wholly by a one-story building of an open-air business or by poles placed in the ground or partly by such a pole or poles and partly by a building or structure” (7).

became pages of marks like forwards slashes, which I refer to here as “hotel-sign-writing,” first drawn by hand, then as part of Florence Observed, a book made with Craig.

Later, I wrote a list of what the slashes reminded me of:

- My dog whimpering after we’d left him for a while.
- People throwing chairs or the like in the way of an onslaught, c.f. Bride of Frankenstein, Night of the Comet, The Silent Partner.
- Rain.<sup>ix</sup>

When allowing often intuitive work to guide research, results can be unexpected and baffling. I attempt here to theoretically and historically contextualize this hotel-sign-writing.

The process of creating the hotel-sign-writings allowed me to speak very near to layers of difficult to articulate and conflated present and past feeling states without making them explicit (“Speaking nearby” I somewhat brazenly borrow from Trinh T. Minh-Ha, who uses it to describe her way of addressing the specific knowledges and history of anthropology. Such speaking moves between boundaries, allowing it to come very close to subjects without residing fully in them—“A speaking . . . whose closures are only moments of transition opening up to other possible moments of transition.”<sup>40</sup> By speaking near to a subject, here an inexpressible feeling state, without actually touching it, the inexpressible quality of it can be recognized.

The structure of the narrative that emerges from the hotel-sign-writing is highly organized and follows a strict pattern. However, it is also repetitive, circular and mute, refusing to disclose verbally comprehensible information. The staccato repetition and compulsive organization of the slashes speak near to confusion without ever fully claiming it. The structure, while ordered, is plotless and circular. This plotless way of writing can be articulated through Arthur W. Frank’s formulation of chaos narratives. Chaos narratives are incomplete, stuttering, and repetitive. They are narratives more about silence and the space around words

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ix Later, it also reminded me of Woodstock, the character in Charles Schulz’s Peanuts—like me, tiny, scruffy hair, speaking through unintelligible marks.

than about words themselves—“The chaos narrative is always beyond speech, and thus it is what is always lacking in speech. Chaos is what can never be told; it is the hole in the telling.”<sup>41</sup> Chaos narratives do not lead from one event to another. They reflect experiences lived “without sequence or discernable causality,”<sup>42</sup> a plotless “and then and then and then.”<sup>43</sup>

The hotel-sign-writing was made out of necessity, although I’m not entirely sure what for. Hanne Darboven’s “mathematical prose”<sup>44</sup> as well as her characteristic cursive marks suggest to me a similar form of necessary, illegible writing. Darboven uses writing as a form of what she calls “going on,”<sup>45</sup> creating work, substantiating time through labour. This requires “safeguards against description”<sup>46</sup> in the form of writing without describing. In writing, Darboven emphasizes the process of writing as a way to be “mediated by the mediated experience of language”<sup>47</sup>—the physical act of writing serves as a form of mediating experience. Touching on her motivations behind writing, she says:

Each time I have to write, it becomes so calm and so normal. There is no story there, nothing to figure out, but still exciting. I feel myself not thinking what other people think but what I think. I write for myself. Going on is the enormous thing I do.<sup>48</sup>

The initial hotel-sign-writing was done by hand using hand-gridded pages, highlighting and tracing. The slashes change through the process of making them, in pressure, in angle, in speed. As the pages progress, the slashes become faster, impatient. There’s an immediacy in communication between brain and hand in such a line. You can tell what my hand was doing by each line’s velocity, pressure, the way it trails off or doesn’t, like a forensic investigation of splatters or cuts or slashes. Sara A. Tremblay’s piece, There are Some Things You Need to Know (2011) exemplifies this highly communicative power of immediate, hand-drawn marks. Subtitled “There are some things that need to be said, drawing seemed to be a good way to tell you”, Tremblay draws rows of small urgent slashes over a blackboard before erasing them. The marks exhibit a need to communicate combined with an obscurity of meaning. The physicality of the drawing is highlighted as she falters, pauses, grows increasingly tired.

Darboven uses pencil and paper because they are “the simplest means for putting

down...ideas,”<sup>49</sup> because, for her, “the ideas do not depend on the materials.”<sup>50</sup> However, in my writing, the materials were very important. As far as I understand, different parts of the brain are used for drawing and writing. Unlike Tremblay, I would call my marks writing. The physical contact of the pencil on the paper, the speed of mark-making, the movement linearly from left to right all felt to me like writing—the slashes felt the same as writing words, just words that could not be read as such. Through repetition, through variation, the slashes serve as a mute but not unexpressive accounting of experience, becoming performative in their accumulation.



FLORENCE OBSERVED

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*Excess*

P1400687	1	premium (?)
P1420066	2	basketry, candles, reflection
P1410422	3	rain, puddles, debris
P1420070	4	pale between dark rectangles
P1400737	5	composed window display
P1400689	6	child, chucks, ice cream
P1420860	7	ENGEL&VÖLKERS
P1420064	8	a preponderance of material, arranged
P1410468	9	MG.K
P1400709	10	greenhouse (not allowed)

*Prison*

P1420865	11	three bars, off-centre
P1410116	12	———
P1410437	13	(upon return)
P1410048	14	cushions and stool
P1420817	15	identified gathering place
P1400731	16	protective bag on bike seat
P1400736	17	corner vegan; seating cube
P1410274	18	generous amounts of barbed wire
P1420036	19	many windows, various sizes
P1400900	20	downspout, balcony, closed shutters

*Confrontations*

P1400893	21	exposed masonry, wet spot
P1410365	22	paper enclosed, glass case
P1420142	23	deep shadows
P1410329	24	small step
P1420907	25	landmarks displayed
P1400733	26	tables and seats
P1400877	27	grass
P1420110	28	paper, cracks, welcome mat, purses
P1420109	29	paper, cracks (repeated pattern)
P1420826	30	bike parking, storm drain on rainy night

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*05/05/2019*

- poured water into plastic cup
- moved to take a sip
- missed mouth, poured water onto floor
- water, on floor

- poured water into plastic cup
- spilt some over top of cup
- drank half whilst returning to bedroom
- drank other half whilst in bed

*05/05/2019*

- poured water into plastic cup
- drank one mouthful in the hall between washroom and bedroom
- drank remainder without noticing
- cup empty

*05/05/2019*

- used to wash my face

*05/05/2019*

- balanced plastic cup on drain in sink
- turned on faucet
- stream of water knocked cup over
- held cup and filled conventionally
- still working on drinking water

*06/05/2019*

- it's in tea

*06/05/2019*

- warmer than usual
- let one drop fall on my foot

*06/05/2019*

- poured water into plastic cup
- drank all whilst standing by sink
- left plastic cup by sink

*06/05/2019*

- gulped it down like no tomorrow

*07/05/2019*

- fell short



05/05/2019  
sampling

05/05/2019  
disaster

05/05/2019  
uhhhuuhhghh

05/05/2019  
better . . .

07/05/2019  
new beginnings

08/05/2019  
about town

09/05/2019  
ideal . . .

12/05/2019  
new

13/05/2019  
here he comes . . .

