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Goin' Down Swinging: Queer Fury

Mad Green

g.mad@wustl.edu

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Goin' Down Swinging: Queer Fury
by Mad Green

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

Chair, Master of Fine Arts in Visual Art Program
Lisa Bulawsky

Thesis Text Advisor
Amy Hautt

Faculty Mentor
Jamie Adams

Graduate Committee Member
Cheryl Wassenaar

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Meghan Kirkwood

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I am a Fighter, a Dyke, an Artist.

As a Queer artist working in drawing, printmaking, photography, video, performance, sculpture, and now social practice, I investigate my relationship with the violence I inherited from my father while trying to find space for tenderness and community. My practice has always been deeply embedded with my personal story as I constantly dissect my narrative, sifting through memories to try and understand them. Everything is a self-portrait; the drawings of myself as a child and adult, the video of my hands wrapping themselves up for a fight, the five Etch-A-Sketches reiterating the insults I heard over and over from my father (fig 1). My work provides insights into aspects of my identity that are otherwise enigmatic.



Figure 1: Mad Green, *Constructive Criticism for a Developing Mind*, five Etch-A-Sketches, installation size varies, 2022.

When creating a piece, my ideas spawn from a memory, a feeling, sometimes a smell, which is then visualized through a drawing (fig. 2). These drawings then find life through varying materials and forms—deconstructed boxing gloves, newspapers, found fabrics, wood, video, audio, action—translations of my experiences. My artistic foundations are in painting and drawing, so I often find myself trying to add endless details to an art piece to support my ideas. But, as I have moved away from illustrative work, I parse out the details and let my viewers

understand the meaning of the work for themselves. It is a constant give and take with materials and ideas, figuring out which detail is too much, and which deserves to stay.

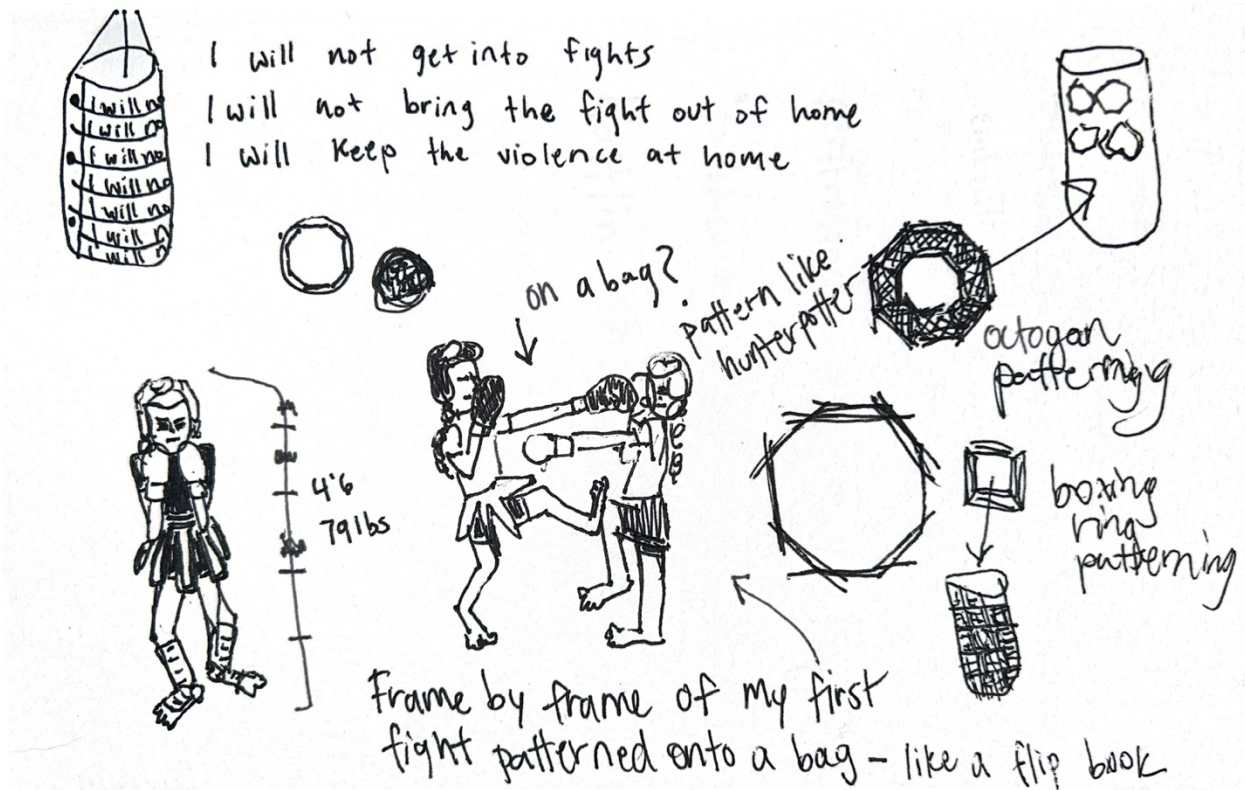


Figure 2: Mad Green, Sketchbook scan, 2023.

After years of avoiding it, kickboxing finally broke into my artwork in 2022. I spent a year digging into my past, my father's career, and how these affected my worldview. The emotional and physical labor I put into these artworks allowed me to understand I needed to fight for the sake of my Queerness. My personal journey had turned into an urge for community, to turn my artistic lens outward and combine it with my activist values. Making work solely about myself was no longer adequate as my rage boiled to the surface.

SB 728: (Andrew Koenig) Aims to create the “Parents’ Bill of Rights Act of 2024,” which includes requiring teachers to forcefully out students who share that they are LGBTQ+ or request a pronoun change-- within 24 hours. Teachers and school counselors can face charges of incompetence, immorality, and neglect of duty if they fail to follow this rule.

