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good dyke art

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good dyke art

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Fine Arts in Art

by

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University of Missouri
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Abstract

The work in *good dyke art* visually expands upon conversations about institutional critique and its contradictions, specifically questioning who dictates the boundaries between institutions and bodies: how divisions are made between them and who enacts or receives force. One's participation in this critique, however, indicates a participation in the problematics of the institution and by extension, a desire to critique may also be considered a desire to participate in that system.

Ceramic, glaze, and found objects manifest an allegorical formalism that utilizes coded languages of institutional spaces, traditions of queer-coding, and charged word-play. The ceramic vessel forms reference the Ancient Greek pottery form of the hydria, a three-handled water jug. I reinterpret and remake the hydria constructed with holes or bottomless forms, breaking the viewers expectations for how a vessel *should* function. The three-handled form is a literal interpretation of a non-binary way of approaching an object. In 'good dyke art' the hydria serves multiple functions: as a stand-in for the body, a reference to classical antiquity, and a marker of institutional influence. The hydria, glazed orange and turned on its head, takes the form of a traffic cone. Safety orange, hardware store blue, and fluorescent green are institutional symbols of caution and, in my work, function as gesture and a designation of space—both literally and formally. Materials found in hardware stores, academia, and corporate buildings are strapped or attached to the ceramic pots, emphasizing their precarity. Stressed objects enact force onto others—and give way to force in their breakage.

The precariousness of the installations urges the viewer to be aware of their own body and of the space they take up—implicating them as well as the artist in the work

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Introduction: good dyke art.

During my years as a graduate student at the University of Arkansas, the University decided that it would no longer offer trans health care as part of student health insurance (Ennis). State courts lifted local protections in Fayetteville, Arkansas for individuals on the basis of gender identity and sexuality (DeMillo). These institutional restrictions were not given University-wide pushback and were allowed to remain. The academic institution, functioning in a way that could at most provide enthusiastic tolerance for students and faculty who are part of the LGBTQIA+ communities and very little more. To blame these issues on the idea of an institution, positions the institution as abstracted power seemingly beyond body that functions outside of the individual—not as a collection of individuals. It is easy to have an understanding of the institution outside our bodies—something huge and outside of us, built to protect, immovable—an understanding that attempts to devalue individual power. The work in *good dyke art* visually expands upon conversations about institutional critique and its contradictions. Who is given access to dictate the boundaries between institutions and bodies? How are divisions made between them? Who enacts or receives force? How can one secure oneself? How do individuals navigate their own bodily experiences in relation to institutions, how do they navigate boundaries set forth for them and by them? And, how can one critique the institution, be it gender, the museum, the gallery, academia, etc., without recognizing one's own participation in the institution by the very critique of it?

As I have navigated the boundaries of an academic art education, I have observed how my own body has been coded and functioned within art institutions. I have often been presumed to be “too feminine” to be any deviation from expectations for white cis women. Professors, colleagues, peers, and students have all reacted differently to using my pronouns in academic

space (my pronouns are they, them)—some with outright refusal and some with good, yet imperfect intentions, and some have used them seamlessly. I do not write this in order to shame nor applaud individuals for past interactions, but I include this as an example because it has influenced my interest in how language functions when talking about art and artists. I believe language is *good enough* but is limited by what it has in excess: words. Words are symbols meant to represent something else—once something is named, it constructs meaning that both encourages its validity and creates limitations for its meaning. I’ve often experienced a disconnection with how I perceive myself and how others perceive me. I feel at times as though I lack the vocabulary to name myself either that I have yet to find the words or they do not yet exist. I am interested in how an arrangement of objects can function as writing does, pointing toward larger ideas with a set of symbols of materials and tools, language and form. I have grown affectionately close to the works of artists Felix Gonzalez-Torres, Gordon Hall, Sarah Oppenheimer, Sara Lucas, as well as the writing of Leslie Feinberg and Audre Lorde. I observed the ways in which these artists constructed, wrote, or spoke about their work and the significance of material and intellectual participation through a formal arrangement of material and found or constructed objects. Through engaging with the works of the aforementioned artists and writers, I have developed my own system that exploits and celebrates the allegorical potential of material as it functions within an art object or installation. Gonzalez-Torres mentioned in an interview about his work being labeled “political,” that he believed all art to be political. Yes, indeed all art is political. To be able to make, produce, and display work in a traditional gallery or museum is inherently tied to politics considering larger ideas of access, privilege, and education. However, this privilege is not often positioned as the canonical understanding of the artist. Artists are often understood by their proximity to art movements and art history but are not universally thought of

as political, nor, equally politicized. To make an example of one of the more famous canonical abstract expressionist painters, Jackson Pollock's work was not received nor is often remembered as political art. His work was successfully institutionalized as contributing to a movement that fundamentally changed the role of the painting in contemporary art. Linda Nochlin touches on the multitude of issues that kept cis women from accessing the same institutional success male artists were afforded from her perspective as a white cis women in her essay, *Why Are There No Great Woman Artists*. Pollock's paintings are not labeled as political art and while Nochlin does not mention him by name, we can understand how the paintings he made, his process, and the criticisms he received are indicative of his inherently privileged political position as a white cis male artist working in New York City in the 1940's and 1950's. Felix Gonzalez-Torres explains this succinctly in an 1995 interview for ArtPress Magazine with Robert Storr, when asked the question how he defined the parameters for political art, Gonzalez-Torres responded,

