

Trying to Trust You More

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A PROJECT IN LIEU OF THESIS PRESENTED TO THE COLLEGE OF FINE ARTS  
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To each interaction infused with risk. May it only help us understand our own  
pulse and for whom it beats.

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Summary of Project Option in Lieu of Thesis  
Presented to the Graduate School of the University of Florida  
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In *Figures of the Subject in Times of Crisis*, Achille Mbembe and Janet Roitman describe a regime of subjectivity as “a shared ensemble of imaginary configurations of everyday life, imaginaries which have a material basis and systems of intelligibility to which people refer in order to construct a more or less clear idea of the causes of phenomena and their effects, to determine the domain of what is possible and feasible, as well as the logics of efficacious action. More generally, a regime of subjectivity is an ensemble of ways of living, representing and experiencing contemporaneousness, while at the same time inscribing this experience in the mentality, understanding and language of historical time.” How do we speak through institutions and structured space? As public and private spheres blur together confusing us as citizens, what actions can help make sense of that blurring?

I am interested in looking to the gallery as a monument to its own form and a domain to highlight these questions. Using form and structure as allies in constructing a common ensemble made of physical space, time and imagination, the work will test if the monument can be performed. What will be the configuration of mutual knowledge found in this setting? I am interested in using participation and engagement as forms of access, able to produce public readers, public writers and public knowledge. I am also interested in highlighting vulnerabilities and responsibilities within these spheres, as it is apparent that I am transversely vulnerable to the environment, as much as to my own mental landscape of thoughts and emotions, as to my revolving social relationships. As Felix Guattari states in *Three Ecologies*, “Here we are talking about a reconstruction of social and individual practices which I shall classify under three complementary headings, all of which come under the ethico-aesthetic aegis of an ecosophy: social ecology, mental ecology and environmental ecology.”

The exhibition form will strive to produce new models of subjectivity and work by composing a collage of reality from the fragments of collapsing space by constructing a monument of scaffold. This one large interactive installation highlights cross relationships of individual and social body awareness and the structural environment itself through the form of implied action and storytelling. The work culminates in a continual process of reinvention as bodies merge in and out of the allotted sphere, with the space between as the changing dynamic.

## ***Chapter One: Staging Devices of Existence***

“The form holds sway over the thing and movements over categories. The production of gestures wins out over the production of material things. Beholders are prompted to cross the thresholds of a catalyst like modules. The artist goes as far as to come across as a world of subjectivization on the move...like the mannequin of his/her own subjectivity.” -Nicolas Bourriaud in *Relational Aesthetics*

*Trying to Trust You More*, a project incorporating individual exchanges and stories shared within a common ensemble, uses participation and engagement as forms of access, able to provoke public readers, public writers and public knowledge. A series of notebooks filled with stories from participants were left within the gallery space to be read and written in throughout the duration of the exhibition. The installation consisted of sets of tiered scaffolding, demarcating the space with domestic items including my bed, chair and sofa.

From the domestic sphere to the institutional, our relationships and encounters with others and the structure such relationships are housed within, shape our space, nurturing or controlling certain interactions to take place. Relationships are housed within different spheres, such as organizational systems to interpersonal connections. In larger systems from churches, to universities, to governments our individual actions are diluted in service of a larger structure of control and in turn we are placed in a position of feeling out of control, without

knowing who or what is regulating, allowing or disallowing actions, with a machinic tendency to follow. Within a one-on-one relationship, however, it appears evident that we do have influence and the ability to alter both physical and emotional landscapes. Co-subjective relationships show us that our actions do matter and in turn we are vulnerable to the actions of others.

What actions can promote this sense of co-subjectivity within a setting like the gallery? Within the installation of scaffolding, was climbing allowed? No. Was swinging allowed? No. An administrator told me that, "If a woman was swinging and her skirt flew upwards and everyone laughed at her, the mental abuse she may suffer could be a liability for the gallery." Was this a normative practice of overprotection and concern for mental safety? Projects exist as social experiments, trying to understand to whom are we bound to and why.

Interactions ask at what times and places are we thought of us as companions or as subjects? As we cross paths, entering and exiting different passages with different individuals, there is a sharing of experiences that can bring us closer together or cause us to disconnect. We can and do affect each other. This simple idea is the catalyst to my research and work.

Through a series of restrictions placed on the project by the administration the day before exhibition, the project was forced to shift functions from an interactive exterior structure constructed of multiple sets of scaffolding and various platforms open for climbing, rearranging, walking and balancing, to an interactive interior

with the emphasis on storytelling. An administrator said the initial project was too risky to allow students, faculty and visitors to put their bodies in a position of harm, despite the soundness of structure. Robert Morris said in a letter to Tate curator Michael Compton in 1971 that, "I'd rather break my arm by falling off a platform than spend an hour in detached contemplation of a Matisse. We've become blind from so much seeing. It's time to press up against things, squeeze around, crawl over - not so much out of a childish naivete to return to the playground, but more to acknowledge that the world begins to exist at the limits of our skin and what goes on at that interface between the physical self and external conditions doesn't detach us like the detached glance."



