

“NOTHING” THERE, NOTHING “THERE”

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Western Carolina University in partial fulfillment of the
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By

Alexa (Lex) Turnbull

Director: John Seefeldt
Associate Professor
School of Art & Design

Committee Members: Mary Anna LaFratta,
Kevin Kirkpatrick, Tom Ashcraft

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I would not be where I am today, conceptually or physically, without the help of the following books. You may consider this my suggested reading list if you find what i have to say in the following pages intriguing.

Bloodchild + Other Stories - Octavia Butler

Emergent Strategy - Adrienne Maree Brown

The Art of Making Dances - Doris Humphrey

Dancers as Diplomats - Clare Croft

The Dancer and The Dance - Merce Cunningham

Grasping Shadows - William C. Sharpe

On Longing - Susan Stewart

Ghostly Matters - Avery Gordon

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ABSTRACT

“Nothing” There, Nothing “There”

Lex Turnbull, M.F.A.

Western Carolina University (April 2021)

Director: John Seefeldt

Everyday we communicate, navigate, deconstruct and reconstruct boundaries in our internal and external lives as a means to control our experiences. We do this in an attempt to keep ourselves “safe” from “others”, but this is a false sense of protection. Systemic boundaries follow this pattern and morph to maintain the oppression of those in our communities who are marginalized. Awareness of this false sense of protection we have grown to rely on has made me fully invested in the body as a tangible boundary to explore imagined and actual environments. My work uses familiar boundary-making materials to create absurd spaces that function as metaphors for the arbitrary ways we construct environments in an attempt to exclude “danger”. I use art as the tool for exploring and exploiting these false notions of safety, with all of their comedy and tragedy. I have made a commitment to navigate these spaces intentionally. I explore these objects + forms as someone who has always believed inanimate objects to possess their own unique essence. On one hand, this allows the objects + forms to take on their own experiences, as I imagine them to be animated, invoking the absurd. As we utilize these objects as tools for boundary making, it further reveals their absurdity and the ephemeral nature of our environments. The spaces we make to welcome this danger to exist, in an imagined way, allows us to reflect on the pitfalls of society in a somewhat digestible way. The making of haunted houses and horror movies utilizes a “trick the eye” approach to creating that is just as absurd and imagined as ours. In my life thus far, I have tried to make myself smaller, to take up the least amount of space. This coping mechanism of mine is not unique, but it has driven the

creative work I do. The work becomes a key to manifesting an interior, imagined world while manipulating an exterior, shared world. One way I tap into this mode of making is through dance and performance. Both play a major role in my work as I understand dance to be the language of our body and soul. The nature of dance as an ephemeral and authentic movement that will never be recreated the same way twice is interrupted by my use of video performance, that can be replayed on a loop. This action exploits the ephemeral nature of our beings. The ephemerality of life and movement scares us, and we try constantly to hold onto and replay our memories. The performance aspect of my work mirrors our need for control and preservation.

INTRODUCTION

“Nothing” There, Nothing “There” is a deep dive into my lifelong exploration of the boundaries, objects and anti-objects that make up our environments. My research includes content from my earliest paranormal experiences to reputable books and journals. Everyday we communicate, navigate, deconstruct and reconstruct boundaries in our internal and external lives as a means to control our experiences. We do this in an attempt to keep ourselves “safe” from “others”, but this is false protection. If you don’t believe me, just look to the systemic boundaries that follow this pattern and morph to maintain the oppression of those in our communities who are marginalized. Awareness of this false protection we have grown to rely on has made me fully invested in the body as a tangible boundary, as I explore imagined and actual environments. I have made a commitment to navigate these spaces intentionally, and the book in your hands is my way of trying to retrace my steps.

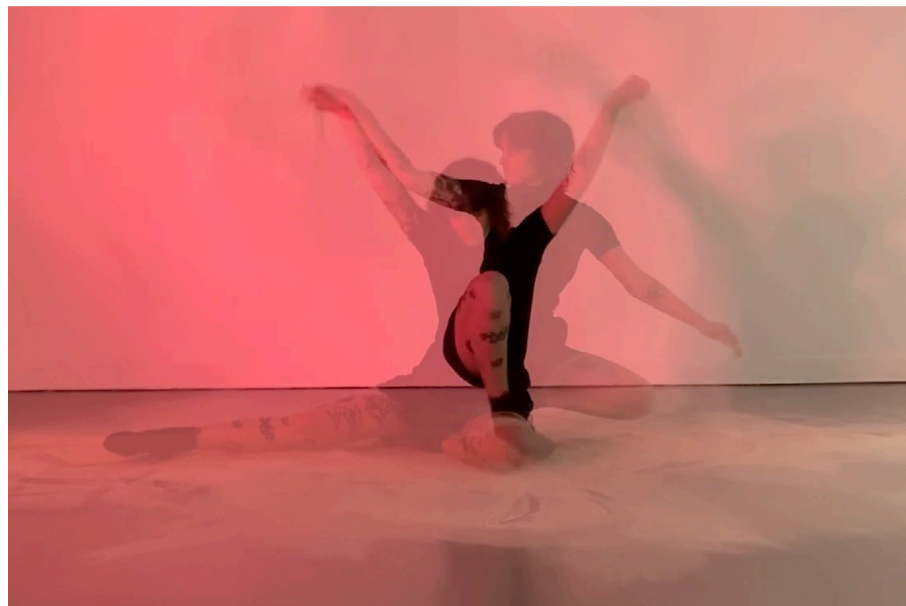
My work uses familiar boundary-making materials to create absurd spaces that function as metaphors for the arbitrary ways we construct environments in an attempt to exclude perceived and possible danger. I use art as the tool for exploring and exploiting these false notions of safety, with all of their comedy and tragedy. My hope is that this compilation of thoughts, experiences and research will, at one point or another, be of use to you as you navigate through the various paths of life, and recount the past. Some advice you did not ask for: Be ever-questioning and never stop growing.

