

*Soap Boxx*

Submitted to the Art Department, Allegheny College, in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
for the Degree of Bachelor of Arts.

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Project Board:

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Honor Code Pledge: *I hereby recognize and pledge to fulfill my responsibilities, as defined in the Honor Code, and to maintain the integrity of both myself and the College community as a whole.*

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### Artist Statement

I chose to study art to understand the mythical forces driving culture. At that time I had only heard of Monet and Van Gogh, but the museum tour guides and art teachers in my life always seemed to value Art (with a capital “A”) and argue its relevance to the things I got to experience, like music and food and finger painting. I didn’t see the connection. It always seemed like a big secret, and I sought to figure it out. I am a mere three odd years into a deep dive of all of the Art I can find, and all I learned is that secrecy is intentional. The discipline has very little to do with lowly hobbyists or folks who measure the value of an artwork by whether they could make it themselves. It turns out the secret is to act like a child, and *fuck*, I should’ve known! I’d like to figure out how to make a practice that shows everyone who has felt alienated by Art they are more than capable of participating. When Kaprow declared “the jig is up!” the gatekeepers had to channel their money, hunger for control, and panic into all of the papers, manifestos, exhibition catalogs, and reviews. As a result, the shared experience of wanting to make things is inaccessible. Making is an assertion of self, and rather than making those assertions of myself for the sake of feeling precious, I want them to encourage others to feel invited to assert themselves, too.

## **Acknowledgments**

Thank you to Paula for reading, reading, and reading some more, and listening, too.

Thanks to Ian for listening, too, and asking the tough questions that I was pushing to the side.

Thanks to all the Art Department for hearing me out and giving me the space I needed to figure this out. Thank you to all of the gallery assistants I ever worked with, and Nick and Jenna and all my coworkers at Kettle Lake Kitchen, for showing me a sense of community in doing work.

That's hard to find, but I'll keep looking for it and carving it out as I go along now. And, finally, thank you to the folks who cleaned out the shelves in the old art store to make the Boxx empty for us. Couldn't have done it without you.

### **Introduction to *Soap Boxx***

Coming up with a proposal for a senior project after your junior seminar was rudely interrupted by a global pandemic requires flexibility. Even before our unexpected quarantine, I had difficulty finding a wall to make marks at a large scale. The new context—heightened awareness of six-foot distance, critique over Zoom and GoogleDrive, transient living when everything seems extra filthy—only offered new obstacles to finding a wall. Painting on walls rather than hanging paintings on walls makes people nervous because it involves more clean-up, but as a student gallery assistant, I would be the one cleaning it up, anyways. The initial premise was simple: take a space with some walls (I even specified that there only need to be three), draw all over them, and clean it up. I am more likely to be given space if I promise to clean it up, and I don't mind repainting walls white. I can be considerate.

The proposal was perfect: my idea was transferable and temporary. The logistics were the next step. First, there was the matter of finding a space. I happened to come into a leadership role within the Student Art Society organization and, by extension, obtained domain over the newly acquired Boxx Gallery. The organization had plans for the space that were also interrupted by COVID-19. When we all reconvened in the fall, we'd lost six or so of our nine members to remote learning or graduation. Recruiting new members proved difficult, as well, and the club went stale. I got the go-ahead from the few members left to use this project's space after our debut *Exhibition of Rejects*.<sup>1</sup>

My simple childlike frustration for myself and others can be tied into greater dialogues. The thing is, though, that the greater dialogues have a way of sucking the life out of pure

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<sup>1</sup> Allegheny College Student Art Society, *Exhibition of Rejects* (April 20-24, 2021), Meadville, PA, Boxx Gallery.

frustration and wrapping it up in a bunch of long words that cost too much to learn about. Maybe there isn't any way to subvert that and once the words dry up you should stop talking.

Postmodernism is characterized by a conflation of high art and mass culture. What this means is that lived experience became fair game for art, and didn't need to be sterilized under the same conditions enforced by modernism. However, high art uses institutional frameworks to remain separate from producers of mass media. The overlap is inevitable, but the key difference is a facade of legitimacy reinforced by papers, dress codes (even unspoken), and money, but first and foremost, by modernist sensibilities that never left. Digital media has only further complicated the process of legitimizing - they recently developed blockchains to append onto digital files for collectors to launder their money into "reproduction rights." At some point, postmodernism as it was defined died.<sup>2</sup>

One attempt at defining post-postmodernism is metamodernism. Metamodernism as defined by scholars Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker seeks to retain postmodernism's lessons and build new narratives that imagine new endings, taking a more critical eye on nihilistic attitudes.<sup>3</sup> Other scholars contest this notion, arguing that modernist sensibilities never *left*, but rather remained informative, and postmodernism has reached the same echelon of effortless influence.<sup>4</sup> Scholars and artists alike face difficulty to define a *next* after an entire movement that subverted the idea of a *next*. Modernism in literature is characterized by a grand narrative in which we are all moving forward towards an end, and all progress is good progress. In visual art, we see a transition away from narrative entirely, with an

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<sup>2</sup> Linda Hutcheon, "Epilogue," In *The Politics of Postmodernism*, 165-181. London Taylor & Francis Group, 2002. ProQuest Ebook Central.