15/05/2019  
hmnnn

17/05/2019  
around

18/05/2019  
here

19/05/2019  
glad

25/05/2019  
shhh shhhhhhhh

25/05/2019  
friendship

abramovic balcony (across) blue fin legible towards cc nero shirt(s) striped  
shutters brown wall across white windows E (reversed) L (reversed)

accompanied fin windows

accompanied angels balcony (across) car(s) red crest fin flag(s) garden greenery  
illuminated legible towards cc medici nero park scalloped shutters grey topiary  
white windows 100+ 200+ 300+ 400+ 500+ E (reversed) L (reversed)

balcony (across) fin legible towards cc white windows E (reversed) L (reversed)

bins (beside) fin windows

accompanied bins (beside) bicolour fin flag(s) legible towards cc nero orange  
shirt(s) striped shutters brown topiary tourists white windows

blue fin nero white windows E (reversed) L (reversed)

balcony (across) bins (beside) cameo car(s) red crest fin flag(s) greenery groin  
vaults legible towards cc portico scalloped shirt(s) striped shutters green stars  
four tourists white windows 100+ E (reversed) L (reversed)

accompanied canon european fin windows

car(s) red fin greenery scalloped white windows

balcony (across) car(s) red crest fin flag(s) greenery legible towards cc nero  
scalloped white windows 100+ E (reversed) L (reversed)

fin windows

fin flag(s) white windows E (reversed) L (reversed)

accompanied fin garden greenery legible towards cc nero scalloped white  
windows 100+ E (reversed) L (reversed)

fin greenery windows

balcony (across) bins (beside) cameo car(s) red crest fin flag(s) greenery groin  
vaults legible towards cc portico scalloped shirt(s) striped shutters green stars  
four tourists white windows 100+ E (reversed) L (reversed)

accompanied car(s) red fin greenery illuminated nero scalloped white windows  
E (reversed) L (reversed)

fin legible towards cc white windows

Figure 16–Figure 25. (pp. 36–26) Excerpts from Aisha Ali, Andalrah Ali, and Craig Rodmore, Florence Observed, bookwork, 2019–2020

Figure 16. Cover

Figure 17. Table of contents

Figure 18. Excerpt from “Topiary” (pp. 11)

Figure 19. Excerpt from “Hotel Signs” (pp. 55)

Figure 20. Excerpt from “Hotel Signs” (pp. 65)

Figure 21. Excerpt from “Hotel Signs” (pp.79)

Figure 22. Excerpt from “Hotel Signs” (pp. 103)

Figure 23. Excerpt from “Water Reports” (pp. 113)

Figure 24. Excerpt of “Doppelgänger Reports” (pp. 119)

Figure 25. Excerpt of “Key to Hotel Signs” (pp. 123)

### III. Writing Toward Disappearance / Binding / Florence Observed

At one point, Craig said that the hotel-sign-writing “assumed no audience for completion” and that seems to me to make sense. When faced with showing it, even to friends, I was initially filled with abject horror—it seemed too personal even if detached.

The last section took me out of my collaborative process and into work on my own. This section sees a return of collaboration, here with Craig and Anda, in producing a “real” bound book, Florence Observed. Florence Observed is a book of photographs without photographs.<sup>x</sup> In it, the writing around the topiary and hotel sign photographs are separated from their referents (although the hotel sign photographs already were) and recontextualized with appendices featuring various correspondences between Anda and I from Italy, as well as a key that reveals the patterns of the hotel sign writings. The book is typed, not handwritten. I later learned that Hanne Darboven also made or planned to make a “real” book of her hand-written, also typed. Part of her logic for doing this was that it was a “real” book, so it should be typed and bound.

Paratextually, Florence Observed has all the trappings of a “real” book.<sup>xi</sup> Despite mostly being a book of forward slashes, Florence Observed has page numbers, a table of contents, regular margins, appendices, a colophon. The stacks of hand-written pages—“the form associated with prepublication”<sup>51</sup>—are transformed into a bound codex. The hand-written titles in Topiary book, the hand-written slashes

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x        Aside: the artist, Stanley Brouwn also created a book of photographs with no photographs in it. His book, Tatvan (1970) began as a project to photograph a route beyond the end of the railway in Tatvan, eastern Turkey—“the idea of a journey that couldn’t yet be made, but someday might” (Herbert 2016, 56). Instead, he made a book that listed the distances from locations, all called “x” and some very far away, to Tatvan. His book is speculative, by necessity, non-moments, routes from unknown locations. The patterns used to create the hotel-sign-writing and the writing related to the topiary photographs are spatially and temporally situated, emerging from the moment the photograph was taken.

xi        Paratext is that which surrounds the text of a book (font and typeface, margins, paper, cover, preface, but also marketing, interviews...), in other words, “the means by which a text makes a book of itself and proposes itself as such to its readers and more generally to the public.” (Ginette and Maclean 1991, 261)

in Hotel-Sign-Writing, with their ambiguity and diagnosticity are replaced with a typed slash which Craig tinkered with, giving it softer, rounded edges to evoke but not imitate the original writing. The gridding of these slashes reduces their immediacy, and increases their legibility as a pattern—“as a controlling system the grid makes it easier to give the surface or space a rationalization.”<sup>52</sup>

With the hotel-sign-writing, I have referred to the baffling personal necessity of the work, conflating layers of images and associations with illegible writing. However, beyond this document, I am not interested in communicating this through the work. I am interested in the act of creating work. But this is very separate from the objects created. Binding<sup>xiii</sup> a book transforms it into a space of reading. This book is very pared down, printed on grey paper with a great deal of space around the text. Most of it is pages of forward slashes, rhythmically changing but also repeating from page to page. There isn't a lot to look at in it.

Personally, this allows me to protect the (mis)reading of subjective experience in the work. As discussed earlier, Peggy Phelan identifies the state of being visible with a risk of loss of subjectivity. By removing the images in Florence Observed, by presenting it as a book of photographs without photographs, by removing the visible marks of writing, I perform writing towards disappearance, allowing the work to be read beyond the process of creating it. Through the process of creating the book I was able to see the writing from an outside vantage point separate from the experience of creating it. The process of collaborating on the book allowed for this distance.

This is sincere, but speculative. I wonder if the book's extremely reduced visual language creates space for readers to project themselves into the work, to feel the work without necessarily understanding the content in a verbal sense. The most frequent reading I have received of the book is that its interest lies in the  
xii      The use of binding here refers to the act of binding a book. It is not a reference to Freudian binding, of which I know very little, though my cursory knowledge suggests some parallels. In “An Outline of Psycho-Analysis” (1938), Freud discusses binding as well as unbinding in relation to instinct: “[We] have decided to assume the existence of only two basic instincts, Eros and the destructive instinct...The aim of the first of these basic instincts is to establish ever greater unities and to preserve them thus—in short, to bind together; the aim of the second is, on the contrary, to undo connections and so to destroy things” (148).

way it seems to want to communicate without being understood. Jonathan Flatley discusses repetitive and minimal work as “producing emotion without depicting it.”<sup>53</sup> Andrea Fraser describes her experience of the Minimalist work of Fred Sandback: “It is a place of affective possibility created by work that doesn’t ask me to feel, and so, I think, allows me to feel, and to be alone, in the presence of the art that’s so quiet and still, and makes too little in the way of demands.”<sup>54</sup> This is how I hope the book can be read.



