

**THAT THING:
Confronting Difficult Trauma**

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ABSTRACT

Society censors, rather than confronts, stories of rape and harassment. Rachelle Wunderink's thesis work unveils the consequences of sexual assault trauma by forcing viewers to engage with the emotional affect. She does this in three key ways throughout her body of work: *Blankouts*, an immersive wheat-pasted installation, which looks at the covert ways in which society suppresses women's stories of assault through the use of coded language and censorship. Secondly, *Trauma Embodied*, looks at how the artist self-censors her own stories through a multi-layered editing process of eight different videos. Lastly, in Wunderink's thesis exhibition, *That Thing: Confronting Difficult Trauma*, the artist activates the gallery space creating various modes of interaction with the work engaging her audience to consider the ways in which the work imprints on their own experiences.

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INTRODUCTION

That Thing: Confronting Difficult Trauma, is the culmination of Rachelle Wunderink's thesis work at York University from 2019-2021. Incorporating influences from Affect Theory, Relational Aesthetics, and Trauma therapy, Wunderink's thesis exhibition examines the ways that trauma lingers leaving lasting imprints on lives. The show is made up of two distinct but connected projects, *Blankouts* and *Embodied Trauma*. *Blankouts*, explores how society censors and codes female stories of assault. Viewers experience a repeating wallpaper pattern made of redacted transcripts, which are wheat-pasted to the gallery wall. Wunderink uses aesthetic concepts to entice the audience into closely examining the specific transcripts. *Embodied Trauma* confronts the audience by asking them to partake in the disarming aftermath of assault. Comprising eight different videos, this series divides the gallery space into two areas: A 're-triggering zone' contains videos that are more sensitive in nature, and a secondary area projects silent videos on a large-scale wall that reference the integration of trauma. Wunderink's use of repetition and censorship throughout the entire show is representative of the idea that trauma can cause fragmentation¹. This paper, as well as her thesis exhibition, explores the ways in which Wunderink uses her personal experiences to examine trauma as an affect. It also places Wunderink's work within an art historical context both reflective of past feminist works, as well as contemporary art aesthetics.

BLANKOUTS

Blankouts attempts to visualize how society censors stories of sexual assault. The artist began by recording a series of video interviews that described her autobiographical experiences with sexual assault and harassment². These videos were then transcribed into a series of documents and provided to a group of 25 female-identified participants.

¹ Throughout this paper, I explore a multi-layered narrative surrounding my own experiences. These experiences are deeply personal and oftentimes hard to put into words. I have therefore relegated these intimate narrative moments of my process to the footnotes. These footnotes are to further explore the idea of censorship and layering that is prevalent within my work but furthermore act as a safe place for me to burrow small hints of how trauma has influenced my art making process.

² To fully understand my mind and process through my first year of study, it is important to me to discuss what traumatic event led to the catalyst of this thesis work. I was raped in 2014 while living abroad in Venezuela, an event within my life that I had never dealt with until the fall of 2020. This reckoning came about because of the isolation due to the pandemic. The COVID-19 pandemic has forced me to confront a lot of the aftermath of this event, and process how this continues to affect my life. It has also caused a divide within my thesis process. When I look at how I was creating work at the beginning of my MFA to now, there has been a remarkable paradigm shift. My own internal fear of this event enabled the first year of my thesis to be held hostage. I wanted to create meaningful work to challenge the greater conversation of rape culture, but I feared my own stories. I feared my own vulnerability.

These participants were sourced from a pool of people important to Wunderink at various points in her life. The participants were asked to review the transcripts before redacting them in any manner they saw fit, including crossing out or editing the story. These redacted documents were developed into a site-specific installation designed for the Special Projects Gallery at York University.

Wunderink iterated the final installation of *Blankouts* several times before identifying an aesthetic language that reflected her process of repetition and redaction. Patience and care were just as vital during the development of *Blankouts*; participants took almost six months to receive, contemplate, censor, and return the transcripts. Several individuals involved with the project needed time to reflect on both the artist's narratives and also their own experiences. As Wunderink received redacted transcripts, she scanned each page and began to experiment with the aesthetic language of these revised documents. Initially attempting to create a drawing that layered each transcript on top of each other, Wunderink felt that this disguised too much of the actual narrative³. She wanted to give her audience the freedom to choose their level of engagement with the work. Layering transcripts undermined the entire project, hiding experiences and imitating the censorship that was meant to be rejected.

³ As a mixed media artist, I continually want to bring back each project to tactile materiality. What I learned through the process of *Blankouts*, was to listen to the needs of each project. I went down many rabbit holes through my two-year MFA process. I started with mediocre collages, shifted to collecting traditionally women's crafts to appropriate, made beautiful escapist paintings, and attempted to build models of a safe space. The safe space project was a particularly idealistic and lofty dream that was never plausible. When it came time to look at the completed *Blankouts* transcripts from my participants, I started on my usual path of experimentation. Curiously, while I experimented, I started to pull back, not wanting to do anything to these documents. The mark-making of each individual participant was distinctive and important. I felt in many ways the documents created their own aesthetic language that I did not want to impede on. Just as I fostered a culture of care with my participants, I wanted to honor their contributions to this project. This led to a frank discussion with an advisor who encouraged me to think about simplicity. She is the one who suggested wheat-pasting. After that meeting, I started to play around with the replication of these documents and wheat-pasted them to my studio wall as a trial run. This felt like the right arrangement for *Blankouts* and completed the cycle of my own internal anguish throughout the project. I found when I started *Blankouts*, I was full of shame and ignored the initial videos for several months, and now at the end of this project I displayed the stories in a frank and confident manner. While this process is difficult to convey to an audience, internally it allows for a letting go or distancing for myself. This process, while taxing and emotional throughout, felt resolved.

Venezuela (2014)

It's in the same year... um... it's a different country... I've hardly ever talked about it... um...
 I had moved to Venezuela in the summer of 2014. It kind of started off great in a very interesting way, but the country was falling apart. It was a big sigh.
 It scared really quickly.
 I didn't get along with a group of my co-workers. They kind of singled me out. About half of the co-workers lived in the same apartment building, on the same floor as me. These people would party till all hours of night and well, you know... I didn't... I've definitely partied, so I don't judge them for that.
 My apartment was right in between these four people and on the one side it was these two frat bros who were REALLY just non stop drinking, non stop bringing girls over, just non stop AND out, walls are paper thin. On the other side there were these two girls from Wisconsin who were cousins. The one cousin and I really didn't get along. We had sort of... this sounds dumb... but we had gone to the same gym and had gotten together decided we weren't going to date him. Then she ended up dating him. So... backstory... anyways.
 I had to go on a visa run to Trinidad and Tobago, with these four people and we were staying in the same hotel room, which was paid for by my school. So we took our flight there. I am determined to play nice, even though at this point I'm pretty frustrated with these people. It's about 3 months into being in Venezuela.
 So this one night, the one girl, her name... well I'll keep her anonymous. She had met this Trinidadian guy who owned a restaurant. I was just going to spend the night at the hotel but she invited me out. I had no beef with her so I said, "Sure. Ya. Let's go out."
 So we went to this guys restaurant. It was after hours and it was closed. It was just me and these four co-workers and these two Trinidadian guys. I remembered being drunk really quickly.
 And... the one girl I didn't get along with... we basically had a fight brought on by the fact that we were drinking. Um... I did end up making her cry, and I felt a little bad about it.
 The rest was blurry... I think there was some weed.
 I didn't remember it happening.
 I guess one of the Trinidadian guys took me in the back room and had sex with me.
 I don't remember anything... the next thing...
 ...The next thing I remembered was waking up in the morning really early.

Um... I didn't know where I was. I wasn't in the hotel room and I was completely freaked out. I didn't have underwear on. I had a skirt on though.
 And there was this guy next to me. I didn't know who this guy was.
 I kind of jumped up and put my underwear back on... um... I was in some sort of house. He kind of jumped up and he said "Oh Hey" and tried to have a conversation with me.
 I remembered trying to maintain calm but I was freaking out.
 I... I just wanted to get out of the situation.
 You know, weirdly enough... he didn't seem like a mean person but he had no clue... how violated I felt... um... So I was kind of like, "I need to get back to the hotel... um."
 I walked out of the house and he followed me and he offered me a ride. And I was like, "I DON'T KNOW WHO YOU ARE!"
 I remembered walking down the street trying to orient myself, trying to get back to the hotel and...
 He was kind of following me with a car. He eventually pointed me to a taxi and said to me to get in here, and directed the driver to the hotel. He left.
 I saw him about four or five days later. The other guy, his friend was hanging out with my co-worker. He just smiled and the whole time I was thinking... I don't... I don't remember anything...
 I actually didn't think I had sex until my fratbro co-worker informed me that... ya... it happened. It happened at the restaurant.
 I remembered looking at him being like, "Why didn't you stop it?"
 "Why?"
 "Why did you just let that happen?"
 It was...
 I didn't talk about it for... I think... about a year and a half.
 I remembered eating the most delicious breakfast at the hotel. Literally said to myself "This didn't happen and you're not going to admit it."
 And then I didn't... I didn't talk about it.
 I told my co-workers that I was responsible for myself. Let's just not talk about it. It wasn't until a year and a half later that I kind of broke down. About it.

