CONSIDERING *THE CONFESSIONAL*: SPACES OF LEARNING AND OBJECTS TO MOVE WITH

BY

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THESIS

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ABSTRACT

This thesis embraces its form as a means for recognizing and representing the work of *The Confessional* mobile art gallery. Comprised of seven interlocking pieces, *The Confessional* was designed to be moved in and out of spaces with ease provided it was built out of light materials and for a tool-less assembly. The space was built in the summer of 2018 by a team of artists and designers including Ahu Yolac, Angela Inez Baldus, Henry Wilson, and Krannert Art Museum’s exhibit and installation expert Walter Wilson. Following its construction, The Confessional has played host to artists Erin Hayden, Lila Ann Dodge, Adrian Wong, Catalina Hernández Cabal, Paulina Camacho Valencia, Alicia De Léon, and Sarah Travis. These artists have worked to collaborate with the space as it has been positioned in various locations including the Sipyard, an experimental outdoor bar located in downtown Urbana, Illinois, Monaco, an artist run gallery spaced located in St. Louis Missouri, and the Link Gallery, a commons located between the School of Art + Design at the University of Illinois and the Krannert Art Museum.

As an artist and pedagogue, I am interested in the pedagogical function of art which is shaped by the spaces and objects which inform our understanding of what we know. I trace my understanding of *The Confessional* and my personal relationship with the gallery to better explain the varying ways that it can be known and understood. I believe that *The Confessional* is one of many things that’s meaning shifts through the contexts in which we view it. I make visible this shift in meaning by describing *The Confessional*’s materiality, mapping its transformation from an idea to an object, anthropomorphizing and interviewing it, and sharing experiences and relationships which were informed by the making of the space and the taking of space from one place to another each time it is made again. Keywords: *questions, art, knowing, people, objects*
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

If I could get away with this section being the biggest and boldest section of the paper I would. Many ideas are continuously being formed and shared by multiple people. The idea which prompted the making of The Confessional started this way and my work continues to be formed by many. I spent a lot of time wondering about the ways that this space has come to be known by graciously considering the conversations had with and around the space. These conversations have informed what I know about entire experience, the process making the object, and formation of my reflections in this paper. I refer to the people who actively participated in the making of The Confessional throughout the entirety of this paper, but in reality, none of this would have been possible without all of the people I will list. Some of these conversations have been brief and others long. Some of the conversations have been through e-mail, others in school, and others happened in the comfort of my home. With all this said, and in no particular order of significance, I would like to thank the following people with whom The Confessional and I have conversed: Jennifer Bergmark, Catalina Hernández Cabal, Ahu Yolac, Shivani Bhalla, David Baldus, Pamela Baldus, Joshua Baldus, Michael Baldus, Paulina Camacho, Hannah Ayers, Ruth Nicole Brown, Jenny Foster, Alicia De Léon, Erin Hayden, Jeff Robinson, Allison Lacher, Mel Cook, Jeremy Armstrong, Natalia Villanueva Linares, Deniz Arsan, Zack Tucker, Rachel Storm, Matthew Cho, Walter Wilson, Henry Wilson, Elisabeth Horan, Sarah Travis, Ellen de Waard, Alan Mette, Michael Parsons, Kiley Reed Black, Audra Weinstein, Will Arnold, Melissa Pokorny and the University of Illinois’ School of Art + Design Visitor’s Committee, Yunling Man, Chris Higgins, Anke Pinkert, Ashli Anda, the University of Illinois’ Graduate Employee Organization, the Urbana Public Arts Program, the Illinois Program for Research in the Humanities, Elliott Stokes, Paul Kenneth, Conor Murphy, Emma Jebe, Jody
Stokes-Casey, Sarah Richter, Alyssa Bralower, Conrad Bakker, Ross Roadruck, Patricia Leon Quecan, Lila Ann Dodge, Adrian Wong, SOLHOT, Bianca Xunsie, Laura Hetrick, the Monaco board of directors, Ryan Griffis, Vicky Shikova, Kayla Huenenburg Akyuz, Madison Jordan Ciaccio, Francesca Fox, the Lucero family, Sara Kramer, Kendra Paitz, and Jorge Lucero. The way these lists get formed I feel is prone to allowing someone to slip through the cracks and go unaccredited for their work. I am fairly confident I could have missed someone in the process of compiling this list and I want to clearly acknowledge this. Because of the many collaborations The Confessional has taken a part of, the number of people who are responsible for making it happen is large and expanding (likely further than my knowledge). Thank you to everyone who came to one of the events in The Confessional and supported the artists who engaged the space. Thank you everyone who helped grant funding to The Confessional. Thank you to those teachers and artists who have done as Audre Lorde calls us to do through living and speaking your truths.
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Chapter One: What? (Definition)

“What is it?” (Video essay transcription.)

…What is your research? What is your art? ...The Confessional exactly? ... the question you are trying to answer? ... the goal? ... the desired outcome?

I struggle when asked what is..., not because I am searching desperately for an answer and grasping onto nothing with each reach, but because there are many directions to reach, many ways of holding, and as I look back again and again to consider the many theories to hold, all the while, I only have two hands for holding. Of course, this explanation itself may seem to be a deviation – a tactic for circling further away from a definition, straying from the prospect of adhering to a solid claim. And to this I say maybe there is some truth. And to you – the skeptic—I say please consider ruminating in the space of not knowing while I conjure a list of possible answers to the question “what is” which I dance with daily.

What is The Confessional?

It is believed to be true that seahorses mate for life. In fact, upon finding their life partner, seahorses will link tails and dance continuously for eight hours while changing colors. This dance is repeated daily in an abbreviated fashion. The couple awakes not knowing whether the other is alive or dead. The dance is what reunites the two, tails twisted, being together.

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1 Find full length video by visiting https://vimeo.com/331868216.
The Confessional

1. A mobile gallery space built in the summer of 2018 by Angela Baldus, Walter Wilson, Henry Wilson, and Ahu Yolac. Originally conceptualized in December of 2017, the space grew from an idea prompted by a class taught by Dr. Jennifer Bergmark called Exhibition Practices. While imagining a space that would activate conversation around accessibility, art, location, institutions, and mobility, a small and intimate room or booth came into consideration. Building from here the correlation between this space and that of a confessional booth brought both conceptual and formal opportunities for growth of the idea into an object. The day the idea was born classmates Angela Baldus, Siegfried J Oyales, and Hannah Ayers dreamed without constraints. As Baldus moved to consider the idea in practice she began to work more closely with Jennifer Bergmark and proposed drawings and models of the space to Krannert Art Museum’s head exhibition installation expert Walter Wilson. During the Spring of 2018, Wilson, Bergmark, and graphic designer Zack Tucker became important collaborators in the process of turning this idea into a feasible plan which was granted funding from the Urbana Public Arts Program, as well as facilities and space from the University of Illinois School of Art + Design. Currently the mobile gallery is owned and operated by Angela Baldus – the artist and head curator of the space.

3. Closet-like piece of furniture used in the Roman Catholic Church and some other 
liturgically ‘high’ denominations for auricular confession (Confessional, 2009).

4. The Confessional is a mobile gallery space built to exist within other spaces.
   Comprised of three white walls, a screen, and a closed curtain—the space invites 
artists, makers, thinkers, and collaborations to engage audience members, one at a 
time, with ideas related to conversation, confession, and criticality.

5. The Confessional imagines the “what if (?)” presence of something else, which can be 
described yet not defined. This something else is perhaps the agency of the art object 
or the pedagogical function of art—or maybe it is an individual confession of graces, 
grievances, or cradled guilt onto a conscious mind (the viewer), a conceived being 
(the artist), or thing (the art object). The something else is possibly to-be-determined 
or arguably nonexistent without human agency.

6. A space designed to study intimacy between a person, an artwork, the artist, and the 
place where they all meet.

7. A site of learning.
Chapter Two – Who? (An interview with *The Confessional*)

Please make yourself a comfortable seat before reading this interview.