Figure 26. Aisha Ali and Atanas Bozdarov, Gallery Closed for Labour Day, 30 August–3 September 2019



Figure 27. Aisha Ali, Atanas Bozdarov, Cayden Johnson,  
Craig Rodmore, Angus Tarnawsky, Florence Yee, Back,  
23–29 August, 4–20 September 2019





Figure 28. Aisha Ali, Atanas Bozdarov, Craig Rodmore, and Florence Yee, Packaging, 21–23 September 2019

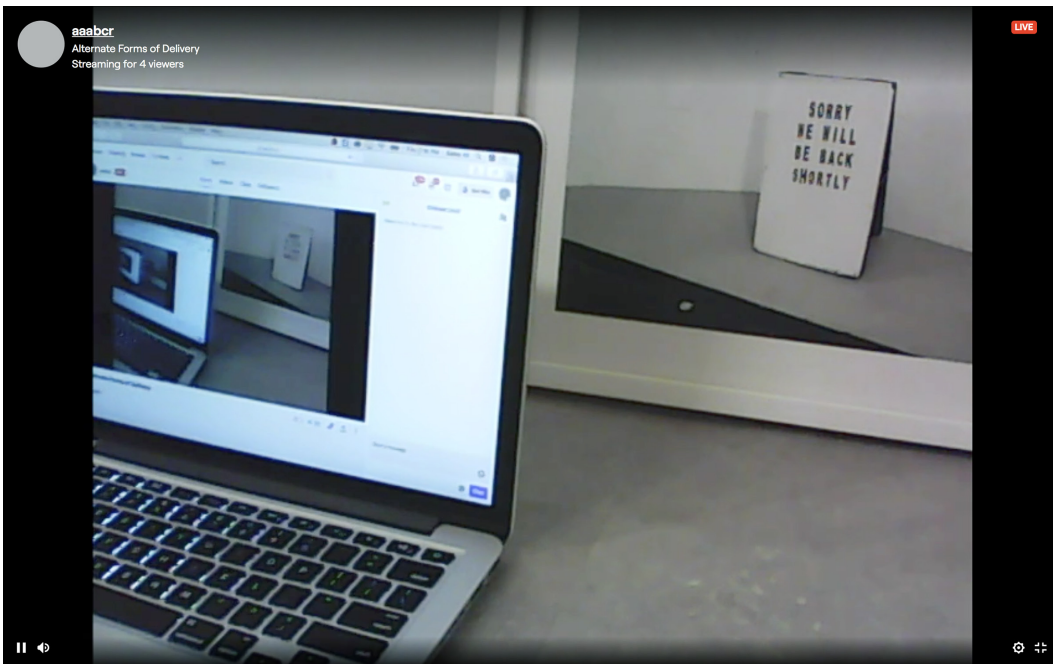


Figure 29. Aisha Ali, Atanas Bozdarov, Inbal Newman, Craig Rodmore, Florence Yee, Alternate Forms of Delivery, 18 March–24 April 2020

#### IV. Installing / 418<sup>xiii</sup>

In Cave (1991) the artist Gavin Turk displayed a plaque in an otherwise empty gallery. The dimensions for the work are the gallery, not the plaque, transforming the gallery space from a paratextual element shaping the work into part of the work itself. From May 2019 onwards, Craig, Atanas, Florence and I have been installing shows, often seen by very few people in Room 418 of OCAD's 205 Richmond building. The shows often improvise with what is already around us, and what we find interesting. Back was a show of choice backs of various objects we had made. Its follow-up, Packaging showed selections of the improvised packaging used over the course of the year. Seasons' Greetings was one of Atanas' charcoal cane tips and a package of Santa Claus napkins we'd found in the studio. Often books feature in these shows and are transformed by their surroundings. In Back, the books like Index become objects of formal contemplation, placed among other pleasing backs. In Packaging, Florence Observed returns, but as unbound signatures in a box made of cute and scored FedEx envelopes and masking tape, the provisional protection made for transporting them.

With the Covid-19 pandemic our degrees came to an abrupt and unexpected end. The school closed and all upcoming thesis exhibitions were cancelled with administration repeatedly promising "alternate forms of delivery." In this context, we put on our last 418 show, Alternate Forms of Delivery, a closed-gallery exhibition consisting of a livestream from 418 showing a photograph of a sign reading SORRY WE WILL BE BACK SHORTLY and a computer viewing the same streaming video, hosted at twitch.tv/aaabcr for the duration of the closure. Like any livestream, the number of people currently watch is visible serving as a quiet form of intimacy in the time of physical distancing.

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xiii For complete documentation and further discussion of 418 see "Appendix C. 418, Extended Edition" (pp. 80–174)

### Some Thoughts (Conclusions)

This thesis aimed to explore the questions: What personal narrative possibilities emerge from writing and making at the edge of narrative? How can these narratives be used to surface, shape and depict understandings of mundane experience? And how do these narrative possibilities emerge and change when primarily working collaboratively? These questions were designed to allow for open-ended work led by my intuitive, collaborative studio practice and, as such yielding often unanticipated results.

Through this work I developed a working process that was personally sustainable and allowed for the creation of work that seemed in some way honest. The work created here often surprised me. I did not expect the focused exercise of collecting indexing and meaning-making in Index to have such an enduring effect on the way that I navigate space. I did not expect my writing to fall into illegibility in writing on my own in the Hotel-Sign-Writing. Interestingly, I found that this process of making felt more like my own work than anything I had created more consciously. This emphasizes to me the importance of developing a methodology with knowledge of oneself and the ways one works.

In creating this work, I became preoccupied with honesty, or rather with things that felt honest. However, what I mean by honesty evades me.<sup>xiv</sup> It does not necessarily mean telling the truth, as far as I can tell, but seems to be a combination of signifiers of honesty, use of defaults, clear process and the viscerally felt experience of creating the work, not all of which need to be present. For example, exposed wires as well as a visible blip where a video is looped struck me as more honest than looping it seamlessly. Simple marks on paper strike me as extremely honest, possibly because of the immediacy of the mark-making. When I take photographs, I put the center of focus in the center because the photographs then look easily taken and reveal a logic to their execution. Newsprint strikes me as overwhelmingly honest for reasons I cannot express but seem to be related to its connotations of process and as a default material in many classes.

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xiv In my thesis defense, Catherine Black suggested that perhaps what I'm describing is "frankness, the unadorned, humility, authenticity, candidness"

I believe this notion of honesty is related to my engagement with intuitive processes. I can understand this partially through my understanding of a dual process model of cognitive processing where consciously and intuitively made decisions differ qualitatively<sup>55</sup> and intuitive decisions often yield more consistent and agreeable results.<sup>56</sup> It also relates, I believe, to a preoccupation I have with work looking like the person or people who created it, not necessarily in a literal sense, but in a way that it makes absolute sense that the creators of the work created it.

Through this thesis, I experimented with writing on the edge of narrative through indexing and categorization of experience with various levels of transparency (Index, is very transparent Topiary books and Cat Beading less so, Hotel-sign-writing very opaque). These varying levels of opacity correlate with the level of collaboration I was engaged with at the moment—collective meaning-making seemed to lend itself more to more explicit descriptiveness than personal meaning-making.

Emerging from these investigations is the importance of categorization in shaping understanding. The works created here made clear that storytelling and writing are not just acts of describing but active meaning-making. Through writing about experience using various rules and patterns, it became clear that the way I/we were writing was shaping the ways I/we were understanding the world. This also made clear the separation between the insights found through the process of creating the work, and the objects that can be received by readers of the books. In Index, for example, it became clear that making categories differs from using them. It is through actively creating one's own personal taxonomies that new ways of seeing and describing can emerge. I feel this work must be done for oneself—the fact that I did it will not help others to change the stories they are telling unless they do it themselves.

