

Charismatic

Things

Terminal Project Report

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Charismatic *Things*

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I. Figuring the Excess/Charismatic Things

In his 1984 essay collection *The Responsibility of Forms* Roland Barthes refutes the notion of a blank surface writing “No surface, wherever we consider it, is a virgin surface: everything is always, already, rough, discontinuous, unequal, set in motion by some accident: there is the texture of the paper, then the stains, the hatchings, the tracery of strokes” (162). Here Barthes considers the nascent material (the substrate) of a work of art not as a neutral surface, but as a presence that is already lively and activated. The idiosyncratic precondition of material that Barthes describes is where much of my work begins: from a cast-off or remnant, severed from its value system, which forms the logic for a response. In my practice these leftover materials—removed from their original context, and laden with evidence of their past— are imbued with “thing-ness”. These residual surfaces, enlivened by their status of post-use, are re-metabolized in the studio in order to navigate within frameworks of natural and synthetic, consumption and waste, subject and object.

I consider the material (things) to which I am drawn charismatic because their purpose and influence extends beyond their initially conceived function to provide a form of guidance, in this case, artistic. The English word charisma is a Latinized form of the Greek term *kharisma*. Derived from *Charis*, one of the three attendants of Aphrodite, the word indicates a favor or divine gift; a power or talent divinely conferred from God. The Oxford English Dictionary establishes that in theology the term charismatic is used in reference to prophetic ecstasy and the Holy Spirit. In an art context, the term charisma evokes the word *aura* in its capacity to inspire devotion and enthusiasm. We see objects everywhere imbued with the animating effects of charisma: pet rocks, shamanistic talismans, and Eucharist hosts to name a few. Theorist Jane Bennett designates this “curious ability” of inanimate objects to generate effects thing power. What is important, for my practice, is that the thing power of my materials is heightened by their status as leftover or remnant. I describe the ingredients of my work— things such as gift wrap, cardboard, and various forms of post-consumer packaging—as charismatic because it bestows upon them the animacy and charm that they provoke in me.

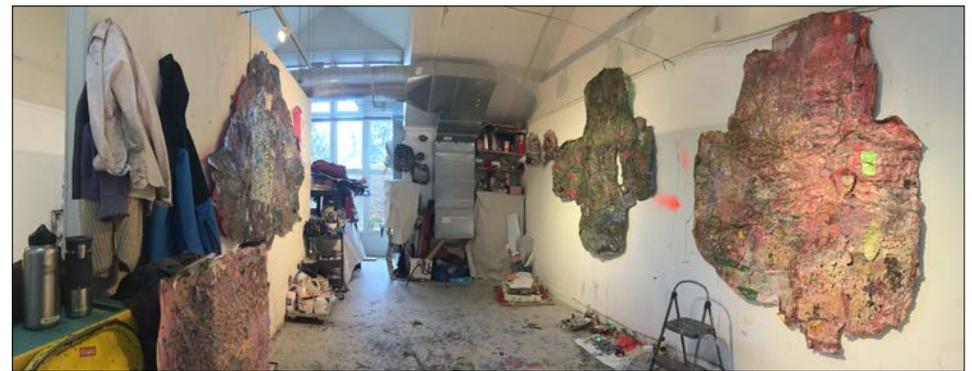


Pink One (left) and *Big One* (right) 2022
Image Mike Bray

My studio is a porous container; an ecosystem where cognition and logic are contaminated and instantiated by my surroundings. Timothy Morton writes that art gushes “charismatic causality despite us. And unlike a lot of things in our current world...(sophistication, taste, cost), we still let it in” (2018, 88). I allow this causality to build in cycles of accumulation, while gleaning, filtering, and re-metabolizing material within the space.

The charged, relational space of the studio is where objects transform into things. A thing is a raw material; an amorphous mass that awaits or defies categorization. The things arrive from disparate timelines or localities but, once stockpiled within, they are made relevant by their vicinity. Connections emerge in-situ based on proximity and distance, or fragments gesturing to each other from across the room. Things are different from objects because they are able to break out of both the circulation of a given system, and their definitions as determined by a subject (a name, a gestalt, a stereotype, a history, etc). Building on Bill Brown’s Thing Theory, American academic W.J.T. Mitchell explains that things are “simultaneously nebulous and obdurate, sensuously concrete and vague...they figure the excess, the detritus, and waste when an object becomes useless, obsolete, extinct or (conversely) when it takes on the surplus of aesthetic or spiritual value, the *je ne sai quoi* of beauty... that animates the commodity” (2005, 156). This murkiness— of inside and outside, use and value— permeates the work. There is no storage, really, just potential energy as things sit poised for use.

