11-8-2018

Creating Coping Mechanism: An Anatomy of a Gallery-Based Installation and Performance Work

Jamie M. Kutner

Louisiana State University and Agricultural and Mechanical College, jkutne1@lsu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/gradschool_theses

Part of the Art Practice Commons, Fine Arts Commons, and the Interdisciplinary Arts and Media Commons

Recommended Citation

https://digitalcommons.lsu.edu/gradschool_theses/4833

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the Graduate School at LSU Digital Commons. It has been accepted for inclusion in LSU Master's Theses by an authorized graduate school editor of LSU Digital Commons. For more information, please contact gradetd@lsu.edu.
CREATING COPING MECHANISM:
AN ANATOMY OF A GALLERY-BASED INSTALLATION AND PERFORMANCE WORK

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
Louisiana State University and
Agricultural and Mechanical College
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts

in
The School of Art

by
Jamie Marie Kutner
B.F.A., Rhode Island School of Design, 2006
Postgraduate Diploma, EINA Centre Universitari de Disseny i Art, 2012
December 2018
Dedicated to Pam and Bob. You gave me this beautiful life, however tangled.
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my committee chair, Dr. Hye Yeon Nam, for her patience, her support, her worry, and her faith in me. Without her guidance and occasional prodding, neither this project nor paper would have reached completion. My committee members, Derick Ostrenko, Kelli Scott Kelley, Malcolm McClay, and Scott Andresen, have supported my studio practice in more ways than I can enumerate, and I thank them for their unwavering support. I would also like to thank these current and former LSU faculty members for guiding me through pivotal moments in my graduate education: Leslie Koptcho, Kimberly Arp, Alkis Tsolakis, Rod Parker, Dr. Susan Elizabeth Ryan, Dr. Trish Suchy, Dr. Jill Brody, Dr. Matt Savage, Paul Callahan, and Leslie Friedman. Thanks also to LSU staff members Mark Shumake, Angela Harwood, Elizabeth Duffy, Catherine Wells, Jennifer Mayer, Malia Krolak, Meg Guidroz, and Jonathan Mayers.

My deep gratitude goes out to the following colleagues and friends—so often a blurry boundary—for their life-saving influence in the ways I think, write, and create: Kelsey Livingston, Tristan Hahn, M. Riley, Nicklas Benedix, Sarah Ferguson, Andrew Pfalz, Adam White, Tamara Duplantis, Matt Blessing, Leah Hamel, Naomi Bennett, Cassidy Creek, Rodneya Hart, Chris Broussard, Mary Pappalardo, Morgan Anderson, Andrea Berg, Emily Graves, Chelsea Ramirez, Eric Euler, Veronica Hallock, Livia Cohen-Shapiro, Tina Ufford, Nellie Reesby, Melodie Reay, Paula Mastrangelo, William Bromberg, Rosario Pappalardo, Carlos Jarque Palacios, Yosef Shuman, Andrew Sedlak, and Emma Sedlak.

Thanks to the mental health and social work providers at the LSU Student Health Center, LSU Office of Health Promotion, Jefferson Oaks Behavioral Health, Legacy Behavioral Health, Family Service of Baton Rouge, Louisiana Rehabilitation Services, and, despite its appalling conditions, Eastern Louisiana Mental Health System. Who would have ever thought that I’d find the mental health care I needed in Louisiana? One of my therapists taught me to express my gratitude to my cats, so, Zoey and Scooter, here’s to you.

I would be in a very different station in life without my aunt Jackie Kutner and my grandmother Etta Kutner, who, more times than I can count, have given me the moral, emotional, and financial support that enabled me to keep going. Thank you for being my bonus moms.

A bittersweet thanks to my sister, Tyler. I’m so relieved that we’re back in each other’s lives.