The rules used to execute the work revealed the importance of creating generous rules that allowed all actors in the creation of work agency in shaping the work. In Cat Beading the rules used<sup>xv</sup> were not generous and focussed more on creating

xv      bead for 12 hours. When cats are in the room, bead with their fur. When they aren't, bead with black glass beads. When the 12 hours is done, don't adjust beading (no finishing)

the work than engaging in collaborative work. The rules used for Reading Poetry with Nalah<sup>xvi</sup> allowed her much greater agency in creating the work, and did much greater justice to a potential for collaborative work with cats. While the rules with Nalah allowed for more varied interactions and for her to have greater agency, they were still more based on reducing harm (lack of consent) than engaging in creation of work together. The rules for Index, on the other hand, had an inherent generosity built into them, where they structured the creation of work as gifts to others and each other (collect what each other might like, index based on what a lover of a given object might like).

The work with my cats was ended with Nalah's death, and my increasing distance from Marty, Oliver and Pikkul, leaving the potential for collaborative work with them mostly unexplored. As I rebuild my relationship with them, two areas of future investigation emerge. First, the material aspects of the Cat Beading—of creating textiles collaboratively with animals I know while I wear textile made from the bodies of animals I can never know daily. This raises questions of material production and interspecies relationships of love but also exploitation that warrant further investigation. Second, the performance with Nalah raised questions of what of a collaborative work with a cat could be in the context or an artistic practice. As I discussed earlier, I wouldn't view the video documentation of the work as collaborative because we didn't share aims in making it. Through its closeness to our daily interactions, the collaborative element of creating work merged into our everyday experiences with one-another. We were interacting together in a way that was ephemeral—a strength Phelan sees in performance as a way to work towards disappearance<sup>57</sup> raising for me the question “Is the (circular) logical conclusion of collaborative work with my cats the daily experience of living with them?”

Also requiring further investigation is the layering of experiences whether in Index or in the Hotel-Sign-Writing where multiple layers of experience were conflated, and how making these objects reflect and shape experience. Craig and I wrote in one of our copies of Index, marking out things we remembered from the process of making it—things we said, things we liked, things we forgot,

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xvi      wait until she initiates interactions, read her a poem repeatedly until one of us had had enough

ideas that were never realized—in the margins. The qualities of a printed book as both a multiple and a unique copy, as interchangeable, but also modifiable, and specifically uses and usefulness of marginalia suggest an avenue for future research.

## Endnotes

- 1 Donna Haraway, Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Cthulucene (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016): 118.
- 2 Ursula K. Le Guin, “The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction,” in Dancing on the Edge of the World (New York: Grove Press, 1989), 169.
- 3 Ibid 150.
- 4 Ibid 169.
- 5 Ibid 168.
- 6 Ibid 169.
- 7 Ibid 169.
- 8 Nancy N. Chen, “‘Speaking Nearby:’ A Conversation with Trinh T. Minh-Ha,” Visual Anthropology Review 8, no. 1 (1992): 82.
- 9 Ibid 87.
- 10 Ibid.
- 11 Lucy Lippard, “Hanne Darboven: Deep in Numbers,” Artforum 12, no. 2 (1973): 37.
- 12 Mel Bochner “Serial Art, Systems, Solipsism” (1968), in Minimal Art: A Critical Anthology, ed. Gregory Battcock (London: University of California Press, 1995), 92–93.
- 13 Peggy Phelan, Unmarked: The Politics of Performance (London and New York: Routledge 1993), 148.
- 14 Ibid 5.
- 15 Ibid 27.
- 16 Ibid 148.
- 17 Ibid.
- 18 Maria Lind, “The Collaborative Turn,” in Taking the Matter into Common



Hands: on Contemporary Art and Collaborative Practices, ed. Johanna Billing, Maria Lind and Lars Nilsson (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2007), 16.

19 Susan M. Anderson and Serena Chen, “The Relational Self: An Interpersonal Social-Cognitive Theory,” Psychological Review 109, no. 4 (2002): 619.

20 Ibid.

21 Ibid.

22 Donna Haraway, When Species Meet (Minnesota: University of Minnesota Press, 2007), 22.

23 Ibid 4.

24 Ibid.

25 Lisa Visser, “Animals in a Room,” Master’s Thesis (Toronto: OCAD University, 2011), 22.

26 Bochner, “Serial Art, Systems, Solipsism,” 98.

27 Ibid 100.

28 Sol Lewitt, “Sentences on Conceptual Art” (1969), in Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology, ed. Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1999), 107.

29 Hanne Darboven, “Statement to Lucy Lippard” (1968), in Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology, ed. Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1999), 63.

30 Sol Lewitt, “Paragraphs on Conceptual Art” (1966) in Conceptual Art: A Critical Anthology, ed. Alexander Alberro and Blake Stimson (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1999), 16.

31 Visser, “Animals in a Room,” 6.

32 Lisa Jevbratt, Interspecies Collaboration—Making Art Together with Nonhuman Animals (Presented at the Minding Animals Conference, Australia, July 2009), 1.

33 Ibid.

34 Le Guin, *Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction*, 153.

35 Georges Perec, *L'infra-ordinaire*. (Michigan: Seuil, 1989), 210.

36 Roy Boyne, "Classification," *Theory and Culture* 23, no. 2–3 (2006): 21.

37 Boyne, 27.

38 Anna-Sophie Springer and Etienne Turpin, preface to *Fantasies of the Library*, III–VII. Edited by Anna Sophie Springer and Etienne Turpin. (Cambridge MA: The MIT Press, 2016): IV.

39 Jonathon Flatley, "Like: Collecting and Collectivity," *October* 132 (Spring 2010): 88.

40 Chen, "Speaking Nearby," 82.

41 Frank, Arthur W. *The Wounded Storyteller*. London; Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2013 (1995), 97.

42 Ibid.

43 Ibid.

44 Darboven quoted in Sam Lewitt, "No More Words," in *Artists on Hanne Darboven* edited by Stephan Hoban and Kelly Kivland (New York: Dia Art Foundation: 2016): 65.

45 Darboven quoted in Lucy Lippard, "Hanne Darboven: Deep in Numbers," 37.

46 Sam Lewitt, "No More Words," 65.

47 Ibid.

48 Lippard, "Hanne Darboven: Deep in Numbers," 37.

49 Darboven, "Statement to Lucy Lippard," 62.

50 Daboven, 62.

51 Craig Dworkin, *No Medium* (Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 2013),

13.

52 Josef Müller-Brockmann, Grid Systems in Graphic Design: A Visual Communication Manual for Graphic Designers, Typographers and Three Dimensional Designers, (Salentein: Niggli Verlag, 1996): 11.

53 Jonathan Flatley, “Allegories of Boredom,” in A Minimal Future?: Art As Object, 1958–1968, edited by Jane Hyun (Los Angeles: the Museum of Contemporary Art/ Cambridge MA: The MIT Press, 2004): 69.

54 Andrea Fraser, “Why Does Fred Sandback’s Work Make Me Cry?” Grey Room 22 (Winter 2005): 45.

55 John A. Bargh and Tanya L. Chartrand, “The Unbearable Automaticity of Being,” American Psychologist 54, no. 7 (1999): 462–479.

56 Ibid; Timothy D. Wilson and Jonathan W. Schooler, “Thinking Too Much: Introspection can Reduce the Quality of Preferences and Decisions” Journal of Personality and Social Psychology 60, no. 2 (1991): 181–192.

