

Washington University in St. Louis

## Washington University Open Scholarship

---

Graduate School of Art Theses

All Graduate School of Art Theses

---

Spring 5-15-2020

### Encumbered by Stage Fright Or I'm Not Sure Why I Did That

Chris Scott  
c.m.scott@wustl.edu

Follow this and additional works at: [https://openscholarship.wustl.edu/samfox\\_art\\_etds](https://openscholarship.wustl.edu/samfox_art_etds)



Part of the [Fiction Commons](#), [Interdisciplinary Arts and Media Commons](#), [Nonfiction Commons](#), [Other Music Commons](#), [Painting Commons](#), and the [Poetry Commons](#)

---

#### Recommended Citation

Scott, Chris, "Encumbered by Stage Fright Or I'm Not Sure Why I Did That" (2020). *Graduate School of Art Theses*. ETD 136. <https://doi.org/10.7936/5hf8-je88>.

This Thesis is brought to you for free and open access by the All Graduate School of Art Theses at Washington University Open Scholarship. It has been accepted for inclusion in Graduate School of Art Theses by an authorized administrator of Washington University Open Scholarship. For more information, please contact [digital@wumail.wustl.edu](mailto:digital@wumail.wustl.edu).

*Encumbered by Stage Fright Or I'm Not Sure Why I Did That*

by Christopher Scott

A thesis presented to the  
Sam Fox School of Design & Visual Arts  
Washington University in St. Louis

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of  
Master of Fine Arts

Director of the School of Graduate Art  
Patricia Olynky

Thesis Advisor  
Monika Weiss

Primary Advisors  
Lisa Bulawsky  
Richard Krueger

Graduate Committee  
Heather Bennett  
Thomas Reed

I hope to be as honest as possible. I'm hoping to be the star of the show. This is a series of onanistic musings, giving glints of insight into my studio practice through a rambling narrative that oscillates between truth and fabrication. There are instances of laconic earnestness paired with ostentatious exaggeration. The frequent leaps from subject to subject, often seemingly unrelated to one another, reflect the ineluctably scatterbrained headspace that dictates how I operate in the studio, in every facet of life. Through this lens of storytelling I delve into a few artists, like Bruce Nauman, and rock and roll musicians, like Lou Reed, who I have been unable to divulge myself of a fixation with. They come to function almost like characters in the anecdotes.

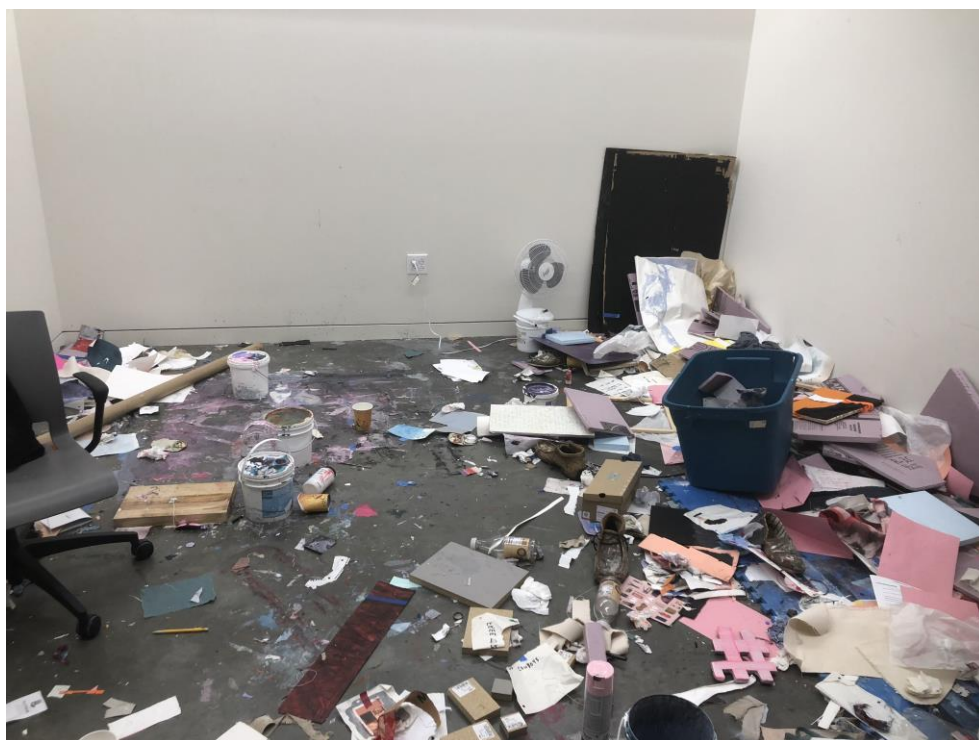
\* \* \* \* \*

I'm going to tell you a couple of stories. I'm going to talk about myself quite a bit. I have a tendency to embellish, so take it all with a grain of salt. I don't mean to insinuate that the following writing is insincere, but it is glazed with anamneses and illusions. I like to think that through some phantom version or versions of myself I'd do a bit of aggrandizing; I could be the rock star I daydream of. Though sometimes the person playing the fool is a fool.

\* \* \* \* \*



Lewis Center Studio, March 2019.



Weil Hall Studio, March 2020.

I was painting an orange square. It had a nubby texture. I spit in the paint to loosen it. Towards the bottom of the square, a thin line of cyan cut through. The mutual vivaciousness of the colors caused the cyan line to appear as though it were vibrating through the orange. It flared like a marquee. I found myself on a meek stage in a dimly lit, unpretentious dive. A few dozen faces in the crowd, no expression particularly legible, minus the bartender at the far end of the room. The Miller Lite neon sign illuminates his face, he wears an impassible mug, his arms are crossed. Seated on a wobbly, wooden stool, I greet the crowd and doublecheck the tuning on my guitar. I tell them I will I play a couple of songs. My voice cracks, palms clammy, wrists aquiver. I had a hell of a time handling my guitar. Even in figment I'm encumbered by stage fright.

I am doodling a cowboy on a sheet of notebook paper. His right hand is reaching for the gun at his waist. In his mouth is a lit cigarette giving off wisps of smoke. I'm not too pleased with how the smoke looks. It's difficult to draw smoke. I begin to play the first song of my set. I have no original material. I'm not much of a singer, but I can talk alongside a melody convincingly enough. I open with a somber tune, "Pale Blue Eyes," a timeworn choice for the lonesome man on a small stage. It's a bit of a Sisyphean tune, about a forlorn boy trying to reclaim lost love; "Thought of you as everything / I've had but couldn't keep."<sup>1</sup> The audience's collective eyeroll at the song choice is damn near audible. Can't say I blame them much. It can be a touching little number at the right time, but perhaps more often than not, it feels risibly pathetic.

I'm on my hands and knees. My sleeves are rolled up to my elbows. I have a metal bench scraper in my right hand. I'm knelt over a four-foot by four-foot piece of off-white burlap. To the side of the burlap is a one-gallon bucket, filled with roughly ten ounces of watered-down paint. The paint is a caliginous grey-blue, like old, tattered denim condemned to a dark closet, or

eastern skies at dusk on a cloudless spring evening. I grab the bucket and pour a bulk of the paint onto the burlap. I use the bench scraper to spread the paint across the surface of the burlap, intermittently hopping to my feet to relocate myself and give my knees a respite from the concrete floor. I return to a kneel and resume the frenzied scraping. It's a fiercely repetitive action. I am under the charm of a cathartic rage. The fever of the action befogs any awareness of time. It may have taken one minute; it may have taken one hour. I only knew I was done because I felt defeated. I mutter the outro to my first song; "Linger on your pale blue eyes."<sup>ii</sup> The crowd grants me a courteous, stolid round of applause. A table near the doorway of the watering hole is having a chuckle. I hope it's not at my expense. I thank the room and inform them I have a few more songs to play. I scooch my wobbly stool a few inches closer to the microphone stand. This next song is about two people who, uh, had been drinking for a very long time and get into one of those conversations where you arrive at a fairly obvious thing, I murmur into the mic.

I'm nestled in the corner. A sudden chill pricks up my hunched over back. I take a slug of coffee. I survey the objects seated near me; a paintbrush taped to a one meter stick, an empty paper cup with the dried residue of blood red paint inside, loose threads from torn burlap, six colored pencils (olive, violet-blue, royal blue, maroon, hot pink, black), an old oscillating table fan, a crushed beer can, a thumbtack, a loose sheet of notebook paper with a footprint on it and lyrics from T. Rex's 1971 song "Lean Woman Blues," "I'm like a child in the sand / On the beach of the land of you." At my feet is a copy of Richard Hell's *Massive, Pissed, Love*, open to the fourteenth page, with a sentence highlighted that reads "People love bands and their music for the alternative worlds they betoken as much as anything else about the music."<sup>iii</sup> I begin to strum the chords of the second and final song on my setlist, another tune from the Velvet Underground, "Some Kinda Love." This number is a little more whimsical than the opener, I

probably should have led with this one. The table near the entrance begins another round of cackling. One member of the party attempts to shush the others. The attempt to mute the rest of the group makes them laugh a little softer, through their hands. “And some kinds of love, the possibilities are endless / And for me to miss one would seem to be groundless.”<sup>iv</sup>

I’m lying on a stretched out roll of burlap. The paint on it has recently dried. A joke I often tell myself: if I lay with the painting it will tell me secrets. It will tell me what it needs. Sometimes this doesn’t feel like a joke. I’m lying on my back. The concrete is not especially accommodating to my poor posture. If I lie still long enough, the lights will go out and I can imagine I am elsewhere. I roll over onto my side and extend my leg out. I slowly caress the surface of the burlap with my left hand, rubbing back and forth over the same area. It becomes warmer after repeated fondling. Spots on the burlap where the paint has accumulated are smoother. My hand is fond of them. I close my eyes and continue to stroke the same spot. I halt my pawing. I reach for the corner of the burlap, grasp it, and pull the sheet over myself like a blanket. I bring it within an inch of my face. The burlap is porous enough to catch flickers of light through. I let out a ghastly exhale and begin to cough. I apologize to myself. I’m fumbling through the second song. I omit the fourth verse and jump straight into the outro; “I don’t know just what it’s all about / But put on your red pajamas and find out.”<sup>v</sup> The chattering table near the door, perhaps becoming aware of their discourtesy, quieted during the middle of the song. A woman seated at one of the tables nearest the stage was regarding me with a look of discomfort. When I answered her gaze, the corners of her mouth twitched. Her attention shifted to her beverage. She fidgeted with the two cocktail straws in her glass. She wore an embarrassed grimace. The last thing you want when you’re on stage is awareness that someone in the audience feels sorry for you.



