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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA SAN DIEGO

By the Sweat of My Browser

A thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements for the degree  
Master of Fine Arts

in

Visual Arts

by

Wren Gardiner

Committee in Charge:

Professor Jordan Crandall, Chair  
Professor Danielle Dean  
Professor Nicole Miller  
Professor Deborah Stein

2023

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University of California San Diego  
2023

## EPIGRAPH

It's like a dream  
No end and no beginning  
You're here with me  
It's like a dream  
Let the choir sing

Madonna

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

By the Sweat of My Browser

by

Wren Gardiner

Master of Fine Arts in Visual Arts

University of California San Diego, 2023

Professor Jordan Crandall, Chair

*By the Sweat of My Browser* is a video installation that muddles the definitive slashes often placed between fact/fiction, reality/simulation, rehearsed/improvised, truths/lies. Utilizing performance, props, paper mache, and the language of the internet, I explore this muddling and its material effects on the phenomenology of the human body.

This paper contextualizes the installation of work. In it, I discuss key frameworks of my art practice, what Nicole would call “the whys of my work,” through short monologue-style vignettes. These relate to communication and language, camp as a mode of survival, and existing as a teen in the year 2007 - when all media converged and the separation between the internet, TV, cinema, and user generated content collapsed.

This body of work was formed as an attempt to navigate having a human body, one that breathes and bleeds and cries and smells, while simultaneously living in the user space of the internet, which is fundamentally anti-body. Through its content and form, it addresses lives lived in constant mediation and the new phenomenologies that have emerged because of this. I discuss my process of making and researching in this paper. These directly mimic the content and form of the work. Or do the content and form mimic the process? Maybe they are an infinite loop, with no end and no beginning. That would be fitting.

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***Part 0: prologue (the 3 backdrops)***

## ***0.1 the language issue***

Okay, let's be honest. The way institutions use language is annoying. I hate it, actually. It's really confusing sometimes. And inaccessible. Just talk regular. Like, just speak in a NORMAL way. It's not that hard. You can say intelligent and interesting things without fancifying every word. It's cringy, like somebody sue me if you ever hear me using 6 big words strung together in a row in a sentence that takes up as much space as an entire paragraph. YIKES.

I feel like my distaste for this type of language comes from the fact that I basically kindof can't understand it most of the time? Or like 70% of the time. It's like the words strung together don't add up to anything coherent for my brain to grasp. Which at this point in my life I get. Like I used to think that I was just sort of weird and was randomly bad at certain things like reading and paying attention in school, but then I found out that I have adhd, which was when I was like 19, and now things just keep getting clearer and clearer. Except at first it was confusing. I was like, why didn't anybody tell me this before? Which is actually a whole complicated thing with multiple factors, but I feel like the main overarching thing is that children who are raised as girls, so mainly children who were assigned female at birth, are hardly ever diagnosed with adhd before they're adults, because the symptoms aren't as obviously recognizable as children who are raised as boys/children assigned male at birth. It's a socialization thing that has to do with gendered expectations. Like, people assigned female at birth don't usually externalize the frustrations associated with their neurodiversities, we *internalize* them, so they can kindof go unnoticed a lot of the time. And then they manifest as shit like eating disorders and "low self-esteem" and addiction. It's honestly kind of dramatic.

But anyways, basically, kids who are being socialized as girls learn to mask their neurodiversities or the symptoms are taken as ~\*just girly things\*~. Like one of the symptoms is

being very talkative, but a lot of times people see that and are just like “oh you know girls, they love to gossip hehe lol” 😊 And then masking the neurodiversity is when you learn to hide it in certain places, like at school or at work, and it low-key takes up a lot of energy.

I feel like the main thing that always gives away my neurodiversity is the way I talk. Especially when I’m trying to explain something that “happened.” Or tell a story. Also I have the impulse to interrupt people a lot. Like a thing will pop into my head and I can’t mentally move on until I’ve expressed it. Which, okay, none of this would be a problem if these weren’t the types of things that suddenly make people stop taking you seriously. They’re the sorts of things that turn you from intelligent to cute. Or even worse, from intelligent to quirky. The worst possible transformation. At least when you’re cute, you’re cute. When you’re quirky you’re just fuckin weird. So, to avoid being labeled as “quirky” or “cute” (read: dumb) I guess I learned how to speak like other people did. Or I just didn’t speak.

Anyways though, so I’m pretty sure this is why I get annoyed with the way institutions, specifically academic ones and art ones, treat language. I wanna say that I started making my monologues as a way of directly critiquing this, but actually it started because one of my teachers in undergrad just encouraged me to do it, I think because I tried to tell him a story about something once and he thought my way of telling it was interesting? Who knows, but then I did it for a class, and miraculously everyone liked it, or at least they said they did, and no one was weird about it. And so I just kept doing it intuitively. And then finally I figured out what I was doing and why I was doing it enough to like, do it on purpose.

## ***0.2 the camp factor***

So I used to be a competitive gymnast, when I was like 11 to 17, and it was obviously a traumatic experience, but what *is* cool about it now is that I can still do chin ups. And the splits. And leg lifts. And kindof press handstands. Even though I never practice. My body just *remembers*. Isn't that cool? It's also crazy because actually learning how to do those things the first time took so much work, but now I'm just coasting. I mean, I can't do as many repetitions and they're harder and my form's not perfect, but still.

Sometimes I wish I hadn't done gymnastics though. I can't decide if it was worth the trauma. Sometimes I feel like the only things it really taught me other than the actual sport of gymnastics were how to ignore my body's needs and how to work. Basically how to survive in late stage capitalism, which tbh, is actually kinda useful. I don't even know why I liked it though? They were so mean to me because I was old and tall. Like they literally called me Granny and Giant. GRANNY AND GIANT, like WHAT THE HELL IS THAT??? I was 15 and 5'3". Honestly. I'm actually laughing, well more cackling like a crazy witch, as I think about this at the ridiculousness of all of *that*. But damn, I believed them. Like, wish I had understood that ridiculousness at the time. Would have been **nice** to understand that the way adults were treating me and all the other children was problematic. Oh and they also acted like I was dumb sometimes. Like literally stupid.