<sup>3</sup> Timotheus Vermeulen and Robin van den Akker, "Notes on Metamodernism," *Journal of Aesthetics & Culture* 2, no. 1 (2010): pp. 56-77, <https://doi.org/10.3402/jac.v2i0.5677>.

<sup>4</sup> Dennis Kersten and Usha Wilbers, "Introduction: Metamodernism," *English Studies* 99, no. 7 (March 2018): pp. 719-722, <https://doi.org/10.1080/0013838x.2018.1510657>.

emphasis on medium-specificity. Critic Clement Greenberg championed this rhetoric, clinging tightly to Kant's definition of aesthetics as outside of utility.<sup>5</sup> Postmodernism is defined by a sharp rejection of the Grand Narrative because of who it left out and therefore worked against, including the artists themselves. Postmodernism brought about the non-narrative. The problem is, they were trying to reject modernism within the systems it built, and at this point they either benefitted from those systems or died or both.

I think the "modernist sensibilities" scholars trying to define metamodernism, or post-postmodernism, or whatever you want to call it are observing a desperate attempt from folks who were left out of the Grand Narrative to make up lost footing. The Grand Narrative never left; we just made the non-narrative a part of it, and everyone is struggling for space because we insist on keeping everything. Postmodernism, defined as *after* and consequently mutually exclusive from modernism, became ingrained in the frameworks produced under and by modernism, and everyone is grappling with the contradiction.

Jerry Saltz published a review of P.S. 1's *Greater New York* (2010), also cited by Vermeulen and van den Akker, and observes the dual presence of sincerity and irony in contemporary works.

At once knowingly self-conscious about art, unafraid, and unashamed, these young artists not only see the distinction between earnestness and detachment as artificial; they grasp that they can be ironic and sincere at the same time, and they are making art from this compound-complex state of mind.<sup>6</sup>

This so-called "compound-complex state of mind" is where I find myself making things, too. Vermeulen and van den Akker considered this phenomenon an "oscillation," but I argue it is a

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<sup>5</sup> Diarmuid Costello, "Greenberg's Kant and the Fate of Aesthetics in Contemporary Art Theory." *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism* 65, no. 2 (2007): pp. 217-28, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4622225>.

<sup>6</sup> Jerry Saltz, "Sincerity and Irony Hug It Out," *New Yorker Magazine*, May 27, 2010.

duality.<sup>7</sup> Considering irony and sincerity as inherently related is necessary, but not something that should get sucked up into the canon, either. It's a natural response to the all the more prevalent and simultaneous demystification and absurdity of *everything*.

In *Soap Boxx*, every layer has both sincerity and irony, and I didn't even have to *try* to make that happen. I sincerely want to live in a gallery space that wasn't built to make me feel comfortable, which is pretty ironic. I sincerely want to share the space with everyone by covering it in proof of my occupying it first. Also ironic. My role as "president" has been little more than a title, both sincere and ironic. I want to extend participation in this compound-complex state to see if anyone else sees this, too. I want folks to come mark up my walls and then tell me what a good project I made. This compound-complex state is not actually a secret, and I don't want to operate within it on my own, anyways.

Proposing and following through with a project like this are two different things. The idea has grown in different ways as I will outline later, but the lesson I maintain thus far is the same lesson I relearn every goddamn day. Plans are futile, and restrictive even, because they are based on predictions rooted in truths that mean less each day. Having one project uprooted may have left me pessimistic, but I assure you, this is a lesson I'm familiar with. The problem is, I have found, I am still expected to plan despite the obvious fallacies, hence the proposal and an outline of this paper that looks awfully different now. Ironic, right? Sincere, too.

The purpose of this project began as my using a platform to be myself in a way I have a hard time finding the space to feel comfortable doing so. I wanted to allow myself space to be unapologetic, disruptive, and, simply, to make my presence known. This is a direct challenge to the expectations I was socialized with and continue to reinforce without thinking. *Soap Boxx* has turned into an attempt to extend the platform to others to see if my participation contributes to

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<sup>7</sup> Vermeulen and van den Akker, *Notes on Metamodernism*, 5-6.



rather than hinders an invitation to also make their presence known. *Don't worry, I'll clean it up. I already made a mess, anyways.*

### **Marks Matter Because We Make Them**

Making the case for mark-making is not difficult. We've always made them, we haven't stopped, and we keep finding new ways to make them. However, in the advent of digital media, non-fungible tokens, streaming and caching and other forms of consumption, the process by which marks are made is expedited. My argument is physical marks are not obsolete, even in the event I can upload my consciousness into a SIM card or something in the next ten years. The logic isn't new, either; at the height of modernism, scholars, philosophers, artists, warned of the dangers of advancement. Avante-garde movements have sprung up over the 20th century, from Dadaism to Abstract Expressionism, that emphasize process-based making. This is a natural impulse, but unfortunately, once those get sucked up into theoretical frameworks and billion-dollar collections, the task of artists becomes to find new processes.