CHAPTER 1: THE BODY

In my life thus far, I have tried to make myself smaller, to take up the least amount of space. This coping mechanism of mine is not unique, but it has pushed me to explore the body as our most tangible boundary. We build environments within ourselves, compartmentalizing our thoughts and dreaming with learned information, but we also define a space. We can change the amount of space we take up from one second to the next.

I grew up throwing myself head first into dance, starting classes at three years young (thanks, Momma). Because of this, dance and performance play a major role in my work. I understand dance, and movement in general, to be the language of our body and soul (fig.1). The nature of dance as an ephemeral and authentic movement that will never be recreated the same way twice is interrupted in my art process by my use of video performance. Videos that

play on a loop exploit the ephemeral nature of our beings, and the stagnant nature of a monitor challenges the space my body takes up. The ephemerality of life and movement scares us, and we try constantly to hold onto and replay our memories. The performance aspect of my work mirrors our need for control and preservation.



(fig. 1: still from video performance, “minimalist beach for one” which is an exercise in movement guided by my memories of the beach in my hometown)

The use of new media art goes beyond exploiting the ephemeral nature of movement, life and time; it enables one to manipulate the space, body and focus to control what the viewer sees. This manipulation can be used to create a truer depiction of reality, or to make you question that concept of reality entirely. Using video to retrace memory and document a choreography that is so dependent on one's lived experience is more than a delivery system, it is a conceptual mode of expression that has the ability to reflect even our most internal mindscapes back to us.

CHAPTER 2: OBJECTS

As I explore the objects + forms we use to make up our environments, the objects + forms take on their own experiences. I imagine them to be almost-animated, invoking the absurd. As we utilize these objects as tools for boundary making, it further reveals their absurdity and the ephemeral nature of our environments. Through this process, I have started to reflect on my own environments and desires for these boundaries and the moments i indulge in them breaking down or dissipating. The spaces we make to welcome this danger to exist, in an imagined realm, allows us to reflect on the pitfalls of society in a somewhat digestible way. The argument of whether fear is valid or not is irrelevant here, as everyone's own emotions are valid in their own rights. Instead, I am interested in poking at the bruises on these tools we rely on to decide what is dangerous and what can protect us (fig. 2).



(fig. 2: still from video performance, “No Hunting Purple Paint”. the specific color purple paint legally indicates a no hunting/trespassing/fishing zone in participating states... or does it?)

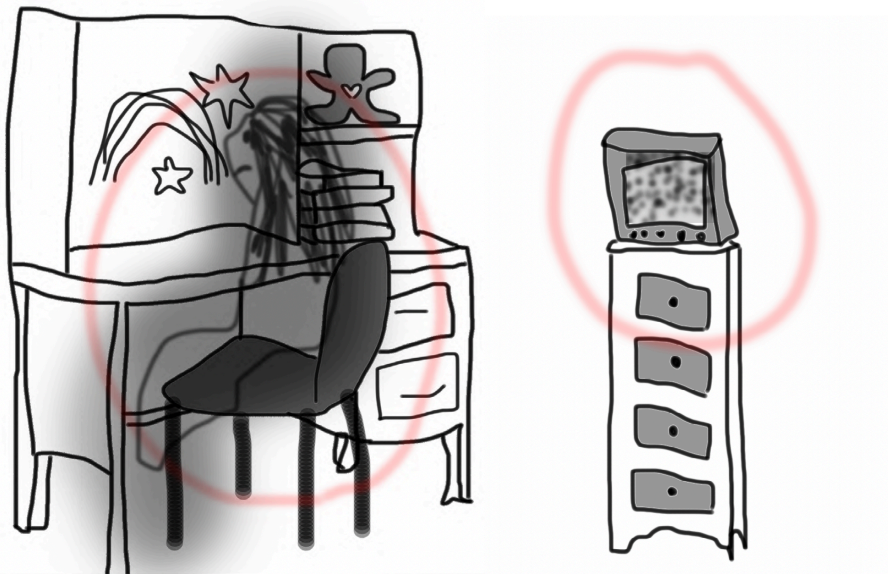
CHAPTER 3: ANTI-OBJECTS

It's always going to be easier to break down things that we can touch and understand, but what about the intangible? What about the visible things in our environments, that we cannot touch, like the moon and shadows? Anti-objects, which i understand as objects that exist to function as the antithesis of their surroundings or assumed use, are a major component in my work. The art objects I make seem to dance on the line between anti- and actual.