Mom and Dad, it’s so hard to put everything into words. From your sweat equity in—and funding of—my harebrained thesis project, to committing to work on our complex relationship, you’ve shown me that following my crazy heart is 100% worthwhile. I’m immensely grateful to you both, and I love you.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS........................................................................................................... iii

ABSTRACT ......................................................................................................................................... v

SECTION I. ............................................................................................................................................ 1
  Start ................................................................................................................................................ 1
  Start Again ..................................................................................................................................... 1
  Start A Third Time ............................................................................................................................ 2
  1. Performer .................................................................................................................................... 3
  2. Audience ...................................................................................................................................... 6
  3. Site ................................................................................................................................................ 7
  4. Time ............................................................................................................................................. 9

SECTION II ......................................................................................................................................... 11
  Designed Experience ....................................................................................................................... 11
    A ..................................................................................................................................................... 11
    B ..................................................................................................................................................... 12
    C ..................................................................................................................................................... 13
    D ..................................................................................................................................................... 14
    E ..................................................................................................................................................... 15

EPILOGUE ......................................................................................................................................... 16

WORKS CITED ............................................................................................................................... 17

BIBLIOGRAPHY .............................................................................................................................. 18

VITA .................................................................................................................................................. 20
The project examined in this paper is an exhibition of gallery-based durational performance art, and its resulting three-dimensional artifacts, that was created through a tangled process of relapse and recovery from mental illness. The first section of this paper peers into the parameters of ephemeral artistic practice. I discuss the process of merging my recovery and creative practice through performance art, and then parse the discussion of the work into the categories of performer, audience, site, and time. Section II details various aspects of spectator experience through a second-person narrative tracing the crowd flow of the exhibition. I conclude with an epilogue, framing the work in the exhibition with a current snapshot of the blurred boundary between my practices of living and art.
 SECTION I

Start
I knew from the outset that this body of work would position itself outside of the bounds of traditional gallery display. There was no avoiding it, since the process of making this exhibition coincided with the most tumultuous period of growth in my life thus far. I made this work through the process of recovering from—and relapsing into—mental illness. Four or five times over. The intersection of art-making and new-habit-forming became one beautifully messy gradient, and although it is not the sole identifying framework of this artistic endeavor, acknowledgement of my process of unraveling is necessary. But even prior to this, I've never been one to fit cleanly into a box. My studio practice has always been process-focused and conceptually driven, even before I started unlearning every conviction I've ever held about the way humans operate. Recovery has been a process of diving deep and learning how to feel. Coping Mechanism has been part of that process, demanding that I wring out the juices from tender subject matter in my lived experience, and use them to design a series of encounters that request emotional participation with my audience. I built physical walls to separate space in the gallery, but in order to do so, I had to learn to dismantle my inner walls.

Start again
I have organized this paper into two sections. The first section unpacks meaning through four parameters: performer, audience, site, and time. I have borrowed this structure from Amanda Coogan, whose doctoral dissertation outlines the same four coordinates of durational performance. These function as means by which to navigate the psychological, physical, emotional, and phenomenological dimensions of the exhibition, and ponder the larger context of this body of work. The second section walks through a narrative containing details of iconography and spatial/experiential arrangement in the exhibition.

---

Start a Third Time

Snap to about a year ago: I was filling out the gallery paperwork for my thesis exhibition, drawing an epic blank on the basic parameters of display. It became clear to me in that moment how far into the wilderness of participatory art I had landed. Price? Non-existent. Impossible to purchase. Insurance value? For what, the two-by-fours? What are the materials of this work, for that matter? Maybe flour and water, or fabric and sweat, or time and space, definitely emotional exchange—the synapses in your brain and those of the people around you. How does that fit into a title/medium/price format? I’m not even sure it’s art.

Let’s assume that the medium of this work is emotional response, or maybe human interaction. Individual consciousness. Crowd flow. Interpersonal systems. Everything in this exhibition acts as a tool toward that end. Include in this toolkit the video installation, the artifacts, the performer—when present, the detritus of performances when I am not. The precedent for this assumption lies in the work of the Dada movement, fluxus, and the lineage of performance and installation art that leads through the early Internet era right up to the present moment. Those who practice this genre have a track record of de-monetizing art, de-capitalizing art, de-arting art. It’s the blurring of the line between art and the body, and our collective bodies, and life itself, that seems to pull a common thread through these experiences. It is the frayed end of this filament that I’ve searched for.

