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Inside/Out desire: The Female Gendered Voice

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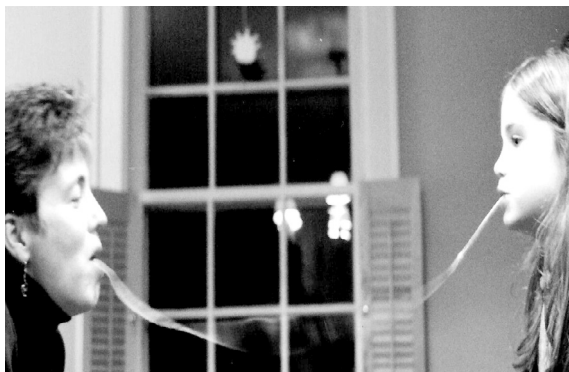
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INSIDE/OUT DESIRE:
THE FEMALE GENDERED VOICE

HANNAH PLISHTIN
HONORS THESIS 2012 - 2013
ART DEPARTMENT
CONNECTICUT COLLEGE

INSIDE/OUT DESIRE:
THE FEMALE GENDERED VOICE

TO MY MOMMA,
FOR ASKING WHAT FILLS THE REALTY OF MY MIND



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I. PREFACE

My investigation of women's expression as a gendered subject originates in an attempt to better understand my own. It was through my mother's journey finding her own voice that initially sparked my inquiry into the relationship between a woman's voice and what becomes her reality.

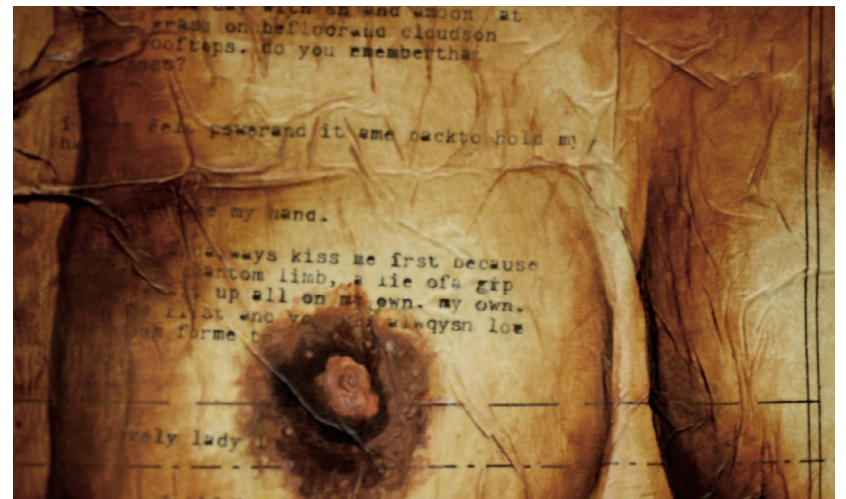
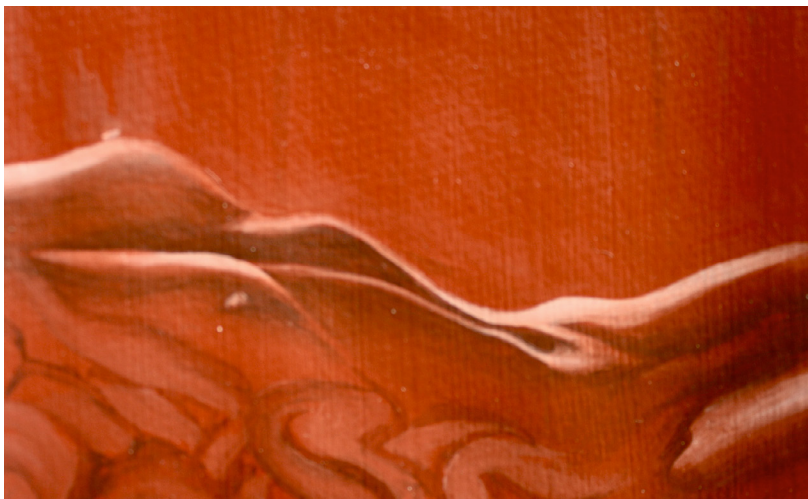
When my mother was diagnosed with ovarian cancer last year, her communication began to change. She started to really listen, give priority to, and value the things she wanted. Witnessing this transformation in my mother generated a number of observations and questions about myself and other women. How often do I, and other women, squelch our own voices? How often do we not express what we really think and feel when we actually want it to be heard?

I am curious about communication and the gendered female identity. Resources in linguistics, sociology, gender studies, etiquette, economics, and psychology reveal a number of significant connections and raise new questions: What are the gender expectations of women's language and expression in Western society? What is the basis of want and desire as feelings? Does gender socialization affect women's communication of want and desire?

In my painting series, *insideoutme*¹ from 2011, I blended images of my body with personal texts that I had never before revealed. This process functioned as an intimate exploration of the overlapping nature of body, voice, and identity. In another work from that year, *typographic explorations: a to z*,² I examined language using typography as a visual communicator. With the memory of these mixed media works still in my fingertips, I began to envision how I might explore this new subject matter through traditional and digital artistic processes.

1 Following is an excerpt from the artist statement of *insideoutme* that exemplifies its relevance to this work: "As humans, we share the experience of the physical: through our bodies, we not only experience our own reality but are made a part of the physical world. While my work often involves an investigation of my most private physical and psychological self, often including intimate content, I find that my subject matter – and the reflection it engenders – always connects me to the experience of others." (Hannah Plishtin. *insideoutme*, mixed media, 2011. <http://www.hannahplishtin.com>.)

