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Artist Statement and Source Research

I want to share stories through my art. These stories are about all of the relationships we have with people in our lives. To create these stories, we have to connect to others, and share parts of our selves with another person. In return, that person gives us a piece of his or her life. The stories in my art are created from the connections people forge with each other, and they manifest as interactions between people.

An essential part of my artwork is the relationship between artist, artwork, and participants. The objects I create are only a small part of the artwork; I need an active audience to help me create the essential aspect of the artwork through interaction with my objects. The dolls are the visual aspect of the art, but what are most important are the potential interactions with the public. Some of these interactions are public, in the gallery. Some of them only happen on the Internet or in our imagination.

Using dolls and games as a medium, my artwork is benign, referencing children's toys. I want to create a comfortable space where we are relaxed and playing. The dolls are more complex than children's toys--they change gender, sexuality, race, and body type. Because they do these things, but still look like children's toys, these dolls equalize different bodies, different desires, and different stories. In referencing didactic children's toys, the dolls place their own stories in the realm of everyday and common. This is a space where we all can play out our lives, our loves, our stories. No one has a completely conventional life and this space is where we can play that out and accept our varied and nuanced selves.

The characters these dolls become depend on the person playing with them. I can't define the interaction between audience and art any more than I can define the people who come in to see the artwork. I just want to create something accessible, engaging and relatable to the public. It is the viewer defines the characters and their stories.

The poet Rainer Maria Rilke writes of a concept he calls "blood remembering"—he defines it as creating art out of the many experiences of our lives. Rilke explains that poetry is not simply feelings. An artist must go and live, have many life experiences to distill into a piece of art. It becomes more than memory—it turns to blood within us, until it is indistinguishable from our selves. It is difficult to evoke a feeling or experience that we as individuals haven't had. I have only a small collection of memories. Perhaps this is why I enlist the audience to help me in art making—to bring their stories in to expand the potential of the artwork. These dolls can express the many stories of our experiences.

Nikki Sullivan explains how each time we view an image, be it painting, sculpture, film or advertisement, we “read” the image, and translate it through our own experience to recreate the image with our variations on the interpretation of the image, our personal slant. Through these readings, popular culture can be queered. Sullivan also describes different methods of queering popular culture, such as inherent queer readings, images informed by camp, the gaze, or images engaging within heterosexist institutions. In her

essay “Queering Popular Culture”, Sullivan discusses the Barbie Liberation Organization, a group that switches the voice boxes of Barbie dolls with G.I. Joe dolls. The trans-gendering of the dolls creates a counter-institution that operates under the transparency of children’s toys, but with an alternate reading where Barbie likes to fight for the United States and G.I. Joe wants to get his nails done.

In her book *Gender Trouble*, Judith Butler explains gender performativity—gender identity is performed by men and women and is not inherent in a single person. In my art, the participants perform gender through the dolls, both in the public of the gallery, and the more intimate privacy of their own computers. Though the Internet is a public forum, and always has a danger of surveillance, when the participants interact on the Internet, it is a one-to-one connection. In the gallery, it is a larger and more public performance, in front of whoever is in the gallery at that time.

The dolls are theatrical props for the performance of gender that happens literally, in the games with the dolls, as a metaphorical extension of the performance of gender that occurs on a daily basis. I have made many types of dolls to reflect a variety of people through body type, gender, race, and orientation. My goal is to create enough types of people that we can find one relatable character, and find many other characters who may not be like us, but we can connect to nonetheless.

One-way in which the doll and game-like nature of my project is alarming—and subversive—is because of the reference to child-like activity, specifically the association with children’s sexuality. Michel Foucault, in his *History of Sexuality*, discusses how as sexuality becomes alarming to the Victorians, they police children, obsessing over any sexual thoughts or actions children may have. “The sex of the schoolboy became in the course of the eighteenth century...a public problem”, Foucault explains, one that required that children be monitored. Foucault describes the arrangement of secondary schools, with bathrooms that can be monitored, or sleeping situations that segregate the sexes. The assignation of sexuality to children can be seen still today, as children are in the center of rhetoric surrounding gay marriage. The dolls and child-like imagery in my art is intended to make the viewer comfortable, as it is non-aggressive, but it also deals with the ideas and issues of using children at the center of debates over sex.

One concept my artwork is grounded in is that of Relational Aesthetics. In describing a relational aestheticist, Nicolas Bourriaud explains, “what [the artist] produces, first and foremost, is relations between people and the world, by way of aesthetic objects [sic]”. The artwork is not necessarily the objects created by the artist, but the interaction between viewer and object, which is facilitated by the artist. Bourriaud explains relational artwork as emerging in the 1990s. He spells out the role of the viewer in relational artwork as having changed, “the artwork of the 1990s turns the beholder into a neighbor, a direct interlocutor”. Compared to modernist objects, relational artwork makes the viewer active, a participant and co-creator of the artwork. Bourriaud takes issue with the modernist art, which dictates to the viewer, whereas artists such as Felix Gonzalez-Torres use the viewer to help create the art, and create meaning within the artwork.

Gonzalez-Torres creates work that physically involves interaction with the viewers, as the public takes pieces of the artwork with them from the gallery. Much of his work centers on his lover Ross Laycock, who died of AIDS in 1991. As the work is handed out, it becomes a disappearing body, and quietly speaks of AIDS and loss.