Here's the thing: there are only so many processes. A human arm, leg, body can only move in so many directions, and our brains cannot come up with truly random movements or images. However, any number of individuals can engage in the same process and all of them can have a different outcome. Is the end-product not valuable? Well, there's only so many walls, pieces of paper, pigments, and so on, and the materials become less and less environmentally conscious, between petroleum content in paints to energy consumption for blockchains. It isn't sustainable for us to value every single thing every person makes, at least not in the way we've established the extension of value, which is payment and conservation. The problem is, though, we are not encouraged to *do anything that isn't valued*, and the *processes* are authored.

Anyone *can* splatter paint onto a canvas. Pollock wasn't the first one to do it, he was just the first one to get published about and paid for it, as far as the Western-dominated records show.

Anyone can scribble. Pollock probably wanted to do more than splatter, but I bet his collectors wouldn't have that. I'm not saying that's why he died, but I do know that it's hard to give a fuck about your life when you don't feel like you have much control over what you do with it.

Marks are not always written, either. Sounds can be marks, and so can smells, tastes, or anything else that invades our senses. Music, cooking, dancing, and other mediums are less likely to be placed into the "High Art" category. I think this has to do with their impermanence. The works that were already in the canon are primarily paintings and sculptures, and that's just because they held up against time. Separating "high" art from "low" art was always a Western tradition. The rich never wanted to be associated with the poor, and that wasn't going to change in the advent of mass media. However, in post-postmodernism, "high" and "low" art have become so interwoven that the distinction between them is crumbling. "High" art placed emphasis on the authoring of processes, but with YouTube tutorials and LiveStreams, it is more difficult to consider processes intellectual property.

There is a movement in the Art world to revisit existing collections and curate shows to reevaluate processes that were historically undervalued. Jennie Goldstein and Elisabeth Sherman of the Whitney Museum of American Art curated *Making Knowing: Craft in Art, 1950-2019* to showcase works in their collection which "reclaim visual languages that have typically been coded as feminine, domestic, or vernacular."<sup>8</sup> Craft-based processes deviate from Kant's definition of aesthetics outside of utility, and also take more time to complete. Artists working under postmodernism would employ tedious mediums to subvert expectations from galleries and dealers to make work as quickly as possible. It is more difficult to be a prolific beader than a

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<sup>8</sup> Jennie Goldstein and Elisabeth Sherman, "Making Knowing: Craft in Art, 1950–2019," November 22, 2019, <https://whitney.org/exhibitions/making-knowing>.

prolific Pop artist. Having this exhibition in 2019 signifies a shift towards valuing process in making as a response to oversaturation of media and consumerist modes of feeling.

My favorite marks are the ones scattered through bathroom stalls, carved into picnic tables or fence posts, colored onto paper table cloths. They are a constant, no matter how spaces and technologies evolve, and that's not a coincidence. The places that people tend to mark are either a) decidedly not precious or b) already marked up. This phenomenon speaks to the role of mark-making in finding solidarity with one another. These types of marks differ from craft-based processes because the utility is not in the product of the making, but rather the process. *Making Knowing: Craft in Art, 1950-2019* draws attention to undervalued processes, but how can we make overvalued processes accessible again?

Street art explored this area of compulsive, sometimes antagonistic mark-making, and is heavily intertwined with the Abstract Expressionist movement. Jean Michael Basquiat and Keith Haring were prolific graffiti artists before they began working on canvases. Lady Pink is the quintessential can-hang-with-the-boys street artist, primarily working through the '80s and early '90s. These names are known because they eventually garnered representation from galleries, and many of their works exist in museum and gallery collections to this day. However, the impact of graffiti is voided when placed in the so-called nonspace, because it remains contained and nondisruptive. Vandalism is still a crime, because marking up a property is by legal definition synonymous with ruining it. When street art entered into the High Art realm, the disruptive nature of the medium became compartmentalized and co-opted by the privileged.

Reevaluating past movements and plucking them out of the canon will serve to make them accessible to the masses. The movements were born out of rejecting or challenging the

systems they ultimately sought to subvert, and this is a grave error. What makes this phenomenon all the more frustrating is these movements are the most *doable*.

### **Making Marks is a Privilege**

There are many parallels between finding a space to draw on walls and simply finding an area where I feel comfortable or call home. I decided to take the project a step further and commit to living in the gallery for my project's duration. I will be drawing on the walls and tuning into Zoom lectures, eating lunch, sleeping in the gallery, and, by extension, Doane Hall of Art. The difficulty I face when searching out spaces to be comfortable stems from the need to compartmentalize intimacy and vulnerability away from the public eye. In a college dorm building, for example, suddenly rooming with someone when you previously had more space to yourself can be a shock, but others who are familiar with sharing space are less thrown off. I am more comfortable keeping negative emotions to myself and expressing them in a way that tries not to disturb my surroundings or the people who occupy them.

My compartmentalizing looks different from that of the roommates I've had. My first roommate was an only child, and our room was practically divided evenly down the middle. She washed her own dishes, never touched my things, and neither of us cried in that room or in front of one another. She went back home after one semester. My other roommate was the youngest of three girls, and she did not share that instinct to protect her things. I would wager her older sister might have been more protective; she, on the other hand, saw no issue with taking whatever shirt, hairbrush, mirror, or what have you that was lying around, and she didn't care much for doing dishes at all. She cried in front of me, but I can't say I did the same. Both roommates helped me put the room back to its depersonalized self at the end of the semester. I found myself frustrated by my socialized tendency to remain as unnoticed as possible because it gave others space to tread over me. Whenever I try to push against that instinct - like drawing on the walls,

for example - I wind up feeling like a jerk. I don't think the solution is making other people feel like jerks for leaving behind remnants of being around, but I do think we ought to figure out how to coexist with one another in a way that lets us both cry.

