Other

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Dedication

The author wishes to dedicate this paper to my significant other whose continuing support has allowed me to face many hardships, late nights, and tears. To my friends and colleagues whose continual thought-provoking talks helped to engage and further my understanding of self and environment, for helping me build literal walls, painting, and helping me create crazy tunnels. To my family whom without I would never be where I am today.
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Introduction

“Let 1,000 categories of sex/gender/desire bloom. Through that proliferation, we can undo the privileged status of the two-and-only-two categories that are currently treated as normal and natural.” - SL Bem

As a pre-pubescent child I would sometimes escape familial tensions by sneaking out of my bedroom window to walk on the long gravel driveway of our home on 611 Timber Ridge Road. On these walks, while surrounded by woods, I felt comfortable enough to be without clothes, I was free in my body, safe in my self-hood. It was a space in time in which where my body was ambiguous, and the freedom of gender nonconformity was still possible. During this prelude to puberty, I was at ease in the vehicle of my body and less like an “other” within public and private spaces.

My thesis exhibition □ Other focuses on the Other as a category of gender. It is the kind of box one might find–or might not find–on forms that force us to choose one’s identity. With this series, I attempt to communicate my identities and the tension with my expression of my gender fluidity within the space of schools, as well as society’s changing understanding of gender.

My overall goal for this show is to initiate conversations about shifts away from the traditional concepts of male and female and toward an understanding of gender that is fluid and self-governed. The works in the exhibition examine the ways that structures of gender normativity are learned, and explores ways in which people cope with how the educational systems instill the restrictions of the gender binary. The body of work also

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draws on the obstacles I have encountered as I try to communicate with my family and various educational institutions about my shift to a more fluid gender identity. Ultimately, this exhibition hopes to create a safe space for viewers to explore and play with their own concept of gender identity.
Chapter 1: 611 Timber Ridge Road

The show <typeof Other> marks the third iteration of 611 Timber Ridge Road. The piece was first shown in “Safe(r)” (2016). That version of the installation utilized a porch, a pair of rocking chairs pushed against a wall upon which was a painted mural that represented the memory of my safe space (Figure 1). The second version was in a space where painting on the walls was not permitted. Therefore, I utilized a quilt made by my grandmother. The quilt’s backing is black and covered in large pink and red flowers whose petals are scattered about like flickers of embers flying through the sky (Figure 2). A string of lights was placed behind the blanket. I set them to flicker and fade to give off the contradictory feeling of flames and fireflies. The audio presented with the second instillation was an intimate journey that my mother and I took together up a mountain to recover a wildlife camera that was stationed to take images of my childhood home now owned solely by my biological father.

Figure 1. 611 Timber Ridge Rd, Installation #1 photo documentation Safe(r)
The title of the work refers to the road I consider home. I traveled the moon lit gravel path over and over again as I escaped the box known as house and the bedroom where the restrictions of social conformity were always bearing down on me. As a child one’s room is a sanctuary and so my room with the hot pink trim, puke greenish/brown walls, and feminine gifts given in expectation of my perceived gender gave me anxiety. This pressure is what propelled me to escape and find relief surrounded by the unassuming nature, listening to the rhythmic crunch of my feet stepping on the gravel.

When visitors of □ Other first enter the gallery, they are presented with a binary choice of travel. They can go right toward a white wall or they can turn left toward the flickering lights and a human figure on a window off in the distance (See Figure 3). To reach the figure of light the viewer must travel on a gravel path. As the viewers move along the tunnel-like setting the sound of their steps permeate the gallery. The path is
made up of two different types of gravel arrayed in a binary pattern that becomes increasingly blended as people traverse it. The barrier that contains the gravel is painted hot pinks. Behind a locked door an animation is hidden and is never to be seen by the viewers. The wall to the left is covered with a quilt pattern, rendered in the colors of night. The pattern slowly up into a black fabric where UV painted stars light up the canopy. In the distance are noises that fill the gallery, but as one draws closer to the large window with a genderless figure illuminated by fluid light the sound remains seductive. The lit figure shines a line that spreads onto the gravel pathway and leads the viewers to the right where a small 7” LCD screen is placed within a wall that blocks one’s navigation of the gallery. The gravel pathway narrows into a small corner underneath the small screen (Figure 4). The video is mounted at a height that makes the viewers squat in order to see it. The images played are bubbles lit in a way that could be perceived as nebulas in space. On the screen, colorful scenes of bubbles are distorted by lighting to create a perception of space, with nebulas and galaxies floating across the surface. The soundtrack of beeps and whooshing are arranged to give a calming effect to the area.
The fact that I may never be able to walk the gravel path of my home means that I no longer have my childhood sanctuary. The somber expression of the figure at the end of the tunnel reflects this loss of freedom. Because of this, I recreated the experience within the gallery. Therefore, my place of refuge is no longer a location but is instead an action.

