

The Object / The Body / The Ritual:
An affectual dissection of plastic bags through performance design

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Abstract

Roland Barthes has famously noted plastics as “miraculous substances of infinite transformations and transmutations”, yet we are in the midst of a paradigm shift in which the material plays an increasingly destructive role in our society and environment. The thesis addresses the question of how meaning is made and transformed by theoretically—and practically—dissecting plastic through three distinct research areas: object, body, and ritual. Most prominently, my thesis demonstrates how situating the plastic bag in a funeral can forge human to non-human reverence and reformulate affectual associations. Through creative investigation and extensive multidisciplinary research in visual arts, film, and queer theory, I aim to provide a deeper understanding of how plastics can obscure and entangle the boundaries between theatre and performance art.

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Methodology

Throughout my graduate education at York University while learning about the complex theories and applications of sustainability in designing for the performing arts, I have continually grappled with the conceptualization of material mortality in relation to the human body. Although I have been taught to understand the innate destructive quality of synthetic, and inevitably unsustainable, materials in an arts practice, I find myself drawn and inspired by the immortal—and arguably defiant—nature of plastic in our ecologies and in the arts. In order to challenge and deepen my creative practice, I have chosen to develop a thesis project which correlates the material life cycle of plastics—particularly plastic bags—with my life experience through revisiting and reimagining one of the most influential rituals in my life: the Catholic Funeral.

Part performative aesthetic investigation / part praxis documentation, my thesis seeks to dissect and decipher plastics through the dramaturgical fusion of both theatre and performance art. Although plastics have recently become a popular scapegoat for ecological devastation, its intimate relationship with our bodies, as both a penetrating and constricting force, is often overlooked—if not blatantly ignored. Drawing upon what Heather Davis describes as “*toxic queer progeny*” (Davis 116) and Annie Sprinkle’s notion of “*ecosexuality*” (Theobald 2), my research seeks to recontextualize the perception of plastics not as innate ecological foes but as intimate non-human partners in our devastated world. In situating plastics as objects of reverie *and* empathy in performance design, I argue that the material holds the potential of unraveling human anxieties around mortality, grief, and guilt.

Situating my creation process and artist statement (Appendix F) in this thesis work has meant both distinguishing *and* blurring the lines between discordant and entangled roles that I find myself embodying and shifting between: dramaturge, performer, director, playwright, and designer. In order to document and illuminate the fluid, the hybrid, and the queer nature of how these roles are embodied and transformed, I have delineated the work—and my shifting perspectives on my relationship to the work—into three distinct chapters: the object, the body, and the ritual. Each chapter outlines research while simultaneously investigates which roles I am embodying, avoiding, and shifting between: the object as embodiment of—and shift between—dramaturge and designer, the body as embodiment of—and shift between—performer and designer, and the ritual as embodiment of—and *fusion* between—director, performer, playwright, and designer.

The conceptual stimulus of this thesis began with—and continues to—centre: the plastic bag as a performative object. For the purposes of this thesis performance, the object of inquiry, ie. the plastic bag, is situated and reimagined in performance design as the symbolic embodiment of my grandmother’s corpse. The synthetic object, imbued with personal meaning and situated in a performative context, exists

in multimodal stasises, as an icon of production waste and as an imaginary platform for emotional reverie to blossom. The object—although theoretically and viscerally potent—functions as a challenge to my current creative process as it is a material that I have little to no experience working with and yet am infinitely inspired by. The critical research and creative investigation on plastics are discussed in Chapter One: *The Object*, which seeks not only to summarize the contradictory nature of the plastic bag and its cultural history, but dissects the intrinsic bridges between materiality—*plasticity* in particular—and my queer arts practice.

Alongside my research into the history, aesthetic, and performative qualities of plastics as a design object, my thesis focuses on its relationship with a performer body. In Chapter Two: *The Body*, I explore how the body of the performer and its embodiment, interaction, and mutation with the object can be curated into an investigation of human ritual of death and mourning. The research on the performer body seeks to decipher not only the significance of bodily presence on stage, but the impact of its absence in both the design and the performance: how can one create “*haunting*” in performance? As the sole performer on stage, I have cast my body as an instrument of enacting ritual practice, a structure to embody iconography and character, and as an organic platform for inter-material relationships to foster. Focus on aesthetic and symbolic iconographies of the body, is expanded and deepened in this chapter through critical analysis of the works of other performance artists and their relationships to design objects as a means of establishing and destabilizing perceptions of inanimacy on stage.

In Chapter Three: *The Ritual*, I explore and curate the space in order to discover how dramatic action may inhabit and transformed the performed experience within. Through the documentation of Catholic Ritual practice, funeral dramaturgies are dissected and reformed through both conceptual and embodied performance designs. Understanding of the historical and cultural importance of final rites and rituals offers potent contextual framework that allows me to inhabit, illuminate, queer, mutate, and transform these rituals in service of my own individual investigation of material mourning. This chapter functions as documentation and the culminating fusion of two preceding chapters by including performance research, finalized designs, embodied performance, and the integration and entanglement of creative roles in my process.

In the final section of my thesis document, *An Epilogue: Reflection*, written post-performance, I document my closing thoughts on the performance, analyze success and failure of objectives, and outline what insights and questions have arisen, been answered, or are being carried forward after graduating. The reflection of this process serves as a conclusion to two-years of research and investigation and lays the foundation for further interests and explorations to come in the future.

Objectives

To connect the abstract concepts of *the object*, *the body*, and *the ritual* with the practical implementation of those conceptions in performance design presentation, I have outlined a series of objectives to which I am attempting to achieve in both my process and final performance. Examining each of these objectives alongside the ongoing work means reconciling the dissonances in my own process before, during, and after this creative endeavour and what insights, skills, and discoveries can be made throughout the process and subsequent reflection.

The objectives for my thesis project are:

- (1) Uncover a diverse network of approaches, theories, and practices towards the creative process—thinking *and* making—which could inspire my own individual performance design process.
- (2) Discover new processes, styles, forms, structures, and techniques which exemplify and entangle a hybridity between theatre and performance art.
- (3) Explore, develop, and improve theoretical and practical skills in the use and manipulation of plastic bags in performance design for the future.
- (4) Conceive, perform, direct, and design a culminating performance which is technically flexible, minimal, and adaptive enough to tour to future sites after this initial production.
- (5) Challenge my usual organizational structure of designing by resisting the desire to conceptualize scenography until after the completion of my research, rehearsal, and aesthetic investigations.
- (6) Develop a strong theoretical and practical framework *and* vocabulary for my work which bridges the various areas of creation I am interested in pursuing including: theatre, film, visual arts, puppetry, performance design, dramaturgy, ritual anthropology, and performance art.

Chapter 1: The Object

Plastics have exploited their formable qualities not as much in the direction of fulfilling technical and constructional needs as in the expression of different images.

— Ezio Manzini, *Plastics and the Challenge of Quality*

Plastics emerged onto the consumer market in the later part of the nineteenth century as a byproduct of the explosion in biological and chemical technology and as a response to the growing commercial and consumer demands for cheaper goods (Elias 22). The word “plastic” comes from the Greek “plassein,” which means to mold or shape and were developed mainly to do just that—take the shape of any object imaginable (Friedel 2). The American social historian, Robert Friedel, documents the emergence and cultural significance of plastic in his essay *The First Plastic (1985)*, in which he stresses plastics role as a “cheaper substitute material for older ones which were becoming increasingly expensive” (4). Plastic was treated as a “raw material for artistry and ornament”, and it was not long after their invention before they dominated the commercial industry and dramatically revolutionized the production of everything from cutlery to cars (12).

Plastics provided a cheap and popular alternative to many luxury goods that were previously unavailable to lower and middle class consumers like glass, crystal, and precious stones. Continually evolving and developed alongside other technological advancements in industries such as photography, film, and electrical, plastics served as the cornerstone for the growing market demand offered by the ‘*mass culture*’ movement (McGaha 32). The material soon became a staple in the American household and stood in as symbol for the mobility, accessibility, and growing adaptability pop-culture strived to embody (36).

After the Second World War plastic products took a downward spiral in public consensus and quickly became associated with the concepts of “inauthenticity, cheapness, low quality, and bad taste” (Sparke 16). In comparison to other natural materials—clay, stone, brick, wood—the plastics were seen as inferior and imbued with an ever-growing sense of “falseness and artificiality” (Nicholson 305). Although many designers attempted to shift this reputation, the associations clung to the material and the consumer’s reception of material continued to fall (307). It was not until nearly fifty years later, in the rising counterculture to the Modern Movement, that commercial designers returned to plastics in order to streamline their sleek and spherical structures which dominated the forthcoming Pop and Post-Modern styles (Sparke 23).

Although the aesthetic innovation of the material continued to dominate the artistic minds of many designers and inventors worldwide, the late 1960s birthed the rise of an ecological zeitgeist which targeted and criticized plastics for their inexcusable environmental devastation and lack of proper

disposability and recycling possibilities (24). Allied with anti-capitalist movements, plastics became the scapegoat for a villainized industry which was destroying the natural world and once again plastics returned to their stasis as “helpless victims for hostile criticism” (31). This negative association between plastics and ecological devastation continued to cling to the material and its progeny for decades to come, slowly evolving into the contemporary battles forged against plastic straws, micro-beads, six-pack rings, and arguably the most loathsome of them all: single-use plastic bags.

Developed much earlier by Swedish engineer, Stein Gustafson Thulin, single-use plastic bags were a revolutionary cheap and practical alternative to the traditional paper bags produced for decades (Caliendo 2). Plastic bags, unlike their ancestral non-synthetic counterparts, were designed to be easily manufactured and stored, but surprisingly sturdy and waterproof for the various produce and product materials they were designated to store and transport. With over five trillion plastic bags produced every year and over 160,000 bags used globally every second, the objects were quickly discarded to the waste in hoards (3). Since 2004, various countries around the world have begun implementing tariffs, strict regulations, and even complete bans of the single-use plastic bags and as of 2018, over ninety-eight countries have enforced bans or restrictions on the object (Frienkel 42). As of provincial government meetings held in June 2018 on Prince Edward Island, my home province is set to become the first province in Canada to ban them completely.

Dominating the landfill, scattered along the roadside, or clogging up global oceanways, the mass production and disposal of plastic bags has quickly become the archetype of contemporary mythology documenting anthropocentrism, massive consumer waste, pervasive ecological ignorance, and the hallmark image of a capitalist’s system’s negative impact on the environment. With over 4.1 billion tons of plastic bags produced every year and only a 12.8% rate of return and recycling, the growing mass of plastic in the world is slowly creeping towards similar total biomasses of animate species (Caliendo 4). This number is likely to increase even further with the most recent announcements from China and India enforcing new import bans on the material (6), and with China alone having previously imported over one-third of the world’s plastic waste, the import ban threatens to throw the global plastic market into turmoil (Parker and Elliot 2).

Infused within a cultural paradigm which increasingly demonizes negative environmental impact on the Earth, government regulations have shifted an ecological battle into a capitalist war. Despite the tactical offence and increase popularity in an individual “*eco-culture*”, the global market is struggling to keep up (4). All things considered, plastic bags—inanimate and apathetic to human desire—have done, and continue to do, what they were always designed to do: they persevere; immortality embodied.

Chapter 1.2: Properties

Everybody's plastic, but I love plastic. I want to be plastic.

— Andy Warhol

Long before I had selected the plastic bag as my object of inquiry in this thesis development, I had begun collecting and storing various selections of them in a small drawer in my studio apartment. Having come upon the precarious object in my daily life as a consumer or drifting along the roadside, I began an active search to find, and seek refuge for, the peculiar versions of the object that attracted my attention. My personal collection includes: a fire-truck red bag from a small shop in Chinatown, a soft cream bag with two bold green stripes found in the trash on Queen Street, a clear bag found tangled in a tree with the text “*PLASTIC BAGS CAN BE DANGEROUS*” written in pink font, and a thin white bag with the image of a rose—the logo of an aging lingerie shop whose name I can never remember—given to me by a friend to hold leftovers from a Thanksgiving dinner (Figure 1).

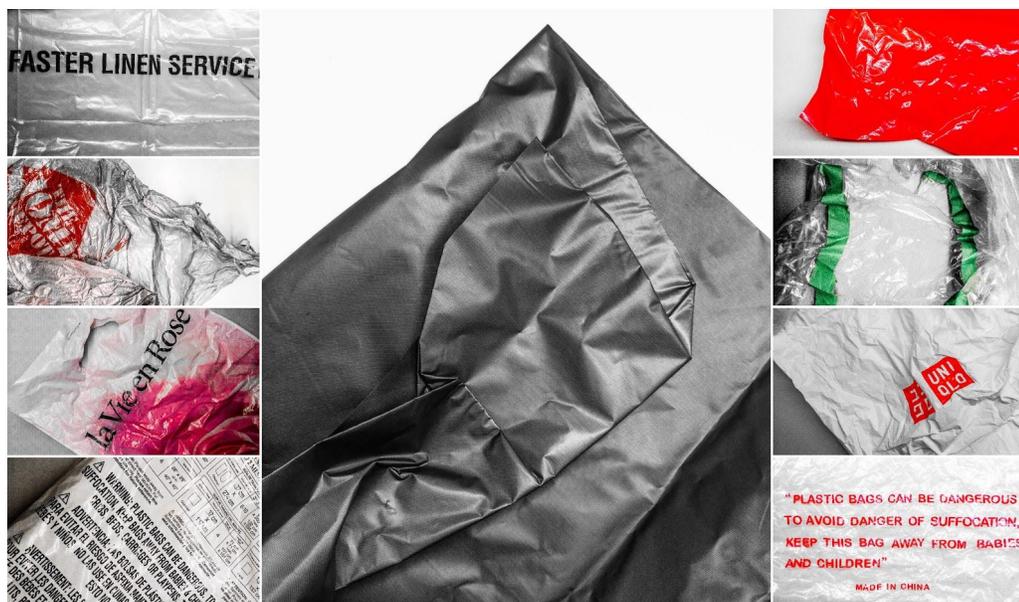


Figure 1: Documentation of personal plastic bag collection.

Each object holds a particular memory to its discovery and an imaginary personality in its own aesthetic and performative design. Cherishing the traditionally discarded objects in my home meant recognizing that my selection, and subsequent adoption, of each object marked not only an interest in their aesthetic, but a sympathy to their fate in the greater cycle of things in the world; I brought them in not only because I liked them but because I saw something of myself in them.

Although the invention and implementation of the single-use plastic bag was an incredible fusion of chemical engineering and consumer marketing, the object is rarely revered for its unique and compelling aesthetic properties. Selecting the plastic bag as my object of inquiry came not only from my interest in deciphering its contextual history or exploring its potent iconographies in performance, but from my attraction to three properties in the object itself: it's ability to be (1) malleable, (2) translucent, and (3) perforable. My interest in each of these properties as a point of aesthetic research was sparked not only by their design potential but by how each property illuminated varying aspects of my own identity as a queer artist. Documenting my experimentation and interplay with the objects and my own body, I developed a series of aesthetic investigations for each of these properties and how playful approaches to the material could reveal new avenues of design and performance potential to come.

The following work is structured as a reflecting research document on aesthetic investigation and as a creative journal outlining an evolving search for meaning and discovery in exploratory object play; the experiments in object play began in September 2018 and continued up until February 2019.

Malleability is often described as the ability for a material to change and distort its form, traditionally when coming into contact with another animate or inanimate force applied to it (Bell 4). The ability for a material to change, adapt, and adjust its form means an incredible advantage in terms of spatial awareness, if even inanimately. This flexibility of form and structure always attracted my gaze as I found myself twisting and turning the object physically and in my imagination into wild and distorted things (Figure 2): a howling face, a tangled mass, a coiled serpent, a crumpled shell of a being. Although willing to be mutated in form, when released the plastic bag slowly crinkles back to its original form—uncoiling itself like a boa constrictor from its prey.



Figure 2: Documentation of aesthetic investigation of malleability in plastic bags.

Witnessing the cyclical metamorphosis and return of form in the various plastic bags in my experimenting, I found myself envying them. As a child I always repressed the idea of myself becoming a “*queer body*” in fear that my transformation would be irreversible. Although I yearned to manifest inner feelings into outer expressions on my body—tattoos inked across my flesh, piercings scattered across my face—I feared the person I was would be lost in the metamorphosis. I was more comfortable in the stability of, rather than possibility of, my identity and therefore sacrificed true desires in fear of irrevocable change, but the malleability I longed for was not the same property I eventually acquired. Conceptualizing and coming to terms with the mercurial nature of my own identity as a queer body meant acknowledging that malleability as an artist can be incorporeal and transcendent. I, like the plastic bag, can make, *remake* and *unmake* my body as I see fit and through performance design, onstage and in my daily life, thus recycling and mutating my own form infinitely.

The second property which has always transfixed my curiosity has been its translucency which is described as a material’s “ability to permit light, but not details shapes, to pass through it” (Chowdhury 17). This property, unlike complete transparency, means objects and beings seen through the plastic bag are blurred and transfigured but never entirely visible. Much like staring off into the mist or looking through a window after a morning’s dew, the plastic bag as a lens offers a distorted perspective on the world. Meditating on this distorted and refracted view of the world, I find myself—much like Alice in the Looking Glass—caught between two worlds: the real and the imaginary (Figure 3).

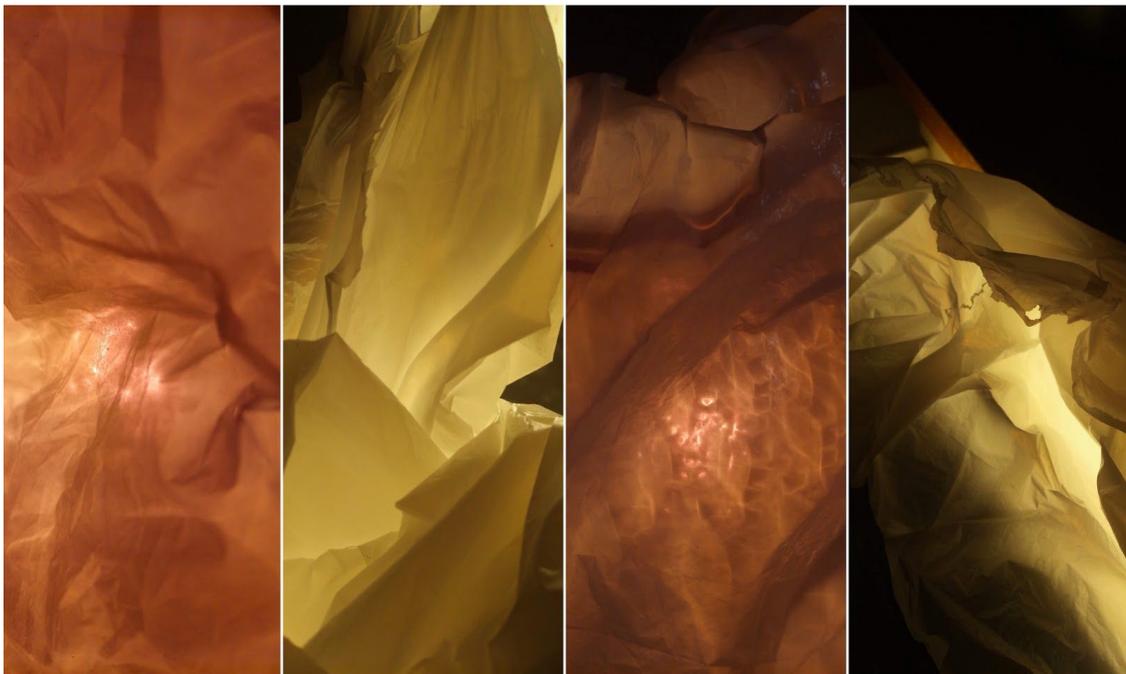


Figure 3: Documentation of aesthetic investigation of translucency in plastic bags.

Laying on the floor of my studio apartment with the plastic bag pulled taught across my eyes, I follow the trickling of light from my window to the crystallized refraction of my bedside lamp across the wall. Through the plastic bag shadows appear dull and transfigured but I move my head back and forth rapidly and they come to life. The shadows dance across the walls and I find myself seeking out patterns and forms in their mercuriality: a dog lashing its tail, a woman bending backwards, a toppled turtle struggling to regain stability. Not wanting to indulge in the seemingly hallucinogenic visions for too long, I pull the plastic bag from my eyes and remind myself of the familiar, and all too ordinary, circumstances of the home I reside within. It is in this fragile moment of stillness and silence that I feel most reminiscent of one of my all-time favourite queer icons: Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz* (1939). Swapping ruby slippers for discarded grocery bags, I yearn for the return to Oz, its technicolour landscapes, and the wondrous creatures which inhabit it. Plastic bag returned to its hiding place; I am Judy Garland in the pseudo-dressing room: fragile, mortal, and alone.

The third, and final, property which drew me to my aesthetic investigations was the plastic bag's ability to be perforated. Having manipulated, transfigured, and meditated on the distorted visions of the plastic bag in my solemn experiments, I found myself struggling to reconcile how these actions could enlighten and, more importantly, progress my thesis work. Fearing this lack of progress and perceived uselessness of these experiments, I centred my frustrations and anger on the plastic bag itself and on one occasion dug my fingernails into the material, pulled it taught, and ripped the bag to shreds. The sensation was exhilarating; fine white lines snaking through it like stretch-marks, wrinkled folds laying flat, the audible snap of the openings slashing through its form. This particular bag, one that I had cherished for many months in my collection, now lay in a crumpled mass of fragments on the floor. Although I momentarily regretted my impulsive destruction, I quickly realized it had opened a new and exciting avenue of investigation.

Reducing the impulse to completely destroy the form of the object, I instead investigated the boundaries of its malleability when pushed, penetrated, and eventually perforated by my own body and various objects at my disposal. This perforation of the material created a gap, or hole, in which to move and look through thus evolving its potential as a portal between worlds from merely perspective to physically navigable (Figure 4). The subsequent perforation investigations provided the necessary progression in order to view, critique, and examine my physical presence in relation to the object with direct and irreversible affect on the object. Witnessing how I was able to change not only the temporal form, but the permanence shape and silhouette of these objects altered my perspective on the work and established new avenues of aesthetic, and eventual theoretical, analysis.



Figure 4: Documentation of aesthetic investigation of perforability in plastic bags.

The conceptualization of the plastic bag as a perforable or penetrable object shifted my aesthetic investigation further into its correlation with queer intimacy and sexuality. The act of penetration, whether documented in research surrounding heteronormative or queer sexual practices, almost always presents itself as a deeply symbolic play between power and dominance often situating the penetrated as “subordinated and feminized” (Bolso 560). These associations, while pervasive in many of the historical discussions and interpretations of sexual intimacy, have been challenged and reformulated by queer communities who scrutiny and resistance to the symbolic nature of penetration have lead to new associations including, but not limited to: the lesbian phallus, the power bottom, and the pegging dominatrix (564). Symbolically inserting the plastic bag amongst these associations with the penetrated, I immediately began to reexamine my focus in the aesthetic investigations by turning the gaze back upon myself and analyzing the presence of my own body in the interplay. I had begun these experiments thinking the plastic bag functioned solely as a mirror to my own queer identity and experience in isolation, but now I saw its potential in illuminating something even more complex: my body as partner.

After several months of exploring the aesthetic properties of the plastic bag and documenting my reflections and insights along the way, I found myself stuck in creative stagnation and non-productivity. Although I knew how to work and play with the objects, I increasingly found myself unable to discuss and explain my ongoing thought process accurately to advisors and colleagues. After much contemplation and many frustrating attempts to justify the experimental work I had spent so long exploring, I decided to shift my dramaturgical methodology of research in order to focus on the theoretical and philosophical underpinnings of the work at hand. The goal of including the subsequent readings and reflections made by diverse theoretical perspectives was two-fold: (1) to broaden my ways of thinking in order to challenge my ways of making, and (2) establish a vocabulary and theoretical framework I could learn and use in order to discuss and justify the work.

Chapter 1.3: Theory

...the whole world can be plasticized, and even life itself.