The “white cube” as coined by Brian O’Doherty is a residual modernist innovation. Museums, galleries, and even webpages adhere to crisp, clean lines and white backgrounds to serve as a non-space for media to occupy.<sup>9</sup> The modernist grid is closely related, and all of it is tied up in complicated notions of sterility, progress, and nationalism. A common subversion of the white cube throughout postmodernism executed a plethora of ways was to quite literally leave the gallery space. Despite efforts to subvert the paradigm, these modernist residues are still very much alive, only exacerbated by the panic of a global pandemic.<sup>10</sup> These sensibilities inform the impulse to compartmentalize.

Jenny Holzer appropriates the language patterns of graffiti without any of the visual traditions, for example. Her *Truisms* (1978-87) sought to recode antagonistic and impassioned language within modernist sensibilities - they have been displayed within the past five years in neat grids of 12”x12” squares.<sup>11</sup> Her work and that of the other artists mentioned and working within this framework influenced the culture I grew up in, but unfortunately, they became trapped in the canon. Rather than cultivating more widespread participation in the practice, the legitimization of expressive mark-making simply led to a fetishization of the aesthetic, and a steady uptick in the cost of Molotow markers and clothes with holes in them.

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<sup>9</sup> Brian O’Doherty, “Inside the White Cube: The Ideology of the Gallery Space,” (San Francisco, CA, 1976).

<sup>10</sup> Paula Burleigh, “Paula Burleigh on Zoom and the Modernist Grid,” Artforum International (Artforum, June 22, 2020), <https://www.artforum.com/slant/paula-burleigh-on-the-zoom-grid-83272>.

<sup>11</sup> Jenny Holzer, “Jenny Holzer. *Truisms*. 1978–87: MoMA,” The Museum of Modern Art, 2004, <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/63755>.

Contemporary exhibition spaces exist on the fringes intentionally so as not to be sucked into the canon, and “have become an important way for a greater number of artists to have influence and to make their own art world.” An increasing number of these galleries are literally artists’ living rooms, while institutionally backed spaces began incorporating domestic materials, such as carpet, couches, or drapes, to subvert the dominance of the white cube. Some examples of artists creating these exhibition spaces include David Prince of Adjunct Positions, Michelle Grabner and Brad Killam of the Suburban gallery, Emily Weiner and Sharona Eliassaf of The Willows, and those are just a few published in the *New York Times*. “Artists are the tastemakers now.”<sup>12</sup>

Living *in* the white cube is more difficult to do. Marina Abramovic attempted to do so in the show *The Artist Is Present* at the Museum of Modern Art.<sup>13</sup> However, this performance did the opposite of demythologize the role of the artist. On one hand, there were a number of other performance artists recreating some of her most famous works. This legitimizes Abramovic as the author of the process, while also pointing out their replicability. However, the film which accompanied the exhibition emphasized Abramovic’s hand in the training of these performance artists, implying that they would not be the *same* if she had not had a hand in their creation.

By contrast, Paper Tiger Television created a makeshift living and working space in the Wexner Center’s residency program, called *Dream House*. The organization is founded on collaboration, and the “domestic space” they curated was to invite participation from visitors. However, since they operated as a group, they were able to take shifts “living” in the gallery,

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<sup>12</sup> Robin Pogrebin, “It’s an Art Gallery. No, a Living Room. O.K., Both.,” *The New York Times* (*The New York Times*, July 3, 2016), <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/07/04/arts/design/its-an-art-gallery-no-a-living-room-ok-both.html>.

<sup>13</sup> Rebecca Taylor, “Marina Abramović, *The Artist Is Present*,” (*Smarthistory*, August 9, 2015), <https://smarthistory.org/marina-abramovic-the-artist-is-present/>.

making the function of the space as a home less important than the aesthetic. They filled the room with second-hand furniture, and at the end of the exhibition, they hosted a tag sale to redistribute the materials back into the community. They sought to demystify the collaboration process and make it seem accessible.<sup>14</sup>

There are a number of distinctions between the MoMA and the Wexner Center, but the most blatant is the fact that it is an awful lot harder to get permission to live in the MoMA. The MoMA is a whiter cube. Abramovic's permitted mark was her presence, in multiplicities, and she was not expected to clean it up. It took an awful lot of career building for her to be able to reach an echelon where her presence was plenty. Additionally, now that she has done that, the whiter cube is *so white* that her presence will not just leave. No one will be able to do a show of that nature there again. This phenomenon is what I want to change.

The white cube mythos is a critical reason anyone will have hang-ups about participating in my *Soap Boxx* performance. In order to subvert this, I will leave up the marks I make during my stay in the Boxx so as to make the space feel less intimidating to occupy. If I repainted it prior to the opening as I originally planned, the space might be alienating to anyone who does not already feel welcomed by the department, because we serve as the informal Art Authority in our tiny rural community. The word "gallery" alone is laden with authority. Leaving the marks up will contrast expectations of a display space. There is a possibility that my marks will be alienating, too. I think if I am present in the space to consistently reassure permission, though, this can be avoided.