FIGURE 1: Rachelle Wunderink, *Blankouts (Participant 3)*, 2021

Venezuela (2014)

This is in the same year... um... it's a different country... and I've hardly ever talked about it... um...
 I had moved to Venezuela in the summer of 2014. It kind of started off great in a very interesting way, but the country was falling apart. It still is. (a big sigh)
 It scared really quickly.
 I didn't get along with a group of my co-workers. They kind of singled me out. About half of the co-workers lived in the same apartment building, on the same floor as me. These people would party till all hours of night and well, you know... I didn't... I've definitely partied, so I don't judge them for that.
 My apartment was right in between these four people and on the one side it was these two frat bros who were REALLY just non stop drinking, non stop bringing girls over, just non stop AND out, walls are paper thin. On the other side there were these two girls from Wisconsin who were cousins. The one cousin and I really didn't get along. We had sort of... this sounds dumb... but we had gone to the same gym and had together decided we weren't going to date him. Then she ended up dating him. So... backstory... anyways.
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 So we went to this guys restaurant. It was after hours and it was closed. It was just me and these four co-workers and these two Trinidadian guys. I remembered being drunk really quickly.
 And... the one girl I didn't get along with... we basically had a fight brought on by the fact that we were drinking. Um... I did end up making her cry, and I felt a little bad about it.
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FIGURE 2: Rachelle Wunderink, *Blankouts (Participant 11)*, 2021

After several failed attempts, Wunderink unified the inherently repetitive nature of the documents by photocopying them in an attempt to mimic the repetitious nature of trauma. The project's final design creates a wallpaper effect of redacted transcripts adhered directly to a gallery wall. After each photocopy Wunderink darkened the contrast to create a visually arresting degradation of the text. Bessel A Van Der Kolk, in his book *The Body Keeps the Score*, examines the complexity of trauma and how it manifests throughout the body and mind. Van Der Kolk says "As long as a memory is inaccessible, the mind is unable to change it. But as soon as a story starts being told, particularly if it is told repeatedly, it changes-- the act of telling itself changes the tale." (Van Der Kolk, 3803). Photocopying these fixed scripts created a visible transformation that Wunderink integrated when attaching each replicated page to the gallery wall. As a whole, each page appears to be identical, but upon further examination, the audience can decipher the differences between each page. This creates an enticing obstacle for viewers, allowing them to actively choose to understand the whole story. A secondary objective is to engage viewers to consider the reasoning behind each redacted word. Ideally, this holistic interplay between the installation as a whole and each individual page should require viewers to contemplate and question the many ways in which society, and women themselves, censor these experiences. The full narrative is only revealed if viewers have the patience to parse through each page. While developing *Blankouts*, Wunderink discovered that the work needed to be simple. She couldn't rely on the traditional languages of painting and drawing, as these aesthetics over-complicate and detract from the overall experiences contained in the documents. Simplicity and ad hoc methods communicate the power of redaction allowing the participants role to be exemplified rather than minimized.

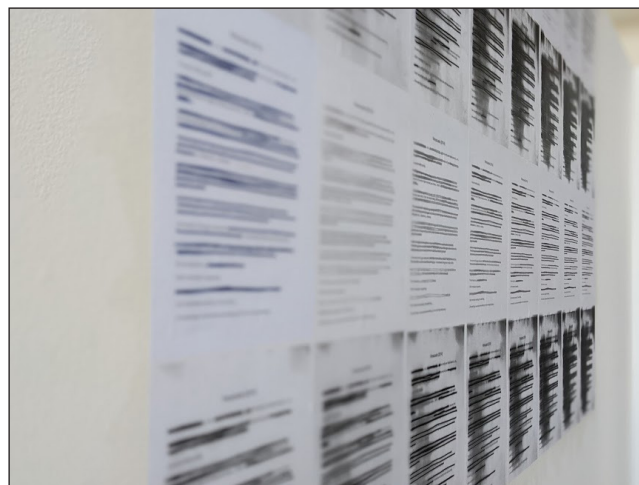


FIGURE 3: Rachele Wunderink, *Blankouts (Studio Test)*, 2021

Society often scrutinizes victims of sexual assault, depicting them as undeserving of sympathy. What society misses is the lasting traumatic stress that rape survivors continually live through. PTSD is difficult for all survivors and was prevalent throughout Wunderink's development of *Blankouts*. Through each step of this series, the artist contemplated the layers of removal as a method of trauma integration. Simultaneously, she created a critical discourse on how society often fails survivors of sexual assault, illustrated through the redacted documents. While the project itself developed organically, the artist struggled throughout each stage of this project. She recognized the inherent PTSD that often overcame her during the recording, transcribing, and editing process⁴. Van Der Kolk notes that "One of the hardest things for traumatized people is to confront their shame about the way they behaved during a traumatic episode" (Van Der Kolk, 370). When Wunderink reviewed the initial recordings of her stories of rape and harassment, she was overcome with the emotional burden of reliving these traumatic events. After creating these videos, she stopped work on the project for several months, finding it difficult to confront the revealed pain. Van Der Kolk goes on to explain that psychologists are just beginning to understand the lasting affects of trauma: "We have learned that trauma is not just an event that took place sometime in the past; it is also the imprint left by that experience on the mind, brain, and body. This imprint has ongoing consequences for how the human organism manages to survive in the present" (Van Der Kolk, 526). The artist took this to mean that shame keeps traumatic survivors silent and ignorant of these lasting imprints of stress. In hindsight her avoidance would seem to indicate that she felt internal shame that needed to be resolved before continuing with the project. This is precisely how

⁴ *In the fall of 2019, a professor encouraged me to videotape myself discussing my rape. As a painter, I didn't inherently know why a video record of my story would help my work, but I did it anyway. With the help of another MFA student, I set up a camera and some lights and sat to talk about 6 different experiences I had with rape and harassment. While these videos ended up being an invaluable tool for the rest of my thesis work, the physical act of sitting for these videos was excruciating. I didn't have the words at that moment on why this experience was one of immense pain, I have since started to understand this lasting effect on me. Looking back, I can now realize that many of the stories I had collected through my journals existed on the page. Saying these stories audibly was admitting to myself, that my body had been continually violated. It is important to re-examine this process and its lasting affect. I was alone when filming, so why did the experience deplete me? No one was there to criticize what I said but yet I felt judged by the camera. In reality, I was the judge, jury, and witness to my own trial. By saying these stories out loud, it facilitated the bodily affects I had successfully been ignoring to come to the surface. Viewing these videos today, I observe the imprinted affect of trauma. It reveals itself through my shoulders, the way I talk, and how my face contorts while discussing these stories. I was not coping, and as soon as I had finished the last story, I ignored these videos. The reality of viewing these videos was too much for me at the time. I left them untouched for 7 months.*

society fails survivors of sexual assault, using shame as a way of hiding problems. The insidious nature of society's surveillance of women's sexual liberation also leads to public judgments of victims instead of perpetrators. This results in self-censorship by women hoping to avoid being re-traumatized by police reporting, media, and the culture at large. They keep their stories of assault quiet, their shame feeds on that silence.

After coming to terms with that internal shame, *Blankouts* became a way for Wunderink to acknowledge, confront, and grow from the trauma. Van Der Kolk says "...our capacity to destroy one another is matched by our capacity to heal one another. Restoring relationships and community is central to restoring well-being ...language gives us the power to change ourselves and others by communicating our experiences, helping us to define what we know, and finding a common sense of meaning."(Van Der Kolk, 4701). The artist intentionally involved women she had known previously in order to both share and acknowledge what she has overcome as well as create a safe space for the artist to come to terms with her own experiences herself⁵.