*Sweet Jane (Live) At the Matrix, November 27, 1969. 2019.*

Single channel video, 3:56, looped.



*Sweet Jane (Live) At The Matrix, November 27, 1969* begins with a shot of a stark white space, ostensibly an artist's studio. The frame is slightly cocked; visible above the top edge of the white wall is a dilapidated tiled ceiling. Positioned in the center of the frame is a microphone stand with a paint brush taped to a broomstick lodged in place of a microphone. I saunter into the frame, a gangly figure adorned in a denim shirt, unbuttoned enough to expose a portion of my chest. I reach into my shirt pocket and grab a pack of cigarettes; Marlboro Red, cowboy killers.

I light my cigarette, I begin singing, cigarette still in mouth. I grip the microphone stand and begin swaying about. I continually mount and dismount the stand like a hobby horse as I sing, rubbing my pelvic area up and down. Tripping over the mic stand, shimmying my hips from time to time, seemingly so sure of what I'm doing, despite a heavy-handed hint at inebriation. Always, I keep hold of my cigarette, sure to take a drag between almost every line of the song. When I finish delivering a line, I swing my cigarette hand in the air; that's how you know I really think I'm doing a good job. The first verse ends with the line, "Nobody was looking at my body / They all were focused on my eyes." This ought to be funny because, presumably, it is not true. The focus is likely anywhere but my eyes. I pull out a cheap harmonica after the first verse and aimlessly huff into it. The forthright shriek of the harmonica is arresting and worthy of a much-needed chuckle. Up to this point in the video, the general impression is that of a graceless discomfort. The abrupt humor of the harmonica squeal only serves to make glaringly apparent the awkward distress of the rest of the video.

I selected an alternate version of "Sweet Jane," performed in November 1969 at the Matrix in San Francisco, to befuddle the element of authorship. On that particular November night in 1969, Lou decided to really have fun with the lyrics, making changes to damn near the whole tune; only the chorus and the breakdown are the same as the studio version. Singing an

alternate, lesser-known version of the song was done to present to the observer the possibility that I had gone and rewritten the lyrics.

After heaving out the second verse, I forgo singing the cathartic outro in favor of a few full chested retches on the harmonica. There's no attempt at an actorly finale, I merely tromp off frame with a final drag or two of my cigarette. In his essay "The Velvet Underground vs. The Rolling Stones," Richard Hell wrote

Rock and roll is aggressive self-assertion. Full fledged front men have to be difficult, egotistical people... Part of the job description of the front person is to be godlike for teenagers. A rock and roll show is about the audience agreeing to surrender to the band in such a way that the band gives back that which it's received from the crowd in the form of the crowd's pleasure in itself, in the form of the crowd's ideal of itself, of its own glory (as personified by the band's front man).<sup>vi</sup>

The function of the audience at the rock and roll concert is, essentially, to make a heroic figure of the front man, to elevate the debauched and aberrant behavior into supremely admirable qualities. The hope of *Sweet Jane (Live) At The Matrix, November 27, 1969*, is that having the front man perform in a sterile space – without the crowd, stripped of his band, absent the bright lights of a venue, bereft of all the general intoxicating qualities of that ostentatious environment – the debauched and aberrant behavior of the front man is divested of its heroism. The in-your-face awkward sexuality, the cigarette, the ostensive drunkenness, the unabashed bravado; all these putative traits of the rock and roll singer turn somewhat miserable, grievous, embarrassing.



Gijsbert Hanekroot. Lou Reed Performing at Carré Theatre, Amsterdam, Netherlands. 1972.

If lipstick were black  
you'd wear it  
If love were straight  
you'd curl it  
If life were wet  
you'd burn it  
If death were free  
you'd earn it  
If you were death  
I'd hiss you  
If you were life  
I'd catch you  
If you were here  
I'd kiss you  
But since you're not  
I'll miss you

*Lipstick* by Lou Reed<sup>vii</sup>

\* \* \* \* \*

I am in my childhood bedroom. When I packed all my belongings and moved away at nineteen, my mother promptly redecorated. The walls are now a sandy brown. There are framed photographs of family members on the nightstand. There are unframed photographs of family members on a bulletin board in the corner of the room, next to the window. There is a photo of my deceased grandfather, Alvin, as a young man. He's wearing Navy blues. Next to him, a photo of my dead dog Ernie. The room has new carpet, softer than the one from my boyhood. The neighborhood has scarcely changed since my adolescence, hackneyed Midwestern suburbia. Every lawn is green and trimmed. Trees are sparse and the few that have found roots in the community are dainty, mostly stripped of their leaves and gnawed to the branch by Japanese beetles. The neighbors recently cut down a burgeoning sycamore. There is an elderly couple walking their dog at a sluggish pace. I deposit my guitar in the sectioned-off booth to right of the stage where this evening's performers have been instructed to place their belongings between sets. I rove to the bar and plant myself on a tottering stool. The bartender is having a conversation at the opposite end from where I'm seated. I will give him a moment. I have an urge to check my phone.

I am in the storage room in my mother's basement. There is an old piano she has affirmed is over one hundred years old. It is only slightly out of tune. I press one of the keys. It drones through the room, an echo enlivened by the cold concrete floor. There are sealed boxes of knickknacks and doodads from my grandfather's house, innumerable containers of Christmas decorations, a haunting lawn Santa tucked in the corner, rolled up rugs shoved in a pile against the wall, patio furniture I have no memory of, heaps of hockey and other sporting equipment from my brother's prepubescent phase as an aspiring star athlete, and in the front corner of the room a hoard of nearly every painting or drawing I have ever made. The bartender asks what I

would like to drink. He seems perturbed that I interrupted his conversation. He hands me a can of beer, less chilled than I would prefer. I swivel in my seat and scan the room. Everyone is absorbed in chatter at their respective tables. In the center of every table is two or three fake, plastic candles, which casts every face with a hushed orange sheen. Many happy faces, it is nice to see. I have marginal anxiety about someone making off with my guitar and backpack, but at the moment, I can see they are where I left them.

I rummage through the stack of artwork and pull out a drawing on a 6"x8" sheet of paper, dated to December 14, 2015. It's a charcoal sketch of a seated male nude. In the top right corner of the paper are scribbled the words: After Prud'hon (from memory). I can remember exactly where I was when I drew it, seated at the window of a second-floor café in Iowa City, Iowa. I was drinking hibiscus and listening to the album *Marquee Moon* by Television. I would periodically break from drawing to look down at the crowds walking on Dubuque street. It was an abnormally warm December afternoon. I saw a young man fall off a skateboard. At the table to my right is a young woman with sandy blonde hair and thick framed glasses. She is fixedly rapt in a textbook. I can somewhat make out from where I'm seated numbers and graphs on the pages. I creep my sketchbook an inch or two my right as I shade the thighs of the figure, hoping she may toss a glance at the wonderful drawing I am working on. I signal to the bartender for another beer and thank him under my breath. This one is colder than the first. He fills a shot glass with whiskey, some brand I have never seen before, and tells me it's on him. I thank him again, a little louder this time. His lips tuck in and the corners of his mouth curl, he nods at me, acknowledging my thanks. He looks at the floor as he walks back to the other end of the bar. I toss back the shot. It is dreadful, but I am not above accepting a complimentary pity drink.

I burrow deeper into the mass of artwork. It is curious to see years of labor collecting dust. But I am not woeful about the matter. Abrupt changes have come about, to put it mildly. As it stands today, March 18, 2020, I find immense difficulty in conjuring any sentiment towards the things I've made. Or the things anyone has made, really. Nevertheless, I have sprawled out my current painting materials in my mother's basement. My makeshift working space sits adjacent to the mound of past toils. I rest myself on the brisk floor. I deliberate for a moment on the ways in which the new working environment will mold the things made. There is no quicker or more effective way to disrupt a comfortable working pattern than to rupture habit entirely, to dissolve all semblance of schedule. Peter Halley once wrote "When one speaks of abstract art, it is essential to remember that it is only a reflection of a physical environment that has also become essentially abstract."<sup>viii</sup> The room is very dim, like a meagre concert venue after the show has ended and before the house lights have come on. I have a lamp on the floor a few feet in front of me. The languid overhead lights do little to help me see. I wonder if they have been changed since we first moved into this house. I was in second grade, which would place me at the age of seven. My parents had recently divorced. It was a civil performance, a mostly mutual agreement. I think had my mother not informed my father that there was turmoil in the relationship he would have gone on blissfully unmindful until the end of their days. But that is just a presumption. He played a lot of golf. I have little memory of that time. But I know my mother was happier after the split. I recall her singing in the kitchen. I told her "Mom, I have never heard you sing before." She started to cry. I put down my Legos, abashed. I did not understand at the time that someone could be made to cry from joy. The shot of whiskey has rendered me a bit nauseous. I ask the bartender for a glass of ice water and quickly swill it down. I follow in suit with the beer. I rise to my feet, my cheeks crimson, my legs less stable than five minutes prior. I should've had

a few before I went on stage. I tromp towards the backdoor of the bar to the left of the stage. I step outside, fumble with my lighter, and light a cigarette. The streetlamp above me beams a molten orange, but the air is cool and limp.