57 Phelan, “Unmarked,” 148.

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## Appendices<sup>i</sup>

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i From the Addenda of Samuel Beckett's Watt (1953): "The following precious and illuminating material should be carefully studied. Only Fatigue and disgust prevented its incorporation. (215)

## Appendix A: There is a Postscript to Florence Observed

A video of two snowman-like topiary in the revolving door of Toronto Western Hospital. On Google Street View, they have been there at least since April 2012, but I didn't see them until I was collecting topiaries. The video is looped every two minutes, a small hiccup when it loops. It couldn't be longer because people kept going through the door and the doors stopped rotating when the hospital was closed. It was shown on a small off-white Panasonic television from 1992 that OCAD was giving away. Craig and I researched how to make the television work. It took a long time.

The snowmen are in small compartments that separate the two large, wheelchair accessible openings of the revolving door. The door rotates mechanically and speeds up when someone is walking through. Stalder discusses the rotating door as part of a trajectory of dematerialization of the liminal space of entryways: “the body no longer knows inside and outside but only a continuous state of ‘being in the middle.’”<sup>ii</sup>

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ii Laurent Stalder, “Turning Architecture Inside Out: Revolving Doors and Other Threshold Devices,” Journal of Design History 22, no. 1 (2009), 74.





Figure 30. Snowman trapped in revolving door

(Aisha Ali, The Body No Longer Knows Inside and Outside  
But Only a Perpetual State of Being in the Middle, 2019)



Figure 31. Snowman trapped on television

(Aisha Ali, The Body No Longer Knows Inside and Outside  
But Only A Perpetual State of Being in the Middle, 2019)

## Appendix B: Cherubs

A professor of early modern literature, Misha Teramura, once told my sister, “You repeat a word to reveal new dimensions.” Repetition predominates the processes and objects of my practice.

Craig and I cast these cherubs from one made by Esco, “purveyors of large-headed celebrity statues.”<sup>iii</sup> The original cherub was destroyed by a storm and repaired by Craig. Sultry and defiant, with an unexpected ass, the cherub proposes unending hypotheses, tests and attempts that rarely reach resolution.<sup>iv</sup> As material tests, each cherub reveals new dimensions of the object; an aluminum one is perkier than the rest, a latex one lolls in a particularly languorous manner, the bronze’s hair seemed to shrink slightly in its casting.

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iii Lisa Stein Haven, Charles Chaplin’s Little Tramp in America, 1947–77. (New York: Springer Publishing, 2016), 220.

iv For a more detailed discussion of the cherub, see Craig Rodmore, “Title TK” (Master’s Thesis, OCAD University, 2020), Appendix A (“Endless Folly: Heaven Is a Place on Earth”), 55–71.



Figure 32. Original Cherub, plaster painted bronze, repaired  
2018–2019



Figure 33. Original Cherub's base, repaired 2018–2019



Figure 34. Cherub Mould, silicone, fall 2019



Figure 35. Plaster Cherub, fall 2019



Figure 36. Wax Cherub, fall–winter 2019  
dusted in baby powder from the removal of the latex cherub  
skin (Figure 39)





Figure 37. Bronze Cherub, fall 2019–  
(ongoing; now a fashionable rosegold)



Figure 38. Aluminum Cherub, fall 2019–  
(ongoing)



Figure 39. Latex Cherub Skin, winter 2019



Figure 40. Smooth Aluminum Cherub, fall 2019–  
(ongoing; to be polished)

Appendix C: 418 Shows, Extended Edition

After Living with Things	pp. 81–86
Gallery Closed for the Queen	pp. 87–88
Gallery Closed for Renovations	pp. 90–91
Exhibition for Ali	pp. 92–95
Better Homes and Gardens	pp. 96–104
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After Living with Things

10–14 May 2019

Aisha Ali, Craig Rodmore, Florence Yee

Retrospective ephemera Atanas Bozdarov, Craig Rodmore, Lucia Wallace

The flotsam of our studio courses' group show, Living With Things, to inaugurate our new gallery.

AFTER  
LIVING  
WITH  
THINGS

Figure 41. Sign written by Florence Yee



Figure 42. Florence sat on the windowsill and read me a book of Craig's dreams over WhatsApp while I was in Italy





Figure 43. Stackable letter trays in time-out; they disguise some poorly received work



Figure 44. Those were tulips



Figure 45. Hammer; Ancestor Money

Gallery Closed for the Queen

17–20 May 2019

Atanas Bozdarov and Florence Yee

(Victoria Day Weekend)

GALLERY  
CLOSED  
FOR THE  
QUEEN

Figure 46. Sign written by Florence Yee

Gallery Closed for Renovations

28–30 May, 1–6 June 2019

Craig Rodmore, Florence Yee Studio

Gallery was closed for renovations.

GALLERY  
CLOSED  
FOR  
RENOVATIONS

Figure 47. Sign Written by Florence Yee



Figure 48. Renovations in progress



Exhibition for Ali

31 May 2019

Atanas Bozdarov, Craig Rodmore

A gift for Ali Qadeer.



Figure 49. The photographs on the left were used to hide unpleasant outlets



Figure 50. Installation shot



Figure 51. A broom that disappeared, reappearing eventually in the studio; behind the broom a pile of filth featured in several shows before a well-wisher disposed of it

Better Homes and Gardens

7–10 June 2019

Aisha Ali, Andalrah Ali, Atanas Bozdarov, Craig Rodmore, Florence Yee

The theme was plants.

BETTER  
HOMES  
&  
GARDENS

Figure 52. Sign written by Florence Yee



Figure 53. Many people stepped on the bubble-wrap; no one wanted to touch the fun fur



Figure 54. The level belonged to Sheetal





Figure 55. Prayer plant and fake plant



Figure 56. A plinth napping



Figure 57. The pile of filth, previously featured in Exhibition for Ali; an outlet often hidden due to disgust



Figure 58. Shades of white



Figure 59. Craig called the house “Bozo”

Unwritten Rules of Territoriality

16 June–2 July 2019

Aisha Ali, Atanas Bozdarov, Craig Rodmore

A large cardboard ramp built to code as a proposal to make the local fry and burger joint, Rudy's, accessible. Accompanied by a development proposal sign in Rudy's window.

Cardboard was attached together with pins. The show done, the ramp was easily disassembled and we used the cardboard for months to come.

UNWRITTEN  
RULES OF  
TERRITORIA-  
LITY 21A

Figure 60. Sign written by Florence



Figure 61. Ramp





Figure 64. Remainders—the ramp was constructed to efficiently use nearly all the cardboard we had with minimal waste



Figure 63. Further ramp remainders



Figure 62. The ramp disassembled



Figure 65. Rudy's featuring Florence Yee and the development proposal

Sorry Derek

15–18 August 2019 (in Graduate Gallery)

Aisha Ali, Atanas Bozdarov, Craig Rodmore, Florence Yee

An apology to Derek Sullivan to celebrate the end of our independent studies with Derek Sullivan.