But anyways, I guess if I think about it, maybe part of what drew me to it and still does tbh is the fact that the whole thing was and is actually really campy. On several levels. Most obviously, the performance. Like you're parading around by yourself doing flips and leaps and bizarre dance moves wearing nothing but a rhinestoned leotard in front of a few judges and some parents and siblings sitting in the bleachers of a random high school in Glendale. And for what? A trophy

bought in bulk online? A plastic gold medal? The clout a high score would give you amongst a very small niche group? Honestly yah. The whole thing reeks of camp. Expensive camp, but still. Like you're very seriously doing something, but embellishing it with little signs of fun - like a choreographed \*clap-clap\* to the beat of your floor music right before going into a difficult tumbling pass. Now that I'm thinking about it, I feel like peak gymnastics camp is the NCAA. There is **literally** no gymnastics sector more campy than that.

But yah, so maybe that's why I liked it. It took something hard and even kindof ugly at its core and disguised it and made it pretty and fun to look at as long as you didn't look too hard. *And* it involved performance? Obviously, I doubt I understood this at the time, but it makes sense now. I mean, given my current interests.



Image 1: Video still from *By the Sweat of My Brower* (2023) opening credits montage.



### ***0.3 the celebrity crush***

Celebrity crushes are weird. Honestly, I haven't had that many. And also what qualifies as a crush? Like it's one thing to think someone's cool, but it's another thing to have a "crush on" them. I feel like having a celebrity crush just means you have to be kindof obsessed with the person. I pretended to have a celebrity crush on Zac Efron in middle school (LOL). Like, I think I just thought it was the thing I was supposed to do. That is honestly so embarrassing. Okay don't judge me, but I had this like 5 foot tall poster of him that came in some magazine and... Okay it's hard for me to even say this, but... I put *lipstick kisses* on it. Like oh my god, I CANNOT.

Really, the funny thing is that I wouldn't have known what a crush was if it slapped me across the face. I feel like I can say this confidently, because I totally DID have a crush on a celebrity! *Before* the Zac Efron poster. Except I didn't get that at the time. But now as an adult who has had crushes on people - both celebrity and normal - I can clearly recognize that this was the first actual celebrity crush, and it was on this girl named Alyson Stoner who was on Disney Channel and we were both like 11. She was actually also in *Cheaper by the Dozen*. And the *Step Up* movies. And two Missy Elliot music videos (*Work It* and *Gossip Folks*). And an Eminem music video (*Just Lose It*). Lol. Like clearly based just on the fact that I knew this at a time when there was barely any internet and information was harder to come by, I obviously had a crush on this bitch. Like the lengths I went to researching and thinking about this girl were weird. Also, wait, is it rude to, as an adult referencing the kid you had a crush on as a kid, call that kid "this bitch"?? Anyways. Also, I watched *Cheaper by the Dozen* like every day when we first moved to Tucson. How interesting, I wonder why. Also, she wasn't even that famous! Like she didn't have a main role in any of these things. I was so obsessed with her that I literally wanted to become an actor so that we could be friends. Which tbh is not what I told myself at the time, but it's all starting to make sense now.

I feel like celebrity crushes are cute and funny when you're a kid. Well, I want to think they are. I guess I actually just want to think *my* celebrity crush was cute and funny and not as weird as it was, so I'm trying to rationalize it by being like "oh you had a crush on a little girl and you didn't realize it, how cute," and "you didn't know any better," but in reality it's actually still weird even if there are some innocent little things about it. It's also not like I specifically was the only person who was like this. Like let's be real, it's a societal situation. It's a spectacle situation honestly. Like, okay in one sense it is, because I didn't know this girl. She was literally just images to me. But in another sense maybe I sensed that there was something wrong with my obsession with her without her actually being "real" to me, hence my aspiring actor era? Like, she would only be really real if we knew each other irl or something?

Obviously that never happened and eventually I made actual friends that I saw everyday at school and at some point Alyson just faded from my thoughts. Now when I have a celebrity crush I feel like I just automatically understand that it's just an obsession with the idea of a person based on their image and what they, or their social media manager, type out and post on the internet, like I just think they're hot and cool on Instagram.

Wow, I guess I've come a long way.

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***Part 1: media***

## ***1.1 television and moving image***

I never became an actor, but I did become a performance artist. Performance is the central axis of my practice around which video, writing, and installation all orbit. It's hard for me to make a piece of work that doesn't involve me doing some performative element. When someone asks me what type of art I make, I say performance art first, even though the outcome of the work is usually a video installation and I spend hours and hours writing the performance scripts, months workshopping them, and even more months memorizing and rehearsing them. During my aspiring actor phase, I told myself I wanted to be an actor because I "wanted to entertain people." I thought this sounded better than saying "I want someone to look at me, I want to be the center of someone's attention, I want to be beloved." Now though, I care less about framing it as entertainment. Art and entertainment are similar and overlapping. Both reflect a cultural moment, both have to do with leisure, both are experiential. I think the main difference between the two is that entertainment just kinda like... is what it is. It begins and ends with the viewing experience, whereas art extends beyond that. What specific things someone thinks are art vs entertainment are entirely subjective to the person.