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<sup>14</sup> Bill Horrigan, "Paper Tiger in the Box, and in 1991," Wexner Center for the Arts (Wexner Center for the Arts at The Ohio State University, October 10, 2007), <https://wexarts.org/blog/paper-tiger-box-and-1991>.

### **Maintenance Means More Marks**

What is the relationship between crying and cleaning stuff up? Let me start with the obvious: cleaning and crying are both a part of the woman's experience, as I've been told. I can unpack that further by saying both are undesirable parts of the more significant human experience. More personally, though, I have a lot of hang ups around both crying and cleaning up. I think it all boils down to my mother, but I could go back further and say it has to do with gender dynamics and the alienation I have felt towards and because of them. I grew up with specifically Catholic definitions of femininity: particularly quiet, docile, and reserved. I am none of those things at my core, but I spent more time in my life than I should have or ever want to again learning how to pretend I was.

My mother always had specific ideas of cleanliness, that to me, seemed to seek to return the house to move-in ready conditions anytime someone other than our family was going to be inside. I always thought it was strange that she wanted us to pretend we didn't live there. I understood picking up filth - bugs, mold and other creatures come when you don't mind filth - but why should toys be in bins? Why should clothes be smooth and not wrinkled? Why would shoes be lined up and not left the way our feet kicked them off? It comes down to vulnerability. Letting people see that would give too much away; they would know my mom has kids that leave toys out, wrinkle clothes, and kick their shoes off, which would make us like other kids. It isn't that she didn't know this or wasn't okay with this, but she had to compartmentalize it for our sake. Since time and space are competitive within her framework, evidence of raw being would disrupt whatever her visitor's purpose might be. Her role as matriarch revolves around the comfort of anyone who enters her home.



Maintenance, as Mierle Laderman Ukeles points out in her *MANIFESTO FOR MAINTENANCE ART*, is a necessary component of creation.<sup>15</sup> Maintenance is a necessary component of our relationship with one another, and defaulting to coexisting challenges residual hierarchies put in place by the systems we've built to subscribe to. In her manifesto, Ukeles actually defines maintenance as a part of the "life instinct" versus the "death instinct." This reframing was coopted in feminist theory as a repackaging of the gender binary, but Ukeles was pointing out that life and death, creation and destruction, are not mutually exclusive. There is duality to everything. In fact, she was subverting an existing perspective that maintenance is destructive - all of the cleaning done behind the scenes was and still is kept out of public viewing because it was disruptive of the creations themselves. By performing maintenance in *Hartford Wash: Washing/Tracks/Maintenance Inside & Outside* (1973), she was elevating the labor to the status of the artworks on display.

Choosing to pursue art only further complicates that compartmentalization because I am encouraged and sort of need to intersect those raw components of my experience with my means of making a living. This problem is why choosing to be an artist is a radical decision and why people are uncomfortable talking about art if they don't assign it to their identity. Now, though, with more people working from their kitchen tables or living rooms, that constructed compartment we put vulnerable and authentic interaction into appears more fake. Living on display does not feel secure, but it could if we all cut the bullshit. The reason it does not feel secure is because display spaces are supposed to achieve nonspace, and complicated emotions can and should require more time and space to process, but those interrupt the white cube or grid

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<sup>15</sup> Mierle Laderman Ukeles, "MANIFESTO FOR MAINTENANCE ART, 1969!" A Proposal for an Exhibition: *CARE* (1969), <https://queensmuseum.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/04/Ukeles-Manifesto-for-Maintenance-Art-1969.pdf>.

and are only welcome if you make it your job to feel. We are programmed to react harshly when the emotions of others interrupt our experience because they're distracting. They would not be distracting if we didn't care about each other, but we *do* and we ought to stop pretending we don't.

I cannot predict whether people will care, or how, but I can care. I plan on living in the space as the roommate I wish I had the balls to be. I won't mind my mess or keep the noise down, I won't respect the property as it was given to me, and maybe then I'll be able to cry. This will be harder than it sounds. It will be a process of subverting the behaviors instilled in me and that does not happen overnight. However, in doing so, I will be accessible to anyone who has a complaint, and rather than responding as little as possible or otherwise contentiously, I will do my best to compromise. I am not looking to disturb. Is there a way to challenge the notion that my unfiltered, decompartmentalized being is inherently disruptive? That is the question I seek to answer in the first part of my project.

Picking up the space after is damage control. The facet of disruption, particularly for someone who feels a need to express themselves through mark-making, that I cannot seem to make nondisruptive is the physical alteration to spaces after I leave them. One of my earliest memories of a panic attack was when I went to turn in a spelling test. They used to give us these half sheets of printer paper, cut vertically, with twenty numbered lines listed neatly along the left edge. They had a rare but alluring quality: the backs were *blank*, pure white printer paper, the kind my mom kept too high for me to reach so I wouldn't use it up. I covered that thing front and back, and when I went to turn it in, I was shocked to see my other classmates submit theirs clean and neat. I was so distraught, and my teacher had to convince me, in tears at this point, that it was okay as long as she could read my answers. From then on, though, I made a habit of doing it lightly with

pencil so I could swiftly swallow it up with an eraser. Incorporating the maintenance of cleaning up my living space in the gallery is an alternative - it lets me go apeshit, not worry about indents or erasability, but with a whole lot of WhiteOut on deck. Walls are more durable than paper, too.

