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Universe of Things: A human presentation of food-for-thought.

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Universe of Things:

A human presentation of *food-for-thought*.

Madeline Halpern

May 2nd, 2019

BFA in Studio Art

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Abstract

I present this statement under three loose categories: People, Objects and their Environment. I consider People as human, Objects as art objects, domestic objects, and food, and Environment as the shared space of the former groups. Food directs this statement as I present each concept and creative process as a metaphorical dish. Material exploration carried me from a direct practice of reorienting acrylic paint and questioning object functionality through personified sculptures into theoretical thesis work in which I use interpersonal relations and the idea of consumption to translate tactile, gustatory and olfactory sensations into digital film. In this meal I use my artwork as well as work of other makers to locate precedents for using falsehood and misdirection to convey information and for granting agency to objects. The theoretical realms of Object Oriented Ontology and the Theatre of Cruelty inspired me to infuse banal objects with vitality and write nonlinear scripts for my thesis. Cartoonist Winsor McCay, filmmaker Chantal Akerman, and playwrights Eugene Ionesco and Truman Capote inspired me to create videos in an absurd style where I devalue spoken language in favor of sound and visual cues and allow food and consumption to hold leading roles in my narratives.

Please enjoy.

Overview and Background

My studio practice hosts disjointed clusters of exploration. My working process is tactile and reactionary and my reliance on material to dictate its next form has resulted in a collection of series that I will weave together for you. I treat artmaking like following or inventing new recipes by setting artificial guidelines to direct my studio work and using the raw materials in my studio as ingredients.



Fig. 1. Halpern, Madeline. *Via US-54W/Us-70W/I-10W*. 2018. Acrylic paint. Documentation of performance on-site installation, Joshua Tree National Park, California.

In the past I aligned myself with medium of acrylic paint, pushing its structural integrity and malleability to facilitate material play challenge painting's elevated discipline in the traditional art world (see fig. 1). I have also used a parameter of 'objects'



Fig. 2. Halpern, Madeline. *Portraits of Sauce and Grave*. 2018. Acrylic paint, oil pastel, marker, clear pouring medium on carved pine panel.

both to represent people in a portrait series and to construct a surreal dinner party environment. For example, in my *Portraits of Sauce and Grave* I represent my subjects through an amalgam of their personal belongings—replacing

their physical features with objects (see fig. 2). Recently I began isolating audio and visual elements of digital video and pairing them together in post-production, using interpersonal relations and the idea of consumption to orient my making.

In my thesis I consider moments of sensation between people and their space. My relation to touch is different than yours, which makes the likelihood of my depiction of touch being readable to a third party quite slim. The struggle to communicate sensation and the embedded potential for misinformation intrigued me. In response, I conceptually speak to and call upon touch and smell, but formally work in a medium that holds a layer of remove from the reality of those sensations: digital video. In my thesis films I examine: my aversion to touch via the act of tickling; my debt to a red light bulb; my association with food and the prevalence of consumption in my daily routine; and the necessity of information to facilitate comprehension of my work. I set out to: 1) translate visceral feelings into the audio and visual components of a video— the likes of which would facilitate a relationship between itself and the watcher that mirrors my experience while confronting another person and 2) pinpoint moments of origin for these concepts in my piecemeal studio practice. Now, a note on food.

Why Food? Food: for Gluttony and Consistency.

Food holds both a personal relationship with its consumer and an intense association with community. It provides a tangible connection between people and things and is capable of anchoring this written interpretation of my undergraduate practice. The three meal system dictates my choices and movements each day. It's structure and reliability provides a format for the somewhat healthy western lifestyle I choose to lead and despite its relegation to

normalcy, food consistently provides pleasure by satisfying our cravings. At times, it even acts as an instigator of altered states of mind, through poisoning or food induced vivid dreams. I have long noticed food's presence in my life but I did not recognize its relevance to my art work until I made *Soiree* (see fig. 3). I oriented *Soiree* around the home environment, using the motif of a dining room to relate the sculptural objects. I eventually used the (ir)regularity of my reliance on food to anchor a series of videos that became my thesis.