I look at a small painting on the ground before me. A wash of black paint on a scrap of canvas primed with PVA adhesive. The surface is flush with a shimmer, despite gobs of paint having been applied. The scrap, already primed, was handed off to me. My peers know I have an affinity for unwanted material. They have been more than generous with their donations. In that regard painting feels communal, sometimes. A small group of friends is contributing to my output. It is a nice sentiment. It is so cold in the basement the paint I laid down hours earlier is still very wet. I think for a moment that this frustrates me, but I quickly dispense those feelings. The paint will dry eventually. And perhaps my patience will reward me with something beautiful. “Beautiful” is a peculiar word to describe your own work. Sometimes I feel that way. If I can grant myself enough distance to forget that I made the thing, sometimes I may catch myself reckoning: that painting is beautiful. It doesn’t last. I think it feels better to hear others say my paintings are beautiful than to think it myself. But I am not sure. I may change my mind on that. I decide to leave the wet paint as is. I’ll return in a few hours in hopes that it’s dried. I take a long drag of my cigarette and release a plume of smoke. I cough a few times. The door I exited the bar from is cracked. The light sneaking out from the sliver between the door and its hinge reflects a dull yellow on a frozen puddle near my feet. I can hear the chatter and the music from inside, muzzled by the door. Other than that, it is distressingly quiet in the alley. I take another drag. I remember reading that John Wayne smoked six packs of Camels a day. I’d like to quit. It’d be the right thing to do. But I enjoy smoking. I don’t feel particularly trapped by it, but I haven’t put my heart into giving it up. I’m sure the proverbial cage would compress if I gave

quitting an honest effort. I blame the movies. I wouldn't have picked it up had Joaquin not made it look so right in *The Master*. I smoke it to the butt and toss it on the frozen puddle. I put it out with my boot and almost slip on the ice. At least no one would have been around to see me fall.

I stroll up the stairs and return to my childhood bedroom. I fixate on the photograph of my grandfather Alvin as a young man, in his Navy blues. We look alike. I have very few memories of him. Only one is notably vivid. We were eating at a Steak 'n' Shake in Springfield. I was probably eight years old. There was one of those claw machines filled with stuffed animals situated at the front of the restaurant. He spent the better part of the dinner with me and my brother trying to win something from the machine. We must have spent fifteen dollars on the thing. He had an adolescent's energy. He was more determined than the two children to claim a teddy bear. He was so proud to hand my brother that toy. My mother tells me that is among her fondest memories. I amble back into the bar and return to my stool. On my path there I'm sure to check that my belongings remain in the booth where I left them. They haven't moved. I sit down and ask for another beer and a shot of the putrid whiskey the bartender had shared with me. My thoughts turn to my grandfather. I can't recall how old I was when he died. I think I was in high school. I can't recall how old he was either. Mid-seventies, I believe. He'd had a near death experience in his fifties; liver failure. My mother claims he drank a bottle of whiskey every day for thirty years. The bartender brings me my drinks. I admired him as a kid, though I don't think the thought ever crossed my mind that I wanted to be like him when I grew up. I belt down the whiskey and gag for a moment. I take a quick drink of the beer to prevent a full-on heave. That shot was a mistake, I mumble to myself. As a kid I wanted to be like Jimmy Page when I grew up. I saw Led Zeppelin's *How the West Was Won* concert film for the first time when I was ten.



That is what I will do with my life, I thought at the time. I never really put the effort into properly learning guitar.

I take a seat in the chair in the corner of my childhood bedroom, beneath the bulletin board adorned with pictures of family. The sun is out today. The neighbor is mowing his lawn. A robin is nestled in the bush just outside the window. I pick up a notebook from the floor and flip through it, searching for a blank page. I'm going to write a poem, I tell myself. I used to write so much poetry. I would jaunt about Iowa City, looking for spots to perch and scribble. I would write about the river or about the people walking by me or about a misunderstanding I had overheard in a coffee shop. I was reading a lot of Dante at the time. There came a period when I stopped wandering the town. Finding impetus from playing the part of the flâneur ceased. I recall a passage from Benjamin:

The street conducts the flâneur into a vanished time. For him, every street is precipitous. It leads downward – if not to the mythical Mothers, then into a past that can be all the more spellbinding because it is not his own, not private. Nevertheless, it always remains the time of a childhood. But why that of the life he has lived?<sup>ix</sup>

I would lock myself in my bedroom and sit on the floor next to my desk. I lived alone in an apartment on Dubuque street. My apartment was on the thirteenth floor. Everything I wrote during that time was coated in an opioid residue. I did not write for several years after those two months. I reach for a pen to my left and place the notebook in my lap. Before attempting to write, I always tend to dupe myself into the belief that language will just pour out of me. It obviously never works out this way. A blank sheet of paper daunts me. I never know where to go. I tend to ruminate on childhood. I take a sip of beer. The patrons at the opposite end of the bar are paying their tabs. One of them appears particularly inebriated. They are all sharing a laugh. The bartender calls one of them by name and says he'll see him around. I'm now the only person seated at the bar. Most of the tables in the joint are occupied. The current act on stage is singing

“Free Man in Paris” by Joni Mitchell. She sounds spot on. A member of the crowd lets out a whistle. I don’t turn around to watch. I can tell without looking she has the audience gripped. She’s one of those folks endowed with arresting presence. My eyes are laid on the chewed-up coaster under my beer. I wonder if my grandfather ever listened to Joni Mitchell. I retrieve a 3.5” x 5” notebook from the interior pocket of my coat and set it on the bar in front of me. I flip to a blank page. I dig for a pen in the pocket of my trousers and have no luck. I signal to the bartender. I ask him if I may borrow a pen. He hands me one and his face glooms. While I have him, I order another beer. He delivers it to me and shifts his regard back to the stage.

I have yet to find a word to put down. I’m dredging through memories to get me there. I’m ten years old on my school’s playground. My elementary school was named after Vachel Lindsay, a poet. I fall from the monkeybars and land flat on my back. It knocks the wind out of me. I cry a great deal. I’m seventeen in the passenger seat of my friend Dane’s car. It’s the week after graduation. He passes me a joint as Iggy Pop’s “The Passenger” blares through the car speakers. I’m twenty-three and in New York City for the first time. I’m on the metro. I’m trying to look like I know where I’m going but I’m sneaking glances at my phone to make sure I get off at the correct stop. I’m meeting the first mentor I’d ever had on the game of art, TJ Dedeaux-Norris, at MoMA PS1 to see the Bruce Nauman show. She’s waiting in the lobby for me. I’m immensely grateful she’s giving me the time of day. We catch up as we enter the first room of the show. I tell her about grad school. She tells me about her upcoming solo shows and the new crop of students at Iowa. It’s odd to shift from an instructor–student kinship to behaving like old friends, not that the mentorship ever really ends, I’ll always feel she’s my teacher. We stand still and watch Nauman’s *Contrapposto Studies, i through vii*. I felt a bit starstruck by the work. TJ turned and said to me: I’m surprised every time by how he gets it so right with so little. I think

about how silly it is to be in awe of such insipid actions. The act on stage has just finished singing the Joni Mitchell tune. The audience gives her a raucous applause. I clap along. She sounded stellar. She tosses out a thank you to the crowd and segues into the next song, Guy Clark's "Stuff That Works." I scrawl some marks in my notebook, fidgety scratches like illegible cursive. Sometimes capricious doodling helps me come to my senses. As I wearily admire the rendition of Guy Clark humming about the room, a curious disposition comes about me. I feel for a moment like I'm in a movie. Or that I should be in a movie. I begin to jot down some words. They become a poem.

\* \* \* \* \*

*I wish to be Bruce  
To pique a couth herd  
By tracing a square with my steps  
Or walking back and forth  
(and back and forth  
back and forth)*

*At the MoMA  
I rubbernecked his  
Beer belly  
As I was being delivered a great sermon*



Bruce Nauman. *Contrapposto Studies, i through vii*. 2015/2016. Seven channel video.

A sunny day in New Mexico. There's a cloud here and there, but, as is the case in landscape such as this, they appear so far off in the expanse they're like wallpaper. They're as nonmoving as the mountains below them. Nauman is saddled on a colt, he wears a Stetson hat, a red striped shirt, blue jeans and a pair of brown leather boots. He's putting a pair of colts through their paces; that's a cowboy way of saying: teaching a young horse the proper maneuvers and mannerisms to accompany a rider. I'm observing this on two monitors and an eight by ten-foot projection in a gallery at MoMA PS1, though the breadth of my focus is geared towards the projection, the immensity it lends to the already vast western landscape makes it difficult to look away. Were I not familiar with the piece prior to my visit, I would have no idea what putting a colt through its paces meant, or that that's what Nauman was doing here. At fifty-nine minutes and forty seconds, I don't anticipate I'll have the patience to observe the entirety of the piece. I doubt Nauman expected anyone to ever sit through the whole thing either.

A few minutes into my viewing, the sky above Nauman and his colt begins to shift hue, the blue gives way to an alternation of seductive, hallucinatory pinks and purples. I fleetly come about an unsavory association to the colors; a codeine infused cough syrup I toyed with as a teenager. I laugh off the thought. Nauman, his colt and the ground they gallop upon have mutated into an acidic green. I realize the pun present in the title, *Green Horses*. In color, green, and unseasoned in experience, green. He always nails the titles. During my daydreaming I failed to notice the video invert. The horse is now on the top of the image, sky below. After a minute of watching, it appears the horse is riding the cowboy, the colt is putting Nauman through his paces. I would like to be the colt, the tenacious young creature, putting the old artist through his paces, tiring him out. Maybe he'll run out of ideas and I can have some. Mimicry ain't so bad for the time being, I suppose.