*Chapter foreword by Angela Inez Baldus*

I am interested in people and how people make meaning. I am often unsure of how to describe the ways that these interests become entangled in the work I do. Within me there is a fear that by saying *something* important is happening, I will risk sacrificing the sincerity and humility of the work. Defining the *something* happening sometimes presents the *something* as a commodity, often closes the *something* off from multiple interpretations, and usually takes away its ambiguity rendering its malleability powerless. Lately, I have started to feel less comfortable with language because of the very possible act of flattening theories. Some theories hold what feels like endless possibilities to explain experiences or phenomena that we encounter in practice. Other theories hand themselves to poetic conventions wielding our imaginations into new directions. I am very interested in what happens when we experience the poetry of theory, just as I am interested in possibilities and impossibilities that theory can help make visible. However, there are risks that are taken when we take a theory out of its original context and apply it to something new. Some of the language in this paper is taking that risk. Why take the risk when it is uncomfortable, flirting with a possible misinterpretation and failure? Because, like an artist must make the first mark on the paper to see if that mark should stay or instead they should draw another, sometimes we need to attempt to hold onto the *something* that we may never fully understand. We may know a *thing* about it after all. Taking these risks is intended to open theories to multiple interpretations. I know one day someone who has held onto a theory much longer, or knows a history key to understanding its meaning, and perhaps has read the theory in different contexts (making new meanings) may come along and highlight a moment
that the risk taken was effectively steamrolling its meaning and its interpretative possibilities. This is what I mean by flattening of theories. This is a risk that using language openly and differently than used before takes. I invite you to think about not knowing the context crucial to how the word’s meaning is made as a way of looking closer at what it could mean in different contexts. What does not knowing ask of us? What permissions can we take when we trust the truths of what we do and what we do not know? In the book *On Certainty* philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein (1969/2009, p.333) states,

80. The *truth* of my statements is the test of my *understanding* of these statements.

81. That is to say: if I make certain false statements, it becomes uncertain whether I understand them.

82. What counts as an adequate test of a statement belongs to logic. It belongs to the description of the language-game.

83. The *truth* of certain empirical propositions belongs to our frame of reference.

While reading feminist scholars, poets, and artists Donna Haraway, Claudia Rankine, Audre Lorde, and Tierra Whack (to name a few), I have found myself thinking about how they each echo the importance of the work they do by both showing and saying their truths. I know of the responsibility to acknowledge my frame of reference, read close, and look back. I choose to test my understanding of truth statements because I know this responsibility. Audre Lorde (1984) said, “but primarily for us all it is necessary to teach by living and speaking those truths which we believe and know beyond understanding” (p. 43). Lorde prompts us to imagine the truths that may not always be seen, take concrete form, or be made logical the way Wittgenstein describes
philosophy’s relationship to language and certainty. Nonetheless, these truths are as much present and important to both living and speaking.

My favorite writing happens when poetic devices are employed, when the entry to the text is enveloping, and when the form taken facilitates its understanding, often using language that is felt. The Confessional is a thing whose being is contextual. Here I use the word being to specifically mean the way The Confessional is understood and how the space functions in conversation with other exhibition spaces, the pedagogical function of art objects, and human experience of forms that call our attention to contexts. Depending on where, who, and how The Confessional is in conversation with these ideas it may become understood differently. In this sense, what The Confessional is (which definition or description we can refer to understand it) refers to its being. It may be one of the seven descriptions I have provided in chapter one, a combination of these options, or perhaps even an entirely new option all together. What I imagine The Confessional to be now versus what it will be later will change. Currently, The Confessional is close to me, friends of mine, collaborators, and our collective human agency. It is felt. I like the idea of thinking through the object as an anthropomorphized thing, because of how I have been living with it and feeling its presence. When considering an anthropomorphized object, I immediately think of Chairry from the television series Pee-wee’s Playhouse (1986). I am drawn to how goofy and fun Chairry is and in my experience, playfulness, like what is seen in the Playhouse, is important to living comfortably in a space. Please do not make the mistake of thinking that Chairry is making light of research interests (life interests), people, and how

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2 Pee-Wee’s Playhouse was a popular children's television show inspired by The Pee-Wee Herman Show which aired on HBO and was aimed at a more adult audience. The show has been championed for both its creativity and inclusion of diverse characters human and nonhuman. I have personally continued to watch the 1988 Christmas special every December.
meaning is made. The example I use is important, because from my experience it is Chairry who
gave me permission to see things we live with as forms that inform our lives – affect our living.
Looking at these forms and talking about what we see is one way of interpreting and engaging in
what we know to be true about the world. Through entertaining ideas about who we are (the
human and nonhuman) I hope to offer you a point of entry into what these things might mean.

The way that artists look at things is important. This looking is different than, and
sometimes similar to, how an anthropologist, sociologist, scientist, or botanist would look at
something. When Wittgenstein considers truths inside of their frame of reference there is the
possibility to expand our understanding of different ways of knowing. Perhaps what I find most
interesting about speaking to and working with artists is the varied approaches artists take to
representing what they know. An artists’ investment in their work maybe untraceable,
ambiguous, and possess a kind of magical allure which could be the result of a very brief
moment of inspiration or, on the contrary, the investigation of a relationship developed
laboriously over the course of many years. This range of experiences and reflections present a
possibility to think through how we understand what something is as fluid and constantly in
formation. When asked to respect each other, what and who is part of the each other? Whose
frame of reference are we thinking through and whose truths are we stating? If we expand the
pool of possible human and nonhuman examples, then is it possible to see things new? To look
again. To imagine others looking. I am nervous while walking this tightrope that shifts power
relationships between people and objects. I am nervous to play with metaphors because of the
power words have. But I think that this shift in understanding is important, and as such, so is
being nervous.
For example, recently, I listened to a visiting scholar talk about a project where they invited people to imagine anthropomorphized objects and what they know. People became responsible for the objects through naming and adopting them. The intention was to prescribe value to things that otherwise may be considered trash or abandoned. Because most of the things being adopted did not represent the human form they were unlike the Charlie-in-the-box from the island of misfit toys in *Rudolf the Red Nosed Reindeer* (Muller, 1964) or the Stepin Fetchit marionette doll in the *Silly Symphony* short *Broken Toys* (Sharpsteen, 1935) which as an example poses issues of Black representation (Lehman, 2002) by reinforcing power structures and racism through depicting stereotypes. Nevertheless, while the objects initially seemed to avoid making meaning through their cultural context, there was still something lost in the lack of consideration or criticality towards what the process of naming and adopting means. The cultural context and power relations are still present and so considering what the meaning of the work is cannot be complete without looking at the work in relationship to the power of naming and adopting. After all, who is doing the naming and adopting? Or maybe the better question is why is this work important and who is it for? These questions, twisted into a singular thread, should act as a through line to most scholarly work and provide a unifying place from which to begin thinking about the work scholars and artists do. While in conversation with my advisor, I find myself often realizing that the questions he asks me are rooted in why and who. By expanding the who question, is it possible to share the why through and across differences, emphasizing the importance of the work?

On the same day I heard the visiting scholar’s talk, later in the evening, I happened to watch season 6, episode 32 of *Adventure Time*, titled “Friends Forever” (Ristaino & Sanchez, 2015). In this episode, the character Ice King’s things all come to life after the Ancient Sleeping
Magi of Life visits the Ice King’s castle. There are a few moments in this episode that really made me think about the impossibility of knowing the thoughts of an object and when this impossibility may matter. For instance, Ice King has a difficult time communicating with the objects because they seem to be already using language that is more abstract and theoretical than the Ice King cares to engage. When attempting to break the ice with humor, the objects turn away from and scoff at the Ice King. The lamp character, which is a mediatary character between the rest of the objects and Ice King, suggests that the Ice King does research about the objects in order to know how to engage with them. This proves itself a challenge. This challenge is important. I think this is reflective of a challenge that is present when interpreting an object, claiming to know the object, attempting to anthropomorphize the object, and also assuming that the relationship will always work out, improve, or create something new. This challenge is also present when claiming to know people. Perhaps, instead of leading to understanding, this claim will lead to destruction. Perhaps some things always remain uncertain. I think that these challenges are very similar to the challenges that present themselves when doing research. Furthermore, this challenge is omnipresent when the subjects of your research know things you will never know and you claim to know the subjects.