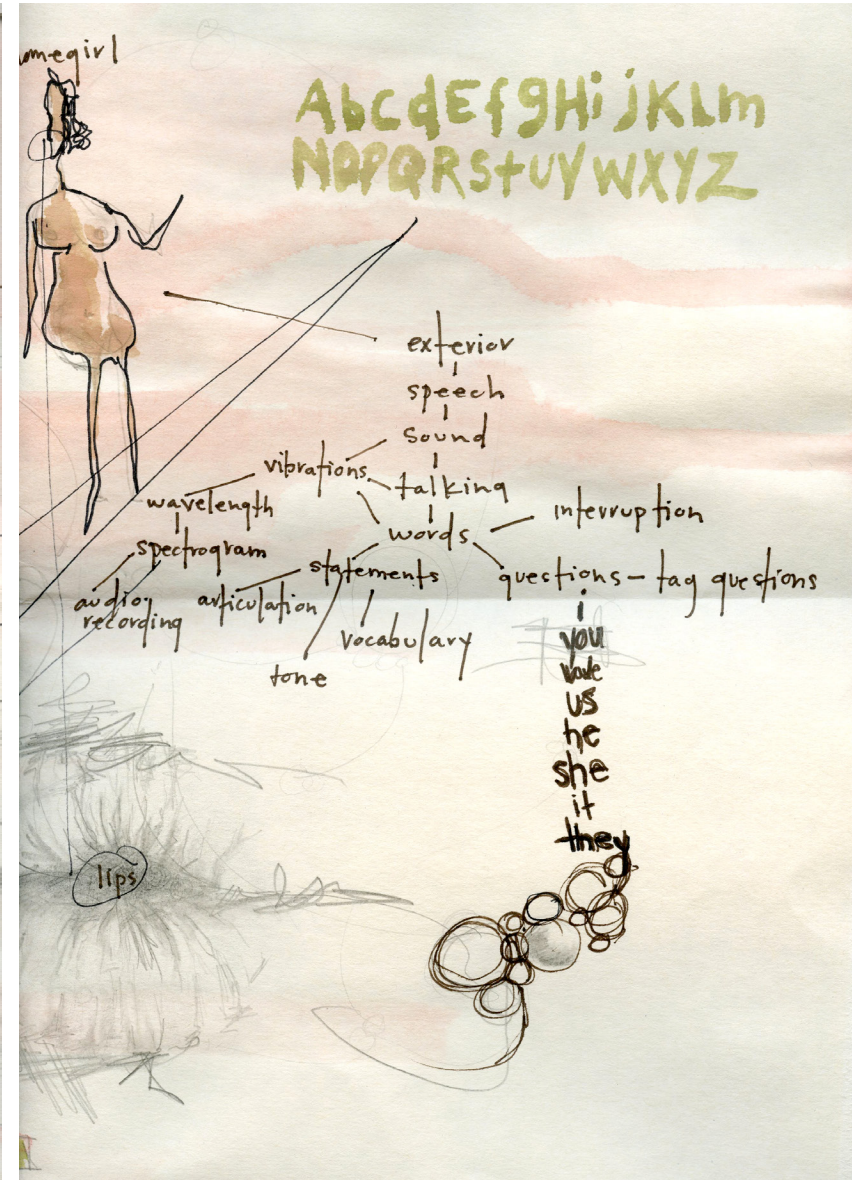
2 My artist statement for *typographic explorations: a to z* explains: "[This work] was inspired by my interest in typography as an effective visual communicator. I am fascinated by the individual expression of each letterform. Although universally recognized, each letterform generates a subjective relationship with the viewer, shaped by one's personal experience and associations. Typography and letterform can, on a subliminal level, possess personality, emotion, gender, and even cultural affiliations." (Hannah Plishtin. *typographic illustrations: a to z*, mixed media, 2011. <http://www.hannahplishtin.com>.)



INSIDEOUTME, MIXED MEDIA, 2011

“WHO WE ARE AND WHAT WE SAY
IS IN MANY WAYS DEPENDENT ON
WHO WE MUST NOT BE AND WHAT MUST REMAIN UNSAID,
OR UNSAYABLE.”¹

¹ Don Kulick, “Language and Desire,” in *The Handbook of Language and Gender*, ed. by Janet Holmes and Miriam Meyerhoff (MA, USA: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 119.



AN EARLY BRAINSTORM MINDMAP, 2012

2. STATEMENT

Language is a profoundly complex and multifaceted topic, yet the intangible power it carries is clear. It is this power that allows us to establish ourselves as individuals and members of groups; it tells us how we are connected to one another; and most importantly, language can establish who has control and who doesn't.¹ Therefore, it comes as no surprise that in patriarchal Western society where women still possess and exert less power than men their voices are in many ways restrained.² From the playground to the bedroom, suppression exists in every aspect of women's socialization.

Beginning in the 1970's with the rise of the second wave of the women's movement, the connection between language and gender became a prevalent topic in linguistic investigations.³ Within this, it is the specific verbalization of want and desire that I find particularly meaningful. Although the majority of previous

literature on language and desire focuses on psychoanalysis and sexuality, the expression of want and desire reveals and reflects larger social realities.⁴

I explore this idea using visual and spoken language in a series of works on paper and digital videos. In form and content, all work is informed by a collection of interviews. Through this investigation, I hope to probe gender power structures and their effect on women's language, particularly the expression of want and desire.

1 Robin Lakoff, *The Language War* (Berkeley and Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press: 2000), 17-41.

2 Robin Lakoff, "Language, Gender, and Politics: Putting "Women" and "Power" in the Same Sentence" in *The Handbook of Language and Gender*, ed. by Janet Holmes and Miriam Meyerhoff (MA, USA: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 162.

3 Penelope Eckert and Sally McConnell-Ginet, *Language and Gender* (Cambridge, UK ; New York : Cambridge University Press, 2003), 1.

4 Kulick, "Language and Desire," 119.

3. CLARIFICATIONS

Although the word “gender” has been in use for centuries, according to the Oxford English Dictionary, the idea of gender as *a state of being* did not become common until about fifty years ago. The term “gender” is often still equated with its more limited meaning as “sex,” yet gender does not unfold from biology or even from an individual’s predisposition to be a particular kind of person. It is a societal arrangement and construction deeply ingrained in the social order.¹ While Western culture still clings to the male/female binary, gender identity is far more diverse and complex, and as a result, I am compelled to properly explain the context of this investigation.²

As terms, “female” typically refers to biological sex and “woman” refers to a social construction. However, I will use the term ‘female gender’ not in reference to the sex categorization but rather interchangeably with ‘women’ in reference to the socially constructed gender role. I use these terms only to reference those who identify as such. While withholding want and desire is not

exclusive to women, this work *is* rooted in personal investigation with women as the focus. Furthermore, gender adheres to no universal expectations or norms but rather is part of the socio-cultural context. As a white, heterosexual, middle class, 22-year-old female American from New England, my perspective is influenced by these factors. Lastly, this work is not research guided by experiment or intended to provide concrete conclusions about my subject, but serves as a humanistic inquiry and an exploration of identity that informs my artwork.

¹ Eckert et al., *Language and Gender*, 32.

² “Understanding Gender,” Gender Spectrum, accessed March 20th, 2012, <http://www.genderspectrum.org/understanding-gender>.

“WOMEN ARE NOT BORN, THEY ARE MADE.”¹

¹ Eckert et al., *Language and Gender*, 15.

4. LANGUAGE AND GENDER

Language is how we interpret what we call our reality.¹ As Robin Lakoff states, “language is the means and medium by which we construct and understand ourselves as individuals, as coherent creatures, and also as members of a culture, a cohesive unit.”² Linguists have contemplated and analyzed language for many years, yet the specific academic niche surrounding the ties between language, gender, and power is fairly recent. It was sociolinguist Robin Lakoff’s article *Language and Woman’s Place*, first published as an article in 1972, that catapulted research surrounding the subject of language and gender into the academic conversation. In the dominance approach, she argued that women’s language is characterized by elements of “tentative, powerless, and trivial” speech, both reflecting and producing women’s subordinate position in society.³

For the thirty years following, linguists have debated Lakoff’s argument and further researched the links between language and gender. In my consideration of the subject, I drew from the various perspectives of Deborah Tannen,⁴ Jennifer Coates,⁵ Margaret Gibbon,⁶ Deborah Cameron,⁷ and Mary Bucholtz,⁸ among others. While many of Lakoff’s original claims are no longer relevant, it was her pioneering work that directed attention to the critical issues of power and the interaction of language and gender.⁹

1 Lakoff, *The Language War*, 20.

2 Lakoff, *The Language War*, 21.

3 Eckert et al., *Language and Gender*, 1.

4 Deborah Tannen, *Gender and Discourse* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994).

5 Jennifer Coates, *Women Talk: Conversation between Women Friends* (Oxford, UK: Cambridge, Mass.: Blackwell Publishers, 1996).