I want the space to be used afterward, and it took me a while to land on a way to help visitors or audience members consider the potential. I want the message to be, *Maintain spaces so others can use the space when you're done*, and not, *...so you can have a hand with what others do with it*. There are complications in subverting hierarchies when you're working within them. For starters, I am already in a leadership role which allowed me to have access to the gallery. Considering this privilege was crucial to doing this correctly, but I was in denial about it for a long time. I don't like being a leader of anything because I don't particularly care for semantics, nor commitment, but the Student Art Society was specifically handed to me through a unique series of events. Getting it off the ground has been difficult for pandemic reasons but also because nonmajors are intimidated to join. Students get spooked by the idea of having any role in Art (with a capital "A") because of the mythology it is built on and around and continues to churn out. Whenever I mention the gallery space, I anticipate people to get as excited as I am about it, but it seems to me that the idea of the club having domain over a space in the context of Art makes them even more squirrely. I wanted this project to serve as a final attempt to sell the potential of the space as an opportunity for *all* Art. Putting anything in the gallery gives it a legitimacy that can only come from extending the mythos of that word.

I finally live in a single apartment this semester, with my own bathroom and everything, but I still managed to disturb my downstairs neighbor. Ash came to my door around three in the morning one night, angrily pounding. I answered and must have looked pretty scared, because she immediately backed off.

“I’m sorry - someone in this apartment is being really loud and I am trying to sleep.” I could see that it took a lot for her to come there. For one, I had been loud, but had gone to sleep around a half hour earlier. This meant she had been stewing on this, maybe working up the courage. For another, she flinched after articulating each word, and to say I felt bad would be an understatement.

“No, *I’m* sorry. You live here, too, and deserve to sleep. I’ll keep it down.” I layered every layer of sweetness I could and she thanked me and left. The next day, I left a severely collegiate gift basket - a bag of microwave popcorn, some ramen, and a Clif bar with a note taped to it. I said something to the effect of, *Sorry again! Here’s my number in case you need to reach me again - no one should have to venture into the cold to get some sleep.* This little gesture meant a lot to her, as she later told me, and we’ve been pals ever since.

There was one evening in particular where Ash and I were having a grand time in my living room. We were joking backing and forth, and she expressed a secret pipe dream of being a stand-up comedian. There isn’t a platform for her to go ahead and try that, not without having to worry about being good at it, which isn’t why she wants to try. This conversation led me to realize the Boxx Gallery could be that space, and I had the ability to make that happen. I asked her if she’d be interested, and she was ecstatic.

The rest followed naturally, through word of mouth. I later scattered posters around the Campus Center and Doane Hall of Art. I was and always am doubtful of follow-through, but the project grew. People want that space. My inclination to extend it to one person derived from a greater observation, which is that everyone has something they’d like to display in an environment with legitimacy but without pressure.

Legitimacy is a funny thing, because it is constructed, but the thing about constructs is everyone thinks that means they're fake. They're not fake - they produce very real feelings that require real care. We crave legitimacy because we want to be valued, but value is linked to the time and space we occupy, which is competitive. "Legitimizing" a space - keeping it clean, advertising it, calling it a "gallery," "classroom," "lab," etc. - plays into and utilizes constructed leverage in the competition, and requires labor. If that labor is consistent for all of the people, happenings, and so on that occupy the legitimized space, and done so by the facilitator of the space rather than delegated "down" the chain, can the hierarchies we're leveraging be subverted?

There were hierarchies everywhere I looked. I wanted "The Performance" to be a singular event, but that would require some level of preplanning. Creating a setlist involves hierarchies. I also wanted to film it, but owning footage for my own use defeats the purpose of my project. The urge to film it came from my own footing in my respective competitions - I wanted a deliverable for a grade and to share on social media. I need documentation to prove it happened if I want to convince someone else to let me use their space in a way that is at all similar. I also wanted maintenance to be a part of the performance, allowing me to be a laborer in the background, but it was brought to my attention that this could be distracting. Ultimately, with my name on it, my presence is going to upstage other presences. These were all obstacles that needed to be subverted.

Rather than establishing a setlist, I decided to ask performers to come anytime during the senior exhibition. I will conclude my residence in the gallery the Sunday before the exhibition opening, and will take the two days leading up to it to clean the space and get it ready to host. Reframing myself as a host rather than a manager or something more bureaucratic was crucial to maintaining a noncompetitive environment. I will come every day at 10 AM to open the Boxx

and close it at 10 PM. The lack of structure may lead to some overlap, and the means by which performers go about working through that amongst themselves is a part of the overall experience.