As mentioned in the Overview, food will orient the threads of this statement. Each time I unearth a new concept or creative process, consider yourself being served a fresh dish. I will provide the staples of the meal allow my ruminations to satiate you. Consider the feeling of fullness that follows a decadent dish: have you ever excused yourself from a table too full to finish the last few scraps of food? I too may leave a thought unfinished. Do not worry, for as is expected of any proper host, I will have the next dish waiting for when you slink back into the dining room, hungry for more.

Informative Appetizer

This meal outlines my departure from the directness of sculpture and shift toward using interpersonal relations and the idea of consumption to guide my production. The following dishes represent video works that study interaction between people and objects in various pairings, guided by the influence of food and sensation.



Fig. 3. Halpern, Madeline. *Soiree*. 2018. *Soiree Seating*: repurposed dining room chairs, house paint, scenic moss and woodcut seats; *Soiree Bibs*: fabric, yarn, woodcut print, pencil stamp; *Grassy Lampoon*: collagraph print on Okawara paper, two light bulbs, green shag.

Dish No. 1. People: for and against each other.

The first plate I will serve you is a euphoric sense of delight. What better form does delight take than in an innocent tickle? Tickling as a source of pleasure dumbfounds me. Rather than the cathartic experience of primitive pleasure that Sigmund Freud insists on, my association with tickling is of its role in conditioning me to associate touch with tension and a lack of power (Phillips 10).

“Tickle Torture” is a childhood game of mine. The Rules: a chase ending with capture by two sisters that pin the third sister—usually me—down on a bed or the ground, one holding the arms the other the legs, tickle until mercy is called. No participant was ever physically hurt, apart from the occasional scratch, but the psychological and emotional remnants of that game have survived in me to the present. This game that hosts a keystone of my relationship with touch was the perfect platform to communicate a physical sensation through audio or visual devices and became the namesake for my video: *Tickle Torture* (see fig. 4).

I consider Adam Phillip’s book *On Kissing, Tickling, and Being Bored* for my work related to touch. In Chapter 1, *On Tickling*, the act and experience of tickling is labeled a



Fig. 4. Halpern, Madeline. Stills from *Tickle Torture*. 1 minute 21 seconds. <https://vimeo.com/329266982> 2019.

pleasure that cannot be reached by a single person (Phillips 9). This caveat invites the issue of dependence and trust involved with person to person interactions. This, paired with Phillip’s later discussion on self-examination while in solitude helped me recognize that my reaction to physical contact is a consequence of a game that took place many years ago (32). In his chapter on *Risk and Solitude*, Philips

interprets an idea of Sigmund Freud: "The absence of the visible and the absence of an object; and the risk, as in dreams, that innermost thoughts will come to light" (27). This idea inspired me to separate the audio and visual imagery in my video to communicate a sense of unease and helplessness. I directed my sibling and two participants to re-enact our fun little game and recorded their giggles, laughs and shrieks. The vibration and visceral quality of the



Fig. 5. Stills from: Sharits, Paul. *T,O,U,C,H,I,N,G*. 16mm, color, sound 12 minutes. 1968. The Paul Sharits Estate, 2019, <https://paulsharits.com/index/>. Accessed 30 April 2019.

sound was too irresistible to veil so I let the audio signify the physical action. The visual component is a shadow figure whose movement resembles dancing at first but soon becomes sinister— stalking and creeping across a wall. The ambiguity of the figure's movement highlights the questionable intentions of the two antagonists and the blurred boundary between child play and

trauma. I looked toward artists who use the performative body as both a formal and

narrative element in their films. I built off the choppy pacing and pointed humor present in the video work of Paul Sharits, specifically his piece *T,O,U,C,H,I,N,G* (see fig. 5).

Mimicking Sharits' color, sound and duration, I paired the audio and visual elements and manipulated the pacing of my video to communicate the urgency of the chase over the arc of the game.

Dish No. 2. Objects: for and against People.

This next round is your entrée as it reflects the bulk of my research. As you chew on this information, please treat your plate kindly— this means no accidental scraping of your knife! The personification of objects in my sculptural work wet my palette to the possibility

for objects to exist apart from humans' designation and conception of use. I dove into the study of Object Oriented Ontology, or OOO, and absurdist theatre. In keeping with the Theatre of Cruelty and its position on language, I practice a devaluation of language in favor of visual cues and sound in my video work (Esslin 10). This is not to say that there is a removal of language in my work, but I will get into that later. For now, let's discuss objecthood.