Morris' piece entitled *Bodyspacemotionthings*, opened the Tate Modern to an interactive experience between body and form, exploring the viewer's perception and experience of object and space.

## ***Chapter Two: Storytelling and Machines of Subjectivity***

The question within my own project changed from, “What would the form govern?” to, “What would the form allow?” This change from an exterior to interior focus shifted the scaffold, which was my primary component to work with inside the gallery, as a structure that experimented with a type of kinesthetic intelligence and action to a structure that invited an emotionally based set of intelligence. The form became a frame that had to be activated from within instead of from without. The frame was thought to be an experimental book in which multiple stories could be shared simultaneously, all supporting each other in idea and feeling. The willingness to share individual, personal stories and experiences, which ranged in diversity, was the action now assigned to activate the new space. Individuals were asked to write or tell a story relating to the topic of trust and ended up telling many stories of love, relationships, travels and home. The platform was also assigned then as a place to tell my own story of a physical form, the scaffolding, which transformed from active to inert due to administrative restraints. These performative platforms are what Bourriaud in *Relational Aesthetics* describes as staging devices of existence. He states that these working methods of time and ways of being, instead of concrete objects, are the material for artists (Bourriaud, 2002).

Walter Benjamin speaks of storytelling as a way to retrieve our collective humanness in an age of information. Storytelling, he says, does not try and

communicate the essence of a thing, yet sinks the thing into the life of the storyteller, in order to bring it out of him again. Thus traces of the storyteller are forever connected to the story itself (Benjamin, 1936).



Four portable DVD players were strapped throughout the scaffolding installation playing videos of actions where risk is being performed in different locations within interpersonal relations. With a focus on the mobility of form and the transference of relationships, locations were set in a burned home, a moving car, a bike and the gallery. Each of the videos depicts two bodies in conversation through mutual and co-affective action. The same impulse to assign risk through movement and vulnerability is taken on throughout the changing settings. Two audio tracks play throughout the installation, *Trying to Trust You*

*More*, allowing distant conversations, songs and environmental sounds to be heard simultaneously from the multiple platforms of the scaffold.

One video depicts my partner Matt riding on the top of the scaffolding strapped to the roof of my moving car. Saying yes to my invitation, the video shows the ride atop the roof from the construction rental site where we attached the metal frames to the gallery at speeds reaching 50mph. This “yes” on his part transferred the responsibility to myself, as the driver, and placed him in a



vulnerable place of trusting me behind the wheel. I understood with clarity the affects of not seeing a speed bump, stopping too fast or making other reckless errors. My awareness to the

environment, my own actions and Matt’s actions on top of the car were accentuated due to the precarious placement of bodies in a moving space. This simple action allowed us to feel something real, an actualized experience of connection and trust. The car became our machine of subjectivity and tested the limits of what we would allow the other to do. He described this experience in one of several notebooks placed with the gallery. The event of moving the scaffold became a performance with the scaffold as the stage. A woman vehemently yelled at us about the dangers involved, while horns honked, fingers

were pointed and laughter ensued by children whose neighborhoods we passed through. Our intimate relationship was symbolically experimented with as the action displayed an active position of being able to hurt or nurture the other.

Another video playing within *Trying to Trust You More* is of a burned house being “chalked” with silicon dioxide of multiple colors. This substance is used in construction to mark a cut and in turn highlights what needs to be removed. A shamanistic hand is seen throughout the video coloring the burnt frame of the house adding a layer of colored chalk to the ash and debris that lay around.

An empty and abandoned house exists in its most destructed form while still hinting at the lives that once occupied the space. One picture remains. One shirt is thrown on the floor. The color of the chalk spreads through the air and rests on each of these items along with the walls that remain, creating an abstract site-specific painting. A police officer interrupted the action, defensive of any vandalism that was occurring on the abandoned property. Questioning my artistic motivations a conversation was born which changed his position from one of protecting a space to protecting myself, the intruder. He spoke with concern for my well-being and safety due to the dangerous location of the house and history of the house post residential space.

Another video within the installation was strapped to an accessible ceiling compartment that my bed sat in within the scaffold inserted into the gallery. People, while on the bed, could look up to view the video of my friend Alex, riding on the back of an old racing cart pulled by my bike. We rode this updated rig from my house to the studio and back again while performing a series of movements testing our balance or lack of balance that occurred throughout this



ride.