A particularly important part of *Blankouts* is the relational aesthetics used throughout the process. Relational Aesthetics, according to Nicholas Bourriaud, is "a set of artistic practices which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole human relations and their social context, rather than an independent and private space" (Bourriaud, 113). Wunderink does not perform Bourriaud's traditional idea of relationality, as the relational aspect of this type of aesthetic takes place in a public context. Instead Wunderink created a reciprocal relationship of trust between herself and the participants, using erasure as a strategy when presenting *Blankouts*. The artist was selective but intentional in which participants could partake in redacting her personal stories. Participants read delicate accounts of the artist's assault, which is potentially re-triggering for any woman.

⁵ I started to dream of creating a physical safe space for others to partake in. This started a preoccupation that allowed myself to forget the true meaning of what I was trying to process and create. What I didn't realize was this was another method of avoidance, taking the focus away from my own body trauma and putting it on the appeasement of others. How could I create a physical safe space that everyone could feel safe in? This is an impossible question, as everyone's safe space is in the realms of subjectivity. Is it even possible to do this? I now know that, no, it isn't possible. It was an exercise in understanding how the affects of a safe space facilitates the need to be retriggered. This fixation, I later realize, was a way for me to slowly come to terms with my own trauma. The distraction of creating a safe space for everyone was a shallow understanding of how safe spaces are generated and maintained. Regardless, this was another indispensable step to confront my own vulnerability and fear.

Claire Bishop argues in her article *Antagonism and Relational Aesthetics*, the need for antagonistic artwork to challenge the audience. She looked at Thomas Hirschhorn and Santiago Sierra's work, pointing out how these artists "...set up relationships that emphasize the role of dialogue and negotiation in their art..." The relations produced by their performances and installations are marked by sensations of unease and discomfort rather than belonging" (Bishop, 70). The *Blankouts* transcripts always had the potential to trigger the participants. This is precisely why Wunderink communicated with care when navigating conversations about personal trauma and emotions. The artist found a balance between antagonism and reciprocity, acknowledging her participant's lived experiences while still creating a socially relevant series.



FIGURE 4: Wendy Clarke, *One-to-One*, 1994

Since the systematic objectification of women is a relatively common experience, as one in four women will be assaulted within their lifetime, participants often related their own experiences with sexual assault, creating a call and response relationship (Department of Justice, Canada). Wunderink created her own community of witnesses who read, observed, and responded to her experiences of gendered violence. The fluid nature of this project provoked a diverse response from Wunderink's participants and generated difficult realizations. Wendy Clarke's *One-to-One*, is another example of how the confessional style can lend to relational work through community building. Clarke's piece organized inmates at a local prison to record themselves discussing memorable experiences within their lives. These videos were viewed and responded to by people outside the prison. Despite the differences between *One-to-One* and *Blankouts*, both pieces found the sense of community with participants. Clarke humanized prisoners to an audience that vilified them; Wunderink started a conversation with others who had met with similar experiences. Many women mentioned Wunderink's vulnerability and thanked her for sharing something so difficult. Others sought clarification for the project, as many women did not want to censor the story at all.

One participant said “I guess I’m very familiar with stories like this just from being female and I would want audiences to see stories like this in full (because men should know) so I wouldn’t naturally censor anything” (Anonymous Art Participant). The artist encouraged participants to imagine themselves in the story and censor the content for a specific audience. Participants who grew up in conservative Christian households tended to censor the story as if they were speaking with their families. Others censored insignificant details and left the story largely untouched. Others applied a critical eye to the stories, cutting most of the content or using a variety of alternative words. One participant was unable to read the transcripts at all and dropped out of the project⁶. Like Clarke’s *One-to-One*, Wunderink’s community transformed from passive to active participants within the project⁷. This reshaped the simple confessional to an integration of subjectivity, perceiving these women not as voyeurs but integral to the work itself (Smith 965).

⁶ *As someone who is often retriggered by works linked to sexual violence, I encouraged this particular participant to drop the project if she was not up for it. Since I conducted this project during the pandemic, I wanted to acknowledge the fraught emotions participants were dealing with as COVID raged through their communities. It was important for me to show care for the women who agreed to a project that was potentially triggering, especially in a time of world upheaval. The woman who dropped it, kept insisting she could do it, but every time I checked in with her I could tell she was struggling with even opening the transcripts. Her response was, “To be honest, I’m afraid to open it.” I tried to respond allowing for time and also an option to not complete the project. She responded again “I seriously want to look through this, but I don’t know if I am strong enough.” I re-explained that her participation was voluntary and if she can’t engage, to not do so. When I checked in one last time she told me that she opened the packet, pulled out the transcripts, couldn’t do it, and put them away. She said “It’s in my studio and it looks at me everyday.” This response was unique, but also reflective of my own experience coming to terms with my rape. It was easier for me to leave that story buried, and untouched, but at the same time it would always be there making its way within my subconscious. I wanted to tend to her own emotional reactions to the project, but ultimately I had to let her be as I recognized that she needed space for her to process her own reactions to the project. I never received her transcripts, nor did I expect I would. I did want to assure her that she could throw out the project if she needed but I will never know what she did with it. I can assume the transcripts were buried, similar to me burying these stories for years.*

⁷ *From a very young age, women have trusted me with their stories of gendered violence. When I was 15, a close friend told me of her molestation, and the denial of it by her father. Later, this same friend was raped at a party by her friend. These stories have always followed me, and so have the many coded ways in which women discuss them. Repeatedly, I recall women telling me about their encounters with unwanted sex and denying it was rape in the same sentence. Time and time again, I told them it was rape. If it wasn’t consented to, it was rape. When it happened to me many years later, I realized the deep shame that follows bodily violation. While these women may have not realized what they were processing was a rape, I reacted differently. I was clear headed enough the morning after to know that what happened to me was rape. However, I consciously decided to never acknowledge it. I know now this is a common reaction by many women, as we fear re-victimization. The reality is a part of me died that day. It was not the rape that killed a part of my soul, but the way in which I censored and denied it, allowing for that shame to take hold.*

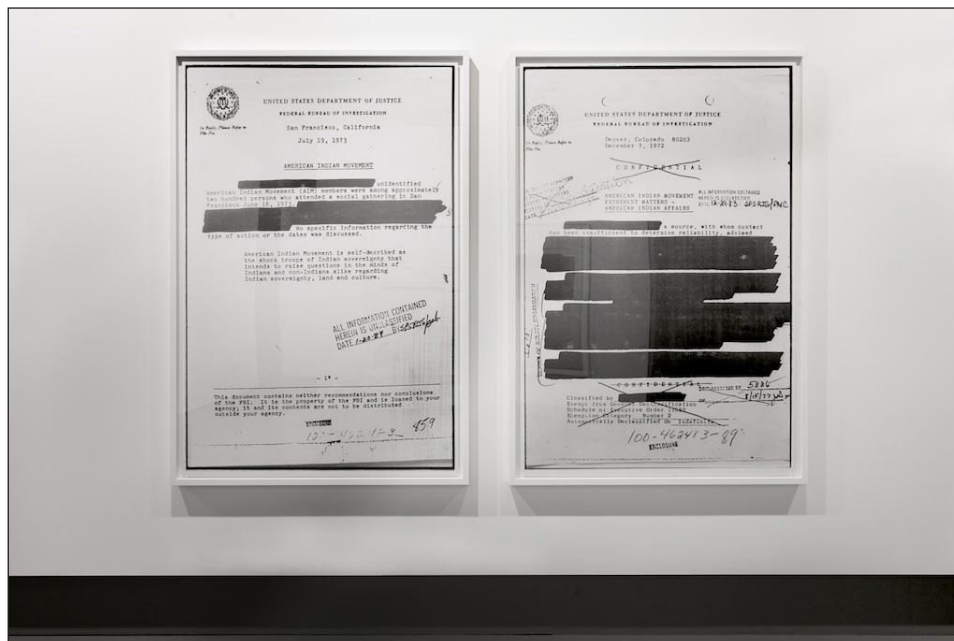


FIGURE 5: Dana Claxton, *AIM*, 2010

Throughout the process of Wunderink's thesis work, she aimed to confront her audience and asked them to engage with difficult work. Dana Claxton, a Canadian artist, highlights the idea of confrontation through censorship in *AIM*. *AIM*, is a series of large-scale black and white photos replicating declassified FBI documents related to the American Indian Movement in the 1960's. These full-scale images reveal the coercive role of the US government in attempting to erase a movement. Furthermore, the audience questions what is behind the redaction within these documents, highlighting the government's response of fear through furthered oppression. Wunderink's *Blankouts*, while using different subjects, was obviously influenced by Claxton's usage of erasure and redaction. Wunderink uses this aesthetic to highlight how society frames trauma in a linear narrative. This societal neglect paired with the internal shame of victimization leads to women's experiences being unreported and untold. Women are often relegated to gender-identified safe spaces where members exchange trauma and attempt to collectively process the violence enacted upon them⁸.