HB 2308: (Adam Schnelting) Aims to define the terms “sex,” “male,” and “female” within the Missouri Human Rights Act as a strict binary.

HB 2309: (Adam Schnelting) This bill establishes the "Defining SEX Act" and provides statutory definitions of the terms "boy", "father", "female", "girl", "male", "man", "mother", "sex", and "woman". This bill also specifies that "gender", when used alone and to refer to males, females, or the natural differences between the two, shall be considered a synonym for "sex", and shall not be considered a synonym or shorthand expression for "gender identity", "experienced gender", "gender expression", or "gender role". "Gender identity", if the term is used in state law, administrative rules, or guidelines, shall not be considered a synonym or substitute for "sex" or "gender".

HB 1674: (Mark Matthiesen) Requires employers to force their employees to use restrooms and locker rooms based on their assigned sex from birth despite their gender identity.

HB 2357 (Chris Lonsdale) & 2355 (Ben Baker): Requires students to use restrooms based on their assigned sex from birth despite their gender identity.

HB 1519: (Brad Hudson) prohibits any health care institution or professional from being required to perform or participate in any medical procedures related to sex reassignment surgery or gender identity transitioning if such procedures are contrary to the institution's or professional's moral, ethical, or religious beliefs.

HB 1520: (Brad Hudson) Removes the sunset and grandfather clause in the gender-affirming healthcare ban that was put into place in 2023 (SB49).

HB 1405: (Hardy Billington) No employee or independent contractor shall knowingly address, identity, or refer to a student by pronouns that are different from the pronouns that align with such students’ biological sex unless the public school or school board receives written permission from the student’s parent. No public school or school board shall require an employee or independent contractor to address, identify, or refer to an individual by pronouns that are different from the pronouns that align with such individual's biological sex if such usage is contrary to such employee’s religious or moral convictions

HB 1981: (Jamie Burger) No [schools] shall allow any student to compete in an athletics competition that is designated for the biological sex opposite to the student’s biological sex as correctly stated on the student’s official birth certificate.¹

These ten bills have been proposed since January 1st, 2024, in my home state of Missouri. ¹ Midwestern Queers are disappointed. We are devastated. More than that, we are so fucking angry. My social practice project, *Queer Fight Club* is a direct response to the dystopic reality of being Queer in Missouri. We deserve a safe space to release the anger that has been festering inside of us, for some, all our lives. I have seen the violence of homophobia too closely and have had too many occurrences in too few years. This, in addition to the fear I felt in my childhood became too much to bear—I yearned for a healthy coping mechanism. I was looking for a place to complain about these things where I was not met with pity but matched with the same level of outrage. *How dare they?* That is what I wanted to hear. More so, I do not want to be the only Queer I know who can throw a punch, who has the skill to back up the anger fuming from our mouths. This is how it began.

¹ As of February 28th, 2024.

Part One

Fight

On February 7th, 2024, Nex Benedict, a 16-year-old non-binary high school student, was jumped by three girls in the bathroom at school in Oklahoma. The next day, they died by suicide. “The bullying had started in earnest at the beginning of the 2023 school year, a few months after Oklahoma governor Kevin Stitt signed a bill that required public school students to use bathrooms that matched the sex listed on their birth certificates. [...] Nex was a straight-A student who enjoyed drawing, reading, playing video games, and was devoted to their cat Zeus” This is why we fight.

-The Independent²

We cannot allow our fear of anger to deflect us nor seduce us into settling for anything less than the hard work of excavating honesty; we must be quite serious about the choice of this topic and the angers entwined within it because, rest assured, our opponents are quite serious about their hatred of us and of what we are trying to do here.

-Audre Lorde³

Every Sunday, I host two kickboxing classes where straight people are not allowed. As a Queer raised by a bigoted mixed martial artist, I had never experienced a space that accepted both violence and Queerness. The two are basically antonyms. Growing up as a small Dyke who did not know what they were, I was surrounded by men who tossed slurs at my future community while embracing one another after a devastating fight. The dichotomy and dissonance were confusing and relentless. Now, as an enraged adult, I have difficulty finding ways to release my anger while trying to build a safe, Queer community. This type of space does not seem to exist, at least not in the Midwest where Trans women of color are murdered at an incredibly high rate and no day passes without a new legislative proposal to strip another of the few rights we do have. So, I set out to create it. By passing on my expertise to other Queers, I hope we can begin to fight against homo-and transphobia in the most literal way possible; by learning how to knock someone out.

When I started hosting *Queer Fight Club (QFC)*, I interviewed everyone to understand why they were there and what they hoped to accomplish. On camera, my first question was why were they sitting in front of me: What brought them to *Queer Fight Club*? The most obvious answer was an urge to learn how to fight or defend oneself. Other participants said:

“With increases in anti Queer violence, knowing how to fight is extremely important.”

“There were times when being able to defend myself could have gotten me out of something, and I want to be able to do that for myself and my friends.”

There also was a need for Queer community. Our members who are local expressed how hard it can be finding a group of Queers in Missouri. Many of the fighters explained that they were also hoping to find a better connection with their body, as many of us have a strained relationship

with the ways our bodies present themselves, and some of us with disabilities have an even harder time with what is happening within our bones and muscles. I asked questions: Do you feel safe in your body? The most common answer was, no, not most of the time. Can you trust your body? Again, not really. Do you feel the need to be protective of yourself? Yes, across the board. Some people responded at length, describing recent encounters like being mugged or being made to feel small in public. Some people kept it short, trying not to open themselves up too much. One commonality was everyone seemed excited about being in a Queer space that centered on movement and physicality (fig. 3).