I began the process of arranging this exhibition by questioning how I might create an experience that is at once viscerally honest and broadly accessible. The crux of all of it, I’ve found, is to consider my viewership in all of its complexity; to acknowledge the intelligence of each individual who might experience this work, with all their beauty and all their baggage. I ask for a social contract of sorts: that you, upon entering, accept me in the same way. That you accept yourself in the same way. That I accept myself in the same way. I left little gems for myself in the midst of a chaotic fog. I leave footholds for you. My narrative is not linear, and you must find your route through it. I ask you to trust your subtle self. Trust me. It is only now that I believe I can take on that trust responsibly.

---

Artists I am inspired by within this scope include, but are certainly not limited to: Janet Cardiff & George Burres Miller; Amanda Coogan; Kurt Schwitters (Merzbau tour performances, among others); Sophie Calle; Joan Jonas; Raphael Lozano-Hemmer; Christine Sun Kim; Ana Mendieta; Ann Hamilton; Janine Antoni; Vito Acconci; Nam Jun Paik; Francesca Woodman; Judy Chicago (Womanhouse in particular); Pina Bausch; Marcel Duchamp; Martha Rosler; Olafur Eliasson; Marina Abramovic; Mierle Laderman Ukeles; Tehching Hsieh; Andrea Fraser; Santiago Sierra; Ana Maria Taveres; Felix Gonzalez-Torres; Alan Kaprow; Chris Burden; Rirkrit Tiravanija; Carsten Höller; Robert Morris; Golan Levin; Helio Oiticica.
1. Performer

The kernels of movement that I developed into the performance works in *Coping Mechanism* came out of an experience of unraveling, but the impetus to shift my primary means of working to ephemeral projects was also a part of that process. My background is in drawing, printmaking, and graphic design, and although I tended toward more process-based methodologies within those practices, I did tether much of my self-worth to the tangible output of art making, and by extension, the aggregate of tangible accomplishments. One central shift that occurred through my recovery process—learning to trust an internal, innate value system—coincided with trusting a creative practice that stands on the intangible. It is unnerving to loosen one’s grip on known systems, more so to let go of them entirely. But putting my faith in a performance- and installation-based practice, where any objects and images on display only possess value because of their role in performance works, was precisely what needed to transpire for me.

As I put this hunch into practice, it became clear that the performance works themselves needed to stem from my recovery process. The two central works in the exhibition, in all their iterations and re-performances, pull from very literal coping strategies that began as newly minted replacements for habits of self-harm.

![Figure 1. Bread of Affliction, performance, 2016. Photograph by James Letten.](image)
Bread of Affliction began with a daily practice of baking bread after sessions in my outpatient program. I would come home feeling paralyzed from the weight of my diagnoses, but the acts of measuring flour, testing water temperature, smelling yeast, kneading dough, and parsing fermentation times anchored me to corporeal experience—to the present moment. There are countless other references that I find meaningful about bread, the act of making it, and the act of sharing it. We are anthropologically wired toward fermented grain, I believe. The title of the piece itself stems from Judaic tradition, a reference to the Passover matzo and the suffering that necessitated its making. The iterations of the performance piece itself reference the act of home baking far more than they do professional baking. But all this came second to the fact that making bread was my survival strategy.

Treatment Room has a darker origin. Patients who self-harm are often taught to substitute non-scarring actions for ones that might cause more permanent wounds. So, in the depths of my first relapse after my hospitalization, I remembered that I could safely inflict pain on myself without causing serious injury. I grabbed hold of the picture rail in my living room, and let my body weight hang from it. I set up a camera on a timer to document the way my body responded as my fingers went numb. The images were interesting to me, but the experience was more so. Through the months that followed, that central action snowballed into the iterations visible in the exhibition, gaining a more fleshed out beginning, middle, and end, a textile element, and some requisite nudity. But the key element in the piece remained: self-inflicted temporary pain as substitution for self-inflicted permanent injury.

