

## ABSTRACT

Lauren Ferrara

Throughout my thesis work, I created three pieces that incorporate the themes of reflection, transformation, and embodiment of space. The first sculptural piece I address is titled *Absence*. This work was a response to my personal experience with PTSD, which resulted in a tangible visualization of the concept through the process of material manipulation. In this discussion I bring up key points of my material processes, and how I halt the transformation of materiality right to the border of recognition and unrecognition. The next section includes a discussion of my experiential installation titled *Isolation*. This piece explores the presence and feeling of isolation and confinement during the COVID-19 global pandemic, and invites the viewer to reflect on their own personal connection to the space and theme. Constructed of found branches of trees native to New Jersey, this choice of material bridges the emotional experience of isolation to the physical location in which I experienced it. This work further acts as a mirror and an emotional visualization of the reality in which it was created. My final piece was a performance art piece titled *6 Feet Apart*, which was created in response to the COVID-19 global pandemic. This performance took place at my home in New Jersey and lasted for a duration of two hours. Touching upon the reality of social distancing and its impact in an enclosed space, I invited my entire family to perform with me. *6 Feet Apart* served as a reflection of the new performance we must take on in our daily lives in quarantine, and brings light to how our movement and existence have been altered throughout this process. Exploring the common thread of reflection, each of these pieces explores themes of memory, transformation, and environment in three distinctive art forms. In my thesis I refer back to previous works to ground concepts and points in my artistic process. Additionally, I reference and discuss the works of contemporary artists Cornelia Parker and Leonardo Drew, along with postmodern dance performer/choreographer Trisha Brown.

Reflective Space: A Response to  
Environment Through Process and Performance

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“Life isn’t a support system for art. It’s the other way around.”

- Stephen King, *On Writing: A Memoir of the Craft*

Giving a special thanks to my art support system for providing me with wisdom and inspiration throughout my artistic practice and everyday life:

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And all my fellow Art Studio peers

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As an artist, I primarily create sculptural works, interactive installations, and performance art. Within my installations and sculptural works, I repurpose common objects and push their properties to a point where the materials reach a new state of being. Throughout my performance art, I explore the relationship between body and space. Additionally, reflection of environment and self is prominent throughout my work. I began this thesis during the months leading up to the COVID-19 global pandemic, and finished it during the peak of outbreaks in the second largest hotspot in the United States. My sculptural piece titled *Absence* was made on Mount Holyoke College's campus, while my *Isolation* installation and *6 Feet Apart* performance piece were influenced by the rupture of the global pandemic and created at my home in New Jersey. Within this body of work, all three pieces incorporate the themes of reflection, transformation, and embodiment of space.

The first sculptural piece is titled *Absence*. This work was a response to my personal experience with PTSD, which resulted in a tangible visualization of the concept through the process of material manipulation. The second piece I created is an experiential installation titled *Isolation*. This piece explores the presence and feeling of isolation during the COVID-19 global pandemic, and invites the viewer to reflect on their own personal connection to the space and concept. My final piece was a performance art piece titled *6 Feet Apart*. For this performance, I invited my family, whom I was quarantined with, to perform with me. This performance explored the boundaries that have shaped the reality of community and environment during this period in history. Throughout my practice, I reference contemporary artists Cornelia Parker and Leonardo Drew, along with postmodern dance performer/choreographer Trisha Brown.

To begin, I will be looking at contemporary artist Cornelia Parker, in regards to her sculptural and installation practice. In the book *The Social Psychology of Experience: Studies in*

*Remembering and Forgetting*, David Middleton and Steven D. Brown present a psychological discussion of Cornelia Parker's work. One viewpoint that caught my attention stated, "Parker's work serves as a good metaphor for our modern understanding of memory... Here, Parker's work is fully resonant as memory itself often seems to hang by a thread, to be balanced on the cusp between recovery and dissolution" (Middleton and Brown 13). This idea is particularly present, physically and conceptually, in her installation *Cold Dark Matter: An Exploded View*.

This installation was shown in two parts. The first phase of this installation was shown as a fully intact shed in the Tate Modern London gallery. The shed was filled with a variety of miscellaneous objects and was complete with a single light bulb, hung in the center of the space. For the second phase, the garden shed was blown up with explosives. After the explosion, Parker collected all of the fragmented pieces that remained and curated them in a suspended display in that same gallery. Placing a light bulb similar to the original in the center of the installation, striking shadows and pieces of light were thrown throughout the entire space, creating a dramatic and theatrical atmosphere. Observing the installation in situ, the viewers can see both fragmented pieces with highly visible traces from the explosion, as well as pieces that look completely untouched from this state-altering process. The coexistence of these two contrasting states of being correlate with the quote mentioned above, concerning the presence of balance between recovery and dissolution. In reference to Cornelia Parker's work, my process of choice-making and manipulation of materials embodies a similar approach to this concept of memory and balance.

