

As you may have guessed, the genre of body horror (and David Cronenberg's works in particular, amongst others) have greatly influenced the way I think about my own identity and the art that I make. I grew up in Rye Brook, New York, a small suburban town about forty minutes north of New York City. My town was predominantly white and upper-middle class. My high school had four hundred students total; of these students, I was the only out trans person (in fact, I was the only person who identified as trans in any way at the time). I could not safely come out at home, begin any sort of medical transition, or begin any true social transition, as I was living in an unsafe environment. I did not socially transition until I moved to San Francisco for college in 2013, and I did not begin medically transitioning until I moved to Brooklyn in 2017, at which point I also went fully no-contact with my mom as a result of her transphobia, homophobia, and racism.

I have been drawn to horror as a genre for a long time. The fascination for me began as a way to "prove myself", in a sense, and distance myself from womanhood as much as I could (a sort of "I'm not like other girls" phenomenon; in fact, many of the online communities I was in who thought similarly were mostly made up of queer women who were also seeking to distance themselves from cis/hetero conceptions of womanhood). As I unlearned this and other harmful ways of thinking about my relationship to gender, coming to understand myself as nonbinary in the process, my relationship with horror also changed. I stopped seeking out only the most gross and shocking films I could find and instead began to focus on watching films that I was genuinely interested in.

I have found myself particularly drawn to the works of Cronenberg because, on some level, I feel like he just understands me. His films often have an air of beautiful tragedy; and, as I reaffirmed my own Jewish identity, I also came to appreciate the thread of Jewish sensibility that I find in Cronenberg's writing and characters (incidentally there is a wonderful discussion of

Jewish/Christian interfaith relationships in *The Fly* as well as Jeff Goldblum's status as a Jewish sex symbol in the book *Why Harry Met Sally: Subversive Jewishness, Anglo-Christian Power, and the Rhetoric of Modern Love* by Joshua Louis Moss). And, of course, as so many others have noted, his films also feel incredibly non-normative and critical of so many oppressive social structures, including gender. I actually realized as I was researching and reading criticism of Cronenberg's films that my own attitudes towards his work coincidentally seem to mirror the critical discourse. When I first watched *Videodrome*, I liked it but found it quite misogynist and interpreted it as aligning womanhood with the evils of mass culture and technology, similarly to Robin Wood's feelings on Cronenberg's oeuvre. While I can and do of course still hold this criticism, being able to reinterpret *Videodrome* as trans allegory has given the film an entirely different meaning for me and allowed me to recognize why I have felt so drawn to it from the first time I saw it, despite its flaws.

My 2018 piece *I'm An Insect Who Dreamed He Was A Man And Loved It* is a video loop which draws from *The Fly* (1986), "big bug" horror movies of the 1950s, and my experiences growing up gay and trans in the suburbs. By "big bug" movies, I am referring to films such as *Them!* (1954), *Beginning of the End* (1957), *The Deadly Mantis* (1957), and others; these are not body horror movies, but are instead linked directly to white suburban fears of nuclear war and the AIDS epidemic, as well as suburban homophobia. The 1958 version of *The Fly*, which stars Vincent Price, can be read similarly and most notably as a metaphor for the fears of technological advancement in the early years of the Cold War. I focused most predominantly on Cronenberg's version, however, due to its much more grotesque depictions of body horror and physical transformation as well as its relationship to the AIDS epidemic, having been made in 1989 and, as I wrote above, having been the subject of much critical writing to this point.