Figure 2. Video still of Treatment Room, performance, 2017. Documented by Matthew Blessing.

Figure 3. Video still of Treatment Room, performance, 2017. Documented by Mariel Gates.
I have a bad habit of dissociating. It’s an old coping mechanism that got me through the 28 years before I started trauma recovery, and it doesn’t go away easily. I shut down, I clam up, I turn off my senses, I feel separate from my body, and most of the time I don’t realize it’s happening until it’s far too late. So, attempting to interpret the physical experience of performing these two pieces is a colossal task. It is as if I’m fitting my mind into a body that I wasn’t completely present in to begin with. But I can say that I remember the cellular exhaustion of performing Treatment Room four times in one week, feeling less control over my grip each day. I remember the feeling of damp flour crusting on my hands, the sweet-astringent punch of fermenting wheat and rye sharp in my nose for hours. I remember jumping up toward a bar just barely out of my reach, being lurched back by the floor-bound textile that I had sewn myself into. When I finally caught hold of that bar, its coldness and my maxed-out ligaments made it so I could only hold for a matter of seconds before I dropped to the floor again. I remember the bruised tissue on my tailbone from the first fall in the first performance, and the way I hedged my ascents a bit from then on. But I also remember it feeling validating to be witnessed in that kind of pain and vulnerability.

Figure 4. Bread of Affliction, performance, 2017.
2. Audience

Integral to Claire Bishop’s analysis of participatory art is the notion of activated spectatorship, which insists that sensory fullness is necessary for experiencing immersive artworks. To be a conscientious participant, in Bishop’s perspective, one must be more than a viewer, as humans are more than disembodied sets of eyes. One must show up as a whole being, not only with five senses, but with all of the baggage of one’s embodiment and socio-political experience. I believe that it is the responsibility of the artist/performer to create a suitable environment for that wholeness, bearing witness to that audience as a collection of complex human beings. As Judith Butler says in her essay *Sexual Ideology and Phenomenological Description*, “…‘bodies’ remain abstractions without first being situated in concrete social and cultural contexts.” In the essay, Butler presents a critique of Merleau-Ponty’s phenomenology in a similar manner to which Bishop critiques Bourriaud’s relational aesthetics, namely, that both ideologies implicitly assume white cis-masculine cerebral utopias. Butler further posits that Merleau-Ponty’s concept of the ‘subject’ “consecrates masculine identity as the model for the human subject, thereby devaluing, not gender, but women.” While Merleau-Ponty is right to posit that human beings have a strong physiological intelligence, he is operating with a blind spot toward non-masculine, or more broadly, non-normative embodied experience. Bourriaud presents shining examples of 1990s participatory art, but similarly, he does not question what kinds of bodies have access to such aesthetic experiences. Immersive, participatory artworks have the potential to celebrate, critique, and explore the limits of our humanness, but only insofar as they hold space for a multitude of corporeal, social, and political realities. It is under this assumption that I operate as an artist, and with this conviction that I meet my audience.

When performances occurred, I noticed the social orientation of spectators click into place, with each gallery-goer transmuting into audience member, coming in as close as each felt was socially appropriate. This intuitive gesture depends on each spectator ascertaining the boundary of the proscenium individually, yet in the most beautiful of socially intuitive acts, an audience—a sense of ‘us’—forms instantly. I could feel it happening from my position as a performer. In the short span of the performance’s

---


beginning, itself a subjective timeframe, each spectator must question their personal bubble, feel out the spatial and social dynamics of the room, and define where performance space ends and viewing space begins. The mechanics of this phenomenon are contingent on a number of factors, including but not limited to age, cultural identity, gender socialization, and where one locates oneself on the spectrum of introversion and extroversion. It results in a fascinating array of right answers.