I figure that my failure to communicate with people must exist beyond humans to other (non)living entities. Meaning, objects and animals must also experience frustration within their isolated environments. I have explored this gap of communication between people and objects in my installation work—using the frame of dysfunctionality and functionality of objects to stand in for personal barriers and aesthetic masks. In the practice of OOO there is an emphasis on collapsing the “bifurcation of nature” and an intention of granting agency to the nonliving entities that occupy our anthropocentric world (Shaviro 1-2). In contrast with correlationism— which insists on an inherent connectivity between the perception of human beings and the objects they surround themselves with, OOO detaches the purpose and identity of objects from their human counterpart (Shaviro 30). The concept of sentient things struck a chord with me, as I have consistently adhered autonomy onto inanimate objects in my studio work. In my *Soiree* installation (see fig. 3), I adhered personality to objects to highlight their (dis)functionality first in a domestic sphere and then more critically once I positioned them as art objects. In a nod to Camus' positive nihilism, I satirized the conventional roles that people designate to objects (Camus 15). By inserting my objects into an art installation whilst claiming each of them a functional domestic role I ensure their failure to perform. I capitalize on the familiarity of chairs, cushions, lamps, tablecloths and napkins and rely on my viewers recognition of their prescribed function so that upon closer examination, each object reveals itself as underperforming its role.

I revisited the idea of living objects after reading *The Universe of Things*, a short science fiction story by Gwyneth Jones. Jones presents a world dictated by mechanical objects or tools infused with life by Alien visitors. The story's human protagonist, a mechanic, is tasked with fixing an Alien patron's car. At one point, the mechanic touches one of the alien tools and its uncanny liveliness causes him to recoil in a wave of revulsion and nausea (Jones). The mechanic's revulsion is an example of the "broken tool", a concept coined by German philosopher, Martin Heidegger (qtd. in Shaviro 50). OOO scholar Steven Shaviro describes Heidegger's idea as "when a tool, or thing, fails to function as expected, then the excess of its being is suddenly revealed to us. When this happens, the tool is more-than-present; it stands forth too actively and aggressively for me to posit it as present-at-hand...the tool, or the thing, becomes alive" (Shaviro 50). The tool becoming present-at-hand marks a key moment that I consider the very basis of OOO. Meaning, this is the moment that tools gain a vitality and autonomy that forces humans to act and work with them rather than simply use them (Shaviro 48).

The idea of a tool flaunting its autonomy and the broken tool concept informed my

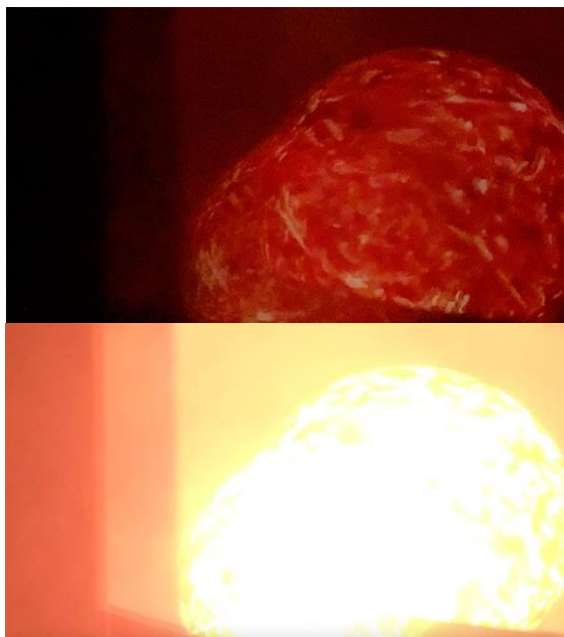


Fig. 6. Halpern, Madeline. Stills from *Lizard Tank*. 59 seconds. <https://vimeo.com/328998026> 2019.

depiction of a red light bulb in my video piece *Lizard Tank* (see fig. 6). *Lizard Tank* was also a study in translating a physical experience into visual and audio components. Subtle vibrations and cropped framing imply a throb or heartbeat in the bulb and suggest a discrete autonomy in this innocuous object. I used color and movement to communicate the control that the bulb has over my thoughts and body. The language in the video refers to my relation to the

bulb and voyeuristic experiences that I have had under the influence of its warm pink glow.