Theorist Elizabeth Grosz writes that the vitality of the studio “...is where intensities proliferate [and] where [the] future is affectively and perceptually anticipated” (2008, 79). This anticipatory energy unmoors an object from its perceived value, use, or symbolic burden to become re-invigorated and re-contextualized by its relationship to other things. The finished pieces are a representation of these conditions—and relations—of the studio. Rather than an object that is produced and then decorated or given a finish, the surface and object are created at once, continuously. Moments and gestures are preserved as indexical signs for their maker, like paw prints in mud.



Panorama of studio April 19, 2022 5:10 PM PST

The work is omnivorous and is easily seduced by color, texture, sparkle, and shine. Paper, paint, and glue are the foundational material around which all else orbits. The forms are built outward from the center so that the final surface is also what is contained within—a concentrated mass of material, gesture, and response. Through actions of compression, layers congeal into forms that “force themselves into existence” (Barlow 2018, 111). It would be a mistake to call this a surrender to material. The object and I are willing the result together, manifesting an excess of possibility rather than a determination. The final work is born out of process, not a preconceived notion of an end result. There is no out to be figured, just a shifting network of ins as we aim for density and singularity without losing potential.



Maxi Pad, 2022, gift wrap, pigments, glitter, watercolor, found plastics, oil pastel on paper
62 x 76 x 8 in. image Mike Bray

Who has not gazed in wonder at the
snake shimmer of petrol patterns
on a puddle, thrown a stone into them
and watched the colours emerge
out of the ripples...?

Derek Jarman *Iridescence*



Long One detail, 2022



Pink One, 2022, gift wrap, pigments, glitter, watercolor, acrylic, beeswax, cardboard, found plastics on paper, 62 x 81 x 3.5 in.

II. Relentless Flickering: Sparkle and What Lies Beneath

Iridescent pigments, glitter, and other shiny materials figure importantly in the work for their ability to disrupt conceptual and aesthetic fields. Writing in 2015, the editors of *e-flux journal's* Politics of Shine issue note that this disruption is caused, in part, by the deceptive quality of shine. Together they describe shine's tendency to behave as both mask and shield; a diversionary tactic that mediates decay and distracts from ongoing collapse. They write: "Shine and luster tend to block the view of things, while at the same time inviting fetishistic adherence". In this way, shine is cast as two-faced: a lure that mesmerizes us dumb while obscuring a barbed hook. Artist and writer David Batchelor notes in his book *Chromophobia* that this treachery is compounded when shine colludes with color:

Western philosophy is used to dealing with ideas of depth and surface, essence and appearance...and this just about always translates into a moral distinction between the profound and the superficial...If surface veils depth, if appearance masks essence, then [color] masks a mask, veils a veil, disguises a disguise...it is a double deception. It is a surface on a surface, and thus even farther from substance than 'true' appearance" (2000, 54).

In both Batchelor's writing and the Politics of Shine passage, we see crises of truth borne from the attempt to parse the superficial from the essential. There is a sense of frustration in prying open and extricating the appearance of a thing from the thing itself. A paranoia is provoked by a kind of pregnant flatness. A skin is formed, in no way suggestive of flesh; an imperceptible space blooming between the surface and what lies beneath.

Shine, shimmer, iridescence, and sparkle are conflated in my work because all are viewer-dependent. They are not necessarily matters of pigmentation, but rely on positionality and vision to come into existence.