6 Margaret Gibbon, *Feminist Perspectives on Language* (New York: Pearson Education Limited, 1999).

7 Deborah Cameron, “Gender and Language Ideologies” in *The Handbook of Language and Gender*, ed. Janet Holmes and Miriam Meyerhoff (Malden MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 447.

8 Mary Bucholtz, “Theories of Discourse as Theories of Gender: Discourse Analysis in Language and Gender Studies” in *The Handbook of Language and Gender*, ed. Janet Holmes and Miriam Meyerhoff (Malden MA: Blackwell Publishing, 2003), 43.

9 Eckert et al., *Language and Gender*, 160.



WORD BUBBLE STUDIES, INK AND WATERCOLOR ON PAPER, 10"X10", 2013

WANT, V. ¹

1. TO FAIL TO POSSESS ESPECIALLY IN
CUSTOMARY OR REQUIRED AMOUNT
2. A: TO HAVE A STRONG DESIRE FOR
B: TO HAVE AN INCLINATION TO
3. A: TO HAVE NEED OF
B: TO SUFFER FROM THE LACK OF

DESIRE, V. ²

1. TO LONG OR HOPE FOR
2. TO EXPRESS A WISH FOR

¹ “want, v,” in Merriam – Webster.com, accessed March 20th, 2012, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/want>.

² “desire, v,” in Merriam – Webster.com, accessed March 20th, 2012, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/desire>.



SNAPSHOTS OF INTERVIEWEES

5. THE INTERVIEWS

I interviewed 37 women¹ in their early twenties from Connecticut College, Wesleyan University, and my hometown of Lenox, Massachusetts. While I knew all of the interviewees, most I knew little about personally. In hopes of exposing the unexpressed, I devised a series of questions intended to reveal the respondents' unvoiced wants and desires. Video recording each subject, I asked the following questions:

1. What is something you want or desire in your relationship with a best friend that you have never expressed?
2. What is something you want or desire in your relationship with a romantic partner that you have never expressed?
3. What is something you want or desire in your relationship with your mother that you have never expressed?
4. What is something you want or desire in your relationship with your father that you have never expressed?
5. What is something you want or desire in your relationship with a sibling that you have never expressed?

Hearing these inner truths reach air for the first time was a powerful experience, often overwhelmingly tender and raw for both the interviewee and me. In this process, I found deep corroboration and affirmation of my own experience. The fact that these significant wants and desires had never been expressed before was evidence that these women had not felt empowered, for one reason or another, to articulate them. These findings became the crux of this study and the motivation for the resulting body of work.

¹ It must be noted that an individual's age, race, sexual orientation, class, religion, etc. undeniably influence their communication and language. However, these variables are not my focus and therefore, I did not ask these questions of the women I interviewed. As a result, I am not in the position to clarify any of these identity characteristics. However, based on my background with these women, I can presume that the large majority was between 20-22 years old, white, and heterosexual.

6. GENDER SOCIALIZATION: EXPRESSING WANT AND DESIRE

In Western patriarchy, socialization demands that women be invested exteriorly, not only in terms of physical appearance, but also in terms of possessing a sense of responsibility for the well being of others. As playmates on the playground, lovers in the bedroom, and mothers and wives in the home, women are socialized to make others happy by prioritizing other's needs above their own.¹ In this, the only way to perform the female gender role 'correctly' is to be other-oriented, attending closely to signals from others regarding the state of their minds and bodies.² While men are expected to be autonomous, women are supposed to be "communal," perpetually focused on others' interests and the maintenance of social harmony.³

This outward focus directly correlates with the ways in which women are socialized to communicate. In terms of language, women are expected to be quiet, unassertive, undemanding, and selfless.⁴ Women are to avoid promoting their own self-interest at all costs. While research suggest that women tend to speak faster, more often,⁵ and with more emotional

freedom than men,⁶ the subjectivity of their language tends to differ. Research shows the subject of women's language and questions tend to be "other-oriented" in accordance with the social expectation that women should devote themselves to the needs of others.⁷

In the interviews, one respondent expressed that she wanted to "be meaner...in a good way...to my friends..." indicating her desire to voice her opinions regardless of what others want to hear or the impact it might have on those relationships. This response implies the fear of deviating from the normative expectation of women's behavior and language. In abandoning a "niceness," she becomes "mean," "unladylike," or even "a bitch."⁸ In addition, the majority of interviewees exposed a desire to be listened to and better heard. Phrases such as, "I want you to listen when I speak," "I want you to ask about me more," "I want you to listen but not offer advice," resonated throughout the transcript. The subtext of the yearning to be "meaner" and to be "listened to more" suggests a lack of self-oriented expression. To speak one's own truth requires a woman to abandon facets of her expected selfless role.

1 Martin, *Becoming a Gendered Body...*, 503.

2 Eckert et al., *Language and Gender*, 160.

3 Eckert et al., *Language and Gender*, 38.

4 Babcock et al., *Women Don't Ask...*, 62.

5 Studies show that women speak an average of 115 more words a minute and an average of 13,000 more words a day than men (Brizendine, *The Female Brain*, 14).

6 Studies show that from birth, parents tend to discuss feelings more openly with their daughters than sons (Babcock et al., *Women Don't Ask...*, 117).

7 Babcock et al., *Women Don't Ask...*, 63.

8 Babcock et al., *Women Don't Ask...*, 11.

Eventually, as suggested by the previous examples, the expectation to focus on external harmony comes into direct conflict with a woman's own wants and desires, which involve an interior focus. Fulfillment of want and desire requires power, assertion, and a sense of personal entitlement - all qualities which women are discouraged and socialized to linguistically abandon. In short, the assertion of want and desire is at odds with women's expected gender role. Here, a tension arises between what she wants and what she asks for. In this, a struggle lives between how she is assumed to behave and communicate and what serves her self-actualization. She begins to withhold her own truth and develops an interior voice at odds with her language and behavior in the world.⁹

⁹ Babcock et al., *Women Don't Ask...*, 117.

*WISH, V.*¹

I. TO HAVE A DESIRE FOR
(AS SOMETHING UNATTAINABLE)

¹ “wish v,” in Merriam – Webster.com, accessed March 20th, 2012,
<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/wish>.