I felt most at ease in my body during the prelude to puberty. I was less confused about my fluid self within social settings when I could be easily construed as male or female. I was not alone in escaping from one's home in order to feel more at ease with myself. Fashion model Teddy Quinlivan talks about how she would take late night walks...
on her journey to becoming the individual she knew herself to be. We both left the homes that forced us into the spaces of the binary in order to be ourselves.

During this prepubescent age, I could easily be read as male or female by my choice of clothing. Clothing became costumes in my performance of gender stereotypes. I put on dresses to represent female, or jeans and plaid shirts to become male. However, the in between state of nudity is my most natural state. When I climbed out of my bedroom window and went on night walks I never felt male or female. I merely existed in space. The preteen self was a utopian time for me. I felt more at home within that form of body before major changes and social constructs would place sexual and gendered expectations onto my outward gender appearance.

Change is the natural state of being for all things. The bubble video embedded in the wall is my personal representation of my journey through gender subjugation. The seemingly space like surface is continuously changed and disturbed by outside occurrences. When I am by myself I am a serene surface but when I interact with the public spheres my serenity is distorted by having to carry the female label. I don’t see my gender as one thing but instead as an existence in constant flux, influenced by my interpretation of external stimuli.

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2 “Model Teddy Quinlivan On Coming Out As Transgender | NowThis”. YouTube video, 3:40. Posted [June 13, 2018]. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d08Ex1zIS0E
Chapter 2: □ Other and So We Color

The artwork □ Other explores the ever-changing interpretation of the spectrum of gender within educational spheres. I began this piece by creating an animation of a young androgynous human form that blinks and turns in a full 360 degrees (Figure 5). I reached out to high schools in Manassas, Virginia, where I live, and presented the project to students. I asked them if they would like to volunteer their time to color in one of the cels for the animation. I instructed them to color the figure in a way that would express their understanding of Other in the context of gender. The students returned the cels, anonymously, and I subsequently scanned and reassembled them into the short animation for □ Other.

I also worked with students at my old high school in my home town of Gatlinburg, Tennessee. Students there participated more than students from Manassas. This rural school does not have a space set aside for students to be able to safely receive the tools to help them navigate their exploration of self. Unlike many of the metropolitan schools, my old high school does not have clubs and organizations such as GSA (Gay Straight Alliances) and other gatherings within the communities such as PFLAG (Parents,
Families and Friends of Lesbians and Gays). The opportunity to express themselves through coloring gave rural students a voice and exposed them to thoughts about how gender is not a binary structure. This animation is ongoing and will expand with increased participation.

High school students are on the cusp of being granted some power over their determination of self within society but are still denied a voice because they are “too young”. This sends students through a traumatic time where they are not allowed to be heard and are instead subjugated by the “adults” within the academic systems. I wanted, if even on the smallest level, to give these students a platform where they could express themselves and have an opportunity to be given an anonymous visual voice to interpret the spectrum of gender.3

Other artists also explore the juxtaposition of physical gender versus ones individual gender expression. New York City based photographer Lissa Rivera’s series “Beautiful Boy” is one example of this (Figure 6).4 In this series Rivera’s photographs her partner, who is seen as physically male in female garb. She speaks about her work and what they build together:

“Artistically, it was important to us to build a world together where we could explore the ways photographic technologies have affected the construction of identity in an experiential way. ‘Beautiful Boy’ became a tool to explore the ways powerful images can change culture for better or worse. I wanted to learn the visual techniques of advertising photography to repurpose them in a way that exposes their cultural impact and at the same time presents gender-fluidity as beautiful.”5

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Rivera utilizes already well known commercial visual techniques in order to disseminate a new way of expressing identity through the juxtaposition of opposing physical body to cultural constructs of gender within society. The publication of these photos helps others re-establish who they are in the new context of an ever-growing spectrum between the male-female gender binary.

In the same way Rivera utilizes well known photographic techniques, I make use of structures and expressive pedagogical methods that have been in place in America’s public-school systems for over 100 years: coloring, game play, and social interaction. Coloring is a positive way in which children gain an understanding of societal constructs of gendered expectations in an educational settings. I apply these pedagogical approaches to communicate ideas regarding gender-fluidity. In addition, I expose the

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shift from a binary to a spectrum within our current institutional systems towards an open-minded dialogue. The figures in both So We Color and Other are not already clothed identities on paper but instead only a gender neutral androgynous being that is awaiting the expression of an individual to be placed upon it.