There is a lot of power that I take when voicing *The Confessional* – it is a type of representation. *The Confessional*, in interview form, is what I know and understand it to be. This interview follows forms that I have been living close to for years. The first is similar to an episode of *Fresh Air* with Terry Gross – the conversation unfolds with attentive listening between me and the thing. The second part of the interview appropriates questions from a *Frieze* (2018) interview with Martha Rosler (pg. 198). I have included Rosler’s interview in the footnotes as a kind of caveat. The questions and answers are intended to be read together and in
relation to how each influences the meaning of the other. This inclusion provides an example of one way artists use interviews to say what they want about art and the world. The way I imagine *The Confessional* answering these questions and contributing to this discourse is different. I use these questions as an enabling constraint towards creatively thinking through who *The Confessional* is. The overarching question present here is this – if the object has its own agency, then what do we know about the work it is doing, and from this frame of reference, how is this work made visible and invisible?

**The Interview**

This is an interview with *The Confessional* and I am Angela Inez Baldus. Today I will sit with *The Confessional*, a mobile art gallery space built in the summer of 2018 and discuss ideas about where and who *The Confessional* is. You might be familiar with the mobile gallery space which has most recently exhibited the work of artist Erin Hayden in her solo show titled *Ask Questions*. The gallery, Hayden’s work, and Hayden herself traveled from the Sipyard in Urbana, Illinois to Monaco in St. Louis, Missouri last fall. During this time *The Confessional* made its debut. Within the months following this debut several reflections were written. I would like to share an excerpt of one of these reflections with you now. In this narrative poem *The Confessional* gives a voice to its materiality.\(^3\)

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\(^3\) At this moment of interview, you are invited to flip to the last pages of this chapter where you will find figures representing the material poems that I reference in the interview or continue reading the conversation as it unfolds.
Angela Inez Baldus

I wanted to start by saying thank you for being here today, spending time to talk to me and share ideas about the who and where of The Confessional. There are so many questions that I have personally about this, but I think, to follow the excerpt that was shared with our listeners, it is appropriate to ask why you chose to write about your experiences through what I will describe as the anthropomorphic feelings of the materials which you are made of?

The Confessional Mobile Gallery

Wow, yes. What looks like a heavy question may actually be quite simple and, sticking with the metaphor and the materials – light. Simply stated, I have come to understand who I am through that which defines me quite literally and that which is experienced situationally. The materials I am made of are felt in moments that stand inside of an understanding of histories specific to what I know. In the excerpt you played I am speaking of hands which touch the coroplast that make up my walls. Once assembled these walls hold the bodies to which the hands belong. Of course, these bodies belong to people and these people bring their own individual knowledge of what I am to our collective experience. In these moments I am touched metaphorically and physically. I am understood through both my materiality and immateriality.

AIB

Yes, and one of my favorite lines is in the poem is written from the perspective of the screws, when you (or they) say, “The only things I know about left and right are directly correlated to how deeply rooted I have become”. Here it seems as though the screws are collectively contemplating the larger idea of The Confessional. This idea to me is one of many, but
nevertheless one of the most prominent ideas. It is the idea that what we know is rooted in time
and experiences specific to our place and physical existence. Do you think this is a theme you try
to address in the poems as the materials contemplate their individual purpose through present and
past experiences?

CMG

Recently I have found myself grappling with who I am in relationship to everyone I know. I
started by thinking of the people I know, but quickly found that claiming to know these people
was often more difficult than claiming to know a specific moment with each person. The
moment often led me to remembering something sensational about the experience we had
together. I do not mean sensational here to be descriptive of an exciting or excellent event, but
rather the memory relating to senses which often, for me, is also exciting and maybe even
excellent. All this to say, yes, I think that in communicating the ideas surrounding what I know,
what you know, and how we share these knowledges, it is helpful to think with and through the
materials and what they know. It is really a political move as much as it is poetic.

AIB

I may be reaching here, but upon hearing the words politics and poetry in the same sentence I
immediately think of the feminist slogan, “The Personal is Political” which in turn brings me to
thinking about Audre Lorde and the Combahee River Collective. Strangely enough, and perhaps
this bit is serendipitous, upon asking my advisor suggestions for courses that would expose me to
more poetry and help me become a better writer, he suggested I take a course with Dr. Ruth
Nicole Brown. It just so happened Dr. Brown was teaching an undergraduate course that
semester called Race, Gender, and Power. I signed up as a graduate independent study blindly having faith in my advisor’s recommendation, but a little bit weary of the amount of poetry I would be reading or writing. Turns out that Audre Lorde weaves words and politics together better than I had ever heard and my experience in that class was personally transformative. Put simply, what is it about you, *The Confessional*, that wishes to do something similarly political or personal?

**CMG**

There are many ways to answer this question and each speaks to a different aspect of how I came to be. First, there is the idea. Before I was an object, I was an idea. The idea prompted the process of making me a physical object. The process was informed by how several people interpreted the idea. As soon as other people became part of the process of making me I began to understand the collaborative aspects which continue to inform what I am. During my construction into an object there were constraints which shaped the form I could take. Some of these constraints are political in the ways they are connected to structures of power – specifically money and access. The way I am intended to function shifts depending on the way I am engaged, who engages me, and what they hope to get from me – the contexts. The example you bring up refers to people who were really living, searching, and creating for other people. I do not imagine that what I do is ever truly going to amount to the work of someone as brilliant and influential as Audre Lorde or any person for that matter, but I do imagine that the people who engaged in interpreting what I am and can be are doing work that resonates with the example you gave. The idea of what I am flirts with how to make visible some of this work – how to sing, dance, smell, and touch it. This visibility is limited and temporary, after it happens, there is only a story left to
tell. The imagined experience moves and pushes for thinking about what a shift in power looks like. Data, which here is whatever makes the work visible, is recollection of the experience, an object left over, or a photograph that attempts to document what happened. The experience is relational and contextual – existing in time and space. It is fleeting. The way we reflect on the experience is again contingent on an interpretation of that experience, sometimes collective and other times individual but, always in relationship to what we know. The interpretation becomes new in this moment, separate from the original moment – and again, it too, takes on new meanings based on how it is held (told, described, shown).

AIB

I am interested in the way that meaning is shaped by forms. Reflecting on the definition of yourself as an art gallery and curatorial space I am going to take the liberty of shifting this conversation towards the form of an artist interview. The following questions I will ask you are lifted from an interview with artist Martha Rosler I found on Frieze magazine’s website. I am aware that this shift in tone may feel jarring but believe that moving into a new space will reveal different ways that you are operating as a gallery, an artwork, and something else less definitive.

What images keep you company in the space where you work?4

Frieze: What images keep you company in the space where you work?  
Martha Rosler: Prints of engravings from photos of Frederick Douglass and Harriet Tubman and an old poster from the San Francisco Mime Troupe. A black and white photo by Dona Ann McAdams, and another of Eleanor and David Antin on their wedding day.
I work in many spaces. Because different people and environments make up these spaces, the images that keep me company change. As an idea I surrounded myself with different images than I do now as an object. As an object I have become something other than the idea I was based on because what I have learned through this transformation. Presently, on this page, I am working within a digital space or maybe (depending on how you are accessing this interview) a physical sheet of paper, and also, within the space of a conversation. Most of these spaces are not physically tangible, but (and I see my existence as proof of this) the interpretation or idea of these spaces can be represented and engaged through a physical object that is felt, touched, and affected by its environment.

AIB

What was the first piece of art that really mattered to you?\(^5\)

CMG

Something about the term piece seems strange to me, but for the sake of answering the question I will pause and think about what this could mean, to me, as an object. For me to be interpreted and used in the way that I was intended to be I would have to say that there is not one specific piece of art that stands out as mattering to me more than others, but there is a moment when questions, like this one, began to matter. The first time I asked myself, “What is art?” might be

\(^5\)F: What was the first piece of art that really mattered to you?  
MR: A drawing of Marley’s ghost from an illustrated version of Charles Dickens’s *A Christmas Carol* (1843). I was four or five when I first saw it, and it haunted me for years. Like the gaze of the Medusa, but male.
the first “piece of art” (in the way you use the term) that really mattered. Because of this I think that Erin Hayden very appropriately titled her show *Ask Questions*. Hayden’s work is about formal material investigations, but it is also about wonder, play, and people. The artist was interested in engaging the audience in questions about what the images mean and where they came from, but also in how they operate within the space. The title encouraged questions and so did the artist. The question, “what is art?” is an interesting one to think about in this situation. A digital collage became the curtain to the space and a found pewter fairy sat in my window so to interrupt or influence the conversation that might be had between the inside and outside of the space. These physical things were not the only art that was being engaged. The performance of the artist during the time of the opening, the relations built between the artist and those who moved me, and me (the sculptural object that became a gallery for the purposes of this event) were also made and engaged. I should mention here too that the only way to see the work was to attend an opening which took place in two locations – a Thursday evening in Urbana, Illinois and a Friday evening in St. Louis, Missouri. The two openings felt distinctly different from each other. I believe the differences were contextual.