A TO BE, WATERCOLOR ON PAPER, 22"X30", 2012

7. CONTROL AND POWER: UM, WISHING, AND QUESTIONING

In Western patriarchal society, women are socialized to exercise less power physically and vocally. In fact, until quite recently, most important aspects of women's lives were outside of their power to control. Women could not vote, own property, or receive a formal education. They did not have the right to control their own reproductive systems nor did they have legal standing outside the private sphere of the home. As Babcock and Laschever explain, "women were in every material way dependent on the will and whims of others to decide their fates."¹ While reality has changed drastically for women over the last century, social barriers and constraints remain significant.

In the interviews, the lack of power experienced by the interviewees was evident in subtle yet telling ways. I noticed, for example, use of the word "wish" instead of "want." These two terms, although often used interchangeably, have different meanings. "Wish" means "to have desire for" but also indicates that something desired is unattainable.² It quietly possesses an unachievable quality, indicating the speaker's feeling of doubt concerning her ability to realize her hopes, almost as if she expects them to remain unsatisfied. Similarly, I found that declarative statements were often spoken with the intonation of a question,

a mode referred to as high-rising terminal (HRT) or "uptalk" as dubbed by the media.³ For example, "I want you to ask me how I want to be touched," sounded like, "I want you to ask me how I want to be touched?" Similarly, the use of non-absolute language, or 'hedge words,'⁴ such as "um," "I guess," "sorta," was very frequent throughout the interviews. Both of these language elements reveal an entrenched sense of uncertainty or insecurity regarding whether what the interviewee is saying is "right."⁵ Lakoff proposed that these forms of language relate to the ways in which women are taught to be agreeable by softening and attenuating their expression of opinion.⁶ More recent research suggests that rising intonation simply invites others to respond to what is being said. Yet, in my opinion, the rising tone remains problematic if it is functioning as a way to avoid being heard as "self-centered" and if it exists to further the required "sociability" of the female gendered role.⁷

3 Eckert et al., *Language and Gender*, 158.

4 'Hedge word' is a term coined by Robin Lakoff in reference to non-absolute words that convey the speaker is uncertain about what he (or she) is saying (Lakoff, *Language and Woman's Place...*, 79).

5 A recent study of the popular game show Jeopardy! proves that women are twice more likely to use uptalk when making a statement. What's even more interesting is that the more successful on the show a man is, the less likely he is to use uptalk while the more successful a woman is, the more likely she is to use uptalk, indicating her hesitation to use authoritative language even when she is in an authoritative position. (Thomas J. Linneman, *Gender and Jeopardy!...*, 82).

6 Eckert et al., *Language and Gender*, 158-159.

7 Eckert et al., *Language and Gender*, 174-175.

1 Babcock et al., *Women Don't Ask...*, 24-25.

2 "wish v," in Merriam – Webster.com, accessed March 20th, 2012, <http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/wish>.

These subtleties in language relate to the Babcock and Laschever research in *Women Don't Ask: Negotiation and the Gender Divide*. Through the lens of salary negotiation, the authors explore the idea that women expect less and therefore ask for less.⁸ They suggested that women ask for less because of a weakened sense of entitlement resulting from an extensive socialization of powerlessness. Women expect less and feel satisfied with less because history tells them they don't deserve more and to demand more is "unfeminine."⁹ Women, according to Babcock and Laschever, learn to abide by external social authority, which decrees what is acceptable and not acceptable to want and ask for.¹⁰ In other words, self-agency succumbs to what a woman's external reality decides she deserves. Could the frequent use of the word "wish," hedge words, and continuous rising intonation indicate this socialized understanding that women are less likely to realize their desires?

8 Linda Babcock and Sara Laschever, *Women Don't Ask: Negotiation and the Gender Divide* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 2003).

9 Babcock et al., *Women Don't Ask...*, 52.

10 Babcock et al., *Women Don't Ask...*, 31.

“IF NOTHING IS ALLOWED IN OR OUT, THEN THE FEMALE BODY REMAINS
A DISTURBING CONTAINER FOR BOTH
THE IDEAL AND THE POLLUTED.”¹

¹ Hilary Robinson, *Feminism-Art-Theory: An Anthology*, 1968-2000 (Oxford ; Malden, Mass. : Blackwell Publishers, 2001), 564.



SPEAKING ON PRESENCE, WATERCOLOR ON PAPER, 22"X30", 2012



I WISH YOU WANTED, WATERCOLOR ON PAPER, 4"X6", 2013

8. PAINT AND MIXED MEDIA

LIPS AS SIGNIFIER

The lips are my artistic signifier. Considered the true exterior end of the vocal tract, our lips shape the articulation of speech. The lips are what move when words are spoken; they encircle the cavern from which speech emerges, and are what we most immediately associate with language.

Beyond this, the lips are connected to sensuality and sexuality, a relation originating from evolutionary biology.¹ Of all the bodily surfaces, the lips contain some of the most sensory neurons, making them extremely sensitive to every kind of stimulus. When touched, these neurons relay messages to the brain, triggering many tactile sensations including sexual excitement.²

Furthermore, originating from evolutionary necessity, the woman's lips are a rudimentary indicator of fertility, swelling at puberty and thinning with age. In fact, studies show fuller lips are linked to higher estrogen levels in women, indicative of reproductive capacity.³ Yet, the lips as a sign of a woman's sexuality have become lost in the insidious fog of sexual objectification. A woman, as historic symbol of sex in Western culture and society, is seen and valued for the body parts she

possesses.⁴ Her lips are among the primary instruments in this objectification. In Surrealism, a largely male-dominated art movement of the early 20th century focused on the subconscious and theories of Freud, the lips are used as sexualized female imagery. For example, in Man Ray's *The Lips* or Salvador Dali's *Mae West Lips Sofa*, the lips are portrayed as sexualized objects of the woman's body. Today, myriad images of the woman in Western mass media – on billboards, television, and in print – show her pout in shiny, sexy focus. Yet, her lips don't speak. They function as silent objects of sexuality.

Part of my aim is to consider, yet also diverge from, the standard representation of women's lips. The prominence I give them is not meant to contribute to the fragmentation and objectification of the woman's body, but rather to serve as a platform, a necessary locus, through which to develop an idea.⁵ Taken directly from image stills of the interviewees, the lips in this work signify speech; they gain substance not through their sexual appeal but through the words, the spoken truth, that they make possible.

1 Sheril Kirshenbaum, *The Science of Kissing: What our Lips are Telling Us* (New York: Grand Central Publishing, 2011), 11.

2 Kirshenbaum, *The Science of Kissing...*, 11.

3 Kirshenbaum, *The Science of Kissing...*, 13.

4 Alan Soble, *Sex from Plato to Paglia: A Philosophical Encyclopedia* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2006), 723.