— Roland Barthes, *Mythologies*

Conceptualizing the physical and physicalizing the conceptual, the search to frame, formulate, and structure the thinking and making of the object in my performance had become a seemingly endless cycle of questions and unsatisfying answers. Although I felt comfortable to discuss my own interest in thinking and making such an object to my colleagues and advisors, I found my references lacking breadth and depth. The desire to research how other artists and scholars have grappled with similar intrigues to human/plastic relationships came from the desire to establish a sense of interconnectivity, or rather forming a pseudo-queer family in my thinking. Compiling a vast collection of scholarly and artistic references, I narrowed my research focus to four subjects of theoretical intrigue: (1) toxic progeny, (2) ecosexuality, (3) objectophilia, and (4) erotic asphyxiation. Surveying the construction and reception of these four subjects, I began to consider how each could be integrated into my design and performance in order to offer new insights, discoveries, and connections.

My first encounter with the interconnectivity of plastics and queer theory came from reading Heather Davis' *Toxic Progeny: The Plastisphere and Other Queer Futures*. Her essay discusses the intrinsic bridges found between plastics non-reproductivity and perspectives on a queer future, urging the reader to reconsider ways of seeing and conceptualizing toxicity as a mirror to our own bodies composed of "plastics, toxins, and queer morphological" (Davis 244). Instead of focusing on the inherent toxic nature of plastic compounds, Davis argues that our initial desire to produce plastic came from a desire to "barricade and protect" ourselves the permeability of our own bodies (245). Reframing our relationship to toxicity and plastics, Davis urges the reader to acknowledge the "porosity of our bodies" and find ways to "live with toxicity", rather than push it away (244). This desire for a more dynamic and interwoven relationship with toxic substances is echoed by queer theorist Mel Y Chen in her instructive book *Animacies: Biopolitics, Racial Mattering, and Queer Affect*:

I would be foolish to imagine that toxicity stands in for 'utopia' given the explosion of resentful, despairing, painful, screamingly negative affects that surround toxicity. Nevertheless, I am reluctant to deny the queer productivity of toxins and toxicity, a productivity that extends beyond an enumerable set of addictive or pleasure-inducing substances, or to neglect (or, indeed, ask after) the pleasure, the loves, the rehabilitations, the affections, the assists that toxic conditions induce. (Chen 2012, 211)

Although it is easy to find oneself caught in a theoretical labyrinth of human and object relations, Davis' perspectives on toxic progeny extends beyond the metaphoric into to the physical composition of our biomatter. A new form of rock termed the "*plastiglomerate*" (Figure 5) has been discovered in the earth, which refers to an "infuriated, multi-composite material made hard by agglutination of rock and molten plastic" (Corcoran 6). Literally restructuring and mutating the geomorphology and biochemistry of our planet, Davis argues the presence plastics will become "one of markers of the Anthropocene", defining an age in which human activity has caused irrevocable damage to the future of Earth (Davis 234). Plastiglomerate is the incredible result of human and non-human engineering and design which entangles and infuses the boundaries of what is "*natural*". Arguably a symbiotic and parasitic relationship, the aesthetic entanglement of these objects inspires and deepens my understanding of how the design of my own object could morph and infuse with my own body.



Figure 5: *Plastiglomerate* sample/ready-made collected by geologist Patricia Corcoran and sculptor Kelly Jazvac at Kamilo Beach, Hawai'i, 2012.

While the theoretical perspectives provided by Davis and Chen and the physical examples documented by Corcoran and Jazvac offer significant advances in conceptualizing human and object relationships with plastic, I was fascinated by those those who go one step further in their search for non-human intimacies. Annie Sprinkle and Elizabeth Stephens, who describe themselves as "two ecosexuals in love" (Theobald 4), sought to push the boundaries around how we understand human and non-human relationships when they founded "*sexecology*", or "*ecosexuality*", a radical form of environmental activism centred on "*nature fetishism*" (Reed 32). Challenging the traditional and mythological symbolism of nature as a motherly, nurturing, protective force, they sought to recontextualize the non-human elements of the Earth as intimate lovers. Influenced by posthumahist

theories on human and non-human relationships, Sprinkle and Stephens stage radical, absurdist, and political interventions with nature including officiating wedding ceremonies between themselves and the moon, the earth, the water, and gold (Morris 12). Inspired by the performative structure of their non-human marriages, I sought to steal from their absurdist, yet caring, explorations of enacting human rites on non-humans subjects and investigate whether a funeral would offer similar responses to sympathize, collaborate, and even commit oneself to an inanimate subject.

Although the ecosexual movement offered a foundation and a framing for how to engage, or perform engagement, with human and non-human subjects, I found many of the testimonies for ecosexuals privileging the animacy—or inherent “spirit”—of the natural world. The majority of their performative interactions and interventions, including ecosexual bathhouses and orgies, focus on connecting with non-human, but animate subjects, such as plants, bacterial communities, and forest or marine ecologies (32). Resisting the romantic desire to connect with the spirit or essence of the natural world, I found myself returning to Davis in search of ways to understand a toxic and inanimate relationship between humans and non-humans. In this second reading of the works I found the missing key to the contextual framing: substance, element, material, and object are not synonymous. Plastic, as an object, resists ecosexual framing because it is not *natural*; it is human-made non-human.

Returning to the term “object” in order to further scrutinize and investigate my use, contextualization, and performance of it in my thesis, I withdrew from popular theorists around human and non-human and sought out even more unconventional and offbeat interpretations found along the theoretical periphery. Late at night and far from the usual academic resources I had been tapping into, I stumbled across a documentary on “*object sexuality*” (OS), or “*objectophilia*”, a term used to describe individuals with “an intense feelings of attraction, love, and commitment to certain inanimate items, objects, or structures of their fixation” (Marsh 6). Swapping ecosexual marriages to rivers and forests for commitments to archery bows and the Eiffel Tower, the relationships of the OS community are often expressed in blunt, even humiliating, interviews where the authenticity of their claims (and sanity of the individuals) is metaphorically put on trial. While I do not identify as a objectophile, therefore do not share the same sexual or romantic desires to my object, I was compelled by their stories and the defiant inability for their relationships to be poeticized; they were real, honest, brutal accounts of human and non-human love—but what if an attraction to, or sexual pleasure derived from, an object could be dangerous and potentially fatal?

Following the object fetishism and deviance rabbit hole deeper, I sought out other paraphilia that pushed the boundaries not only between human and nonhuman relationships but life and death. The term “*erotic asphyxiation*” is defined an act in which the “intentional restriction of oxygen to the brain for the

purposes of heightening sexual arousal” (Curra 43). While the taboo erotic interest is rarely discussed in public, the term is commonplace in psychological and criminal lexicons classified as a subcategory of paraphilia in the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual* of the American Psychiatric Association (Hucker 157). Author John Curra describes the phenomenon in his book *The Relativity of Deviance*:

The carotid arteries (on either side of the neck) carry oxygen-rich blood from the heart to the brain. When these are compressed, as in strangulation or hanging, the sudden loss of oxygen to the brain and the accumulation of carbon dioxide can increase feelings of giddiness, lightheadedness, and pleasure, all of which will heighten masturbatory sensations. (Curra 46)

Occurrences of erotic asphyxiation were first documented in the early 17th century as a treatment for erectile dysfunction (Money 34). The macabre suggestion most likely came from observing male subjects executed by hanging displaying post-mortem erections, otherwise known as “*angel lust*”, and occasional ejaculation due to the hanging (Kaplan 26). Having seemingly always been entangled with death, the recreational practice of erotic asphyxiation, and most significantly autoerotic asphyxiation (performed by oneself) has led to thousands of accidental deaths including an estimated 250-1000 dying each year by the act in the United States (Uva 13). While various methods are used to achieve the level of oxygen depletion needed to induce hypoxia, one of the most common practices is the plastic bag over the head (Hucker 159). Recontextualizing the plastic bag not only as a symbolic marker of death and decay in our environment, its use in erotic asphyxiation has situated the object in a precarious anthropological place teetering between sex toy and lethal weapon.

Although my interest in employing the object in my performance has no connection to engaging in the deep play of erotic asphyxiation as a means of inducing pleasure or threatening death, I am interested in the potent and discomfiting affect of its iconography as a stage image. While the image of a person engaging in autoerotic asphyxiation has permeated the fringes of pop-culture in films like *Ken Park* (2002), *World’s Greatest Dad* (2009), and *Filth* (2013), I draw aesthetic and dramaturgical inspiration from two references in particular: the TV show *The Leftovers* (2014-2017) and the film *You Were Never Really Here* (2017). In the two works, the male protagonists grapple with depression, suicidal thoughts, and a crippling sense of self-loathing. Seeking a temporary escape from their realities, each character engages in autoerotic asphyxiation with a plastic bag over their head not as a means of sexual feeling as a desperate attempt to *feel* anything at all. The reoccurring moments—each captured in fleeting disquieting shots (Figure 6)—feature characters behind a translucent mask gasping for air, their brutish frames reduced to crumpled piles of despair and agony.



Figure 6: Characters performing autoerotic asphyxiation in *The Leftovers* (left) and *You Were Never Really Here* (right).

In each of these portrayals of the act I am interested in how the relationship between these men and the plastic bag is treated; what decisions made by the director, designer, and performer were made in order to establish the unique perspective witnessed in each? Whether through the ferocious, yet methodical, way Justin Theroux encircles his neck with duct tape as a distorted version of *Feeling Groovy* by Simon & Garfunkel plays in the background, or the fragile stillness of Joaquin Phoenix's slumped figure in a flickering closet light, each performance captures a degree of tenderness between man and object. A theatrical example of this tenderness and potent symbolism is the centre of Native Earth's production of *Huff* (2017), which portrays the "wrenching, yet darkly comic tale of Wine and his brothers, caught in a torrent of solvent abuse and struggling to cope with the death of their mother" (Cardinal 2). Reframing the performative act in theatrical frameworks, I am interested in expressing the intimate and dynamic nature of my relationship with the plastic bag, but a symbolic representation of how humans attempt to control the things that threaten to destroy them.

Whether standing on the shoulders of theoretical giants like Davis and Chen, dancing amongst the ecosexual orgies of Sprinkle and Stephens, or wandering amongst the shadows of taboo subcultures like objectophilia and erotic asphyxiation, I have found my interests and objectives for the performance entangling and deepening. Encoding these new conceptions, frameworks, and narratives into personal performative ideologies has transformed ideas into images, thoughts into makings, and laid the foundation for the design and construction of the object to come. Playing with the plastic bag, whether for sexual pleasure or as a means to express the turmoils of the human condition, is dancing with death. Acknowledging this complex interplay in my own work means examining how the specific choreography of such a dance can illuminate and challenge these associations and perspectives in order to unearth new meanings which speak to my story in performance and back to the audience watching.

Chapter 1.4: Object Design

Sometimes human places, create inhuman monsters.

— Stephen King, *The Shining*

Although understanding where to situate the plastic bag as an object inquiry in my performance has been key to unlocking many physical and theoretical experiments, envisioning its design and construction would ultimately be the tie that bound the work together. The process of imagining how and in what ways this object could be manifested on stage began with the simple question: what does it mean to make a plastic body? Drawing from a wide range of aesthetic examples including: mannequins, dolls, sex dolls, and sculptures in visual arts, I examined how various aspects and qualities of each design manifest their own unique affect in an audience or participant engaging with them. Through aesthetic examination of physical examples and the theoretical framework I outlined, I identified three ideas I wanted to incorporate into the design: (1) the object as an elicitor of the uncanny, (2) the object as an icon of death, and (3) the object as a man-made monster.

As a child I thought I was the only one who felt the disquieting feeling of being watched as I wandered through the parade of mannequins various department stores as my mother shopped. Glossy eyes and pearly white smiles, I used to imagine the plastic bodies were the remnants of human souls captured in time; a modern day gorgon lurking somewhere in the lingerie aisles. Strangely enough it was not until I was sixteen and halfway through high school that I learned there was a reputable theoretical claim for this eerie sensation I had grown up experiencing. Sigmund Freud describes this unsettling to dolls and waxworks in his essay *Das Unheimliche* (1919), as the sensation one feels when recognizing the “strangeness in the ordinary” (Freud 223). Freud argues that is the mannequins’ humanoid appearance, resembling but strangely unfamiliar to the human body, which elicit a sense of disease and discomfort. Psychoanalytic theorist Jacques Lacan expands on this idea, noting that the uncanny places us “in the field where we do not know how to distinguish bad and good—pleasure from displeasure.” (Troube 13). Intrigued by how such an object could elicit this displacement and confusion in a human subject, I sought to establish further ways designing for the uncanny could be employed in my own object design.

While arguably all humanoid figures have the ability to elicit a feeling of uncanny, the degree to which an object can produce such a feeling is gauged by its placement in the “*uncanny valley*” (Figure 7), a hypothesized relationship between “the degree an object’s resemblance to a human being and the emotional response to such an object” (MacDorman 297). Developed by robotic professor Masahiro Mori, the term was used to describe the hypothesis that a robot’s increasing resemblance to a human being elicits positive feelings of empathy up until a certain point. At this turning point, teetering between

“barely human” and “fully human”, the object is often received by observers as repulsive and disquieting; an elicitor of explicit uncanniness (Mori 98). While Mori was interested in this degree of uncanniness in order to analyze how best to evoke empathetic responses required for “productive human-robot interaction” (100), various theories have risen to support the phenomenon including: cognitive appraisals for mate selection, mortality salience, pathogen avoidance, sortis paradoxes, conflicting perceptual cues, and the religious definition of human identity (Mathur 27).

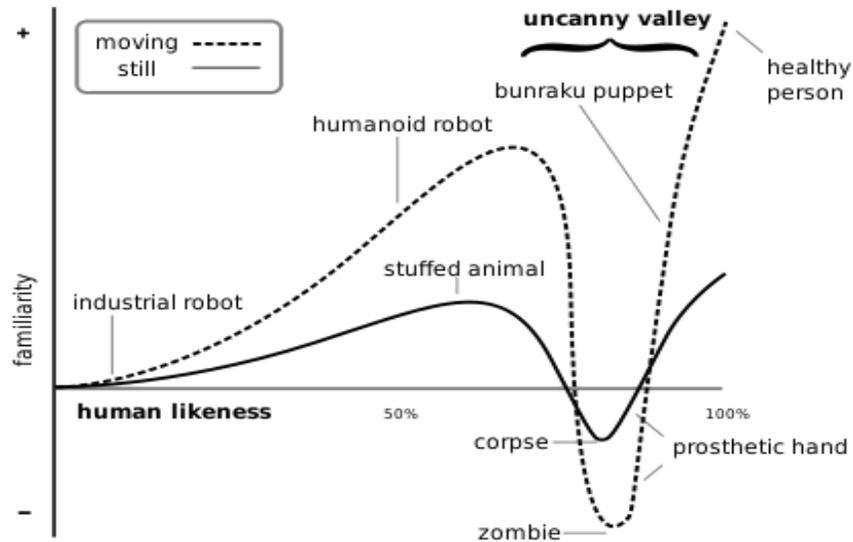


Figure 7: A graph of the uncanny valley according to Masahiro Miro.

Broadening this hypothesis to other objects and nonhuman creatures beyond robotics, I am interested in the uncanny valley of inanimate objects in the diagram above and how my own design could be conceived in such a way to elicit this turning point to the uncanny. Acknowledging the role of my object is to exist somewhere in the crux of corpse and puppet—straddling itself as a still and moving object—I want to draw inspiration from the aesthetics and connotations of each in order to design the object. Drawing influence from the use of mannequins and sex dolls in the photography of prolific artist Cindy Sherman, her design and arrangement of plastic body parts entangle corpse and puppet—often resembling simultaneously a dismembered human corpse and the mutated contortions of some marionette orgy (Figure 8). Imagining the object not only as the symbolic corpse of my grandmother, but what stylized choices in its making can bring its appearance closer to the literal embodiment of a corpse offered potent macabre inspiration to my design process, but one design choice in particular: the object as a *humanoid*.



Figure 8: Various examples of sex dolls used in the photographs of Cindy Sherman (from left to right): *Untitled #257*, *Untitled #261*, *Untitled #258*, and *Untitled #253*.

Recognizing the symbolic and aesthetic potency of the corpse as design stimulus brings me to the second and significant factor I want to incorporate: the object as an icon of death. After playing with various renderings for a realistic corpse-like object made of plastic bags (Appendix A), I decided the renderings, although eliciting the uncanny, were moving too far away from the aesthetic iconography of the plastic bag itself as form. Not wanting to lose the death-like connotations of the object's design, I sought out other iconographies of death and dying which could incorporate and *highlight* the plastic bag not only as a part of the design, but as an essential visual component to the final product. Instead of returning to the theoretical correlations between plastics and death, I challenged myself to find real aesthetic examples of plastic bags correlation to death. Returning to the question of why I was so fascinated with eliciting the uncanny in the first place, I circled back to one artist whose eerie design and directing has deeply influenced my own artistic exploration: David Lynch.

Infamous for his cult classics like *Blue Velvet* (1986) and *Mulholland Drive* (2001), Lynch has an impeccable ability to create characters and atmospheres which blend the fantastical and the familiar in unflinchingly strange worlds. His style of filmmaking—having coined its own adjective, “*Lynchian*”—is a complex mashup of nuanced abstractions and images, but the hallmark of his work is “the production of unfamiliarity in that which was once familiar...an obscure area between safety and danger” (Criswell 4). Relinquishing narrative context and employing “explicitly vagueness”, Lynch leaves an audience in an unstable and uncomfortable place of horror where danger—even death—no longer lurks amongst the shadows but resides in the glitches of the everyday ordinary (Criswell 2). Fearing my eventual fall into the seemingly endless exploration of Lynchian theory, I returned to his artworks not with an eye for their obscure and abstract affect but the precise images which could offer insight into my design process.

Sneakily watching episodes of *Twin Peaks* (1990) during late-night reruns while my parents slept nearby was a ritual occurrence growing up. Forbidden from watching the show for its “disturbing images” as my mother called them, I still remember the first time I saw Laura Palmer’s pale blue body flicker across the screen (Figure 9). Discovered on the rocky shores of the town’s only lake, the homecoming queen’s effervescent features—captured in fleeting dream-like sequences—are now rendered dull and lifeless. Her hair—a wet and tangled mass—and her complexion—an icy grey-blue speckled with dirt—haunted my childhood imagining of death. It was not until years later when I attended my first funeral and accidentally brushed my hand along the body’s flesh that I recognized the coldness I had only previously imagined in Palmer’s ghostly image. While I have always remembered the image of her haunting most vividly by the colour of her flesh and the calmness of her stance, I had forgotten one peculiarity which heightened the image’s uncanny nature: the cocoon of translucent plastic which surrounded her.



Figure 9: Image of the dead body of character Laura Palmer in *Twin Peaks* (1990) directed by David Lynch.

Although the image of a corpse wrapped in a plastic bag is a trope found in many crime thrillers, the reality of its use in the disposal of bodies is commonplace in many real-life homicide cases; “Body of registered sex offender found wrapped in plastic” (Fox 23 News), “Woman accused of murder after body of man found wrapped in plastic” (ABC News), “Trail of blood leads to body wrapped in plastic on Detroit’s East Side” (WWJ News). These gruesome realities are present yet distorted in the delicate design and directing of the discover of Palmer’s body. Shifting from the wide-angle of her crumpled figure along the shoreline—her body easily mistaken for any other miscellaneous plastic waste—to the

intense close up of her face nestled amongst the crinkled plastic, Lynch grabs the viewer and yanks them inward, as if leaning in for one last kiss. Unfurling the plastic from her body, the translucent material mimics the same cool tones of her flesh and resembles a fragile halo of ice or broken glass. Beyond its aesthetic, the plastic wrapping Palmer's dead body is a makeshift protection from the harsh winter elements and nearby wildlife; a synthetic sarcophagus.

This image of the plastic bag as a literal "*death bag*" is what sparked the subsequent shift in my design from the fullness of the corpse imagery to the hollowness of the receptacles that contain them (Appendix A). Taking Lynch's presentation of Palmer's body as stimulus, I sourced an industrial roll of translucent plastic bags, approximately the twice the size of the human body, which closely resembled the appearance of the one used in the series. Conceptually exhuming its contents, I began to imagine the design of the object as a hollow synthetic membrane imaginatively discarded from the human body itself, much like how a snake would shed its skin. The object—designed as a synthetic humanoid sack—connotes the corpse and its uncanniness not through its close aesthetic resemblance to the decaying human body, but through its offering of a hollow absence of where a corpse may have once been contained.

Setting out as designer and fabricator of this humanoid plastic body, it is not lost on me the connotations with Mary Shelley's *Frankenstein* (1818). Aligning myself with the lineage of artists who have dedicated themselves to the production of monsters, like Guillermo del Toro or J.J. Grandville, I am passionate about ensuring the design of this object evokes the image of monstrosity. Although I hold a special place in my heart for all the wicked and strange creatures who have haunted my upbringing, there are a select few recurrent monstrosities which have dominated the content of my work, including: the minotaur, the gorgon, and the harpy. Each of these monsters is the combination of various human and animal characteristics and are each of divine origin, either manifested by gods as blessings, curses, or cruel punishments. While the stories of these monsters have provided insight artistic explorations in the past, I have challenged myself in this project to explore the realm of monsters who are most unfamiliar or unexplored in my work, what I call: "*man-made monsters*". Extending beyond just theoretical construction, I am interested in using the design of this object to exemplify the presence of the making of—and the *maker* of—the beast in the work itself.

Unlike the fantastical nature of the minotaur or the gorgon whose features often lean closer to animal than human, the stories which explore the direct production of monsters by mankind almost always retain a high degree of human resemblance. Seeking to make the image of the beast in their own likeness, many of these monster-makers and their wild pursuits are described as examples of the danger of "*playing God*" (Ball 14). While this term most notably arises in discussions surrounding ethics and

morality, its use in contemporary lexicon has become an “overused and denounced cliché” for journalists to advocate for the restriction of scientific progress (16). Fearing the advancement in biotechnology and transhumanist practices, many scholars have used the example of Shelley’s *Frankenstein* (1818) as a hallmark argument for the dangers of engineering intelling beings (McKibben 122), but what about the production of monsters is so terrifying?

Extending beyond *Frankenstein*, there are copious examples in pop culture of monsters fantastically produced by humans which threaten to dismantle and disorder the stability of everyday life. While the cinematic landscape of horror in the 1980s—“*the quintessential age of the slasher*” (Atwood 2)—was dominated by an excess of monstrous figures, one of the most iconic villains to take the screen was the smallest: Chucky in *Child’s Play* (1988). As the haunted embodiment of murderer Charles Lee Ray—aka. Chucky—the small plastic doll serves as a frighteningly effective foundation for the fear of the uncanny to be ramped up the extreme. Although obviously imbued with a level of magical realism, the notion of Chucky as a children’s toy is a clever and unsettling image as it builds upon a object which already exists in the everyday world. His plastic body, although still pervious to disfigurement, is imbued with animal-like agility and a seemingly invincible response to violence which would normally kill his previously human form. I argue that Chucky’s ability to instill fear in an audience as a monster is even more sinister when reconciling that his body is something man-made.

Examining the aesthetic nature of Chucky’s evolution through the *Child’s Play* franchise, I began to note what particular characteristics of his design were sparking my interest and how they could inspire the design of my own object. Straying away from the idea of manifesting a creature which installs palpable fear into my audience, I was drawn instead to the parts of Chucky’s design which exemplified his blend between human and nonhuman, and highlighted the nature of his fabrication. Beyond the obvious artificiality of his matte plastic skin, rounded cherub-like features, and spikey doll hair, I was fascinated by how his body becomes an impressionable surface for which the violence enacted in the film is traced and recorded. Key to his macabre design, Chucky’s body—unlike the plastic “Good Guy” doll he is made from—*bleeds*. As his body is continually mutilated and disfigured, leaving large gaping slashes across much of his face and body, his monstrosity transforms and his appearance becomes increasingly frightening. Steadfast in his bloodthirsty pursuit, he begins to bandage and repair his wounds with stitches, staples, and even bandaids—a very human behaviour for an inhuman monster to be performing. These gruesome bandagings, especially the stitches, are reminiscent of how one may suture a plush doll back together after some mishap in the real world, and exemplify the human process of making and *remaking* which I seek to incorporate into the object design.