AIB

If you could live with only one piece of art what would it be?

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If you could live with only one piece of art what would it be?  
**F:** If you could live with only one piece of art what would it be?  
**MR:** I am a serial monogamist so, every now and then, I’d have to change whatever caught my fancy. At this moment, I’d choose Cecelia Condit’s film *Possibly in Michigan* (1983) or Max Almy’s video *Leaving the 20th Century* (1982).
This question seems fundamentally impossible based on what I know about art.

What do you wish you knew?

I wish I knew how to care for the moments that are given to me. I wish I knew how to do this. I believe that this care comes from a collaborative exchange. I believe it is an ongoing negotiation between what I know I am and what I am used for. Currently what I know I am is imagined through those who made me and what we have done together. I also wish that I knew what to do with the problem Boris Groys’(2016) posits when stating,

We are all aware of the fact that our civilization is based on inequality, but we tend to think that this inequality can be corrected by upward mobility – by letting people realize their talents, their gifts. In other words, we are ready to protest against the inequality dictated by the existing systems of power, but at the same time we tend to accept the notion of unequal distribution of natural gifts and talents. However, it is obvious that belief in natural gifts and creativity is the worst form of social Darwinism, biologism, and, actually, neoliberalism, with its notion of human capital. In his published lecture

7

F: What do you wish you knew?
MR: Astronomy.
series, *The Birth of Biopolitics*, Michel Foucault stresses that the neoliberal concept of human capital has a utopian dimension – that it is, in fact, the utopian horizon of contemporary capitalism (p.57).

Because Groys (2016) seems hopeful at the end of this chapter of his book *In the Flow*, I have spent some time wondering about what it means to, “Aestheticize the world and at the same time act inside it” (p. 58). I have been wondering about how to aestheticize the world knowing about the art world and who has been historically recognized as a talented artist. I have been thinking about what it means to aestheticize in and outside of these historical understandings.

**AIB**

What should change?

**CMG**

This is a very big question that I can only begin to think through and, in conversations with others, imagine. Small changes are becoming more important to me and as an object whose construction is really quite simple, I can say small alterations have made big differences in the way I am accessed. Small gestures that look at who and why I have become what I am speak to this. For instance, my entry was made large enough to be wheelchair accessible. This was something that Walter Wilson brought the construction plan for my design. Walter was likely aware of this construction point because of his experiences working museums. By suggesting

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8

**F:** What should change?
**MR:** Ownership and distribution of resources.
this point during my construction Walter showed how he thinks with conversations around accessibility. This might seem small, but when thinking about who the space is for, it is really big. I believe there are moments, daily, that we can all think and look for small change which is really quite big.

AIB

What should remain the same?

CMB

There is a lot of power in claiming to know the answer to this question, but I believe the truest answer is love and with love comes care.

AIB

What could you imagine doing if you didn’t do what you do?

CMG

I could imagine I would be put to other uses such as providing shelter, privacy, or protection. I could be more utilitarian, less ambiguous, and more stationary. I could imagine this now, but if I did not do what I am doing currently, I could have never imagined anything at all. The answer to

________________________

9 F: What should stay the same?
MR: The ongoing human effort to build affiliations and inclusive communities.
10 F: What could you imagine doing if you didn’t do what you do?
MR: Research.
this question is compromised by what I already know about who I am. The form I have taken may not exist without doing what I do now.

AIB

What music are you listening to?\textsuperscript{11}

CMG

I am currently listening to Ryuichi Sakamoto but over that past few months I have listening to many different songs, conversations, and confessions. For instance, when I am not performing art gallery I have been deconstructed and stored within a studio space. In the studio I listen to critiques that carry through the walls, conversations between friends, and occasionally synchronized trip hop\textsuperscript{12}.

\textsuperscript{11} F: What music are you listening to?  
MR: As it happens, a sea shanty. But the last time I looked at this questionnaire, I was listening to Johann Sebastian Bach’s \textit{Musical Offering} (1747).

\textsuperscript{12} From the month of June 2018 to June 2019, \textit{The Confessional} listened to whatever was being played in the University of Illinois’ South Studio One. This mostly means that music played by artists living and taking space within this building were heard. These artists include Alicia De Léon, Elisabeth Horan, and Angela Inez Baldus. When \textit{The Confessional} says it listened to synchronized trip hop, it is referring to the various moments when Baldus and Horan synched their sound systems to play Portishead at the same time so it could be experienced through the whole building as one continuous performance. Find their Spotify playlists by following these links:  
\url{https://open.spotify.com/user/angelainezbaldus?si=xpQ04CuLQRQ0NvpZVeW4Q}  
\&  
\url{https://open.spotify.com/user/1257153600?si=FAYLWtozReGeiBFhFak45A}
AIB

What are you reading?

CMB

Perhaps it is more appropriate for me to ask you this question.

AIB

Ha! Yes, of course. I have to admit that the texts I have been engaging are broad. The things I have read recently range from those listed on syllabi to texts syllabi led me to. These texts have been intermixed with various other ideas I have personally sought out, encountered through proximity, or have been directed to through the rabbit hole. That said, I could list these texts in a dry fashion and you could grab a sheet of paper to quickly jot down ones you may not have heard of or those whose titles stand out. Or, you can look at something that I have made and would like to show you. Artist and pedagogue Jim Duignan (2012) released a SHoP publication which is free to digitally download through the Stockyard Institute Free Press titled a Primer on Informal Art Education and Community Learning as part of PROJECT: A Series of Chicago Primers in conjunction with The Southside Hub of Production (SHoP). My advisor Jorge Lucero gave me a copy recently. Inside there are interviews, essays, and photographs documenting

F: What are you reading?

F: What is art for?
MR: First of all, for the simultaneous complication and condensation of the burning questions we ask or should be asking. Second, for a sensory or cognitive jolt.
pedagogical art practices. There are also several “philosophies of insert maker’s name”. Each philosophy takes the form of a drawing — every word connected to another by lines weaving like a spider’s web. I have borrowed this form to make my own web of texts that have been near me during the making of you (The Confessional) and the making of me (what I know and believe to be true) within the past year. Many of these texts were introduced to me within the context of a class curriculum which I want to highlight through the way I have color coded this digital drawing. The green texts represent things I have engaged while taking classes with my advisor Dr. Jorge Lucero including both Art and Cultural Theory and Teaching Art at the College Level. The red texts were required reading for a class called Performing Publics co-taught by Dr. Chris Higgins and Dr. Anke Pinkert in the spring of 2018. The pink texts were read while taking Race, Gender, and Power a course taught by Dr. Ruth Nicole Brown in the fall of 2018. The orange texts were read during professor Ryan Griffis’ class Art and the Anthropocene also taken in the fall of 2018. The light blue texts represent things that I read outside of a course curriculum. The dark blue texts are selected texts from courses taken with Dr. Sarah Travis which I found particularly important to my understanding of who I am as an educator. The size and position of the titles are much more arbitrary even while choices were made to guide your experience through and around each work. There are several reasons why I have chosen to present the information in this form which include my love for word maps, my interest in making a data visualization (a project students I am teaching currently were asked to do), and my desire to figure a way to include the Futura typeface as silly and small homage to my advisor Jorge Lucero echoing his prolific use of the font. Perhaps this all sounds superfluous, but the point is to acknowledge the forms I am using as intentional conversations of their own. The form informs the understanding of the thing I am trying to communicate. The texts should be read in many
ways embracing their visual language and asserting this language as another way of communicating, knowing, and understanding. Please look to what I have titled, “Philosophy of The Confessional” and “Philosophy of Angela from years 2018-2019” as visual representations of the different nodes I am thinking with and through.