3. Site

Coping Mechanism was held in the two-room gallery in Foster Hall on LSU’s main campus. With the guidance of my father, an architect, I designed and constructed temporary partitions in the gallery space in which the wall placement carved out spaces for display and performance. The partitions were materially rough, built with two-by-fours and a wobbly underlayment skin, painted a cool white to match the gallery walls. They evoked a project space more than a finely crafted gallery environment. An institutional blue-green-grey color threaded through the space and on my person, by way of painted walls and hand-dyed fabric. The front room held one small alcove amidst the expanse of the dimly lit, open gallery, while the back room was fragmented into an anteroom, two loosely-defined performance spaces, and a dark alcove that housed a two-channel video installation. My goal in organizing the gallery in this arrangement was to create a space in which private nooks occur within an otherwise open-plan environment, encouraging crowd psychology to bump against moments of personal introspection and privacy. In addition to this heightened psychological dialectic, the environment was sparse. I received comments from some spectators that the sparseness of the space had a discomforting effect on them, and I wonder if this is partially due to a cultural urge to fill spatial or temporal voids, similar to our American discomfort with silence.

This designed physical space mimics the space of the mind. It is liminal, with its alcoves and its expanses, and I believe that this offers the possibility to shape the individual and social experience. Inspired by Michel DeCerteau’s essay “Walking in the City” and my own observations of the oscillation between individual and social consciousness, I designed this exhibition so that the partitions would act as spatial obstructions, offering spectators navigational agency within a rigid spatial structure. The stark, minimally adorned gallery space, paired with the complex divisions installed within the gallery

---

interior, created a scenario in which spectators were likely to key into a sense of heightened spatial and psychological awareness. Simply by navigating the obstructed gallery, one was likely to experience phenomenological synthesis.

Privacy matters in this design the way it does when you step into an elevator. And what you choose to do with that privacy may alter the comfort level of those around you. A friend mentioned to me after the reception that a woman breastfed her baby in the waiting room during the reception, and I find it fascinating that she found the space private enough—or the action public enough—to do so. Another friend commented to me that he felt like he needed exit the waiting room as quickly as possible. I know there are countless other strong experiences that I don’t have an anecdotal referent for, but that only leads me to attempt further interventions of this nature in future work. The partitions created a scenario that carved out space for installation/performance hybrids whose weight tugged on the liminality of publicness and privateness. That was by design. What I hadn’t planned, however, was for the spatial divisions themselves to offer spectators the opportunity to play in the gap between public and private action.

![Figure 5. Kutner, Robert: Gallery plan with partition layout, 2016.](image)
4. Time

Although the performances took place at advertised times within open gallery hours or during the timeframe of the reception, the experience of the exhibition relied on intuitive time. Witnessing the performances, watching the video loops, working through the artifacts, the spectator pieces together the framework of a foreign system that is as temporally sparse as it is physically so. The aesthetics of time in the two central performances of this exhibition inform one another. While Bread of Affliction operated within the timeframe of my sourdough starter’s microbiome and the slow repetitive act of printing, Treatment Room occupied the timespan of a set of actions contingent on the limitations of my physical body. While both performances repeated central kernels of movement, one set of actions filled the span of several hours before indeterminately drawing to a close, while the other one barely logged several minutes before my body gave out, thus pushing the performance to a precise end.

Within the repeated elements of both performances, I think I could have used pacing more effectively—my movements slower, more drawn out and more deliberate. However, I do appreciate the temporal contrast evident in these two works. Bread of Affliction pushes against boredom, especially in contrast to the hyper-lapsed, networked pace of contemporary life. Treatment Room asks spectators to consider the timing of embodiment, and of the mental ability to withstand it. Neither of these works puts much stock in the notion of ‘endurance’, which I see as a means of boasting ‘look what I can do’ or ‘look how long I can _____.’ They are instead about duration as a means of fostering self-awareness in spectatorship, as a means of fostering emotional literacy and the capacity for empathy. Value in this arena of temporal experience is created not by the movements of the clock and our achievements within it, but by the results of an intuitive process that expands to fill the timeframe it requires.
Figure 6. Artifact from Treatment Room, performance, 2017. Photograph by James Letten.