I will make myself available to assist in moving any necessary equipment, setting up or tearing down, and otherwise helping make it happen without having a hand in the thing itself. I will hire students to take photographs of some performances, and will use my phone or laptop to document my own role, both during and after my stay in the gallery. The legitimacy of a “professional” photograph will therefore be extended to my guests rather than myself, and I will have memorabilia from their performance rather than ownership over it. Hiring a photographer rather than taking the photographs myself will also extend legitimacy to students who may not necessarily want to perform. They get to put on their resume that they were hired to take pictures for a gallery exhibition. It also keeps my hand out of the depiction of the performers. The photographer will inevitably have a framework specific to them, but that framework is inherently more disconnected from this project, which is beneficial. They serve as an audience perspective in a way I cannot without introducing the hierarchy into the expression.

The end product, in my wildest dreams, is a space covered in pigments and scribbles from me but also anyone who enters the space. I will leave my cart of supplies in the room, frequently wash the brushes and change the water, and informally invite visitors to leave a mark on the wall, too. The venue will be an informal absurdist performance space where visitors can choose to be an observer or participant, and the terms of those roles are entirely up to them.

### **How it Actually Played Out**

I moved into the Boxx a day later than planned. This was the first of many deviations from what I outlined and outlined again. I brought my twin mattress and all of its dressings, enough clothes for the week and toiletries for makeshift hygiene in the Campus Center

bathrooms. I also wheeled my cart full of paints, pastels, and other goodies from my studio in the room next door. The first thing I drew was a house, as big as I could, on the wall opposite the entrance so it was visible to anyone who walked by.

The Boxx gallery is a neat space. The entrance is nestled in thick-paned windows arranged in an asymmetrical modernist grid with gray borders. When you walk in, you find that the ceilings go higher than the doorway appears, and are decorated with fluorescent lights and exposed concrete framing. The floors are bare where carpet squares were ripped up, with glue still attached and flecks of white paint littered around, especially close to the walls. The walls themselves have been touched up with different shades of white as part of a lighthearted white cube subversion incorporated over time by myself and other club members. It isn't a large room - something like 20'x15'.

Sleep was the most difficult thing. I have always had trouble shutting everything down enough at night, but something about the windows in the Boxx gallery made it almost impossible. I always thought my relationship with sleep was related to that between me and crying. They are both activities that I need to feel safe to execute, and my brain is particular about what constitutes "safe." The white cube does not make me feel safe. Since disruption is a privilege I do not feel extends to me, and the white cube is decidedly *not* disruptive, I felt uncomfortable. This discomfort was expected, but there is no way to prepare yourself to be uncomfortable on purpose. The most unsettling facet of the experience was a recurring thought that someone could see me while I was asleep. Drawing the house made me feel better.

I think when I proposed this project, there was a lot of doubt from anyone enduring my pitch that I would actually *cover* the walls. I knew this would not be an issue. The thing is, when I am in a nonspace, I am not comfortable because my experience of myself and the world around

me relies on subjective information. When met with a blank wall, especially without the pressure of the wall being Pure White, I feel an urge to prove the wall is there and is blank. The best way to do this is to make it *not* blank. This feeling is something my therapist relates to anxiety and dissociative episodes, and it's the same feeling that has in the past led to self-destructive behaviors. I don't think it's an outrageous feeling, though, nor one that is unique to me. I think it's simply a result of being aware. When I reach a point of awareness where I realize I can be wrong, the need for proof is exacerbated.

The following feeling was one I was not as prepared for. I underestimated how guilty making marks on a wall would make me feel. Occupying the space made me feel guilty, but that was less of a shock. When the building coordinator waved compulsively as she walked past or the maintenance worker taking the overnight shift sheepishly asked for my garbage, the guilt I felt was familiar. It was the same guilt I felt when moving a roommate's laundry out of my way or leaving a dirty mug on my desk. Making marks on the walls produced that same guilt. It was not that it was unfamiliar, *per se*, but old. It was the guilt I felt when I turned in a filthy spelling test. I tried to work through it while pursuing this art degree but, *Goddammit*, it is not going anywhere.

I chose to share the space sooner than anticipated to alleviate this guilt. I had had enough. I began inviting folks who dropped in to mark up the walls with me. They would get wide-eyed when I'd unfurl my brush pouch, and let them use my Real Paints and Real Pens. Some people struggled with just putting *anything* up. They would look at me out of the corner of their eye as if it was a test of some kind. They were worried about ruining some constructed integrity of my work that I never claimed it had. I wanted them to get that out of their head. Sometimes it made



me sad, even. I wanted to shake them and say, *Just scribble! For fuck's sake! Can't you see that is all anyone is doing?*

I had to go to work in between. I have two jobs, which seems rare around here for some reason. I didn't know how many kids got money from their parents until I came to this school - I thought that was a Disney channel myth or something. I work in the gallery, and had to run downstairs to help install remote student work for the Junior Seminar pop-up. I also work at a restaurant in town, and I had three open to close shifts in the middle of my stay in the Boxx.

Throughout my stay, I documented everything on my Official Artist Instagram account. As planned, the documentation of the duration of this project that was indisputably *mine* was left up to me and my iPhone camera. I did this to serve as a demystifying process. On campus, a handful of students and faculty knew what I was up to, but a majority don't. I don't follow *everyone* on Instagram, so I can't say this broadened my audience much further with certainty, but it maintained the illusion of an audience. This serves as a legitimizing step. Posting is an act of assertion now, too, but in the digital realm rather than the physical. Basically, posting it proves it happened, and takes the event out of limitations like time and space, but introduces new constraints like image borders, copyright protections, algorithms, and so on. I'll be able to refer to the posts when explaining this to someone else in the future, but it also introduces *Soap Boxx* as something at all. People are more inclined to join in on something that is already a thing. If the thing relies on their participation, that's too much pressure.