Shadows are all around us, and we use them to orient ourselves and to be aware of the surroundings that we may not be able to see in our direct line of sight. Shadows are used as plot development in movies and stories, and they often symbolize an anti- or bad presence. In psychology, shadow work is the personal work one does to understand their unconscious, negative or hidden personality traits. Some people understand ghosts to be the shadow of a being that once was, whatever that means. Disclaimer: I am not here to try and convince you that ghosts exist, but the ghosts I have encountered have continuously driven me to make the work I do, so bear with me.

Your understanding of “ghosts” can be as common as the lingering spirit of someone who has passed away, or it could be more passive, like the sensation of chills or smelling something odd with no explanation. Another type of ghost that lingers in and around us all, are the leftovers of our own experiences. Our experiences are constantly shaping our internal and external environments. Oftentimes, the afterimages of certain experiences can spill over into the present and continue to color our experiences. The illustrations in fig. 2 are recent drawings of some of the paranormal things I experienced in one of the houses I grew up in. There is a subtle but strong desire in me to time travel and record these things, or interview the ghosts, to better understand what these memories are. But isn't that just typical of us, as humans in the 21st century. We have decided that vetted information is more worthy of our time than individual memory. So, I've given up on that 'want' and embraced that whatever I experienced is not going

to leave my mind, and it will never be justified either. If I could, I would encourage you to do the same about the anti-objects you encounter. We can't touch gravity.



(fig. 3: illustrations of childhood paranormal experiences)

CHAPTER 4: POWER(LESS) STRUCTURES

While we have the intangible fresh in our mind, let's move our attention to the power that buildings hold in their architecture alone. If you've never walked into a building and felt that overwhelming sense of "i don't belong here", then you'll have to take my word for it. The good news is, each brick that makes up these buildings can serve as a reminder that it is just a building. Consider the working class, or factories that are involved in the process of making the materials available, or building the physical structures. The buildings that can chill us to the bone as we step inside them, have no real power against us, unless they start to fail. If the roof caves in, the power over you would simply be the crushing weight of said building collapsing.

Hostile or defensive architecture is the term used for architecture that serves a more devious purpose. Whether it is intended to make some feel they are not welcome or to keep nature at bay, its goal is to control a public space that's most likely on stolen land, and exists only because of the wealth inequality it seeks to perpetuate. Its goal is to obtain power in a situation. The power of these structures is rooted in long lines of oppressive hierarchy that are flawed and imaginary, and it's this same imagined hierarchy that we should be working against to find a more just environment to exist in. You have that power.

As imagined as the hierarchy is, it does not stop it from oppressing the oppressed. The hostile architecture of benches that make sleeping on them impossible are just one example of the way a small addition to a seemingly typical bench can turn it into something oppressive. Not only does this architecture often look menacing, its existence simply is. Understanding this has been crucial to my work as an artist and community member, fighting against these injustices, no matter how small, is absolutely necessary.

CHAPTER 5: SMALL BUT MIGHTY

Miniatures can allow us to perceive a controlled environment in its perfect stasis while still suggesting implementation and contextualization. For example, my father's lifelong hobby of building Model Railroader sets allows him to create a space where he is in complete control of everything from fake grains of dirt to large plaster mountains. These spaces become a key to manifesting and manipulating an interior, imagined world.

Another more universal example would be the world of fairies, which has a rich history dating back to the 13th century. Fairies are an example of miniatures that function as an alternative present reality, "living amongst us", in a way that takes up less space while functioning so similarly to us. Albeit absurd, miniatures have the ability to reflect our own societies' imagined structures back to us. Our imagination can grow alongside theirs.

CHAPTER 6: TALK BACK

So much of our existence is about communicating. How we communicate to others, how we communicate to ourselves, subconsciously or otherwise. Do you make your stomach growl when you're hungry, or is that just your body communicating with you? How we each communicate, with ourselves and our environments, is completely unique from one person to the next. There will be overlap in our language, but each of our bodies contains its own dialect.

The natural world communicates to us all in its unified language, regardless of if we are listening. How we are able to listen and talk back, is completely up to us. An additional component of this written thesis work is a 7-inch vinyl with recordings of me communicating with certain environments i've encountered time and time again. You can access the audio through the files attached to this document. Some of the audio is interpersonal, and less clear to decipher, and others will be quite familiar and open to interpretation. Remember to listen just as much as you talk. Thanks for being here, thanks for being You.