Figure 7. Artifact from Treatment Room, performance, 2017. Photograph by James Letten.
SECTION II

Designed Experience

Coping Mechanism is designed to vary in experience depending on the moment and duration of a spectator’s visit. At its heart, it is an exhibition of gallery-based durational performance and installation art, spatially framed with artifacts from the process of crafting the performance pieces. The first room of the gallery contains three artifact sites. The Waiting Room, a liminal non-space between artifacts and installation spaces, displays a list of performance dates and times pegged with plastic letters into a directory board. Further into the gallery, space is delineated for two durational performance pieces and one dual-channel video installation.

Experiences outlined in this section are based on first-hand accounts of exhibition-goers, combined with my own observations as the performer and designer of the exhibition, which I’ve re-traced through memory, externalized, third-person-ified, and spun into a narrative. There are hundreds of potential encounters with the work in the exhibition. Here are some possible paths through:

A. You walk into the gallery. The room is sparse. The lights are low. Ahead of you stands a large greenish-grayish-blueish cube. It takes up more space than a small group of people, but not by much. To your right, there isn’t much to see. Dim lights, white surfaces. To your left, something big on the far wall. A similar blue-grey. Fabric. Left of that, something sharp on a pedestal. More fabric. Another pedestal. You start walking toward it, but as your eyes adjust, you catch something scribbled on the wall to the right of the cube. Art? You come closer to it, and notice that the cube has one open side. You step inside it.

Above your head, but maybe not out of your reach, hovers one long panorama of hands and faces. They’re photographs, slathered to the wall with wheat paste, torn edges of thick inkjet-printed paper overlapping one another, like a film strip or a Muybridge, but not quite as predictable. You notice that it’s the same person’s hands and faces, some scaled up, some scaled down, ripped down the middle, cropped at the forehead. Flash photographed. You can’t see the whole head at once. Light olive skin. Brown hair, pulled back. Green eyes. Thin fingers. She seems female, petite, but not very feminine. She’s gritting her teeth, cringing, grasping for a steel bar stained orange. She’s barely holding on. In some frames she’s lost her grip, or maybe she’s in ascent. Her hands are red from the abrasion. You pace the perimeter of the
cramped space once more, craning your neck up, then see what those pedestals were about.

Across the gallery, in the space that was to your left when you stepped into the room, two pedestals stand next to each other, an arm’s length away from the wall. The first has an apron draped over of it, made of rough brown linen. It has red stitches, and sharp points stick outward, embroidered into the space that lands right over the heart. A floury crust dots the lower segment. Hand marks, wiped on legs. Next to that, a small stack of dried dough balls pile on top of one another, roughly sewn onto newsprint with white cotton twine. They’ve dried out in puffs that envelop their containing stitches. There’s some red stitching again, on slips of paper, with something stamped on them. It’s hard to make out, since the hardened dough covers part of the text. You can read a word here and there. Nourish. Affliction. Bread.

To your right, just before a doorway, your focus shifts to the textile hanging from the wall. Now that you’re closer to it, you feel its weight, see it bunching just above the tacks that hold it up. It’s wider than an arm span, maybe wider than two arm spans. It looks like the shape of a room with a shard missing. All points lead in toward the lower left quadrant, which holds sections of fabric that flip and fold down the wall, onto the floor, ending in what looks like sleeves and a collar, propped up on a plinth. The texture and color vary slightly across the textile, from coarse, thin cotton to gossamer linen, from dark blue-grey to light aqua, but all close enough in hue to each other, and to the painted wall, to feel connected, and distinctly institutional. Messy stitches in white thread join the fragments together. The closer to the excess fabric, the more haphazard the stitching becomes. Do you sense the absence of a body in the defined space of the textile? Do you understand it more as art, or as artifact?