Some but not all of these texts are about art. I would argue that all of these texts are about people in some way. In relation to these ideas I pose to you another question from the Martha Rosler interview, all things considered and in a much different context, What is art for?
Figure 2: Angela Inez Baldus. (2019). *The Philosophy of Angela*. [acrylic paint, tracing paper, brads, cardstock]. Champaign, IL.
Figure 3: Angela Inez Baldus. (2019). The Philosophy of Angela. [acrylic paint, tracing paper, brads, cardstock]. Champaign, IL.
This question is difficult to answer without observing a specific moment, object, idea, or relationship. There is art that is for hanging on the walls of your home and then there is art that functions within museum walls. Art in museums and institutions usually reflects the mission of the museum. The audience museums attract through their mission varies from museum to museum and with most older museums their mission has changed throughout time. Differences between what the artist knows and what the audience knows sometimes changes the meaning of the work. Sometimes the art is pedagogical attempting to show or tell something to the audience that they may or may not already know. Experimental spaces and artist run spaces usually have much shorter lives allowing for more specific and nuanced missions. Calling something art might be what makes it art, but that claim is difficult to defend. This difficulty is dependent upon which discourse you engage. When considering art that is about not being art (non-art, bad art, bad painting), absurdity, or ambiguity, one almost always needs to still understand a canonical history of art. Sometimes this art is about forms and sometimes it is about imaginaries belonging to visual languages. Often it is political. Other times it is many things I have listed together and other things all together. There is art that is sold for millions of dollars to collectors and there is art that is impossible to commodify given its relationship to time and material. What is art for? Communication, expression, enjoyment, revolution, belief, exploration, nothing, knowing, and being. Probably all of this art I have described is for people. Sometimes humans advocating for nonhumans however expand how we think about what art is for.
Yes, I would have to agree that art is all of these things and also say that when the question, “what is art for?” is asked, I find it difficult to not immediately ask the follow up question “who is art for?”. In this interview you provide context, so we may develop a better understanding of who you are, who you have been defined by, and who has been engaged in the process of making and interpreting you. I believe you begin to touch on ideas about what this all means in relation to understanding art and making meaning. A lot of people’s understanding of art is based on forms which they are taught to engage with, revere, and critique in a specific way, in a historical and contextual experience. It is evident to me that through care and consideration you are trying to better understand what is important about these forms, the reasons we value them, and who is invited to be a part of this experience. What do we know from all of this? We could and should continue to ask this question, but for now I would like to thank you for your time and I hope that you will extend this thanks to all those who helped make you happen.
Chapter Three: Stories

There are several things that had to happen before The Confessional became something material. First, a plan had to be fully sketched out. The plan needed to be solid and feasible, because without a plan then the grant money would not have been attainable. Then, the grant money had to be awarded or the building of the space could not be afforded. Once the plan and money were a go, then it was a matter of attaining a space, access to facilities, and supportive assistance for building. While these things seem pretty straight forward, the matter in which they were attained was slow and tedious – requiring long waiting periods and various hoop jumping. It took six months to secure all the resources necessary. After this, the build took another couple of months, and after that, I started planning the first exhibition in the space. In this chapter I will theorize what happens when The Confessional moves. To do so it is important that I explain what I mean when I refer to the space moving. First, I am referring to the actual mobility of the space – the moment when it is carried from one place to another place. Second, I am referring to the moment when something is happening in the space – when a relationship between the thing (The Confessional) and outside things (spaces and people) forms. Finally, I use movement to refer to a shift in the contextual understanding of what the thing is and what it does differently based on the space it occupies.

In total there are three stories I would like to tell about The Confessional. First, there is the building of The Confessional. Then, there is The Confessional’s inaugural exhibition, Erin Hayden’s Ask Questions. Finally, I will talk about The Confessional’s participation in the Society for Art History and Archaeology’s graduate student conference Fictions and Frictions: The Power and Politics of Narrative. Concluding this chapter of vignettes, I will introduce what The Confessional plans to do at Franklin Middle School in April 2019 with SOLHOT, an arts-
based research collective, and Bianca Xunsie, a Chicago based comic artist. I will also explain how the project was designed to come to an end and propose some possible ways for the work to continue after the thing is no longer an active participant in my practice as an artist and educator and I am no longer that facilitator of its movement.

Figure 4: Zack Tucker. The Confessional Logo. [digital drawing]. 2018. Champaign, IL.
Chapter Three: Story One of Three: Starting with a Thank You

When I look back and consider how I got here, to the moment of writing about *The Confessional*, I find myself feeling the need to often begin with a list of people who I would like to thank. Something I have noticed about thinking through a list of thanks is this – with each name read aloud I can remember a moment when learning took place. If I practice reading these names aloud it is as if I am in effect mapping out my own personal transformation in relationship to the thing and how I have come to understand it. Additionally, it seems that what I know and understand about the world is a culmination of what I have learned to know and understand about everyone on the list of thanks. I begin here, emphasizing how important interpersonal relationships are to knowing, learning, and building things, because *The Confessional* never would have been built if the list of thanks did not exist and if Walter Wilson, Henry Wilson, Jennifer Bergmark, Zack Tucker, Rachel Storm, and Ahu Yolac’s names were not on this list.

Figure 5: The first model of The Confessional made to explain the project to Krannert Art Museum installation and exhibition expert Walter Wilson.
Before the space was built there was an idea. This idea possessed a desirable clarity which immediately exposed its need of a financial supporter. Luckily, the City of Urbana’s Public Arts Program is designed to support and distribute funds to local arts projects which promise to enrich, engage, and explore different collaborative forms of the arts in the community. *The Confessional* was a promising project with aims of doing such things. However, while the goals of the space are in line with many of the mission goals of the city’s arts program, I had never written a grant proposal before. Grant proposals require confidence and clarity. The idea should not only sound imaginative, it should also be entirely feasible. This feasibility should be obvious to an artist, a city councilperson, an accountant, and a community representative alike. The language should be inviting, exciting, and formatted to the needs of proposal guidelines, from its budget to its narrative. I was very nervous. And so, I leaned on support of those on my list of thanks. I reached out and asked questions of those who had jumped through hoops like these before. I will admit this process was not entirely comfortable. But, because Jennifer Bergmark, Rachel Storm, and Zack Tucker were graciously giving of their time and feedback I was able to put together a grant proposal which presented the project feasible and interesting enough to ensure the funding I needed to buy the materials to build the space. Because costs are difficult to account for and grant money is available, but not bottomless, the in kind time that Walter Wilson, Ahu Yolac, and Henry Wilson dedicated to the build of the project was an imperative part *The Confessional’s* creation and led to the successful byproduct of their labor.
Figure 6: Early materials chart researched and compiled by Angela Inez Baldus and Ahu Yolac

So how did these people become so important to *The Confessional* taking form? Each of the people I have mentioned above have come to the project with their own set of skills and experiences. Instead of relying on only what I know and have experienced, the fact that I was able to lean on them for support is key. In the process of leaning, *The Confessional* first began to move. This first movement is how *The Confessional* initially began to be understood in
correlation to interpersonal relationships and considering where these relationships happen. Here, is where I would like to take a moment to talk about how The Confessional is a specific thing within its materiality, but as an idea it took other forms and made other things come to be. By listing something I know now about each of the people on my list of thanks (from this part of the story) that I did not know before leaning on them for support, I will show you part of what I mean. However, to fully understand the depth and range of how each relationship has grown and developed you will have to use your imagination. There are simply too many possible stories to tell and not enough space to do so here in the body of this text. That said, the moments I have highlighted here are some of my favorite and I hope that you will understand why.

While working with Dr. Bergmark I eventually learned that in addition to being a wonderful resource to think through ideas about community engagement because of her experiences running art gallery spaces just outside of the city of Chicago and in Champaign-Urbana, she is also a harsh sound critic who developed a nuanced understanding of the way we hear and experience sounds in different spaces because of her father’s work in sound engineering and production. Consequently, what she has learned from being near her father has uniquely influenced her auditory experiences throughout most of her life.