The themes of memory and reflection present themselves with many faces throughout my artwork. Starting as a concept, memory and environmental factors seep their way into my material processes and reach a visual form. A prime example of visualization of memory in my

practice is my *Absence* sculpture. This sculpture was conceptualized around the same time I was diagnosed with PTSD. For this sculpture I expressed the process of dealing with PTSD and how to visualize it in a tangible and tactile way using found fabric, recycled plastic bags, and recycled paper. Reflecting on my own PTSD, in relation to the transformation of Parker's *Cold Dark Matter* installations, I visualized my experience as simultaneously existing in a state of recovery and dissolution. With that conceptual visualization, I established a connection between concept and material through the physical process of transforming materials. To physicalize this concept, one process I engaged in was the repeated action of tearing recycled clothing and fabric with my hands. Focusing on a single piece of fabric at a time, I would not stop this repeated action of tearing until I felt both my material and I had reached a stopping point. In doing so, I reached the balance of both a visual dissolution of material through a tactile coping mechanism, as well as recovery to a good state-of-mind through tangible relief.

Continuing this discussion of process and transformation, the balance between recovery and dissolution shows itself in another form. Challenging and pushing the boundaries of my materials' properties, they reach a liminal space within their physical state. This state presents itself in my process of material manipulation. When altering materials, I halt the transformation of materiality right to the border of recognition and unrecognition. In *Absence*, this coexistence is highly present within the transformation of the recycled plastic bags. Using a heat gun, I manipulated the properties of the plastic's materiality through the process of melting and re-shaping. Focusing on the individual object, I reach a state of almost complete alteration through an organic stopping point.

When making, I hold an individual relationship to each material/object I transform. Being extremely detail-oriented, I inspect each plastic, fabric, and object I obtain and understand all the

physical properties of that material in order to reach the fine line between identifiable and unidentifiable. This attention to individual relation to materials is visible in my past installation titled *Just One Bottle*. This installation's purpose was to serve as a commentary on the growing usage of single use plastic products and its environmental impact. Choosing to focus solely on plastic water bottles, I collected several hundred of them from recycling bins. For each individual bottle, I peeled off the label, cleaned the bottle, cut the bottle into a spiral, and looped it onto a long line of trash bags. Continuing this process, the act of repetition and the effort expended for each water bottle provided me with the tactile reminder of mass production and mass plastic waste. Displaying them in a suspended spiral shape, the density of the installation erased the individuality of each bottle, and instead created an immeasurable mass. Allowing the viewer to interact and walk through the installation, this created a space, as well as a moment for the viewer to focus on the detrimental impact of the 'it's just one bottle' mentality. The act of collecting and acquiring objects is eminent in my practice. I am drawn to find and repurpose objects and materials to give them a second life.

Leonardo Drew is another contemporary artist that I reference in my sculptural and installation work. In the article, "Existed: Leonardo Drew," by M. Kathryn Shields, Shields discusses Leonardo Drew's exhibition at the Weatherspoon Art Museum at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Shields focuses on the intentionality behind the process and transformation of materials, as well as the importance of reaching a sense of presence and revival within the objects he collects. One quote that reflects the way I think of his work is, "This residue, the trace of what once existed now preserved as a memory... They speak of a past, of abandoned objects, familiar shapes, previous artistic practices, and everyday forms given new life through an artist's vision" (Shields 101).

In relation to the article as a whole, this quote is a strong synopsis of Leonardo Drew's non-representational art practice and his relationship to the collected object. Taking abandoned objects and providing them new life is a motif that is present within his work. Specifically, this is present in his piece titled *Number 8*, created in 1988. The objects that he chose possess an element of decay and abandonment, while simultaneously having a sense of revival. Many of the objects he displayed consisted of organic decaying materials, like animal carcasses. Looking from afar, the piece in its entirety holds a massive weighted presence. When approaching the piece, the viewer is engulfed with numerous objects that present themselves from hidden nooks and crevices. The piece looks weighted down with horror vacui, which evokes the presence of withering decay. Creating experiential spaces that embody different forms of presence is a part of his oeuvre.