B. You cross the doorway, blinded by the track light pointed at you. Blinded by the whiteness of the small space you’ve entered. There’s nothing in here except for a couple of benches and a sign, and you. This feels like a doctor’s waiting room. You read the sign, yellowed white plastic letters not-quite-perfectly spaced on a black plastic background, the kind they used to have in hospitals. Sturdy oak frame. “Performances,” it says, with a few dates, times, and titles. You’ve already missed a few. You check your schedule on your phone to see what you could catch this week. You walk onward.

1 In Foresight Strategy, the ‘artifact’ is an object or experience that you examine in the present moment from an envisioned timeframe and context. A strategist would imagine the circumstances that existed in the creation of these objects and images, and begin to build a world from of those insights. In the same way, these objects are artifacts of my performances, and I am asking viewers to imagine the context in which they were created. Through the performances and videos in the second room of the gallery, they will gain further insight into the objects’ circumstances, but I placed the artifacts first so that spectators can enter the proscenia of the second room having considered the objects’ making.
There’s another white wall ahead of you. To your right, around a bend, an alcove, darkened, empty. You disregard it. You turn left instead, and left again, into an expanse on the concrete floor littered with pedestals and baking gear, flour puffed onto the floor. There are traces of bare feet through it, and traces of people wearing shoes. You take stock of the scattered supplies, noting the sweet-astringent twinge of fermentation in the air. Heavy linen bags—flour?—a carafe of water, a glass bowl. A triple beam balance, like from chemistry class. Some numbers are scribbled and scratched out on the wall. Everything is crusty with dried dough, dusted white with flour, like a mad scientist’s lab. A mad baker.

C. You’re at the reception. You walk into the waiting room. It’s tight in there, so, skulking past a woman using the benches to breastfeed, you feel the smallness of the room. You, that is, and the handful of other people making their way in or out. You wonder how she found privacy in there.

You amble past a collection of baking gear, step in some flour, and tuck into an alcove, curious about the glowing light of a projection. You’re faced with two boxes propped on pedestals, pointed inward toward the center of the space. They’re both looping videos on their petite screens. One is blueish, the other yellowish. On the left, your mind clicks into the context for the fabric piece from the front room. It spans the footprint of the room in the video, and it’s the same color as the walls. On the right, there’s a long point-of-view shot that almost looks embryonic, except for the hands mixing and measuring, scribbling something, futzing with a triple beam balance.

You’re squished into this space with a handful of other reception-goers, each leaning in, crouching down, tilting sideways in their own way, trying to hit the right viewing angle. Get it wrong, and all you see is a white spot.

You find your position and your posture. You notice that the artist is sewing herself into the floor/fabric, wearing a dress that borders on hospital gown in both form and color. Come to think of it, the whole scene has an institutional feel. She drops the spool. It bounces. She sews deliberately, ritualistically—straightening out the thread, picking up a strip of fabric from the floor, fitting it around her, tenderly stitching it to her dress while avoiding a needle in the thigh.

2 The waiting room is art.

3 These are two rear-projection boxes, each 8 x 12 x 31 inches, made from birch veneer plywood with a frosted glass insert at the front end, and hidden from view, a pico projector at the other. Files are queued and looped through the projectors’ onboard media players.
She stretches her body upward gracefully, as the orange-hued steel bar above her head comes into view. You bristle a little as she readies her stance and reaches up, taking one heaving jump toward it. The fabric ripples around her. She misses by a few millimeters, sending the bar into a shudder. She topples to the floor, held back by the strips of cloth she attached to her body. It sounds like she bruised a bone. She is visibly injured, but tries again, and misses. Tries again, misses. A few more times she lunges upward, until she finally does grab hold, only to slip from exhaustion seconds later, collapsing into a heap. Heaving.

She seems resilient though. She’s back up. Only now she doesn’t reach upward. She begins to rend the collar of her dress. She splits the cloth below it, baring her shoulder, then her breast. Her garment, and the floor-bound fabric attached to it, drop. She stands strongly. Naked. Resolute. Then she paces for a moment, landing in the corner of the room, where she closes her eyes and goes into recovery mode. And the video loops back to the beginning.