Bruce Nauman. *Green Horses*, 1988. Video installation (color, sound) with two color video monitors, two DVD players, video projector, and chair. 59:40, looped.

A group of patrons exits the gallery and I'm left alone with the installation and a museum attendant. Now that I've been excused of museum goer banter, I can hear clearly the sounds of the video; the colt's hooves clickity clack and every so often can be heard a squelched, rather inscrutable parley. I learn later from reading a Thomas Beard article titled "Back in the Saddle," these are the voices of artists Steina and Woody Vasulka, whom Nauman asked to act as cinematographers for the piece. The phrases coherent enough to be made out are simple things: "I'm showing low light... If you like going further away, it's fine...It's wonderful...Did you see it?"<sup>xx</sup> I thought perhaps I was deceiving myself into hearing the voices, they seem so negligible at first. Learning later the dialogue was statements of such guile, I couldn't help but laugh. Beard

wrote “the voices contend with the majesty of the terrain.”<sup>xi</sup> Maybe Nauman was trying to dumb-down the whole cowboy mystique, there at least seems to be some conflation of what it is to be an artist with what it is to be a cowboy. The installation accompanying the video, the projector on the box it came in, a leather chair, is meant to mimic the artist’s studio, the conditions under which he’d be viewing the video for the first time. This humble mimicry of the studio paired with an endless loop of the arduous task of putting a colt through its paces sort of deglamorizes both artist and cowboy. But maybe I’m reading into it too much.

I attempt to sneak a video on my phone of the work, the museum attendant notices and politely asks me to stop. I apologize and we chat for a moment. I ask how frequently the attendants rotate galleries, he says every few hours. I ask him how long he’s been forced to stare at *Green Horses* and he tells me it’s his second hour in the gallery. I enjoy the colors and it’s easy to zone out, he tells me. He recounts a story from a previous day on the job when he was tasked with the gallery housing *Double Steel Cage Piece*. One museum goer at a time is permitted to enter the cage and walk through it. A young woman entered, behaving perfectly normal, enthusiastic to traverse the contraption, he said, and by the time she exited, she was crying softly. I have to walk through this thing, I thought to myself. I had a similar experience. About halfway through I felt the legs on my hair standup, my smile dissolved, I quickened my pace, my hands began to shake. When I escaped, TJ whispered to me: your face went white, you looked like you lost somebody.





Bruce Nauman. *Double Steel Cage Piece*. 1974. Steel, 7' 11/16" x 12' 5/16" x 17' 11/16".



Me inside *Double Steel Cage Piece*. February 2019.



Spend the years of learning squandering  
Courage for the years of wandering  
Through a world politely turning  
From the loutishness of learning.

*Gnome* by Samuel Beckett<sup>xii</sup>

\* \* \* \* \*

On the plane ride back to St. Louis from New York City my thoughts maunder round. I'm in the window seat, drinking some overpriced whiskey. I feel a little bad about it, there's a kid in the seat next to me, but his parents in the seats across the aisle are enjoying some beverages as well, which soothes the guilt a bit. I'm scrolling through photos on my phone of all the art I saw over the last week. New York seduced me in precisely the way I expected it would, the way everyone told me it would. After seeing what felt like every great painting ever made, going through a retrospective of the artist I struggle to model myself after, experiencing the frenetic creative energy that just somehow permeates the city, and paying eight dollars for a beer, you'd think I'd be energized to return to the studio. I'm a little intimidated, frightened to do so, in fact. The first-rate cover of Guy Clark's "Stuff That Works" has just ended. She thanks the crowd and receives thunderous approval, a handful of whistles, a howl or two, an ovation that goes on just a little too long, if you ask me. I get down the last word in a poem and close my notebook as she exits the stage. Some of the tables begin to clear out of the joint. The rest hustle up to the bar to refill their beverages. I do my best to condense my body before the wave hits. As the swarm saddles up to the bar, I can feel others achingly aware of my discomfort.

I enter my studio the next morning, it's bitter and muggy outside. Debris is flung about, paper and canvas, polystyrene and assorted fabrics, paint tubes and brushes, pencils and markers, the usuals. The mess is an embracing sight. I pick up a small painting I was festering with before the trip. It feels anonymous, foreign. I hurl it at the window and pause. I'm not sure why I did that, I say aloud. I look at an image of *Green Horses* on my phone. I open the copy of *Bruce Nauman: Disappearing Acts* I purchased from the MoMA gift shop. I sit in my swivel chair, low to ground, and read the Thomas Beard article. I come to a quote from Nauman in the essay and the passage halts my reading.

It's difficult to see what the functioning edges of language are. The place where it communicates best and most easily is also the place where language is the least interesting and emotionally involving... When these functional edges are explored, however, other areas of your mind make you aware of language potential. I think the point where language starts to break down as a useful tool for communication is the same edge where poetry or art occurs.<sup>xiii</sup>

I open my pocket notebook and thumb through the pages, littered with phrases I'd been collecting for about a month or two, sourced from eavesdropping, from music, poetry and film, from conversations I've had, from anywhere a provocative word or phrase found me. I'm arrested by one about midway through the notebook, it reads: *Like a horse on a treadmill with a carrot dangled before its face*. In a flutter I grab a sharpie and a sheet of lined notebook paper from the floor and harshly and swiftly engrave the sentence on the top half of the sheet, in capital letters. I take a deep, ghastly breath, cough into my elbow and lean back in my chair. Folks at the bar are bumping into me left and right, nudging my shoulders trying to get their drinks. My stool is so goddamn wobbly I almost fall the ground. A man standing over me shoots me a dirty glance for having coughed. Fuck you, I think to myself. With live music done for the evening, the bartender turns on the usual rotating playlist this establishment employs. The first tune to come on is "No Fun" from the Stooges debut album, it feels apt. "No fun to hang around / Feelin' the

same old way / No fun to hang around / Freaked out for another day.”<sup>xiv</sup> I notice my pocket notebook still on the bar. I shove it in my coat before anyone notices it and accuses me of being a writer.

I grab one of the many scraps of purple polystyrene strewn about and snap it over my knee, breaking it into smaller sections. The sound claps through the empty room. I love doing this, I love that noise. I drop to my knees. I impetuously pour matte medium onto the surface and evenly spread it about with a wetted brush. I carefully, as carefully as one can be in such a caffeine-fueled intrepid condition, lay the freshly inscribed sheet of notebook paper atop the pool of matte medium. I worry the sharpie will smear. I reach for a squeegee and gently it run across the surface, removing the excess matte medium, until the paper rests almost flush to the polystyrene. I bounce to my feet and toss the squeegee to the ground and walk away, I have to slow down before I fuck this up, I think to myself. I walk out of the studio and tramp about the place, moving in circles, hoping none of my studio neighbors show up and catch me in such a schizoid spell. I’m pacing about, I’m putting myself through my paces, I chirp to myself and laugh. I get a little breathing room as the herd gets served their drinks. The bartender drops a beer in front of me without my having asked. I must have looked in need. A few seats to my right is the closing act, she’s dressed the part. Leather jacket, tattered black jeans with a hole in the left knee, a plain white t-shirt, black leather boots with a several inch heel, purposefully messy hair that looks a little chewed up from countless dyeing, a beaded necklace with some sort of pendant on the end, big hoop earrings and a polite fervency to her composure. A couple of dudes appear to be lingering with their compliments a bit too long, she looks peeved. I hear the bartender tell her the drink is on the house, he pours a glass of rather pricey whiskey.

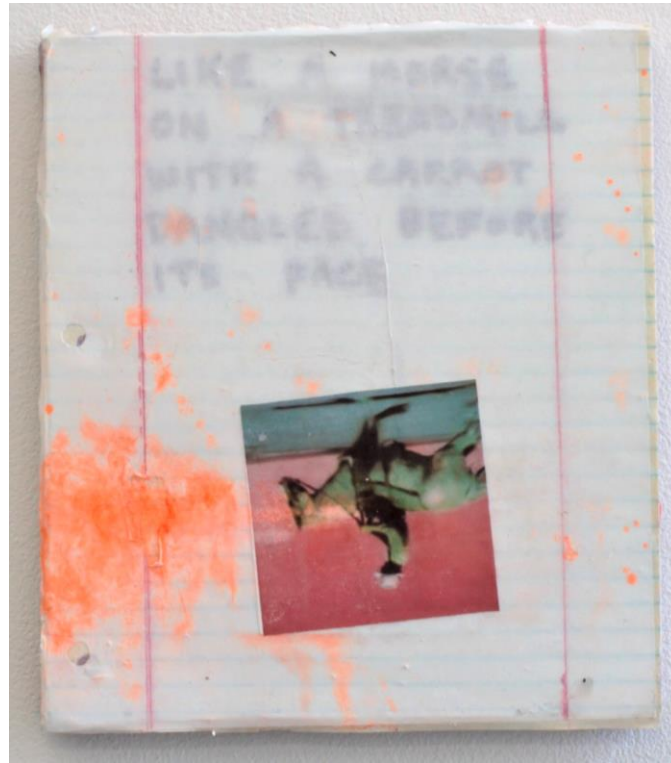
I print an image from *Green Horses* from the fussy, old inkjet printer in the studio building. It must have been low on blue ink, the sky in my printed image is not the lucid magenta present in the video, but a dull red. I kind of enjoy it actually. I scurry into my studio, the paper has nicely adhered to the polystyrene, but the text is too legible, too frontal. I drop some matte medium on the surface and repeat the process of laying down a sheet of notebook paper and softly rubbing the surface with a squeegee. The improvement is immediate, the text is murky, it begs proximity to be made sense of. I'm scratchily impatient for this layer to dry, so I head outside to sit in the damp cold. The light mist feels nice, I'm sweaty from drinking too much coffee and galloping about the place. I'm eavesdropping on the conversation happening down the bar. My head hangs low to mask the smug smile I wear. The two dudes are still giving their best shot at impressing the star act of the evening. I have that Guy Clark album on vinyl, one says. My mom used to play Joni Mitchell around the house when I was a kid, the other follows up. If you ever want to grab a drink or have a jam session that'd be rad, you know I actually play guitar too; I think they delivered that one in unison. Uh-huh, that's crazy, sounds great, she retorts. I raise my head and take a sip of beer, unable to drop my sneer. I glance in their direction. She has her chin resting in her palm, she faces away from the stooges. I pluck my notebook from my coat and plop it on the bar. I open to the poem I just wrote and read over it. I've done worse, I think as I slurp some beer, a drop or two runs down my chin.