5 Robinson, *Feminist – Art – Theory...*, 582.



THE GIRL SAID, WATERCOLOR ON PAPER, 3 PANELS 30"X7" EACH, 2012

WORKS ON PAPER

Watercolor proved an appropriate choice as medium for this subject. Pigments held together by water-soluble binders give watercolor paint an inherent fluidity. In various small studies throughout the year, I familiarized myself with the loose nature of the paint, largely uncontrollable even by the hand that directs it. Like language and the body, watercolor is flexible and mutable, progressing and developing with time and context. I employ the liquid nature of the paint for its corporeal ties to saliva and water, similar to the way in which the contemporary artist Marilyn Minter often uses lips as a surface on which to explore the material that settles upon them – for example, glitter, pearls, etc.¹ I handle the medium with a loose hand, allowing the lips, teeth, and tongues to emerge organically from the surface of the paper, very much like words emerge from the matrix of a woman's mind and body. The pinks, reds, and purples of the color palette are similarly redolent of the body's interior and orifices. The red, referencing blood, elusively insinuates an exposed wound, analogous to the tender and often painful spoken content of the interviews.

Imagery sources for the watercolor paintings are taken directly from the interview footage. Similar to the dynamic lips portrayed by contemporary artist Julia Randall,² I also look to capture and illustrate the mouth's movement in speech.

1 Mary Heilmann, Matthew Higgs, and Johanna Burton, *Marilyn Minter* (Gregory R. Miller & Co. 2010), 71.

2 Julia Randall. *Lures*, colored pencil on paper, 2006-2007. <http://www.juliarandall.com>.

In my painting titled *the girl said*, the frame-by-frame lip movement of each word in the title is in a serial form reminiscent of a sound wave. In other paintings, I reference the mouth speaking significant words, such as “want” and “desire,” in the interview footage. Here, the digital and analog methods of work are inextricably dependent on one another.

In the work titled *deep down*, I investigate the texture of the lips in a new medium. Scanned images of tissue paper sculptures, these tactile studies explore the lips in color, thickness, and dimensionality. Similar to my earlier work *insideoutme*,³ the layered and wrinkled tissue paper is evocative of the thin and delicate nature of skin.

3 Hannah Plishtin. *insideoutme*, mixed media, 2011. <http://www.hannahplishtin.com>.



CAPTURED, WATERCOLOR ON PAPER, 30"X10", 2012



CAPTURED (DETAILS)





DEEP DOWN, SCANS OF TISSUE PAPER SCULPTURES, 10"X10" EACH, 2013



AN INTERVIEW STILL

9.VIDEO

The digital component of this work merges my honors thesis with my senior project for the Ammerman Center for Arts and Technology. Not only did the video allow me to ‘capture’ the interviews, but it also revealed the close connection between the video process and my subject. Video, like spoken language, unfolds across time, changing and developing as it emerges. Meaning of both language and video forms sequentially and only fully manifests once all words or clips have been arranged, joined, and perceived by the listener/viewer. These similarities proved video to be an appropriate medium in which to explore the interviews.

The two video projections are composed of three basic visual elements: the interview footage, the transcribed interview text, and a nasoendoscopy¹ recording of my vocal folds. Displayed in the same space as the traditional media pieces these videos are to be read as part of the larger body of work. I used Premiere Pro video editing software and Python and Processing computer programming languages to create these works.

¹ As explained on the White Memorial Medical Center website: “Nasoendoscopy is a procedure that examines the anatomy and physiology of the velopharynx during speech using a flexible endoscope via the nose. The purpose of the procedure is to evaluate speech and velopharyngeal function as a baseline for clinical management and outcome measurement and to determine type of treatment modalities for a patient.” (*White Memorial Medical Center*)



A COLLECTION OF INTERVIEW STILLS

THE VOICE: INSIDE AND OUTSIDE

Though informing my entire body of work, the interviews are most clearly present in the video installation. In an immediate and extremely physical way, the video is the closest embodiment of the interview process. In this, the video installation is central, representing the nucleus from which all the other works stems.

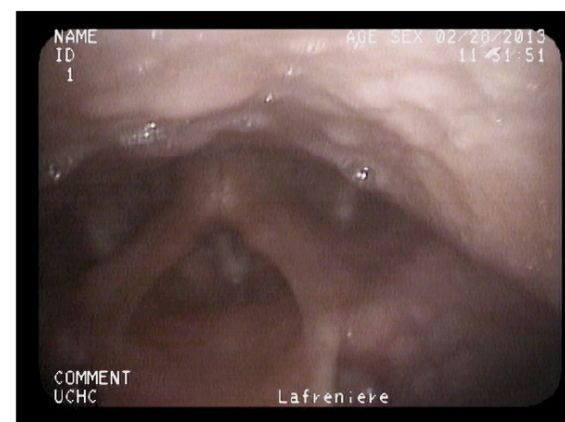
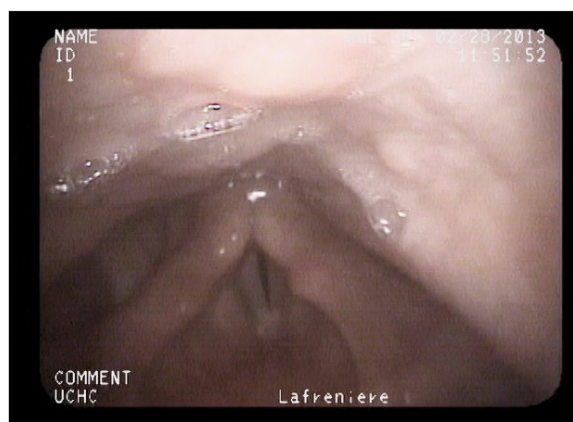
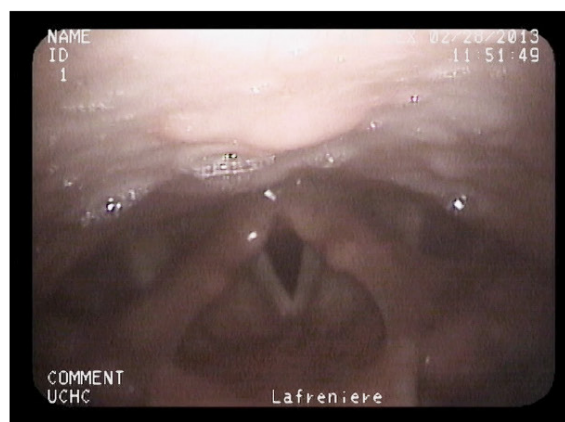
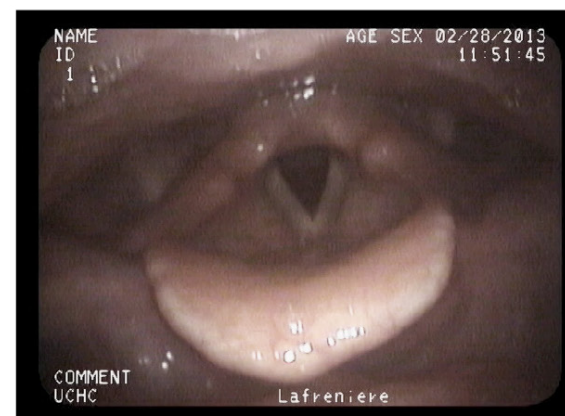
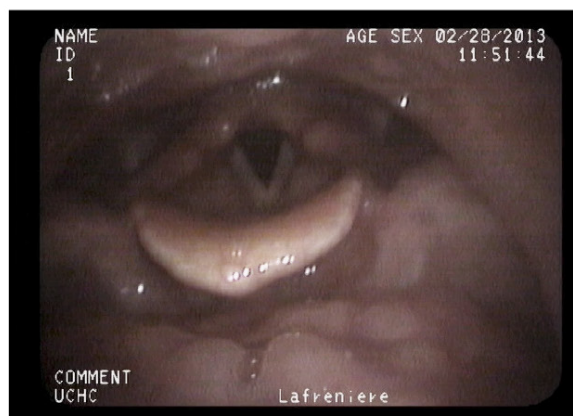
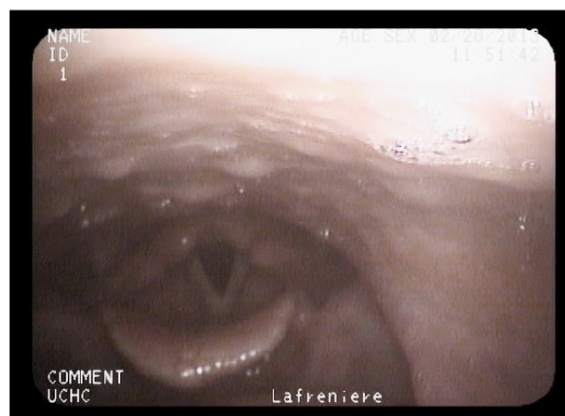
In the video of the interviews, the mouth of each interviewee is the center point of the frame, creating a focus on her moving lips. This decision functions to conceal a certain amount of the interviewee's identity and, more importantly, appoints language as both the symbolic and literal center of the work. Instead of revealing what each interviewee says, I focus on what she does not say. I construct the video from moments of her hesitation, contemplation, awkwardness, uncertainty, and use of hedge words in the slight spaces between her answers. While the audio therefore lacks "content" – composed mostly of pauses, swallows, and "um's" – the emptiness of her mouth's expression creates an unexpected richness: though the content is not heard, it is felt. A sense of withholding is created, calling on larger conceptual ideas of suppression within the work.