This whole time you’ve had your peripheral vision on the other screen’s repetition. It’s flour, water, becoming dough. You trekked though flour on the way into this room. Two performance pieces, both repetitive in their own ways. One severe, momentary. Or a collection of momentary actions. The other mundane, long, but tender, done with care. Coming back to the front room, you didn’t notice the dress in the fabric artifact before, but you see it clearly now. Or at least, what remains of it.

D. Milling around at the reception, somewhere in the expanse between the projection room and the exterior of the waiting room, your conversation skids to a halt as you realize that the performer has occupied the collection of surfaces covered in baking gear. You draw yourself near enough to witness but not so close that you’re invading the performance space. A small child does the same thing that you’ve just done, but her assessment of the space lands her among the bakeware, right next to the performer, who seems to roll with it. Her actions are quick and deliberate. She takes perfectly fluffy dough from a glass bowl, parses it into eight somewhat equal hunks, shapes them methodically into rounds, and carries them, two at a time—one in each hand—over to pieces of fabric pre-stamped with something. Little puffs of flour form on the fabric as she drops the dough in place. Once they’re all filled, she dusts off her hands, and exits. She doesn’t queue that she’s leaving.

4 It’s rough, raw linen, the kind used in a baker’s couche.
E. You walk closer to the dough mats. There’s something verbal on the corner of each of them, with letters that jar your memory of the address stamp kit in your parent’s office. “Bake this,” it requests of you, “Bring back a piece the size of your hand.” You can either agree or disagree to that social contract. You bundle up the dough in its linen wrapping, coddling the delicate bundle as you make your way to your car, as you walk up your driveway, as you set it down on your kitchen counter. What temperature do you set the oven to? How do you know when it’s done? You make a few guesses, and then let it cool. The whole loaf is the size of your hand, so you make two final decisions. Rip it open. Share it with your family.
EPILOGUE

Quite some time has passed since Coping Mechanism. I relapsed again, and I recovered by returning to craft. My process of cementing my new life habits coincided with learning woodworking, and merging my knowledge of textiles with that. If the work in Coping Mechanism was a means of tethering my creative practice to my process of unraveling, the phase that has followed marks a process of weaving those worn threads into new cloth. I’ve zeroed in on the notions I had about navigable spaces, and focused my lens on furniture—the way we hold our bodies on it, the ways we relate to others through its use, and the spectrum of publicness and privacy evident in its design. I work in an upholstery shop, surrounded daily with fabric and wood, immersed in the tender heart of repair. The practice of emotional participation is part of my daily experience in a manner that I had not previously experienced.

In place of those inner walls, now dismantled, I have made space for the slow process of self-actualization. I am not yet certain what aesthetic form that will take, but I have a few ideas to intertwine this skill-building phase of my recovery with new participatory works. I plan to pursue installation and performance work in which upholstered objects are stand-ins for the human body, or networks of human bodies, as means of exploring body awareness, emotional landscape, public/private dichotomy, and cultural and interpersonal alignment. I am interested in ephemeral, co-created art experiences, which spectators can access and influence in totality by physical and/or digital presence. I want to examine complex human systems through video art, live performance, design, and object-making, in a manner that pushes spectators and performers to explore our shared human-ness.

My specific path has led me to a profound sensitivity to human complexity, but I also see the skills entailed in the discipline of human-centered design becoming increasingly necessary for our rapidly changing world. As the technological landscape speeds forward, automating so many processes in our lives, I believe that we will need to look to art ever more as a cultural compass. And just as the Dada movement encapsulated the absurdity of its time, in this historical moment, I believe that our lifeline will be art that pushes us toward mastery of our inner worlds.


BIBLIOGRAPHY


VITA

Jamie Kutner is an installation and performance artist originally from Baltimore, Maryland. She has a background in printmaking, typography, and community arts education, but moved toward a more ephemeral studio practice after re-examining how she oriented her self-worth. Keenly aware of the potential for performance art to aid in design research, she plans to turn her artwork into a form of ethnography by pursuing a career in design for humans and human systems. She currently resides in Baton Rouge, Louisiana, with her two cats.