I realize again how successful ideology is and how easy it was for me to fall into that trap, calling this socio-political art. All art and all cultural production is political. I'll just give you an example. When you raise the question of political or art, people immediately jump and say, Barbara Kruger, Louise Lawler, Leon Golub, Nancy Spero, those are political artists. Then who are the non-political artists, as if that was possible at this point in history? Let's look at abstraction, and let's consider the most successful of those political artists, Helen Frankenthaler. Why are they the most successful political artists, even more than Kosuth, much more than Hans Haacke, much more than Nancy and Leon or Barbara Kruger? Because they don't look political! And as we know it's all about looking natural, it's all about being the normative aspect of whatever segment of culture we're dealing with, of life. That's where someone like Frankenthaler is the most politically successful artist when it comes to the political agenda that those works entail, because she serves a very clear agenda of the Right. For example, here is something the State Department sent to me in 1989, asking me to submit work to the Art and Embassy Program. It has this wonderful quote from George Bernard Shaw, which says, "Besides torture, art is the most persuasive weapon." And I said I didn't know that the State Department had given up on torture - they're probably not giving up on torture - but they're using both. Anyway, look at this letter, because in case you missed the point they reproduce a Franz Kline which explains very well what they want in this program. It's a very interesting letter, because it's so transparent. Another example: when you have a

show with white male straight painters, you don't call it that, that would be absurd, right? That's just not "natural". But if you have four Black lesbian sculptors from Brooklyn, that's exactly what you call it, "Four African-American Lesbians from Brooklyn. (Storr 5)

What *is* labeled political art rather than what art is not, often says more or as much about the society creating the taxonomical system of coding than truly anything about politics the work is said to represent. All work is political in the sense that it cannot be divorced from the circumstances in which it was created. Its impact then comes from how the work is contextualized within art history but also from where it is exhibited and how it was made. There is a site specificity to the process of the production and the exhibition of art that is often reduced into vague ideas of "the studio" or "the gallery" as a kind of neutralized non-space. These locations of production and display are an expectation, not often a consideration. Institutions, no matter how invested in the arts or a progressive politics, cannot be neutral and to posit them as such too easily absolves them (and the benefitting individuals) from the responsibilities to acknowledge the histories and sensitivities to persons and place. Neutrality serves as a seemingly benign tool of oppression but can be dangerous in affect. It functions to erase any histories of what it was before it was named as such. To neutralize is to absolve and neither institution nor individual can be absolved of their responsibility nor their participation. The gallery as with the museum and art institutions as a whole are not neutral spaces in which to showcase or display art, ideas, objects, or dialogue. The histories of these institutions as ideas and as locations are attached to them. We understand material and words to have meaning, then of course buildings and rooms have meaning. Institutions have meaning.

I am interested in how the iconography of institutions can be positioned to complicate the narrative of the gallery as neutralized space. I have built my thesis exhibition to be comprised of fifteen specifically installed individual pieces in an exhibition titled, *good dyke art*. The title

functions initially as a play on words, calling myself both a good dyke and a maker of good art *and* a maker of good dyke art. When considered within a larger context of queer art and queer theory, the title is meant to push back against ideas of queer tokenism within art shows—or the utilization of “queer” as a contemporary trend or queer-baiting by institutions to generate social and financial capital. The title also expands upon conversations surrounding the word queer as trend. Mainstream culture has often borrowed from LGBTQIA+ culture—particularly from transwomen of color. The appropriation and regurgitation of that culture is then whitewashed into the mainstream. Mainstream culture still borrows from queers, but now millennial queers are being courted with watered-down representation by mainstream culture. Therefore, queerness or the misguided phrase “gender neutrality” is projected as a trend that positions a masculine-leaning androgyny as “gender-neutral” in ad campaigns and in hashtags. Simplified into a hashtag, identities are abstracted and divorced from the reality of a lived experience. Queerness is positioned by advertisers to be synonymous with a specific progressive coolness rather than being proud to be seen as a faggot or a dyke. Additionally, I wish to honor the histories, herstories, and hirstories of the word dyke and of dykes as they have survived and thrived within and outside of a heteronormative gender binary.

The map of the exhibition functions as the first piece in the show as well as an “intended path” throughout the gallery (figure 1.5). If an individual does not make note of the maps, arranged as a pedestal of 5000 pieces of 8 ½ inch by 11-inch US Letter stacked paper, then they miss a key component of the show. Their non-participation in this aspect does keep them from understanding a point-of-reference that written example provides but their non-participation functions theoretically. That viewers may not see something that is intended to guide them—that one must be observant and have knowledge of the space and its behavioral expectations in order

to participate in the *true* behavioral expectations of the exhibition. Ideally, the viewer will use this piece of paper to guide them through the space. I have named each piece as, “untitled” with a subsequent parenthetical poetic fragment for the titles. They are united as a group through their collective “un-naming” through my use of *untitled* while the poetic fragments in the titles call back toward the fragmented poetry of Sappho of Lesbos, a writer from ancient Greece. The numbering of the works in the exhibition functions as grammar for how to read the works—an attempt to allow objects and material to function as writing can.

An exhibition is a series of questions.