Performance and video are very closely related to entertainment. My favorite videos to watch are TV shows. TV shows are different from movies, because they last longer and exist in pre-cut, bite sized chunks. They fuck with our attention in a way that movies don't. I love all types of TV. Dramas, comedies, reality TV, docuseries, sitcoms, sketch shows, talk shows, game shows, the news, cartoons, true crime, etc. I'm especially intrigued by TV, because it reveals who we are as individuals and as a collective. The specific shows we watch tell us a lot about ourselves, and the fact that we collectively watch so much TV, regardless of the specific show, tells us a lot about who we are as a society. Because I'm making video and performance art, I'm not sure

how my work could possibly *not* be impacted by a mass popular culture phenomenon that revolves around videos and performances.

There are 2 types of TV that most directly impact my work:

1. Reality TV. Faves include *Love Island UK* (2015), *Dance Moms* (2011), *Masterchef Junior* (2013), and *The Circle* (2018) - the UK version.
2. "Surreal Niche Comedy," as I've decided to call it. These shows don't really fit into a specific genre, and they're harder to find. *At Home with Amy Sedaris* (2017) and *The Rehearsal* (2022) are examples.

A major difference between my work and the shows on TV is that they exist within different frameworks with different rules. (Also, our budgets are like, way different.) The framework of TV is entertainment, even if sometimes certain shows are more than this. Most people initially go to TV to be entertained, so this has to come first. If a TV show isn't entertaining its audience, then it won't *have* an audience. If it doesn't have an audience, then it won't be able to exist, because it won't be making the money it needs to pay for the production of the show. The framework of art is that it's transformative in some way. People seek out art in hopes of finding something out, about the world or themselves or culture, so transformation has to come first. Brecht would call it teaching or being "didactic," but that feels weirdly hierarchical. Like as if the artist knows so much more than their audience. My work takes elements and conventions used in TV shows and places them outside of their usual context, which either changes their meaning or reveals something new about their meaning that we didn't see before.

**Reality TV (is fake [and we {mostly} know that])**

We still call it reality TV, even though we mostly know it's not real. Maybe when it first started we didn't know this, but now it's 2023, and people know a lot more about representational media. If we know it's fake then why do we watch it so much? I watch reality TV, because at the very least it is reminiscent of real life. *Dance Moms* was the first reality TV show I watched. I watched it from the very beginning to the very end, every week, as it came out.

I started watching *Dance Moms* as a freshman in college when my roommate happened to show it to me one night, and I quickly became a superfan. Initially, I liked watching it, because I was reminded of gymnastics, and that interested me. The show is about competitive dancers, their overbearing mothers, and a coach that is always watching named Abby Lee Miller. There was overlap in what I was watching and what I had actually experienced as a child. I don't know if I realized this as a 19 year old, but I was kindof watching my own gymnastics trauma play out just with other people in a slightly different situation with the added element of the whole thing being filmed. It's actually kindof fucked up.

Even though my gymnastics experience wasn't exactly the same or as dramatic as what I watched on *Dance Moms*, as I watched the show every week, I was able to empathize with the cast, especially the kids. I'd watch Chloe be compared to Maddie and think with conviction "this is gonna fuck these kids up when they're older." I felt like I knew what these two 9-year-olds' futures held, because I had previously spent so much time in an adjacent athletic environment that was equally as hyper competitive, half naked, and body centric as the one I was watching on TV. By empathizing with them, I could empathize with myself.

With *Dance Moms*, there was an obvious connection, like if a football player's wife watched *Basketball Wives* (2010). But there are some reality TV shows that I watch religiously where I feel completely different from the characters that I'm watching, like I'm looking at a whole

different world. *Love Island UK* is my favorite of these. The people are so different from me, yet they still feel kind of relatable? To me, *Love Island UK* feels like cishet, rich, British tabloid culture. It's kind of like a lot of other reality TV dating shows. Single people come on it to find love and it's all very stereotypical. It's fake boobs and waxed assholes and lounging by the pool doing nothing. If it was just this, I don't think I would watch it. It's the British element that makes it watchable. It's "pulling people for a chat" and being "absolutely gutted" and "bish bash, fucking bosh," whatever that means, that makes it interesting. There's an American version, and I don't know a single American who has actually watched more than a few episodes. (My Canadian cousin has though. Go figure.)

There is something about British TV that always holds my attention. I think being fascinated by the UK is a quintessentially white American thing. It's like trying to understand your parents. Catching a glimpse of British culture from afar is like when you're a kid and you catch your mom hanging out with her friends and acting completely different than how she normally acts when she's with you. Britain is like the United States' mom. The US was invented by British people (on stolen, colonized land) and now the popular culture of this newly invented nation feeds back into the old place in a weird little loop. Americans think of Britain as a place with accents and afternoon tea and the funny hats and tall buses, then we see shit like *Love Island UK* and realize that that's also Britain, and their pop culture is just a slightly different version of ours. The similar, but slightly different versions are what interest me most about *Love Island UK*. When I watch it, it's kind of like I'm looking at a cursed image. I recognize all the things I'm looking at, but I've never seen them put together like this. The more I watch, the more I start to question what is really going on and ask why and how did we get here?

Reality TV is reality TV because of its use of confessionals. Every reality TV show has them. Confessionals are the moments when cast members turn into talking heads. When they directly

address the camera and explain something. There's usually a green screened background and a crop from the shoulders or torso up. Obviously, confessionals are used in other types of media too, like news or documentaries, but there is nothing like a reality TV star who knows how to play it up for a confessional. People imagine this to be easy, but not everyone is actually good at talking to a camera. Think about *Keeping Up With The Kardashians* (2007). We are still making memes with Kim's confessionals from 2010. She knew how to do it better than any of her sisters, especially back then. If confessionals make reality TV reality TV, then confessionals are the most important part of any reality TV show. They're where audiences connect with the people on screen. Chloe from *Dance Moms* didn't remind me of myself when she was dancing, she reminded me of myself when she was talking.



Image 2: Video still from *By the Sweat of My Brow* (2023) monologue.