Following the thread of creating an experiential space, there are two statements that I confer with when thinking about Leonardo Drew's practice. In the Washington Post interview titled "A TRASH COURSE IN SCULPTURE: Leonardo Drew Elevates the Value of Junk," by Michael O'Sullivan, this article gives the reader a hint to how Leonardo Drew thinks when he creates. The first quote from the artist himself that struck my attention was "The grid is my basis of sanity. Otherwise it would be just noise. I mean, these things are loud, but if you know what to listen for, they'll speak to you" (O'Sullivan G01). Many of my pieces have an underlying presence of the 'grid' he mentions: whether that shows itself in a physical structural framework or a conceptual grid that my process is based on.

The second quote that stood out to me was, "Drew alternately calls his works 'mirrors', implying that whatever you see in them is a reflection of yourself (like Rorschach ink blots), and 'emotional visualizations'" (O'Sullivan G01). This presents itself throughout all of his work,

starting with how he numbers his pieces. By giving non-representational art a number instead of a title, he provides the viewer the space to create their own narrative and the opportunity to fabricate their own connection to the experience at hand. I reference a version of this philosophy within my own art practice. This is visible in my *Isolation* installation.

This piece is an experiential installation that a single viewer can enter. Consisting of found wood, the structure embodies a nest-like shape. This installation explores the presence and feeling of isolation during the COVID-19 global pandemic. By dispersing the branches, this emphasizes the feeling of confinement. This is reminiscent of the newly adopted reality of being able to see out your window but not being allowed to go outside. The wood chosen for this piece consists of trees native to New Jersey. Connecting to my concept, this choice of material bridges the emotional experience of isolation to the physical location in which I experienced it. This work is a mirror and an emotional visualization of the reality in which it was created. And when given the chance, it will serve as a space for others to interact with and reflect on their own emotional visualizations of the experience at hand.

This philosophy of creating a ‘mirror’ and an ‘emotional visualization’ has exhibited itself in different forms within my past works. Specifically, this idea was prominent in my *Fragmented Self Reflections* installation. For this installation I created a small dark space for viewers to enter. Inside, I installed hanging mirror shards from the ceiling of the space, which forced viewers to manipulate the positioning of their bodies to adapt to the environment. From one corner I had a video projection playing on a loop. When the projection hit the mirrors the reflection was scattered throughout the space. The mirrors confronted the viewers with a fragmented reflection of themselves. *Fragmented Self Reflections* was a meditation of the frame of mind I was in at that moment in time, and invited the viewer to contemplate on their own individual experience in

the space. In constructing these installations, usage of space and response to the environment are prominent in my decision-making.

When planning a project, the relationship of the body to space is eminent in my choice making. Most of my works are moderate to large scale, as I tend to think in feet rather than inches. Working at this scale gives the viewer an opportunity to take part in a full body experience. When thinking about how I collaborate with space, I focus on how our bodies let us perceive art. I consider how our bodily experience affects and shifts how we experience the world and environment around us. This is active in my *Just One Bottle* installation. Walking through a narrow spiral path of cut up water bottles, participants tended to shift the positioning of their bodies to avoid getting caught. Reaching the center, they found themselves entirely consumed by the mass of plastic. Surrounded by the evidence of plastic waste, the viewer had the opportunity to reevaluate the impact of single use plastic products on the environment.

When creating installations, a response to the environment in which they were made is always present. I start by calibrating my mind and awareness to the environment that surrounds me. This presents itself in one of two ways: how the society around me shapes the environment versus how that affects me in return. For instance, while studying abroad in Siena, Italy, the artwork I made during that time period was a raw response to my environment and daily exposures. Having the experience of being completely immersed within an unfamiliar environment for four months, most of my artwork revolved around personal reflection of my standing within that culture. I brought to attention my reflection of the invisibility of minority groups, such as LGBTQ+ people and identities, within that culture. A primary example of one of my reflection pieces was my site specific installation titled, *Metamorphosis: Gender & Identity*. This installation took place inside a nondescript closet in the hallway of my school. I chose this

specific site in reference to the historic metaphor of the closet for LGBTQ+ oppression. Inside this closet I used recycled mirror shards, paint, creative writing, fabric, lighting, and sound to convey the theme of invisible gender identities in Italian culture, along with a personal reflection of my experience as a genderqueer person within that space. In transforming this closet, I created a space for those societal issues to have a moment of visibility, and created an environment that facilitated conversations on this topic between myself and native Sieneese community members.