Gonzalez-Torres is drawn towards using the public in his work, often stating that he needs the public to “complete the work” . His interactive sculptures sit the gallery, candy spills or sheets of paper that the viewer is encouraged to take home as a souvenir. Gonzalez-Torres considers himself more director of his artwork than creator, saying “I tend to think of myself as a theater director who is trying to convey some ideas by reinterpreting the notion of the division of roles: author, public, and director” . Through his direction Gonzalez-Torres crosses the public-private divide within the gallery. Gonzalez-Torres considers his artwork part of his self, which he has put in the gallery in order to destroy his work through the distribution of pieces of the artwork. The destruction of the work, and handing out of parts of his “self” allows Gonzalez-Torres to share with the public, create an interaction where himself and Ross go further in the world than they could sitting in the gallery as a solely visual object. It is a literal expansion of the way in which viewers take their memories of a piece of art with them; the viewer can literally take away part of the artwork, and even more importantly, Gonzalez-Torres facilitates the creation of the art which is the interaction between himself, the objects, and the public.

Gonzalez-Torres operates within the mainstream, and uses the legitimizing power of mainstream objects—childlike candy, or the minimalist cube, to give himself cultural power. The minimalist cube shaped of a stack of paper, for example, is titled “Untitled (Loverboy)” is titled after Ross. His parenthetical titles often reference his life with Ross, or lovers as twinned objects, the sameness representative of homosexuality, when two lovers are of the same gender there is a doubling which Gonzalez-Torres reflects in his pieces. In another piece, “Untitled” (Portrait of Ross in L.A.), the viewer takes the spilled candy and is invited to eat and enjoy parts of Ross’s metaphorical body, which becomes much more sexual than one would think candy had to power to communicate. These objects then become queered, but still mainstream, and the participant may read the full intent of Gonzalez-Torres, or the participant may simply take the piece of paper or candy, and enjoy the object at face value as an aesthetic object which he or she may interact with.

This way in which Gonzalez-Torres’s work is gently subversive is very effective in that his identity and story is shared within the larger master narrative of art and society, and he gently opens viewers up to queered (non heteronormative), alternative readings, and is more accessible to some gallery visitors than the work done by Gonzalez-Torres’ contemporaries, such as the activist group Gran Fury, which would create public art pieces expressing their anger at politicians and religious figures who ignored and belittled the AIDS epidemic. Gran Fury created posters with pink triangles on them, with the statement “Silence = Death” and other public art with the intent of reaching the public with their political message.

I have found inspiration for my manner of representation from Cindy Sherman’s Untitled Film Stills series. Sherman often uses herself as a model for her photographs, as she dresses

as different women, presenting many different women to the viewer as her photographic disguises. The photographs show blank female characters, and Sherman leaves each photograph untitled, allowing the viewer to create his or her own assumptions about who the photographed subject is, aided by pop culture tropes and stereotypes. By viewing and making that assumption about the woman depicted, the viewer has to think about why he or she makes that assumption, putting some level of critical analysis on the viewer.

Of course, Sherman uses blank characters to critique stereotypes, whereas I use blank characters and stereotypes to some level of critique, but I also want the viewer to be able to find parts of themselves in the imagery I create. Sherman specifically speaks to female identity and stories, especially those given by those who hold cultural power who misrepresent women. It is my hope to undercut these misrepresentations of people through openness and accessibility of imagery that includes the stereotypes and tropes which Sherman photographs, but other imagery, which places people of differing identities next to the ideal and norm.

Sherman uses photographs in the same manner and with the same goal for which I use children's imagery. Photographs are a transparent, evidentiary medium. If we see a photograph, we expect that it has recorded something that has actually happened, an object or person that exists in real space and time. For children's books, games and toys, we expect a level of simplicity and didacticism. Children's images should mirror the real world so children can begin to understand cultural values and rules. By mirroring the parts of the world that don't fit everyone's cultural values, I undercut those values while equalizing differing values. Sherman too, mirrors cultural ideas about women even as she undercuts those interpretations. The medium of photography (and the medium of games and dolls) holds the expectation of fact in what it depicts. This then gives these media the power to critique, when they show nontraditional ideas, the viewer can step back and rethink his or her expectation of the medium and of the cultural norm that Sherman or I want to critique and subvert.

Photographs also function differently than paintings in the role of imagery. Sherman rejected painting; especially painting at the time that she was creating art, as something that was inaccessible. She said of her medium:

"I didn't want to make 'high' art, I had no interest in using paint, I wanted to find something that anyone could relate to without knowing about contemporary art. I wasn't thinking in terms of precious prints or archival quality; I didn't want the work to seem like a commodity."

I connect to this idea of creating artwork that has non-art associations. Photography had by the 1970s, achieved status as a fine art form, yet Sherman titled and sourced her images as from popular culture and films. As I create what are essentially computer games that are accessible on the Internet, I am not interested in expensive art objects or as Sherman put it, art "as a commodity". I want to create something that is accessible to the viewer—readable and open in meaning and content. Since our art is open to the public, it allows for easy replication and access—it is in a public realm of the Internet, it is open in content and meaning. In some ways, we are both provocative by creating something that is more accessible and reproducible.

My dolls aren't self-portraits, but I can project my self and stories into the dolls, and masquerade as a straight white male, a gay black woman, or an androgynous asexual youth. The dolls are like masks, or avatars that we can use to take on different roles or characters, as Sherman takes on characters with makeup and costuming, as Gonzalez-Torres takes on roles alongside the viewer. When playing with them I create a space for my identity along with all of our identities as I create and share stories about the characters developed in the dolls.

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