Figure 3: Queer Fight Club, Group photo from class, January 2024.

In her introduction to *Participation* (2006), Claire Bishop suggests multiple definitions and approaches to socially engaged artwork. She describes two common approaches:

[one,] an authored tradition that seeks to provoke participants, and [two] a de-authored lineage that aims to embrace collective creativity; one is disruptive and interventionist, the other constructive and ameliorative. In both instances, the issue of participation becomes increasingly inextricable from the question of political commitment.⁴

Queer Fight Club is a mix of these two approaches. We aim to provoke, both each other and our aggressors. We want to bring the anger out of each other and give it to others. Simultaneously, *QFC* is about how we take care of and inspire each other. As Bishop says, both aspects of our collective effort are a part of our political motivation. Our rage and tenderness work together to uplift our community members in the face of inequality.

Bishop goes on to discuss the distinction between social practice artwork and other disciplines like performance art:

Although the photographic documentation of these projects implies a relationship to performance art, they differ in striving to collapse the distinction between performer and audience, professional and amateur, production and reception. Their emphasis is on collaboration, and the collective dimension of social experience.⁵

The goal of *Queer Fight Club* is and has been to provide agency to Queer people. My definitions of social practice put the participants at the forefront. While I am in a position of leadership amongst the group, the role of the participants shifts the focus from myself back onto the community at large. I want to share my expertise to create a more socially engaged community that shares experiences, takes care of each other, and collaborates in both artmaking and self-defense.

Eight months into this journey, I have realized I could not have predicted the profound impact *QFC* has had on me and our cultivated community. This was especially notable during a period when we were without a space to train. We continued to meet up, discuss, plan, and laugh over breakfast at my house, a night in my studio, or a coffee around town. Through a creative workshop I led, members of *Queer Fight Club* created a community manifesto, both in writing and audio recordings, where all their voices were heard and empowered. I invited them to delve into what this community means to them, what their anger, body, and energy mean to them. In this audio piece, I felt as though this group of people transcended from students to creators and collaborators in our artistic and social endeavors. Previously, I had invited them into artmaking more casually, but here they were able to take full control of the narrative, in how they were represented, in how our group would be introduced into the world. I asked the participants to make three lists regarding the fight club: “I believe,” “I know this to be true,” and “I want.” Here are some of their answers:

“I want straight people to feel scared, uncomfortable, or to at least know we are around every corner.”

“I believe in the power of our bodies.”

“I believe there is more love here than we know. We can fight for each other. I believe this is fucking serious, and it is so fun. It is both of these things simultaneously.”

“I want to break free. I believe that once you break norms, keep fucking going.”

“I believe in punching things for fun, and punching things that deserve it.”

“I want to get angry, to say how dare you?”

“To be openly Queer is to be incredibly strong and resilient, it requires one to learn and grow capacity for deeper love and compassion for oneself and others.”



Figure 4: Mad Green, *Tad and Izzi (QFC)*, Black and white 35mm film photograph, 2023.

The name *Queer Fight Club* was inspired by the gym my dad created called Southside Fight Club. I spent hours in this gym, training, coaching, and cleaning. Southside Fight Club is a cluster of memories, both exciting and awful. In 2011, when I was 12 years old, it was also a central topic of an article written about me in a local magazine, *The Riverfront Times*. The article was supposed to be about my journey as a young fighter being trained by my dad, but instead, it was just a soapbox for him to talk about his struggles as a single father. The journalist asked me questions I was not prepared for, and it felt way too personal to share with the entire city. But they ran it. As I have come into adulthood and better understood the things that happened to me, I realized how much I hate this article.

In my performance piece, *Sparring with My Memories* (2023) (fig. 5), I glued the last physical copy I had of this article onto a standing punching bag—after adding some of my own edits to correct the fallacies—and beat the shit out of it for 15 minutes. In the video documentation, the blue punching bag, skinned in old newspaper, sits at center frame. It’s a close shot, cutting off the top of the bag and only allowing parts of my body to be seen as they hit the bag in front of a white wall. The sounds of the blows echo in the room, booming after every hit. The bag itself wobbles and re-positions in reaction to each punch or kick. As the newsprint begins to rip, it hangs and waves loosely while the bag finds its balance. When the bag shifts to the right, more of my body is revealed as I move with it. I am wearing a black hoodie and blue shorts, with green wraps on my hands. At multiple points, I kick the bag completely over and pick it back up to begin again. My breathing increases as my face reddens. The bag continues to rip.



Figure 5: Mad Green, still from video documentation of *Sparring with My Memories*, 2023

By physically destroying this article I am showing the power of physical rage, the action of protecting and avenging the spirit that this article tried to destroy. Through this therapeutic use of violence, I express the power of my anger while simultaneously releasing it. The content of the piece, the article itself, is evidence of the harsh path that brought me to where I am. I fought with this piece for years, and I was finally able to win.



Figure 6: Cassils. Documentation of *Becoming an Image*, performance piece, 2012-

Sparring with My Memories was heavily inspired by Cassils' performance piece *Becoming an Image* (2012-) (fig. 6), in which they enact violence on a 2,000-pound slab of clay in total darkness. As the performance is reimagined and performed in new spaces, the details of the movement always change. They are illuminated only by the flash of a male photographer's

camera. Through physical expression, Cassils leaves a lasting imprint in the clay through their punches, kicks, elbows, and various blows. Without the need for words, Cassils translates their emotions and frustrations, sharing them with the audience with each flash of the camera. In addition to the photographs, a version of the 2,000-pound slab of clay has been exhibited as evidence of the performance.