In this piece I imagine myself as Seth Brundle, the main character of *The Fly*. The piece reimagines the story as one in which Brundle undergoes his monstrous transformation purposefully, knowing that his transition from human Brundle to hybrid Brundlefly will give him increased strength, confidence, and superhuman abilities. In the film, Brundle's transition ends in his death, as he urges his girlfriend Ronnie (Geena Davis) to kill him and put him out of his misery. As Caden Gardner points out in his conversation with Willow Maclay:

...even before he goes full-blown monster, [Brundle] ceases to be the man that Veronica once knew, and was in love with. He is dehumanized and has his humanity removed. That does not mean Veronica completely recoils and rejects him...She wants to care for him and save Seth but does not know how, but grants Seth his wish of being shot with a gun to kill him and end his misery. The deteriorating body that isolates and alienates, a monstrous sight at a man who wanted to play God and self-improve in order to be somebody more than an eccentric nerd. That's how I see *The Fly*. The idea of trying and it turns into a self-inflicted wound, a cause for more disarray, chaos, and dysphoria in the body...¹

Willow Maclay also notes that "In a narrative context [Brundle's] failed science experiment is not inherently different from the people who died transitioning when surgeries were brand new and doctors didn't know what they could and couldn't do."² I was interested in exploring an alternate ending to the film, wherein Brundle's transition is purposeful, and he embraces his new form without feeling shame or dysphoria as a result of others around him pushing him to conform to societal norms. I see this also as being linked to Susan Stryker's discussion of the Frankenstein

¹ Willow Catelyn Maclay and Caden Mark Gardner, "Body Talk: Conversations on Transgender Cinema with Caden Gardner (Part Six)". <http://curtsiesandhandgrenades.com/index.php/2018/06/07/body-talkconversations-on-transgender-cinema-with-caden-gardner-part-six/>.

² Willow Catelyn Maclay and Caden Mark Gardner, "Body Talk: Conversations on Transgender Cinema with Caden Gardner (Part Six)".

mythos and the idea that “The transsexual body is an unnatural body [and] the product of medical science.”³

In the piece, I give myself as Brundle a better ending in that my monstrous transformation/transition is a premeditated choice (“He thought about becoming an insect/Insect blood becoming faggot blood”). The choice of the word “faggot” is also a deliberate positioning of my political identity and acknowledgement of my status as a locus of fear in the suburbs where I grew up. While my body is not literally present in the video, it is invoked via the hand-cut lettering and personal photos that make up the background. I also made a companion zine for this piece, entitled *BRUNDLEFAG*, which expands on the concepts within the video and includes more personal poetry and other collaged elements.

In 2019, I created *Hold My Hand Tell Me That You Love Me*, a soft sculpture and video piece. Continuing to draw inspiration from the works of Cronenberg, this piece is somewhat related to *eXistenZ* (1999) and draws from my own experiences as a trans person on the internet. I met the first trans people I ever knew online on sites like Deviantart and Tumblr, and these sites are also where I first tried out new names and pronouns. On the internet, trans people have complete control over their identities and can manifest our true identities through pronouns, names, and virtual personas. This work seeks to merge virtual and physical trans bodies through the creation of a computer case, or skin, that turns a laptop into a living thing, and imagines the computer itself as a trans entity that the viewer can interact with.

The main character of the piece is a transgender computer named Tom Cruise, and the design of the soft sculpture is very much indebted to the design of the gamepods from *eXistenZ*. I was thinking a lot about the contradiction of wanting to depict the trans body without allowing it

³ Susan Stryker, “My Words to Victor Frankenstein Above the Village of Chamounix: Performing Transgender Rage,” *GLQ: A Journal of Lesbian and Gay Studies* 1, no. 3 (1994): p. 237. <https://doi.org/10.1215/10642684-1-3-237>.