The formal arrangement of material is a way to present content while the forms themselves *are* content. Through this formal arrangement of objects, materials, ideas, words, I am interested in what an alternative to macho sculpture or toxic masculinity can look like in formal installation-based sculpture. I am not interested solely in the condemnation of machismo art emblematic of the white-cis-hetero-patriarchy but am additionally interested in providing an alternative of a specifically non-macho sculpture and its practice. Is it possible for me to break pots without violence? Can non-toxic masculinity exist within art institutions? If something is broken in private, is it less violent? What can butch art or dyke art or any intersection of the two look like when the historical significance of the terms are considered as both a critique of and participation in a toxically masculine patriarchal language and culture that has historically been a tool of cis-white-supremacy? How can art function that is both a critique of art academic institutions while being a full participant in it and product of it?

World War II ended in 1945 and the men who had served in the United States Army were rewarded with the gift of education under the Servicemen's Readjustment Act of 1944, also known as the G.I. Bill by the United States government (Humes). Only cis-straight-men were legally allowed to serve in the military. During the war, racist segregation laws separated men by race and forcibly oppressed enlisted men of color, specifically individuals who identified as black and African American, were put into less privileged positions than those given to men who were white. The G.I. Bill itself was thought to be ideologically progressive due to its “race-neutral” language. In practice it functioned as an extension of racist Jim Crow laws which systematically benefitted whiteness and white communities, and fundamentally disadvantaged black and African-American communities (Alexander). Local and state Veteran Administration counselors discouraged or outright refused men of color from pursuing an institutional academic education and instead pushed them toward trade schools or economically disadvantaged jobs (Humes). The white men who received free educations were given an institutional head-start in their chosen fields. Some went on to attend and receive degrees from art institutes and art schools going on to establish their own institutions and influence a multitude of media areas.

Peter Voulkos was an influential artist who rose to prominence and was afforded much success in the fields of academic fine art and within academic ceramic institutions in the United States in the 20th century. As a recipient of the G.I. Bill, Voulkos attended art school at Montana State University (formerly Montana State College) and went on to earn his Master of Fine Art from California College of the Arts and Crafts in 1952 (Duncan, 61). His work was well received abstract expressionism in the medium of clay—breaking the form of the vessel into a non-functional sculptural object. He founded the ceramics areas at the Los Angeles County Art

Institute (now known as the Otis College of Art and Design) and the University of California at Berkeley, taught at Black Mountain College, and was an inaugural resident artist at the now institutional fixture of the ceramics world, the Archie Bray Foundation for the Ceramic Arts (Duncan, 62-63). Voulkos often made a spectacle of his studio practice, working alongside students in the classroom or through performative demonstrations of him forcing, punching, and physically dominating the clay into a form. A public way of working that he learned from his professor in ceramics, Frances Senska, during his study at Montana State College (Forbes).

Machismo and performative masculinity have long been acceptable methods of production in art but is not often positioned as content itself. Through naming the history and the political and social systems that produced a specific cannon, I intend to reference the structures that encouraged toxically hypermasculine art practice and have built specific artists into institutions themselves. Pollock, whom I mentioned previously, is an obvious example of how an artist can be absorbed by the cannon into an institution. His paintings are staples in the permanent collections of nearly every major art museum. I think it can be more difficult to discern this same effect in smaller art world bubbles, but I believe they are imperative to name. I do this not to shame the artist and their institutional success but to understand the circumstances that allowed them to be valued and given institutional access and success. Individuals who receive institutional success are not necessarily geniuses, only people who were privileged enough to have access to opportunities and understanding of how to network within a group of influential people who possessed the access and capital to create more opportunities. Considering the patriarchal political and cultural circumstances, it is not surprising that hypermasculinity and hypermasculine coded materials were valued in art but rarely discussed critically. bell hooks, scholar, writer, and critic wrote in her text, *The Will To Change: Men and Masculinity and Love*,

that the only socially acceptable behavior for men is anger. While bell hooks is writing from a contemporary lens, her writing on how masculinity has been policed and allowed to function still defines a larger historic problem that has valued a very narrow idea of masculinity,

Male violence in general has intensified not because feminist gains offer women greater freedom but rather because men who endorse patriarchy discovered along the way that the patriarchal promise of power and dominion is not easy to fulfill, and in those rare cases where it is fulfilled, men find themselves emotionally bereft. The patriarchal manhood that was supposed to satisfy does not. And by the time this awareness emerges most patriarchal men are isolated and alienated; they cannot go back and reclaim a past happiness or joy, nor can they go forward. To go forward they would need to repudiate the patriarchal thinking that their identity has been based on. Rage is the easy way back to a realm of feeling. It can serve as the perfect cover, masking feelings of fear and failure. (hooks 72-73)

With this excerpt from hooks in mind, we can further contextualize the obsession with hypermasculine art made of difficult, serious industrial materials. After WWII, mainstream culture in the United States saw a return to and a reinforcement of gender roles as men returned from the war. Assimilation back into the workforce forced middle and upper middle class women to leave the jobs they took while men fought in the war. Returning home to domestic labor. Men were conditioned to show their emotions in one way and had returned to a life with memories of past trauma and few coping mechanisms. Toxic masculinity permeates all aspects of culture as it is a product of patriarchy and we all function within it. No one is exempt. This reinforcement of strict and traditional gender roles affected the queer community who at the time, were only able to safely communicate a desire through coded language, symbols, clothing, etc. for fear of persecution, assault, jail time, and death. Working class lesbians created a system of butch and femme coding and dress to indicate to one another a shared queerness, a code which was helpful in terms of meeting one another and as a technique of self-preservation as a way for the community to protect themselves against undercover police officers who would pose in gay bars. At the time both gender non-conforming behavior, dress, and homosexual behavior were all

punishable by law and pathologized as psychological disease—and what was punishable by law was exploited by police officers who made a regular practice of beating and sexually assaulting arrested individuals.