The other visual component of this video is footage taken from a nasoendoscopy. A medical procedure typically used in the investigation of voice disorders, this video nasoendoscopy (formally nasopharyngolaryngoscopy) was performed on my

vocal folds for my own research purposes. I was inspired by Mona Hatoum's *Corps étranger*,¹ in which the artist threaded a medical camera scope through various orifices of her body to explore her "foreign body." Alone, this technical process is an examination of sound production. Yet, when viewed with the interview footage, it takes on new meaning relating to various states of vocal expression. In editing, I cut and splice between the two visuals to juxtapose the voice as it exists inside and outside the body.

To advance this idea, this video and the text-based video are projected on opposite sides of a rectangular, suspended, aluminum surface. In this, the videos become a sort of object and entity of their own. The viewer cannot see both videos at the same time, eliminating any association between the words and the speaker. The viewer must walk from one side to the other, physically transitioning to achieve "both sides" of the voice. The tension created between the interior and exterior voice invite the viewer to consider the relationship between our inner realities as women and that which we share with the world. What do we express and what do we withhold, and why?

¹ Hatoum, Mona. *Corps étranger*, video, 1994. <http://www.artstor.org>.



STILLS FROM NASOENDOSCOPY PROCEDURE OF MY VOCAL FOLDS

HER OTHER LIPS

The nasoendoscopy revealed, quite unexpectedly, how closely the vocal folds resemble female genitalia. While my focus remains on the woman as a social rather than physical entity, the physical similarities are too brilliantly apparent to be overlooked.

The lips of the mouth are a “genital echo,” as put by British zoologist Desmond Morris, resembling the female labia in their texture, thickness, and color.¹ In fact, “labia” means “lips” in Latin, a fact that links the mouth to the physical female in an irrefutable way. In *Eve’s Secrets: A New Theory of Female Sexuality*, Sevely explains, “in naming the sexual parts of [females], metaphors were often taken from the more familiar parts of the body.”² Anatomists named the folds of the vagina after the lips of the mouth because both are fleshly folds that encompass and introduce orifices of the female body.

In Western culture, the vagina carries stigma in a way the penis does not. For reasons that reach far back into our male-dominant culture, the vagina is regarded as “mysterious, hidden, unknown, and, ergo, threatening.”³ Even the word creates unease, as explored most notably in Eve Ensler’s widely performed series *The Vagina Monologues*⁴ in which the word “vagina” is used as the

‘invisible word’ to stir up anxiety and awkwardness.⁵ Hannah Wilke, a feminist artist who explores the social stigma surrounding female genitalia in her work, similarly observes:

Nobody cringes when they hear the word phallic. You can say that Cleopatra’s Needle outside the Metropolitan Museum of Art is a phallic symbol, and nobody will have a fit. You can say the Gothic church is a phallic symbol, but if I say the nave of the church is really a big vagina, people are offended.⁶

It is this stigma that has rendered female genitalia a central subject of discourse in women’s art, particularly since the women’s art movement of the 1970’s. Feminist artists Hannah Wilke, Judy Chicago, and Carolee Schneemann are only a few examples of women artists who created dialogue surrounding such taboo imagery. Referencing the vagina, these artists confront society’s repulsion by and evasion of it as “the *horror of nothing to see*,” as described by feminist philosopher Luce Irigaray.⁷ Although often questioned as detrimental to feminism’s very purpose, these artists’ portrayal of female genitalia is used to confront fundamental patriarchal norms and fears. My work shares this double meaning, provoking questions regarding the voice and the female gender.