⁸ *Years and several countries later, I started to let out small details of what happened to me while I lived in Venezuela. This was always done in a safe space of only women or queer folks. Sometimes, a single friend, other times during craft circles, or bar hangouts. My story expanded or cut short depending on the reaction of others in the room. I would question whether they could handle the reality of a rape story. The one thing I continually noted during this time, was how often it felt like a call and response. I would call out rape culture, tell my story, and a woman in the room would always respond with their own story of assault. This communal processing started me on the path to my thesis work. I needed the safety of women and queer spaces to acknowledge that this had happened to me. At the same time, I often held back from revealing the whole story. I censored myself and undermined its importance within my life.*

'Difficult Knowledge' is a term coined by Deborah Britzman, which looks at history through a revisionist lens highlighting oppression, and marginalization (Rose, 2). 'Difficult Knowledge' often puts audiences in an uncomfortable position that challenges their understanding of history. Like Claxton using FBI documents as a testimonial to her people, Wunderink's work relies on the audience to question their own understanding of what rape survivors look like. She further asks the audience to explore how censorship doesn't remove the importance of shared history. While Wunderink focuses on personal narrative, her integration of women participants specifically from her own narrative history, incorporates an understanding of women's intergenerational trauma; an inherited history that all women share, whether or not they experienced the stories themselves. She wants her audience to question how censorship works within their own experiences, in which they censored others or themselves. Claxton says "Difficult knowledge, which suggests a shattering of self not learned or taught, a letting go of long haul beliefs in order to teach what is unknown or perhaps unpleasant" (Claxton). Wunderink's own process led to a breakdown, followed by her own rebuilding throughout her thesis. Earlier in her thesis work, others challenged her to obscure the difficulty that trauma can bring, advising that she take the personal out of the work. Wunderink questioned this; without the personal, the work would fail to affect her audience and would further perpetuate how 'difficult knowledge' fails to disseminate within the public sphere and therefore aid the erasure of the artist's own intent.

While *Blankouts* may be difficult to view, it also offers an opportunity for public healing⁹. In their article *Take It Public: Use Art to Make Healing a Public Narrative*, psychologist Rosemary Barnes and painter Susan Schellenberg studied the effects that art can have in healing from trauma. Deeply personal traumas that become public provide relief; both for the individual creating the art and the public. Barnes writes "Public events like Susan's that focus on emotional pain and healing provide public windows on these vital, but ordinarily private, experiences, and thus provide opportunities for public discussion" (Barnes and Schellenberg, 187). Schellenberg, who had a history of mental distress, used art as a language to communicate the complexities of trauma. She found catharsis in a public acknowledgment, while giving her agency within her healing process. Schellenberg notes, "Where 'stigma' is concerned, I believe that publicly shared art and healing stories offer opportunities to highlight the actual contribution

⁹ *While revealing my personal stories of sexual assault have been painful, it also offered a renewed sense of vigor. This started with contacting my participants, and engaging with them in conversations of vulnerability, emotional labor and healing. In the microcosm of my participants, I ended up being a witness to their personal stories of trauma and gendered violence. Together we processed, and could start to name the internalized shame that often holds women silent.*

that individuals with lived experiences can bring to society” (Barnes and Schellenberg, 191). Like Schellenberg, Wunderink’s lived experiences are reflected in her art. The censorship aspect of *Blankouts* also serves as a way of contributing to calling out rape culture¹⁰. Wunderink asserts her agency into the public purview to ensure that the public engages with the discomfort of trauma, confronting the systemic ways it’s discussed and stigmatized.

EMBODIED TRAUMA

In *Embodied Trauma*, Wunderink edited the same interviews she transcribed for *Blankouts* in order to create a video series that provided insights into the aftermath of sexual assault. This series of videos explores her mental and physical disconnection and examined ways to integrate this trauma into her daily life. These videos used layering, cutting, and context to conceal the actual narrative of the original interview video. Instead, the artist’s distress is revealed through non-verbal cues from her face and body¹¹.

Embodied Trauma centers around the concept of Affect Theory, particularly focused

¹⁰ *This public display of my personal narratives is the crux of my whole thesis. Through each iteration of redacted documents I receive, I become more comfortable with the public display of these personal stories. It was a learning curve and a deeply personal process that I am continually thankful I embarked on.*

¹¹ *This project started out quite late into my thesis in about December 2020. It was a rough start as an event happened, in which I accidentally retriggered another femme-identified person over a zoom critique. While this was not done intentionally, at the moment of confrontation significant apologies on my part ensued. This also sparked a questioning by others pointing out how personal and emotionally raw my work was. Many insisted that I could not handle taking on this work because of its personal nature. It seemed as if they were responding to my own anxiety surrounding the need to present the work in a raw form. I sat with this moment in time for quite a while, which led to a question about what I am actually trying to do with my work. I certainly didn’t want my work to be overshadowed by the potential re-traumatizing of individuals who have a shared history of sexual violence. I want to honor women’s shared history by using my stories as a catalyst to have difficult conversations about rape and trauma. As I proceeded, I learned the ways in which my work was uncomfortable for people, acknowledge that discomfort, and proceed to offer a trigger warning. Trigger warnings are a way in which audiences can opt into potential topics. While others questioned if I was even emotionally capable of handling my own trauma, I offered a simple boundary. I know what I can handle, and I find the only way for my own healing was through the confrontation and examination of my rape. This is by no means a blueprint for everyone’s trauma, as imprinted trauma is a deeply personal thing, and manifests differently in everyone. For me though, this moment of complete discomfort was an impetus to gain a needed distance from my artwork. My emotions were too wrapped up in other people’s reactions and this event was the breaking point. I had to continue with this work, as it meant too much to me to abandon. I only wish it didn’t have to occur so publicly, and at the expense of accidentally re-triggering someone else. I learned my lesson, owned up to my role, and was able to continue to re-examine what the aesthetic language surrounding difficult knowledge can be.*

on the affect of trauma¹². Eric Shouse, in his article *Feeling, Emotion, Affect*, explained how affect and emotion are distinct although commonly mistaken as the same thing. He says that while emotions or feelings are "...a sensation that has been checked against previous experiences and labeled". An affect is "a non-conscious experience of intensity; it is a moment of unformed and unstructured potential" (Shouse, 3-5). He goes on to discuss how affect is abstract in its nature because it "cannot be fully realized in language" (Shouse, 4). The artist attempts to catch her audience off guard, not through a rationalization of PTSD but through the use of affect. Her intent with this video series was to cause the audience to experience an unnamed intensity within their body, reflective of the artist's own understanding of the bodily trauma. Simon O'Sullivan looks at visual art's role with *Affect Theory in The Aesthetics of Affect: Thinking art Beyond Representation*. He argues that art itself is a bundle of affects "frozen in time and space," and that as a viewer, "you cannot read affects, you can only experience them" (O'Sullivan, 126). Wunderink strives to actualize this concept by utilizing the editing and layering of sound and video. If art itself is affect frozen within time, Wunderink transmits the affect onto her audience. She isn't asking them to feel what she feels but to engage with their own body's intensities.

¹² *In the Spring of 2020, I took a class taught by Professor Jennifer Fisher that looks at Affect Theory and its relevance in visual arts. I'll be honest, at the start of the class, I often left baffled and annoyed by the topic. It all seems a bit like nonsense to me. As an educator myself, I took the advice I use to give to my own students. I did my best to engage within the class, to find meaning out of the topic, whether I completely understood it. As the weeks went on, I started to grasp the meaning of affect and realized how prevalent it is within life, culture, and society. I find that the classes that spark the biggest emotional reaction, angry, annoyance or otherwise, tend to be the classes that pushed me the most. This class was challenging, but each step and process changed how I thought about the artist's role aligning with Affect Theory. Many artists are naturally attuned to Affect Theory, we just never had a name for it before; we called it intuition or process-driven creation. Being able to put into words the type of nuanced processing as an artist has been an invaluable experience. I transformed into a disciple by the end of the class, carrying the lessons of Affect Theory into my everyday life.*



FIGURE 6: Rachelle Wunderink, *I Don't Remember* (Video Stills), 2021

Wunderink's exploration of trauma as affect is difficult to pinpoint due to its highly personal nature, as trauma can never be understood by those who have never experienced it. The affect of trauma is continually relived by a survivor as Van Der Kolk explains. "Why trauma is primarily remembered not as a story, a narrative with a beginning middle and end, but as isolated sensory imprints: images, sounds, and physical sensations that are accompanied by intense emotions, usually terror and helplessness" (Van Der Kolk, 1412). Wunderink uses her own experiences with assault when attempting to capture Van Der Kolk's understanding of trauma as a sensory experience. By focusing on the affect instead of a narrative, she challenges the viewer to consider the sensory imprints left by trauma. Victims of PTSD often re-live the event, but disassociate themselves from it and create a dual memory (Van Der Kolk 3567). By sharing these moments of trauma, one can begin integrating the event into their daily lives. For example: "ordinary memory is adaptive; our stories are flexible and can be modified to fit the circumstances... but there is nothing social about traumatic memory" (Van Der Kolk 3552). By asking her audience to partake in her trauma, she is attempting to recreate the visceral and emotional task of reliving the event. Her video *I Don't Remember*, attempts to affect the viewer by provoking confusion. She repeats "I don't remember it happening, I don't remember anything, I don't remember."