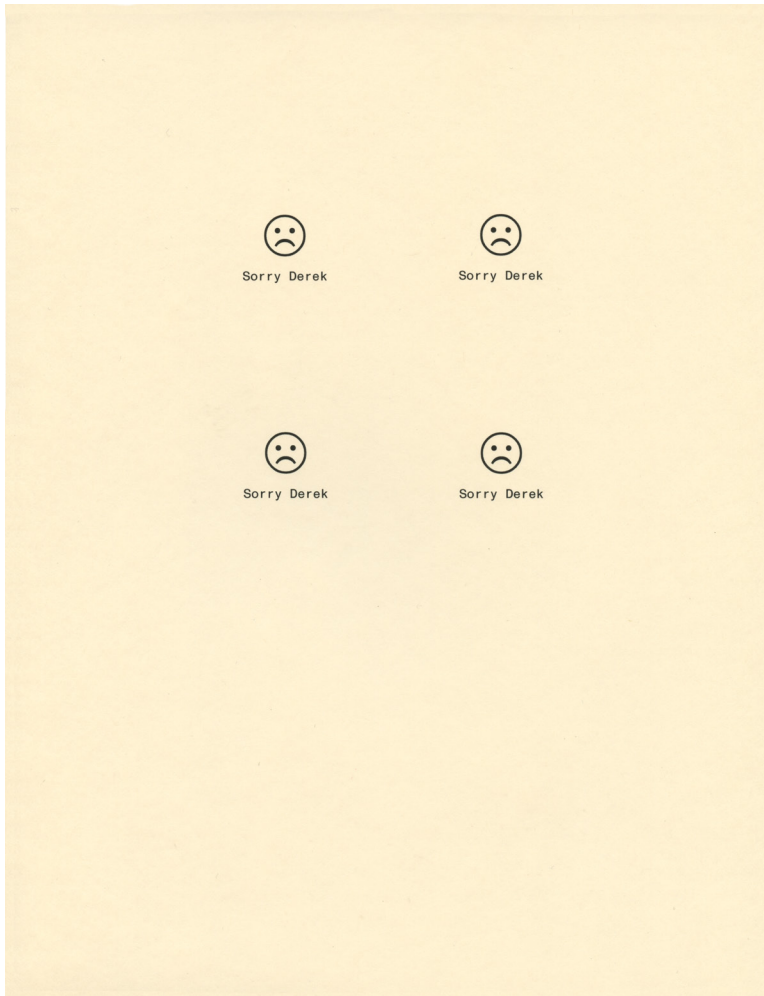


Figure 66. Us four



Figure 67. Summer sun



Figure 68. Summer shade





Figure 69. An offsite 418 show, this is the Graduate Gallery (205 Richmond)



Figure 70. Packaging containing Florence Observed, scraps, and Accessibility, a blank book masquerading as a Whitechapel book on accessibility by Atanas



Figure 71. Flo's corner



Figure 72. FedEx and Accessibility



Figure 73. Donald Judd Ramp by Craig and Atanas



Figure 74. Donald Judd ramp



Figure 75. Latex Balloon and Florence Observed



Figure 76. Poster for Sorry Derek by elevator



Back

23–29 August, 4–20 September 2019

Aisha Ali, Atanas Bozdarov, Cayden Johnson, Craig Rodmore, Angus Tarnawsky,  
Florence Yee

The pleasing backs of the objects we made.



Figure 77. The table



Figure 78. The table



Figure 79. The table



Figure 80. The table



Gallery Closed for Labour Day

30 August–3 September 2019

Aisha Ali and Atanas Bozdarov

A tablet and speakers playing firework sound effects in the closed gallery over Labour Day Weekend.



Figure 82. Sign written by me in the style of Florence Yee



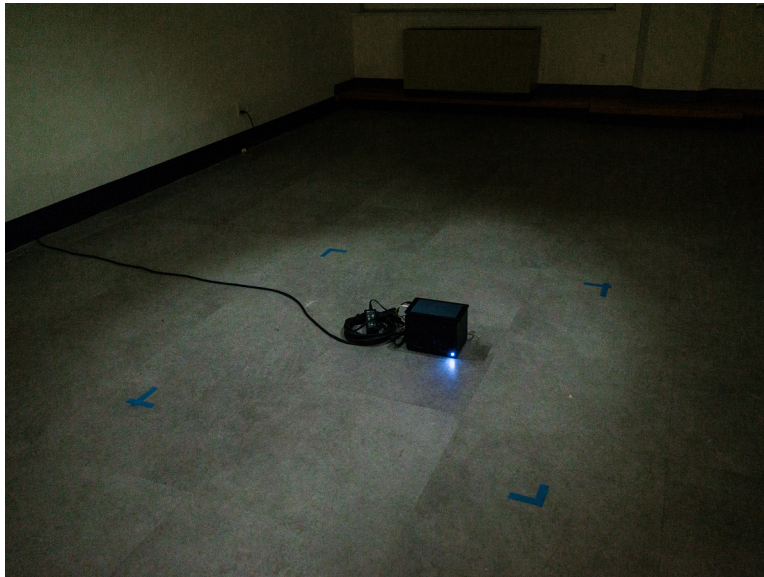


Figure 83. Tape used to mark the tables for Back which was to continue after the holiday; the tape remained indefinitely

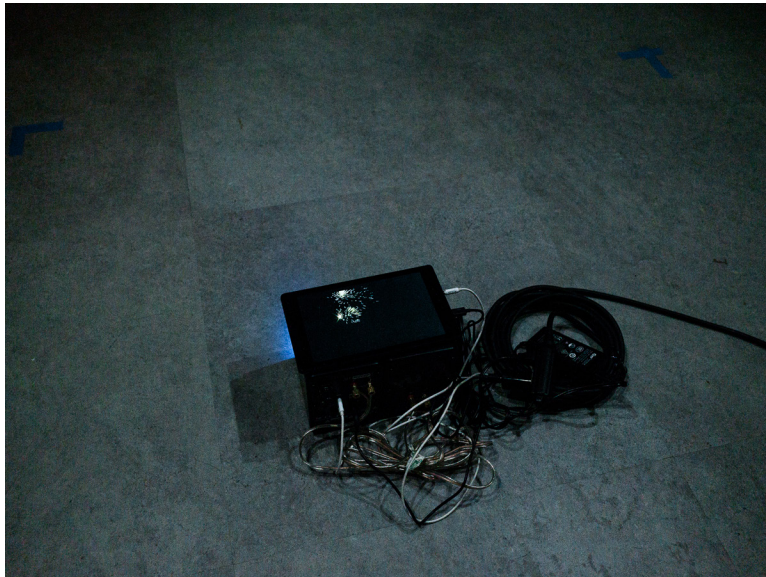


Figure 84. Celebration

Packaging

21–23 September 2019

Aisha Ali, Atanas Bozdarov, Craig Rodmore, Florence Yee

Improvised, entertaining, and otherwise pleasing packaging we had in our studios.



Figure 85. Fifteen feet of packaging



Figure 86. Florence Observed in FedEx



Figure 87. A scream and a clown



Figure 88. "Bozorav"



Figure 89. Tape alignment





Figure 90. Packaging covering outlet



Figure 91. More packaging, another outlet



Figure 92. Cart used to transport the packaging

Delivery

18–24 October 2019

Aisha Ali, Atanas Bozdarov

Much of packaging, sorted by colour and on the cart used to transport it.



Figure 93. Ready to go



Figure 94. Ready to go

Incomplete

20 December 2019–9 January 2020 (in Graduate Gallery)

Aisha Ali, Atanas Bozdarov, Craig Rodmore

The mostly unfinished projects of a semester of work.



Figure 95. Poster by Craig Rodmore





Figure 96. A television to be playing The Body No Longer Knows Inside and Outside But Only A Perpetual State of Being in the Middle, but no media player was to be found



Figure 97. A cherub watching some ramps





Figure 99. Ramp



Figure 100. Cherub and skin



Figure 101. Cherub and bottle



Figure 102. Cherub



Figure 103. Cherub





Figure 104. Cherub



Figure 105. Opportunistic placement of some filth



Figure 106. Cherub, record and ramp—the record is of an Allen Iverson press conference (2002); no record player was ever bought or borrowed



Figure 107. Television cables

Season's Greetings

20 December 2019–7 January 2020

Aisha Ali, Atanas Bozdarov, Craig Rodmore

A charcoal cane tip made by Atanas and a pack of Santa Claus napkins we found.  
Remained in the gallery while it was closed for Winter Break.