Reality TV is extremely powerful. Even too powerful sometimes. It's powerful, because we see ourselves in it. It makes much more sense to imagine ourselves as reality TV stars than as the fictional characters of drama series. We could be reality TV stars. They were all normal people once too. Even though we know reality TV is fake, sometimes it's hard to separate what exactly



is fake and what exactly is real. A lot of times when we're watching, we don't really care. The people in the shows are just vessels for us to project whatever we want onto.

### **An as brief as possible analysis of *The Rehearsal***

*The Rehearsal* (2022) is different from drama and reality TV. It's one of the Surreal Niche Comedies I was talking about earlier. When I watch these shows, I get the sense that the their creators are actually *trying* to fuck with my idea of what's real and what's fake. I question which parts were planned and which parts were unplanned, which performances were rehearsed and which were improvisational. Unlike reality TV, which edits out most scenes that would make elements of the shows seem planned, these shows incorporate those scenes as plot devices.

Throughout the series, *The Rehearsal* continually sets itself up as one thing and then becomes another thing, so when I was watching it, I never knew what I was going to get. I was kept on my toes. In the first episode, it presents itself as an anthology series that helps "real" people have difficult conversations with friends or family members by rehearsing different potential outcomes of the conversation with actors in elaborate replicas of the location where the actual conversation will take place. The premise and production are semi-ridiculous to begin with, but because I had seen Nathan Fielder's other show, *Nathan For You* (2013), I was already expecting a high level of bizarrrity. I was expecting bizarre, but I wasn't expecting the form of the show to continually morph.

By the end of the 6 episode season, the show was... not what it had presented itself as in the first episode. Here is Wikipedia's synopsis of the final episode:

Nathan stages a ninth birthday party for Adam, but faces a problem when Remy, one of the child actors who played Adam at age six, becomes attached to

Nathan, calling him "daddy" even after his scenes are over. Remy's mother explains that her son might have trouble understanding the difference between acting and reality. To discover what went wrong, Nathan repeats Remy's scenes with different actors including Liam (a nine-year-old Adam actor), an adult actor, and a mannequin. He then explores what might have happened if Angela had stayed with him and meets with the real Angela, who urges him to forgive himself, as her religious beliefs state. In an attempt to truly understand the connection between parent and child, Nathan stages a new scenario in which he is Remy's mother Amber and Liam portrays Remy. They re-create the experience of appearing on *The Rehearsal* and becoming attached to "pretend daddy" Nathan. After coming to the emotional realization that they should not have done the show, Nathan as Amber seemingly breaks character and tells the fake Remy, "I'm your dad."

Like, what?

In the first episode I was laughing, and I barely ever laugh (a semi-frequent topic of discussion in therapy). The vibe was that it was funny and kindof light hearted, but also a little strange. By the last episode though, I wasn't laughing as much. How could I **possibly** laugh when I was asking myself questions like "how can we ever know what the future will hold and how do we deal with that unknowing?" and "is Nathan autistic, and is that what this is actually about?" and "how do you get along with someone when your fundamental ideas of 'truth' are at odds?" I was kindof spiraling actually.

In *The Rehearsal*, Nathan openly and frequently acknowledges the fact that he's making a TV show and that we're watching it on HBO. In episode 2, which is where the show really starts, Nathan begins a rehearsal with a woman named Angela. The premise is that she will rehearse raising a child. This rehearsal is set to last a month with the child, Adam, aging 3 years every few days, so that by the end of the rehearsal, he will have gone from newborn baby to 18 year old adult. Because of child labor laws, they have to switch the child actors out every few hours, so Adam is constantly changing, which continually reminds the audience of the constructed nature of television and, more broadly, any video. By the end of episode 2, Nathan, with

Angela's consent, steps in to coparent Adam with her in a non-romantic, non-sexual partnership, since her search for a mate hasn't gone well. (Finding someone to play the "dad" was also a main plot point of the episode.)

This coparenting rehearsal goes on throughout the rest of the 6 episode series sometimes in the foreground, sometimes in the background. In one episode, Nathan, in need of more actors for the project, travels home to LA and conducts a workshop where he trains actors for the rehearsal using "The Fielder Method." He returns "home" to Adam and Angela a week or two later but realizes that in the rehearsal story world, Adam is now 15 and Nathan, his father, has been absent for 6 years of his life, which he then feels he needs to incorporate into the rehearsal story in order to make it as realistic as possible for Angela and himself. Whenever Nathan is unsure of what to do or how to handle a situation, he does a rehearsal of it. He's the show's main character, but within this broader role he is also switching roles. We're watching several different versions of Nathan - real boss, real acting coach, real actor, real cat dad, real son, fake actor, fake coparent, fake dad, fake real mom, etc. Sometimes we even watch other people play him, while he plays someone else who is interacting with his fake self.

What I like and find interesting about *The Rehearsal* is that it moves through different modes of storytelling. By doing this, it is disruptive to the genres of television and moving image, because it shows the materials of the medium. It's easy for us to understand that a painting or sculpture was *made* by someone. We can see things like brush strokes and indents made by tools. The materials of representational media are much easier to hide. It can be dangerous when these materials are hidden, because people take what they see as fact when it's really a construction. When I see a painting, I don't take it as fact, I take it as an artist's idea of something transformed into a visual representation. Video and other representational media like photos and audio recordings act under the false pretense that what we are seeing and hearing is real.

That's their myth. In *The Rehearsal*, there are moments when we're supposed to think something is "real" and moments when we're clearly supposed to think something is fake. Going in between these modes emphasizes the fact that there even *are* modes and that what we're watching didn't exist as we're seeing it before someone filmed it with a camera.