In the end, the red bulb assumes the role of a broken tool, slowly gaining livelihood and influencing my decisions to peer into the world of my neighbors.

Dish No. 3. Environments: for People and Objects.

I offer you a decadent dessert. The inspiration for this final meal is a comic strip by

American cartoonist Winsor McCay called

Dreams of the Rarebit Fiend (see fig. 7). After

consuming a meal of Welsh Rarebit, the

characters in the strip spiral into their own psyches

through a series of irreverent scenarios that range

from silly to disturbing. Printed in the New York

Herald from 1904-1925, the strip circulated a full

generation before the Surrealist movement forced

depictions of the unconscious into the public

sphere. McCay curated a situation for his reader to

witness a character spiral into the depths of the

absurd. He weaves brutal self-examination and

societal critiques into his strip and forces them to operate within a rigid 9-panel construction

to ensure that both the reader and the character is trapped in their own unconscious until the

release of the final panel—which depicts the protagonist awakened from sleep. McCay chains

the reader to his protagonist, forcing them both to ride out the fever dream until the welcome

release of the final panel. Unlike the fictional character, whose return to consciousness is met

with an exhalation and easy dismissal of the previous event, the reader is left to ponder that

day's dose of reality.



Fig. 7. McCay, Winsor. Selection from *Dreams of the Rarebit Fiend*. 1905. Frederick A. Stokes Company. Digitized Jul 20, 2007.

<https://books.google.com/books?id=TBIFAAAAYAAJ> Accessed 1 May 2019.

I took the idea of food-induced self-examination and applied it to my studies of interaction between objects, people, their shared space, falsehood and sensation to build the narrative of my final video work: *Hallucination by Decadence: Dream of Three Gluttonous Fiends* (see fig. 8). I pulled from the following films and plays where food acts as the conceptual anchor while language is relegated to the wings. In *The Cook, The Thief, His Wife*



Fig. 8. Halpern, Madeline. Stills from *Hallucination by Decadence: Dream of Three Gluttonous Fiends*. 11 minutes. <https://vimeo.com/331427867> 2019.

& Her Lover
by Peter
Greenaway,
food takes on a
leading role.
As the
characters
reveal their
gluttony and

carnal desires, food becomes increasingly decadent, ultimately acting as the vehicle for the film's horrific and cannibalistic climax (Greenaway). Similarly, the food in Truman Capote's *The Grass Harp* and Eugene Ionesco's *The Bald Soprano* emphasizes the insidiousness of consumption and the regularity that its presence provides to a situation. In the *Grass Harp*, each scene is centered, in one way or another, on the meals of the day. Whether it is through the meticulous listing of menu items for supper, a comedic excess of bowls placed during dinner, the picnic in the woods or choosing eggs over rocks for ammunition in a forest fight, Capote consistently uses the concept of food to control his characters (Capote 14, 25, 88, 105). The disruptive language in those plays follows the Theatre of Cruelty: which considers a dislocation of formal language in favor of communication through visual cues, sound and stage design in a "deliberate attempt to renew the language of drama and expose the

barrenness of conventional stage dialogue” (Esslin 10). The characters in *The Bald Soprano* follow a stream of logical nonsense as the energy of the scene builds to continuous points of climax (Ionesco 16-18). The play is a cacophony of thought, sound, perception and judgement embedded in banal conversation with no clear direction. Theorist Martin Esslin characterizes the Theatre of the Absurds’ rejection of language as an “earnest endeavor to penetrate to deeper layers of meaning...to give a truer, because more complex, picture of reality in avoiding the simplification which results from leaving out all the undertones, overtones, and inherent absurdities and contradictions of any human situation” (13).

This diversion of language and emphasis on external methods of communication is present in my video as I replace dialogue with misleading subtitles. Inspired by Theatre of Cruelty I devalue spoken communication in favor of sound, visual cues and incongruous text to convey information to my viewer. Language is not removed but rather relocated and disrupted. In this work I considered a cacophony of information with no clear motive and the centrality of the kitchen. I view the confident presentation of nonsense as fact and the lifeblood of a kitchen in the film as a distillation of my studio practice.