Looking at the stylization of the stitchmark as a delineation of human construction, I sought out other man-made monsters whose seemingly incoherent bodies were held together by the threads of human intervention. Similar to Chucky, the crisscrossing network of stitches is visible on a number of monstrous figures whose sutures represent the meticulous process of their creation by a human maker (Figure 10). Whether stitched by their own hand or by an ominous parental figure, their stitches function as metaphors of vulnerability and the inevitability of their own demise / disembodiment; one tug of the thread and their bodies could fall apart. Stitching on human flesh, outside of the repair of bodily injury, is a common practice in the reconstruction of corpses after autopsies, further connecting the iconography of man-made monstrosity and death. The quality of these stitches—frantic and chaotic—mirror the internal turmoil of them and their makers, each struggling to keep themselves in one piece. Incorporating this technique into my own design, I chose to hand stitch the object with bright red thread, a symbolic nod to the blood infused in Chucky’s plastic veins, while honouring my grandmother whose sewing needles and threads were left to me after her death.



Figure 10: Various examples of stitching in the costume design of man-made monsters (from left to right): *Matinee Theatre: Frankenstein* (1957), *Edward Scissorhands* (1990), *Seed of Chucky* (2004), and *Batman Returns* (1992).

Finalizing the conceptual period of my design, I integrated each of my three initial ideas for the object into complimentary practical steps in the design construction process: (1) trace a humanoid figure in silhouette (elicit the uncanny), (2) create a hollow death bag in form (icon of death), and (3) sew the piece together with thread (man-made monster). Organizing this structure of thinking and making provided the groundwork for which I could continue to develop and evolve a similar approach not only to my process as a designer, but now as a performer, and eventually as a director.

Chapter 2.1: The Body

Presence

I inhabit the wax image of myself, a doll's body. Sickness begins here; I am a dartboard for witches.

— Sylvia Plath, *Witch Burning*

In the beginning of my thesis process I conceptually cast a chorus of elderly women to be the performing bodies in the final presentation. The initial interest in this peculiar casting decision was to mirror and multiply the imagined presence of my own grandmother on stage in order to explore her relationship to plastic and my own queer identity. Although multiplying her presence was intriguing and the image of a chorus of elderly women manipulating plastic bags was exciting, something was still missing: *my* presence. Working closely with my advisor, I began the process of scrutinizing the essential qualities of these performers bodies while simultaneously conceptualizing new ways of integrating my own presence into the performance. Eventually my advisor asked me to create a list of all the performers which inspired me the most as an artist, which included: Franko B, Ron Athey, Carolee Schneemann, and Olivier de Sagazan. Examining the list, I found one thing in common: they all perform alone. Terrified by the prospect but aware of its potential as an incredible learning tool, I made the decision to cast myself as the solo performer.

With the knowledge that I would be the one inhabiting and embodying the world of this performance I began to reformulate my process; moving away from the comfort of being a dramaturg and a designer, I had to understand myself as a performer as well. This additional shift in roles marked the progression of my thesis into a rehearsal process. Questioning how and in what ways my own presence and performance could affect the work, I returned to the list of performers who inspired me and found three elements of their performances in particular which I wanted to explore in my own rehearsal process: (1) transformation, (2) exposure, and (3) pain. Researching various key performances by each of the artists, I documented how each element was integrated, in design and performance, and used the elements as stimuli for my own creative process as a performer. Each of these performance elements mirror the three properties of plastic bags that initially attracted me (transformation/malleable, exposure/translucent, perforable/pain) and exemplify new ways of exploring, embodying, designing, and performing these properties on stage.

Whether layering clay on the face to create monstrous forms or extracting sacred scrolls from bodily cavities, the ability to transform oneself through performance is key to the works of Olivier de Sagazan and Carolee Schneemann. Embodying malleability, the two artists blur the boundaries of flesh

and object by using their own body as a canvas and cavity for transformation to take place. Trained as a painter and a sculptor, Sagazan pushes his medium to the next level in his performance *Transfiguration* (Figure 11) in which the artist covers himself in clay, paint, and soil to eradicate his identity and “become a living work of art, somewhere between marionette and puppeteer” (Sagazan 22). His frantic energy and sporadic movements are a flurry of improvised performance in which he forms and reforms his own identity in a seemingly endless ritual of transformation making it difficult for the viewer to identify who, or what, he is becoming.



Figure 11: Olivier de Sagazan performing *Transfiguration* in *Samsara* (2012).

While Sagazan uses the application of clay to explore masquerade as a form of transformation, Schneemann inverts the transformative technique in her work *Interior Scroll* (Figure 12). In the performance she mounts a table wearing only a white sheet and an apron and briefly reads from her own book *Cezanne, She Was a Great Painter* (1976) before discarding the book and covering her body in mud. Exploring a series of ritualistic gestures and poses, she eventually finds herself in a squatting position and begins to unravel a long rolled-up scroll from her vagina. Examining the role of interiority, Schneemann exposes and navigates the cavities of the female body in order to exhume and reveal their potential as sacred spaces. Transforming her body through performance, she embodies herself as reader, container, and creator of objects and knowledge. Booth exposing and infusing the naked female body with the creation of art, Schneeman introduces the possibility of an erotic woman who may be “primitive, devouring, insatiable, clinical, obscene; or forthright, courageous, integral” (Schneemann in *More Than Meat Joy*, 237). Similar to Sagazan, I am intrigued at the potential of my body, and its orifices, as spaces

of containment and exhumation and how extracting objects and substances from the body can manifest new ways of symbolically, and literally, unraveling processes of storytelling on stage.

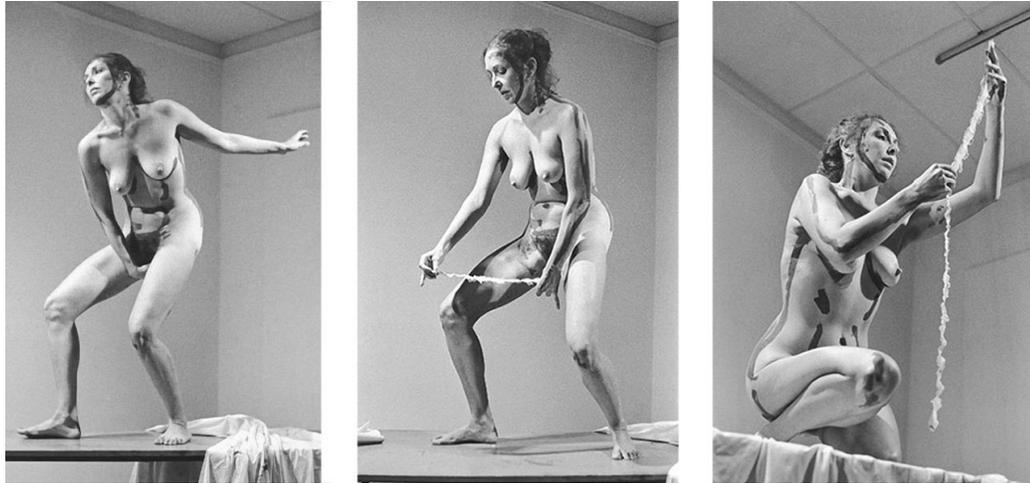


Figure 12: Carolee Schneemann performing *Interior Scroll* in East Hampton, New York, in 1975.

Examining the transformations taking place in the works of Sagazan and Schneemann, I am intrigued by the possibility of merging and entangling them in my own rehearsal process. Using layering and extracting techniques, I explored various ways of transforming my own body in order to express a ritual of mourning. In attempting to recreate and mimic various works by each artist using my own body, I was able to identify what objects and materials resonate with my thesis work and how the plastic bag could be manipulated in order to compliment and complicate these processes of transformation on stage. Employing the relentless fluidity of application in Sagazan's *Transfiguration* and the stoic iconography of Schneemann's kinetic *Interior Scroll*, each performance exemplify the malleability of the human body in form *and* identity through performance and offer insightful reassurance in focusing on the process of becoming rather than the final product of what is become.

Although my exploration in transformation had me layering copious materials and objects over my body, the process of removing and deconstructing these transformations left me feeling exposed and vulnerable. Peeling back the layers of disguise, I began to explore how the element of exposure could offer new insights into my rehearsal process. Inspired by one of my all time favourite performance artists, Franko B, I sought to understand how the exposed body on stage challenged audience and artist in constructions of voyeurism, pornography, and subordination. Stripped naked and painted white, the body of Franko B in his performance *I Miss You* (Figure 13) is a stark canvas for the blood which trickles down his arms. Walking down a runway lit with bright fluorescent lights, his exposure is a symbolic expression

of love and loss, forcing the audience to bare witness to his pain and suffering. Resisting the beautification of the naked form in performance, B's body is a stocky, bald, and overweight form whose extended exposure is blunt and forceful to an audience sitting less than a meter away. As a queer body the exposure of naked flesh coupled with the exposure of blood is often a repulsive—if not completely terrifying sight—evoking associations of HIV/AIDS and brutal self-mutilation. Much like the translucency of the plastic bag, his naked body becomes a lens to obscure, distort, and transform perceptions.



Figure 13: Franko B performing *I Miss You* at the Tate in 2003.

Navigating the world as a queer body, I recognize the powerful and political act of visibility exposing your naked body to the world can be. Living in a culture whose pedagogy and semantics are dominated by notions of secrecy and invisibility, what Tony Adams' describes as "queer identities inextricable tie to the metaphor of the closet" (Adam 236), the exposed visibility of queer bodies is a vulnerable and dangerous space to occupy. B exposes his naked body not as demand for audience attention but as a reclamation of space traditionally reserved for "dominant culture" (Adam 242). Tracing his own blood across the floor in splotched marks and footsteps, B stains his presence into the cloth and leaves part of himself to linger long after he finishes the performance. This exposure of body and its contents offers a poetic portrayal of the translucency of the human body. His pale white flesh, much like the plastic bag in my investigations, acts as a lens for the audience to bare witness to his own bleeding, but his suffering. Understanding exposure of queer flesh as a means of metaphorically performing translucency, I embark on new explorations of how my own body could offer gaze inward and outward in order to obscure audience interpretation and affect.

While the exposed and stained flesh of B remains one of the most influential images on my work as an artist, I have found it difficult to share the work with other friends and colleagues during my process

as many express reactions of fear and disgust at the sight of the blood. Having normalized the image of his bleeding body, I had forgotten the nature of his performance and how the element of pain can provoke, but alienate and disturb, an audience. The powerful effect of pain in performance is evident with many works by Franko B but resonates with another prolific artist on my list, Ron Athey. The sadomasochistic performance works of Athey often stage himself in gruesome and disturbing rituals in which his body is pierced, penetrated, punched, and cut open. The violent nature of his performances is described eloquently by author and scholar Karen Gonzalez Rice in her book *Long Suffering: American Endurance Art as Prophetic Witness*:

In *Martyrs and Saints* (1992-93), performance artist Ron Athey literalized the torture of Jesus and the martyrdom of St. Sebastian in and on his own body...hands sealed in rubber gloves, carefully pinched and pierced his flesh. They precisely placed thick hypodermic needles, one after another, into his forehead, embedding a cross-hatched crown of thorns...blood erupted from these wounds as each metal thorn was pulled from his head. Thick rivulets of blood ran down his face and covered his features. (Gonzalez-Rice 59)

Whether restaging religious torture sequences or enacting violent fetishes on his own body, Athey pushes the boundaries of his own flesh in order to defy symbolism, irony, or metaphor in art and instead *embody* suffering. While his performances are confronting and disturbing acts to bare witness to, many of them are representations of artworks and historical images which already permeate Western culture such as the pervasiveness of the crucifixion of Jesus Christ. Athey queers and distorts these iconographies by inserting his own presence, a brutish naked form covered in tattoos and genital piercings, into the rituals and recasting a contemporary audience as voyeurs of these brutal punishments. Reconciling religious iconographies with potent onstage realities, the boundaries between what is real and what is performed are blurred, if not completely obliterated. Distorting the perception of rituals and rites, Athey's exploration inspires and complicates how I approach the rituals of mourning in my own rehearsal process by challenging not only the content and the form, but my own boundaries of artmaking.

In *Self-Obliteration #1: Ecstatic*, an episode in the performance cycle *Incorruptible Flesh* (1996-2013), Athey is situated on his hands and knees, naked except for a long blonde wig, and surrounded by four panes of glass. He brushes his blonde hair methodically, each time striking the floor with a thud, until finally he removes the wig and reveals that it is pinned into his scalp with hypodermic needles. Blood pours from his open wounds and he begins an intimate dance with the panes of glass, cradling them across his naked body and smearing them with blood (Figure 14). The evocative image of Athey moving with the panes of glass conjures images of lost lovers and unfulfilled pleasures, each images and associations which connect to my intrigue in objectophilia in performance. The contrast

between his embodied pain and the inanimacy of the glass is a cruel and compelling duet which speaks to how I want to merge, entangle, and re-contextualize my own presence and performed relationship with the plastic bag.



Figure 14: Ron Athey performing *Self-Obliteration #1: Ecstatic* in Ljubljana, Slovenia, 2011.

The pain and penetrative nature of much of Athey's torturous performances function as performative representations of the third property of plastic which attracts me: perforable. Athey situates the flesh and orifices of his body as spaces to be penetrated and perforated in order to explore notions of pain and pleasure. In many of his performances, including *Solar Anus* and *Judas Cradle*, Athey incorporates acts of penetration with his own rectum as a potent representations of sex, power, fear, and desire. In an interview with performance studies scholar Dominic Johnson, Athey describes his interest in, and the power of incorporating, the rectum in performance:

There is a homophobic repulsion at the idea of the rectum as a receptacle for sex; or further, a more general body-phobia (that many gay men share) of the turned-out asshole as fist-hole: punch-fucking, double fisting, dark red hankies, and the elbow-to-armpit fist. There is the pathology of shit-eaters, a direct link to cannibalism. But more importantly, in our time, this particular hole garners more phobias for its symbolic potency as a receptacle for disease. (Johnson 4)

Conceptualizing the rectum as a hole filled with, and made up of, connotations of fear, disease, and destruction is even more insightful in my practice when correlated with the associations of plastic bags in our environment. Perforable and penetrable, the plastic bag like the queer rectum, is a symbolic receptacle of death and destruction. Much like Athey's penetrative performances, I am interested in exemplifying the vulnerable and endurable qualities of the plastic bag simultaneously. This intrigue in the

performable nature of the plastic bag in relation to Athey's inspiration sparked a series of rehearsal experiments exploring acts of autoerotic asphyxiation as a mode of investigating perforation and penetration in performance. Inserting my head into the plastic bag, I situate myself in a dangerous liminal space in which suffocation is possible—but never permissible—in order to explore this “death drive” in performance that Athey describes in his work:

The content, what I heard myself saying with urgency and brutal flourishes, was more like a manifesto, calling for me to abandon conventions, emotional safeguarding and complacency, in order to build a deeper love. This came to sex with no boundaries, a willingness to literally have no limits in the interaction of animalistic sex. This idea of intense pleasure ramped up to full-throttle, would it be able to stop before the death drive at the brink? (Johnson 8)

Although my symbolic correlation between the plastic bag and my own queer presence on stage has illuminated many insights in the rehearsal process, especially through exploration of these performance elements, I must acknowledge the dissonances and differences which have become more apparent and significant in the work. I, unlike Athey, have no interest in literally inserting my body into a place of pain and penetrability. Dramatizing this dissonance is key to the performance and more easily constructed when the actions are not directed upon my own body but upon the object in the space. Plastic, unlike my own body, does not feel pain or bleed when punctured; plastic, unlike my own body, does not *feel* at all. Recognizing this seemingly obvious limitation of the object is key in the conceptualization of how the theatrical nature of its presence may resist and defy the performative nature of my own. Inserting the symbolic and physical presence of the plastic bag into this work aids in entangling and complicating the monstrous form of the performance and defy easy categorizations of the work as “theatre” or “performance art”, but a fusion of the two on stage.

Investigating each of these performance elements and their conjunction with the properties of plastic in my rehearsal process has deepened and expanded the content and form of the work. Through each rehearsal experiment, like the earlier design investigations, I continue to revel in the infinite possibilities of my presence in relationship with the plastic bag by asking deeper and more essential questions of the work and *why* I am making it. Reconceptualizing my own presence in the room as a maker of these elements and properties through performance has illuminated the work and challenged my skills as an artist. Having established the variety of ways my own body as a performer can inhabit and enact performance, I sought to explore the gaps, hollows, and absences in the work in order to bolster deeper questions and further entanglement of my roles as performer and designer.

Chapter 2.2: Absence

We're all of us haunted and haunting.

— Chuck Palahniuk, *Lullaby*

My grandmother, Rita Olscamp, passed away on May 1st, 2017 only hours before the opening performance of my undergraduate thesis performance. I was in Abu Dhabi at the time and my grandmother, along with the rest of my family, were back on Prince Edward Island in Canada. When I returned home, I remember asking my father about the funeral and how regretful I was that I could not attend. I told him how it was so strange to come home and her already be gone and he laughed, gesturing to a nearby shelf and said, “She’s right there.” On the shelf was a small pine box with the carving of a cross on the lid; having chosen to be cremated before she was buried, my father volunteered to keep her ashes at our house until it came time to do the final burial. Holding the box, the last physical remnants of my grandmother’s body, in my hands was a surreal and uncanny experience. Engaging with my own body and memory in performance, I am interested in incorporating this strange sensation into the work as the contradictory embodiment of presence holding absence.

Having explored various levels of integrating and complicating my own presence into the performance through various rehearsal experiments, I decided the next stage of the rehearsal work would be to explore and incorporate ideas and images of absence. In order to explore this duality of presence and absence I began researching what philosopher Jacques Derrida calls “*Hauntology*”, a term referring to the “situation of temporal, historical, and ontological disjunction in which the apparent presence of being is replaced by a deferred non-origin” (Derrida 12). This spectral replacement is often represented as a ghostly figure which is “neither present, nor absent, neither dead nor alive” (Gallix 32). Although this term is most often used in history to describe the intrinsic and constant influence of the past on the present and the future, I am interested in how applications of hauntology could be explored and applied to performance. Described as the spectral embodiment of a “nostalgia for a lost future” (Hatherly 13), how could the plastic bag, situated as a dying object, function as a hauntological ghost for a future no longer reachable?

Scattered along the roadside or twisting in the wind through a nearby field, the aesthetic qualities of the plastic bag in movement evoke images of ghostly figures drifting in space. Lifeless and yet lifelike, the littered plastic bag is a discordant reminder of human production which no longer sees fit to care for or employ the object’s use. Constructing the symbolic corpse of my grandmother out of plastic bags means attempting to replace my grandmother’s absence with a physical but inanimate presence. The plastic bag—as symbolic corpse and ghost—works to blur and obscure the representations of past, present, and future when situated in relationship to my own mortal and present body on stage. In

rehearsals I began to explore this body/object play between animate and inanimate, living and dead, absent and present, through the use of puppetry.

Infusing practical and theoretical approaches to puppetry into my thesis performance and design seemed like a fitting connection as it exposes a complex tradition of body/object play in theatrical history. The puppet, as a man-made object with often life-like appearances, is a ghostly mimicry of animacy extended from the human performer onto non-human materials. The uncanny nature of puppets is described by Kenneth Gross in his book *Puppet: An Essay on Uncanny Life* as:

...neither commodities, nor fetishes; they were lucidly present, but subject to dream; possessions freed of possessiveness, precious, but easily set aside, even trashed; sexual, yet without fixed gender; both weightless and grave, vehicles of an ancient tradition, yet without solemnity; things subject to our playful remaking, but demanding an odd kind of responsibility. These small things measured the size of the soul. (Gross 23)

This mysterious fluidity of the puppet as an object of performative and aesthetic transformation offered insights into new ways of seeing, thinking, and working with the plastic bag body and subsequently rehearsal processes with the object progressed and evolved. While initially the various puppetry experiments explored in these rehearsals manifested many exciting choreographies and images, I began to resist and scrutinize the categorization of the object solely as a puppet because too much attention was being given to its presence and not enough to its absence. Fearing the inclusion of this puppetry perspective on the work may have distanced the performance further from my initial intentions but not wanting to give up on the theoretical potential just yet, I returned to my role as a dramaturg to research and expand my definitions of “puppet”.

Expanding my search and deepening my research into the various approaches to the forms and techniques, I found the writings of Alissa Mello who captured a more nuanced approach to puppet theory with the inclusion of “trans-embodiment”; a process of “transference of direct and indirect embodied techniques between animate and inanimate performers” (Mello 6). In her paper *Trans-embodiment: Embodied Practice in Puppet and Material Performance*, Mello suggests this transference is not only human directed to object, but an active “dialogue between live and material bodies”, each affecting the other (8). Applying the concept of trans-embodiment to my relationship with the plastic bag body, I reconfigured how and in what ways we could interact with each other and how to establish ways for the object to affect my performance, resist animacy, and deepen representations of absence. Challenging the expectations of puppetry I was able to frame the object as a “corpse puppet”, whose appearance mimics liveliness but whose stillness emblemizes deathness.

Chapter 2.3: Icons

I've had so much plastic surgery, when I die, they will donate my body to Tupperware.

— Joan Rivers

Although the extensive explorations in performance art and puppetry established a solid foundation for my rehearsal process as a performer, I found myself blocked by the notion of staging this work in a theatre. Each of the performances I had drawn upon up until this point were performed in galleries or non-theatrical site specific settings and drew much of their performative strength from queering traditional situatings of performer / audience relationships. Having chosen to situate my work in the Joe G. Green Studio Theatre at York University, a traditional black box theatre space, I struggled to imagine how this space, and the relationship to the audience, could be queered, mutated, and transformed. Resisting the urge to completely separate myself from the theatre as a form, I challenged myself to identify other artists who blurred and distorted the boundaries between performance art and theatre in order to find solutions to how to stage the work effectively.

While my body and its relationship to the plastic object were reflected symbolically through various staged choreographies, the performance up until this moment represented a personal, sympathetic, and *real* portrayal of mourning, rather than the queered and fantastical distortion of reality I was searching to portray. Yearning for a certain degree of distance between my own identity and my role as a performing body, I looked to artists who engaged with trans-embodiment and performative masquerade in order distinguish themselves as artists from the performer-body seen on stage. Drawing from performance artists such as Narcissister, Christeene, and Kembra Pfahler, I discovered each of them was employing a highly theatrical technique in order to distance themselves from their performative work on stage: *character*. Rather than just portraying the process of transformation, each of these artists used various aesthetic transformations of their own bodies prior to taking the stage in order to obscure their identities and embody characters of themselves which existed only in the performative stage world. Examining performances, techniques, and processes of each artist's embodiment of character, I discovered solutions for my desire for dissonance while simultaneously illuminating new ways of performing each of the three properties of plastic I sought to explore.

Looking to what artists explore the embodiment of character and artificiality in performance, my first instinct was to incorporate and examine the work of anonymous feminist performance artist, Narcissister. Born of Moroccan Jewish and African-American descent, Narcissister's radical performances tackles various issues and interpretations of race, gender, and sexuality on stage. Although much of her work features herself on stage partially or completely naked from the neck down, her presence is infamous for the plastic doll-like mask she uses to cover her face. This mask, and much of her

work with mannequins, was initiated in her first public performance *The Mannequin*, and remains the most constant identifier of her performance presence ever since. Drawn to the similar interest in the making of a plastic body, Narcissister's design and use of this mask is an incredible example of manifesting character transformation through performance design.