## **1.2 the portal**

I read a book by Patricia Lockwood where the main character was always in “the portal.” The portal was the internet and she entered it through her phone most of the time. In the portal she would get completely lost in the sauce. The sauce of the portal is like, everything. It’s everything that’s not material. It’s photos and videos and writing and reading and news and events and opinions and maybe some facts. It’s a google search that says “difference between apple cider and apple juice.” It’s a TikTok live stream where a group of people appearing to be a family sit in a disheveled looking building in ripped and dirty clothes, speaking a language I don’t know asking for roses and corgis. It’s my mom lurking my Instagram and liking all my posts from the last year, which isn’t weird when she does it, because she doesn’t know any better.

It’s hard to think about what the portal is not. Not just, what can’t I do on the internet, but, what’s **impossible** to do on the internet? It’s impossible to smell on the internet. It’s impossible to taste on the internet. It’s impossible to touch on the internet. It’s impossible to be material on the internet. It’s impossible to have a real, physical body on the internet.

### **Anti-body/bodiless**

The internet is a bodiless space. The internet has only stamps of bodies, remnants of things that at one point in time had a physical shape. Even AI is a stamp of something once physical.

Someone had to invent AI, didn’t they? And how can a space even be a space if it doesn’t exist in material form? What kind of space is that? The internet is like an air sign with a few earth placements. There is something that makes it run that is physical, I know there is, but when I google it, it just talks about cables. Funny how the information can be right there at my fingertips, but if it’s boring or confusing in the first few minutes, or hell, if I just don’t care that

much, I'm out. But whatever, that's not the space of the internet I'm talking about. I'm talking about the space of the user, the user who has a body that breathes and bleeds and cries and smells. I looked it up, and apparently some human people can't smell... but they're still included here. Lol. When I first wrote this paper in the fall of 2022, I looked it up and robots couldn't smell at all. The human bodies hadn't discovered how to make the robot bodies smell yet, and tbh I was hoping they never would. Maybe it was selfish, but I wanted **ONE** thing that I could do that a robot couldn't do. Back then, I could *dream*. But now it's 2023, and some scientists in Tel Aviv taught them how to do it. Robots smell now 😞 Horrible news.

Anyways.

To be anti-something means to be opposed to or against the "something," not just passively disengaged. Like antiviral medication. It's made to fight a virus, to shut it down. If the internet was passive about its lack of bodies, it would only be bodiless. But it's also anti-body. To be clear, when I say bodies, I mean *physical* bodies, not images or words or sounds that come from bodies. Not the stamps. The point of the internet is to be able to share information without needing to be in the same physical space as someone else. That's literally what it was originally invented for. And now we have a vaster, quicker, stronger, and more accessible version of the original.

We don't have direct conversations and we don't look directly at things on the internet. If everything we see on the internet is just stamps of people, then we are always at least once removed from any conversation we are having, even if it's with our bff who we just saw irl 2 hours ago. Nuance on the internet doesn't come from body language, tone, or mid conversation eye contact. It comes from the way we type words rather than the way we speak them. A "?" is different from a "???" which is *much* different from a "?!". A large chunk of text sent as one

message communicates something different than the same amount of text sent as multiple shorter messages. Nuance comes from the way we interact with a camera, rather than with another body. A camera angle or split second of pause at the beginning of a video can instantly tell viewers what generation the person in the video is from. TikToks are different than reels on Instagram, even though they're fundamentally the same thing when taken out of context. It's not rocket science that when I'm moving through the user space of the internet I'm speaking a different language than when I'm moving through physical space. Even within the language of the internet, I speak different dialects. I text differently than I WhatsApp. I interpret a "... " differently when it's in a text from my dad vs when it's in a text from my lover. Also, there's the fact that I'm speaking the American English internet language. I could go on and on.

I feel like I don't know how to get him to go without being really fucking annoying and like, naggy. Like, I have a lot of health anxiety, which is a known fact, but also TimDarby's dad died when he was in like his mid 50s of a heart attack (it was literally 10 years ago yesterday!) and he was all on the phone like "I just went to the doctor like 3 years ago"!! And he was dead serious about that being just fine!! Like, TimothyDarby this is urgent!! WAKE 🙌 UP 🙌 BABE!!

Image 3: Excerpt image of monologue text.

We had to develop this language, because the internet is bodiless. There's no way for us to have physical, material presences on the internet. The nuances of internet language are collectively invented translations of the nuances of physical language. Even though this language has developed, some things still get lost in the translation, like body language, tone, and eye contact. We'll never be able to fully translate these things, no matter how hard we try and no matter how much new technology is invented, because the internet is fundamentally anti-body. It was made to elude physicality. In fact, new technology just complicates the

translation. When we communicate on the internet, we have to pass through an interface.

There's not the usual irl phenomenology going on that we, as social beings, have relied on since the beginning of time to understand each other and the world. Instead there's portal phenomenology.

### **Onlife phenomenology**

It's complicated to navigate having a breathing, bleeding, crying, smelling body and not having a body at all. They're two completely different experiences. When I'm on the internet I'm necessarily *required* to be in two places at once. My body is somewhere and my mind is somewhere else. I'm split up. It's a different experience than daydreaming. I hardly ever daydream anymore. I don't know if it's because I'm an adult or if it's because the time I might previously have spent daydreaming, I now spend in the portal. Daydreamers need quiet, and the internet is anything but quiet. It's never still, there's always something going on. It goes 24/7 365. The user space of the internet feels endless and full and layered, but it takes up no physical space. It has no physical presence, so I have to make up visual analogies and tell anecdotes to describe it, but they're never exactly right. It's the world if the world was shaped like a maze for an unfigureoutable reason; it's a ball pit at a McDonald's PlayPlace with a thousand birthday parties going on for people of all different ages; it's a fist fight and a food fight combined. See what I mean? Nothing quite fits.