While I spent much less time with Rachel Storm on a regular basis, I have come to know her involvement in the community and her prolific work within the arts and arts advocacy. My relationship with Rachel led to collaborative writing projects between myself and her work with Art Now! – an artists’ interview and video highlight series that airs every month focusing on different creative practitioners in Urbana-Champaign. The Confessional initially gave reason for me to lean on Rachel’s support opening up an opportunity to know her and her work better.
After spending many hours consulting and then building *The Confessional* with Walter Wilson, I heard many stories, but perhaps what I know and may consider of the greatest value is the humility which surrounds the work that Walter does and all the small considerations that he takes to create better access and more opportunities for people to experience art. I see this as being linked closely to Walter’s interest in moments of wonder. It is as if life is full of many moments of wonder and Walter is constantly considering hundreds of them, looking for ways to highlight them, without ever worrying about getting any credit for calling someone to the moment. I like to think that Walter is one of the most interesting artists I have met since moving to Urbana-Champaign. Walter taught me that getting excited about another person’s idea and doing something to aid in the process of that idea manifesting into a form, is often invisible yet, definably invaluable work. I also learned that Walter’s son Henry once rode a sheep in a Texas rodeo. These other stories you hear when working closely with people in collaboration as important, because they are how we begin to understand each other beyond what we are defined by. Henry and Ahu made the building team four in total. When the four of us came together it was obvious who held the expertise, but nonetheless, we were all important to the process as a whole. I would like to think that if Walter, Henry, Ahu, and I were to be on the same flight and end up escaping a crashed airplane on a desert island, we would probably put together a survival plan with an alarming sense of ease owed to our experience of working together.

Ahu Yolac came to live in the United States in the Fall of 2017 just months before we met, became close in proximity (we are of the same cohort), and started discussing ideas together. I learned that while Ahu spent many years in design schools in Turkey, my sketched drawings of the space were incredibly confusing as they were calculated in inches and feet. In attempt to make sense of the drawings, many of my measurements were converted to the metric
system originally confusing Walter to think I was maybe Canadian or had spent time living outside of the United States. While these small differences in language initially slowed our communication, Ahu and I used meetings about *The Confessional* to give us a reason to spend more time together, co-work in coffee shops, and get to know each other better. I like to think that *The Confessional* was the precursor to Ahu and her partner Deniz cooking me dinner while teaching me how to read the backs of tea tins and Harry Potter in Turkish.

![Figure 7: The Confessional pictured in South Studio Building One during early construction in the summer of 2018.](image)

The building took place during the ninety-degree days of the hot midwestern summer months. Because my degree program does not usually call one to make things, before the build I
spent several months defending my research and writing about my need for studio space, as well as, access to facilities where I could build the gallery. I was granted space and graciously powered through the very warm working conditions. Stopping by the store and stocking up on cold water became part of my routine for building days which usually began in the evening after Walter was done with work at the museum. Since it was summer, and the studio was hot, we had the ideal free reign of the facilities. This was a happy and accidental coincidence which resulted from the far less than luxurious conditions of the studio. Ultimately, the build was laborious, the work of many, and proof of the patient and understanding attitude of the collective forces which helped me take an idea, talk it, form it, and walk it into existence. The first steps being the first movements.
Figure 8: The Confessional (completed, built, & assembled)
510.325 lbs. = 231.5 kg

Figure 9: The Confessional and its parts weighed.
Figure 10: Angela Inez Baldus. (2019). *All the tools used*. [digital drawing]. Champaign, IL.
Chapter Three: Story Two of Three — When I Jump Back and Forth in Time.

In this chapter I will tell you a story in a way I have never tried to tell a story before. First, I will present you with a transcribed recording of me reflecting by speaking out loud and to myself about the experience of bringing The Confessional to two different locations between October 18th and 19th of 2018. The recording was taken on October 20th while driving a cargo van from St. Louis, Missouri to Champaign, Illinois. Upon arriving in Champaign, I unloaded the gallery back into my studio space and this marked the end of The Confessional’s first exhibition. I have provided the full text to expose the messiness that goes into recalling as much information as possible. After reading through this text numerous times, I have decided that for you (the reader) I must do the work necessary to make sense of this text. To do so I have added bracketed text that was not part of the original recording. Thus, [if you see text in brackets like such] it is text which I have added for the purposes of clarifying what I would like you (the reader) to devote more of your attention to. I think that exposing my editing process is one way to see how an experience shifts, sometimes out of necessity (need for clarification), and other times because what we choose to remember shifts as does our understanding of ourselves in relation to others shifts. I provided a key as a way of coding the transcription to show how I faced my recollection of the experience once rereading and looking back at the words that were said. I have also chosen to intentionally use proper punctuation only when it connotes a specific pause, break, emphasis, or question. The text for me functions like an annotated poem. Finally, in addition to the transcription, I have provided additional data in the form of photographs and writing from people who engaged the space. Concluding this chapter, I reflect on the lasting affect of this rendition of The Confessional.
Me talking to me, thinking out loud

An hour left in the last leg, which is not really the last leg, of this journey drive
Not the last really, because I need to return equipment to the window and bring the walls of *The Confessional* back into the studio where they will live until they leave again.

[Here I am referencing the University of Illinois School of Art + Design equipment check-out window, which is a valuable resource that all Art + Design students have access to. Students can check out digital cameras, tripods, drills, cables, iPads, and various other electronics. This is once way how the institution proved itself a reliable resource and supporter of my research.]

It has been a long few days, a long year, but it is okay because I like long things

I like long conversations and this one is that
This is definitely the most terrifying drive I have ever driven

I am in a rather large white cargo van driving 70 mph

On a two-lane highway

And the wind is blowing all of the tall grasses almost horizontal

It has been since I have [we] left St. Louis about an hour and forty minutes ago.

I have gotten a little used to it [the wind] since I have been doing it [driving] so long, but

my hands are pretty well saturated with

Not smelly

But you know [imagine the sensation of soaking your hands inside of a hot tub until they are soggy and scrunched, then imagine taking those hands and attempting to hold, grip, and secure an object]

I was afraid that I didn’t

We’ll see

There’s a lot of me on this steering wheel right now, I think

It is cold out, but, my body [is] has never been-warmer and tense [and warm] for longer

At least within my most recent memories

This is the [sensation, may be the] most pressing of what I have had to endure so far

I believe

It is very frightening

You know

I constantly make these associations in my head

In my thoughts
And I think that, sometimes its word associations, or its image associations, or playing with ambiguous ideas that can kind of stretch and overlap and blanket and hold And hold us
Um, you know
Because those thoughts take form in different ways And the forms are what help us situate ourselves in spaces, in places
With people and [with forms we can] really think about who we are, in very real ways While traveling with The Confessional I felt like I was very aware of my own identity and the ways that it grows and expands through this its object[ness] and [in relation to] the people I met and am meeting along the way
I think that is why Erin’s show has been so amazing for me
Serendipity is a word that Jennifer said to me at the Sipyard when I was talking about what felt like these magical coincidences happening all along the way Things that were unplanned that sort of bloomed out of the process There have been a lot of them
Like this wind
It is blowing the car
It is causing me to react to it
I am now alone for the first time in many hours
It’s not typical for me [being alone]
I spend a lot of time alone
I live alone
I feel alone, a lot of time, because of that
But I know I am not

And this big experience has been proof (*truth*)

Because I have been with Erin since Wednesday night at about 10:30 p.m.

And since then until about 2 p.m. today [Saturday]

But back to the air

So it’s funny

If we go off myth and mythology [Erin’s statement for *Ask Questions* explores ideas related to mythological creatures, real and unreal phenomena, and what can be interpreted as magical or mysterious] for one moment I guess I will talk about astrology

And Erin, Jeff, and I talk about this and talked about this during this weekend [astrology when we are spending time together. Often these conversations are about being curious about who we are and why we feel things or do things as much as they are about prescribing to some sort of belief system. I suppose this is my interpretation, but I believe we all approach these ideas sometimes with skepticism and other times, in moments which resonate, with awe.]