I included posts of me doing dishes and mixing sauces at my restaurant job, as a way of saying *See? I can't be an Artist all the time*. It was also a personal reclamation tool. Constantly working while being a full-time student means that your time does not feel like your own, and your value comes from your productivity or contributions towards these Greater things that

you're working to be a part of. As an art student, it also means you are constantly reminded of how little your degree has to do with tangible real-life things, and the glaring reality is that I will have to do something else to feed myself for probably my whole life. Making my restaurant job a part of a project that's completion decides if I graduate or not was an attempt to make the value of my time higher than it is currently dictated to be.

On Saturday, I woke up sobbing. I have mentioned my crying is broken. The last time I cried before that was by accident while telling an advisor that I was feeling defeated about the work I was making, and even that passed pretty quickly. My childhood dog passed while I was in the Boxx, some more major changes and losses are on the horizon, and I felt the pressure of the ticking clock as soon as I woke up. I was late for work, and I scrambled to put myself together and run out the door, so it wasn't until later when I was driving that I let myself cry out of relief. It turned out that I was right about the relationship between my making marks and letting tears come. They made me feel safe enough or real enough or *something* enough, even in spite of those obtrusive windows.

I moved out after seven days, six nights in the Boxx. All three walls had marks on them, and not just from me. I moved the table that lives in there back to its designated corner immediately to the left when walking in, and placed the cart opposite with everything neatly spread out. A friend snagged a keyboard from the music department to stay in the room as well. I extended an invitation to Ash to perform at the opening reception because it would likely be the most trafficked timeframe. (Another hierarchy.) She was excited initially, but lost her nerve a few days beforehand. I told her I understood completely. She said she'd stop by another time.

Instead, another friend of mine opted to employ the keyboard while her buddy grabbed his guitar. The two of them improvised together, and it was just the three of us for the beginning

of the opening reception. After a half hour or so, I decided to take a lap in the gallery downstairs. When I came back up, I was surprised to find the room filled with people enthusiastically selecting tools from the cart, asking to take a turn on the guitar and the piano, and a few others even sitting or standing outside and watching through the windows. The thing proliferated on its own. Some of the folks were department members who have heard or read about my project in some capacity, but not all of them. People *do* want to engage, and *will* if they feel encouraged, and that encouragement *does* come from others.

I will continue to come and open the *Soap Boxx* for the rest of the exhibition and clean it up by the following Monday. The response from visitors snuffed any fear I had about this being unnecessary, or prescriptive. Whether I get an opportunity to try this again or not, I cared. I plan on continuing to care.

## Images



Mierle Laderman Ukeles, *Hartford Wash: Washing/Tracks/Maintenance Outside* (1973), performance.



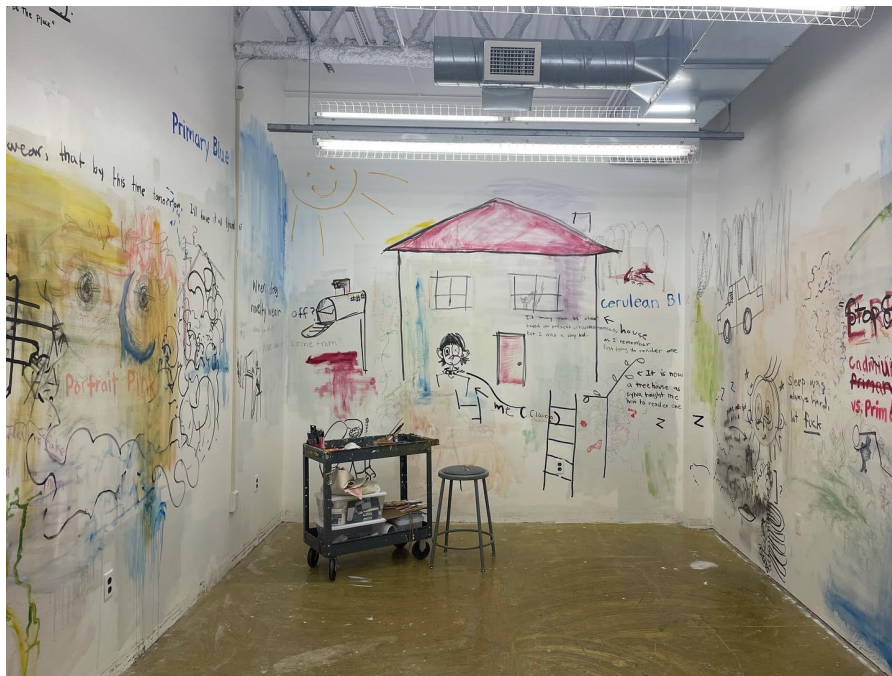
Claire Klima, *Soap Boxx* (2021), Instagram story.



Paper Tiger Television, *Dream House* (1991), installation/video. Photo by Mary Albrecht.



Claire Klima, *Soap Boxx* (2021), installation/performance.



Claire Klima, *Soap Boxx* (2021), installation view

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