I waltz in from the cold, ready to emblaze the image from *Green Horses* onto the painting. I cautiously trim the surplus paper surrounding the image. I brush some matte medium on the back and set it down gently, with the colt on top of Nauman. I cock the left corner slightly downward and pull myself back, reciting the thought I may want to pause before I fuck this up. I unwittingly kick over a cup filled with watered down fluorescent orange paint. It has been sitting

there for a while, since before I went to New York. It has that incomparable musk that only old, forgotten acrylic paint can have, like a plastic, synthetic iteration of garage mildew after a heavy rain, or clothes forgotten in a washing machine. It's running into the cracks in the floor. I pick up a paintbrush, dip it in the stream, and flick it in the direction of the painting being labored over, which sits a few feet away. I'm not sure why I did that, I say aloud. I plunk my beer down on the edge of the coaster and almost tip it over. I manage to catch it before any spills out. The two lads down the bar have ceased their pestering, seems they got the message that was oppressively obvious to the rest of us hanging around. I thumb to the next page in my notebook, if I managed to slog one poem out, maybe another will come. That second one is never really as good as the first.

After another episode of pacing, the paint has dried. The reeky orange amalgamated with the matte medium in a spot and soddened the paper, a foggy pool rather than flung speckles. I don't mind it so much, I come to prefer it. Sometimes the paint will make decisions on its own, better to roll with the punches. The surface is too unaltered, too paper-like, too ephemeral. I pour a dribble of gloss medium on and spread it evenly with a wetted brush. The glaze dries quickly. The spunky sheen makes it feel more concrete. I pin it on the wall and take a breather. I get very close and then back up, I repeat this a few times. I catch myself reckoning: that painting is beautiful. I promptly discharge that thought with a laugh. Not beautiful, not beautiful at all really. It's got an angst to it, I suppose that means it doesn't ask to be beautiful, or doesn't want to be, in fact it shouldn't be beautiful. I make some squiggles on the page and begin to reach for my beer but restrain. I rest my forehead in my palm and run my hand through my hair. No words have come to me yet. I try to eavesdrop on the conversation happening at the table behind me for some inspiration, but I can't discern much over the white noise of the room. A Johnny Cash song

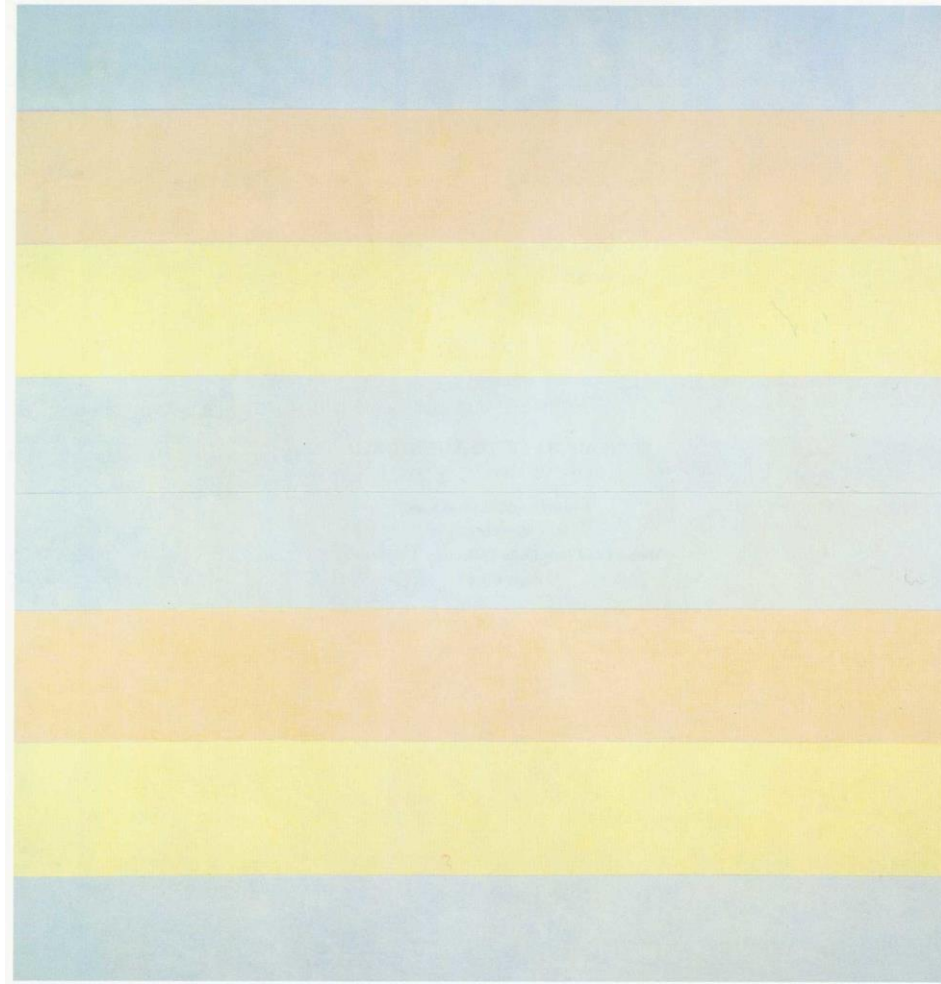
comes on the speaker, “The Legend of John Henry’s Hammer,” from his celebrated live album recorded at Folsom Prison in January 1968.



*Green Horses or I Love You Bruce Nauman.* 2019. Mixed media on notebook paper on polystyrene board, 10.8” x 8.3”.

I sit down in my swivel chair and check the time on my phone. At my feet is a stack of lined notebook paper. I admire it for a moment. It’s really an impeccable design, optimally functional, discreetly beautiful. I think to myself: it’s ergonomic minimalist abstraction, you can get seventy Agnes Martins for three dollars. I recall the room at the MoMA filled with Martin’s paintings. It’s not necessarily the best environment to view them, I would have liked silence. I was disgruntled by the crowds, my annoyance disturbed my focus, for a moment. I caught one unburdened by a flock, titled *With My Back To The World*, one panel in a series of six. Eight

vertical bands, all identical in height. A pastel blue, then peach, then the gentlest of yellows, then two more pastel blue blends in the center, then peach, then yellow, then blue at the base. It's the most inviting palette I've ever seen, I wanted to be embraced by it, I wanted everything in life to be so hospitable. Between each band was a thin pencil line, each one almost perfectly straight. The line between the blue and the peach at the top of the painting had a quiver a few edges from the left side of the painting, only noticeable if one is patient with their experience of the work. Martin had attempted to erase the quiver, this only served to heighten its actuality, its genuineness. I was having one of those extraordinary moments everyone begs to have when seeing art. It's not so often I'm truly gripped by something. I felt like this painting cared about me. I put the beer can to my mouth and take a sip as Johnny Cash plays. I mouth along with the lyrics, I've spent hours of my life dedicating them to memory. "But if you bring that steam drill round, I'll beat it fair and honest, I'll die with that hammer in my hand, but I'll be laughing."<sup>xv</sup> I peer down at my notebook and come up with nothing. The number of beers I've put down probably ain't helping, I'm on the cusp of inebriation, I'm not much of a writer when I'm drunk. I pull my ID out of my wallet and set it on the notebook, lining up the short side of it with the edge of the page. Using the card as a straightedge, I trace feeble lines across the paper, doing my best to make them equidistant. When the page is full, I draw one freehand right down the center, or as close to right down the center as I can get without measuring. It's a little wobbly, but I'm rather impressed with the steadiness of my hand. I grin at my achievement. I'm unexpectedly soothed by the exercise, as calm as I've been all evening. I should've done this before I went on stage.



Agnes Martin. *With My Back to the World*. 1997. Synthetic polymer paint on canvas, six panels,  
60" x 60".

The adventurous state of mind is a high house.  
To enjoy life the adventurous state of mind must be grasped and maintained.  
The essential feature of adventure is that it is a going forward into unknown territory.  
The joy of adventure is unaccountable.  
This is the attractiveness of art work. It is adventurous, strenuous and joyful.

Agnes Martin<sup>xvi</sup>

\* \* \* \* \*



I return the bartender his pen and flip to the front page of my notebook. I take a swig of my now room temperature beer. I peek down the bar to my right and see a row of empty seats. I'm sure I look rather solemn having been the only person glued to the bar all night. I skim the contents of my notebook. Mostly doodles and bad poetry, occasionally a good one, notes from conversations, sometimes just a single word on a page. This one stuck out to me: *posture*. I often find myself scrolling through my pocketbook at bars. It's like a stroll down memory lane without much of any tangible memories attached to the things written. I remember doing all the writing, but I've never been good about noting date or location, all that persists is some vague recollection of how words were pieced together. I rest on a page where I have transcribed a poem from Italian filmmaker Pier Paolo Pasolini, titled *Narcissus Dancing*.