The performance of transformation and character embodiment is vital to Narcissister's work and is continuously evolving with her exploration of costume as a means of exposing and disguising her own body. In her performance *I'm Every Woman*, named after the song by Chaka Khan, she begins the performance naked except for her iconic mask and a large black afro wig. As the music plays she begins to dance and eventually extract various clothing items and accessories from her bodily orifices (ex. a scarf from her anus, a blouse from her vagina, etc.), a technique she calls "reverse strip tease" (Figure 15). Continuously extracting and adorning the costume items, Narcissister makes herself the receptacle of transformation but unlike Schneemann's *Interior Scroll*, sheds the formal nature of the performance for a fun and wildly entertaining spectacle of eroticism and reverse iconography. Narcissister's work exemplifies the symbolic embodiment of the malleability of plastic in performance; embracing her character as a mercurial and chameleon-like presence she switches between age, sex, and race in varying performances. The simple but highly effective nature of her mask becomes an intrinsic icon of character while offering a potent level of distance between herself as an artist and the performance body on stage in order to explore the taboo, discomforting, and radical subject matter in her work.



Figure 15: Narcissister performing her "reverse strip tease" in *I'm Every Woman*, with the beginning of the performance (left) and at the end (right).

Although performance artist Paul Soileau has created a series of characters and personas that he embodies for various drag musical performances, Christeene is undoubtedly his most prolific and infamous. Christeene is the embodiment of what he describes as “*terrorist drag*”, a radical punk rock-esque style of performance featuring torn clothing, matted black wigs, horrendously smeared makeup, and piercing blue contacts (Davies 2). Defying heteronormative gender roles and sexuality in performance, Christeene’s wild and erratic performances exemplify the “unsanitized underbelly of queer experience”, a communal space in which filth and monstrosity reign supreme (Weathers 14). Witnessing the ferocious personality of Christeene onstage, it is difficult to reconcile the image of Soileau offstage whose calm demeanour and effervescent smile is a shocking contrast (Figure 16). This characterized transformation is not only a powerful way to grab the attention of an audience watching but a critical way of externalizing personal issues that would otherwise be too scary to express in everyday life, something I am all too familiar with in the exploration of my own performance. Soileau describes the significance of Christeene and his transformation in an interview with Bree Davies:

When Christeene came out of me I was searching for something that had the action of a switchblade in my pocket—a character I could really put on quickly, but affect people in a much stronger way. Something strong enough to channel things inside of me that needed to come out—more aggressive things. When everything aligned properly, Christine kind of just appeared. I found the wig and went to town...It allows me to try to process and understand me, Paul—as a queer, a Southern boy. Someone understanding my environment and my own social realms. I can push it out through this Christeene character. (Davies 4)



Figure 16: Paul Soileau (left) and his alter ego, Christeene (right).

While the incredible performative and musical talent of Soileau is essential to the embodiment of Christeene onstage, the power of the physical transformation undergone must not be easily overlooked. The application of the costume, wig, and makeup of Christeene is not only about highlighting the key aesthetic qualities of his character but about obscuring the real everyday qualities of his own identity. Conceptualizing Christeene as a sort of performance mask, I argue that unlike the thick layers of obscurity found in most drag or clown performances, Soileau establishes a degree of “*liminality*”, a quality described in anthropology as the “ambiguity or disorientation that occurs in the middle stage of a rite of passage” (Turner 53). Standing at the threshold of transformation, Christeene’s smeared makeup and torn clothing can be interpreted as remnants of a previously transformed body, as precursors of a body preparing itself to transform, and/or as each simultaneously. Conceiving of liminality as a possible metaphor for the translucency in plastics, I am inspired to distort the positioning of time in the transformation of character even further, and like Sagazan, offer continuously evolving and layering applications of metamorphosis.

Similar to Christeene, performance artist and musician Kembra Pfahler uses a highly stylized aesthetic of physical transformation in order to embody a performance character. Naked except for a large black matted wig and thigh-high leather boots, Pfahler paints her exposed flesh a range of colours from pastel blue to blood red. What initially began as the performative embodiment of the lead singer of shock rock band *The Voluptuous Horror of Karen Black*, Pfahler’s describes her performance appearance as the physical embodiment of “*availabilism*”, using what is most available to the artist as the medium of expression, and “*antinaturalism*”, the embrace of total aesthetic artificiality (Burden 12). It is this bridge between availabilism, a practice often described as “low art”, and antinaturalism, a quality often used in “high art” (Fisher 473), that I find most interesting. Embodying an artificial persona using only materials that were most readily available at the time of its conception, Pfahler makes a critical mockery of the tradition of performance art by inserting a theatrical character whose quirky deviance defies the formal setting of its performance. Like Christeene, Pfahler’s performance presence is a turbulent complication of performance art and theatre which offers inspiring approaches to how I may infuse the forms in my own arts practice.

Beyond the defiance of form, my interest in Pfahler’s performance character lies in her ability to stage shocking and often disturbing or painful images in performance with comedy and joy. Witnessing her performance at the Art Gallery of Ontario in November 2018, I was enthralled by her kinetic stage presence and high-energy music, but most captivated by the shocking performance rituals. Walking onstage painted bright red, Pfahler held a large white wooden cross in her right hand and waved it back and forth in the air as she belted out hardcore vocals and backup dancers, all dressed in similar aesthetic

but varying shades of blue and yellow, thrashed their wigs and danced along. Midway through a song Pfahler hands off her cross and proceeds to do a headstand on the stage. With legs outstretched to her sides, a backup dancer raises the cross high above her head and plunges the blunt end into Pfahler's vagina (Figure 17). Music blaring and Pfahler continuing to sing impaled and upside down, I watched as the initial shock of the brutal image transformed into one of comedic and ironic symbolism; a crude joke hidden amongst the theatrical splendour.



Figure 17: Kembra Pfahler performing in *The Voluptuous Horror of Karen Black* in Emalin, London, 2016.

Penetrated by the cross, Pfahler destabilizes the religious iconography with erotic and painful affect. While one may assume such a shocking act would garner disgust and horror from an audience watching, the crowd cheered with some even bursting into roaring laughter. This dissonance in reaction is in part due to the incredible fan base Pfahler has established at such an event but due to the artificiality of her character. Her painted body, stripped naked and teased hair, reminds me of the Barbie dolls my cousins' older sisters would gruesomely transform for some cruel prank; the uncanny and unreal embodiment of teenage angst and rebellion. Radical and political, Pfahler's performances of penetration, unlike Athey, offer a distance from the reality of pain and brutality enacted in order for the audience to celebrate their intention rather than indulging their damage. This embodiment of pain and suffering through a character body offers new approaches to performing the perforability of plastic in performance without having to enact real violence on my own body.

Having built up a strong framework entangling theatrical and performative approaches of character through each of these artists, I have distinguished four characters, or icons as I will call them, that I could inhabit and embody in order to tell the story of this queer funeral service. The four icons I chose to embody in my performance design are: (1) the Leftover, (2) the Priest, (3) the Witch, and (4) the Goblin. The shifts and transformations between each of these icons will serve as active embodiments and initiators of the various stages of the funeral ritual (ie. reception, eucharist, commendation, etc.) while simultaneously being a spectrum of diverse and contradictory perspectives on the story being told on stage.

The idea for each of the icons was conceived and discussed through various meetings with my thesis advisor who challenged me to create new voices and approaches to the actions performed on stage. When asked what personalities came to mind when I imagined the queering of my grandmother's funeral service, I turned to my dreamscapes and childhood mythologies as stimuli. Growing up I struggled to understand the teachings of death and the afterlife taught to me by the Catholic Community; attending my first funeral service when I was only eight years old, I quickly learned the strict regimen of mourning was not to be defied. Witnessing the ritual of mourning performed by my family and friends, I realized everyone had a particular role to play in the process of dying. While the priest's solemn words and my mother's muffled cries are still carved into my memory, I found my childish brain distorting and adding new and strange characters into the mix: a witch flying over the gravestones, goblins hiding in the church organ, and demons lurking in the shadow of the deep gauge cut out in the soil.

Many years and attending a handful of funerals services later, I have come to learn that mythologizing death is a necessary part in my own process of mourning the dead. By inserting fantastical creatures into my rituals of death I bend the perception of what is real and what is imaginary in order to cope with the cruel reality that a person I once knew is now an inanimate object. I selected each of these icons because they served as the most influential personalities who haunt my experience of death, in the real Catholic Funeral I have attended, and the queer deathscapes I escape to.

The first icon is the symbolic embodiment of grief, guilt, and confusion in my experience of mourning: the Leftover. The Leftover is a body who has been temporarily severed from time and space, whether being left behind or pulled away from their familiar world, they are struggling to find direction and stability in an unknown world. The Leftover has the naivety of a child and the resilience of a widow; lost but will not give up. They move through the world with ferocious determination often relentlessly seeking to accomplish a task or mission in order to find their way back to the familiar as soon as possible. The Leftover has experienced a great trauma, whether a violent act of destruction or the death of a close loved one. They rely on stability, organization, and order as pillars of navigating the unfamiliar but their

naive curiosity for the wondrous and the profane take them down dangerous paths. Examples of other representations of the Leftover in my personal memory include: my mother after her sister passed away in 2002, Dorothy in *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), Sarah in *The Labyrinth* (1986), Amelia in *The Babadook* (2014), and Annie in *Hereditary* (2018).

The second icon is the symbolic embodiment of order and apathy in my experience of mourning: the Priest. The Priest is a body who conjures and controls the rules which govern their world. Charismatic and confident, their unstoppable faith and ruling power make them a force to be reckoned with. Resilient and steadfast, they approach the world with great caution and meditation, considering all the options before choosing how to move forward. The Priest, although strong in will and mind, is frail in the body, vulnerable to outside forces, and fearful of mysteries of the unknown which lurk just beyond their reach. Enacting ritual as a means of channeling higher forces working within them, they find solace in the blessing and coordinating of death as a way to control and neutralize it. The Priest is a mortal being in search of immortal knowledge; bound and blinded, they are the narrators of their own demise. Examples of other representations of the Priest in my personal memory include: William in *The Witch* (2015), Carrie's mother in *Carrie* (1976), Tom Edison in *Dogville* (2003), and Sister Jude Martin in *American Horror Story: Asylum* (2012-2013).

The third icon is the symbolic embodiment of the celebration of life in my experience of mourning: the Witch. The Witch is an immortal (but not invincible) body who thrives in the discomfort and unfamiliarity of the world around them. Wild and wicked, they influence the world and those around with divine powers and crippling fear. Unafraid of death and dying, they surround themselves with destruction and chaos as a means of entertaining and distracting themselves from the cruel inevitability of eternity. The Witch is the epitome of queer camp, relishing in the entanglements of beauty and disgust. Distancing themselves from the frailties of the human condition, they reject love and care from all those who draw near to them. Dancing amongst the flames and laughing into the abyss, they face death with a cruel and sickening stubbornness, comforted by the thought that if you lived forever once, you could always do it again. Examples of other representations of the Witch in my personal memory include: drag-queen and actor Divine, The Wicked Witch of the West in *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), artist Leigh Bowery, Faye Dunaway in *Mommie Dearest* (1981), Madeline in *Death Becomes Her* (1992), and Winifred Sanderson in *Hocus Pocus* (1993).

The fourth and final icon is the symbolic embodiment of the chaos of life and the inevitability of death in my experience of mourning: the Goblin. The Goblin is a shapeshifting body which navigates between worlds familiar and unfamiliar with ease. Mercurial and transient, they are a trickster presence who finds joy in causing chaos and disorder in the rules which govern life and death. The Goblin is a

mortal, but seemingly invincible, creature who hides from death with a swift and clever knowledge of the liminal boundaries between worlds. Seemingly invisible but vulnerable, they scavenge the world like cockroaches in the sewer pipes, cautious but unflinching in their relentless pursuit of survival. Although the Goblin is rarely the bringer of death or destruction, they are the maggots and vultures which feast on the rotting corpses. They are the persistent reminder of the cruel inevitability of mortality; lingering and haunting, gnawing and whispering, watching and patiently waiting. Examples of other representations of the Goblin in my personal memory include: the insects beneath the earth in *Blue Velvet* (1982), the owls in *Twin Peaks* (1990-2017), Merde in *Holy Motors* (2012), Charlie in *Hereditary* (2018), the flying monkeys in *The Wizard of Oz* (1939), and dogs in *Black Mirror: Metalhead* (2018).

Providing a structure for which these four icons can exist inside of my performance body, I use the concept of “*embedded narratives*” (Ryan 319), or “*Russian Doll structure*” as a conceptual framework for their situating (Figure 18). Drawing dramaturgical inspiration from the film *Holy Motors* (2012), which follows one central character as they embody a continually evolving series of characters, I wanted to create an embedded network structure of characterization which helps me organize how I move through the performance and various icon embodiments in sequence. Beginning from the foundational character of the Leftover and incorporating performative techniques of application and extraction in costume, each icon is exhumed and revealed from within the performance of the preceding. Imagining the direction of this dramaturgical journey as moving inward and downward—like digging a grave—the performance works to unveil and expose how the characteristics of each icon are vital to the construction of the Leftover as a whole.

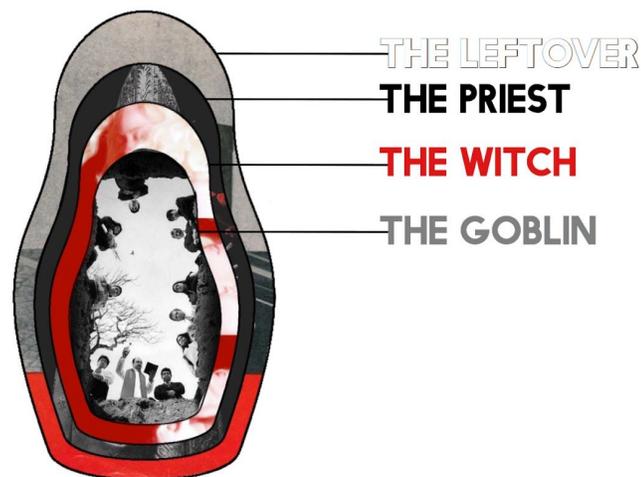


Figure 18: Conceptual framework of character embedding; “*Russian Doll*” structure.

Chapter 2.3: Costume Design

I am really just using the mirror to summon something I don't even know until I see it.

— Cindy Sherman

Identifying and clarifying the specific nature of each of the four icons, I organized a series of rehearsal exercises to explore, embody, and further characterize these icons with my own body. The following process drew on a series of performance styles and techniques to explore movement and gesture including: clowning, butoh, and drag. Infusing aspects of each of these techniques into my rehearsal process, I discovered one key tool utilized in each to explore and embody character: *costume*. While much of my process up until this point had centred the performance work on exploring my own body in relation to the plastic bag, I had temporarily ignored what role my own clothes or costumes created in their reaction and relationship to my body and the plastic. Identifying costume as an essential tool in establishing iconography and embodying character, I began to shift myself back between performer and designer in order to sketch, fabricate, and incorporate various costume options for each of the icons into the rehearsal room.

The initial costume renderings I explored for each of the icons were intended to fuse characteristics of traditional Catholic Funeral participant with various iconographies of folklore and mythology from around the world. Pulling from historical aesthetic representations of Slavic and American folklore, each a tradition which had major influence on my upbringing as a child, I sought to create bold, magical, and outlandish costumes which captured the fantasy of my queer imagining (Figure 19).



Figure 19: Initial costume renderings of three icons: The Priest (left), The Witch (centre), and The Goblin (right).

Although designing the initial costume renderings were a useful exercise to explore the potential aesthetics qualities of each of these icons, I discovered the bold and striking style I had incorporated overshadowed the gritty and gruesome environment I was interested in establishing on stage. Returning to the earlier research and documentation of the performances and artworks which inspired my presence on stage, I realized these costume renderings leaned too far to the world of theatre and not enough to the influence of performance art. Seeking theoretical and practical intervention, I chose to include two new challenges to my work as a designer: (1) invest myself in Pfahler's practice of availabilism and use the materials most readily available to me as an artist, and (2) reintroduce the techniques of application and extraction as processes of costume transformation, ie. Sagazan's *Transfiguration*, Schneeman's *Interior Scroll*, and Narcisster's *I'm Every Woman*. Releasing myself from the rigidity that the process of design renderings had imbued in me, I found solace in the fluid nature of costume exploration which could be done when reflecting back on the rehearsal process of making.

Returning to the sketchbook and the rehearsal room, I realized this dissonance between my performance body and my costume designer mind needed to be tackled by integrating and entangling my processes of rehearsing, experimenting, designing, and making. Reimagining the process of making and designing not as a singular two-dimensional plane moving forward but as a three-dimensional field interwoven and overlapping (Figure 20), I discovered new ways of conceptualizing, critiquing, and investigating costume design through my performance body.

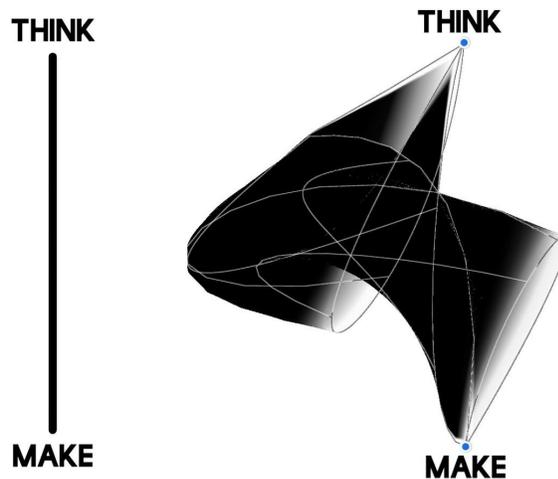


Figure 20: Reimagining of my own process of thinking and making from two-dimensional (left) to three-dimensional (right).

Integrating new, contradictory, and challenging ways of conceptualizing processes of thinking and making helped to shift my rehearsal process to focus more on repeating, returning, and reevaluating rather than producing, completing, and justifying. With ongoing and evolving stages of rehearsing and designing, I began to understand the essential tool of the costume not only as a layer of theatrical presence or character to be *applied* but as an extension and externalization of own body to be *created*. Conceptualizing the costume as something coming from within (like *Interior Scroll*), I chose to stop thinking *and* working with the costumes as separate entities for each of the icons and instead create one transformative costume which shifted and evolved into characteristics of each of the four icons through my own performance. After many investigations and attempts later, I landed on the decision to use one costume / character as the foundation for my performer body and the subsequent three icons would have to be formed from various performative arrangements and adaptations of that foundation, ie. twisting it, turning it, unzipping it, tying it, etc. I chose to embody the Leftover as foundation for the ritual, mostly likely due to their intrinsic embodiment of my current state of mourning, thus making the design of their character body the aesthetic stimuli to which the final costume arose: a knee-length black dress, a black shawl, a pair of black kitten heels, a pair of black gloves, a black hat/veil, a wig, a string of pearls, and a small black coin purse.

The initial foundation costume for the Leftover was developed through the continued entanglement of thinking and making in the rehearsal room as a process of ongoing renderings (Appendix A) and various rehearsal experiments with the majority of objects and costume items I had readily available. In this process I examined what physical iconographies could best embody the characteristics I outlined while simultaneously investigating what objects would be most useful in activating the story through performance. The final collection of items for the foundation costume were each selected through various physical experiments but make up the iconography of a traditional female Catholic mourner. This aesthetic embodied the sentiments of the Leftover while offering a potent dramaturgical introduction of the Catholic Funeral in my performance.

The iconography of the Leftover as a female Catholic mourner was developed and designed drawing upon a fusion of historical and pop-culture references (Figure 21). Although the tradition of wearing “*mourning dress*” during a period of bereavement was common amongst royalty and the aristocracy during the Middle Ages, it was not until the 18th Century that the macabre stylized adornment became popular amongst the merchant and working class (Monet 2). Mourning dress flourished in the Victorian Era with an increase in technological advancements in textiles and them mass production of dull black fabrics and cheap mourning jewelry (6). Queen Victoria, a notable fashion influence of the mid to late 1800s, infamously adorned black mourning dress after the death of her husband, Prince Albert in

1861, and continued to wear them until her own death in 1901 (13). Drawn to the image of the mourning dress as a potent—and often sacred—cultural, historical, and religious icon, I was fascinated not only by its significance to an audience watching but how the foreshadowed transformations could deconstruct, dissect, and transform this icon into something new and monstrous (Appendix B).



Figure 21: Traditional Victorian Era mourning dress (left), Queen Elizabeth II in mourning (centre), and Jessica Lange in *American Horror Story: Coven* (right).

Establishing the mourning dress as the foundational clothing for my characterization, I decided to incorporate further aesthetic stylization in order to distance myself from the icon of the human and move closer to the monstrous. Returning to Pfahler for inspiration, I chose to alter the colour of my skin in order to obscure my personal identity and offer an even deeper foundation beneath the clothing for costume and characterization to affect the performance. The decision to paint myself green arose from two associations of iconography I wanted to integrate: (1) the green-skinned monster (ie. Frankenstein's monster, the Wicked Witch of the West, etc.), and (2) the putrefaction of human corpses. Incorporating the paint offered me a new methodological process of transformation before the performance which took meticulous time and energy to put on, each helped to calm my nerves before performing and embody the character mentally and emotionally as well. Beyond its appearance and process of application, the thin layer of paint dried and cracked into a peelable artificial skin which, much the stimulus for plastic bag body, reminded me of reptiles shedding their skins; embodying metaphor.

Chapter 3.1: The Ritual

The modern habit of doing ceremonial things unceremoniously is no proof of humility; rather it proves the offender's inability to forget himself in the rite, and his readiness to spoil for every one else the proper pleasure of ritual.

— C.S. Lewis

The first Catholic Funeral service I ever attended was in 2002 when my aunt, my mother's sister, passed away suddenly after a tragic accident falling down the basement stairs in her apartment. I was only eight years old at the time but my memory of the event is a vivid and twisted nightmare of tear-soaked family members, copious bouquets of white roses, and the echo of solemn hymns reverberating in my mind. Although my naive perspective on the world saved me from fully comprehending the severity of such an occurrence, my attentive and curious nature was captive to the rigid and highly-choreographed nature of the performance happening around me. Examining the specific dramaturgical structure, essential elements, and necessary occurrences of the Catholic Funeral, I began to construct an approach to ritual performance which would serve the story I wanted to tell.

The term "*ritual*" is discussed in depth by performance studies scholar Richard Schechner, who describes the act as a way to "organize and reorganize behaviours into set patterns" (Schechner 33). This organization of behaviour into a specific and replicable process blurs the boundaries between routine and ritual in most human daily activity (ie. brushing your teeth, taking out the garbage, etc.) until we encounter occurrences of the conscious "elevation of ritual significance" such as religious rituals (34). Consciously elevating the significance of a particular act is done so through imbuing deep symbolic meaning onto objects, bodies, places, and the ways these elements correlate and navigate each other (52). The Roman Catholic Church—which I grew up within—is built upon the participation of rituals in order to express *and* embody faith, such as the Eucharist which asks participants to imbue symbolic interpretation of the wafer and wine as the body and blood of Christ, and by consuming each they are communed with—or embodying—Christ. Although engagement with these rituals was first described to me as "participating" or "taking part in", I believe the degree to which these acts are *performed* is more crucial.

As a rebellious child, I never enjoyed the unquestionable engagement that was asked of me in order to perform my so-called "*faith*" in God; the irony of my love for acting in theatre but inability to perform in church is evident and critical. The rites and rituals I grew up performing demanded that I not only do the decreed acts but *believe* in the significance of what I was doing. Expecting an authentic (or at least convincible) performance of "*faithfulness*" by my friends and family, I found myself caught in an awkward place where I was performing in rituals I did not believe in. Stripping the ceremonies and

organizations of their conscious elevation, I had returned rituals back to routines. Without the symbolic nature of these acts in place, I was able to reimagine, reevaluate, and reconfigure these rituals into new metaphors and meanings which suited my own imagination. This deviance of the ritual performance of faith eventually offered me the dissonance and confidence necessary to relinquish myself completing from participating in such rituals at all. While I have since resisted engaging in any rituals of the Catholic Church, there is one ritual which I still have yet to escape—the funeral.