While the element of play is heavy throughout each action the element of risk is also present. As movements change, ones

attention is drawn to these two seemingly contrasted states as they co-exist between the road and each other. His movements are sexually explicit while at the same time over the top and often humorous. Holding each pose on the apparatus resembled an experimental yoga practice in motion. The bike moves at a fraction of the speed of the surrounding environment of cars, allowing us a brief audience before they whirled past us.

The last video recorded within the series shows a set of actions within the gallery of swinging, pulling and passing ropes back and forth between my partner and me while climbing the floor to ceiling scaffold. We could only show the video of

the action of us on the scaffolding within the gallery opposed to a live performance due to and in response to gallery liability which allowed no access to the physical form itself.



The cited university rule for no physical interaction with the scaffolding read, “Appendix M: Rules Governing the Use of Human Subjects, which states that in all research, developmental and related activities involving the use of human subjects (INCLUDING oneself) the university seeks assurance that those persons who participate as subjects or volunteers does not get exposed to unreasonable risks to their health, general well being or privacy. All Projects involving human subjects must be reviewed and approved by the University’s Institutional Review Board before the planned research may begin. The IRB is a

committee of appointed volunteers who review and approve the use of human subjects, volunteers or participants in research projects.” The scaffold turned stage within the gallery allowed for past actions of the videos and current actions of the storytelling to play out together, contemporaneously. The video depicts the surrounding gallery environment and the other artist’s work which circled my installation, giving an arial viewpoint, as this rope was passed back and forth in a weaving pattern through the scaffold. These other artworks within the exhibition became a stable point of reference for our movements.

### ***Chapter Three: Exchanges***

Artists such as Jenny Marketou influenced *Trying to Trust You More* with projects like, *The Limits of the Social Within the Wild*, *Translocal Camp in my Tent*. Here she asks what does it mean to be a nomad and experiments with places she may or may not have the right to spend the night in. During this twelve year endeavor the artist camps out in different locations then streams videos to the gallery. The project documents the form of a pseudo public action within places from parks to boats. Her intent is in part to explore private and public spheres and test the allowances of each and the interactions of the people that police each sphere.

Paul Ramirez Jonas' piece entitled, *The Commons*, directs a similar openness and authorship that my work is interested in. By inviting viewers to reframe the notion of traditional monuments as a repository for collective meaning and as a place for exchange a conversation is born from the debris of text left behind on the form. A riderless horse sculpture fashioned after the equestrian statue of Marcus Aurelius is placed within a gallery opening the encounter to audience participation, performed with words and stories, growing with each action. In *Figures of the Subject in Times of Crisis*, Achille Mbembe and Janet Roitman describe a regime of subjectivity as a way of living, representing and experiencing togetherness, while at the same time inscribing this experience in the mentality, understanding and language of historical time. (Mbembe, Roitman, 1995).



Mel Chin's recent project *Fundred*, negotiates ideas of risk and responsibility, as the project draws awareness to extreme levels of lead present throughout parts of New Orleans. The project asks participants to draw on fake money that will be collected and delivered to the steps of the capital in Washington D.C. asking for an even exchange. Chin spoke this year at the CAA conference and said, "It's not

about poetics or aesthetics, it's about being a catalyst. We need to get active in the world and engage.”

These projects extend parts of the people and their gestures out towards the environment, intertwining action and place with a physical outcome. Actions transmute mere symbols or ideas and are infused with life as they are tested and experimented in different spheres.

#### ***Chapter Four: What is in Control?***

Slovaž Žižek spoke in Zuccotti Park during the NYC Occupy movement, saying that we must not think that it was enough that “I was there and a part of it”, however that we needed to assert that we are always allowed to think alternatively. The red monument inside Zuccotti Park changed functions during the time of the movement in which this public park became home to the campers and supporters. The once stagnant red structure became not only the central marker of a meeting ground, it became a chalkboard to leave notes, stories, affirmations and a platform to ask questions. The form was performed and animated through individual's thoughts with each participant further defining the purpose and placement of this constructed community.

As I walked down 5th Avenue in New York City, the site of Saint Patrick's cathedral was covered from top to bottom in scaffolding due to renovations. This

metal frame bracing the outside of the cathedral for renovation resembled an exoskeleton for this collective body entering in the doorways on that Ash Wednesday. As I entered the arched doorways, I realized that both the inside and outside of the cathedral was covered floor to ceiling in scaffolding.

By layering both the exterior and interior space with a set of vertical and horizontal planes, the form was changed from a stable environment to one in a process of transformation. This insertion of functional, construction equipment acted as a sign to me of a form that was in flux. I have always been encouraged



through such street assemblages to enter these spaces that were delineated through the construction equipment, signaling that the space was perhaps no longer in full use, perhaps abandoned for reconstruction and renovation all together. This structure only made me want to physically climb, swing and walk through these new, temporal passages of a space I have been in many times to observe a Catholicism of ritual.