While shininess can obscure, it can also—paradoxically—reveal. There is a reciprocal way that shininess prefigures a symbiosis between the self and a surface because shine seems to emerge precisely at the moment it is perceived. Australian ethnographer Deborah Bird Rose proposes *the shimmer* as a mode of thinking in, through, and about the Anthropocene. Through this lens, a glint of luminescence is not a sinister form of seduction and distraction, but a “process of encounter and transformation” that spurs the conscious (2017, G51). Bird Rose describes the shimmer as indebted to the concept of bir’yun, a North Australian Aboriginal Yolngu term that links any kind of pulsation (visual, emotional, spiritual) to a condition of being awake and alive in a world of multifaceted-ness.¹

In the animal world, we find iridescence in iridophores: color-producing cells that may exist within a creature’s flesh, fur, exoskeleton. Video and installation artist Tavi Meraud coins the iridescence as “perception at its most formless, most playful”. Echoing Bird Rose’s description of the shimmer, to iridesce is to embark on a radical encounter, an “explosion of perspectives” between “difference, the hitherto unknown, the Other, the repressed, the inarticulable” (2019). For animal predators, the iridescence produced by the iridophoric cells of their prey is both lure and camouflage, inviting further scrutiny: is the iridescence coming from within—or on—the surface? Meraud, again: “iridescence is always a marker of this interior-exterior negotiation. It is a kind of sign, secreted from within the being of the animal, working its way toward the external world” (2015).



Big One, 2022

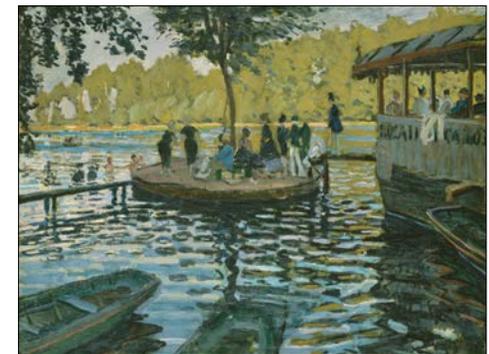
gift wrap, pigments, glitter, watercolor, acrylic, beeswax, oil pastel, latex on paper
73 x 60 x 2 in.

¹ It is crucial to note that bir’yun does not distinguish between Nature and culture: it is described as a characteristic of a pulsating world, not a mechanistic one—a multifaceted, complex abundance.

If we consider the surface of an artwork a terrain that the viewer traverses with their eyes, shine, shimmer, and iridescence become more difficult to locate. This is because shine emanates from a deeper place: somewhere subterranean—it seems to manifest the second it appears, only to disappear again. Perhaps because of its perpetual suddenness, sparkle stimulates anxiety and fascination, often at the same time. As a byproduct of a surface interaction with air and light, perceiver and perceived, shimmer indicates a site of emergence; a precise moment and location where a surface surfaces. It marks an encounter with perception—a residue of an exchange, in the way that a reflective surface will always capture—however distorted or fleeting—a small portion of ourselves.

The negotiation of depth and surface, mediated through shine, is inherent to the history of painting. Visual artist and writer William V. Dunning tells us that the impressionists were concerned with the synthesis of depth and flatness seen through the unpredictable behavior of flickering light, particularly on the surface of water (1991, 131). In his book *Changing Images of Pictorial Space: A History of Spatial Illusion in Painting*, Dunning points to Claude Monet's painting *La Grenouillère* as a particular example of a “unified treatment”² that prioritizes the image of the painting, over the image within the painting. Dunning tells us that the areas of dark and light in *La Grenouillère*:

...simultaneously destroy volume and space by their relentless flickering across the surface of the painting...these flickering lights constantly summon the viewer's attention back to the flat canvas. The use of flickering light to develop recursively, then destroy, the illusion of volume, then flatness, creates two separate images, each negating the other (1991, 131).



(Left) *Fancy One*, 2022 detail (Right) Claude Monet, *La Grenouillère*, 1869, oil on canvas public domain via Wikimedia Commons

² According to Dunning, this “unified treatment” emerged when impressionists abandoned the unified/“rational” light source of the renaissance picture and began to see the world as “flickering lights ricocheting off the surface of a variety of objects”. Dunning writes that this technique was influenced by the way Rembrandt prioritized the objects within his paintings: everything—water, people, trees—were “painted in the same objective manner, using the same technique”, thus “the image in the painting was subordinated to the image of the painting as a cohesive entity” (Dunning 1991, 130-131).