Henry Darger’s work, which is known by some to be “a celebration of childhood fulsome and a whiff of pedophiliac perversion,” is a huge influence on the creation of my own ideal androgynous figure.7 Darger’s Victorian girl figures, with their male genitals, are the visualization of childhood gender being a spectrum rather than a binary.8 His use of an illustrative style, commonly seen in children's books, creates an eerie placement of children within adult situations. In his piece Statues Strangling Children (graphite pencil, watercolor and gouache on six sheets of vellum; date unknown) he creates a multitude of children clothed in an array of dresses. Some figures have horns and wings, while amidst an elaborate arrangement of flora and fauna divided horizontally by a wall. In the middle of the piece is a statue of adult figures, who wear with square academic caps, strangling the children (Figure 7). Witnessing this piece made me consider how the indoctrination of children into the controlling adult world can be glossed over. The message seems to be: follow what is set before you in adult society or suffer the consequences of your actions.

In contrast to Darger’s figures, I created an ambiguous individual that can easily shift within the spectrum of gender. However, both of our figures can slide between the different spaces of gender through a moment of action. For Darger’s pieces this action is of war, negation, or when one is in great peril. Within my artwork, the moment of action is the coloring of the figure by the participants. The gender shift is controlled by an individual’s interpretation either by the drawing into the ambiguous figure or when interpreting someone else’s expression within the piece Other.

As the viewers move through the gallery, they have to break the projection of Other before they reach the next area. When they round the column in the middle of the space they encounter a classroom setting. Six desks are lined against a wall of windows where drapes are drawn. Projected onto them is another piece of work, So We Color. On a wall opposite of the viewer are sets of instructions that read “1) Choose a coloring sheet 2) color to your hearts delight 3) donate back into the binder if you so choose.” Underneath these instructions is a table with three wire baskets that contain the coloring sheets as well as a binder with previously donated work.

So We Color is designed to take place in public spaces in which I ask for participation from various age groups. For the exhibition Just Fine, at the Stamp Gallery at the University of Maryland University College in the summer of 2017, I asked viewers
to express themselves. The instructions I gave for this iteration of the piece were: 1) Take a coloring page 2) Color to your heart's content 3) Make a black and white copy and tape it to the wall. The viewers interacted with very familiar materials they may have used before submergence into public education systems, crayons for coloring and a piece of paper to color on. Viewer were asked to donate their coloring pages to the project upon completion. Donor participation was far beyond what I had anticipated. The majority of donations depicted instances of coping, anxiety, or means of escape.

For example, the androgynous human form is placed underneath a surrealist school desk that floats above it (Figure 8). The figure is bent over underneath the desk and covers their ears. One has an eye bearing down from above (Figure 8a); another has a desk with jagged lines labeled AUTHORITY (Figure 8b); Still another shows the desk interior shooting bullets out (Figure 8c); While still another has the words floating in the air “to slow, to fast, to white, to skinny, [sic.]” that bear down from above (Figure 8d). These are expressions of the donor’s trauma induced while occupying spaces within education systems where their vulnerabilities are used to create harmful interactions with peers.
The participants of *So We Color* express trauma, while others utilized techniques that help with stressors brought on by the vulnerable figure. A variety of rainbows or the words “exhale…inhale” are some of the examples of students representing coping exercises they use to manage themselves while in trying situations (Figure 8e). When invited to uncover vulnerability and interpret into their own expression, viewers took every advantage to use this work to cope with their own anxieties.

Addressing vulnerabilities throughout one’s life is a common act for those who classify themselves under the bureaucratic section of □ Other. These moments are justifiably anxious because of the possibility of rejection from ones who are intimately a part of an individual’s life. Over forty percent of homeless youth identify as LGBTQ and become homeless because of familial rejection for who they are.\(^9\) The stress of submergence into the normative social constructions of public means that individuals, but especially youths and teenagers, need to have a means of safe communication.

*So We Color* is a response to this situation, and the way it combines the means in which we are pressured through the ideology of educational spaces but are also given a way to have a positive interaction with this means of indoctrination enables one to express their own desire to change these regimes. It gives one the ability to reveal our vulnerabilities in order to process the trauma of being forced into societal standards of the public binary.