On Thursday night our conversation grew to include Jeff for the rest of the weekend

We keep talking about our signs because I am a Gemini and Erin’s an Aquarius, and Jeff is a Gemini, and [Jeremy, someone who is very dear to me] someone who I was with for a long time is an Aquarius and [I guess I came to start talking about this because of some kind of poetic connection I felt between the fact that]

these are air signs

and the wind that is with us today *is the air moving*

Moving the air signs
Around

Very much like we have been moving together

Forcefully, together

And I hold it all together now by holding the steering wheel so tight so that I don’t lose control of the vehicle that the space [The Confessional] has now been put in and held while I fumble through what I remember

(lips smack)

The air has gotten to my lips

One that, that I wonder and worry about is this fear, another kind of air, that air

The air about people

That happens so much when we are trying to do something important and we want to be a part of something

Especially in art [I feel this air blow into the space]

I feel as though [when] communities come together to experience art and they may be groupings of people who already know each other but, in that space [the art gallery, museum, party, happening, etc.], people can still have this air about them

I think it’s really not coming from such a bad place

I think that it is really [coming] about them [because they may be] thinking about what is happening as an important thing

[And] So, they may be pompous or critical of the thing as it is happening [to protect it] Closed off to protect their identity [inside joke mentality], protect their access [fear of not being ‘genius’ enough] from someone else’s reception [fear of not being understood by whomever is deemed the expert, fear of being devalued, fear of not being art]
But I didn’t feel that air
That air was not there
There was something else there
I don’t know what it was
Maybe it was spiritual
Maybe it was,
Maybe it was,
I don’t know

I definitely think it is hard for me to claim to know what other people’s experiences of that space were
Some of them were shared with me
But I don’t think that very many of the questions that were asked, and there were a lot of questions that were asked, you know I think that title did something. I think that I was trying to talk about how people’s questions only gave hints to how they were understanding the space instead of providing a definitive and singular interpretation, but at this point I got distracted by the thing which led to the way the questions were facilitated.

And that’s something Erin did on her own
Ya know

She knew about the idea, but this concept, that was her

And it made a lot a sense and it is very funny going back to the serendipitous thing that Jennifer was talking about because I think the week that Erin told me what the show was going to be called, maybe it was the day, where she said this is the show title I am
thinking and she might have even sent over the text at that moment which was really more
of a poem than an artist’s statement but I really like that about Erin’s work and I think it
is something that opens up access to understanding or at least wanting to understand the
work. Multiple interpretations are welcomed by this creative play with words and images.

That week in Dr. Brown’s class that I am taking…I believe it was that week that Dr.
Brown, [she] brought up the importance of asking questions and specifically the “What
if?” question. And I remember Erin then telling me her ideas [I believe it was the same
day I had been in Dr. B’s class] and thinking about how those two ideas really resonated
with each other. and [W]e had a conversation about that[e] parallel over the phone.
Sometimes it just feels uncanny how many things are overlapping. Through what I study
in class, yes, and, also just in different interactions with people throughout the day.

Last night after the show in St. Louis, Erin, Jeff, and I got into an elevator at the hotel we
stayed at with these two women and they were really upset. They were baffled by what
had just happened to them. And we didn’t know, we didn’t see what happened. We just
heard them. I heard them talking about it out loud to each other clearly experiencing
some kind of trauma from what they had just saw but [and] also feeling like this sort of
[confused and upset about] what is-[was]going on. They were questioning what they saw
and what ended up happening is that I asked them the question, “What happened? Are
you okay?” And they had explained that they had just seen a man fall off, I believe he
had just fallen off his motorcycle, and was in the street and a police officer had stopped to
help, but not to help. And this was what was really bothering the women is that the
ambulance wasn’t there yet and the police officer was just looking at and not assisting this man who needed help urgently. Like he was following protocol, maybe, but a kind of protocol that definitely doesn’t care about people, or bodies, or what happens that you can’t predict and that happens with urgent need. There was no urgency in the man and these women were horrified and then this is the other thing, they documented it. So they had these photos, these horrible photos of this police officer standing to the left of this man and not even looking at him. The man was on the ground and he looked like he was not even alive [dead], he looked sprawled out. He was a black man. I don’t know how old. I couldn’t see his face, but maybe around my age, in his late twenties/early thirties. And I said, “What did you do?” And they said they were upset and they confronted the police officer asking “why are you not helping him?” and the police officer was being defensive and still ignoring the situation. I said thank you. They seemed really upset and I’m confused because they did walk away. And I’m not sure at what point they walked away. [And we didn’t go back. We didn’t stop what we were doing.]

This conversation was all happening over the course of an elevator ride. We were riding up like [about] 26 stories. And I did thank them for asking questions and I think this comes back to what was so important about Erin’s show and related to what Dr. Brown was saying in class that day[]. [W]e just need to ask questions. It is so important. As an action. It is a way of moving things, hopefully. It is not always going to work of course, and I don’t know what the work is going to be, that it does. [Sometimes asking questions can be aggressive. It can feel convicting. These are not the kind of questions I am advocating for. I realize that there are complexities imbedded in this call to action.] And it [questions] doesn’t [don’t] always mean answers. Many people have said this.
moments of conversation, Jorge has very much been about asking questions too [asked
questions as a pedagogical and political move. I feel as though I have an opportunity to
say what I know before it is assumed that I do not know the answer when a question is
asked with care. The care in how the question is asked if key.]. And this is something for
me, that within the past year, has changed my life. And the way that I live. And the way
that I think about things. The way I think about people, really. And the way that I think
about my responsibility to life. In all forms. This is a really horrific thing that happened
last night, but it was powerful to me that people were noticing. And people were reacting.
And while we were taking an elevator ride up to a rooftop hotel bar to celebrate the
completion of this leg of this project, these women were also celebrating their lives
together, I don’t know in what way but, they let what happened disrupt their celebration
enough to talk about it and I think that is really important. Maybe it is serendipitous
again. [Maybe it is just life and because I took the time to think through the weekend as
part of my research, I happened to be paying closer attention.] I don’t know that I will
ever forget the image that was shown on the cell phone of that elevator. [In fact, I am
choosing in this moment to remember.]

I think that is maybe the point where I talk about how it has been hard to not feel stuck
during the moving of this thing. Different things that I have seen along the way have
made me feel discouraged because they are ugly things. I have for the first time in this
semester in school, for the past several months, for maybe the first time in my life, I am
finding words to explain oppressions that I have realized that I have known for longer.
And I am starting to with these new words, and this new language, and this new way of
looking at things—uh, see things clearer, and feel things more powerfully. I feel like I am maybe taking some power with feeling them[.], but [I]t is in one way healing, if you believe that people are sort of the meaning of life (the meaning of life exists within the meanings of people), but then when you learn about a lot of the hate and a lot of the way that these experiences are not the same for everyone and how much ugliness there is in the world, the structures that exist that are so embedded, from the beginning, to privilege certain people over other peoples [It is complicated.]. So, in that I recognize and continue to recognize new aspects of my own privileges. And also, I see the ways it has hurt me too. But then it is the how do we change this? And how do we help other people see? And what if they don’t want help? And what does it mean to help? And I guess that when sometimes I get really sad about these things, I have to find reasons to keep moving and the reasons I think are really simple and they are smiles, not because I should but because I care, sharing, yelling, listening to an angry song, and being with people and the thing that keeps me moving is the people and maybe sometimes it is the wind. Because the wind is beautiful too. Imagining things. Imagining how things move.

I just saw a deer dead on the road.