There is this thing called living "onlife" that this author Luciano Floridi wrote about. Living onlife is when we go about our days with constant movement between the analog and the digital, the online and the offline. I wrote about it in my first year review paper in terms of something I named "selfie logic." The definition of a selfie is, "A photograph that one has taken of oneself, typically one taken with a smartphone or webcam and shared via social media." Selfies are like



all forms of self-portraiture in that we can construct our own narrative of who we are. They differ in the fact that there is a crucial social element to them, because there is inherent and immediate potential to share them.

The logic behind a selfie is to create a version of ourselves that we could then share with others online. Selfie logic is used to produce more than proper selfies, though. It's used when an undergrad takes a video of a guy eating an entire Rotisserie chicken in front of the library, when I make a photo of my work in progress, when @2sisters\_angie contemplates writing up a blog post about the puberty book she got her daughter to tell us what was so great about it. That undergrad's video says "I am in college and this is the sort of thing that I encounter at school." My photos say "I am working." @2sisters\_angie's blog post says "This is how I parent." Selfie logic is about impulses that have shifted to cater to the digital world. This is part of onlife phenomenology, but it doesn't cover what it actually *feels* like to live onlife. It doesn't explain the experience of being split up.

Being split up is confusing. It's a lot of switching between languages and contexts. I don't feel settled in either place. I can't be settled when I'm on the internet, because I exist in a body, so I have to be somewhat aware of my physical location. Online, there's more ingesting than there is digesting. The intestines of my brain are clogged. I'm constipated by information. Sometimes I can't handle it, so I deactivate my Instagram in an attempt to clear everything out. When I'm not on the internet, I'm usually thinking about the internet or being pulled towards it (re making decisions using the logic of the selfie). There's less attention being paid to what I'm actually doing in the physical world. My attention is almost always at least somewhat split between the activities of the portal and whatever task I'm trying to complete. Having adhd also exacerbates this. Sometimes I feel like a robot malfunctioning from all the switching, but like, I kindof just let the malfunctions happen, because I'm not sure what else I can do.

Being in the portal changes my relationship to my body, because it's almost an out of body experience. And I'm having it a lot. I don't really *need* my body very much when I'm on the internet. I need my eyes, ears, and fingers. I spend so much time having this out of body experience, that I'm less familiar with my in-body experience. Sometimes when I'm going to bed and am forced to leave the portal, I hyperfixate on my heartbeat or my breathing. I'm so not used to just being in my body without the distraction of the portal that I almost forget how it feels to physically be alive. I become suspicious of regular things, like the beat of my heart or the fact that I have to breathe. I start asking myself, "is my body *okay*?" The bodily sensations I *am* used to and unbothered by are often related to the interactions I have with my phone, which is usually my portal access point. For example, I can tell if I got a text, WhatsApp, news alert, or email based off of a slight variation in the vibration of my phone. I can feel my pinkies when they go numb from holding my phone. I notice the pain in my eyes after I read an entire 300 page book on my phone in 4 days. These things are familiar. They may bother me, but they don't scare me.

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***Part 2: process***

## ***2.1 to place my face in front of my camera is to go to church***

The monologues I perform in my videos were written in a long google document that I have been keeping since 2016. They are just three out of hundreds of entries I've written over the years. I chose these monologues to turn into videos because they had a good base from which I could work. Thematically, they each contained a conflict relating to the physical, visceral body, and they all spiraled out of control in the right way. I almost never pick entries that don't spiral out of control, but the spiraling has to come back to something, it can't be too melodramatic, and there needs to be an element of whimsy, to contrast with the elements of neurosis and fear.

Once the monologues are picked, I workshop them. I add stuff in, take stuff out, move stuff around. I get feedback and have meetings with people who have read them. It's basically what any writer does with any piece of writing. This time, though, I decided to print them out, so I could take handwritten notes on them. This was productive for me, because I got to use my body and I could make symbols and diagrams right there on the page. I've learned that I am a diagram person. The monologues are also on the wall of my studio, so I am reminded of them often and can let my thoughts about them develop over time. Thoughts that are less about the precise words and more about the structure, the overall tone, how these things relate to the topics held within the monologue, how they will relate to the videos that will eventually be filmed.