I want to note that femme/butch cannot not be positioned as a binary because it is already an alternative to an existence as a straight-cis-woman. Butch and femme are both historic traditions of subverting traditional gender roles, performance, and presentation. Butch dress, specifically, has provided an alternative to traditional masculinity. Butch exists as something completely separate from cis-men while also being very much of that world. And in this way the contradictions mirror those of institutional critique. I can subvert gender roles or expectations through wearing traditionally men's clothing. The subversion is dependent on the wearing of the clothing being predicated on a certain wrongness—wearing things out of context or incorrectly as dictated by mainstream fashion “rules”. Butches, masculine-presenting, and gender non-conforming, trans women, cis women, and non-binary folks are not men and are individually separate from men but gender is an institution and we cannot separate ourselves from it even as we critique it—it is something that functions outside of us and is applied to us with and without our consent.

It is imperative to name the histories that influenced both our understanding of that history and how it has affected present conditions. Sara Ahmed, feminist scholar, writer, and theorist, writes in her book *Living a Feminist Life*, about white men as institution,

When we talk of white men, we are describing something. We are describing an institution. An institution typically refers to a persistent structure or mechanism of social order governing the behavior of a set of individuals within a given community. So when I am saying that when men is an institution, I am referring not only to what has already been instituted or built but the mechanisms that ensure the persistence of that structure. A building is shaped by a series of regulative norms. White men refers also to conduct; it is not simply who is there, who is here, who is given a place at the table, but how bodies are occupied once they have arrived. (Ahmed 152-153)

I name Peter Voulkos as an important figure in contemporary United States ceramics not because I believe in his work but because he has been positioned as a seemingly immovable figure in ceramics. Voulkos and his contemporaries helped to reinforce a dialogue about pots, vessels, and the body. Literally making the body into object. My work is a product of this lineage of thought, working through language of the pot to make vessels that purposefully do not function. Cracked, holed, and nearly broken hydria with glaze defects and no bottoms take on—in the sense that it both acquires and challenges the idea of the pot and the contemporary academic language for pots.

Fragility

Fired ceramic and glaze is fragile and easily chipped, cracked, or shattered. Contemporary ceramic work is often displayed in a gallery or museum as a complete object. The object is the recipient of care from the institution—or, at the very least, the displayed object is the recipient of boundaries created by the institution. I am interested in the ways that boundaries can dictate care and vice-versa. Plexiglass boxes, pedestals, plinths, stanchions, and grip tape are all examples of furniture of the gallery and of the museum that attribute value toward the objects that are displayed. Broken ceramic vessels are more likely to be shown in conjunction with the aforementioned furniture in a museum or as a part of an archive—a testament to a specific kind of care given to a broken object. Broken ceramic vessels in a gallery function differently. There is a sense of immediacy to an obviously broken object in a gallery—it is not being preserved; it exists now in its brokenness. Alternatively, care and value operate differently for objects that are not intended to be broken. The average viewer in a gallery probably does not wish to be responsible for breaking an art object in an exhibition. And so, they extend a self-serving care toward objects in the gallery, respecting the boundaries of the objects and exhibition.

We understand fragility initially through the broken ceramic vessels in the gallery. Vessels are shattered, cracked, or are precariously installed, taunting their breakage. Ratchet straps, intended to secure, provide the most precarious moments in the exhibition. Hydrias are strapped to the gallery wall till they shatter in a private performance in work #15. *Untitled, (strapped)* (figure 1.1). A singular hydria is bound with ratchet straps to a metal chair covered in truck-bed-liner spray in work #5. *Untitled, (I'll bottom for the institution and a butch dyke. Give me health insurance, give me attention.)* (figure 1.3). And a two-inch red ratchet strap is wrapped around the base of work #10. *Untitled, the narcissistic loop between gender dysphoria and*

wanting to be hot), taunting participation that would ultimately lead to the demise of the hydria displayed on top of the piece (figure 1.2). I exploit an intentional wrongness of craft and material—either highlighting its failure by breaking or causing breakage. I am interested in the idea of fragility extending through the tangible object to speak to theoretical ideas about fragility. In the book, *Living A Feminist Life*, by Sara Ahmed, she positions experiences of gender and queerness as a kind of fragility,

There is a kind of queer fatalism at stake here: that to be on a queer path is to hurtle toward a miserable fate, queer as a death sentence; queer as self-shattering. And then if things do shatter (as things tend to do), you have fulfilled an expectation that this is where being queer led you. From the example of mixed and queer relationships, we learn how some are assumed to be inherently broken, as if their fate is to break, as if a break is what we were heading for right from the beginning... Fragility can be a regulative assumption that generates the quality assumed to belong to a thing. A consequence can be recruited as a cause. It might be assumed you created your own damage because you left the safety of a brightly lit path. Gender norms too can work like this: when femininity is registered as fragility, when that fragility is used to explain what happens to her or what she can or cannot do, a consequence of power recruited as the cause. She is treated with caution and care because she is fragile. Politics is what happens in between these *because*s. (Ahmed 169)

Coming out of the closet as a dyke defines a certain fragility—in that fragility implies an irreversible process—a breakage and in this case, a break in an expectation to participate in heteronormative society and a removal from a societal value system defined by cis-men. To present as gender non-conforming also breaks an expectation to perform the gender the individual was assigned at birth within the constructs of cis-heteropatriarchal society. Although we understand gender to be often a complex individual experience and not something dependent on body parts nor legal documents, to understand the term “gender-nonconforming” one must acknowledge that through this critique of gender we are still operating within socially constructed ideas of binary gender.