A similar response to the environment also presents itself in my performance art. Within my current performance practice, I reference the dancer and choreographer Trisha Brown and the Trisha Brown Dance Company. Brown was an American dancer and choreographer and was one of the founders of the postmodern dance movement. She was a notable performer in the Judson Dance Theater. This theater was built on the rejection of the confines of modern dance, and promoted experimentalist artists and performers. “Brown was articulating an avant-garde view, one in which artists attack the elitism of high art in order to reconnect with ordinary people's everyday experience” (Burt 14). In her article “Three Pieces” written in 1975, Trisha Brown discusses three pieces of work that were pivotal points in her choreographic career. One piece that is included in this discussion is the performance titled *Roof Piece*. This piece took place in lower Manhattan on rooftops of buildings that spanned the length of nine blocks between West Broadway Street and White Street. Fifteen dancers took part, each positioned individually on a separate rooftop. Interacting with each other, the dancers participated in an extremely spread out game of telephone, passing their movements down the line to each other. Brown states, “Distance in an interior space is stopped or held by the walls of the room or curtains of the stage unless through illusion the boundaries of the given area are transcended. The *Roof Piece* occupies real distance and the boundaries transcended are those of the viewer’s eye.” (26).

Space and boundaries played a significant role in *Roof Piece*. Space acted as both a connector and a disassembler of movement. As movement phrases were passed down the line, the piece held a strong sense of connection. Beginning in one space, the movement traveled through the fifteen dancers to a completely new place. Space also acted as a faulty translator, making it difficult for the dancers to receive the precise movements, ultimately transforming the movement to a completely different form by the time it reached the last dancer. The select audiences for this piece were placed on two separate rooftops, neither of which could see this performance in its entirety. Placing the audience on the rooftops challenged them to view this space in an innovative way. "... if performing *Roof Piece* puts the roofs 'to use' and changed people's ideas about such spaces, the roofs themselves had their own effect not only on the movement material, but also on the performers themselves" (Burt 25).

In response to the COVID-19 global pandemic, the Trisha Brown Dance Company created a performance titled *Room/Roof Piece* based on the 1971 *Roof Piece* performance. The Trisha Brown Dance Company explains this piece stating, "*Roof Piece* uses distance to transcend the boundaries of a room, a stage, and the eye of a single viewer... In order to hold the integrity of the original work, dancers in *Room/Roof Piece* are limited to seeing one dancer on the screen. A separate screen capture collected the entire dance, from generation through termination" (Trisha Brown Dance Company). This piece is a monumental statement regarding the state of the world during this global pandemic, shifting the idea of space present in the 1971 performance to a global perspective. Likewise, my performance piece *6 Feet Apart* presents a similar response to COVID-19.

Calibrating my body and focus to the state of the global environment, I created this performance in response to the current state of social communication and physical distance

caused by the pandemic. Within my performance, I explored the relation and interaction between five performers in a constructed space, and challenged the perception of human interaction.

Referencing Trisha Brown's *Roof Piece*, I refer to the quote mentioned above stating, "*Roof Piece* uses distance to transcend the boundaries of a room, a stage, and the eye of a single viewer" (Trisha Brown Dance Company).

Focusing on the presence of distance and space, I performed with my entire family and set a boundary requiring all performers to remain at least 6 feet apart throughout the duration of the performance. Along with keeping distance, performers were required to wear facemasks for the duration of the piece. Performing in my backyard, we confronted the contradiction of transcending the boundaries of a room, whilst being constricted to the boundaries of our property line due to the mandated quarantine. Interacting with one another through the exchange of movement, performers had the option to mirror movement, respond to others/space, pause/exist, observe, and/or move independently. Using yarn connected to our bodies, we each moved through space connecting the yarn to surrounding fence posts, showing our overlapping paths of connections and traces that we leave within a shared space. By the end of the performance, what remained was an overwhelming mass of yarn filling the space, signifying the amount of interaction that occurs between a seemingly small amount of people in a constricted space. *6 Feet Apart* served as a reflection of the new performance we must take on in our daily lives in quarantine, and brings light to how our movement and existence have been altered throughout this process.