This audio is layered on top of the actual narrative description of the trauma, drowning out the story and leaving viewers with a dizzying confused experience designed to leave the viewer unsettled¹³. The artist also intentionally utilizes repetition to censor the story. The artist's face matches what she articulates revealing a moment of vulnerability. We the audience understand that something happened to her, but we are left in the dark as to the specific details of what occurred. The uncertainty created by affect can make it uncomfortable for the audience to engage with the content. This specific video highlights what is integral to Wunderink's *Embodied Trauma* series, as her goal is to express the unknown intensity of trauma. The layering of images within several of her videos replicates the feeling of dissociation; the repetition of sound reflects the dizzying affect of embodied pain. The details of Wunderink's experience aren't as important as the immersion in the complexities of trauma.



FIGURE 7: Michèle Pearson Clarke, *Suck Teeth Compositions (After Rashaad Newsome)*, 2018

Wunderink continues to use erasure and repetition in *Embodied Trauma* through the concept of in betweenness and Affect Theory. Toronto based artist Michèle Pearson Clarke uses affect in a similar way in *Suck Teeth Compositions (After Rashaad Newsome)*¹⁴.

¹³ *I Don't Remember*, is the video I foresee being the most triggering not because the narrative is told, but because the lack of narrative, alongside the layering of video, gives the viewer a feeling of being haunted. When I watch this video myself, I am taken back to the morning after my rape, confused, lost, and alone.

¹⁴ I had the privilege to see Clarke speak in a class, as well as have a one-on-one critique with her. My biggest takeaway from her talk wasn't her artwork, although it is fantastic, but rather her attitude towards broaching difficult topics. As a queer person of color, her experiences imitate her work in an interesting but antagonistic way. She doesn't back down from her position rather she forges a space within the art world. She taught me that I am allowed to have conviction, and be courageous when presenting difficult work. Her critique came at a critical point in my thesis, where I continually doubted myself. I started to take more chances after that meeting, allowing myself certitude, and believing I do have something important to share about rape culture.

In this piece, Clarke compiles non-verbal gestures shared by the West African diaspora. She particularly looks at the sounds created through sucking one's teeth. This installation visualizes a shared frustration by Black Canadians who are consistently told that racism doesn't exist in Canada. The gesture of teeth sucking is often a subtle indication of anger, without its immediate confrontation. Clarke, like Wunderink, does not reveal a narrative or any words at all. Instead, she focuses on the affect of her participants' bodies, faces, and gestures to convey their own frustrations (Clarke). While Clarke is looking specifically through the lens of Blackness within Canada, Wunderink attempts a similar in betweenness. In *So...and...um*, Wunderink captures the moments between retelling her stories of rape and harassment. Like Clarke, Wunderink explored how meaning can be relayed without words to match. Wunderink removes everything but her gestures and the connecting words; so, and, um. She layers these over video of entering and exiting the space. Her interest in revealing the minutiae of the moment before and after words allows the audience to focus on the non-verbal cues in her face, shoulders, and hands. Her body and facial features exposed her underlying distress, humor, and confusion. The consistency of these connector words is contrasted with how they are being expressed. This highlights how affect can transmit onto an audience, while the erasure of the actual story adds to their confusion.

Wunderink further examines how the transmission of affect works within the context of *Embodied Trauma*. Teresa Brennan parses out how affect, unlike feelings, can be disseminated in her book, *The Transmission of Affect*. She discusses how affects are physiological without a way to clearly define it (Brennan, 6). She says, "There is a common misconception within science that each human body is self-contained, but the reality is that it is common that a person can feel the atmosphere walking into a room without having the language to understand why" (Brennan, 6-7). Wunderink adopts this idea of using atmosphere to transmit confrontational affect to the audience throughout the *Embodied Trauma* series, but focuses heavily on it with the video, *Shame Shame Shame*. In this piece, Wunderink edits a specific story of assault, focusing on the moments when the artist discusses her shame. While the video begins with a repeating narrative similar to *I Don't Remember*, as it continues the words become muddled, with the word "shame" repeated throughout creating a thumping sound similar to a heartbeat. This use of audio and dissonance from the video creates a general feeling of dread felt by the viewer that permeates the atmosphere of the gallery¹⁵.

¹⁵ *Feeling the atmosphere is something I've always been intrigued by since I first moved to Taiwan in 2010. I remember feeling a different kind of intensity in the air, something I couldn't name but could feel. Brennan's Transmission of Affect, clarifies several things I have experienced, especially the idea that as humans we are porous, not self-contained.*

While Wunderink's interest is to obscure the narrative through intensification of its affect, she still alludes to her own experiences through the aesthetics of confessional art. Matthew Ryan Smith looks at the use of confessional video art in *Relational Maneuvers in Autobiographical Video Art*. He says "The autobiographical act is not, and never has been, a singular experience" (Smith, 954). He looks at how the use of personal narratives serve the audience just as much as the creator. While Wunderink aims to explore her own stories through the affect, she intentionally relies on the aesthetics of feminist video art. Smith discusses the innovation of feminist artists as "video art has traditionally served as an instrument for feminist aesthetic innovation, political agency, and cathartic utterance, it has also been referred to as a discourse that enacts a broader sense of community"(Smith, 954). He highlights that many women artists used autobiographical stories to relate to their audience. Canada's Lisa Steele looks at the confessional in a more confrontational way within her video *Birthday Suit with Scars and Defects*. Within this video, Steele presents a stripped-down understanding of the female body. She stands in front of the camera pointing out each scar telling the audience how she got it. Smith recounts that "With her video, Steele not only presents the female body's susceptibility to physical injury but views her topography of scars and defects as an embodiment of her personal identity and politics" (Smith, 967). This work is powerful because of the relation of the body to structural trauma. Structural trauma is the understanding that everyone will encounter suffering but will react differently to it (LaCapra, 77-78). Steele's narrative of her trauma throughout the video is deeply personal, but her viewers who are affected by it reflect on their own scars.

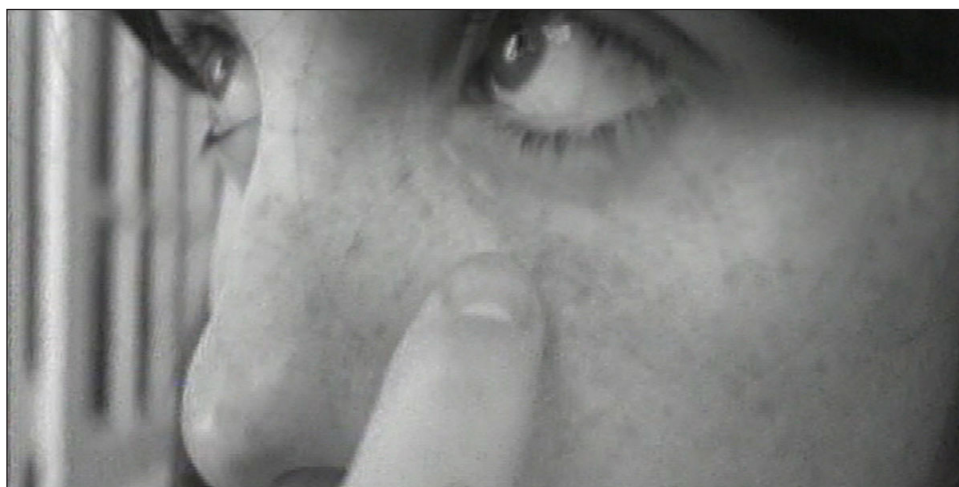


FIGURE 8: Lisa Steele, *Birthday Suit - with scars and defects* (Video Still), 1974

Wunderink's strategy is similar to Steele, using her trauma to transmit the affect providing a space to contemplate their own role within the patriarchy. Smith goes on to say "that memoir operates as 'prosthesis-- an aid to memory;' here Steele's body functions in a similar way. Remembering and working through such wounds can represent a power source of healing and restoration" (Smith, 968)¹⁶. The confessional style acts as a weapon to explore the political by asserting the femme experience into the public realm. It allows for an audience to reflect on the difficulty of hearing personal narratives which hopefully leads to understanding and empathy. In one specific video in the *Embodied Trauma* series called *Fronts n' Goodies*, Wunderink explores encounters of street harassment. *Fronts n' Goodies*, relies on sound creating a complex composition. The artist interjects a false narrative onto the real one, while threading what is actually said into the background. The audience can read Wunderink's lips saying "They started jeering and talking about our cunts and pussies," while a conflicting audio is placed onto top saying "They started cheering and talking about our fronts and our goodies." Selectively censoring the reality while still allowing it to come through offers a humorous interpretation of how harassment is seen by society. Again, this video highlights how the confessional style is censored, repeated and changed. Wunderink asserts her personal narratives as a means to garner a better understanding of rape culture, her placement within it, and it's effect on people of any gender expression.