The repeating vessel form of the hydria, a three-handled pottery form from ancient Greece meant to carry water or cremains, within the exhibition references both body because of the forms intended functional relationship to the body and the language surrounding pottery but also the institution as a form of classical antiquity. The three handles function as a literal representation of a non-binary way of approaching an object. The third handle representing the alternative, the third option. I build and break the vessels not to glorify the violence of shattering but in shattering the hydria, it breaks its form and thus releases the object of its expectation to function, *trans-forming* the static ceramic into random sharp piles.

The breaking of the hydria also speaks to the fragility of the institution—if it is not cared for, it can be destroyed—or outwardly destroy. As the viewer navigates the space of the exhibition, I want them to be aware of their body within the space and in relation to the work both physically and intellectually. As viewers of work, the viewer participates through looking and moving about the space. As participants, I want to implore the viewer to consider their positions in relation to the work and their body within the exhibition space.

Coded Systems: An Arrangement of Objects

Orange is an endlessly interesting and slippery color often used to signify attention or caution on safety cones, traffic barriers, signs, and visibility vests. Orange is a color that is used to communicate between hunters so they may locate one another, keeping each other safe by sight. There is an obvious implied violence to hunting that I do not mean to celebrate—I am interested instead in the ability demonstrated to locate using specific colors or codes. *The ability to be seen and recognized.* There is a relationship between this visual-locating and the locating tactics utilized by queer communities. The butch/femme coding system historically used by dyke communities was a method of coding born out of survival. To continue this legacy through dress or language honors this history while continuing the tradition. I am forever in hope of receiving the “dyke nod” from a queer passerby.

Codes have multiple functions in the work, dictating boundaries and referencing traditions of queer visibility. Flagging within queer communities is a nonverbal means of communication popularized by gay men in the 1970’s in the United States but has historical ties to cowboys during the California gold rush. The tradition of flagging has been adopted by folks of all genders in the LGBTQIA+ community and has been the subject of popular online articles and memes in recent years. The online publication Autostraddle.com published an article in 2018 titled, *Queer Flagging 101: How to Use the Hanky Code to Signal the Sex You Want to Have*, that briefly summarizes the function and history of flagging. Archie, the article’s author, writes casually on the website,

I can’t fully express just how important it is to have nonverbal ways to communicate our sexuality, our gender, our kinks. In a society — especially in the ’70s, but even now — where the sex we want is criminalized or considered more “perverted” than the sex cisgender heterosexuals are engaging in, a handkerchief in the back pocket is a quiet way to show off our sexual deviancy in a world that doesn’t want to see it. Since the 1970s,

the hanky code has been picked up from folks all over the gender spectrum. Some queer people femme flag — using nail color in place of handkerchiefs. It's still around and very much alive and adopted by all sorts of people, but hopefully never by cis straight people! Leave our handkerchiefs alone, dammit! You already have undercuts and now harnesses; let me keep this. That being said, some of the acts that are a part of the historic hanky code aren't great — there's some that are racist at worst or tokenizing at best, so I think it's fair to critique the code. I also think it's possible for something to be good and to be problematic at the same time. I am all about that life. It's a way to look around the bar and see who might be up for some NSFW fun. It started as, and in my honest opinion should remain, a cruising tool. This means a way to signify that you're interested in casual sex or a certain type of sex. I'm not here to police you wearing a handkerchief out as a talking point or because you are trying to signal to your significant other you want a certain type of sex after the bar, but also there's a reason there isn't a flag for platonic talking. Or cuddling. Or veganism — as Chingy, a great flagging expert [founder of The Bottom's Line], has talked about. It's for sex. That's the point. (Bongiovanni 1-2)

The author of the article names the history of flagging and places it within a contemporary context, but it also is representative of the frustrations caused as mainstream culture adopts aspects of queer culture—complicating the function of codes. In this work, I attempt to make reference non-verbal methods of queer communication by choosing specific material that has the potential to give the “dyke nod” to the viewer either because of title, form, object arrangement, or the material itself. Visibility without protection can often be dangerous for systematically-vulnerable individuals.

The tile of the show, cut from silicon carbide sandpaper, is a visual form of queer visibility. The name *good dyke art* is given to an exhibition ultimately creating a space that is named for certain individuals and is meant for those who in return, feel that the space is for them. I allow materials to function as code and represent code. I've chosen referential materials that evoke to the body through context, word-play, and subtle jokes. Latex, faux leather, dental dams, o-rings, key chains, carpet, x-formation of the ratchet straps, and titles of the works combine in the exhibition to construct my own system of visibility. A large ceramic hydria flags both a light pink dental dam and a plastic red square in a hole positioned on the left side of the pot as directed

by the map, toward work # 14. (*Untitled, (push me onto you, I'll balance on my knees, and make a fulcrum of your mouth)*). The large hydria faces work #10. *Untitled, the narcissistic loop between gender dysphoria and wanting to be hot*), an installation of a hollow grey block and stairs, with a hydria displayed on top. The hydria has a series of rings hanging from one of the handles meant to reference a “ring of keys” moment as popularized by the graphic novel, *Fun Home* written by Allison Bechdel. The main character sees a butch dyke for the first time and she begins to understand her own gayness, “I didn’t know there were women who wore men’s clothes and had men’s haircuts. But like a traveler in a foreign country who runs into someone from home—someone they’ve never spoken to but know by sight—I recognized her with a surge of joy.” (Bechdel).