This project channels so many things at once: misogyny, anger, violence, gender, and who gets to tell Queer stories. This was inspiring as I thought about the mis-telling of my own story by a male journalist, by my father, and about how to functionalize that rage. Like Cassils, without providing any context to the viewer, my emotions can be read through *Sparring with My Memories*, both the video documentation and the object left over. My facial expressions and the passion behind my punches translate into resentment towards whatever is pasted on the bag during the documentation. The edits and destroyed newsprints demonstrate an attack or disagreement between a person and a physical object. Releasing this anger through artistic means allows for a deep self-reflection that could not be found in other outlets, like a real fight or a private kickboxing session. Being alone was private enough, but documenting this act allowed for it to be shared, furthering its power. By sharing this artwork, and I believe the same goes for Cassils' piece, we are saying it is okay for Queer people to be angry, and violent, and that these emotions need to be shared. While *Sparring with My Memories* is very specific to my experience, I believe that the specificity is what allows others to connect. Anyone who feels used by their parents, or misrepresented, or belittled, or regretful, or just feels angry, can connect to this piece.



Figure 7: Mad Green, still from *Untitled (Hand Wraps)*, 10:56, 2022.

Another piece that led to the creation of *Queer Fight Club* is a 10-minute video from 2022, *Untitled (Hand Wraps)* (fig. 7). This piece was the beginning of my work on kickboxing as I dove into what it meant for me as a child. The video begins silently as I remove my rings and bracelet atop a floral tablecloth and roll gauze into little bundles. The audio starts as I place one of the pads on my fist. Overlaying the video is an interview of me shot when I was 11 years old, just before my first fight. My voice is shy as I stutter over my accolades: karate tournaments and ju-jitsu trophies. In frame, I am wrapping gauze around my hands. Next, an interview of my dad begins as he describes how I began at such a young age because of his influence. Then, another audio interview of myself plays, hyping up another fight. As I say my name, my hands are fully wrapped. The final audio is from the crowd at one of my dad's fights. As it begins, I cut into the hand wraps I have just finished. As I remove the wraps, the audio declares Green the winner.

This piece was a pivotal moment in my artistic practice as I finally allowed myself to make work about the most prominent feature of my adolescence. For the longest time, a part of me would not allow this subject to come up, but this project was a deep dive into my history in relation to my father. By dismantling the interviews and memories through this project, I was finally able to separate myself from him.

I have quite literally been fighting my entire life. At home, in school, and in a cage before hundreds of fans. But Queers have been fighting much longer than I have, way before I existed. Marsha P. Johnson was not withholding any anger at Stonewall,⁶ the members of ACTUP were not keeping things friendly when they covered Jesse Helm's home in a condom,⁷ and the Trans women who beat the shit out of the cops at Compton's Cafeteria were fed the fuck up.⁸ If I am being honest, we have kind of lost our spunk. We should not be content with what we have, and we can't forget how we got here. How can I be joyous about marriage when the state wants to legally erase me? How can I be content when children are prosecuted and murdered over which toilet they use? I want more angry Queers. Anger is not something to run away from, quite the opposite. Queer people need to lean into their rage because the fight is not over, the next round is just beginning, and we better be ready.

Interlude

The Ring

Goin' Down Swinging (2024) (fig. 8) is inspired by months of community building through *Queer Fight Club* and aims to communicate the rage that our collective deals with daily. I built a 6ft-by-10ft-by-10ft boxing ring—scaled at half regulation size—to bring the DIY gym space into the gallery. The worn stairs list the rules and invite the viewer to duck under the ropes and enter the ring. The base is exposed wood and hardware, emphasizing the structure and solidity of the ring, the foundation upon which *QFC* has been built. On each corner is a four-foot-tall wooden post that are covered with rub-on transferred drawings. The posts are connected to each other by three rows of black rope. Covering the floor is a canvas inscribed with text notating a path for the viewer to follow. On the wall, a monitor is playing a text-based video accompanied by the sounds of the viewers maneuvering the ring. By inviting the viewer into the ring, they are transported to a gym space that encourages emotional release and elevated onto a stage that echoes the feelings of Queers.

As the viewer approaches the piece, they are invited to take off their shoes and part the ropes two at a time, ducking into the ring. Once inside, the viewer faces our community manifesto playing from the monitor, each sentence lingering before moving to the next. They may catch one sentence or all of them, but each statement demonstrates our collective rage and asserts our need for community. The manifesto was collaboratively created with 10 members of *QFC* to emphasize the emotions brought up by our training. The fighters' words in text reveal a level of urgency. Their words embody the collective rather than the individual. As the viewer faces the screen, they confront the entire group's feelings and demands; instead of facing just one of our members, they are met by all of us. When the viewer looks away from the screen, they encounter additional text on the floor: a long sentence describing the connection built by *QFC* between

each member and within ourselves. As the viewer follows the floor text they trace the movement of a fighter in the ring, beginning in the corner, moving out to the center, and then circling the ring to all four corners. As the viewer moves to the corners of the ring, they will notice the subtle drawings on each of the posts. These drawings recollect moments from my life in which I was physically threatened by homo- or transphobia.



Figure 8: Mad Green, *Goin' Down Swinging*, multimedia installation including video, 2024.