¹⁶ I resonate with this quote from Smith because, through the struggle of confronting my own trauma, I rediscovered both my humanity and capacity to endure hardship. This wasn't a neatly achieved process, as my emotions overtook me through many of the interactions I had in the fall of 2020. It was an ugly, uncomfortable process and hard work. This uncontrollable grief spilled out into every movement I made. I have a history of being able to control, or rather repress feelings that leave me vulnerable, but in this instance, I learned how to lean into that feeling of fragility. I allowed for it to break me down until nothing was left. This wasn't a numbing, but rather the opposite. I had expressed every iteration of rage, sorrow, and pain that my body and mind exhausted themselves. In time, I rebuilt the structures of my inner life, integrating this former static memory of trauma rather than ignoring it. I uncovered a restoration of spirit, which allowed for my conviction to continue.



FIGURE 9: Rachelle Wunderink, *Fronts N' Goodies* (Video Stills), 2021

Wunderink also references how the artist Tracey Emin uses the confessional style in antagonistic ways, forcing a dialogue about the double standard facing survivors of rape. Emin's *Why I Never Became a Dancer*, publicly grappled with her own unreported molestation, while challenging the myth of the "real raped victim." (Murray, 1671). In this video, Emin narrates her early life in Margate, juxtaposing the quaint beach town with accounts of consensual and non-consensual sex. The artist then goes on to tell how the men of Margate booed her off stage when she attempted to win a dance competition. They publicly slut-shamed her, calling her a slag (Emin). Emin ends the video in an act of defiance against the men who rejected her, as she confidently dances in an empty room. Emin offers evidence of rape culture by exploring the sexual double standard that exists for women, where men are free to have sex outside of marriage, while women who do so are considered whores (Thomas, 197). Emin understood this complex and her position within it by acknowledging how the men of Margate saw her but she refused to apologize for it. This allowed the audience to stop and think about the sexual double standard and how it can play out in real women's lives. Christine Fanthome compares Emin's confessional art, saying "Confession is an important element leading to the production of truth, the modern confessor may be seen as a channel through which personal wider truths maybe articulated, benefiting both the artist and spectator and encouraging a greater understanding of the human social

condition" (Fanthome, 40). Wunderink looks at Emin's use of defiant storytelling but distinguishes herself apart from Emin's confession aesthetics. Unlike Emin, Wunderink isn't retelling her narratives, instead, she uses confessional aesthetics to examine her own process of trauma. Wunderink doesn't seek retribution or a re-examination of her own story, rather she looks to unveil the aftermath of rape and its lasting effects. Like Emin, Wunderink doesn't fit the image of a "real raped victim," which is why Wunderink never discussed her rape in the first place. She acknowledged how society treats a sexual assault survivor and made a conscious decision to not be that. Emin, while an important inspiration for Wunderink, approaches her work with a boldness of what she overcame. What Wunderink tries to unpack is much more nuanced as she is trying to engage with the affect of trauma, never questioning that she is not a survivor. This shift can largely be seen as a progression of how society discusses rape. Emin was working in the 90's, these preconceived notions of binary sexuality were still prevalent: women were to be chaste, not sexually open. Wunderink, who works in a contemporary context can work beyond binary sexual codes put upon women by society. She muddles narratives creating chaos, to affect her audience.

Wunderink's *Embodied Trauma* nods to feminist video work of the 1970's while also accounting for today's cultural context. The artist was influenced by *WACK! Art and the Feminist Revolution*, an exhibition and catalog venerating several women's important contributions to the contemporary art world. Wunderink honors feminist artists from the past not by reiterating their style, but rather interpreting their aesthetics while considering the changing landscape of feminism within the 21st century. By emulating the women within the *WACK!* Catalog, she tries to find new modes of translating the feminist struggle today. Cornelia Butler, the key organizer of *WACK!* discusses how the aesthetic language of the feminist art movement is not fixed like so many other historical art movements. She says "I want to assert that feminism constitutes an ideology of shifting criteria, one influenced and mediated by myriad other factors. Whereas art movements traditionally defined by charismatic individuals tended to be explicated and debated through manifestos and other writings, feminism is a relatively open-ended system that has, throughout its history of engagement with visual art, sustained an unprecedented degree of internal critique and contained wildly divergent political ideologies and practices" (Butler, 15). Butler highlights the numerous differences in how men and women approach their work in the contemporary art world. This catalog acted as an important tool for Wunderink to understand how women have dealt with trauma and the femme experience, which allows the artist to observe, contemplate, and venerate the women who trail blazed a path for her to walk.



FIGURE 10: Howardena Pindell, *Free, White, and 21* (Video Still), 1980



FIGURE 11: Linda Montano, *Mitchell's Death* (Video Still), 1977

Wunderink's interest in the *WACK!* Catalog focused on the aesthetics used in women's video works to convey concept over quality. In Howardena Pindell's *Free, White, and 21*, she explores how race and gender have impacted her life as an artist. While Pindell is traditionally viewed as an abstract painter, this video explores her lived trauma as a woman of color in America. Pindell recounts experiences of racism starting from childhood, while video clips of the artist dressed up as a white woman interject criticizing these experiences. Pindell responds to the piece years afterward saying, "In the tape, I was bristling at the women's movement as well as the art world and some of the usual offensive encounters that were heaped on top of the racism of my profession" (MOMA, 1). What stands out to Wunderink is how Pindell used the video medium in a stark and raw way, hardly editing the piece. This allows for the words and actions of Pindell to stand out in an authentic way. If Pindell had a polished piece, rather than largely

unedited, it would have lost the immediacy of her point. She isn't trying to present a polished video, rather the roughness of the video adds to her frustration, and expresses the urgency of her message. Here, the aesthetic form of the video offers the artist an immediate avenue of agency and self-determination. While Wunderink is not a person of color, she looks to the boldness of Pindell's resolve as a means to take up space in a white dominated society. Pindell uses her personal narratives to convey the larger issues of race and gender. When Wunderink created the raw footage for the *Embodied Trauma* series, it was an artist tool and never supposed to be seen publicly. Through the process of developing *Blankouts*, Wunderink realized how invaluable and telling these videos were and therefore started editing them. She encountered difficulties due to the lower quality of the original videos¹⁷. The lighting was stark and unflattering, the room had loud background noise, and there was little concern for the framing of the shot. Like Pindell's *Free, White and 21*, Wunderink decided to incorporate the video quality into the concept. During the videos Wunderink recounts traumatic moments commonly lived by all women, using the harsh lights to add to these moments and allowing for the affect to take over. Both Pindell and Wunderink use autobiographical stories to confront their viewers, while creating an aesthetic language not reliant on high production values.