Ideas of visibility and representation are heavy subjects which is why I chose to implement a sort of humor of crass sex jokes within these larger ideas of visibility. Groups of people who have faced institutional marginalization have often been the butt of the joke. I have heard first-hand lesbian jokes from professors in classes where the idea of lesbian is the punchline. I am making crass jokes for people who are often made to be punchlines. The power of the joke comes from the recognition of the joke’s dependency on being made within the institution, as a means to “punch up” despite it. Audre Lorde wrote in her essay, *Uses of the Erotic*, that the erotic is a powerful force that can be implemented against patriarchal systems as a tool that can encourage an understanding between individuals,

The erotic functions for me in several ways, and the first is providing the power which comes from sharing deeply in pursuit with another person. The sharing of joy, whether physical, emotional, psychic, or intellectual, forms a bridge between the sharers which can be the basis for understanding much of what is not shared between them, and lessens the threat of their difference. (Lorde 10)

The exhibition fluctuates between seriousness and facetiousness in titles and casual visual humor, speaking to laughter as a survival tool, a coping mechanism, a unifier, and a device that attempts to bring joy.

I feel there is a discernable impetus for making intentional spaces on a campus and within a larger community where basic access to housing is not guaranteed to LGBTQIA+ individuals. The State Supreme Court of Arkansas struck down the local Fayetteville discrimination protections for individuals based on gender and sexuality in January of 2019, which now allows landlords to legally evict tenants with blatant homophobia or transphobia (DeMillo). Access to housing is just one of a multitude of ways the courts lifting these protections will have an effect. I do not think the gallery is a solution, but it can offer space as relief to queer viewers with jokes, references, and action intended for them. The gallery functioning in this way is imperfect but through its imperfectness it can envelop the necessity to build community rather than just trying to implement the optics of diversity. The necessity of holding space for yourself and other people to feel secure, seen, held, and to encourage beneficial and challenging conversations.

Conclusion

I want to continue to develop a grammar of material, a way of working that relies on the space for both form and content and the viewers' engagement with the work from multiple points of access. The work is ultimately a means to initiate conversation—or at least interaction between individuals in the exhibition space—be it actually communicating or mirroring another's interactions with the work. I do not mean to position myself as being in the “correct” position, rather, I mean to define that the work comes from a position of frustration and curiosity about ideas of institutional access, the spaces I inhabit, and as I learn about and from my position within the institution.

I want to the viewer to give others the boundaries and care they offer inanimate objects and I hope maybe through interacting with the work in *good dyke art* in a physical space something can be understood. Ceramic as both a material and a concept have forced me to learn great lessons about conversation, negotiation, and working with—rather than against. It helped me to strengthen a sense of sensitivity. I can only push the material so far as it will let me, and I have to be aware of its limitations.