I am black with love  
neither boy nor nightingale  
intact as a flower  
I yearn without desire.

I arose amid violets  
at the day's first light,  
sang a song forgotten  
in the unchanging night.  
I said to myself: "Narcissus!"  
and a spirit with my face  
darkened the grass  
with the glow of his curls.<sup>xvii</sup>

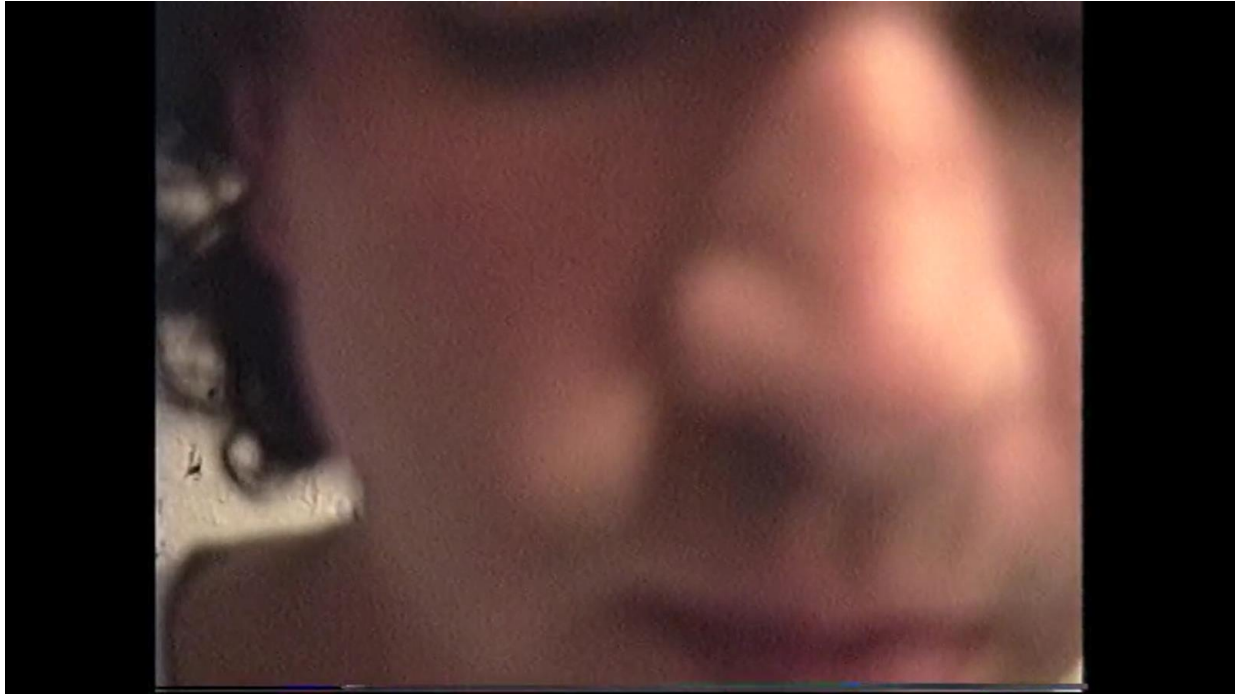
I wonder if my grandfather ever saw a Pasolini film. I wonder if Pasolini ever met Lou Reed. I think I've had this poem copied in every pocket notebook I've carried for the last several years. I close my notebook. It's good to read someone else's poetry after you've written one of your own, a humbling routine. I'm feeling awfully relaxed. I shuffle to my feet and head out the side door for a cigarette.

After a handful of beers, the cold is proving much less of a trial. I pull out a cigarette and light it. I fumble my lighter and it falls to the ground, landing on a frozen puddle. I hunch over to retrieve it and catch my reflection in the patch of ice. I stare at it for a moment, taking drags of my cigarette as I do. My reflection and I share a laugh. I gracelessly climb out of my slouching stance. These barstools are going to ruin my posture, I think to myself. I open my phone to research whether Pasolini and Lou ever met one another. My shivering fingers make navigating the phone screen a hell of an endeavor. The webpage still open from my last perusing of the web ceases my research efforts, an excerpt from a video by artist Sean Landers from 1992, titled *93% Sincere*. I hit play as I take a drag of my cigarette.

I'm feeling really, really, very bad right now. Genuinely, I mean I'm not just putting on for video or anything, I feel really bad. I feel like uh, a lot of fear. And anxiety, of course, and um, uncertainty about the future. And uh, well, I'm basically horrified and uh, I'm trying to figure out why. I think, you know, is it about love or something or is about, you know, fear of making bad artwork or something like that or all these kinds of things? And I guess it's about all of them. I just feel... I just feel like, really, really bad, and I... I don't really know what to do about it.<sup>xviii</sup>

I tune out after about the first minute. Landers' face is disparagingly close, roughly an inch from the lens, as he catatonically mumbles this soliloquy. There are moments where I'd like to chuckle at both the monotone delivery and the pathetic bluntness of the things being said, but the urge to laugh is mostly dispelled by the ostensible sincerity of the rant. I can relate to the things he's saying, everyone can relate to the things he's saying, regardless of how tinted they are by his performative numbness. There's a soundtrack behind him, though I can't quite place its origins; it sounds like something that would be on the soundtrack of *Casablanca*. Its familiarity is almost eerie. It's a culturally inherited sort of thing; the viewer will understand the putative function of this sort of dramatic orchestral music from having seen films like *Casablanca*, which

is to tug at the heartstrings. In this context it feels miserable, preposterous, humorous; its intended purpose undermined by Landers' stoicism.



Sean Landers. *93% Sincere*. 1992. Single channel video, 2:02:28.

I chug through the rest of my cigarette and put my phone in my pocket. I wish I'd made that video, I think to myself. I strut into the bar and back to my stool. My smokey stench is unmuted by the retreat from the cold. I don't usually notice it, but it's unpleasantly apparent at the moment. The bartender brings me another beer, I think he's warming up to me. I begin to wonder what Landers the person is like. I think I have a pretty good sense of who Landers the artist is, but those two entities are oftentimes very different. I wonder if he were to walk into the bar and sit down next to me whether we would get along. I have a hunch we may not like each other very much. I think about what sorts of things I might ask him, what sort of ideas I may pillage. I've delivered a handful of diatribes to a camera myself, I might say to him.

\* \* \* \* \*

Landers enters the dive and tramps up to the bar. He saddles himself in the stool next to me. Howdy, I say. He's dressed humbly, a plaid shirt and jeans, a modest, beige winter coat, some sneakers, thick framed glasses, his hair is black and wavy and hangs just below his ears. He orders a cocktail; I didn't really take him for much of a drinker. I attempt to exchange pleasantries and he humors me a bit. I respectfully allude that I know who he is, though do my best not to inform him that I'm a fan of his work. The further he gets along on his drink, the more willing he is to engage. I'm feeling rather bold, animated by my inebriation, so I let slip that I paint and make videos too. He pulls back his interest when he hears this. It's not such an easy thing to do, he says. No, it's not, I respond. A stiff silence follows. The bartender is lingering a few feet to Landers' right, he's got a devilish little smirk. I assume he hears us and finds humor in our stilted conversation. Normally, this awareness would embarrass me, probably stop me in my tracks, but at the moment, it somewhat encourages my inquiries. I take an aggressive glug of my beer. I toss an audacious request in his direction: do you still find, or did you ever find, any sort of bliss in doing what you do, especially after roughly thirty years of doing it? He takes a sip of his beverage, pauses and retorts to me, almost as if reading a script:

I don't know why but when I (heard) this question I just thought of my perineum... Looking for truth or purity in oneself through making art is like peeling an infinite onion. Each layer alternates between irony and sincerity. I feel more comfortable being ironic and the audience seems to dig my sincerity. So I give them what they want – I tell them about my perineum.<sup>xix</sup>

He takes a sip of his drink with a shit-eating grin on his face. I stare at my drink and roll my tongue around my mouth. I take a sip. I'm a bit taken aback, a tad puzzled, but mostly amused. I turn my head in his direction hoping he's looking at me, hoping I've given him the reaction he

was seeking. He's glancing around the bar, almost like he wants me to get his attention. I may as well keep this up, I think to myself. Another sip of beer and it's empty. He says he'll buy my next one. Nice of him to help the poor young artist. You come off as a bit of a sadsack of shit in your work occasionally, I say to him and he giggles, do you ever think being an artist has made your life more difficult?

Not a bit. But it's much funnier perhaps to propagate the conceit of the tortured artist. Thus: "The artist's life is a very hard life. Nobody appreciates me. I'm the most undervalued artist of my generation. Everybody rips me off and I get no credit for it. My true audience has yet to be born. I'm so depressed, woe is me." Had enough? I've got a lot more where that came from.<sup>xx</sup>

I can't do much to contain my laughter. I'm satisfied, I tell him. I thank him for indulging me and promise him that was the end of my probing. He seems entertained by my questioning. The bartender is leaned up against the shelf behind the bar, he's still got on that goofy sneer.

\* \* \* \* \*

a fresh spiderweb  
billowing  
like a spinnaker  
across the open window  
and here he is  
the little master  
sailing by  
on a thread of milk  
wish me luck  
admiral  
I haven't finished anything  
in a long time

*Wish Me Luck* by Leonard Cohen<sup>xxi</sup>

\* \* \* \* \*

You look like you make these paintings, I once had someone say to me. I'm becoming increasingly self-conscious about people's perception of me as an artist. How many more white guys making abstract paintings do we need, I think to myself. I'm weary about so obviously embodying the stereotypes of the desultory white male artist, but I really have them all. A scattered brain procrastinator; some sort of misguided desire to be perceived as a loner type, despite hating being alone; an inability or outward refusal to explain why I made something; a tendency toward apathy; a proclivity to drink too much and make a fool of myself, particularly at gallery openings, how can I say no to another free drink? It's late in the night and the studio is empty. There are a couple of empty beer bottles under my desk. I call a friend, needing to express my self-centered, self-inflicted woes. She's finding some humor in the matter, which I can't blame her for. My god, you are such a sad boy, fuck, she says and we both laugh. I write down in my pocket notebook: sad boy, fuck. It had a nice ring to it. Just embrace it, she tells me, why are you so worried?