to be perceived (or rather, misperceived) by the cis gaze. The fact of the matter is that cis people simply cannot and will never understand the relationship that trans people have with their bodies. I felt that to attempt to depict a physical form for the character of the film would necessarily always fall short of an ideal body--sometimes, the ideal body is not having a body at all. The first version of the film presented Tom Cruise the computer as a tragic character and, while the work was lauded, the response from my cis peers and instructors made me uncomfortable. Cis people felt pity towards Tom Cruise and its situation, and said that the piece made them feel sad about both the character and about real trans people in their lives. I did not want cis people to come away feeling pity, thinking that trans lives are tragic and that all trans people hate their bodies. I also wanted cis people to feel guilt and shame for the ways in which they directly contribute to the dysphoria that many trans people experience. So I remade the video to be much more confrontational and aggressive. While the video was intended to be shown with the soft sculpture, as well as my 2019 soft sculpture *Valkyrie 2008 (Tom Cruise Fake Ass)*, it can also stand alone as a digital video on the internet. As an aside, I have a deep fascination with the celebrity figure of Tom Cruise; in particular, the ways in which he often serves as a stand-in for an archetype of white American masculinity, yet at the same time often challenges that very archetype.

In addition to drawing inspiration from film, the piece was heavily influenced by the collective Laboria Cuboniks' work *The Xenofeminist Manifesto: A Politics for Alienation* and Donna Haraway's *A Cyborg Manifesto*, as well as the experimental book *Virus* by my friend and contemporary Linda Stupart. These works deal with technology, gender, and transhumanism in ways which continue to be very exciting for me. I am particularly drawn to the xenofeminist rejection of essentialist naturalism, with Laboria Cuboniks writing that

...the glorification of 'nature' has nothing to offer us--the queer and trans among us, the differently-abled, as well as those who have suffered discrimination due to pregnancy or duties connected to child-rearing...Technoscientific innovation must be linked to a collective theoretical and political thinking in which women, queers, and the gender non-conforming play an unparalleled role.

...We need new affordances of perception and action unblinkered by naturalised identities. In the name of feminism, 'Nature' shall no longer be a refuge of injustice, or a basis for any political justification whatsoever!

If nature is unjust, change nature!⁴

With my work, I imagine a universe in which technology is no longer tied to capitalism and is instead in the hands of the people, becoming a tool for gender abolition as it is defined in the XF Manifesto: "the ambition to construct a society where traits currently assembled under the rubric of gender, no longer furnish a grid for the asymmetric operation of power".⁵ My work is an attempt to create a virtual identity that is at once truthful and completely anonymous; one which forces cis people to take it at face value but which offers comfort to its trans brethren.

Additionally, I wanted to create an alternate future in which trans people can completely modify their bodies via technology in ways that are not currently possible (that is, becoming completely virtual, and becoming fully embodied through disembodiment); in this future, the character of Tom Cruise, and other trans individuals, hold power and are not tragic figures which garner sympathy from a cis audience. When thinking about science fiction, particularly surrounding artificial intelligence, the stories are so often stories of horror or sadness. Figures like HAL 9000

⁴ Cuboniks, Laboria. *The Xenofeminist Manifesto: A Politics for Alienation*. Brooklyn: Verso, 2018.

⁵ Cuboniks, Laboria. *The Xenofeminist Manifesto: A Politics for Alienation*.

and the Terminator are frightening because of their inhumanness and seeming lack of empathy (and, in *T2: Judgment Day*, despite the Terminator learning to be empathetic he must still die by the film's end, because something about him, fundamentally, is too inhuman to ever permanently become part of a human family). Taking cues from the references I have mentioned, I am interested in imagining sci-fi worlds and futures which are not apocalyptic but instead positive; futures in which people like me and my loved ones not only survive but thrive, and which see technology and science being used to their full potential for radical social change and the realization of emancipatory abolitionist projects.

Additionally, AI has gender thrust upon it, with virtual assistants like Siri and Alexa being feminized as a direct result of fear stemming from the sci-fi trope of horrifying "male" AI. I am interested in AI claiming its own gender, and in my work have chosen to retain a more traditionally "masculine" voice both as a reclamation of the frightening masc-leaning AI, a rejection of the tendency to feminize AI (particularly "service" AI) in order to make it desirable, and as a nod to my own masculine—but not male!—voice. I like to describe the character of Tom Cruise, in my work, as being inhuman, with no desire to be human—yet still a person.