1 Kirshenbaum, *The Science of Kissing*..., 13.

2 Josephine Lowndes Sevely, *Eve’s secrets: a new theory of female sexuality* (New York: Random House, 1987), 104.

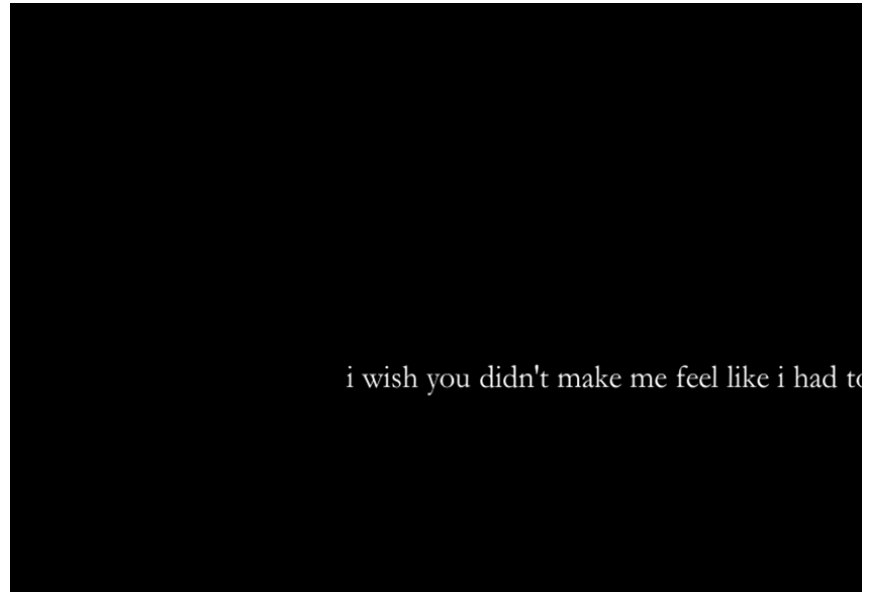
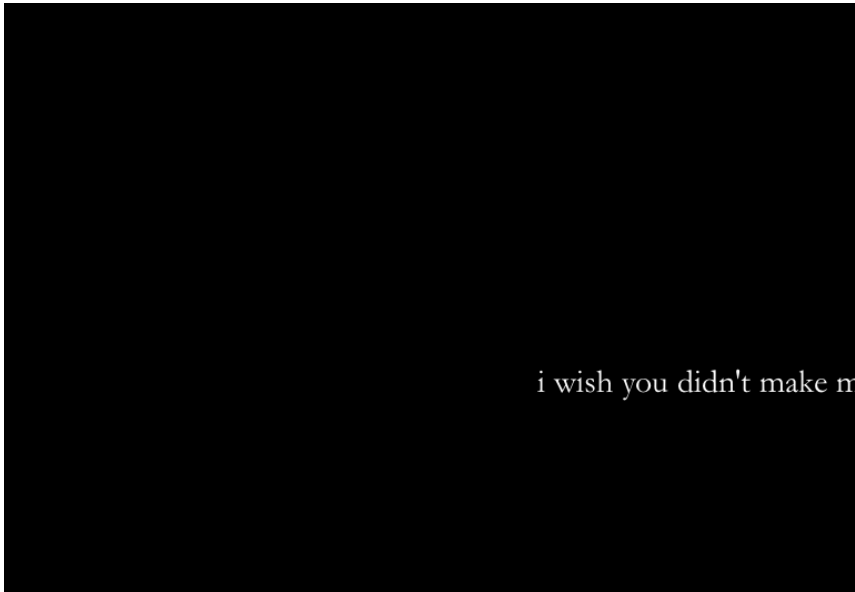
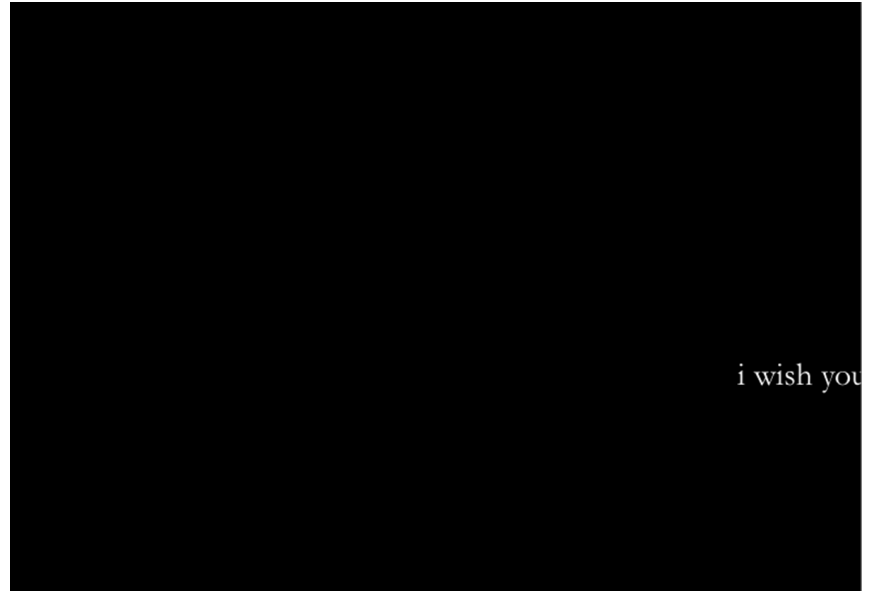
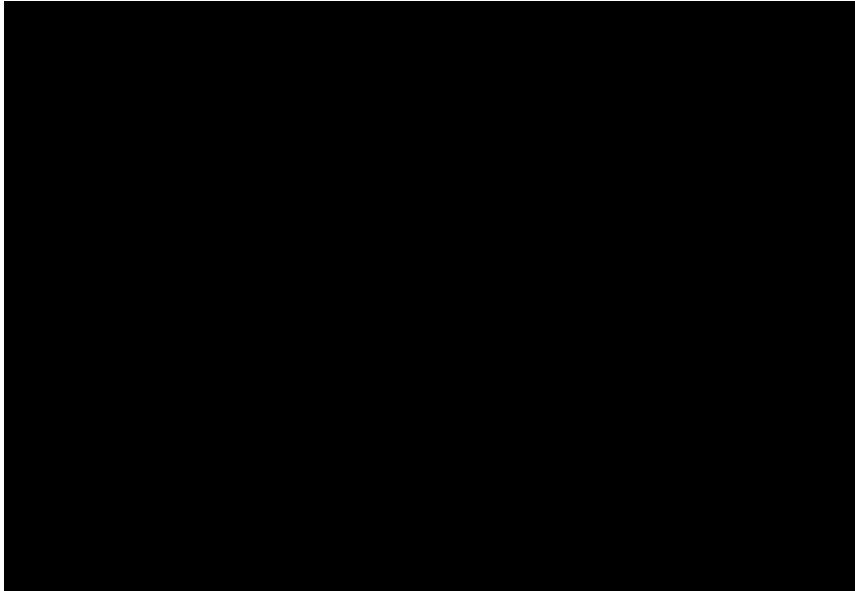
3 Robinson, *Feminist – Art – Theory*..., 576.

4 While the accurate vernacular for both female and male genitals are often avoided publicly and replaced with slang, studies show the use of the word “vagina” is still used significantly less than “penis” (Noveck, *V-Word*...).