Wunderink also looked at how Linda M. Montano's *Mitchell's Death*, within the *WACK!* Catalog, perceives catharsis while grieving. The video is a black and white close-up of Montano's face, as she recounts every detail of her husband's unexpected death. She adopts a pared-down aesthetic to convey her personal grief. Montano interprets the performance itself as catharsis, as she chants every detail about his death, starting from the moment she learned of it to when she lays him to rest. As she chants, acupuncture needles pierce her face, as the camera goes in and out of focus. The artist's poignant examination of grief evokes pain and healing. The needles convey bodily discomfort while the monotonous chanting of his death allows for a release. Montano's meditative narrative functions to transmit an affect to her audience, they can feel the complexities

¹⁷ When I started to re-appropriate these interviews, I was met with several critiques of the low quality of how they were shot. As I said early, filming these interviews were gut-wrenching and I never thought I would show them publicly. Once I started to get comfortable with the interviews by viewing them continually to transcribe for *Blankouts*, I realized how much information was conveyed with my body. I realized I needed to use them, I needed to reveal that vulnerability, but that question of quality came up again. I couldn't recreate these interviews, because the affect would be lost. I was already familiar with the stories, and therefore the way I talk about them has changed. I had two advisors that encouraged me to use the low-quality of the interviews to add to the aesthetic language of the work. Once I started to layer, repeat and edit the audio, the quality never became a question again.

of her loss. She provides an interpretive aesthetic lending to the rawness of grief. The film itself often goes in and out of focus, creating a repetitious blurring of her face reflective of her emotional release. Like Montano, Wunderink also explores the aesthetic language of bodily pain and catharsis. While Wunderink's *Embodied Trauma* series focuses on loss through trauma, it also mirrors how the artist deals with this loss. *Replicate* and *Synthesis* look at the process of integrating trauma into the artist's life. *Replicate* explores the repetitious nature of trauma as skewed images are projected over the artist. The projections relate the affect, shooting the pain on her face. The same footage is continually layered, each time becoming more distorted. While the video starts with the artist in a meditative state, the projections eventually create a chaotic kaleidoscope effect over Wunderink. There are moments when the artist's contemplative face reveals itself underneath the layers, but overall it is shrouded in distortion.

Synthesis builds on *Replicate*, with a few key differences that allude to the artist's integration of trauma. *Synthesis* presents the artist in nature, using a nearby river to create a soothing and therapeutic soundtrack. Wunderink layers the same footage as *Replicate* but without any distortion. The audience still sees the layering, but it no longer encapsulates the entire screen. Both videos look at the artist's own release of loss leading to acceptance. While Montano and Wunderink's exploration of loss is different, their catharsis and simplicity is mimicked. Both artists attempt to use a personal loss as a means of release through the use of repetition. By asking the audience to witness these journeys, they prompt discussions on loss while providing a blueprint to overcome it¹⁸.

¹⁸ *Synthesis and Replicate are drastically different videos in the Embodied Trauma series, but they represent both my grief and integration of trauma I felt going through the pandemic. I couldn't have made Synthesis and Replicate without grieving the person I was before my rape. I had never realized how I held onto this event in my subconscious. Catharsis is the perfect way to describe my whole thesis process, especially the last year. January of 2021, was a true revelation and release, and I believe it is only something I could have discovered by allowing myself to grieve.*



FIGURE 12: Rachelle Wunderink, *Replicate* (Video Stills), 2021



FIGURE 13: Rachelle Wunderink, *Synthesis* (Video Stills), 2021

MODES OF INTERACTION

In Wunderink's thesis show, *That Thing: Confronting Difficult Trauma*, the gallery space is organized in two distinctive ways to allow viewers to navigate their interactions with the work. Special Projects Gallery is L-shaped allowing for the division of the exhibition into the 're-triggering zone' and integration area. The 're-triggering zone' is off to the left when entering the gallery. Here Wunderink sets up that area to have three LCD screens in a triangular configuration looking inward at each other. These screens are where the potentially re-triggering videos from *Embodied Trauma* are placed. In the middle, there is an ottoman to allow the viewer to sit down and experience the overlaying sound of each video playing. The ottoman offers both a place of comfort, while allowing for the transmission of affect to wash over the viewer. The walls surrounding the screens

a sound installation in a group show but was canceled due to other artist complaints. This iteration of the work had participants trigger rape jokes as they walk through a corridor. This was commenting on the nature of flight or freeze reactions to traumatic situations. Place says "The jokes would always be following you, starting a few seconds after you passed a motion sensor. And then the more people that would be there, the more the jokes would pile up on each other. But if you stood still and didn't move, they would stop" (Artforum, 1). In this instance, Place wasn't allowed to utilize antagonism as a means to convey difficult knowledge. She didn't give in though; instead she re-purposed the idea into a performance exploring the power dynamics at play with this particular type of joke. She says "The structure of a joke, according to Freud, is that it is a sudden discharge of repression, often sexual, often kind of obscene. And so, in that way, the joke itself ends up... having the same structure, as a rape" (Artforum, 3). What makes Place's use of antagonism particularly interesting, is it's often called out by the members in her audience. Before a performance she announced to her audience "We can assume that a certain percentage of people in the room have been the victims of sexual violence..." further adding "...and the perpetrators" (ArtForum, 2), increasing her listeners' discomfort, and highlighting the nature of rape culture. While Wunderink doesn't purposefully alienate her audience as Place does, she does consider how her retriggering work is inherently antagonistic. Wunderink believes that her exhibition is confrontational by nature as partaking in one's trauma is painful for anyone. While the artist accepts that everyone's trauma is their own, she also pushes boundaries to uncover the inherent gendered violence within society. Without retriggering, with confrontation, the work doesn't fulfill its purpose, and can easily be forgotten, or ignored. Place continues "I don't like work that really just confirms, generally speaking, what I thought before I saw it. To be affirmed that I'm right is the place that one occupies anyway, and then it's just a question of where you're going to have dinner after. But confronted by the possibility that I'm wrong, or the possibility that I need to rethink things-- that's very upsetting" (Artforum, 6). Both artists challenge viewers to look inward and reflect upon their role within rape culture. They also examine the violence imposed on their gender, subvert it, and force it back upon their audience, asking the question: How does this make you feel¹⁹?

¹⁹ *I have come a long way in a year. The largest take away from this thesis process is to stick to my conviction. I was the most lost when I constantly tried to please others but I have regained my confidence. I trust my own intuition and process when it comes to my work. Losing myself was necessary to find this path again. I would have never come to this work if I wasn't confused about my purpose. Now, I am proud of what I have accomplished, but more importantly, I am proud that I went to a vulnerable place. It has opened up new avenues of making I never thought I would do.*

(META CONTEXTUAL) CONCLUSION

Throughout this paper, Wunderink attempts to separate the academic from the personal. Using a meta-contextual approach to her writing, she allows the reader to gain distance between the artist and her work. I struggled to conceptualize this paper, understanding that the personal view was important to this work. Early drafts of this paper were riddled with metaphorical descriptions of personal anecdotes. This didn't translate well into an academic context. As a result, Wunderink decided to use a persona to describe the academic aspects of her pieces, and limited the personal viewpoint to the footnotes²⁰. Wunderink took on the persona of an art historian viewing her own work through the lens of academia. This persona created further distance from the work, allowing me to capture its importance in the contemporary art scene while not being overwhelmed by my own trauma linked to the work. Furthermore, by the adaptation of the art historian persona, Wunderink continues to feed into the main ideas behind her thesis work. If society censors, rather than confronts stories of rape and harassment, then what better way to drive this idea home than to include a layer of censorship in the paper itself. I wanted to create a secondary voice, my true artist interpretation, to act as the hidden translation of the academic text. This secondary translation can act as its own personal journey of growth through the MFA process, giving needed context to just how devastatingly difficult it was for the artist to parse through the complexities of rape trauma while negotiating and developing an aesthetic of affect and representation. Lastly, Wunderink not only confronted her rape trauma, but developed a critical framework to understand its lasting imprints. Wunderink was able to take this research and develop a body of artwork communicating how trauma lingers, helping the viewer to question their own experiences.