Figure 108. Both



Figure 109. One

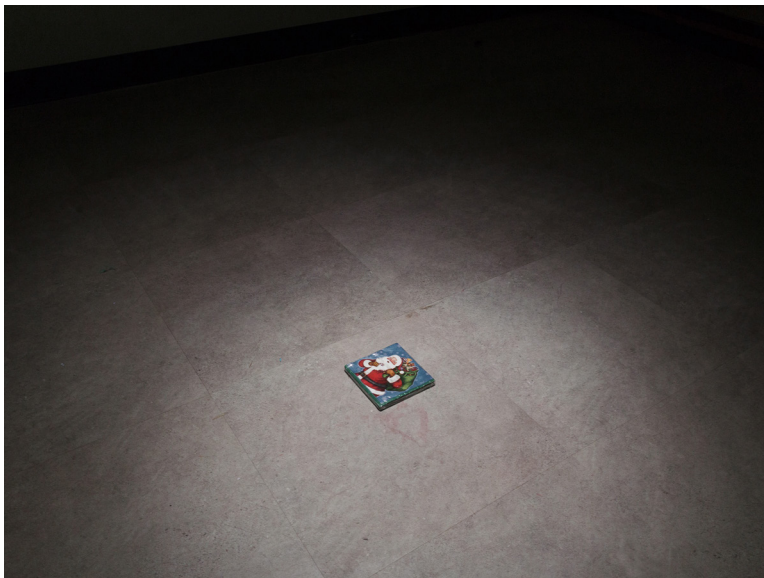


Figure 110. One



Closed for Dress Rehearsal

16 March 2020

Aisha Ali, Florence Yee

A fancy cherub waiting for the school to be closed.

CLOSED  
FOR DRESS  
REHEARSAL

Figure 111. Sign written by Florence Yee



Figure 112. Back to the window



Figure 113. Face to the door



Figure 114. As the school closed down, the cherub went live

Alternate Forms of Delivery

18 March–24 April 2020

Aisha Ali, Atanas Bozdarov, Inbal Newman, Craig Rodmore, Florence Yee

A livestream of the gallery in the locked building during the Covid-19 outbreak.

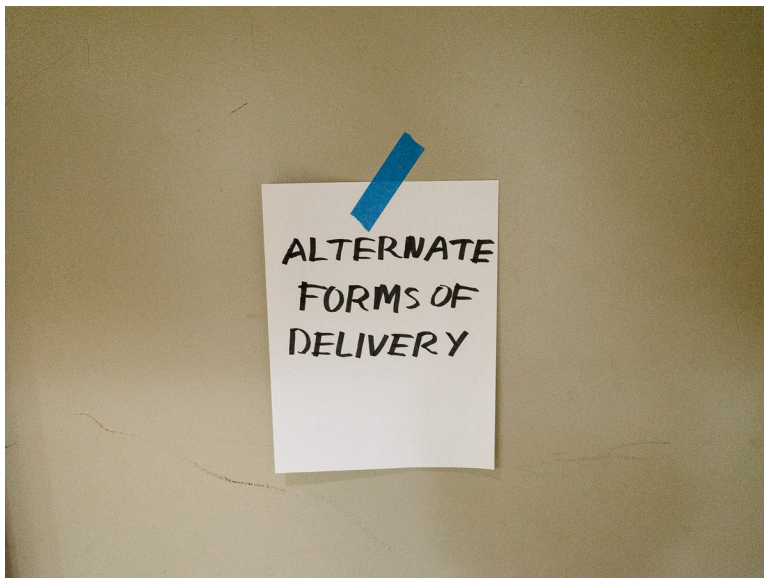


Figure 115. Sign written by me in the style of Florence Yee



Figure 116. 418





Figure 117. Livestream setup



Figure 118. Sorry we will be back shortly



Figure 119. Us five

## Appendix D: Partial Fulfillment

Partial Fulfillment was to be a collaborative thesis show between me, Craig and Atanas before the university closed due to the Covid-19 pandemic. An offsite 418 show like Sorry Derek (Figure 66–76) and Incomplete (Figure 95–107), our variously authored work would commingle throughout the Experimental Media Space (EMS), the Graduate Gallery and room 118, the rooms with which OCAD had provided us to exhibit. Scattered throughout the show would be a variety of ramps featured in Atanas’ thesis<sup>v</sup> and made sometimes by Atanas, but sometimes by Craig or I. At the entrances to the three rooms would be books like catalogues. These books would be Florence Observed, two volumes of Local Refuse (a catalogue of waste photographed by Craig), and Accessibility (a blank book masquerading as a Whitechapel book by Atanas), all of which speak little and reveal less. There would be a triangle of topiary: The Body No Longer Knows Inside and Outside But Only a Perpetual State of Being in the Middle alone in EMS, Topiary in the Graduate Gallery, and Florence Observed outside room 118, a conspiracy that my thesis was, in fact, about topiary and nothing else.

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v For more on ramps and other objects see Atanas Bozdorav, “For Example: Ramps and Other Objects” (Master’s Thesis, OCAD University, 2020).