Identified as the “*final rite*” in Catholicism, the funeral is an last ritual for a human body to engage with—and embody—their faith (Heinlein 4). Returning to the church for these conclusionary ceremonies of the faithful, I am reminded of their deep symbolic significance for the individual who has passed but for those gathering to mourn their death *and* celebrate their life. The rite of the Catholic Funeral, while variable depending on geographical location and liturgical tradition, is compiled of a series of embedded rituals designed to bless the body of the dead and those gathered to witness them (6). The Catholic Funeral is composed of many parts but the four most essential include: reception, eucharist, commendation, and committal. Identifying these four parts was the first step for me to begin to direct and choreograph the performance into a sequence which could explore, expose, and dissect the embedded narratives in each section and their significance in the burial of a body—once human, now plastic.

Instead of focusing on the research and historical basis for each of the sections in the funeral ritual, I examine the role of memory, experience, and interpretation of each part in order to offer my own portrayal of their queering and reconfiguration in my performance. Indulging in the personal memory of funeral experience severed from the conscious elevation of the church, I sought to bridge the real and imagery aspects of the events in order offer a more potent and vivid retelling of how I came to—and continue to—understand processes of grief and mourning. Through this examination I begin to introduce my role as director of the performance and integrate how my own perspective on the concepts of the funeral could be unpacked and reformulated for the stage.

The first part of the funeral is always the most heartbreaking—the reception. The initial gathering of friends and family of the deceased is meant to offer a moment for everyone to reconnect but these intimate gatherings are always overcome with visible sadness and heartache. I remember the first time I walked into the funeral reception for my aunt Patricia I was surrounded by the puffy tears eyes of friends and family clinging to each other for support. These fragile expressions of communal grieving are a powerful way for even strangers to connect and empathize with each other but they can be painfully difficult and traumatizing to experience. Although I prefer to endure my experiences of mourning individually—possibly due to my continued inability to perform faith-centred grieving—these receptions offer a literal and symbolic return from my absence in this community *and* the church. Remembering how

it felt to be a part of these gatherings, I was most intrigued by how these solemn expressions of grief were infused with fleeting moments of mundane ordinariness: my grandmother combing her late husband's hair, my mother ushering children away from collapsing the photo display, and most commonly, the patience of waiting for something—*anything*—to happen. Choreographing and directing the performance of the reception in this work, I want to focus on the intrinsic blend of these two experiences: mourning and waiting.

The second part of the funeral is the most problematic for my own individual experience—the Eucharist. As briefly mentioned, the Eucharist is the ritual acknowledgment of the blessing of Christ and his death for our sins by symbolically reenacting his offerings at the final supper before his death—bread for his body and wine for his blood. The Eucharist—or mass as it is often called in my community—is always challenging for me because I am never sure if I should participate or remain seated while others get up around me. Performing in the Eucharist ritual at a funeral service is about recognizing how intrinsic death is to the cycle of life and that although there is sadness for the individual person who has died, like Christ—there is rebirth and forgiveness in the afterlife. In my experience, the experience of the Eucharist is about communal blessing and symbolic embodiment but at its core: *consumption*. In my choreographing and directing of the performance of the Eucharist I want to focus on ritual enactments of blessing, but a queer reimagining of what consumption means for my own character body. What does it mean to *eat* and *drink* the body? How does the performance of devouring flesh relate to the construction of the monstrous? How can ritual consumption be reimagined for this performance?

The third part of the funeral is designated as a time for both individual and communal mourning *and* celebration—the commendation. The term “*commendation*” literally comes from the term “*commit to the care of*” and is a moment for close friends and family members to express their own praise and gratitude for the individual who has passed in order to pass their care on to God in the afterlife (6). The commendation is often a combination of eulogies, written speeches for the praise of someone who has died, and worship music, songs sang either individually or communally by the church to celebrate both the person who has died and their faith in God (12). In my experience the commendation is both a celebratory and deeply saddening moment for me to bare witness to as it expresses the importance one person has had on the life of others and grapples with the inevitable inability of the speaker to sum up the fullness and breadth of a person's life and death in mere words. In my performance I want to choreograph and direct a moment which encompasses the celebration *and* mourning of life, but incorporates the flaw of human language and music to fully perform the influence and impact of death.

The fourth and final part of the funeral is the most literal but often the most surreal—the committal. The committal is the moment in which friends and family offer their “*final respects*” to the

person who has died and offer communal witness for the Priest to bless the body and “*final resting place*” of the body (14). These expressions—or performances—of finality are a jarring ritual in which those attending the service, myself included, must reconcile the ephemeral life that has been lived and celebrated with the literal interment of the corpse to burial or fire. In the case of my grandmother’s death, she chose to inter her body to cremation and then burial—a radical shift from traditional burial made only weeks before her death—which has intrigued and puzzled me. Although the burial of a corpse in a coffin is still a macabre and unsettling experience in its own right, the family tradition and familiarity of this act offers a semblance of comfort and ease which the preceding cremation of my grandmother does not. Reconciling the burial of ashes is a difficult and riddling perspective in which I must disembody the image my grandmother not once, but twice. Choreographing and directing of the act of committal, I want to express the performance of finality but the puzzling nature of disembodiment for my grandmother in her final interment to the earth.

Examining both the memory and lasting impressions of each of these four parts of the funeral service for my own performance has offered an incredibly insightful and highly-organized dramaturgical structure for the performance to work within. Acknowledging that each part has its own intrinsic acts and affect to explore—for my performer body *and* the audience—I chose to develop a visual score (Figure 22) which would help me structure the embedded character transformations and performance choreographies to come. This score served as the foundation for which the progression of design and direction of costume, set, sound, and light design developed and evolved.

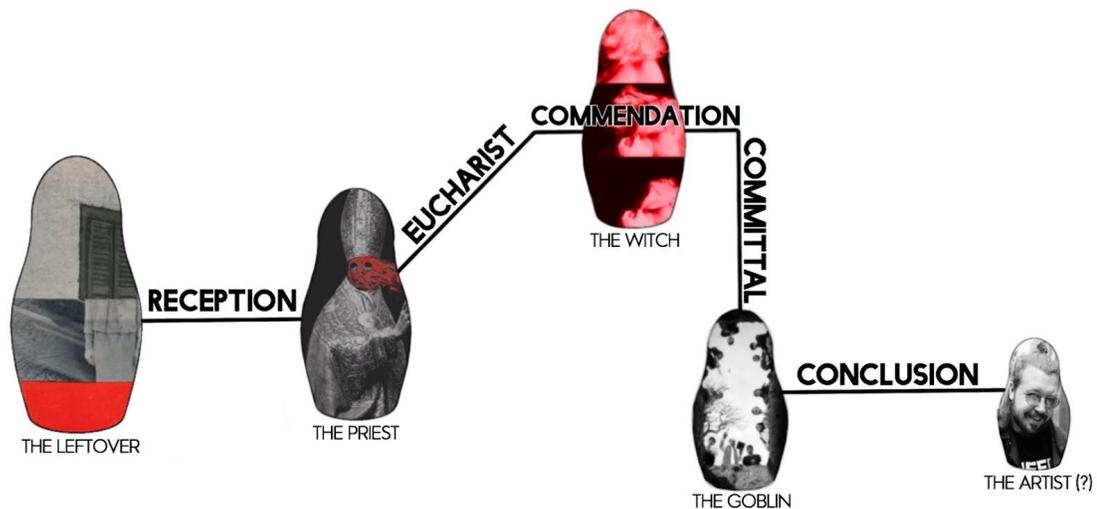


Figure 22: Visual diagram of the score for the dramaturgical structure of the performance.

Chapter 3.2: Artificial Dreamworld

I learned that just beneath the surface there's another world, and still different worlds as you dig deeper. I knew it as a kid, but I couldn't find the proof. It was just a kind of feeling. There is goodness in blue skies and flowers, but another force—a wild pain and decay— accompanies everything.

— David Lynch

With a character structure and dramaturgical score established, I set out to entangle the style and techniques of the performance through further deepening and developing the unique world of the play I will be creating and analyzing my own directorial approach. Although the performance seeks to revisit and reimagine the trauma of the Catholic Funeral in service of the plastic bag body, I—as mentioned in my establishment of character—yearn to distance, if not totally obliterate, the personal and empathic affectual responses from myself and the audience to the act of mourning; if asked to define the world of this performance in one word it would be *artificial*. Obliterating the idea that any of the events occurring in this performance are “*real*”, I want to heighten the metatheatrical nature of the work in directing and design as a way of metaphorically “*making it plastic*”.

Solidifying a theoretical and practical directorial approach which could offer this level of emotional dissonance between performance and reception, I was drawn to Bertolt Brecht and his controversial theory of “*verfremdungseffekt*”, or alienation / estrangement effect (Jameson 10). Analyzing the theatrical power of this technique, I draw comparison with its use in film in order to construct the surreal and dreamlike worlds of two directors whose works have influenced my processes of worldbuilding and storytelling: David Lynch and Lars von Trier. Examining specific works of each director, I identify two techniques I want to employ in the construction of directed, designed, and performed artificiality: (1) insertion of narrative and visual incoherence, abstract, and absurdity, and (2) exposing the mechanics of worldbuilding and storytelling.

The atmospheres produced Lynch’s films are often described as “surreal” and “nightmarish” due to their sporadic and unpredictable narrative structures (Lim 16). Unlike traditional representations of fantasy or magical realism in film, the surreal images and characters in Lynch’s film are rarely provided with any narrative logic or cohesion—characters and scenes seemingly “popping up out of nowhere” (Criswell). My interest in Lynch’s resistance to narrative logic, contextualization, and overall plot cohesion brings me back to its earlier influence on my object design: the ability to conjure dreamlike sensations of the uncanny. Lynch’s work thrives in the abstract, absurd, and incoherent and it is this defiance of traditional plot structures which troubles audiences perceptions and inevitably their ability to sympathize with any particular character or story being witnessed—a reaction which Lynch applauds. It is

this indulgence in visual and structural incoherence which allows Lynch to manifest vivid netherworlds which appear like reality but act under distinctly different rules where anything is possible. This liberty from form and coherence is what inspires the construction and presentation of my own artificial dreamscapes and how they could manifest on stage.

One of Lynch's most iconic dissonances from reality and audience expectation comes in his insertion of musical performances which provide little to no context or consequence for the plot but enhance the disquieting atmosphere of worlds he constructs. In *Blue Velvet* (1986) the plot centres around the mysterious discovery a human ear in a field and the wild investigation that ensues but on several occasions characters seem to break out into song and dance for no apparent reason (Figure 23). Apart from providing a fleeting glimpse into these characters'—and Lynch's—psyche, these “*play within a play*” moments provide jarring shifts in tone and pace. Witnessing these performances, we—like the characters—must watch patiently as the plot is momentarily paused in order to indulge in the musical splendour. When the song is over the audience is left waiting for the explanation or significance of this performance to come but it never does; meaning is often hidden if not completely nonexistent. These absurdity of these musical moments often offer comedic relief to the horrific nature of the worlds they inhabit—intimate and strange moments heightening the performer/audience relationship which I seek to incorporate into my own performance:

Absurdity is what I like most in life, and there's humor in struggling in ignorance. If you saw a man repeatedly running into a wall until he was a bloody pulp, after a while it would make you laugh because it becomes absurd. (Lynch 2)



Figure 23: Characters singing in *Blue Velvet* (1986) directed by David Lynch.

Apart from their odd musical additions, the characters in Lynch's absurd dreamworlds often behave in uncanny and inhuman ways making them appear more alien than human. His unique directorial approach purposely troubles the internal rhythm of his performers by offsetting naturalistic approaches to speech, gesture, and response time. Subsequently, these intentional glitches in human action cause the performer to appear robotic, alien, or monstrous in their incoherent and unpredictable behaviour: ie. speaking backwards or in an extremely high-pitched voice, bellowing demonic laughter, or disquieting staccato speech patterns. My interest in this unique approach to human behaviour is its inherent collaboration between directorial style and performer ability to distance and distort human reality—a infusion I challenge myself to explore in my own work. Attempting to embody my own vision of a “*living mannequin*” through my foundational character body and icon transformations, I aim to heighten and exaggerate my queer perspective on grieving and my absurdity of enacting Catholic Ceremony unceremoniously.

Another technique used to distance—or plasticize—an audience from the comfortable indulgence of “*believing*” the netherworld explored on stage or in film is the exposition of theatrical mechanics. Stripping the realist or naturalist veil from the performance, an audience is forced to bare witness to the methodical logic of staged worldbuilding and storytelling. While this technique is often jarring in a traditional theatre setting, it is common in the design and curation of performance art—a troubling play with form and affect I wish to explore in my ongoing work. An example of this dissonance and heightened metatheatricality is seen in the scenography of Lars von Trier's *Dogville* (2003). Although the film's plot follows the mysterious arrival, refuge, and eventual rejection of one woman, Grace, in a small town, the audience watching is kept sceptical and critical of empathy for the events occurring are all staged in a barren warehouse soundstage (Figure 24). Houses completely deconstructed and street names stencilled across the floor, the artificial nature of their world is a stark and resonant contrast to the brutality of these small town characters who brutally assault and torment Grace. In this way Trier highlights his God-like construction and direction of the gruesome story being told and brings new meaning to my earlier introspection of “*man-made monster*”.

Beyond the metatheatrical style of his scenography, Trier highlights the structural underbelly of his storytelling and reveals the intentions of each scene before they even unfold. Sliced into “nine chapters and a prologue”, the titles and descriptions of each chapter flash across the scene between the onstage action (Figure 24). My interest in the insertion of these chapters as a mode of audience / performer dissonance connects to their ability to “*dissect*” the work into particular fragments—much like my desire to dissect the plastic into object, body, and ritual. Exposing the mechanics of wordbuilding and storytelling, Trier exemplifies the entanglement of theatre, film, and performance art—the warehouse

soundstage evoking a makeshift gallery space—alienating an audience from solely emotional affect and encouraging active critical processes of thinking and questioning his artmaking. Interested in similarly blurring the lines between thinking and making, I draw inspiration from his exposition and narrative dissection as ways of delineating and structuring my own performance score on stage.

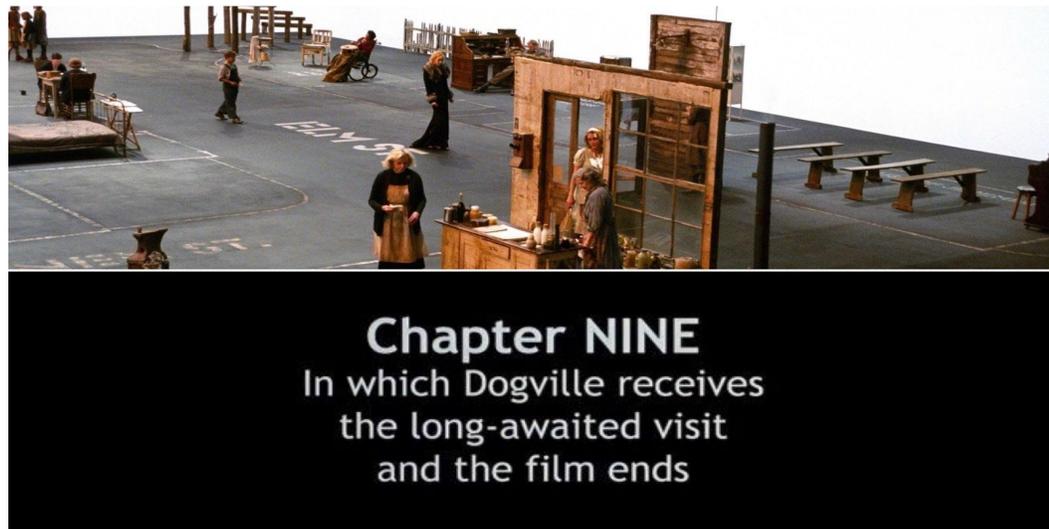


Figure 24: Examples of the Lars von Trier's techniques of metatheatricality in *Dogville* (2003).

Having critically analyzed and researched each director and their metatheatrical techniques, I constructed my own directorial approach to manifesting an artificial dreamworld. This approach focused on mirroring various structures, scenes, styles, and techniques used in each of the director's artworks while integrating my own references—pulling from all of the artists mentioned in the preceding chapters and more—in order to build a shattered skeleton of stimuli to pull from. Restricting myself to one rule—the story of funeral must be told in four parts with four characters—I liberated myself to the chaos and incoherence of my own queer imagination. Through reflection on my research and investigations up until this point, I outlined a network of images and ideas that inspired me (Appendix C) and began exploring how each could be adapted, transformed, and manipulated in order to further develop the dramatic action on stage.

This introspective process of storyboarding and worldbuilding demonstrated a new and exciting challenge in my creative process and helped me to distinguish the unique particularities and peculiarities of my hybridity as performer / director / designer. The culminating storyboard—amalgamated with the dramaturgical score and character structure—laid the foundation for specific decision making in the rehearsal room which inevitably selected the additional props, sound, set, and light design.

Chapter 3.3: Sound Design

I have a machine in my throat that gets into many people's ears and affects them... There's something about my voice that makes them see all the sadness and humor they've experienced. It makes them know they aren't too different; they aren't apart.

— Judy Garland

Sound design is a vital element to how I build stories and the worlds they inhabit. Drawn to the eerie soundscapes of Lynch's films or the haunting echoe of Judy Garland's cries in *The Wizard of Oz*, sound manifests tone and can transform audience perception of stage action. The similarities and dissonances in the use of sound versus music are broad and complex especially in moments when the two conceptions blend and fuse together—a scream becomes a melody, a lullaby becomes a gurgling spasm. Applying the directorial research I explored in *Artificial Dreamworld*, I sought to design and curate a selection of sounds *and* music which would explore one of the highlighted techniques used to alienate an audience and construct an artificial dreamworld: auditory incoherence, absurdity, and abstraction. Drawn to the crux of the two words—"artificial and "dream"—I employed sound design as a tool to establish narrative tone, distort audience expectations through anempathy, and orchestrate the role of time.

The first decision I made about sound design of my stageworld was that I—as performer—would never speak. This decision arose in the desire to continue to distance my personality as an artist from the characters being embodied and to play with the expectations of theatre and performance art. While the removal of spoken text is rare in Western theatre, it is more common in performances which relate in some way to ritual enactment including Butoh, Kathakali, and performance art (Schechner 43). The severance of my voice to my actions is also a jarring distortion of the expectation of human behaviour—a nod to the auditory uncanniness of Lynch's characters. Silence is a captivating and often uncomfortable soundscape to place an audience within and I am interested in harnessing it's affectual potency to increase the audience's attention on physical action and heighten the foreshadowed expectation of sound. Performing without text or live voice, my body acts as a vessel—or puppet—for the characters I embody to take control, transform, and manipulate.

Playing with the balance of sound and silence in performance, I examine how the source and nature of sound can affect an audience's perception of time, space, and emotional response in order to build an artificial dreamworld. Sound design for film and theatre can be separated into two distinct categories depending on the nature of their source: (1) diegetic, a sound whose source is visible and present to the action, and (2) non-diegetic, a sound whose source is neither visible or implied in the action (Stilwell 185). This delineation between the source of sound—deriving from the terms "*diegesis*" and "*mimesis*" (Elam 9)— is fascinating due to its implications in an audience watching and listening.

Whereas diegetic sounds aid in solidifying the logic of action in the real world (ie. someone is moving their lips and you hear a voice), non-diegetic sounds abstract and distort logic by incorporating sounds which aren't happening in real time (ie. a musical score or voiceover narration). While initially my sound design focused on the use of non-diegetic sounds to construct an artificial and dream-like atmosphere, I was drawn deeper into the idea of what happens when the boundary between the two is blurred—a notion film theorist Robynn J. Stilwell calls the “*fantastical gap*” (Stilwell 187). This precarious liminality jumps between stable states seamlessly and offers a transformative space for storytelling and wordbuilding to evolve:

These moments do not take place randomly; they are important moments of revelation, of symbolism, and of emotional engagement...these stories have taught us how to construct our phenomenological geography, and when we are set adrift, we are not only uneasy, we are open to being guided in any number of directions. (Stilwell 200)

Seeking to direct and redirect the audience in a labyrinth of perceptions and associations, I have incorporated a variety of music which compliment and contrast the action on stage. Resisting the “alliance of empathy with the underscore” (Stilwell 198), I selected artists whose songs’ tone and pace alongside their correlating action produce “*anempathy*”, a term used to describe sound or music which “exhibits indifference to current tone, emotion, or plot-point” (Chion 8). Returning to Chapter Two: *The Object*, in which I describe the disturbing coupling of joyful music with autoerotic asphyxiation in *The Leftovers*, I am captivated by music which actively defies an audience’s expectation of empathetic tone—an upbeat song playing while someone is being brutally attacked or a slow melancholic lullaby playing while someone orgasms on screen. My interest in anempathy is its symbolic portrayal of artificiality in a story, a technique which often enhances feelings of “tragic apathy and insignificance” (Chion 9). The sounds and songs explored in the rehearsal room were each selected in accordance to what action I was embodying on stage as ways to distort, distance, and alienate myself and the audience from the “*real*” and edge closer to a dreamlike netherworld.

Extending beyond musical incorporation as a tool for inducing anempathy, I had the desire to create one moment in the performance for spoken text—the eulogy. Steadfast to my decision not to include my own voice, I had to select what—or *whose*—voice would be channeled in order to perform this ritual speech of grievance and praise. After toiling over many ideas to record family members or friends to use in the scene, I returned to the notion of the dream and what a queer reimagining of my grandmother’s eulogy would sound like. This reconceptualization of the speech inspired me to orchestrate a choir of what I called “*artificial matriarchs*”, characters of older women on stage or in film whose performative presence remind me of the spirit of my grandmother. Taking voice clips from various films

and recorded performances, I compiled a library of text bites to explore and play with in rehearsal. The unique sound of each of these characters' voices was delightful to listen to but jarring and discordant when fused together. Pulled from varying narrative contexts, the compilation exemplified a powerful portrayal of auditory incoherence and absurdity.

The final auditory design element I included in the performance was the use of distortion in the volume of diegetic sounds in order to disturb the emotional associations between my performance and the audience and expose the mechanics of theatre technology. While the volume of diegetic sounds are often set to mirror their perception in reality—ex. a dog barks outside and we hear it faintly—increasing or lowering the volume of a particular sound, even with the source visible on stage, induces an unsettling and heightened acknowledgement of omniscient theatricality (Tan 32). Extending the restriction of the use of my human voice to all vocal sounds, I chose to design and curate all the sighs, cries, screams, and coughs used in the performance as recorded sounds with either overly amplified or reduced sound levels. The desire for discordance in the volume and source of the sound aided in the representation of my body as an artificial character and reassured an audience witnessing that every sound heard was a strategically orchestrated technical element and never an impulsive or improvised action. Muffled cries reverberating at high volume or barely audible crackling of flames, the incoherent and absurd nature of the sounds in the performance helped to balance the presence of my body as a performer by making the audience hyper aware of my role as a director and designer.

Orchestrating each of the sounds—music, voices, sound effects—into an auditory underscore, I explored how the length, pace, and transition between each would affect the role of time in my performance. Alongside distorting the audience's perception of time and space, the underlying order of sounds offered a concrete timestamp for which my actions could be overlaid and constructed within. In this way I began to conceptualize sound as an additional character—or narrator—performing and directing the length and pace for each part of the funeral ritual. Organizing this duet into a preset order of cues, I let sound take the lead and my performer body following suit—if I stopped or fell out of beat, the sound would continue progressing with or without me. The decision to preset my soundscape came about initially as a restriction in technical availability—I was working alone and had no one to cue to the performance while rehearsing—yet ultimately became a potent dramaturgical structure which challenged the infusion of my roles as performer *and* director. Troubling the duet, the ongoing rehearsal process was built upon simultaneously building *and* practicing sound cues and became a teetering dance which demanded extensive time commitment, attention to detail, and a hyper awareness of how time and pacing affects my own body in performance.

Chapter 3.4: Set and Light Design

Nature is Satan's church.