The term sad boy comes from a pocket of internet culture fostered in the early 2010s where self-deprecating humor functions as a mode for men to sardonically express sensitivity; a failed attempt at amalgamizing emotional delicacy with an outdated notion of machismo. The sad boy wears self-pity as a badge of honor, viewing sadness as an affirmation of their manhood and not an infringement upon it. They're the type of assholes likely to harangue you about how Sonic Youth changed their life and nobody understands the band like they do, most people who listen are fucking posers, but they're one of the few that really gets it. They might only be in their mid-twenties, but they're happy to assure you their various, undiagnosed mental illnesses

have granted them a lifetime of experience, a wisdom beyond their years. If you can stand their wretched boasting long enough, they might ask you to come over to their musty studio apartment to smoke weed out of moldy bong and look through their record collection. They don't tend to share their poetry, but they trust you for some reason, would you like to read it? You notice a copy of *Infinite Jest* on their makeshift bookshelf, constructed of cinder blocks and planks of wood; yeah, I haven't read it, they'll tell you, I'm waiting for the right time.

In an effort to compartmentalize my self-consciousness, to use it as a tool for art making, I attempted to lean into the behaviors I feared people already thought about me. I adopted a persona, gave him the moniker gifted to me: Sadboyfuck. He'd come about during those times in the studio where painting felt like a drag. I'd set up a camera and let him takeover. Sometimes he'd mosey outside and have a smoke, uttering a monologue of cringeworthy honesty. Other times he'd just like to sing a song. Most often, he'd come up with fatuous tasks to perform, motivated by childlike boredom. Many of them were poor efforts in slapstick. He wasn't above hurting himself for the pleasure of the camera. These borderline dangerous enactments would be repeated so many times or would drag on so long they would be drained of their humor. The first time someone falls on their face it's funny, if they keep doing so over and over again, unable to learn from their misjudgments, the farce becomes grueling. Sadboyfuck's pathetic temperament is meant to provoke equal parts repentant humor and empathic embarrassment; a feeling comparable to watching a small child deliver a horrible performance at a school talent show. If the observer has an urge to laugh, hopefully they feel a little guilty about it.

\* \* \* \* \*



*sadboyfuck*. 2019. Single channel video, 22:47.

I light a cigarette and tell the camera I was recently at a wedding. I'm leaned against a brick wall, my face is blanketed in shade, my expression only apparent when lit by the glare of my cigarette. It is late in the night. I'm wearing a denim shirt. I tell the camera I was embarrassed to tell people how I've been spending my time. The video cuts away from the monologue and plays an example of how I've been spending my time. I set up a row up of one-gallon paint buckets and walk across them slowly, like a tightrope. I fall several times. I do this for about ten minutes. After a rather harsh fall I give up and change my shoes. Cowboys tend to have a lot of pride, I tell the camera. A cut to a shot of a bucket and my paint covered boot. I kick the bucket around for a few minutes. I was really embarrassed, I say, like I know something they don't, like we don't have that much in common. I take a drag of my cigarette. A cut to a pristine white space, a yellow trash can in the center of the frame. A sequence of shots where I dive headfirst into the trashcan. Some of them I land hard on the ground, others I get stuck in the can and flail



my spindly legs about before falling. I thought I looked good in a suit, I say, I've never seen you wear a suit, I really did look pretty damn good in that suit. Taste is selfish, but it still matters to me. I really do love my friends. I take a long drag of my cigarette. It was a beautiful ceremony, and I had sunglasses on. I had sunglasses I say, after rubbing my eyes. I spend eight minutes wiping up a puddle of water I'd spilt on the floor. It cuts to a shot of my face, now in the daytime, facing away from the camera, though I'm wearing the same denim shirt. A box of Marlboro reds pokes out of my shirt pocket. I light a cigarette and attempt to sing a portion of the cowboy folk song of dubious origin, "Red River Valley."

So come sit by my side if you love me  
Do not hasten to bid me adieu  
Just remember the Red River Valley  
And the cowboy that's loved you so true.<sup>xxii</sup>

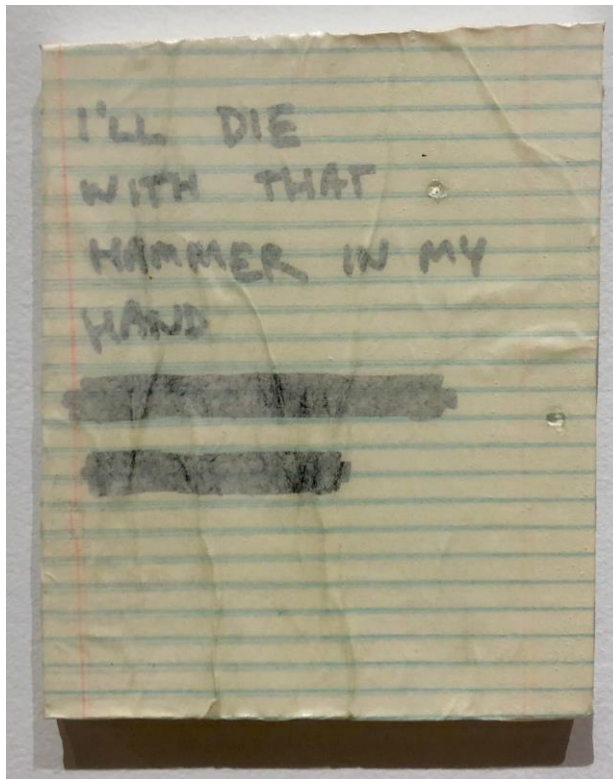


*sadboyfuck*. 2019. Single channel video, 22:47.

\* \* \* \* \*

Over time the goal of Sadboyfuck veered harshly from its original intentions. He wandered free of them for a period. He became a headspace for me to enter where I could do things I wouldn't normally have either the ignorance and/or guts to do. I tried to push him to be a guileless performer, to perform without considering expectation. A phrase I've uttered repeatedly: I had to do it before I thought about how stupid it was. He became like a child, with that came an adolescent wannabehood; overt mimicry of his heroes. He tried to sing like Lou Reed and he called himself a cowboy and he acted out crummy, dewy-eyed homages to Bruce Nauman. His derisive yearning to be like his idols, yielded for me an acceptance of the pointlessness of trying to be original.

\* \* \* \* \*



*Do engines get rewarded for their steam Or the Boy Shapes the Tool Shapes the Boy. 2019.*

Mixed media on notebook paper on polystyrene board, 8.5" x 6.75"

I'm sitting on the floor. At my feet is a stack of notebook paper paintings. I feel I'm on a raft, moving slowly down a river. The water is no longer choppy and the foliage on the banks that canopied the channel not so far back have given way. The sun beams on the water. There's a bend coming up in the river. I look through the stack of paintings. I fixate for a second on one I particularly enjoy, with a lyric from Johnny Cash inscribed on it: *I'll die with that hammer in my hand*. The following lyric has been crossed out: *But I'll be laughing*. A characteristic I feel each of them share is that they aim to call attention themselves, they beg to be seen. They wear their

anxiety, nostalgia, and occasionally irony, on their sleeves. I've found a state of comfort in making them, they feel effortless, and I don't necessarily mean either of those things in a positive way. The water is no longer choppy. I do not mean to say I have no pride in them or that I did not learn from them. But I find it can be easy to dig yourself a rut trying to flex the same group of ideas over and over. On some days I have no ideas; on these days I rehash the ideas I had the day before, or the day before that. I cock my head back so that my chin faces the ceiling. I let out a deep sigh. It is raining something dreadful outside. It is late in the evening; the studio is hauntingly still. If I were to cough, it would reverberate through every nook and crevice of the building. I kick aside some of the debris scattered about the floor to clear myself some space. I toss the stack of paintings in a drawer of my filing cabinet. I feel myself coming into a feverish state. There's a bend coming up in the river. I'm going to make a big painting and it's not going to be anything, I tell myself. I put in my headphones and play "Sister Ray" by the Velvet Underground; there is no song that better accompanies delirium.

I'm on my hands and knees. My sleeves are rolled up to my elbows. I have a metal bench scraper in my right hand. I'm knelt over a four-foot by four-foot piece of off-white burlap. To the side of the burlap is a one-gallon bucket, filled with roughly ten ounces of watered-down paint. The paint is a caliginous grey-pink, like one of those exceptional Midwest nightfalls just after the sun has dipped down and the soft pink edges of the horizon are giving in to the night. The paints are of different viscosities so they will begin to separate if not constantly mixed. I grab the bucket and pour a bulk of the paint onto the burlap. I use the bench scraper to spread the paint across the surface of the burlap, intermittently hopping to my feet to relocate myself and give my knees a respite from the concrete floor. I'm sure to take the time to dance about to the music crooning in my ear. I'm not much of a dancer, but when the curtain is down and I can kick my

legs round the room, I'm not too fussy about how good my shimmy is. I return to a kneel and resume the frenzied scraping. It's a fiercely repetitive action. I am under the charm of a cathartic rage. I scrape the paint to a pool in the center of the burlap and watch it slowly spread out. I scrape it back to the center and let it spread again. The paint thickens as it dries. It's now at the point where I've negotiated all I can with this paint, I now have to allow it to settle upon its own configuration. I bounce to my feet and toss the bench scraper to the ground and walk away, I have to slow down before I fuck this up, I think to myself. I head to the window to watch the rain come down.