The explorative movement, which I imagined inserting, was governed by this

new structure. This space of symbolic action, initiated the gathering of a community. This frail building was nothing more than a container for people to act out their own desires and personal narratives.

My initial desires to disrupt this methodic horizontal action of the congregation, passing one by one in front of the priest, with a vertical climb upwards towards the highest plateau of a symbolic heaven space was intended only for my imagination. With security guards and policeman at every corner no movement beyond that of observation and compliance would be allowed or supported by either the guards or the members of the congregation. The understood behavior in such a governed space is nurtured again on each side of the altar.

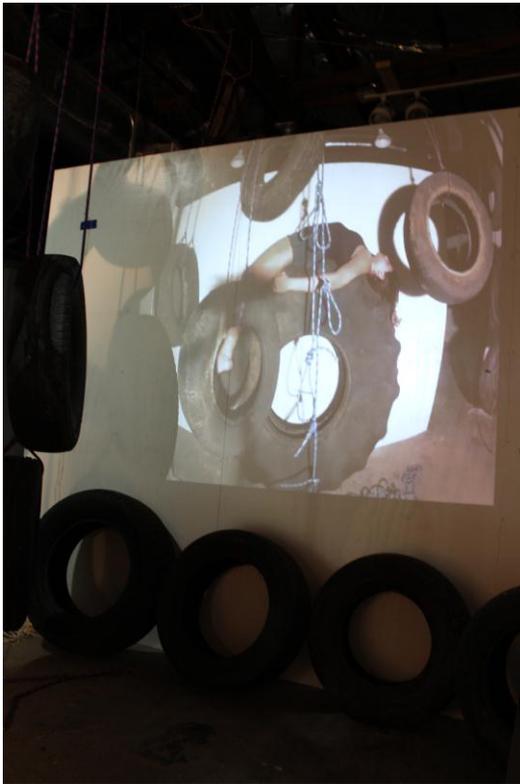
Foucault's panoptic prison structure of enclosure described in *Discipline and Punish* is thought of as another mechanism that automatizes and dis-individualizes power. The Panopticon was also a laboratory, which could be used as a machine to carry out experiments, change behaviors, observe performances and to train or correct individuals. (Foucault, 1975). A woman sat behind me weeping as I thought of Rilke's words, "and how perplexed must any womb born creature feel who is obliged to fly thin air."

A recent visit to Washington D.C. gave me the chance to observe the Washington monument with scaffolding all around it, extending more than half way throughout the erect form. Three children were next to me as I viewed this monument discussing why the construction was underway, with the conclusion that bricks were falling out and the people in charge would be fixing it. The



brokenness changed to one of being in the process of becoming and developing. In *Bubbles* Peter Sloterdijk states that, “It is in the nature of matter that the phenomenology of imperial roundness must turn into a critical gynecology of the state and the large scale church... peoples, empires, churches and above all modern nation states are not least space political attempts to recreate fantastic wombs for infantilized mass populations by imaginary and institutional means in attempts to find their bearings in this unstable super-orb...” (Sloterdijk, 2011, 545).

### ***Chapter Five: Conclusion***



My work and research focuses on how structures can hold and direct a body and how we in turn can hold and direct each other. Elements of risk and vulnerability are highlighted throughout projects as it seems only when we are literally affected in a singular way are we in a state of awareness.

In a series entitled, *Schizochaosmosis*, different platforms were used to

experiment with these ideas. In one part of the installation my body as the performer merged with the form of the tire and was governed by the shape, texture, size and precarious placement of the heavy form. I crawled, laid and rubbed on top and in between these recycled forms to understand my body in relation to the tire as another body. My recognition and knowledge of the “tire body” before the performance was only one of use, to get from differing points in differing cars. To feel it on my skin changed that perception of its object-ness. The residue left on different parts of my body from the tar intertwined our physicality and merged the debris of this shared action.



Another installation entitled, *An Affective Series*, allows for a play on balance to occur. The project asks who or what is in control, the structure, the other person or yourself? Within relating to any other body from environments to lovers it seems to always be a question of merging. I lose part of myself to the person I am with and in part am left responsible for now parts of myself but also parts of the other. We affect each other. When one is thrown off balance, the other in turn feels it.

These projects along with *Trying to Trust You More* look at the gallery as a frame for experimentation and a monument to its own form. Using forms and structures as allies, the process of each project tests what the space can hold and what configuration of relational and mutual knowledge can be found within the setting.

*Trying to Trust You More* composes a collage where the space resides in a continual process of reinvention through each added contribution and interaction. Each participant, reader and writer exists as the changing dynamic and their stories and their bodies, become the material supporting a singularity of our social experience. As individuals share their stories very specific unto themselves difference merges yet is united through their humanness.

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