— Lars von Trier

Scenography is often the first design element that comes to mind when I begin worldbuilding. Imagining what a particular performance world may look like in the space often helps to lay the foundation for what dramatic action and other designs could compliment and contrast this scenic atmosphere. Acknowledging this preferential or hierarchical process of designing, I was challenged early on to “resist the temptation to see the final product” and instead invest in the mercurial period of *becoming*—researching and investigating. Resisting the allure to build my scenic foundation first, I chose to imagine the process of thinking and making as a way of laying out all the puzzle pieces without knowing what the final image would come to be. Frustrated by the slow and cyclical nature of my progress—changing my mind between forms and structures repeatedly—I often found myself drifting back into the construction of the final image only to remind myself of the significance of this objective: new ways of making.

After completing the extensive research and aesthetic investigation period, the process of designing—and ultimately constructing—the set and light design was conceptualized through three ideas: (1) the audience as scenography, (2) the objects as scenography, and (3) the emptiness as scenography. The decision to focus on these ideas for the conceptualization of the space was to explore the visual metaphors for bridging theatre and performance art, expose the mechanics of performative storytelling, and highlight the plastic object and embodied action as focal centrepoints of the work. Merging processes of visual rendering and spatial exploration, I curate and design the final scenography of the performance world through the exploration of audience participation, scenic orientation, object design, and minimal lighting.

Examining the Joe G. Green Studio Theatre (JGG) I was provided with for my thesis performance, I immediately highlighted the inherent restrictions of the space that would ultimately affect the process of conceptualization and constructing the scenography. Reconciling all the technical and spatial restrictions, there was one in particular that proved the most challenging—or insightful—which was the orientation of the space as a proscenium structure with a large immovable four-tiered audience riser at one side. Although the easiest—or most obvious—approach to this arrangement would be to use the risers for audience seating and the delineated “stage space” as foundation and backdrop for the performance, I had no interest in situating my performance in this traditional structure. Seeking to both integrate the audience into the scenography and highlight the exposition of theatrical mechanics, I chose

to reverse the arrangement so that audience would be seated on the ground stage space facing the usual audience risers (Figure 25). The performative playing space is situated in the inbetween where the borders between audience and stage is blurred, if not completely obscured. This arrangement forces the audience to bear witness to the exposed construction of the theatrical space—empty risers, technical booth, and illuminated exit doors—always reminding them that this *is* a theatre. Situating the audience on the same level as the stage also immerses the audience as active participants in the performance unfolding.

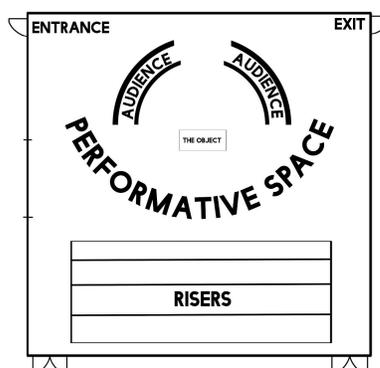


Figure 25: Initial rendering of audience / performative space arrangement in the JGG Theatre.

With the arrangement of audience and performative space set, I began to conceptualize who the audience—bodies and chairs—could be an integral part of the scenography of the artificial dreamworld. Inspired by the iconography of audience seating in the Catholic Church, I chose to curate the audience seating in a ground-level proscenium structure with an elevated backdrop and an aisle down the centre. Although this arrangement offered an inspiring platform for audience integration into the scenographic landscape, I wanted to push the visual incorporation of their bodies further—if I was performing a funeral, they needed to *look* like an audience witnessing a funeral. The decision to say that audience members attending must wear “mourning dress” was a literal way of stylizing the visual iconography of the mass of bodies in the room and symbolically incorporating them as characters into the performance. Returning to the conception of the dreamworld, I wanted the scenography of what I was witnessing as a performer to be as strategically directed and curated as what they, as audience, were bearing witness to. The dramaturgical and scenographic curation of bodies demanded that audience members acknowledge themselves as culpable and participatory agents in the construction of the stageworld and that much like my inability to perform “*faithfulness*”, their inability or indecision to perform “funeral goers” would be scrutinized.

Resisting the urge to fill the theatre space with large scenic elements to evoke the appearance of the dreamworld, I chose to strip back the scenography to the bare minimum and focus on the objects—or

props—used in the performance as visual and imaginary worldbuilding tools. Similar to the use of costume as a transformative medium to embody character and enact ritual, I stripped the space bare in order to create a blank canvas to which the discarding of objects used in the performance—crumpled tissues, rose petals, rosary beads—would slowly build up and transform the scenography of the space; a landfill of waste encircling the dead. Additionally I incorporated four stagnant objects which would remain upstage of the plastic body for the entirety of the performance; each object an icon representing one of the four characters embodied: an umbrella, a folding chair, a corded lamp, and an umbrella (Appendix E). The rest of the objects in the performance would be stored inside my foundational Leftover costume and extracted before use and eventual discardment throughout the performance—an ode to *Interior Scroll* and *I'm Every Woman*. At the end of the performance, the fragmented heaps of objects and costumes across the floor will trace the history of the ritual enacted much like how Chucky's stitches symbolize the impressionable surface of violence, the empty theatre space becomes an impressionable cavity to be filled and filthed. Exiting the performative space, the plastic body is exhumed while the waste is left to haunt.

The final scenographic element I sought to explore—and expose—was the use of light. Rather than designing the use of light as a way to fill space—a choice I most found myself reverting to in earlier processes—I made the decision to accentuate the emptiness of the space. Although an extensive grid of theatre lights were provided to me in the use of the JGG, I made the decision that each light and its source must be visible and present in the performance action in order to acknowledge and remind the audience, and myself, of the performative nature of the work. Relying on the use of exposed practicals, I chose instruments which are most often used in the construction and rehearsal of theatrical work rather than presentation: work lights. These instruments—unlike the plethora of professional instruments hung in the grid—are not subtle or obscured in their physical aesthetic presence and their restricted flexibility in illumination is dominating, isolating, and obstructive. Returning to investigations in *The Body*, the ambient scenographic nature of these lights highlighted presence *and* absence simultaneously and highlighted the construction / rehearsal process rather than the final presentation.

Stripping the theatre space of scenographic decoration or spectacle, I sought to unveil and dissect its technical skeleton literally *and* symbolically. Functioning as a symbolic autopsy of my performance design, the decision to postpone scenographic conceptualization until after rehearsal and investigation process served as a troubling but inevitably educational experience. The culminating scenography including arrangement, immersion, objects, and lighting, was unlike anything I had ever designed before and taught me that in waiting to conceive of these elements vital insights into their role in the performance were unfolded and exposed.

An Epilogue: Reflection

I am more interested in the failures than the so-called successes. I have never cared for entertaining anyone.

— Vaginal Davis

Today is Easter Sunday (April 21st, 2019), and I have just finished sweeping the final remnants of my performance from the JGG at York University. This past Thursday night I welcomed a full house of macabrely-dressed funeral goers into the theatre to witness my performance of the *The Funeral*, and the experience was transcendent. In the week leading up to the performance, I endured an incredibly enlightening adventure of theatrical preparation which took all the work (practical and theoretical) I had completed up until this point and put it to a series of organizational, presentational, and ultimately—performative tests. This short and fleeting period of pre-performance preparation became the ultimate challenge in my thesis development as all the questions and conundrums I had been meditating on for many months demanded real and physical culminations—many of which I was wildly unprepared to tackle, and yet I did. The subsequent epilogue functions as a summarizing diary of the various challenges and insights which arose in this final part of the creative process and what reflections can be made in order to offer further *food-for-thought* for my artistic future.

Individual hybridity (or how I learned to produce alone)

It was not long into my first day working inside the theatre—after having loaded in all the props, costumes, scenic items, and technical supplies—that I found myself irrevocably terrified at the magnitude of work that had to be done. Although the inevitable anxiety of “*tech week*” is something I am quite familiar with in my experience with mounting theatre productions, I have never done it alone. I embarked on this project knowing that I would have to take on multiple roles in the process—dramaturge, director, designer, performer—and took ample consideration for how the embodiment of each role may affect my own creative process of thinking and making, but there was one role I blatantly overlooked: the producer.

After having spent many months researching and organizing the “*dream*” for the final performance, the subsequent load-in and technical set up forced me to take on new managerial and administrative position in the process which quickly overshadowed my creative thinking. Unlike the other artistic roles I had been exploring up until this point, my work as a producer challenged myself in two new and insightful ways: time and space. With only four days to transform the JGG into an artificial dreamscape, I quickly organized a series of ever-evolving tasks to complete in order to best adapt and mutate the space into an environment in which my vision could thrive. Shifting chairs and flickering

lights, I bounced back and forth between various arrangements and configurations with little to no satisfaction. It was not until I stepped back and decided that I needed an outside eye on the process in order to better grasp how to go forward. The introduction of the outsider to the process not only helped to solidify decisions and squander doubts I had, but allowed me to temporarily relinquish full control of the production; a necessary liberation in order to reignite my creative imagination.

Although I contemplated the ways in which my artistic roles throughout the process may shift and entangle, it was not until I embodied this individual hybridity as a producer that I realized the necessity of a form (or framework) for these shifts to be structured within. Simultaneously organizing time *and* space, I had to structure how and when I should inhabit these various roles, and with the transformation of the space, when it was necessary to postpone—or completely avoid—embodying them at all. Setting limitations and restrictions to the balance of these roles allowed me to focus my attention on one task at a time with the necessary perspective in mind—organizing lights and sound like a stage manager, selecting make-up and costumes as a designer, scheduling run-times and rehearsal slots as a performer, taking performance / storytelling notes as a director, etc.

Addressing my initial objectives in this project, I sought to find a process in which I could entangle and mutate my own approach to thinking and making by shifting and fusing artistic roles and this culminating installation and performance period allowed me to do just that. Outlining a particular structure for artistic embodiment with strict relation to limited time and space challenged my hierarchical process of making and taught me what rules, organizations, and languages are necessary for successful producing in my own artistic process. Being a producer taught me that creative hybridity does not need to be mercurial, overlapping, and everflux, but can in itself maintain a order of separate—yet dependant—multitudes.

Returning to the structural component of my multi-/interdisciplinary objective, this experience taught me about what similarities and dissonances arise in the production of performance art, installation art, and theatre. The most significant dissonance I found was the use of light as the majority of performance artists and installation works I had referenced were using bleak, cold, full lighting to illuminate the full area of performance while the theatrical instruments I was using created isolated pockets of lit areas. While the light in performance art often leaves the stage feeling bare and exposed, theatre leans toward fragmentation of space with architectural shadows and spectacular—almost magical—highlights. This dissonance extends itself to sound design as performance art often relies on little to no pre-recorded sound and theatre outlines a highly orchestrated soundscape of cues and music. In both light and sound design I found my familiarity with a richness of a theatrical approach often overshadowing—even dominating—the raw and “*poor*” nature of performance art production.

Finding the core of every image (or reduction as a form of reclamation)

At the heart of this production, there are four core images: (1) the woman with the plastic bags, (2) the priest at the altar, (3) a witch with a lamp for a mic, and (3) a goblin with a shovel. Throughout the design process I have experimented and investigated these images through various aesthetic styles, mediums, and theoretical approaches and yet the images themselves remained constant—if only in my imagination. Although I had rehearsed and selected the final production of these images through object and costume manipulation, I found the scale and detail of these images constantly shifting, expanding, and distorting until finally, at brief moments while performing, I could not see the initial images anymore. While this distancing and exploration beyond the initial stimuli was exciting and did bring about new ideas and images to embody on stage, I found myself losing traction of my initial objectives and why these images in particular were so potent to the work.

In a series of discussions with my thesis supervisor reflecting on the rehearsals in the JGG, I found myself skirting around the issue of minimalism vs. maximalism; I had a desire to manifest spectacle in the simplest way possible. Reflecting on how and in what ways the images I was imagining were being manifested on stage, I saw they were expanding and distorting—subsequently losing meaning—by the grandeur of the spectacle that surrounded them. The desire to create these spectacles of the images came in a personal fear of the audience’s reaction to these images, and the ever-present anxiety of what I call “*visual boredom*”; an image whose simplicity and stagnation is underwhelming and boring to an audience watching. Although this fear permeated my production process, its justification was shallow and assumptious and inevitably lead to the downfall and confusion of the necessary order of these images: minimalism, simplicity, and bluntness.

Returning to how and in what ways I was staging these images—the objects, costumes, manipulations, actions—I began to reduce and retract elements in a step by step process constantly asking myself: *what does this image need to do?* Resisting the urge to dwell too long in what the image looks like, I invested more in the intention of each image in order to reclaim the meaning and affect I earnestly believed each held in my own imagination, and in my desire to share them with the audience. This simple shift in methodology dramatically changed the performance process and allowed me to revisit these lasting images which a fresh and newly reinvigorated gaze. Quickly objects were discarded or replaced, costumes re-shifted and simplified, actions reduced and refined, and the core of the images began to blossom again. Both embodying and reflecting on the images, I recognized that my desire to make a spectacle of each had become a way to “*decorate*” rather than design. Reducing the images to their core, I instead maximized their intention rather than their appearance, their symbolism rather than their entertainment, their memory rather than their impact.

Removing the mask of theatricality (or re-finding myself through stillness and silence)

As I mentioned earlier in the sub-chapter on sound design, I established the structural limitation early in the work that the acoustic score of the whole performance would be pre-recorded and run in and of itself during the production—a challenge I narrowly accomplished my prize myself on its success. As I worked on the orchestration of this entangled soundscape for many weeks, it was thrilling to finally step back from the coding/cueing process and see how it manifested itself as a performance accompaniment. Alongside the quirky AI narrations of each part of the funeral and operatic scores for each character embodiment, I inserted a repetitive “*soundscape of transformation*”, a background sound which underscored my transition between the icons through discarding and extracting objects and costume items. This theatrical soundscape initially helped me to formulate a ritual of transition between the icons—slowly pulling the gloves from my crotch or methodically entwining the pearls from my neck—and yet these periods of transition became in themselves a *character*. It was not until dress rehearsal (the day before the performance) that I had others witness the performance and they too saw this confusion between the characters and this transitory presence which I was embodying with such vigor and ritual endowment—“*who is this new character and why are they so important?*”

With no interest in introducing a new character into the work, I quickly refocused my attention on these periods of transition and transformation and why I had chosen—as a director and a performer—to embody this ritual action both in performance and sound design. Meditating on these moments, I recognized that I was using the cover of theatricality in order to disguise and obscure my own identity and presence inside of the performance. While one of my thesis objectives has always been to fuse and mutate the borders between theatre and performance art, I had done so up until this point almost entirely from an aesthetic, or designer, perspective—not from a performer inhabiting these environments and embodying these characters. When asked who was enacting these transitions and transformations between the icons, the answer was simple: *me*.

Up until the dress rehearsal and the subsequent changes that followed, I had been afraid of permitting my own identity to penetrate the work. Throughout the thesis document I outline the various stylistic approaches and directorial decisions I made in the work in order to distance my own presence from the stage world yet gave little to no reasoning why or in what ways this was the best avenue for the work to be presented. Having selected a series of performance artists who use costumes and makeup to disguise their own identity on stage, I too found solace in this obscurity and yet lost my own truth and feeling in the process. Acknowledging this resistance to the uncomfortable presence of my own true identity on stage, I challenged myself once more to tackle this learning opportunity head-on: I removed all

the soundscapes in transitions, stripped the action of ritual embodiment, and presented myself as bluntly and truthfully as possible—inside (and yet *still* outside) performance; a metaphor for my own queer experience.

In the performance that followed these dramatic changes in the score and performative approach to the work, I found solace in these disquieting moments of transition. Stripped of the theatrical mask, these transitions were eerily discordant with the spectacle of the icon embodiment and served as potent reminders of the everpresent audiences' gaze. As I was performing I distinctly remember the feeling of these transitions as "*them looking at me not looking at them*", a potent symbiotic relationship between performer and audience comfort—they were comfortable as long as I did not look back, and I was comfortable as long as they were looking at me. These transitory moments ended up becoming the most precious and insightful aspects of the performance as they so eloquently constructed and dissected my feelings of being a queer artist splayed bare and vulnerable between transformations unable to speak or articulate any meaning to the event other than the truth of this is who I am in this moment.

An unlikely communion (or what the audience taught me while watching)

As mentioned earlier, one of the most unlikely lessons I would learn in the infusion of performance art and theatre is the transformative power of an audience. Although I had rehearsed and offered various opportunities for friends and colleagues to witness the work and offer feedback, I had rarely performed it *fully* for anyone but myself. Performing in front of a full audience offered the final transformation in the work from draft to finality. Suddenly, performing inside of the work, I became hyper-aware of how their gaze and transfer of energy was directly influencing how I performed—especially how I perceived and interacted with time and space. The collaborative flux between action and reaction—whether candid laughter or echoing gasps—forced me to rethink my own presence in the room and for the first time take authority in the leadership of a sacred communion of call and response: I moved; they gaze followed, I froze; their breath held. In future productions I am interested in further developing / experimenting / challenging the borders of audience interaction and exploring how this communion can be expanded and imploded in the continued entanglement between performance art and theatre.

Cremation; no fire (or why I cannot bare the flames)

The technical / dress rehearsal process was a period of everevolving transformation in the theatre space as objects and scenic elements were constantly being rearranged and reconfigured in new experiments between runs. It was not until these experiments in the JGG that various questions or design

challenges were able to be fully tackled and attempted in the room including: the construction of the grave, the configuration of the altar, and most significantly, the burning of the body. As I had outlined my interest in the symbolic cremation and then subsequent burial of the plastic body on stage, I struggled to manifest how and in what ways this image could be configured through the lens of the artificial dreamscape. Reconciling my attempt to bridge the world of theatre and performance art, I found myself returning to the question: *what is real and what is fake?*

In the thesis defence, the committee discussed the staging of the cremation I had performed (a melancholy durational section in which the Goblin threw a series of electronic candles onto the body from a distance) and how I had come to direct / design / perform this particular arrangement of the fire. Tackling the stage image directly, I earnestly admitted my inability to fully realize or mediate what this image's intention and meaning meant to the performance as a whole. Struggling with the aesthetic of "fakeness" vs. "realness", I had found myself providing only two options in the rehearsal process: (1) a hyper-realistic funeral pyre, or (2) a humorous abstraction of what this fire felt like in my imagination. The decision to stage the latter came not in a honest belief that this was the best solution to the design challenge but from an anxiety of time and technical resources which ultimately lead me to choosing the simplest staging I thought possible—but the monotonous repetition of throwing candles onto the body was and *is* not the only or the simplest solution, but rather the *easiest* in that moment of production anxiety.

Returning to the construction of that image in my defence and further reflection, I articulated that a third and more potent avenue of aesthetic and directorial investigation was missed, and one which I already outlined earlier in my reflection: the significance of what the image *needs* to do, not what it needs to look like. Acknowledging this significance, I outlined other ways I would seek to investigate the crematorial fire in future stagings including: (1) designing irrevocable damage or transformation, (2) the transfiguration of status of material, and (3) the necessity for the action to lay the foundation for the closing image. Each of these three points to further contemplate and possibly explore exemplify significant points of theoretical and practical research which I had attempted to stage in other images and yet failed to fully realize in the funeral fire itself.

Considering the resistance to investing in this fire and what the image of a burning body means both literally and performatively returns to another lasting fear and inability to fully realize in my creative work: indulging in the mess. In future performances and projects I hope to challenge myself to invest in getting my hands dirty and not just from a comfortable distance; *What would it do to the work to fully dance amongst the crematorial flames and swim amongst the graveyard soils? How would my work transform if I was unafraid of what it could become?*

Dissect this; dissect me (*or how this process has complicated the future*)

One of the most complicated objectives I set myself for this thesis project was to embark on a multidisciplinary research and experimentation process in order to more accurately articulate, formulate, and contextualize myself as a hybrid artist interested in exploring multiple—and often contradictory—fields of theory and practice. Reflecting back on the completion of this process, I do acknowledge many moments of success in attempting this entanglement and infusion including: interweaving extensive research in various fields and artistic mediums, incorporating multiple techniques and approaches to designing and performing simultaneously, and inevitably constructing a much broader and deeper contextualization of the artists and artworks which inspire my creative process. Although each of these successes has led me to a deeper understanding of how and in what ways I may formulate myself through hybridity, I have ultimately found myself with more questions than answers.

Reflecting on what was the biggest learning outcome for this thesis project, I highlighted the unexpected and yet incredibly illuminating complexity of processes towards thinking and making which arose and haunted my work. Having begun this process by acknowledging a desire for hybridity in my artwork *and* identity, at the beginning of this process I had no idea what it would mean to fully invest myself in this labyrinth of multitudes, contradictions, and entanglements which I find myself lost within presently. Seeking to dissect plastic in order to glimpse into my own queer identity, I found it dissecting me back—pressing and prying for answers which I was unable to conceive or even fully contemplate. The research and experiments I embarked upon demanded more than just the preconceived theoretical and practical investment I had imagined, but a degree of physical, psychological, emotional, and spiritual fueling in order to be fully realized. Repeatedly bifurcating my own identity and its delineation within multiple ways of working, I eventually relinquished the desire to structure myself within any in particular—or even multiple simultaneously—and did what I had ultimately sought to do in my earlier reflection: let myself exist within the mess.

Sitting here attempting to find the “*right words*” to summarize this thesis reflection, I feel how I felt in the final stage of the performance: raw, stagnant, and patient. I do not know what the future has in store for me or how and in what ways the experience of this thesis will manifest itself in my artwork—and lifework—to come, but unlike so many fleeting moments of this process, I am unafraid. I stand at the edge of the abyss, and like the plastic bag, slip into the wind of change to come.