I also pull from the work of Chantal Akerman, whose films *Jeanne Dielman, 23, quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles* and *Hotel Monterey* emphasize space and daily minutia in a spectacularly unnerving way (see fig. 9). Through long repetitive shots she exposes her viewer to a

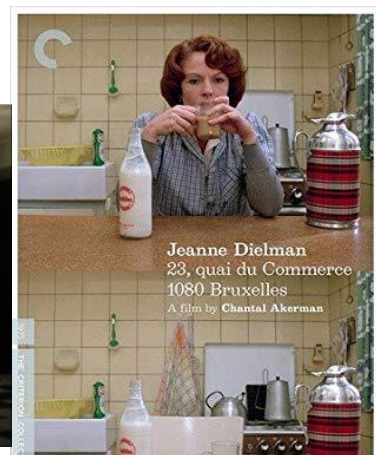


Fig. 9. Left: Akerman, Chantal. Still from *Hotel Monterey*. 1972, *The Criterion Collection*, 1 hour 5 minutes. <https://www.criterion.com/films/20977-hotel-monterey> Accessed 1 May 2019. Right: Akerman, Chantal. Promotional still from *Jeanne Dielman, 23, quai du Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles*. 1975, *The Criterion Collection*, 3 hours 22 minutes. <https://www.criterion.com/films/302-jeanne-dielman-23-quai-du-commerce-1080-bruxelles>. Accessed 1 May 2019.

cringingly normal setting and builds on their expectation for action. Her actors’ movements,

at first mundane, become increasingly sinister and calculated until the very presence of their actions shifts the atmosphere from boring to horrific. Ackerman capitalizes on her audience's expectation for action and uses it to draw out the pace of her films, making her viewer work to see the climax. In contrast to Ackerman and McCay I refuse to fulfill my audience's craving for climax. In *Hallucination by Decadence*, I present the video on a loop to trap my viewer in a cyclical dream, depriving them the end of the journey.

I pulled the core elements of my past studies of self-examination, sensation, escapism and falsity and intermingled them to build my narrative. My script chronicles the interactions between people experiencing an anxiety inducing series of physical and mental journeys ignited by the consumption of an unidentified food treat. Taking inspiration from Ackerman's pacing and interior footage, and the surrealist escapism of the door sequence in Jean Cocteau's *Blood of a Poet* I set the characters in a universe that resembles but is explicitly separate from Earth (Cocteau). My previous studies of objecthood and people existed firmly in the anthropomorphic world and I was attracted to the freedom of a fictional universe for this piece. *Hallucination by Decadence* is the product of my rumination of people, object and space. In it, my watcher witnesses the effects of food on the four characters as it not only acts as the catalyst for their journey, but also operates as a recurring tease to their building hunger or thirst. The characters are trapped within an endless journey and the people who watch are trapped alongside them. I do not provide my viewer an expected sense of relief in keeping with McCay or Ackerman's strategy. Instead, I leave them floating with the characters in a state of unease.

The installation of *Hallucination by Decadence* played on 3 monitors: the left contained written information, the center a narrative of subjects trapped in the dream, the right the space that hosted their bodies (see fig. 10). In this iteration, a set of chairs—that belong to my *Soiree* installation and serve as the impetus for my exploration of food orienting interaction—appropriately act as both seating for viewers as well as metaphorical bodies



Fig. 10. Halpern, Madeline. Installation view of *Hallucination by Decadence*. 20 minutes 24 seconds on 32", 34", 32" monitors mounted at 48" and four chairs. <https://vimeo.com/330704319> 2019.

reflecting those in the film. The fourth chair plays the role of the present fourth body that exists outside of the frame for most of the film. The interaction between my *Soiree Seating* and *Hallucination by Decadence* in the gallery alerted me to the importance of food in my practice. Food and consumption are intrinsic to my creative process as I consume new ideas and then use those ideas to make art as a method of digestion—turning each project into an elaborate meal.