²⁰ *You must be wondering by now, who is this persona I took on, well they are both representative of the different partitions within my life. I have never been good at writing about my personal life, but I considered myself good at writing a research paper. I challenged myself to be more personal with this paper, to allow for my struggle to come out in authentic ways, but I will always straddle the line of wanting to remove myself from my writing. I devised this way of writing for my own sanity. I took on a persona to protect myself and set up a boundary between me and my work. By devising a secondary narrative within the paper, I was able to navigate that vulnerability allowing for the personal to become another layer relegated to the bottom of the page, not taking center stage. It felt fitting to relegate these intimate details to footnotes that ultimately are too commonly skipped by a reader. The paper can exist without these footnotes, but I hope the reader finds that by reading them, they recognize my humanity and the intense emotional processing I went through to get here.*

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Appendix - Blankouts



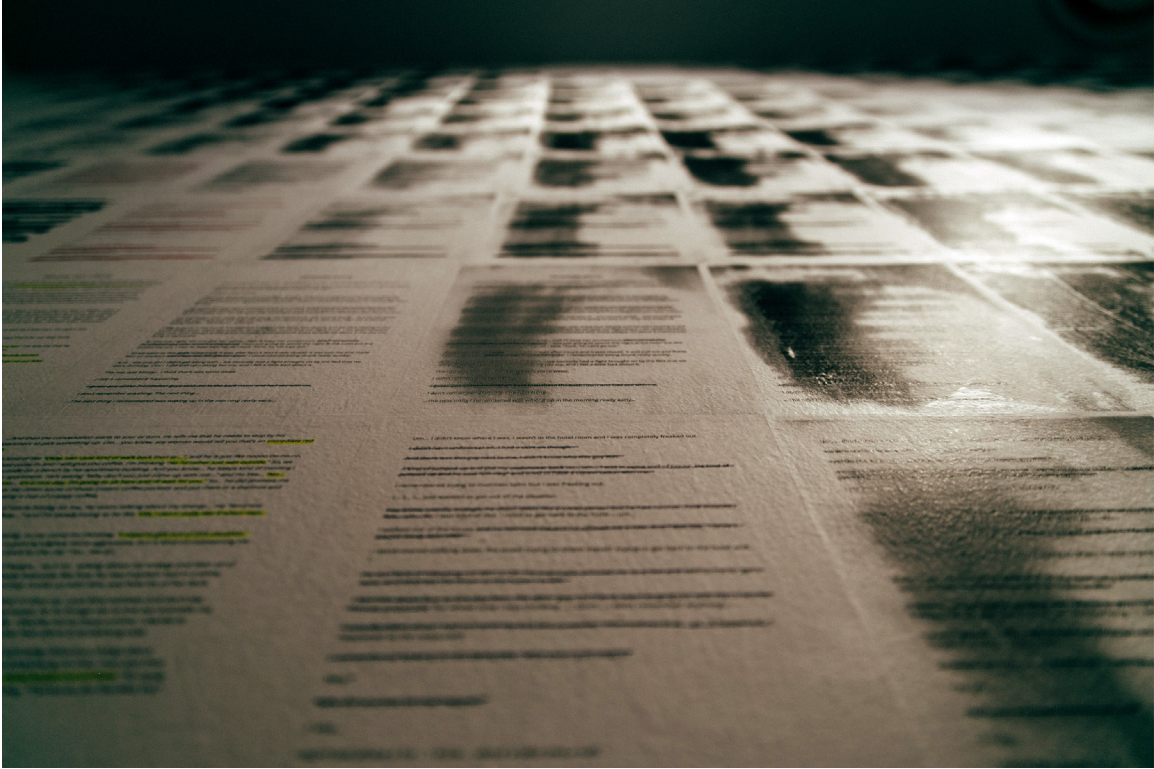
Rachelle Wunderink, *Blankouts* (Special Projects Gallery Installation), 2021



Rachelle Wunderink, *Blankouts*
(Left-side View), 2021



Rachelle Wunderink, *Blankouts*
(Right-side View), 2021



Rachelle Wunderink, *Blankouts* (detail), 2021



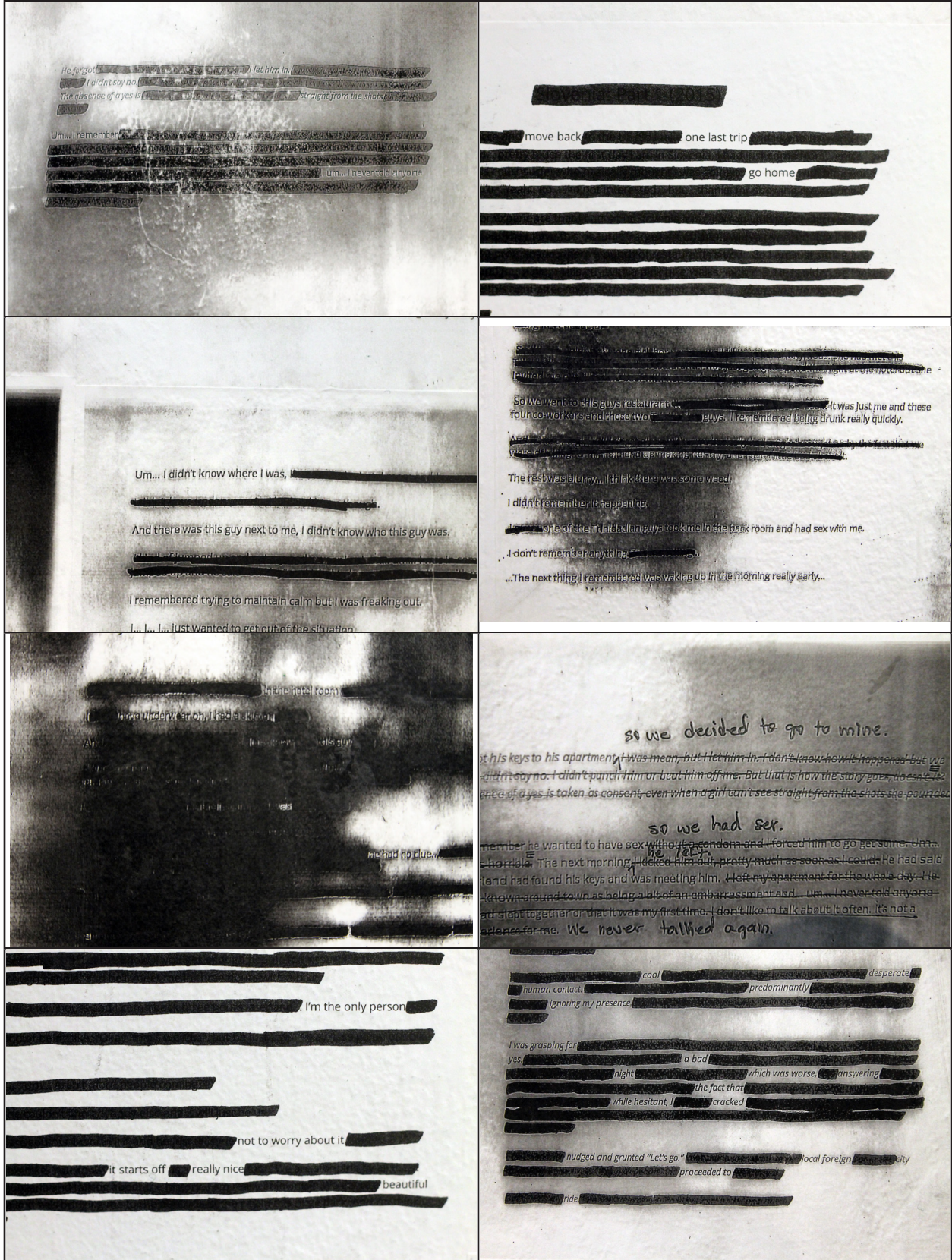
Rachelle Wunderink, *Blankouts* (detail), 2021



Rachelle Wunderink, *Blankouts (detail)*, 2021



Rachelle Wunderink, *Blankouts (detail)*, 2021



Rachelle Wunderink, *Blankouts (detail)*, 2021

Appendix - Embodied Trauma



Rachelle Wunderink, *Yes?/Replicate* (Special Projects Gallery Installation), 2021



Rachelle Wunderink, *Shame Shame Shame/ Synthesis* (Special Projects Gallery Installation), 2021



Rachelle Wunderink, *Politeness/Synthesis* (Special Projects Gallery Installation), 2021



Rachelle Wunderink, *Synthesis* (Special Projects Gallery Installation), 2021

Appendix - Gallery Installation



Rachelle Wunderink, *Special Projects Gallery Installation*, 2021



Rachelle Wunderink, *Blankouts (Special Projects Gallery Installation)*, 2021



Rachelle Wunderink, *Special Projects Gallery Installation*, 2021



Rachelle Wunderink, *Special Projects Gallery Installation*, 2021

Appendix - Video Links

The videos from this series are available through Youtube from the following links:

- "*I don't remember*" video, 2021, youtu.be/RKOEclBCvtI
- "*Shame, shame, shame*" video, 2021, youtu.be/gGdzBcpHqMU
- "*Fronts n' Goodies*" video, 2021, youtu.be/l6LK5gMCREw
- "*Stayin' Alive*" video, 2021, youtu.be/dvuBYEWFu7c
- "*So...and...um...*" video, 2021, youtu.be/R-7R-IUOr9s
- "*Politeness*" video, 2021, youtu.be/liC6DyxnSG0
- "*Yes?*" video, 2021, youtu.be/qr4j0w5vi_E
- "*Replicate*" video, 2021, youtu.be/0OB0F8PLS1k
- "*Synthesis*" video, 2021, youtu.be/mjYr67LZKyQ
- "*Gallery walk-through*", video, 2021, youtu.be/p9qMXvU_okw