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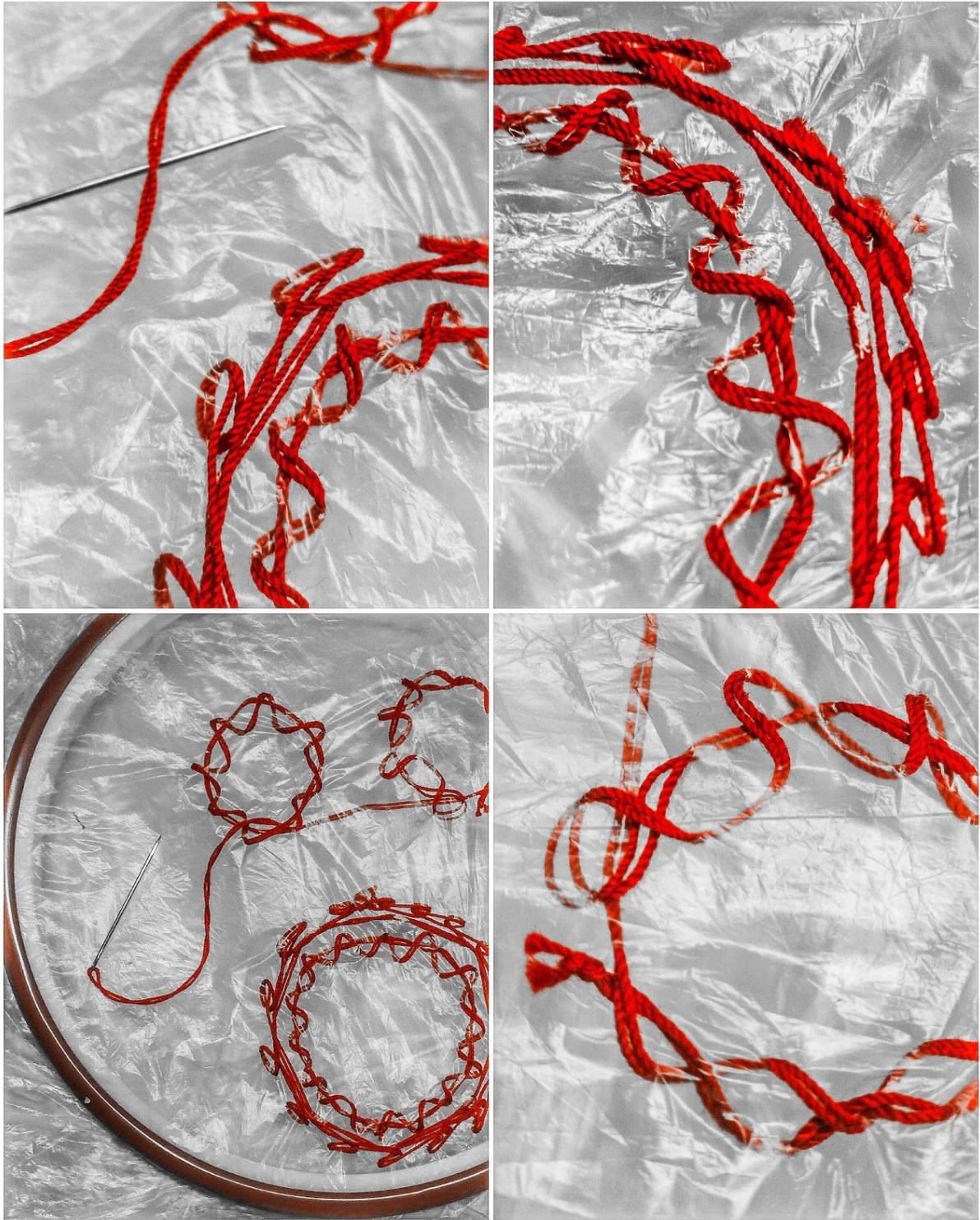
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Visual Sources

- Figure 1: Personal documentation by Lucas Olscamp.
- Figure 2: Personal documentation by Lucas Olscamp.
- Figure 3: Personal documentation by Lucas Olscamp.
- Figure 4: Personal documentation by Lucas Olscamp.
- Figure 5: Plastiglomerate photograph taken by
- Figure 6: Screenshots of *The Leftovers*. Dir. Damon Lindelof, Tom Perrotta. HBO Television Distribution. 2014., *You Were Never Really Here*. Dir. Lynne Ramsay. Amazon Studios. 2017.
- Figure 7: Diagram of uncanny valley taken from Mori, Masahiro. *The Uncanny Valley*. IEEE Robotics & Automation Magazine. 19 (2): 98–100. 2012. Print.
- Figure 8: Three photographs taken from Sherman, Cindy. *Untitled Horrors*. Hatje Cantz. 2013. Print.
- Figure 9: Photograph taken from seasons one, episode one of *Twin Peaks*. Dir. David Lynch. CBS Television. 1990-2017.
- Figure 10: Collage of photographs taken from *Matinee Theatre: Frankenstein (1957)*, *Edward Scissorhands (1990)*, *Seed of Chucky (2004)*, and *Batman Returns (1992)*.
- Figure 11: Screenshot of *Transfigurations in Samsara*. Dir. Ron Fricke. Performed by Olivier de Sagazan. Oscilloscope Laboratories. 2011.
- Figure 12: Collage of photographs taken from *Interior Scroll*. Carolee Schneemann. East Hampton, New York. 1975.
- Figure 13: Photograph taken from *I Miss You*. Franko B. Tate Modern, London. 2003.
- Figure 14: Photographs taken from VICE article on *Self-Obliteration #1*. Ron Athey. Ljubljana, Slovenia. 2011.
- Figure 15: Collage of photographs taken from video files and performance archive at Narcisster.com.
- Figure 16: Photographs taken from Weathers, Chelsea. *Christeene*. Art Lies. Published april 14 2013. Accessed Jan. 3 2019. Web.
- Figure 17: Photographs taken from *The Voluptuous Horror of Karen Black*. Kembra Pfahler. Emalin, London, 2016.
- Figure 18: Personal documentation by Lucas Olscamp.
- Figure 19: Personal documentation by Lucas Olscamp.
- Figure 20: Personal documentation by Lucas Olscamp.
- Figure 21: Collage of photographs taken from Monet, Dolores. *Fashion History: Mourning Dress and the Significance of Black Clothing*. Bellatory Fashion. Published Jan. 3 2018. Web.
- Figure 22: Personal documentation by Lucas Olscamp.
- Figure 23: Screenshots of *Blue Velvet*. Dir. David Lynch. Laurentiis Entertainment Group. 1986.
- Figure 24: Screenshots of *Dogville*. Dir. Lars von Trier. Filmek, 2003.
- Figure 25: Personal documentation by Lucas Olscamp.

Appendix A: Object Design



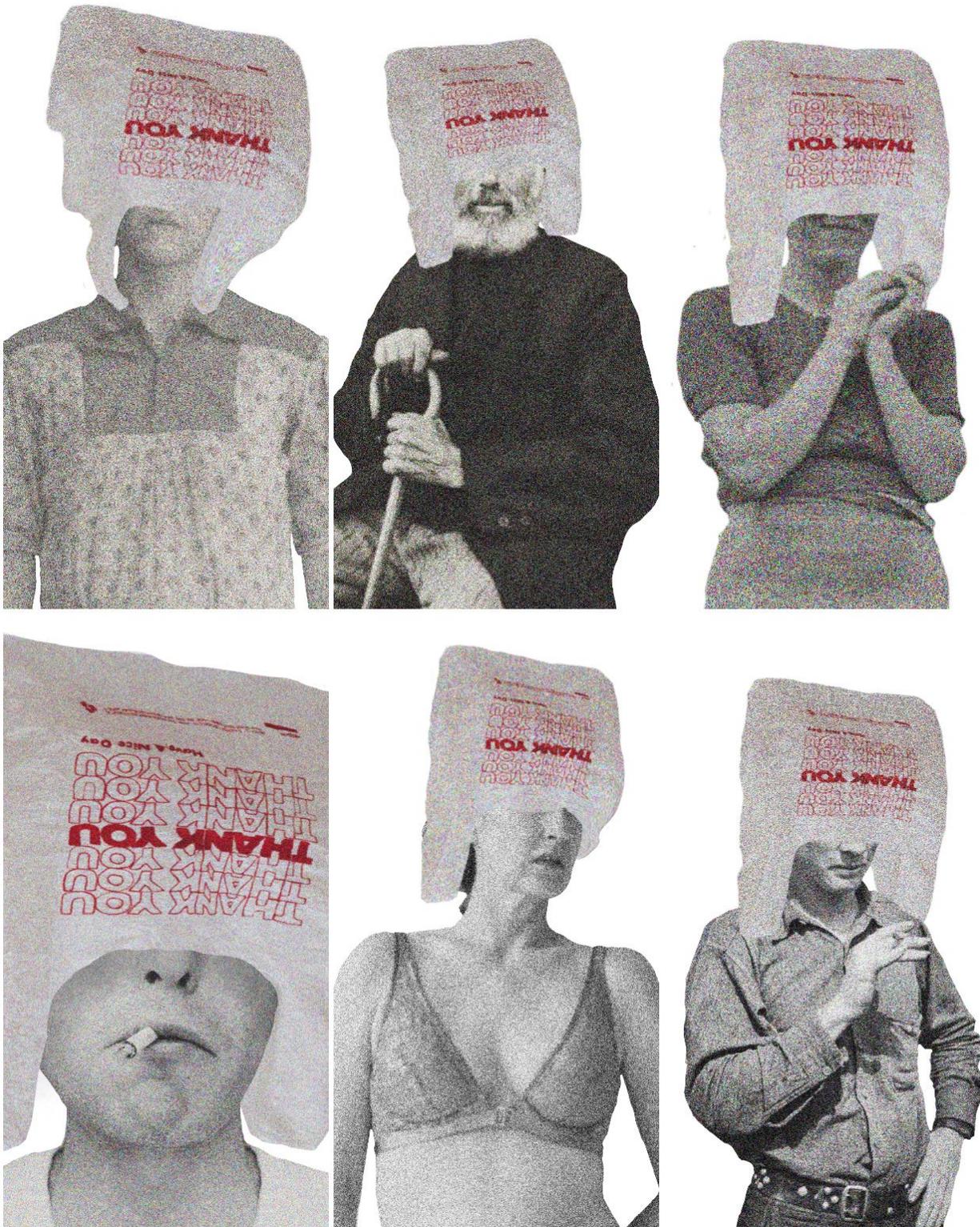
Documentation of experiments with various sewing patterns on plastic bags.



Documentation of investigation of sewing anatomical / humanoid features in the plastic bag.

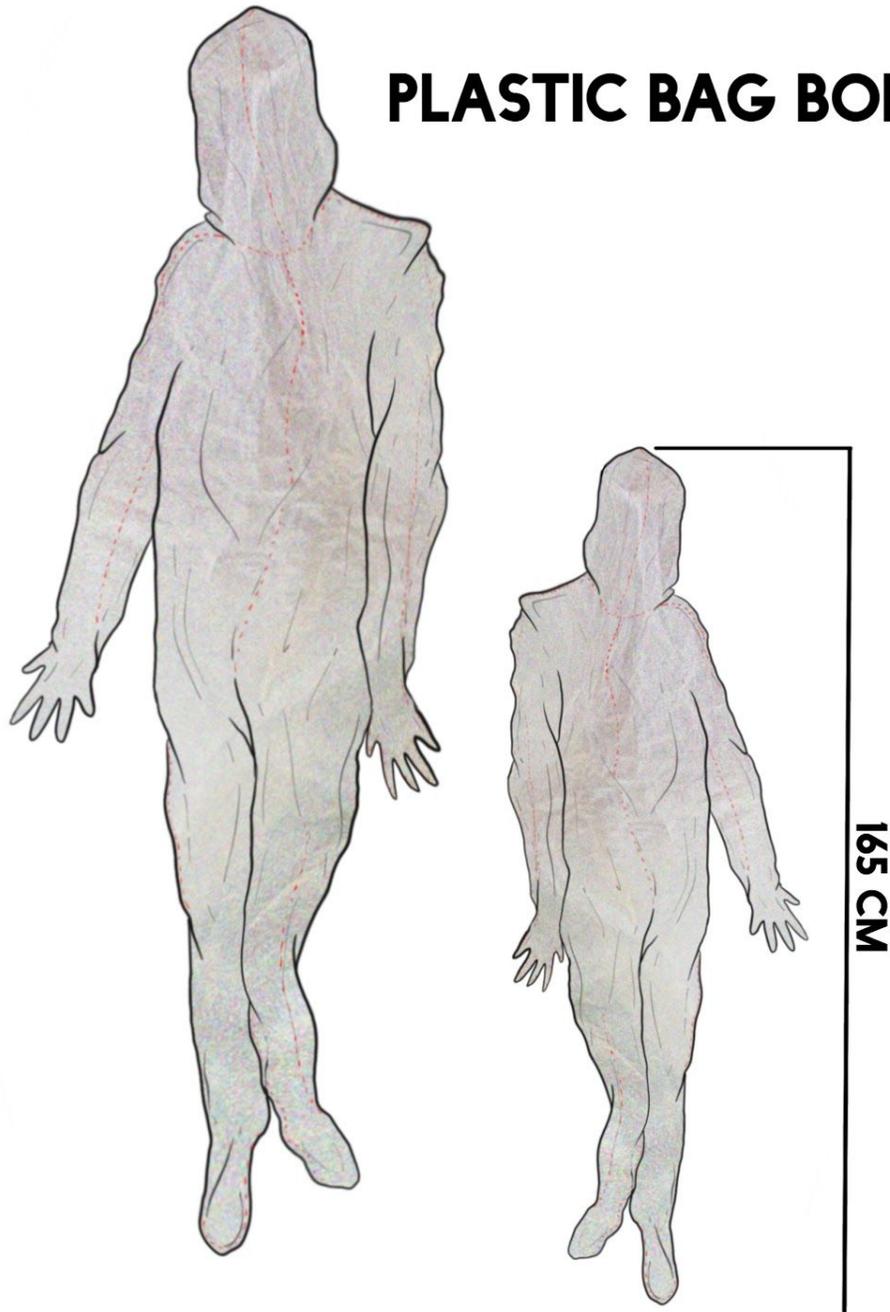


Compilation of references by various artists for the image of the plastic bag over the human head.



Various digital graphic manipulations of plastic bag over head by Lucas Olscamp.

PLASTIC BAG BODY



Luciano P.

Final design rendering of the Object.

Appendix B: Costume Design



Image references for the creation of the icon “The Priest”.



Image references for the creation of the icon “The Witch”.



Image references for the creation of the icon “The Leftover”.

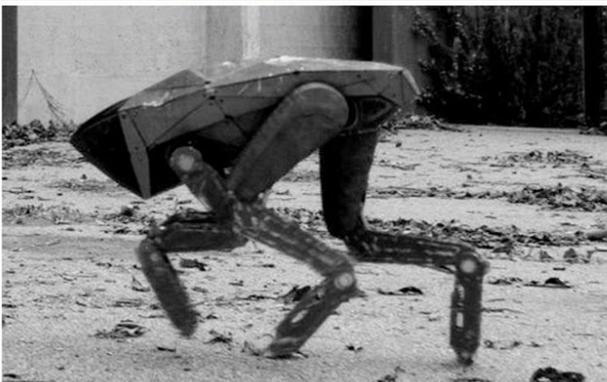
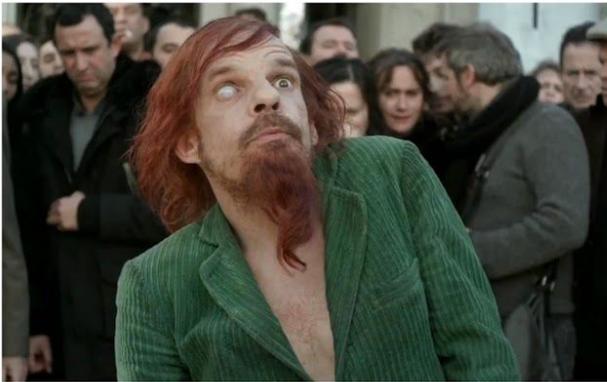


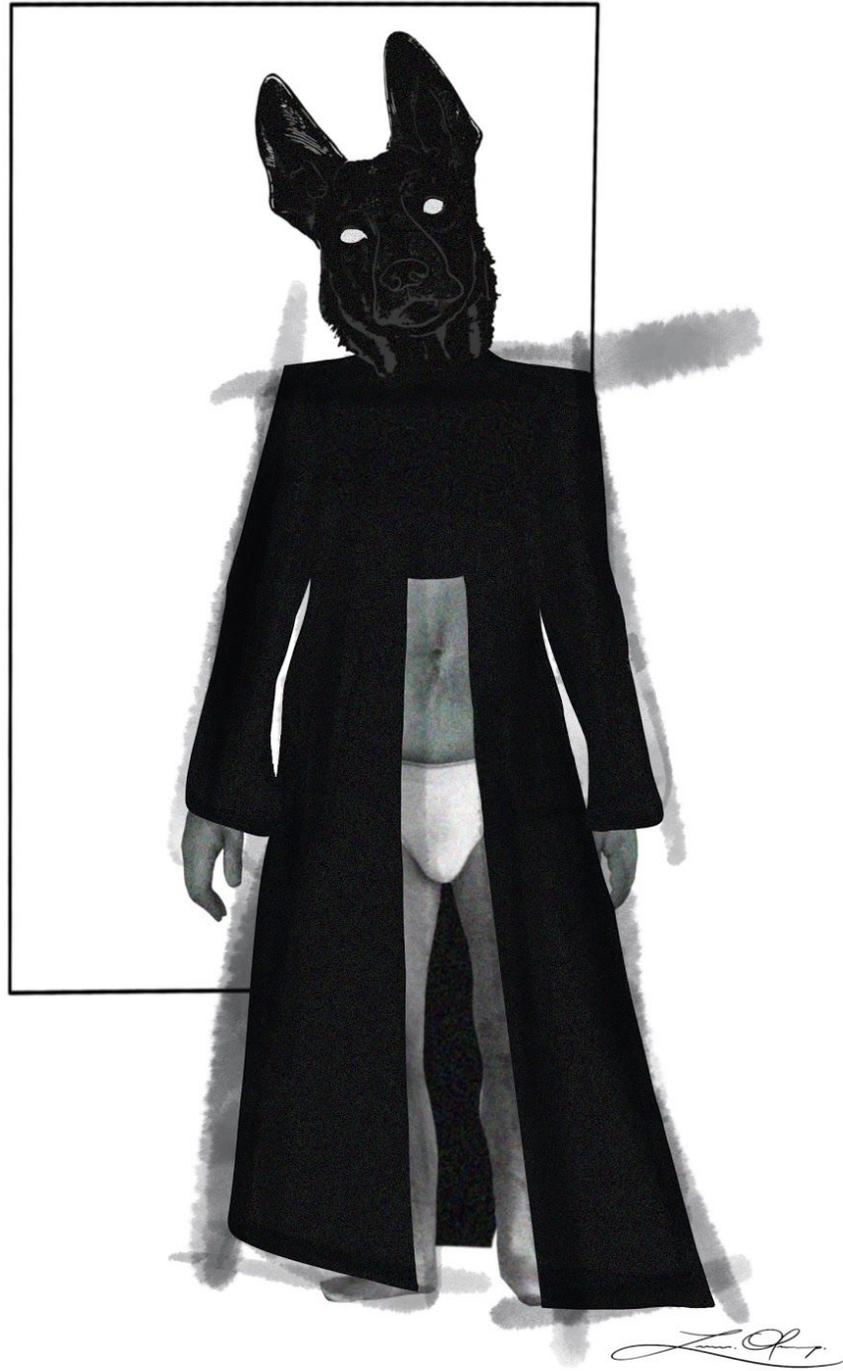
Image references for the creation of the icon "The Goblin".



Draft rendering of the Priest costume #1.



Draft rendering of the Priest costume #2.



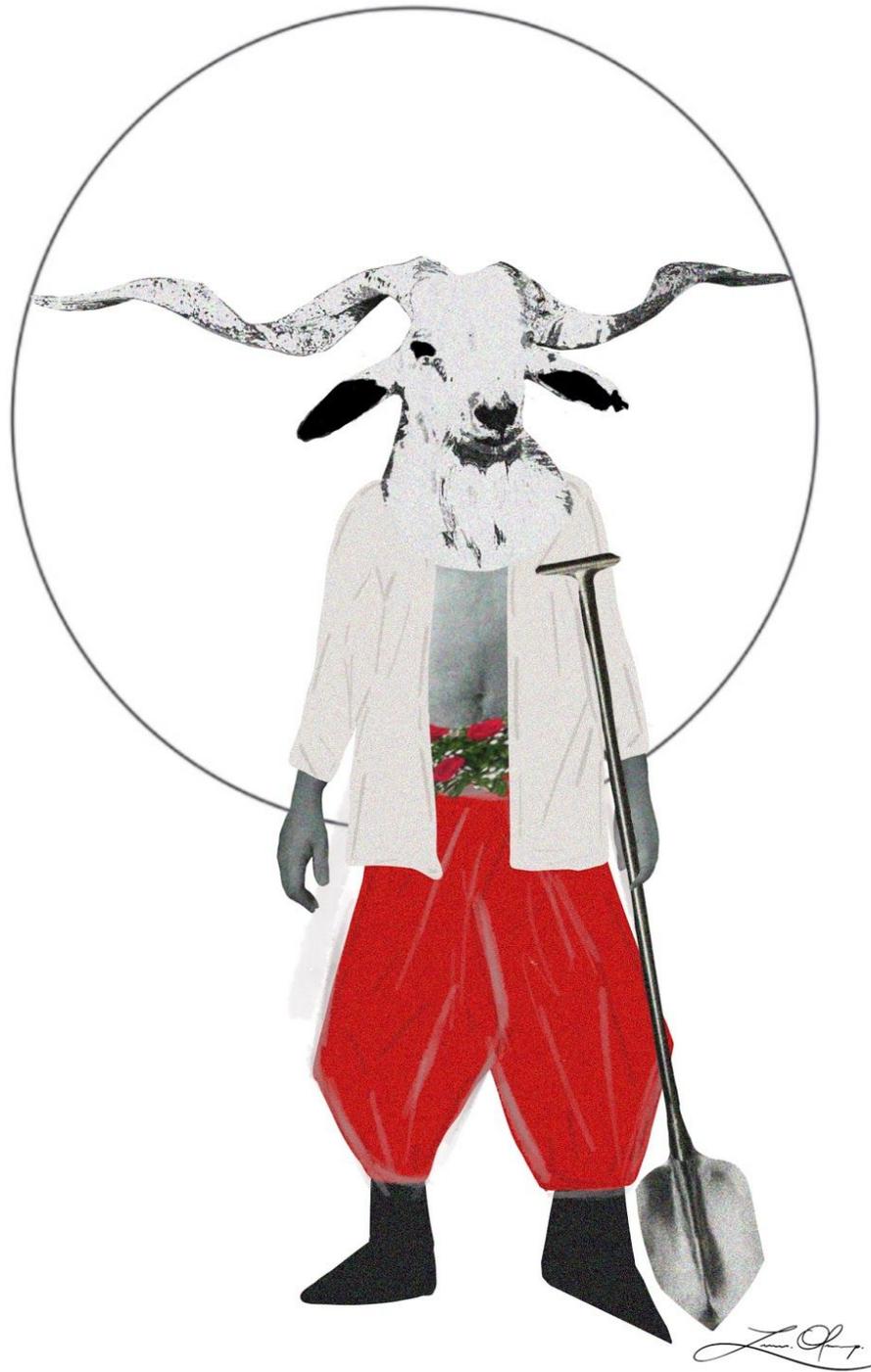
Draft costume rendering of the Priest #3.



Draft costume rendering of the Witch #1.



Draft costume rendering of the Witch #2.



Draft costume rendering of the Goblin #1.



Draft costume rendering of the Goblin #2.



Draft costume rendering for The Leftover.



Draft rendering of various costume explorations in shape and silhouette for The Leftover.