While Dunning describes the depiction of shine as having a unifying force within Monet's paintings, critics elsewhere have described artists' depictions of shine creating a visual uncertainty that operates to dismantle or destroy the gestalt. In her 1996 analysis of the work of artist Cindy Sherman, art historian and critic Rosalind Krauss explains that "wild light" or "gleams" found in Sherman's photographs function to illuminate and disperse the gaze, which Jacques Lacan describes as 'always [participating] in the ambiguity of the jewel.' In preventing the coalescence of a gestalt, Krauss writes that "scattered light...disrupts the operation of the model by which subject and object are put into reciprocity as two poles of unification: the unified ego at one end and its object at the other", confusing the gap between object and subject, perceiver and perceived. (95)

The shiny things that I use in my work are actual, not rendered or translated through film or video. Here, I purposefully return to Mitchell's category of thing. In my work, shiny things operate as a similarly destabilizing force, flickering in "the dialectics of the multi-stable image". This flickering serves to engage the viewer through wavering moments of recognition and obscurity: when a thing takes on a stability through recognition, it becomes an object, but when it de-stabilizes it becomes a thing that acquires more than one name or identity (Mitchell 2005, 156). In short, shininess operates to prolong consideration and experience of the work.



Fancy One, 2022, gift wrap, pigments, glitter, watercolor, acrylic, found plastics and tinsel on paper, 31 x 45 x 5 in.

III. Plastic and Re-Entanglement

Though the finished works can evoke collage, bas relief, or sculpture, I approach my work as a painter and drawer. While these perspectives are not mutually exclusive, I consider these strategies as they relate to space: the former as an outward projection fixed on the horizon, and the latter as preoccupied with immediate surroundings. My practice oscillates between convergent ways of seeing and working: operating sensorially within my surroundings and pictorially within the realm of the image. My way of working is in step with that of the Medieval painter who exists in and of her pictorial world. This is in contrast to the concerns of the Renaissance painter who stands outside of the world and observes it as if through a window (Dunning 1991, 11).

Remaining permeable to my environment attunes me to the structures and materials of the social fabric that surrounds me. One of these such things is plastic. Plastic made its way into the work like an uninvited dinner guest: it seemed less of a hassle to welcome it in than to make up an excuse as to why I needed to keep it out. Its presence in the work provides an opportunity for line, shape, and pure “all the way through” color, while engaging with the means of production in which I participate.

Plastic is a unifying force between humans and animals, the currents of the water, and the slow breaking down of stone into sand and fossils into oil, fuel, and polycarbons, which become plastic, which become garbage (Robertson, 2016). This ontological knot of all matter, from the micro to the macro, underpins what it means to be subject of late capitalism.

As human desire overtook the availability of animals' bodies to meet the global economy's demand for ivory, bone, and tortoiseshell, plastic emerged as a substitute (Freinkel, 2011). As a substance, plastics embody “[a] form of nihilistic lust that pulls, like a black hole, so many of the biological organisms on earth, even as it differentially affects those who benefit from [its] uses...and those who suffer its consequences” (Davis 2016, 354). While often pliable or moldable, plastic remains steadfastly durable: it affects ecosystems while remaining largely unaffected by that ecosystem's influence.



Plastiglomerate sample/ready-made
collected by geologist Patricia Corcoran and sculptor Kelly Jazvac
at Kamilo Beach, Hawai'i, 2012.
Photo: Kelly Wood.

Until the invention of plastic, the arts held a monopoly on artifice. Now chemical engineers are the avant-garde who re-make and re-fashion the earth (Davis 2015, 348). In manufacturing, creativity is seemingly boundless. The consumer appetite for new forms knows no bounds, and manufacturers are more than happy to meet those demands. Conceptual artist Anne Doran says that this is where creativity suddenly hits a wall. Speaking in 1996, Doran states that when the moment of consumption is complete “...we lose our creative thinking. We don’t bring the same lively curiosity to the next step. Where do the things go? What can you do with them? It’s the lobotomy of the Western culture”. (210)

Feminist philosopher Nancy Tuana writes that it is a severing of Nature³ from culture —what we consume, and our status as consumer—that marks the moment when humans turned away from noticing the interactions between our bodies and our ecosystems (2008, 201). This division remains a primary dogma of Western individualism: consumer and product, extractor and resource. Reintegration of plastic waste within our sense of being re-figures a survival beyond purity, cleanliness, and technological fix.

The Cartesian desire to define the self in opposition to other has always been under threat because the world resists this categorization. Jane Bennett tells us that rethinking the idea of the self as a site of secure and stable impermeability is a crucial first-step toward re-entangling the cultural and the Natural. Extending agency beyond the human, Bennett’s *Vibrant Matter* works toward further dismantling the perceived borders between humans and our surrounding world while acknowledging our mutually-pervious present (2010, 110-122).