I have spent more time on *Goin' Down Swinging* than on any other project of my career. I fought with this piece, trying to capture an essence without simply demonstrating *QFC*, because this piece is not *Queer Fight Club*. It has been difficult to manifest this piece as mine while being

inspired by my community. Further, I wanted to protect the members of *Queer Fight Club*. While they did approve of the art that led to and resulted from this process, keeping our community to ourselves was a main point of it all. By adding details that echo past works and previous ways of artmaking, this project has become more personal than I expected. It intuitively just happened. I began by reusing the same shade of pink that served as the title and credit background for my short film, *Is This Really Fucking Happening?* (2023). The drawings on all four posts speak to my love of the medium and my expressive mark-making. Adding these on the posts in contrast to the otherwise raw lumber of the base felt like I was taking notes from a former self. An expressive, painterly quality can also be found in the floor text, the surface of the staircase, and through the bold, graphic lines of the ropes.

After adding the ropes, it looked like a finished boxing ring, and I felt a deep sense of nostalgia and some pride. *Queer Fight Club* has been so healing for the parts of me that were traumatized by my time as a kickboxer, but making this ring a reality has done something similar that I did not expect. As a child and teen, I spent so much time with my dad, building and taking down boxing rings and cages before and after fights. I was so familiar with the ins and outs of this process, learning the mechanics of the arena from such a young age. Looking at the ring I have created for myself and thinking about its representation of my relationship with the sport created an unanticipated emotional impact for me.

During this process, I have thought a lot about accessibility and viewership. As I invite viewers to climb through the ropes, I realize that not everyone will physically be able to enter the ring. This separation between the viewers adds value to the piece in multiple ways. Firstly,

kickboxing, and most martial arts, are not accessible to everyone, both because of the atmosphere within the space and the physical requirements of the sport. As viewers enter the ring, they become performers, fighters. Those who stay on the outside of the ring remain viewers but in a more dynamic way, becoming spectators or fans. They are watching a performance while also being conscious of the way their body is unable to participate in the space. I have designed the ring so the floor text can be read from the outside of the ring, inviting viewers to navigate the exterior of the ring in a directed way. Further, the performers within the ring and the monitor are visually interrupted by the graphic lines of ropes bounding the ring.

With this piece, I give the viewer just enough of *QFC* so they can understand who and what we are, but not enough to know exactly what happens during *QFC*. While the piece is inspired by and in collaboration with my community, it is not an equivalent. Rather, it is an expression of our communal rage and discontent with how we are being treated by individuals on a personal level, and by the government at a societal level. When thinking about the audience, I consider specifically who will connect with it the most; and that is who the work is for. Queer audiences can share the feelings of rage and a yearning for community. While they may not understand everything, they will be damn close. The farther away my audiences get from the target, the less they will understand, and that is also the point, as it is simply not my job to educate. *Queer Fight Club*, and this piece explicitly, are not for everyone, and audiences will have to understand that.

The value beyond the ideal viewer lies within their personal relationship with Queerness.

Viewers who are not Queer can hopefully gain an understanding of the powers within us, the rage and violence, and the need for community. If they claim to be an ally, they will gain insight into our struggles. I hope that they think about their Queer friends and family, and I hope they

get angry with us. If they are homo- or transphobic, they may turn away, or even use our community as a scapegoat for their biases. These systemic and personal reactions to Queerness are usually based on a fear of difference or the unknown, but I hope that any bigoted remarks about this piece are rooted in the fear of a group of Queers trained to fight back.

End of Interlude

Part Two

Community and Care

“What made me feel ‘real’? When [my coach] tied my glove on for me or poured water in my mouth, or when I tripped over the jump rope and had to begin again. I felt real when I asked for help, when I failed, when I was myself.”⁹

Queer Fight Club is about connection: of oneself and their rage, of oneself and their body, and of the community we are cultivating together.

I was a stranger to vulnerability until I started making autobiographical artwork. When I was making paintings, it was a way for me to explore my figure, to become its friend. As I have developed as an artist, so too has my relationship with vulnerability. Through video, performance, and photography, I achieve vulnerability with my audience and myself through honesty, storytelling, humor, and my own body. By looking inward and creating work that can be emotionally taxing or cause self-realization, I find common truths for myself and, I hope, the viewer.



Figure 9: Mad Green, *Untitled (Self Portrait with Trans Tape)*, digital photo, 2023.

My piece, *Untitled (Self Portrait with Trans Tape)* (fig. 9), simultaneously invites viewers who align with my Trans identity while confronting transphobic audiences with the risk of empathy.

The photo was taken in a personal bathroom, with the door ajar to the right, a towel hanging from the back, and a cropped view of a shower to the left. In the middle of the frame, I stand shirtless, staring into the camera with a powerful posture. My figure is cropped from the top of my head to just below my breasts, obscuring the lower portion of my body. My hair is short and falling just atop my ears, with bleached ends and dark roots. My face is emotionless, with a frank gaze, and my mouth is in a bit of a frown. My left eyebrow is lifted, creating a sternness within my expression, almost a questioning gaze. My breasts are covered by beige-colored medical tape, hiding my nipples and the curvature of my breasts but revealing the rest of my chest. Two gold necklaces lay atop each other around my neck, a tighter one spelling out “ACAB” and the other holding a small, circular pendant that falls below my collarbone. A tattoo of Baubo, the Greek goddess of mirth, sits on my sternum. My figure is illuminated from the left, a natural light showcasing the redness of my skin, while also emphasizing the tonal differences read from left to right in the photo.

With this piece, I invite the viewer into my routine while also questioning their gaze. By locking eyes with the viewer, I tell them, “I see you looking at me, and I am looking right back at you.” As a Trans person, I constantly feel like I am being looked at and questioned for who I am, and I want those who are doing the looking to feel just as uncomfortable as I do. I am showcasing these rituals that I do not really want to do, as they are painful, time-consuming, and generally unpleasant, but I must do them to feel a connection to my chest and have confidence that people will perceive me the way I want them to. I hope non-Trans viewers can find some empathy for the battles we fight against our bodies. Body issues are not exclusive to Trans people, so hopefully some viewers will find a connection there. If you can connect with a Trans person, you are one step closer to seeing them for who they are. This piece also functions as a demonstration

of love for my community. It is a connection with others who must deal with their bodies in similar ways, or who wish for a gender euphoria that they have not felt before.