Appendix D: Sound Design

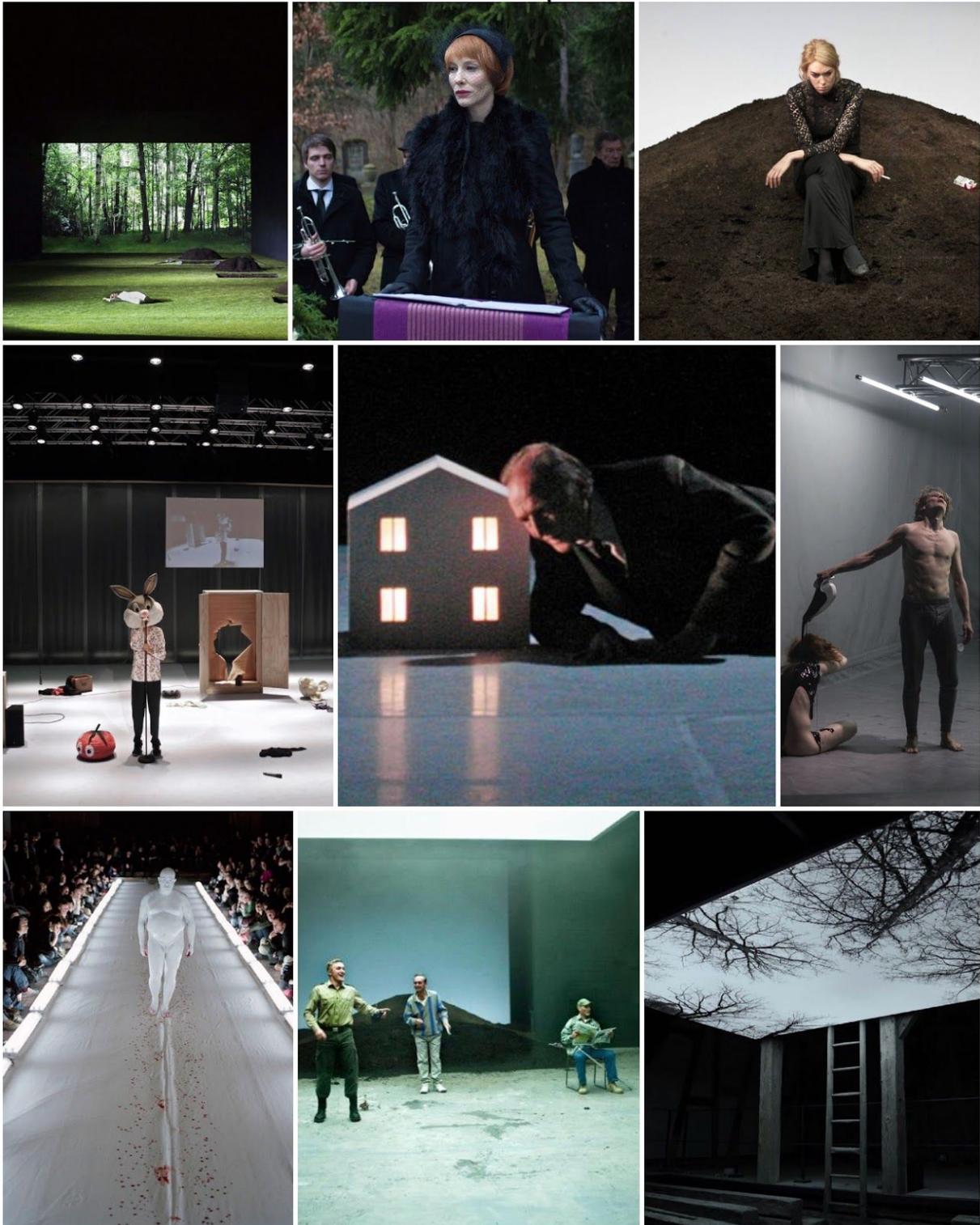
List of songs used in rehearsal / experimentation:

Goodbye by Apparat and Soap & Skin
Daylight by Antony Hegarty
Acid Rain by Lorn
Hallelujah by Leonard Cohen
Fast Slow Disco by St. Vincent
Dark Night of the Soul by Danger Mouse
And Light Shines by David Lynch
Tonight You Belong To Me by Patience and Prudence
In Dreams by Roy Orbison
Sycamore Trees by Jeremy Scott
Urchin by Arca
Ich Gehe Jetzt by Einsturzende -Neubauten
Two Weeks by FKA Twigs
End by Sigur Ros
Only Time by Enya
Departure by Max Richter
Cow Song by Meredith Monk
Blue Velvet by Bobby Vinton
Love is Blindness by Jack White
Slip Away by Perfume Genius
Dancing and Blood by Low
Mustn't Hurry by Fever Ray
Cherry by Chromatics
Condemnation by Julia Holter
He Would Have Laughed by Deerhunter
Trick of the Light by Public Memory
Keep Your Name by Dirty Projectors
Headache by Grouper
Mourning Sound by Grizzly Bear
Funeral Singers by Sylvan Esso

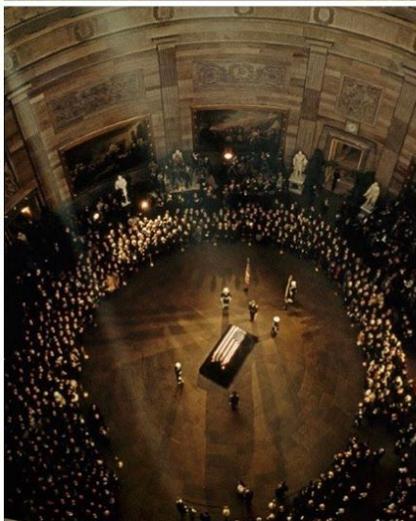
List of sources of audio clips used in rehearsal and performance:

- *Judy Garland Interview*
 - “I’ve never done a play…”
- *What Ever Happened to Aunt Alice?*
 - Opening scene quote “Sad”
 - The ending monologue “I’d make a very handsome pine tree”
- *Death Becomes Her*
 - Drinking the potion, eternal life scene
 - “She’s dead?”
- *Hocus Pocus*
 - “I Put A Spell On you” scene
- *Carrie*
 - Carrie’s mother kills Carrie and she retaliates
- *American Horror Story*
 - Constance mourns Adelaide
- *Mommie-Dearest*
 - Ending funeral scene, daughter talking to Joan
- *The Golden Girls*
 - Balance bids farewell to Big Daddy
- *Feud: Bette and Joan*
 - “We embalmed her body…”
- *Hereditary*
 - Opening eulogy speech at mother’s funeral
- *Harold and Maude*
 - Maude talking about life and death
- *Steel Magnolias*
 - The funeral scene
- *Angels in America*
 - Lullaby sung to Roy on his deathbed
- *Snowpiercer*
 - Tilda Swinton “This is death…”

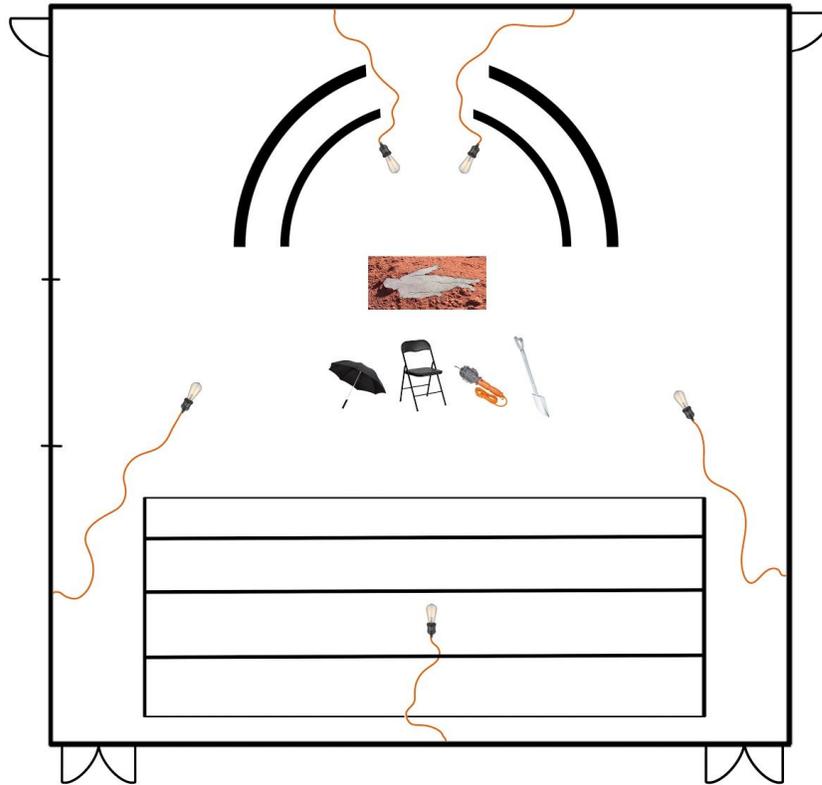
Appendix E: Set and Light Design



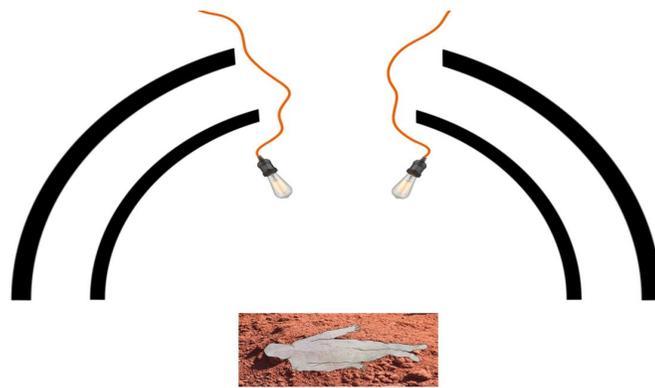
Visual moodboard for the symbolic scenography of the performative space.



Visual moodboard for the literal scenography of the performative space.



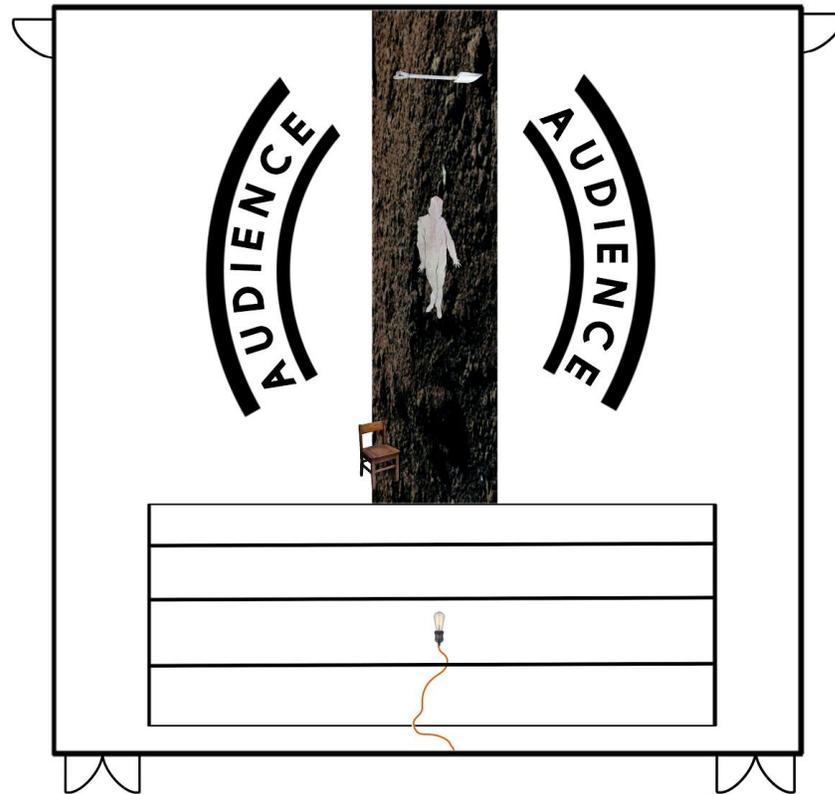
arrangement
 objects as
 scenography
 JGG Theatre
 opening
 bird's eye
 (above) and
 eye close up
 (below).
 on March
 2019



Rough
 of
 in the
 for
 image:
 full
 bird's

**Made
 19th,*





**Included post-performance*; this rendering of the scenic design and arrangement documents what changes arose in the space and how I chose to transform the curation of objects and materials in order to better reflect the shifting needs of the performance: (1) shift the audience from curved proscenium-style arrangement to curved alleyway in order to offer better sightlines for action happening on far ends of the playing space, (2) extend and emphasize the “runway” or corridor of space to provide more “visual foundation” for performance to happen atop of, (3) reduce / conceal the number of practical lights to accentuate the darkness in the space, and (4) include a small bench and wooden chair in order to delineate different performance spaces for the Priest and the Goblin.

Appendix F: Artist Statement

When I am asked to describe myself as an artist I find myself most often using the terms “*hybrid*” and/or “*fluid*” as essential qualities of my identity and practice. I use these terms not because I am compelled to construct myself as many things at once, but because I have no interest in being any one thing at any given point of time. Defining myself through incoherence, hybridity, and mercuriality, I seek to establish my practice in lineage with “*monster culture*”, a term Jeffrey Jerome Cohen describes as “disturbing hybrids who incoherent bodies resist attempts to include the, in any systematic structuration...a form suspended between forms that threatens to smash distinctions” (Cohen 6). Denoting myself as a monster, although arguably one still in the process of metamorphosis, aligns my work with other influential artists to my practice while selfishly indulging my childhood dream of one day being the beast that bit back.

Growing up I was told a plethora of narratives which were prescribed in order to educate me on the cruel realities of the “*real world*” I would one day become a part of. Whether listening to the monotonous retelling of biblical stories in weekly catechism classes or watching reruns of Disney’s *Hercules* (1997) during my Saturday morning cartoon sessions, I struggled to empathize with the protagonists—or so-called heroes—who dominated the storytelling. Severed monster heads in hand, I—unlike the other boys who surrounded me—could not see myself in their heroic stances, and instead found somewhere in the eyes of the slain beast. Although initially naive, it did not take me long to understand that the role of the monster in these stories was to embody the reality of terrors that threaten us as humans in this real world including, but not limited to: predators, disease, addiction, natural disasters, and most notably, death itself. On a basic level I understood why one would want to identify with the conquering of such inherent evils, but on a deeper level I saw in each of these monsters something more human and intrinsically misunderstood: their *strangeness*. Scapegoated as dangerous—even lethal—enemies of the human condition, I struggled to reconcile why these beasts, who looked nothing like the real world terrors they were symbolizing, could not coexist with humanity.

Although I hid my affinity for these strange creatures for many years, in fear of being identified as one of them (cue the decapitation sequence), their presence continued to haunt my creative imaginings. As an artist it was not surprising that soon their beastly visages began to rise up in the content of my work, including adolescent sketches of demonic hordes, theatrical performances of bacchic slaughter, or costumes inspired by the serpentine nature of gorgons. Monstrosity was a constant stimulus for artistic exploration because it provided an ample supply of imagery and storytelling to explore and because it helped me face my greatest fears from a safe and comforting distance. Familiarizing myself with the

creatures which had once lingered in my nightmares, I found myself recognizing the true source of my fears: those who sought to slay them.

Although I had spent a great deal of time and artistic energy exploring the nature of monsters in the content of my work, I have only recently begun to integrate the notion of monstrosity into the conception and construction of form *and* style in my arts practice. Challenging the patterns and predictability of my work, I sought to investigate how my education and upbringing had influenced my conceptualization of artmaking in order to dismantle and reform them. Having spent the majority of my adolescence under the gaze of two significant pedagogical orders—church and theatre—I was quite comfortable identifying and outlining the impertinent structures and processes necessary in each, but when asked to justify them my answers were slim to none. The organization of the church and theatre brought a distinct systematic order to the chaos of thinking *and* making, but they instilled strict limits and boundaries. Understanding this chaos as a form of monstrosity I sought to break free from the chains and unleash my own monstrosity; “the monster’s very existence is a rebuke to boundary and enclosure” (7).

Embarking on this graduate degree and the completion of my master’s thesis in performance design, I have finally found myself in a place where I can express my monstrosity openly and critically. Resisting the comfort of these systems, structures, and processes which have educated and influenced my artmaking, I indulge in the dissonance, difference, and incoherence of my own way of thinking *and* making, “the monster is difference made flesh, come to dwell amongst us” (6). In this project I attempt to bridge and entangle the form, content, and style of my work by introducing amalgamations of various areas of personal interest including: performance art, theatre, film, visual arts, eroticism, and environmentalism. I seek to manifest a symbolic melting pot in which the fusion of these ways of working—many directly conflicting and contradicting with the influential doctrines of church and theatre I grew up within—permit a safe and insightful space for discoveries to be made, lessons to be learned, and previous pedagogies to be *unlearned* and dismantled; “Through the body of the monster fantasies of aggression, domination, and inversion are allowed safe expression” (17).

Unleashing the beast which riles inside of me, I acknowledge the inspiration which comes in its liberation and the challenges which will inevitably arise in its creation. Monsters are all about asking difficult, and sometime unanswerable, questions. Pitting myself against my own process, I seek to reevaluate how I create in order to affect how I live:

These monsters ask us how we perceive the world, and how we have misrepresented what we have attempted to place. They ask us to reevaluate our cultural assumptions about race, gender, sexuality, our perception of difference, our tolerance towards its expression. They ask us why we have created them (20).

Appendix G: Graphics Design



Final invitation / poster designed by Lucas Olscamp.



Series of promotional graphics used on Facebook and Instagram designed by Lucas Olscamp.

**AN OBJECT.
A BODY.
A RITUAL.**

**A TRANSLUCENT PLASTIC BAG LINGERS
AMONGST THE GHOSTS OF THE DEAD.
DISCARDED FRAGMENT OR PORTAL TO A
NETHERWORLD, THE SHELL OF A BODY IS
REMADE IN PLASTIC AND A FUNERAL IS HELD.**

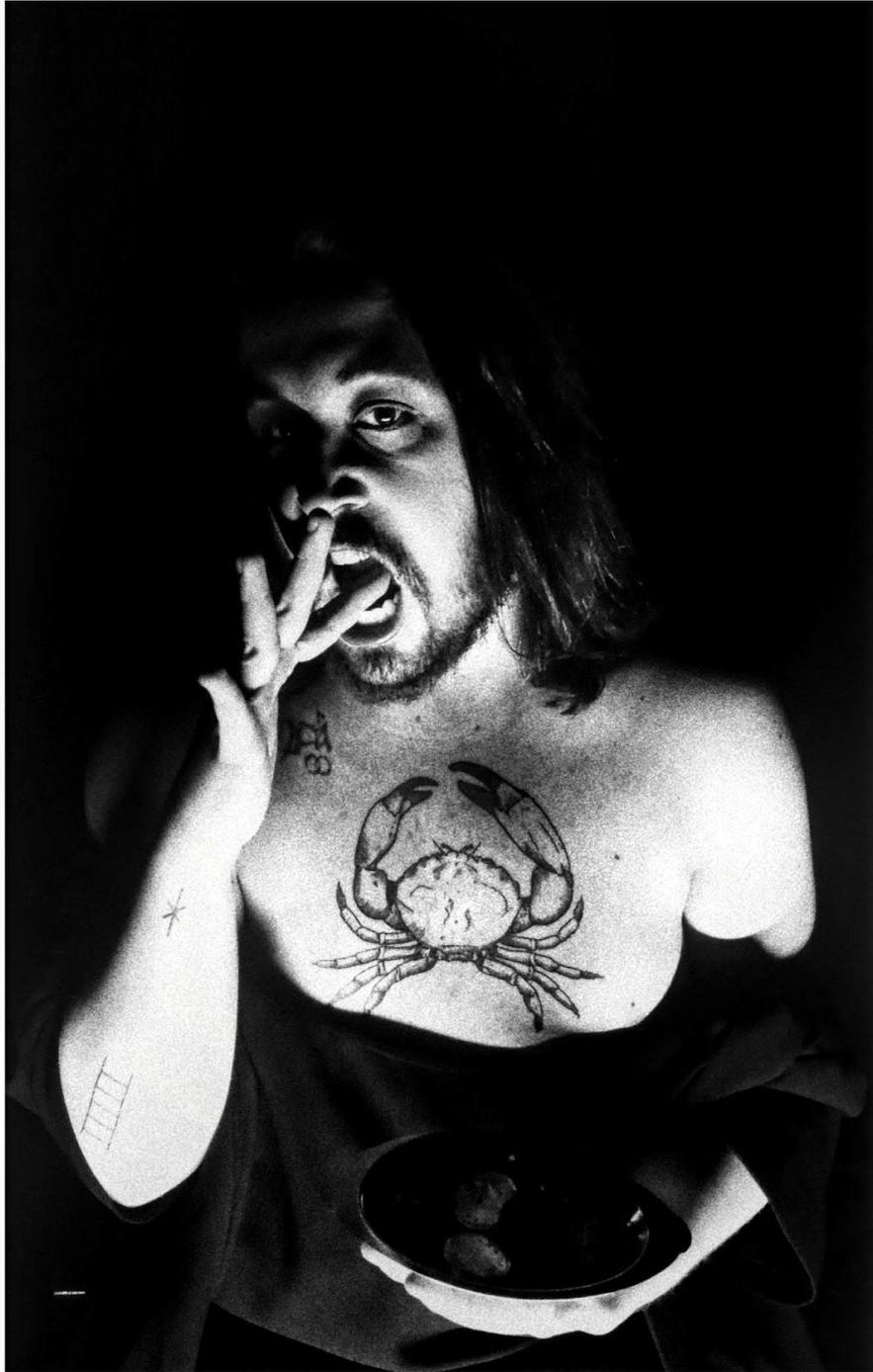
**PART MATERIAL AND OBJECT DISSECTION /
PART BIOGRAPHICAL ASSEMBLAGE,
THIS HYBRID RITUAL NAIVELY ASKS
AN IMMORTAL OBJECT TO SPEAK TRUTH
TO A MORTAL GHOST.**

**TOLD IN FOUR PARTS IN AN EPILOGUE;
THE PERFORMANCE CONFIGURES ITSELF
AS A SERIES OF STAGED DESIGN IMAGES:**

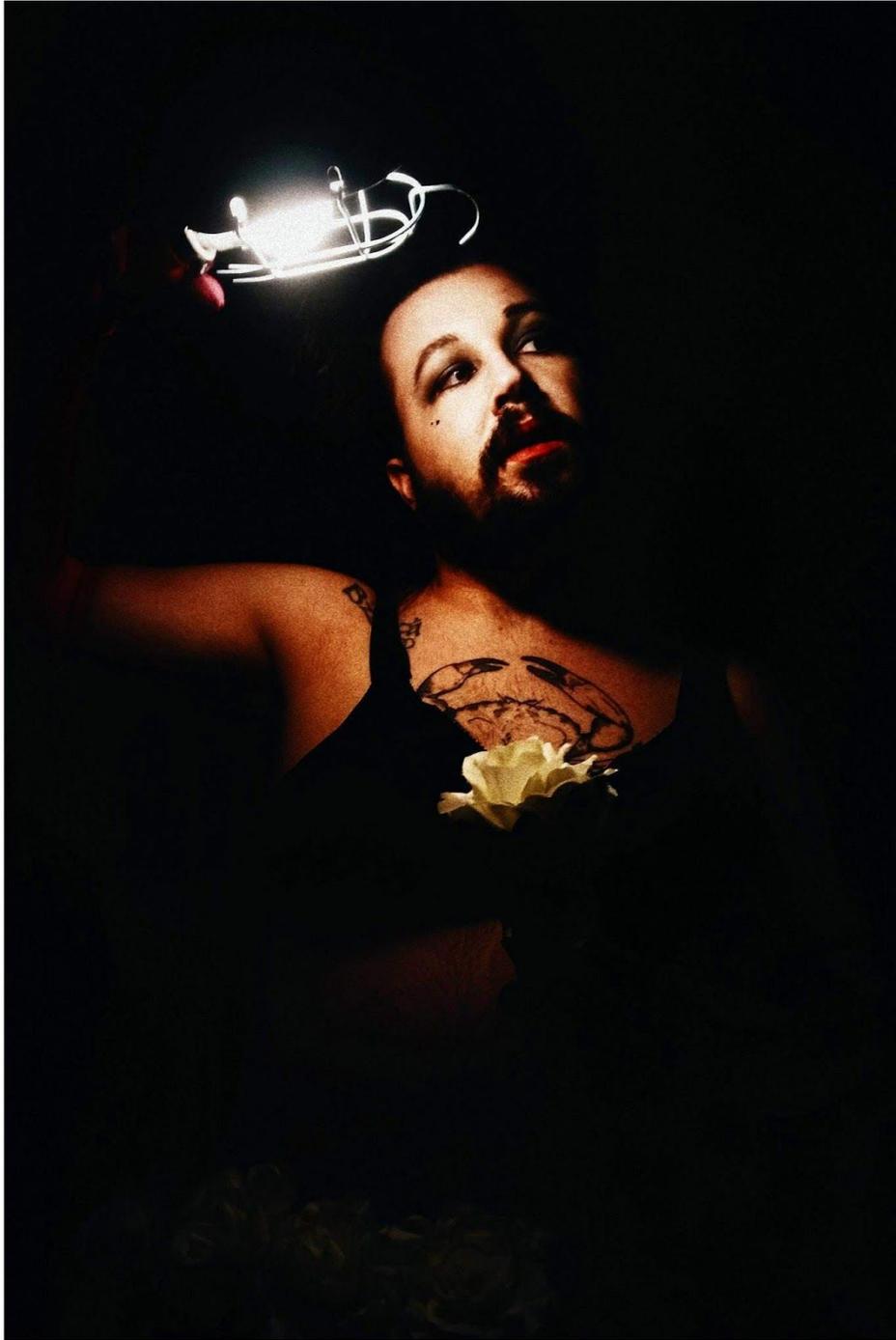
**A GRAVE IS MADE.
A BLESSING OFFERED.
A EULOGY GIVEN.
A BODY BURNED.**

Artist's note on the performance included in the performance program.

Appendix H: Performance Documentation



Documentation of rehearsal / dress rehearsal process in JGG; “The Priest”



Documentation of rehearsal / dress rehearsal process in JGG; “The Witch”



Documentation of body / plastic manipulation in rehearsal in the JGG; “The Artist / The Body”



Documentation of scenic design details in the JGG.