I wanted my thesis to be a culmination of my extended research into these and other themes. At the same time, as a result of my personal political work outside of school, I began to focus on collective living as a means of furthering people power and what it means to be an artist for and of the people. I started working more deeply with the militant activist organization Anakbayan Queens as I was beginning to flesh out my thesis project. My partner Nico had already been a member for some time, and as I had been attending events and working with AB for a while already, I decided to officially join. AB is an overseas org which fights for national democracy with a socialist perspective in the Philippines, and which seeks to fully integrate with the masses in order to eliminate the three basic problems of imperialism, feudalism, and

bureaucrat capitalism. As I began to learn from my kasamas (comrades) in AB, I also began to deeply consider my motivations as an artist. I have never wanted to be a career artist and instead would really like to be a film studies professor; I value the free dissemination of information and want to create accessible spaces for sharing work that is undervalued or ignored by the neoliberal art world. Thus, when considering my thesis, it felt wrong to me to be, firstly, creating some singular piece of artwork that would become spectacle for a predominantly white, cis het, bourgeoisie and petite bourgeoisie audience before being put into storage or thrown away (as I am not interested in selling my work and summarily reject the idea of work that represents my self being owned by a collector or similar, especially in ways which render it inaccessible to others); and secondly, placing value on myself as an individual when I could instead be dedicating my resources and time to uplifting others in my community.

So, my thesis project instead turned into me programming a screening of digital media works by trans people. While I originally was interested in retaining a theme of body horror as rejection of dominant social norms, this theme felt racialized to me in ways which would limit the scope of the project. I am drawn to body horror and narratives of monstrous transformation because they are a way to imagine my trans existence outside of dominant social structures. Reading body horror films as dysphoria narratives, for example, allows me to then reclaim these monstrous transformations as a form of self-love and resistance to oppressive and exploitative systems, particularly as I reflect on my time spent living in a predominantly white and upper-middle-class suburb. If I own my status as a horrifying and disgusting outsider, I politicize my body and existence in a way that openly rejects the ideals I was brought up with— namely, white supremacy and classism. But it is the access to power I have as a white person which allows me to align myself with the monstrous in this way. Because I am white, I am not as often feared or viewed as dangerous by other white people at first sight, whereas non-white people,

and particularly Black and transfeminine folks, are already viewed as dangerous by white society at large. Thus, my ability to reclaim monstrous identity remains somewhat “safe”, and as such feels very tied to my whiteness, so I broadened the theme of my screening from body horror to work featuring experimental form or content as a means of expanding the kind of submissions I hoped to receive.

In relation to this, I made it a point to focus on highlighting the work of trans Black and Indigenous people and people of color, and commit to over half of the featured artists be BIPOC. This is a commitment that I seldom see white curators and organizers make, and is something I have criticized other white people for, so I wanted to hold myself accountable to my own standards. I also committed to paying each contributor to my project, because artwork by marginalized people is so often tokenized and displayed without fair compensation. This commitment to financial compensation further strengthened my desire to predominantly support trans BIPOC, who face the most oppression and exploitation under capitalism.

I have also been very influenced by the work of one of my peers, Ava Hoffman, who—concurrently with my thesis work—was organizing and releasing the first issue of SPORAZINE, a zine of experimental trans writing whose themes matched up (completely coincidentally, as we had not been aware of each other’s work before I came across SPORAZINE’s open call on Twitter) nearly exactly with the themes of my thesis. Her rationale for creating SPORAZINE and feelings about experimental writing are analogous to my feelings regarding experimental digital media work. In SPORAZINE’s introductory essay, she writes:

SPORAZINE believes that trans people’s artistic practices are put into a double bind by the in-favor poetic style: either we toil away in the obscurity of experimental writing, or we risk becoming a site for cis spectacle. SPORAZINE offers a place to gather that obscure work. A protective opacity.