Researcher and theorist Kathryn Yusoff views plastic as a framework for political thinking. Echoing Julia Kristeva’s denial of purity and the “clean and proper” body, Yusoff asserts that plastic—as a fossilized material—is not separate to our subjectivity, but “active within” its reproductive, creative, and technological possibilities; “a form of geologic immanence” (2013, 784). Through this lens, plastic is not inert, as we may traditionally understand it, but an active agent to which we owe a debt because it allows us to conduct our daily lives.



Long One, 2022

gift wrap, pigments, watercolor, beeswax, found plastics and tinsel on paper, 76 x 31 x 1 in.

³ I have previously capitalized Nature, and continue to do so here for the same reason as Timothy Morton: to indicate and highlight its status as a culturally-defined construct.

...through this daily gesture I confirm the need to separate myself from a part of what was once mine, the slough or chrysalis or squeezed lemon of living, so that its substance might remain, so that tomorrow I can identify completely (without residues) with what I am and have. Only by throwing something away can I be sure that something of myself has not yet been thrown away and perhaps need not be thrown away now or in the future.

Italo Calvino *La Poubelle Agréée*

IV. Nobody Works Alone: Waste, Labor and Saturation

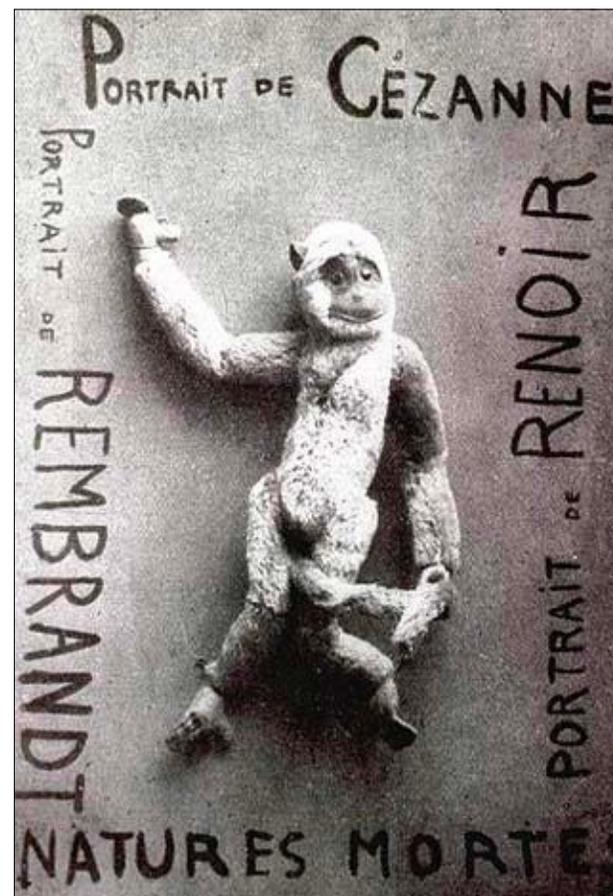
In *The Ethics of Waste: How We Relate to Rubbish*, cultural theorist Gay Hawkins invokes Calvino's essay describing trash removal as a form of "waste management campaign" in which enjoyment and pleasure, not disgust or obligation, are the central components of the authors' emotions surrounding his waste.

While I use trash in my work in a way that could be considered up-cycled or repurposed, my work is not a moral argument against wastefulness—or even against overconsumption, necessarily. Rather, the use of these materials into my work is an attempt to contend with the possibilities of waste and contamination in our porous world. I do not bring items like food packaging, leftover papers, or scraps into the studio out of a sense of guilt or virtuousness for "finding a use" for these items. Instead, I align with Calvino in deriving pleasure in the "active relation" between myself and my waste; "a movement in which the identities of waste and the self are implicated in each other" (Hawkins 2006, 41).