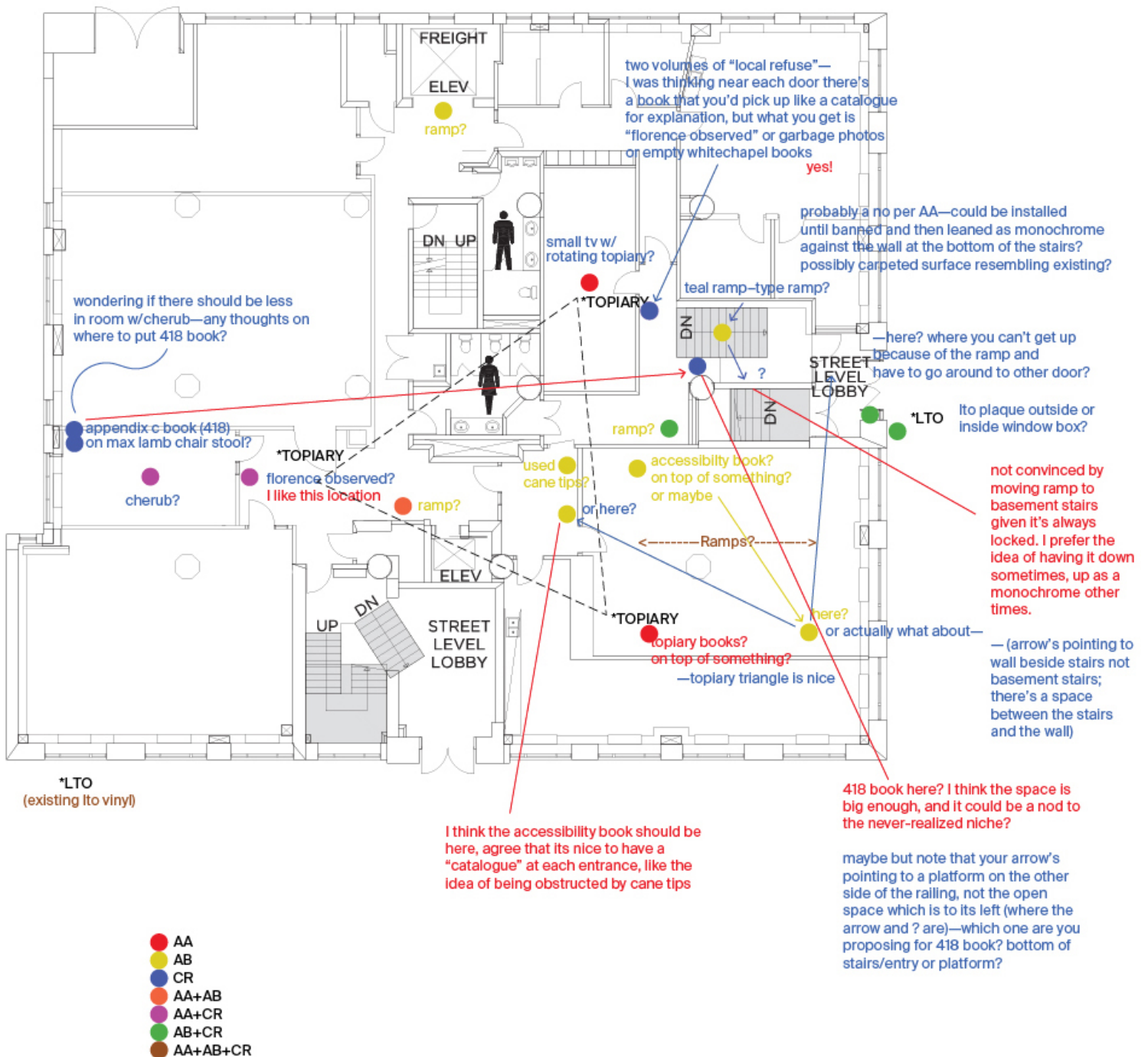


Figure 120. Collective notes for Partial Fulfilment



Figure 121. A bronze plaque reading “Limited Time Only”  
at the Duncan Street entrance to 205 Richmond

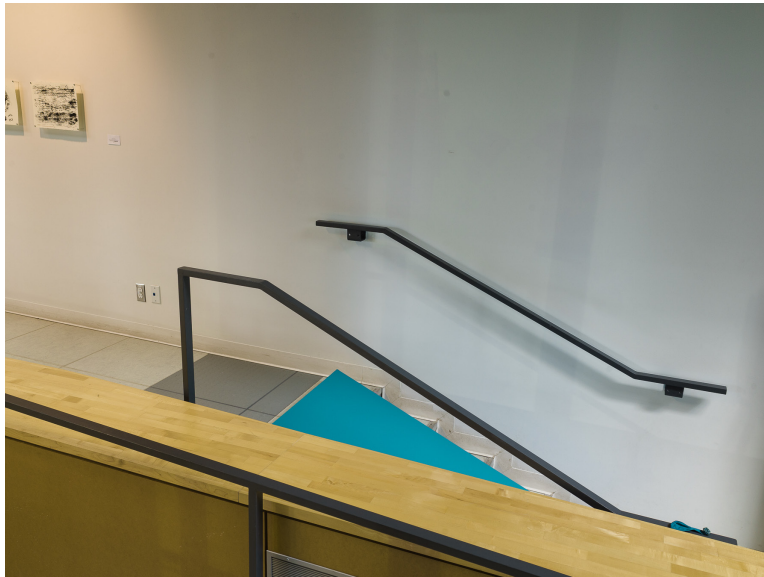


Figure 122. A ramp obstructing entry



Figure 123. Local Refuse (far right), a catalogue of waste,  
at the entrance to EMS





Figure 124. Tiny TV playing The Body No Longer Knows Inside and Outside But Only A Perpetual State of Being in the Middle, alone in EMS, facing the entrance



Figure 125. Accessibility, an imitation Whitechapel book on accessibility (blank inside) outside the Graduate Gallery.  
Not pictured here: used cane tips scattered nearby



Figure 126. A variety of ramps in the Graduate Gallery.  
Figure 127. Topiary in the Graduate Gallery



Figure 128. Florence Observed outside Room 118



Figure 129. A cherub alone in room 118



Figure 130. Original carpeting in Room 118  
Figure 131. Carpeting being removed for the exhibition



Figure 132. Teal vinyl reading “Limited Time Only” near the Richmond Street entrance of the building

### Appendix E: Cone Monitoring

A modestly sized pylon, ENGIE, was in the stairwell near the mouldmaking studios. The first photograph I took of her, the lights turned on leaving her ghostly. Months later, I decided to photograph her every time I passed by.





Figure 133. 10/26/2019 8:11 PM



Figure 134. 10/26/2019 3:59 PM



Figure 135. 11/30/2019 4:05 PM



Figure 136. 11/30/2019 4:16 PM



Figure 137. 11/30/2019 4:18 PM



Figure 138. 11/30/2019 4:20 PM



Figure 139. 11/30/2019 8:51 PM



Figure 140. 12/05/2019 6:27 PM





Figure 141. 12/05/2019 8:36 PM



Figure 142. 12/05/2019 10:14 PM



Figure 143. 12/06/2019 12:04 PM



Figure 144. 12/06/2019 8:49 PM



Figure 145. 12/06/2019 9:15 PM



Figure 146. 12/07/2019 4:39 PM



Figure 147. 12/07/2019 11:27 PM



Figure 148. 12/10/2019 2:47 PM





Figure 149. 12/10/2019 6:03 PM



Figure 150. 12/10/2019 7:37 PM



Figure 151. 12/10/2019 7:38 PM



Figure 152. 12/10/2019 8:05 PM



Figure 153. 12/10/2019 9:04 PM



Figure 154. 12/11/2019 6:06 PM



Figure 155. 12/12/2019 8:11 PM



Figure 156. 12/12/2019 11:00 PM





Figure 157. 12/13/2019 7:28 PM



Figure 158. 12/14/2019 6:58 PM



Figure 159. 12/14/2019 7:09 PM



Figure 160. 12/18/2019 11:49 PM



Figure 161. 02/15/2020 7:16 PM



Figure 162. 02/15/2020 7:18 PM



Figure 163. 02/15/2020 7:24 PM



Figure 164. 02/15/2020 7:32 PM





Figure 165. 02/15/2020 7:37 PM



Figure 166. 02/19/2020 1:30 PM



Figure 167. 02/19/2020 1:38 PM



Figure 168. 02/20/2020 6:04 PM



Figure 169. 02/28/2020 6:35 PM



Figure 170. 03/062020 4:29 PM



Figure 171. 03:06:2020 4:47 PM



Figure 172. 03/11/2020 3:23 PM





Figure 173. 03/17/2020 9:41 AM



Figure 174. 03/17/2020 10:49 AM



Figure 175. 03/17/2020 11:18 AM



Figure 176. 03/18/2020 1:55 PM



Figure 177. 03/18/2020 2:19 PM

## Appendix F: Accompanying Digital Materials

These accompanying digital materials contain, in their entirety, all written works discussed in this document. They can be accessed through the Open Research Repository of OCAD University.

Cat Beading: a record of interactions made of black beads and cat fur; lists of comings and goings, 2019.

file: ALI\_cat\_beadng.pdf

Index: photographs collectively taken and indexed, 2019

file: ALI\_index.pdf

Topiary: 111 photographs of topiaries; accompanying titles as cover pages, 2019

file: ALI\_topiary.pdf

Hotel-Sign-Writing: writing which emerged from the cataloguing and correlating of 46 photographs of hotel signs from Florence, Italy, 2019

file: ALI\_hotel\_sign\_writing.pdf

Florence Observed: Topiary, Hotel-Sign-Writing, and various correspondences, 2019

file: ALI\_florence\_observed.pdf