Figure 10: Mad Green, Screen grab from *Is This Really Fucking Happening?* 12:17, 2023.

In 2023, I wrote and directed a short film, *Is This Really Fucking Happening?* (fig. 10). The film follows my partner Olivia and I as we deal with an immaculate conception during an ongoing alien invasion. We must find an answer while sidestepping institutional homophobia and the removal of reproductive rights. Instead of telling the whole truth, this piece merged satirical fiction with aspects of my lived experience, by blending aliens and homophobia I was able to describe the feeling of being a Queer person with a vulva in Missouri in the most dramatic way possible. This film is about being Queer in a world that does not appreciate your existence. It is about how the female body is never believed in hospital settings, about how our pain and suffering are dismissed. Through this project, I depict the relationship Olivia and I share,

emphasizing our mutual support and care for one another. After viewing the film, a mentor said, “As a straight woman, if I came home pregnant, there is no way my partner would believe I didn’t cheat on him.” While writing the screenplay I did not even consider this, I was simply following how we truthfully treat each other in real life.

Alongside Olivia and numerous friends, both in and out of the art world, we made this 12-minute film in three months. This was the first time I worked collaboratively on a large project, and it changed my entire perspective on art making. While I love personal time in the studio, this film was created by many minds and is the better for it. As I was an actor in the film, I could not be behind the camera, but my crew helped bring my visuals to life while offering in-the-moment critiques and suggestions for a better shot or line of dialogue. It was written, shot, and edited collaboratively, starting the process with a group workshop for the screenplay, filming with many minds on set, and ending in late-night edits with Olivia. I could not have succeeded in this demanding endeavor without the help of my community, and this experience opened my eyes to the possibilities of collaborative practice, revealing how bonding an experience it is to create something with other people.

If I had not written this screenplay, I would not have created *Queer Fight Club*. Although the two are far from one another in thematic and aesthetic qualities, aside from the Queerness, the commonality between the two pieces is that I could never have done them alone. Without the support of the community through conversation, artmaking, and training, *QFC* would not exist. It works because people care and want to create something together.

Queer Fight Club began on September 10th, 2023, in a small, smelly gym in St. Louis County. I was nervous no one would show up, but between the two classes, 14 people came. In our first meeting, I started with a conversation about why we were all there. I described my history with martial arts to assure these strangers that I knew what I was doing, and I explained that my experiences with homo- and transphobia had led me here. We sat in a circle on the floor exchanging names, pronouns, and reasons for coming. We did not work out, but we got to know a little about each other. In the time between week one and week two, I put together a packet for all the members, kickboxing 101 full of terms and necessary supplies, and a schedule for the next 12 weeks.

In week two, we got to work. We began by wrapping our hands for protection. I led the group through the routine to which I am so accustomed—it's now how we start every class and a moment to recall our weeks and air our furies. I taught the class how to throw two punches, a basic one-two, and how to hold mitts for each other. This is also when I interviewed everyone, asking about their histories with violence and connections to their bodies. I began journaling after every session. From my journal after the second class on September 17th: “Reagan has never played sports, but after I helped them adjust their stance, they felt the difference and were getting excited about what their body is capable of. [...] I want to cultivate a space for emotional growth alongside physical preparedness.” At the end of the morning class, everyone in our group exchanged a hug and said how excited they were to come back the next Sunday.



Figure 11: Queer Fight Club, Screengrab from week two documentation (Abby and Joni), 2023.



Figure 12: Queer Fight Club, Screengrab from week three documentation (Sam and Maura), 2023.

Week three, from my journal: “It feels like we’re building a safe little Queer space for all of us. Everyone walks in with a huge smile and is so damn excited. I feel so much mutual respect when we’re all together.” In week three I taught everyone how to throw a hook, and this is where we began truly bonding. Because of the necessary movement from legs, hips, and arms all at once to successfully throw these punches, we must help one another and give each other the grace to learn. When I was able to tweak small movements during the punch, I could see it click for the fighters. One member, Joni, was especially expressive when she connected everything and landed a solid punch. She was visibly shocked by the power she harnessed. This was a shared experience for everyone involved. When we connect to our bodies in this way, we feel our power.

During week three, I believe the group connected, physically and emotionally. As we help each other, we become intimate. We touch each other gently on the hip to signify a stronger pivot, we pat each other on the back after a good round, we hold each other’s feet while we stretch, and we complain and share about our greatest struggles and petty strife while throwing punches at one another. In his memoir, *Amateur: A True Story About What Makes a Man* (2018), Thomas Page McBee discusses his journey to become the first Trans person to box in Madison Square Garden, and how this informed his transition to physical masculinity and defining his manhood. He says:

Boxing breaks many of the binaries about our bodies, our genders, ourselves. With its cover of ‘realness’ and violence, it provides room for what many men lack: tenderness, and touch, and vulnerability. The narratives we see about boxing matches always start at the ending: two guys in the ring, squaring off. The violence obscures the deeper story, the one about the fighters who see your biggest weakness and teach you how to turn it into an advantage.¹⁰

While my childhood in boxing was intertwined with nasty memories, most of the time fighting was joyful for me. My community was incredible, and I was able to become close with people I was also fighting. It was a strange dichotomy of love and violence wrapped into one experience. It was where I formed my deepest connections with others and with myself. I want to take my experiences and reform them for other Queer people to take and feel empowered. As McBee says, the deeper story is with the fighters who build each other up. In a red state like Missouri, Queer people need a crowd in their corners when the fight finally comes, and it always comes. I want to make sure my community is prepared and supported.