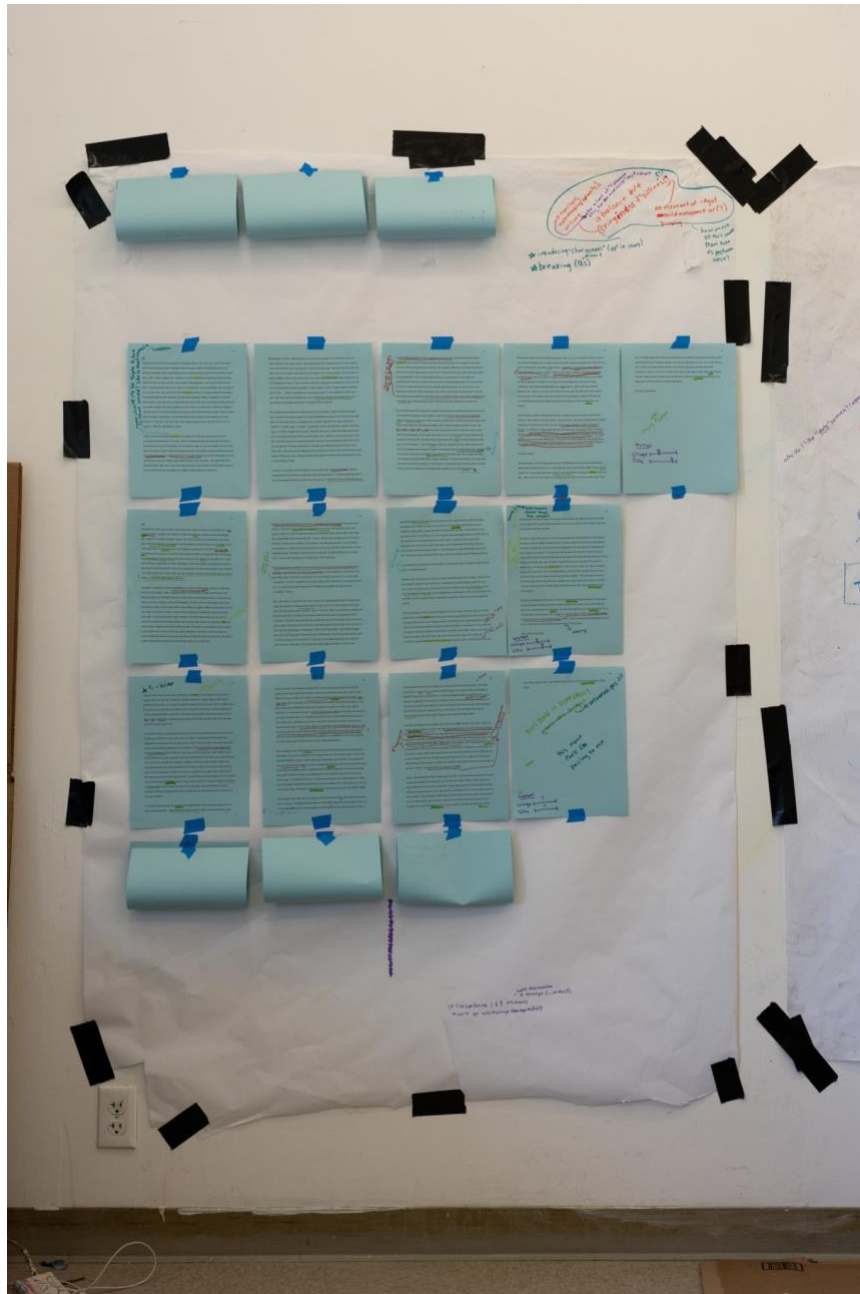


Image 4: Annotated monologues hanging in my studio.

After the text is mostly finalized, I memorize the monologues and rehearse them. This basically consists of me sitting, staring, and talking. Occasionally I'll stand up. I make the monologues to be performed for a camera, not for a physical space. When I rehearse them, I record myself on my phone with the front facing camera. The purpose of this is less about the fact that I will

eventually perform them for a camera and more about the fact that when I'm recording a video on my phone, I can't use my phone for anything else, so there are less distractions. The same way that some people understand how to work a live audience or take up space on a stage, I understand how to work an interface between me and a live audience and how to command the space of a screen. I am extremely comfortable in front of a camera, probably because I regularly practice putting myself in front of the one on my phone. Recording myself rehearsing monologues is just the tip of the iceberg.

A few years ago, I began filming myself washing my face everyday as a way of making personal care seem more exciting. (Lol.) After a little over a year of this however, I started to wonder if it was making me... weird. The way I filmed myself in these videos was also by using the front facing camera on my phone. I needed to see my reflection in order to wash my face, so this seemed logical. The only difference between this and a regular mirror was that there was now a record of me. Some unfamiliar things started happening several months in. For example, I began to notice myself having moments of complete obliviousness to the camera, doing things like talking to myself, rehashing conversations of the day muttered under my breath. I was behaving in a way I would never behave in front of other people, I assume because my body and mind subconsciously know how to behave when there's another person around. It was like I was really alone, but I was being recorded. I also started to notice the opposite effect. At times when there wasn't a camera, and I was actually just standing in front of a normal mirror, I would speak to it in the same way that I would sometimes speak to the front facing camera while recording myself washing my face. I once caught myself telling the hallway mirror what I had done that day which was lol but also kindof weirded me out 😬

After about a year and a half, I decided to stop doing the skin care videos, because they had started to become a chore. It felt like they were making personal care *harder* instead of easier. I

decided to switch to “car videos.” Car videos are just recordings of me driving, mostly to and from school, but basically anywhere that I don’t need a map to get to is fair game for a car video. The car videos operate differently than the skin care videos. For one, I talk to the camera a lot less. After turning the camera on, I say hello, and before turning the camera off, I say goodbye. Other than that, I really only talk to the camera when I have a poignant thought that I feel like expressing right then and there. I sing a lot in them. Sometimes I yell at other drivers and then confess aloud to the camera that “that was rude of me” even though it’s not like other drivers can hear me yelling at them. I make eye contact with the camera at certain moments, like during these little confessions or while performing to a song that’s playing on the radio, but I can’t talk to my phone camera the same way that I talked to it in the skin care videos, because if I *did*, I would crash the car.

In the car, the camera becomes more like a companion, kinda like a dog tbh. It’s always watching me, always available to listen. In some ways, the car videos are a little bit surveillancey, but I don’t care. Nothing is private anymore. My social security number is on the dark web for fuck’s sake. Everyone has a sex tape somewhere. Everyone did something they aren’t proud of in their youth or early adulthood that was recorded or photographed. People come into this world and leave this world on camera. My spouse watched his grandpa die in real time on Zoom, and the other day I saw a Mormon woman’s home waterbirth while casually browsing stories on Instagram. (It was **weird**.) Who cares what the damn camera sees me do, as long as I’m okay with the fact that I did it. Recordings are God, and to place my face in front of a camera is to go to church.