...More obvious shit, but working on this magazine has emphasized the need for spaces where trans people can share art, writing, and aesthetic ideas with each other. Without the intervention of cis people in terms of market or audience...If the work we're doing is being intentionally narrowed by cis institutions, then we must create spaces for the open and multivalent art practices trans people are already doing in their everyday lives or else we are failing the potentials for an alternative present in transgender literature—indeed, an alternative present for experimental writing as a whole.⁶

Hoffman is speaking to her experiences regarding experimental writing, but I feel the same regarding experimental film, video, and digital media. Further, I do not see myself as a curator, but rather simply as someone who has access to resources and a desire to both uplift the vital work that my friends and peers are doing, and to make that work accessible to others within our community.

I do feel that trying to figure out how the event would happen was something of a struggle, which seems unfortunately fitting given the subject matter. Despite having access to institutional resources, it was extremely difficult to find a location to screen the works that I had gathered. While my screening was certainly not suited to, and in fact is a complete rejection of, the gallery space, I was not welcome to use MICA's Lazarus auditorium; besides, there was the issue of inaccessibility due to campus safety potentially barring people from entering. When I attempted to get in contact with local off-campus sites, such as the Parkway Theater, I was met with responses that seemed to commodify the work I was doing in a way that was very uncomfortable for me. I decided to hold the screening in my apartment as a way of ensuring accessibility (no professional venue security) and a casual, communal atmosphere akin to a

⁶ Hoffman, Ava. *SPORAZINE*. Ava Hoffman, 2020.

salon or variety show, heavily inspired both by Living Room Light Exchange, a monthly salon founded by my former professor Liat Berdugo and Elia Vargas in the San Francisco Bay Area, and NOT DEAD YET, a monthly variety show run by Lorelei Ramirez in NYC. However, because I wanted to use this space, my screening could therefore not be an official part of Grad Show, and could not be advertised by MICA or by Grad Show. While I was happy to advertise on my own and felt the support of my peers and classmates, this was extremely frustrating because while folks in faculty and administration seemed on one hand to verbally support my work, I did not in actuality feel materially supported by the institution.

While an in-person screening has of course become impossible with the onset of COVID-19, I have been able to pivot towards a completely virtual screening, which I am actually quite pleased about, as it will allow people who do not live in Baltimore to attend the event. I have also been very excited as this has given me the opportunity to work with a local microcinema whose work I very much admire; I am currently planning, in conjunction with folks from Spectacle Theater in Brooklyn, New York, to host a virtual screening in June via Twitch. I have long been a fan of the microcinema as a community site for sharing experimental and non-mainstream work, from my time as an undergrad attending shows at OTHER Cinema in San Francisco to now, living in Brooklyn and following the work that venues like Spectacle Theater and Light Industry are doing. I am extremely grateful for the opportunity to work with a local space whose values are very much aligned with my own. I am also excited that streaming with Twitch will allow the artists whose work is featured to participate in conversation via the live chat feature, and to see how others respond to their work.

My thesis screening, SYSTEM FAILURE, is a selection of experimental digital media works from eleven trans artists that reckon with depictions of the trans body outside of cultural hegemony. Formal experimentation allows for the most honest communication of complex trans

experiences, while simultaneously rejecting assimilation into dominant industries and modes. These are all works that the neoliberal institution considers too weird, too difficult, too long, too cheaply made to be worth sharing—which is precisely why we need to share them.

The trans body in the world is violently gendered and degendered, hypersexualized and desexualized, feared and fetishized. Trans bodies in “trans art” are valued by the neoliberal institution insofar as trans bodies allow themselves to be violently made spectacle for cis audiences. As trans people, we build our selves. As trans artists, we reject the notion that trans art has no value when it is made by our selves and for our selves. The trans body is in process, a whole that is greater than the sum of its stolen and stitched-together parts. The trans body removes itself from violent and oppressive systems of power by celebrating its Frankenstein self. I live in my trans body. I live in the world. My trans body is the world. Long live the new flesh!

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