During October, our new community turned into a routine, something to look forward to each week. The fighters continued to show up ready to learn and connect, and I was rewiring my understanding of communal gym space, of kickboxing in general. I was getting over some of the shit I had been holding in since I was a kid. These journal excerpts describe my emotional processing throughout this month:

October 1st: “For my brain, I’m getting to reconnect fighting with something much more useful than my dad. I’m getting over some of the things that trigger me, while also getting to rewrite how my muscles feel about the memory of fighting. Instead of connecting this innate mind-body connection with pain, I’m able to push it outward as an act of service and sharing of knowledge.”

October 8th: “As emotionally important as this is, it’s just as physically important. I release so much when I’m [in *QFC*] and I feel so good, so proud to be able to teach everyone and watch them connect with themselves in new ways. It feels like I’m sharing something meaningful.”

October 15th: “I am just overjoyed by this experience. It was an idea and now it’s real and so much better than I could have imagined. I am starting to work out with them now and it’s so fun. I missed going through these motions, working, and sweating with other people. I couldn’t be happier.”



Figure 13: Queer Fight Club, *Combo #1* performance documentation, 2023.



Figure 14: Queer Fight Club, *Combo #1* Installation view, puzzle mats, found fabrics, chain, sawdust, polyfill, 12ft by 12 ft, various heights.

Unfortunately, in late November, 10 weeks into our club, the small, smelly gym we had started to call home lost its lease, and we were spaceless. While our last class at this gym was slightly somber, everyone was looking forward to the future. We laughed the most when the gym was empty, and the padded floor ripped out. Our community did not fade, we did not allow for lost time by hanging out and making art with one another. During this time, a few members and I created an art piece together utilizing the physicality of kickboxing. *Combo #1* (figs. 13 & 14) is a performance piece in which fighters and I did a class session atop the mats left behind from our first gym space with paint on our feet. As we worked out together, the paint tracked our movements with coordinated colors, emphasizing how often we moved around each other, following in each other's footsteps. In such a close space, sweating and breathing on each other, the painted footsteps highlight the intimacy we had while ridding our frustrations through physical means.

When we lost our gym space, I had a lot of trouble working in the studio. All I could think about was *Queer Fight Club*. While I knew this was an art project, I did not know what physical artwork, if any, would result from it. I was taking photos and documenting everything, more in hopes of making a short film about the entire experience. Then, I began drawing my fighters. It was the only thing on my mind when I thought about going to the studio, so I just kept translating photos and videos into drawings and prints, to see what would come. I shared these creations with my clubmates, and we started talking more about art when we were together. A majority of *QFC* are art students or creators of some sort, so it made sense to invite them into my studio and for us to collaborate on physical artwork.

Combo #1 was loosely inspired by Cassils' piece, *Etched in Light* (fig. 15), a performative, figurative cyanotype from 2023. This performance was a one-day event on Fire Island in which Cassils invited a group of Trans/gender non-conforming people to create a living cyanotype on the beach. People laid out in their own levels of nudity on top of a large piece of fabric under the sun to create the print, after which they washed it in the ocean and dried it in the wind. This piece coincides with the ideology surrounding *Queer Fight Club* in which we collectively create a piece of artwork with which we all feel a sense of ownership and pride. I want my collaborators to feel themselves more than participants, allowing them to feel as close to an artist or creator of work as possible. Further, as we train together, we get to know each other's comfort levels and even break through some of them, like the experience had by the participants of *Etched in Light*.



Figure 15: Cassils, *Etched in Light*, 2023. Obtained from: <https://boffo.art/event/cassils/>

When we finally did attain a new space, we did not miss a beat. In January of 2024, I secured a much better, more beautiful space within a local art building in St. Louis City, complete with a wooden floor and gigantic windows. On our first day back, we had a full class of 12 people working out together. Then, we invited newcomers. As of now, in April 2024, we have roughly 20 members who come in and out, with 10 present every week.

The structure of *Queer Fight Club* relates to Adrian Piper's *Notes on Funk I-IV* (1985), where she taught a group of people (majority white) the basics of funk music and dance, with the goal of everyone to:

Get down and party together. [...] To transmit and share a physical language that everyone was then empowered to use. By breaking down the basic movements into their essentials, these apparently difficult or complex patterns become easily accessible to everyone.¹¹

Piper's process of breaking down the musical and societal importance of Funk, which then led to physical expression through dance, has an interesting relationship to *Queer Fight Club*. It's different because its intended cause is to bond people through differences, to educate the oppressors (white folks) on the artistic qualities of funk to investigate racism and xenophobia. Conversely, *QFC* does not aim to build a bridge between Queers and straights, instead, it aims to point out that the bridge was set on fire before it was ever finished. We have no urge to educate straight people, to make them see us, and no intention of understanding them better ourselves. I follow Piper's footsteps in the ways I am coordinating the retrieval of a physical experience from inside the participants, to better understand oneself, and connect to a broader community. Further, as Piper is asking her white participants to connect with a type of movement that they feel detached from through the social obstacle of race, I am asking my Queer participants to

connect with a movement they have been taught to avoid by gendered and societal expectations of violence and anger. The act of kickboxing is inherently hypermasculine and performative, through gym culture, the bright lights around the ring, and the jeers from a rowdy crowd. While Queer people are often expected to be performative and creative, this type of physicality, this expression of rage, is not an experience we are encouraged to have.