As Lou and the Velvets belt away in my ear I whisper along between my clinched teeth. "I'm searching for my mainline / I said I couldn't hit it sideways / I couldn't hit it sideways / Oh, just like Sister Ray said / Play on."<sup>xxiii</sup> I leave to window to play on. I'm pacing about, I'm putting myself through my paces. I'm wobbling to and fro the hallway outside my studio, walking in an exaggerated manner. I head in to inspect the painting. There are several inches on each side between the edges of the burlap and the boundaries of the blob form the paint has settled on. For a moment I lay my body across the painting. A joke I often tell myself: if I lay with the painting it will tell me secrets. It will tell me what it needs. I grab a bucket of black gesso and the bench scraper and kneel at the painting's edges. I scrape gesso onto the surface, filling in the space between the peripheries. The blob form begins to lose its indecisive borders, mutating to a more resolute, unyielding shape. Giving the form some rigidity was fueled by much of a conscious intent; it seemed to be what the painting told me it needed, my arms were just behaving at the painting's behest. I lie down on the concrete floor and bring my knees to my chest. I roll around the floor like a turtle on its back, debris under my back, hoping not to spill any of the cups of paint scattered throughout the room. I roll over an empty beer can and it

crumples under my weight. In pain, I let out a grunt. I'm not sure why I did that, I say aloud. "Sister Ray" is drawing near its conclusion.

Amidst my rolling a member of the debris catches my eye; a red and blue plaid shirt my mother had spilled bleach on and given to me, saying, I figured you might wear this, or maybe you could paint with it. I corral it and rip two long strands from the torso of the shirt. I lie there motionless waiting for the gesso to dry. If I lie still long enough, the lights will go out and I can imagine I am elsewhere. After a minute or so I crawl towards the painting, scraps of plaid in hand. I heap some matte medium onto the interior shape. I set down the strips, lining up their ends with the edges of the pink-grey form. "Sister Ray" has just ended. I am in not a mindful enough state to have a next song in mind, but fortunately the tune that comes on fits the mood; the Stooges' "Real Cool Time." I take the bench scraper and run it across the plaid fabric to remove the excess matte medium, so that it sits flush with the surface of the burlap. I scrape at the painting until the matte medium has dried, the plaid is bound to the burlap. I climb to my feet and hover over the painting with my hands in my pockets. The Stooges song ends and I remove my headphones from my ears. I catch myself reckoning: that painting ain't so bad. The rain has come to a halt, so I throw on my jacket and head out for a smoke.



*Real Cool Time*. 2020. Acrylic and fabric on burlap, 40" x 36"

\* \* \* \* \*

I'm seated at the bar in a dimly lit, unpretentious dive. I order a shot of whiskey hoping it will calm my nerves. My stomach is in knots. I'm not sure I'm going to be able to get up there, I think to myself, I'm going to fuck this whole thing up. I toss back the whiskey and shiver to my feet. With my head down, I slowly approach the side of the stage where my guitar sits. I remove it from its case. I throw the strap over my shoulder and loosen it a bit. Seated on a wobbly,

wooden stool, I greet the crowd and doublecheck the tuning on my guitar. I tell them I will I play a couple of songs. My voice cracked, palms clammy, wrists aquiver. I had a hell of a time handling my guitar. Even in figment I'm encumbered by stage fright.

.

\* \* \* \* \*

*I fashioned for myself a fucking mess of paintings  
And the handful of people who caught them  
Said things like "woah" and "nice job"  
In the end I was bored  
And the whole time  
Saddled with artless fancies  
I just wanted to be  
A goddamn rock and roll singer  
Well, I wanted to be a painter too  
And I was  
But I didn't feel like it  
And maybe if I was Lou Reed  
I wouldn't feel like it either*

---

<sup>i</sup> The Velvet Underground. "Pale Blue Eyes", November 1968, track 4 on *The Velvet Underground*, MGM, 1969.

<sup>ii</sup> The Velvet Underground. "Pale Blue Eyes", 1969.

<sup>iii</sup> Hell, Richard. "The Velvet Underground vs. The Rolling Stones," in *Massive Pissed Love: Nonfiction 2001-2014*. (Berkeley, CA: Soft Skull Press, 2015), 14.

<sup>iv</sup> The Velvet Underground. "Some Kinda Love", November 1968, track 5 on *The Velvet Underground*, MGM, 1969.

<sup>v</sup> The Velvet Underground. "Some Kinda Love", 1969.

<sup>vi</sup> Hell. *Massive Pissed Love*. 15.



- 
- vii Reed, Lou. *Do Angels Need Haircuts?*. Second edition (New York: Anthology Editions, 2018), 17.
- viii Halley, Peter. "Abstraction and Culture", in *Abstraction*. Whitechapel: Documents of Contemporary Art (London: Whitechapel Gallery, 2013). 141.
- ix Benjamin, Walter. "The Flâneur", in *The Arcades Project*. 1st paperback ed (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002). 416.
- x Beard, Thomas. "Back in the Saddle," in *Bruce Nauman: Disappearing Acts*. (New York, NY: Laurenz Foundation, Schaulager, and The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2018), 199-203.
- xi Beard. "Back in the Saddle," in *Bruce Nauman: Disappearing Acts*. 200.
- xii Beckett, Samuel. *The Selected Works of Samuel Beckett: Poems, Short Fiction, Criticism, Vol. IV*. ed. Paul Auster, 1st Grove Press ed (New York: Grove Press, 2010), 9.
- xiii Beard. "Back in the Saddle," in *Bruce Nauman: Disappearing Acts*, 200.
- xiv The Stooges. "No Fun", April 1969, track 4 from *The Stooges*, Elektra, 1969.
- xv Cash, Johnny. "The Legend of John Henry's Hammer", January 13, 1968, track 21 on *Live At Folsom Prison – Legacy Edition*, Columbia, 2008.
- xvi Martin, Agnes. *Agnes Martin: Writings*. ed. Dieter Schwarz, 6. Aufl (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz [u.a.], 2005), 40.
- xvii Pasolini, Pier Paolo. *The Selected Poetry of Pier Paolo Pasolini*. trans. Stephen Sartarelli, A Bilingual Edition (Chicago ; London: The University of Chicago Press, 2014), 77.
- xviii Landers, Sean. *93% Sincere*, Single channel video, 2:02:28.
- xix Evans, Simon. "Simon Evans Puts Five Questions to Sean Landers," *Modern Painters* 21, no. 1 (February 2009): 96. <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=brb&AN=505387665&site=ehost-live&scope=site>
- xx Evans. "Simon Evans Puts Five Questions to Sean Landers."
- xxi Cohen, Leonard. *Book of Longing*. (New York: Ecco, 2006), 67.
- xxii Robbins, Marty. "Red River Valley", 1960, track 6 on *More Greatest Hits*, Columbia, 1961.
- xxiii The Velvet Underground. "Sister Ray", September 1967, track 6 from *White Light/White Heat*, Verve, 1968.

## Bibliography

Beard, Thomas. "Back in the Saddle," in *Bruce Nauman: Disappearing Acts*. (New York, NY: Laurenz Foundation, Schaulager, and The Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2018), 199-203.

Beckett, Samuel. *The Selected Works of Samuel Beckett: Poems, Short Fiction, Criticism, Vol. IV*. ed. Paul Auster, 1st Grove Press ed (New York: Grove Press, 2010).

Benjamin, Walter. "The Flâneur", in *The Arcades Project*. 1st paperback ed (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 2002). 416-455.

Cash, Johnny. "The Legend of John Henry's Hammer", January 13, 1968, track 21 on *Live At Folsom Prison – Legacy Edition*, Columbia, 2008.

Cohen, Leonard. *Book of Longing*. (New York: Ecco, 2006).

Evans, Simon. "Simon Evans Puts Five Questions to Sean Landers," *Modern Painters* 21, no. 1 (February 2009): 96. <http://search.ebscohost.com/login.aspx?direct=true&db=brb&AN=55387665&site=ehot-live&scope=site>

Halley, Peter. "Abstraction and Culture", in *Abstraction*. Whitechapel: Documents of Contemporary Art (London: Whitechapel Gallery, 2013). 137-142.

Hell, Richard. "The Velvet Underground vs. The Rolling Stones," in *Massive Pissed Love: Nonfiction 2001-2014*. (Berkeley, CA: Soft Skull Press, 2015), 13-29.

Landers, Sean. *93% Sincere*. Single channel video, 2:02:28.

Martin, Agnes. *Agnes Martin: Writings*. ed. Dieter Schwarz, 6. Aufl (Ostfildern-Ruit: Hatje Cantz [u.a.], 2005).

Pasolini, Pier Paolo. *The Selected Poetry of Pier Paolo Pasolini*. trans. Stephen Sartarelli, A Bilingual Edition (Chicago ; London: The University of Chicago Press, 2014).

Reed, Lou. *Do Angels Need Haircuts?*. Second edition (New York: Anthology Editions, 2018).

Robbins, Marty. “Red River Valley”, 1960, track 6 on *More Greatest Hits*, Columbia, 1961.

The Stooges. “No Fun”, April 1969, track 4 from *The Stooges*, Elektra, 1969.

The Velvet Underground. “Pale Blue Eyes”, November 1968, track 4 on *The Velvet Underground*, MGM, 1969.

The Velvet Underground. “Some Kinda Love”, November 1968, track 5 on *The Velvet Underground*, MGM, 1969.

The Velvet Underground, “Sister Ray”, September 1967, track 6 from *White Light/White Heat*, Verve, 1968