A higher power, like a god, is supposed to guide the believer’s value system, their morals. Spending time in the presence of a higher power, like going to church, is supposed to bring you closer to these values and morals, remind you of them, clarify them. The presence of a camera

reminds me of these, and if I can't do or say something in front of my own phone camera, should I reeeeeaaaalllly be doing or saying it *off* camera? Accountability in 2023 has a lot to do with what we were recorded doing or saying. What kinds of things can I live with being recorded and what can't I? Sometimes I pick my nose on camera, and I'm just like... sorry my nose was *really* itchy and that wasn't a discomfort I wanted to sit through for the sake of it not being on camera. I fart on camera all the time. People *fart*, it's OKAY. Maybe there are things I do or say that I'll realize one day were not in line with my morals, but I can't know what I don't know, if that makes sense. All I can really do is be honest with myself and try to learn and grow right now, and strangely, the camera helps me do that. (Also, AI can make fake videos that look real, so what does any of this really matter?)

One last thing about the car videos and the skin care videos is that I never watch them. Okay, I've watched a few of the skin care videos, maybe four of them, because I was giving an experimental lecture on performance, but that's pretty much it. I just chose a random one. (I talked about *Bridgerton* (2020) in it.) But for the most part, they just fill up my phone, and then I dump them onto a special harddrive. Unless my iCloud gets hacked or someone goes onto the harddrive, no one will ever be able to watch them... probably. Unless someone wants to sit through like, 1000 hours of footage of me basically doing nothing, no one will ever watch them... probably. It's the word probably that might give them any power, but I don't want a video to hold power over me like that. Lately, in the car videos, as a little joke, I've been addressing my "future assistant who will one day be going through these videos." A great way to control your own narrative is by writing it before someone else on the internet does, by releasing any record of your vulnerabilities yourself.





Image 5: Video still from *Binary Rift* (2022), an experimental lecture on filtered vs unfiltered performance.

## ***2.2 crawling, squeezing, almost breaking an ankle***

To quote the mid 90s direct to VHS children's series, *Bibleman* (1995), "my whole **BODY** hurts, Lord." Recently, I have been constructing cardboard and paper mache pedestal "outfits," as I call them. Remember those silly little paper mache projects from elementary school that were so cute? This isn't like that. To quote my friend Amir, who regularly walks past me crawling on my hands and knees or bending upside down to place a strip of paper in a difficult to reach nook, "there's nothing silly about *this*." I'd like to add that there's also nothing cute about it. I look ridiculous.

Not only have my muscles been sore from all the crawling and reaching and bending, but for some reason, while I was outside paper macheing the other day, the sun decided to come out after a months long hiatus and I, like a dumbass, wasn't wearing sunscreen until Rachel walked by and said "your arms are burning," but it was too late.

Not only do I have a so-red-it's-almost-maroon sunburn, but my right pointer finger is feeling strangely stiff, probably from the several hours I spent hot gluing cardboard together while constructing the pedestal outfits. (Also, I dropped a Trinitron TV on it, so there was already a scar turned callus 🤖) I had never thought about the physicality of hot gluing before, but the most consistent physical aspect of it is literally squeezing the trigger that makes the hot glue come out. I've also learned that a stick of hot glue doesn't go very far. It goes about as far as twice the length of the glue stick, so maybe 10 or 12 inches. Hot gluing the cardboard for the outfits required somewhere between 50 and 100 hot glue sticks.



Image 6: In process paper macheing of installation benches.

And last but not least, not only is my pointer finger stiff and callused, but my right foot has been acting up again. It all started while I was filming the theme song montage for this project. I knew it was a risk to jump on the mini trampoline in platform sandals, the perfect setup for a broken ankle. So, when I felt my ankle starting to roll, I caught myself. Honestly, if it had been anyone but an ex-competitive gymnast doing this, they would have broken their ankle right then and there *for sure*. Thankfully, though, I didn't break my ankle, but I did do something to my foot – the top/side of it on the outside, close to where I assume the foot bones must meet the ankle bones. I knew something was slightly off when it happened, but this was outfit 2 out of 9, the very beginning of the day, and truth be told it didn't hurt *that* much. It felt more like a bruise. So I did the remaining 7 outfits. I sprinted, I pogo stuck, I ran up and down stairs. Then at the end of the day, I don't know if it was the adrenaline wearing off or the strain of the overly physical activities, but suddenly I could barely walk on it. Then I iced it and rested it and after a while, it

was feeling better. But then randomly it just started hurting again? And it's been like that ever since 🤖

This sounds like a lot of complaining, but I kindof love these things. (Great, now it sounds like a humble brag.) All artists have to go through discomforts. This process of physical endurance that goes with making the paper mache objects and filming the videos is so vastly different from the part of my practice where I'm sitting, staring, and talking to a screen, that I am just thankful I get to be in my body feeling what it feels like to be living and breathing. I feel connected to reality. I feel grounded. When I'm not doing these things, everything I do utilizes either a computer or a phone, so I try to minimize technology while doing physical work. I don't listen to podcasts or audiobooks, I don't usually put on music, I rarely have TV playing in the background. This is about feeling what it's like to have a body.

Part of why I came to this school was because I felt like there was something lacking in my practice and I wanted to sort out what exactly it was, how it connected conceptually to the rest of my work, and why I cared about it. What was lacking was matter, physical material that I could touch. This connects to my work conceptually, because my work has always been openly and shamelessly a product of its time. It's a product of being online, living in the portal, connecting without ever touching. It's a product of living a life that is split up - between the analog and the digital. There are joys and there are challenges in living this kind of life. I'm not naive to think that I alone can change this and I'm not trying to. This is the "time" of which my work is a product of. If this is the central current that runs through all of my work, then my work cannot just be images on screens; it has to have something to touch, something where the artist's hand can be seen and felt – physically. The reason I care about this is because having an art practice that lets me be in my body is more sustainable for me as both an artist and a human being. If I am already split between the portal, which constitutes an out of body

experience for me, and real life, I need to split my art practice the same way or I will be spending too much time out of my body to function properly. I'm combating this in my work by laying on my back, paper-macheing the inside of a bench that will barely be seen. Things like sunburns, for example, mean I am alive, still able to breath and bleed and cry and smell.

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