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Figures

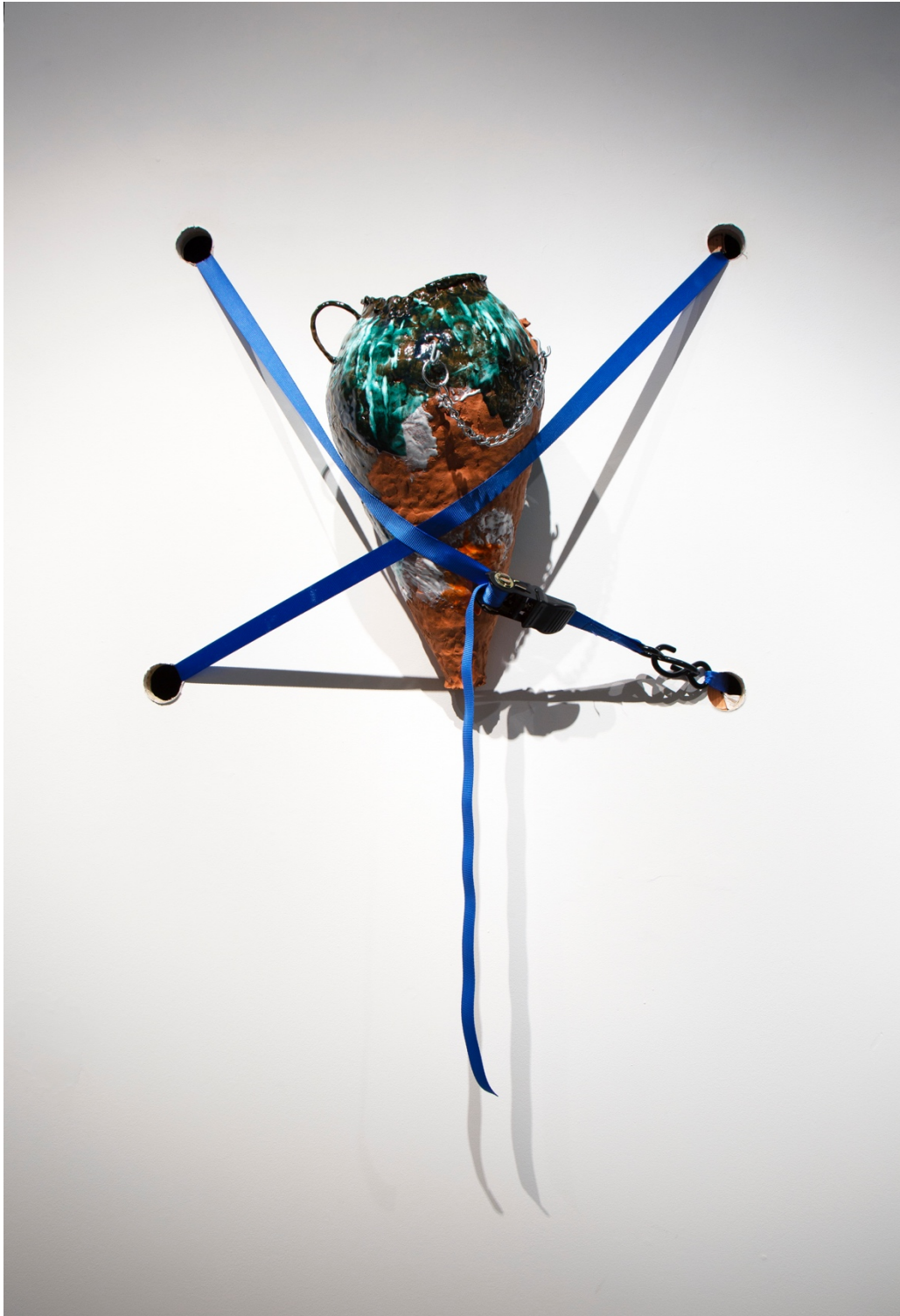


Figure 1.1. Sam Mack, detail image of work #15. *Untitled, (strapped)*, 2019
Photo by author.



Figure 1.2. Sam Mack, work #10. *Untitled, the narcissistic loop between gender dysphoria and wanting to be hot*, 2019
Photo by author.



Figure 1.3. Sam Mack, work #5. *Untitled, (I'll bottom for the institution and a butch dyke. Give me health insurance, give me attention.)*, 2019
Photo by author.



Figure 1.4. Sam Mack, work # 14. *Untitled, (push me onto you, I'll balance on my knees, and make a fulcrum of your mouth)*, 2019
Photo by author.