Both *So We Color* and □ Other utilize the act of coloring within the process of the pieces. One learns the constructs of gender through one’s exposure to these standards

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in our everyday activities. Even as early as the preschool years, one can give examples of sex-based expectations and one is firmly fixed with an either-or thinking of gender between the ages of five to seven.\textsuperscript{10} When asked during a study 1995, more than 95% of children said coloring made them feel happy or good.\textsuperscript{11} A newer study in 2009 checked to see if coloring books were still filled with stereotypical designations of male and female. The study found that there were no changes in gender stereotypes of male and female within coloring books since an earlier study from 1974.\textsuperscript{12} Since we form our understanding of gender at a young age this means that these first educational instances are filled with stereotypical girls in more caring positions while males are in more adventurous and leading positions.\textsuperscript{13} This only perpetuates stereotypes. My work uses an action filled with nostalgia in order to rethink these earlier installation of gender norms. The ultimate goal of the piece within the gallery is to use a positive interaction to create a more open-minded approach to current discussions about the fluidity of gender.

In the piece □ Other the action of coloring is the expression of an individual and their stance on what other within bureaucratic paperwork on gender is. The act of coloring into the humanoid form that would fall under the classification of other is an expression of the spectrum of gender fluidity, that is becoming more present within the


everyday experience of human interaction. Newer generations are breaking down the confines of the either-or representation of gender and their expressions of this new flux are being presented within the animation □ Other.

14 Davis, Erin Calhoun; Situating “Fluidity”: (Trans) Gender Identification and the Regulation of Gender Diversity; Jour 2009 GLQ: A Journal and Gay Studies January 1, 2009 https://read.dukeupress.edu/glq/article/15/1/97/34647/Situating-FLUIDITY-Trans-Gender-Identification-and
Chapter 3: Gender Reveal

It began when I started to bring up the topic about gender. My mother’s jaw clenched and the tension that my step father may have overheard hung thick in the air. She made a comment unrelated to mine in hopes that our conversation would shift away, and I let her. I love my mother and my step father very much and this is why I allowed it. We have had tense and loud conversations over political and personal standings. However, gender is the most difficult one for us to discuss. I wanted to be able to speak with them about my gender so that they can really know me. I want my parents to know how I experience my own gender and how it is different from the vehicle of body within which I exist. I want to inform them, in a non-threatening way, about the constructs that confine and define us on a larger scale, and have them begin to embrace the gender spectrum.

So how can I speak to individuals about this new shift that is beginning within our social structures especially if they don’t understand society’s structure of gender itself? This is what my piece Gender Reveal confronts. It creates a safe environment that uses known societal structures to play a game that enables conversation about shifting ideas of gender.

When I realized that many children learn through game play as children, it set me out on a journey to figure out how I could create a fun, interactive game that would open up avenues of understanding and communication. I wanted to use the language of critical theory in a non-intimidating way, especially for those who do not know the terminology. I want the lexicon to be understood through the action the card takes during the game.
For example, the card mass dysphoria requires the player to pass their stick figure to another person, separating the player from the stick figure they began with. The definition of gender dysphoria according to the Webster dictionary is “a distressed state arising from conflict between a person's gender identity and the sex the person has or was identified as having at birth”. The card creates an instance of loss when the player’s drawing is passed onto the next player in the game. By having the card do a similar action to the definition of the word then some may be able to extrapolate the meaning of the word during its next use within future conversations about gender.

I believe I will have an easier time getting my family to sit down and play a game with me then to have a direct conversation about my gender. If the structures of how our society forms gender are already present within the game, then maybe exposing those structures through a non-confrontational means will help us to understand one another.

Play is how children learn to interact socially. If you didn’t want to follow the rules of the game, then most likely you couldn’t play. However, if you were able to convince the majority about a rule change then the larger number of players could agree that the new rule stands. These skills are learned through social interaction at a young age. Kids learn structures and then convince others that the rules can be changed in order to benefit the game. I utilized already known concepts of learning to cause viewers to question their own concepts of what gender rules are in play during the game, while simultaneously informing them of certain terminology being used during these conversations.

Conclusion

Kinsey famously stated that sexuality is a spectrum and that people fall on a scale.\textsuperscript{16} This should be no different than when talking about gender. Gender is a spectrum and just as society has begun to treat sexuality as multiple, it must treat gender the same way.

According to some “We have reached a stage in our culture where we are open to people choosing their gender.”\textsuperscript{17} The destabilization of the gender binary is beginning. The need for a non-combatant way of communicating this change so that exposure to Other is not met with volatile retaliation is paramount so that Other becomes a normalcy among mass societal structures. This exhibition is a bridge between the before and a step towards the after while still having pockets of safety to protect us along the way.

http://officialhenrydarger.com/about/.

A Time to Act: Fatal Violence Against Transgender People in America 2017;
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“LISSA RIVERA.” Photo–Emphasis, 3 Nov. 2017,


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