Queer Fight Club has expanded my definitions of community and care by creating new ways of being there for other people while showing me old ways I had forgotten. Never have I felt so seen and understood until creating this safe space together. Every single week before starting class, we have community check-ins to share whatever we want and ask questions about how to help one another get through the next week successfully. On the first day of *QFC*, there was a common vulnerability within the group that served, initially, to bond us. As we continued to train and grow closer, we created the community we wanted. For the first time in my life, I can look around and see my community. With members of *Queer Fight Club*, we created something I had only ever seen in movies. This experience has been unique because a group of strangers became a regular support group in which we can talk about the violence we experience, the fear we share, and the ways we want to change it all.

Conclusion

Queer Fight Club began as a way for me to share my expertise and focus my artistic lens on my community. I was not sure if anyone was going to show up that first day, and I did not know if it would work out. I was relying heavily on the idea of providing self-defense, a feature that has not been lost, but has taken a back seat to expressing rage and building community, now the most important characteristics of our time together. I just knew I wanted to train other Queers and find ways to talk about all the shit we have been through. We began with regular documentation including video and photography, with interviews and weekly portraits. But I quickly realized that was not the point. What makes *QFC* so great is the sense of privacy and security we have with one another. This space is only for us and new Queers who join along the way. It is not for consumption by others as an artwork. Yes, we still take photos, videos, and make art about the experience, but it's less about describing what we're doing and more an expression of how we feel.

While I imagined *QFC* would be an emotional experience for everyone involved, both through discussion and physical exertion, I had no idea how therapeutic it would be for me and my connection with my own body. People do say going to the gym helps with mental hurdles, but Queer people do not have the same access to safety within gym spaces as non-Queer folks. It becomes difficult the minute we must pick a changing room, and then the space to exert energy is tainted by this constant social anxiety. On top of this already uncomfortable feeling within gym spaces, living with a physical disability made me lose the connection I once had to my muscles and bones. *QFC* has allowed me to further understand how to navigate this disability while also exercising my rage through physical means. During this experience, I became so

much more understanding and aware of how my emotional distress manifests as physical pain, and how physical activity ameliorates both sensations.

The change is not just within me. I can see it within all my *Queer Fight Club* collaborators.

When I think about our first day and how shy everyone was, I feel so proud of where we are today. Everyone enters the space confidently and excited to be there. We wrap our hands and talk about our weeks, often bitching until I shift attention to the kickboxing. But once we start moving, the physical confidence of the group is palpable. Members who were never confident in themselves are now so sure of the punches they throw and the way they move their hips. My favorite part about *QFC* is watching my participants throw a punch with perfect form and have the sound echo in the room only to be followed by laughter. I am an incredibly proud coach; everyone takes their work seriously while having so much fun.

Eight months into this journey, I look forward to the future. We are continuously growing and evolving based on member needs and group goals. I hope to continue this practice for as long as I am physically capable. *QFC* will expand and improve to provide this communal outlet. I look forward to providing more classes for people to attend and learn, while also adding time for sparring, making this an even more prominent feature of my life and artistic practice. I am excited about continuing to create art with *QFC* and having a space to share all our creations. It is my dream that with time, members will be confident enough in themselves and their skills to keep this going within their own communities and futures, no matter where we all end up. We all can carry this with us to teach and inspire the same things in others.

Regarding my studio practice, I think I will always have something to say about kickboxing or will find a way to slide a boxing glove into a piece. Even though fighting has only recently found its place within my artwork, it now holds an immense importance in both my contextual and aesthetic thinking. I have come to embrace the past and merge kickboxing with the rest of my identity. However, I see *Queer Fight Club* and kickboxing as just a portion of my practice. I want the physical practice to get even more consistent, becoming more routine in my kickboxing training, but I anticipate making work about other things soon. I want to make some silly artwork; I want to laugh more. I want to make work about the beautiful, soft moments of being Queer while simultaneously nurturing this angry practice. I think I can find space for it all.

Image List

1. Mad Green. *Constructive Criticism for a Developing Mind*, five Etch-A-Sketches, installation size variable, 2022.
2. Mad Green. Sketchbook scan, 2023.
3. Mad Green. Group photo from *Queer Fight Club*, 2024.
4. Mad Green. *Tad and Izzi (QFC)*, Black and White 35mm film photograph, 2023.
5. Mad Green. Screengrab from video documentation of *Sparring with My Memories*, performance piece, 2023.
6. Cassils. Photo documentation of *Becoming an Image*, ongoing performance piece, 2012-.
7. Mad Green. Screengrab from *Untitled (Hand Wraps)*, video performance, 10:56, 2022.
8. Mad Green. *Goin' Down Swinging*, multimedia installation including video, 2024. Installed in The Kemper Museum.
9. Mad Green. *Untitled (Self-Portrait with Trans Tape)*, digital photo, 2023.
10. Mad Green. Screengrab from *Is This Really Fucking Happening?* Short film, 12:17, 2023.
11. Mad Green. Documentation from the first week of *Queer Fight Club*, Abby and Joni, 2023.
12. Mad Green. Documentation from the second week of *Queer Fight Club*, Sam and Maura, 2023.
13. Mad Green, *Combo #1* performance documentation, 2023.
14. Mad Green. *Combo #1* Installation, puzzle mats, found fabrics, chain, sawdust, polyfill, 12ft by 12 ft, various heights, 2023.
15. Cassils. *Etched in Light* performance documentation, 2023.

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⁹ Thomas Page McBee, *Amateur: Reckoning with Gender, Identity, and Masculinity* (New York: Scribner, 2019). (*Am I a Real Man?* Page 44).

¹⁰ Thomas Page McBee, *Amateur: Reckoning with Gender, Identity, and Masculinity* (New York: Scribner, 2019). One week later, page 183

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