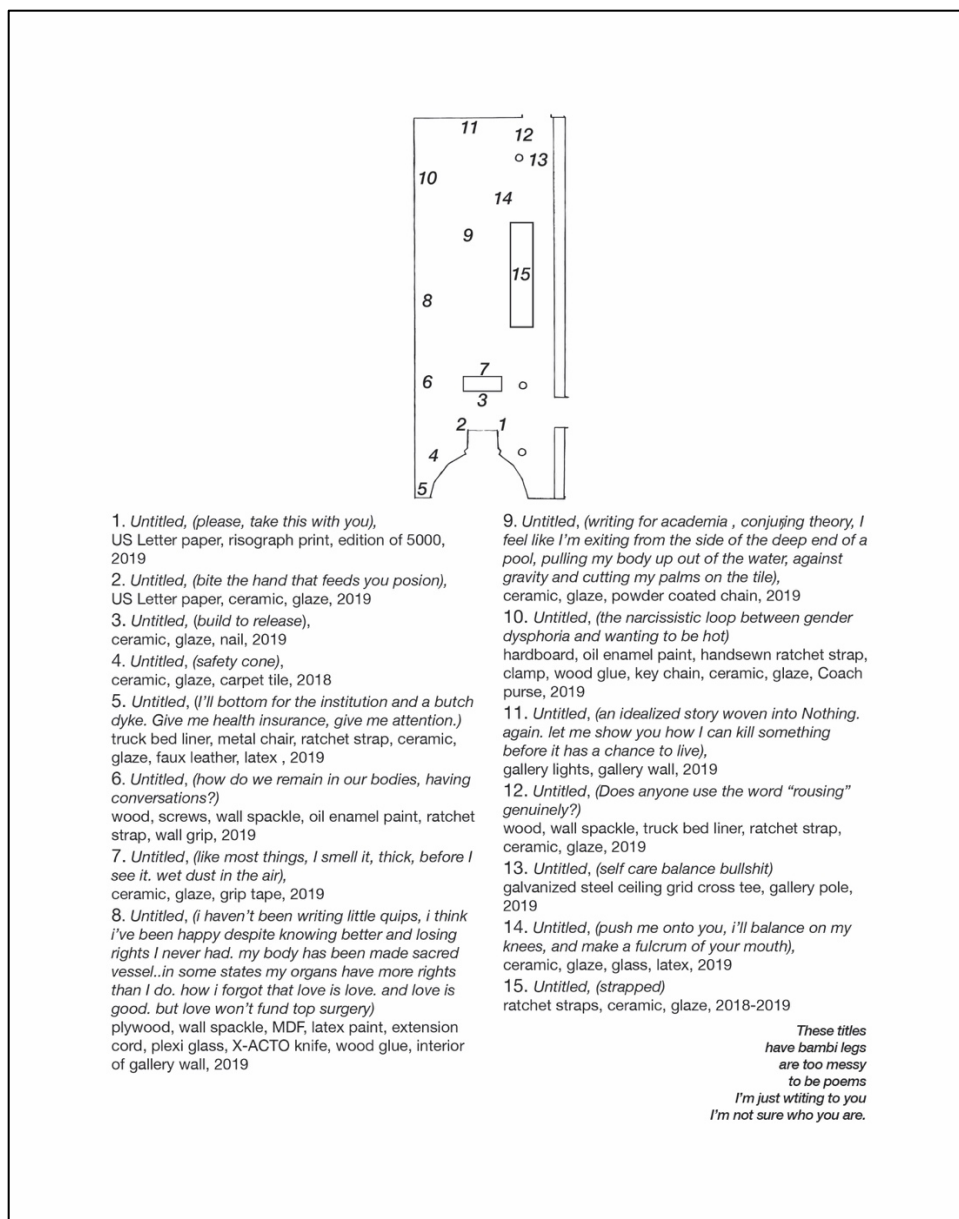
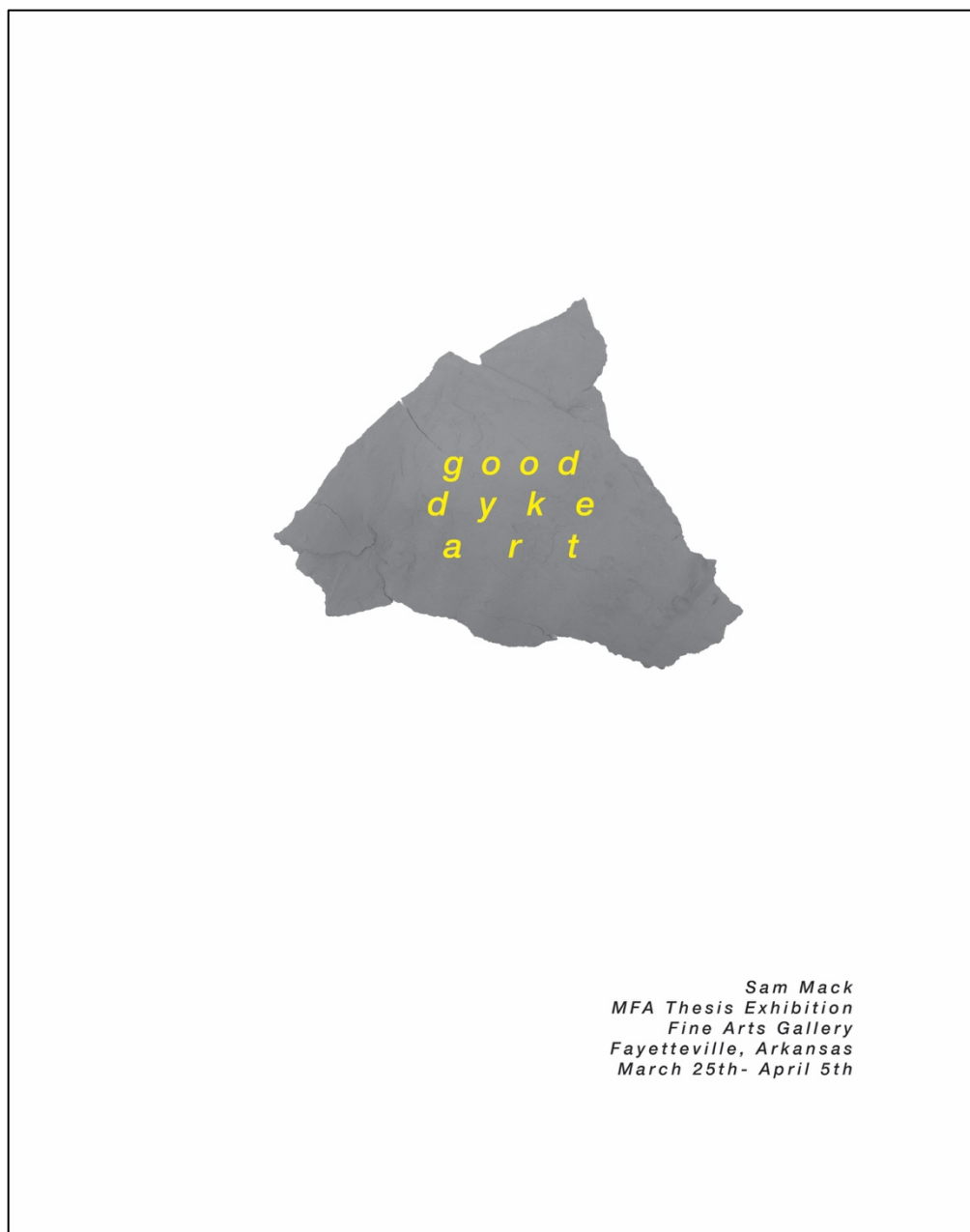


Figure 1.5. Sam Mack, detail of front page of work # 1. *Untitled (please take this with you)*, 2019
Photo by author.



Sam Mack
MFA Thesis Exhibition
Fine Arts Gallery
Fayetteville, Arkansas
March 25th- April 5th

Figure 1.6. Sam Mack, detail of back page of work # 1. *Untitled (please take this with you)*, 2019
Photo by author.