Incorporating themes of reflection, transformation, and environment, I challenge the viewer to shift their relationship with the space that exists between art and themselves and to engage in an experience of reflection and self-discovery. Confronting these themes in three distinct forms,

each piece presents its own distinct interpretation of this commonality. Within my *Absence* sculpture, the motif of memory and transformation reveals itself through the manipulation process of materials. Embodied in my *Isolation* installation, the theme of reflection and presence is attainable through a constructed environment, inviting the viewer to enter and explore the feeling of isolation and confinement. Encompassed throughout my *6 Feet Apart* performance piece, transformation and environment is visible through the performers individual choice making, along with the conceptual backing and when it was performed in art history. In response to my thesis work, I plan to continue my studies of environment and space, further my exploration of tactile relationship to process, and facilitate a deeper investigation of the physical fabrication of memories and reflections.

APPENDIX



Cornelia Parker, *Cold Dark Matter: An Exploded View*, Multimedia Installation. 1991. Tate Modern London Gallery.



Leonardo Drew, *Number 8*, Multimedia Sculpture. 1988.



Trisha Brown, *Roof Piece*, Dance Performance, 1971. NYC Soho District. Photographed by Babette Mangolte.

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## LIST OF ARTWORK

1. *Absence*, 2020  
Multimedia sculpture  
Found wood, recycled fabric,  
recycled paper, recycled plastic bags  
6' × 6' × 9'  
Full Shot Front



2. *Absence*, 2020  
Multimedia sculpture  
Found wood, recycled fabric,  
recycled paper, recycled plastic bags  
6' × 6' × 9'  
Full Shot Back



3. *Absence*, 2020  
Multimedia sculpture  
Found wood, recycled fabric,  
recycled paper, recycled plastic bags  
6' × 6' × 9'  
Detail #1



4. *Absence*, 2020  
Multimedia sculpture  
Found wood, recycled fabric,  
recycled paper, recycled plastic bags  
6' × 6' × 9'  
Detail #2



5. *Absence*, 2020  
Multimedia sculpture  
Found wood, recycled fabric,  
recycled paper, recycled plastic bags  
6' × 6' × 9'  
Detail #3



6. *Absence*, 2020

Multimedia sculpture

Found wood, recycled fabric,  
recycled paper, recycled plastic bags

6' × 6' × 9'

Detail #4



7. *Isolation*, 2020

Outdoor Installation

Found wood, spray paint

6.5' × 6.5' × 7.25'

Full Shot Front #1



8. *Isolation*, 2020

Outdoor Installation

Found wood, spray paint

6.5' × 6.5' × 7.25'

Full Shot Front #2



9. *Isolation*, 2020

Outdoor Installation

Found wood, spray paint

6.5' × 6.5' × 7.25'

Full Shot Back #1



10. *Isolation*, 2020

Outdoor Installation

Found wood, spray paint

6.5' × 6.5' × 7.25'

Full Shot Back #2



11. *Isolation*, 2020

Outdoor Installation

Found wood, spray paint

6.5' × 6.5' × 7.25'

Detail #1



12. *Isolation*, 2020  
Outdoor Installation  
Found wood, spray paint  
6.5' × 6.5' × 7.25'  
Detail #2



13. *Isolation*, 2020  
Outdoor Installation  
Found wood, spray paint  
6.5' × 6.5' × 7.25'  
Detail #3



14. *Isolation*, 2020  
Outdoor Installation  
Found wood, spray paint  
6.5' × 6.5' × 7.25'  
Detail #4



15. *6 Feet Apart*, 04/25/20

Performance Piece

Duration: 2 Hours

Performers: Lauren Ferrara,  
Megan Ferrara, Mary Ellen Ferrara,  
Richard Ferrara, Ian Ferrara

30.3' × 26'

Full Shot #1



16. *6 Feet Apart*, 04/25/20

Performance Piece

Duration: 2 Hours

Performers: Lauren Ferrara,  
Megan Ferrara, Mary Ellen Ferrara,  
Richard Ferrara, Ian Ferrara

30.3' × 26'

Full Shot #2



17. *6 Feet Apart*, 04/25/20

Performance Piece

Duration: 2 Hours

Performers: Lauren Ferrara,  
Megan Ferrara, Mary Ellen Ferrara,  
Richard Ferrara, Ian Ferrara

30.3' × 26'

Detail #3



18. *6 Feet Apart*, 04/25/20

Performance Piece

Duration: 2 Hours

Performers: Lauren Ferrara,  
Megan Ferrara, Mary Ellen Ferrara,  
Richard Ferrara, Ian Ferrara

30.3' × 26'

Detail #4