As described earlier, the materials and forms that animate the work are, in many cases, jettisoned from their original value system or intended purpose. There is a distinction between my process and Calvino's refuse ritual: instead of throwing these things away, I am re-integrating them into the surface and structure of an artwork. Removed from circulation, and re-routed from the landfill, the items now exist in this new third space where the binary of purity and contamination is disrupted through aesthetic and formal consideration. Through an additive process of bricolage, these commodity objects, whose labor is obscured, are digested into the art object, where labor is emphasized and cultivated; producing a new kind of liveliness and value separate or beyond systems of mechanization.

In her 2013 lecture *The value of liveliness* critic and theorist Isabelle Graw discusses the toy monkey readymade in Francis Picabia's *Natures Mortes* as an early example of an artist's absorption of immaterial (i.e. mass-produced) labor into the aesthetic sphere. For Graw, it is painting's particular relationship to labor that establishes its value. This value is formed by the liveliness that is provoked by the amount of time and energy spent making the work, congealed and held within the object of the painting. Arguably, the commodity items themselves can carry this labor-energy prior to integration within an artwork. Visual artist Jessica Stockholder addresses this liveliness through discussion of her use of mass-produced plastics in her sculptural work for the podcast *Bad at Sports*: "Every object that people have made and designed has intelligence and thoughts embedded in it...part of the content of the work is how those things rattle together" (2018). Graw describes a painting like a sponge, saturated and dripping with the labor of the artist. In this way, the object of the painting acts as a container for the labor and lifetime of the artist, producing a specific worth.

There are arguments against Graw's assertions that fall outside of the scope of this paper, but what I find provocative about her lecture—and is relevant for this paper—is the notion of a shallow yet dense surface; a concentration of time, energy, use, and value that resides on a plane. This aligns with how I make and experience my work: not as an escape from the world, or a window into another, but as a real and tangible manifestation of deep engagement with the material, sensory, and phenomenological conditions of being in—and moving through—the world.⁴ In this way, my work, through its making, is already an example of that which it is supposedly "about". Allan deSouza describes art as a cultural practice, wherein the artwork is "a manifestation and function of culture, rather than being 'about' culture" (2018, 86). I see my work—and all art—as entangled within the relations of the production of its time.



Francis Picabia, *Natures Mortes*, 1920, toy monkey, and ink, on cardboard
public domain via Wikimedia Commons

⁴ Grosz, again: "Art is not a self-contained activity in that it is disconnected from the ways in which the natural and social worlds function...[it] is not a window unto these worlds...Rather, it is where intensities proliferate, where forces are expressed for their own sake, where sensation lives and experiments..." (Grosz 2008, 78-79).

V. This is Not a Conclusion

My work does not serve to illustrate or diagram any of the aforementioned concepts or ideas but, rather, to operate both discursively and intuitively in and around these frameworks. The exhibition *Charismatic Things* consists of six bricolage works that examine unfathomable networks in cycles of proliferation, contamination, and decay. There is a refusal of the monumental in the scale and posture of these things, which can reference the slump or stretch of the human body or the textures of an animal hide, but the work also calls to mind things that are much broader and more intangible: natural forces, global networks of commerce, or geologic time. The surfaces of the vaguely geomorphic or pseudo-naturalistic forms are interrupted by moments of manipulation addressing overlaps between Nature and culture but also precious and expendable, figure and ground, subject and object. These works flirt with the natural while keeping it at bay in order to address and erode these porous boundaries.

Microcosmically, the objects contain the remnants of activity that can be traced back to the actions of their maker. Macrocosmically, the work carries the historical burden of painting while holding both the future and provenance of the stuff embedded within. While this report contains multiple images of the work, employing certain transient or “un-photographable” materials that glisten, sparkle, or shine solidifies my defiance of the digital as the primary interaction with my work. Digital color has no weight. I want viewers to be in the presence of a thing to contend with the stature, the mass, the texture in order to expose the non-definitive character of the world. Furthering this, I invite different ways of looking through displays that implicate the body and complex surfaces that invite scrutinization or questioning.



Installation view, *Charismatic Things*
Ditch Projects, Springfield OR, May 2022
Image Mike Bray

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my family and friends for their love and ongoing support.

Special thanks to my amazing and talented cohort whose friendship and exemplary pot luck skills have quite literally kept me alive these past three years. I am so lucky our paths have and will continue to cross.

Thank you to Rebecca Childers and my Writing for Artists classmates: your feedback and encouragement has been invaluable while writing this paper.

With gratitude to my committee for supporting my practice during my time at the University of Oregon.

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