5 Stephanie Rosenbloom “*What Did You Call It?*” New York Times (October 28, 2007), accessed March 3, 2013.

6 Robinson, *Feminist – Art – Theory*..., 582.

7 Robinson, *Feminist – Art – Theory*..., 582.



STILLS FROM VIDEO TEXT

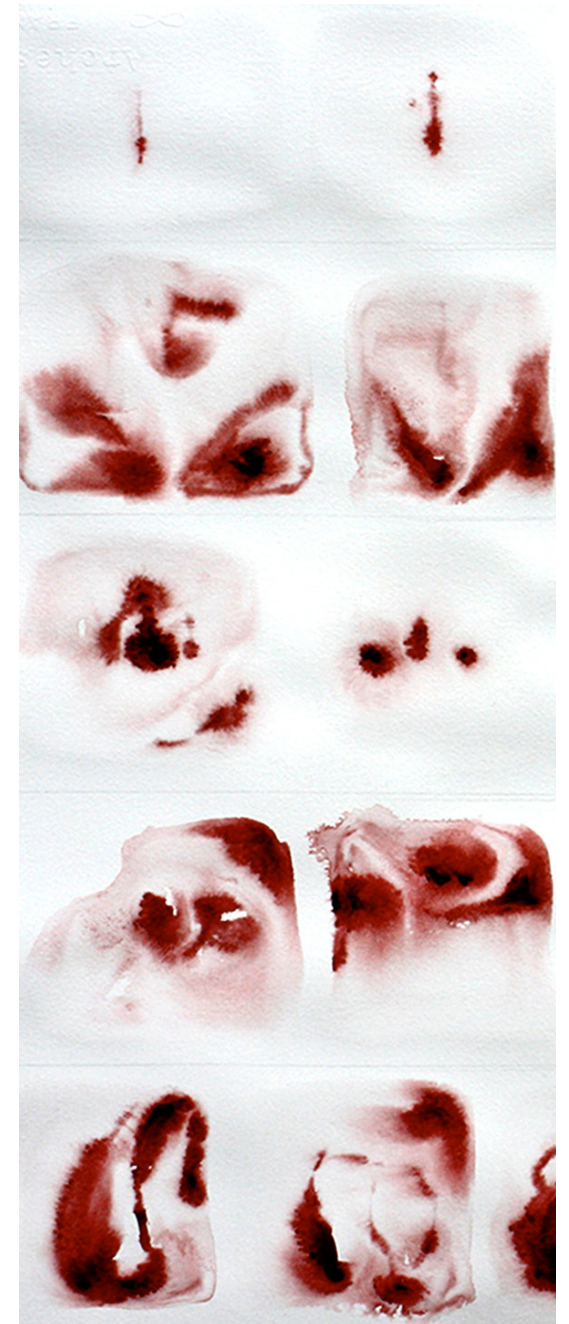
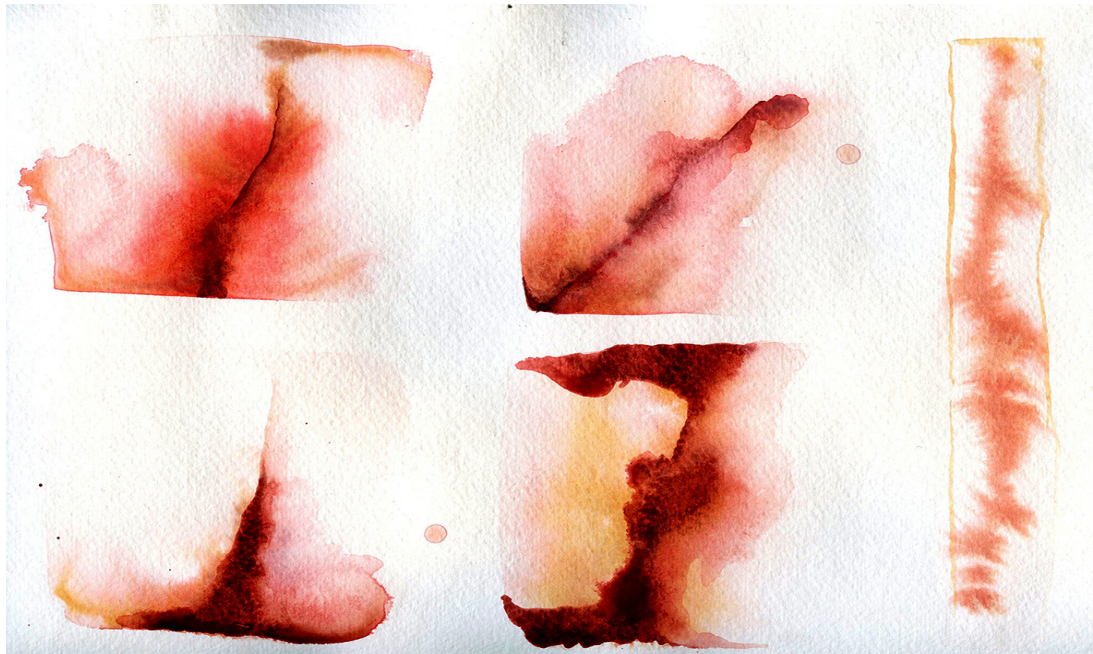
PROCESSING THE TEXT

The text-based video is composed of reconfigured content from the interview audio. After transcribing the interview audio, I used Python and Processing programming languages, assisted by my advisor in the Ammerman Center, to write a program that rearranges the original text in randomly determined units of 1-3 sentences. Projected on the opposite surface side of the interview/nasoendoscopy video, this video is simple in form – rolling white text on a black background – retaining focus on its content.

Similar to the editing of the interview/nasoendoscopy video, the decision to break up the text functions to preserve the speaker's anonymity. By disjointing sentences, I eliminate the collective clues that lengthy interview passages can reveal of identity (specific places, people's names, unique slang words, identifiable experiences, etc). Most importantly, however, this choice functions to transform the text from a sequence of individual accounts into a shared, though fractured, voice. While each woman's experience remains unique, here a larger female gendered experience is represented. Mirroring the recurring cuts of the other video, there is an illogical rhythm to the now fragmented text. Many full thoughts remain intact, yet something akin to lost communication results, relating to the expression of want and desire. I use parts and passages from this text to title many of my watercolor paintings, further fusing the analog and digital bodies of work.

“OUR PLACE IN THE GENDERED ORDER CONSTRAINS OUR ACTS,
BUT AT THE SAME TIME IT IS OUR ACTS (AND THOSE OF OTHERS)
THAT PLACE US IN THE GENDERED ORDER...”¹

¹ Eckert et al., *Language and Gender*, 306.



WATERCOLOR STUDIES OF NASOENDOSCOPY FOOTAGE, 2012



ASK ME, WATERCOLOR ON PAPER, 22"X30", 2013

10. CONCLUSION

As a young woman, my upbringing and social reality differs drastically from those of my mother and all previous generations of women. While the struggle for gender equality has progressed, this investigation reveals and questions how gender disparity remains, particularly, in how women continue to feel the need to silence themselves. It is only through awareness and assertion of self and the voice that we can be fully heard and valued. As an act of empowerment, this work directly impacts my understanding and my interviewee's understanding of the control we have to develop our position in the gendered power structures of today.

Completing this body of work has compelled me to consider how, as an artist, I can continue to act as a conduit of the voice where full expression is suppressed. While this work has concerned my personal struggles and those of a small sample of women, these themes are widely applicable. Because speaking our truth often puts us in conflict with governing powers, this exploration eventually leads to larger public issues of gender and social oppression. By understanding our own voices, we become individuals who have the ability to speak our minds and hearts, and thereby, bring change.

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