I moved the film into the territory of sculptural drama with this installation. Sculptural drama was the initial idea behind Tennessee Williams's famously coined 'plastic theatre.' In production notes of his play *The Glass Menagerie*, Williams describes a concept of theatre that may take the place of the "exhausted theatre of realistic conventions" (qtd. in Kramer 1). In this mode of 'plastic theatre', drama pushed far past a picture of reality and capitalized on all of the stage arts to generate a theatrical experience greater than realism. In it, there is a greater respect for sound, setting, music and visual components being used to enhance the action being communicated. And in it, language and traditional narrative is given less



Fig. 11. Fitch, Lizzie, Trecartin, Ryan. Still from *Retreatery Butte*, 2016. Unique sculptural theater exhibiting Mark Trade (single-channel HD Video, runtime 1:13:30) Original installation dimensions: 157 x 331 ½ x 233 ½ inches. Installation view provided by *Andrea Rosen Gallery*, New York. March 19 - April 20, 2016. <http://www.andreareosengallery.com/artists/lizzie-fitch-ryan-trecartin/images>. Accessed 1 May 2019.

responsibility in carrying the content to the viewer (Kramer 12). Similarly, the script I use in *Hallucination by Decadence* misdirects the viewer, feeding them information that only sometimes matches the situation I depict. Though ‘plastic theatre’ is a slightly archaic mode of presentation, it becomes relevant to my work when I refer to contemporary manifestations of the practice. For

example, Ryan Trecartin and Lizzie Fitch’s ‘sculptural theatre’ installations that combine movies, sound, performance and sculpture to facilitate an immersive viewing experience (see fig. 11). Trecartin and Fitch dispose of traditional narrative structures to make room for far more engaging streams of distorted fiction. My installation work confronts Trecartin and Fitch’s— straying from their emphasis on gender identity, digital American youth culture and corporate media channels, but mimicking their misdirection, irreverence, horror and absurdist approach to language. At this point, *Hallucination by Decadence* lives in many iterations. My challenge now is to choose which one fully satisfies me and then move on to new work.

Digestif

I communicate how I reacted to *Dream of the Rarebit Fiend*, how I conceded control while being tickled, how I let a red light enable my voyeurism, and how I trapped myself in self-examination and falsehood in order to implicate my audience. I want my watcher to leave my videos with an understanding of my association with touch and sensation. If not, then I want them to consider their own association with touch. At the very least, I do hope that my watcher leaves hungry, craving something between tactile sensation and a snack.

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Figures

Figure 1. Halpern, Madeline. *ViaUS-54W/US-70W/I-10W: Joshua Tree National Park*. 2018.

Figure 2. Halpern, Madeline. *Portraits of Sauce and Grave*. 2018.

Figure 3. Halpern, Madeline. *Soiree*. 2018. *Soiree Seating: Soiree Bibs*; Grassy Lampoon.

Figure 4. Halpern, Madeline. Stills from *Tickle Torture*. 1 minute 21 seconds. 2019.

Figure 5. Stills from: Sharits, Paul. *T,O,U,C,H,I,N,G*. 16mm, color, sound 12 minutes. 1968.

The Paul Sharits Estate, 2019, <https://paulsharits.com/index/>. Accessed 30 April 2019.

Figure 6. Halpern, Madeline. Stills from *Lizard Tank*. 59 seconds. 2019.

Figure 7. McCay, Winsor. Selection from *Dreams of the Rarebit Fiend*. 1905. *Frederick A.*

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Figure 8. Halpern, Madeline. Stills from *Hallucination by Decadence: Dream of Three*

Gluttonous Fiends. 11 minutes. 2019.

Figure 9. Left: Akerman, Chantal. Still from *Hotel Monterey*. 1972, *The Criterion Collection*,

1 hour 5 minutes. <https://www.criterion.com/films/20977-hotel-monterey>. Accessed

1 May 2019. Right: Akerman, Chantal. Still from *Jeanne Dielman, 23, quai du*

Commerce, 1080 Bruxelles. 1975, *The Criterion Collection*, 3 hours 22 minutes.

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Figure 10. Halpern, Madeline. Installation view of *Hallucination by Decadence*. 20 minutes

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Figure 11. Fitch, Lizzie, Trecartin, Ryan. Still from *Retreatery Butte*. 2016. Unique sculptural

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