Erin was explaining to me on the way down that in Canada there are these systems that they put into place around the roads that allow for wildlife to travel under in these tunnels so that they don’t need to cross the road and then they have these barricades that won’t allow them to cross the road. So, there is relatively, she said zero, roadkill. I am sure there are bugs that hit the windows still. But it really blew my mind that in Canada there
are people who were able to convince [other] people that we should spend money on saving the lives of animals. It blew her mind too, you know. She was telling me and asked me if I had gone to Canada when I was briefly in Seattle and I told her no, that I was really bummed, because I had wanted to, but it just didn’t work out. She had asked me if I had been to Canada because we were talking about grad schools and I was trying to figure out where I need to go and why I would go there. We were talking about how difficult it felt like to leave this, or what I thought I found very recently within my grad school experience and the community, the art education program, which is the most amazing community of women. It is mostly women and those of us who spend a lot of time in the office have really gotten to know each other well and it complemented the relationship I have with my cohort from last year’s experiences living together and near each other. But we were talking about how special that is and Erin really saw that at the Sipyard and I appreciated her talking to me about that and bringing it up because I felt that too, but you never really know how much of that [that = the love, care, connection, warmth] radiates from the group onto the people who come into it and whether it’s going to feel isolating for the person that is coming to be a part of it or welcoming. What she was saying is that it did what I had hoped and that it felt very welcoming, but, um, we were talking about the PNW and how it didn’t work out for me to go to Canada and then I thought she was going to reference school, but then it was just about the animals. Ha, but I think maybe that does reference that I do want to live somewhere where things are different, and policies are different. I am sure that there have to be many, many similarities too just based on some of the similarities in how the countries were colonized, but some of these small things make big change.
I’ve been having a lot of fears of doing this again. Not because I don’t want to and I think it was wonderful, but it’s been really hard on my body so I am praying I don’t get sick but it might happen. But also, it felt so rich. [cultural capital rich. love rich. newness rich. rich with flexible moving limbs. content rich. friendship rich. rich with meaning.] That I feel like when something happens and there are all these things that even as I am talking out loud and I am hearing myself say it I feel like there are all these things that are becoming in these moments that take, I feel like they have stopped, and they take time to sit with and hopefully with some of the other people who have helped make this all possible. [that I will likely be processing the many ways that this experience has made me feel rich for a long time coming.] I have never made something before that has really been so collaborative. I remember being in undergrad and having to do a couple of different collaborative projects in painting classes that I just really, really despised the idea of. Because I romanticized, and I still romanticize this a little bit, I don’t want to say that I’ve been able to fully let go of what it feels like to be alone in a space making a painting, um, because for me painting I felt like was the thing I needed to do in order to live. I didn’t paint because I always wanted this beautiful object and I really don’t always value my paintings for long after I make them. I like to give them to people who seem to have a deeper relationship with them but collaborating then was always so frightening because I didn’t think it was a language that I could share on a canvas and it never really felt like it was really possible to collaborate in that way, especially these forced collaborations. I know I had to do one at Norfolk, this artist residency I got to go to in undergrad and I remember getting paired with this other painter and I was just so upset
that she was [they were who I was paired with]. She [They] made beautiful paintings and I don’t know why but a lot of people didn’t really like her [them] there. And she [they] was [were] probably not deserving of that, it was a strange place. I think that there were a lot of beautiful people there, but there was a lot of dynamic clashing of personalities as well. Um, but my ego and my desire to be liked by the group got in the way of me really opening up and really working with this other woman [person]. I don’t remember what we made. I don’t know that we really committed to working together. And I really wish I would have, because it seems like in the difficult moments that collaboration provides, the most fruitful things are realized. Possibly not always but sometimes. And the sometimes that they are is what makes it a thing that we should do together. I mean it is pretty silly because then we think about bringing in another aspect of how these ideas are ideas that I have been thinking about and learning about and it makes me think about the conversation that Ryan Griffis and Anna Tsing (Baldus, 2018) had, when they talk about collaboration and the projects they do and how important that collaboration is and how difficult that collaboration is and how sometimes one of the people might…you know you might start with an analogy or start using a metaphor to describe to the person that you are working with what needs to happen or the thing that you are making together to be something, um, but that metaphor might not always make any sense. And this is what Anna Tsing was saying when she was talking about using, I think metaphor was, it was this instrument, I can’t remember…oh no, it was a…I wrote about this, I should remember. I wrote a descriptive essay about this talk that they had. Which I was really very lucky and super thankful, I am super thankful because people have been inviting me to do these other things that have made the last couple of months very busy and
sometimes a struggle, but it’s so meaningful because I have a friend that is in the Art History department getting her PhD and she works for the Unit for Criticism and Interpretive Theory and so she asked me, she was finding someone to be a writer and to write about this talk for their blog and I am also taking a class with Ryan Griffis, which has been amazing, about Art and the Anthropocene, and, um, but, uh, Ryan suggested to Alyssa and Alyssa reached out me, I’m not sure something like that, and Alyssa has been wonderfully supportive and, you know having this person, sort of like Erin, that I’ve really known, not necessarily well, but known for many years. Working together loops around and comes back and you find yourself working with people that you didn’t know, at one point, that you would know for very long. It’s sort of special, but you know, because of that I have had a lot of opportunities that are kindly shared, and I don’t make little of them. I think that they are… these things that I am describing are the things that make me feel like I have faith more than anything else. The poetic play of what happens in moments throughout time it is really the only thing that I, you know I have to slow down, because I think it might make me cry.

Finally, I am calm. I have actually been driving with one hand for a while, I don’t know that it is very safe, but I feel way more confident. The weather has not really let up, it is relentless.

This, this, what I am doing now is funny, because it feels like it resonates with this artwork by Stanya Kahn and Harry Dodge that I have really been kind of coming back to again and again since I first saw it in undergrad and it kind of changed my experience of
art. I talk about this in this video that documented this walk that I took with a group of people in class, in my first class I ever took with Jorge Lucero who is my advisor and, um, you know I was doing something really for the first time. This was really the first time that I feel like I did a thing when the pedagogy was the art but it was also in this sort of format and structure of this class-not-a-class. Anyways, the point of me saying this is that one of the texts was “Can’t Swallow It, Can’t Spit it Out” by Harry Dodge and Stanya Kahn (Dodge & Kahn, 2006). Funny enough I am really trying to put together a Halloween costume for the art education group Halloween event next week which is all femme artists and, uh, and different artists. We are all going as artists and I would really like to go as Stanya Kahn. But in relation to that video I feel very much like Stanya Kahn in that I am performing this act of moving through space/spaces. Maybe it is appropriate that I am moving through cornfields. Ha. But, I keep seeing like giant pieces of dried cornstalk fly through the air. They look like, they look violent really. Huge particles. I can’t imagine not being in this big cargo van, I’d probably be getting smacked in the face with them. There is this moment in that video where Kahn is playing air guitar with a giant piece of cheese, a cheesehead. Which I ordered a cheesehead online and they are not cheap really. I was able to find one for, I don’t know, twenty dollars, but I still felt kind of silly paying twenty dollars for a foam cheesehead for a one night Halloween costume, but maybe, who knows, maybe I will need to wear that outfit to write my thesis. But there is the moment where Kahn is singing and playing air guitar. That Led Zeppelin song, Ahhhhhhaaaaahhhhaa, Ahhhhhhaaahhhha, come from the land of the ice and snow in the midnight… I don’t know all the words, I actually just lose it right there, doo doo doo doo, doo doo doo doo. But yeah, I really want, our party is supposed to go to karaoke, so
I really think I need to learn that song and complete the whole performance. It seems like a really important thing for me. It will be strange I’m sure, it will be strange. There are a bunch of storage, there are just a whole bunch of storage sheds out here. In the middle of these cornfields, I don’t know why. It seems odd. When I first started driving I definitely envisioned my head, you know, twisting and smacking this ceiling of this van a couple of feet above me because surely the wind was going to flip me over. I didn’t know when, but it was just a matter of time. I would just fly up all of a sudden and you know, snap of the neck, and flash into the ceiling and so as the van is kind of getting jabbed around right now that image is coming back. I am not as afraid of it now as I was, I mean I was just thinking it, thinking it fast, in mostly images, not in words that I am using now trying to explain, I think there is a storage container up there on fire. Really black smoke bellowing out. I can’t see where it is coming from yet. Oh, maybe it is a train or something. Yeah. It is a really beautiful old steam engine.

Well, what I was thinking though was that I really wish I had a helmet. I was thinking that even if my neck did snap maybe it would snap in a way that I would survive but the helmet would protect my head from getting a piece of raw metal shooting through it. I mean I guess it could still happen, but I have been praying a little bit. I am not very good at praying. I don’t do it that often, so I don’t feel like I’m that good. I feel like I end up saying Catholic prayers more than praying full reflections which is strange, but I do it when I am afraid. Maybe it is because when I do that I feel like my family is with me. It is something that we did together so often, and we still do. When I am back with them, I pray with them. Intruders that come for what I own, may find that my home, is no
gun free zone, guns save lives dot com. Those signs are always so, I don’t know, my stomach hurts again I guess. I feel like I could talk to this voice recorder the whole rest of the trip but I really think I’m going to try to listen to the radio, I am going to do a little more reflection in writing but it has been good to purge out some thoughts and put them somewhere. I guess before I end, I just want to say this so that I remember. I always get nervous when my family comes to things with me. When we talk about art. I don’t really know why it always has made me nervous and I don’t like that it makes me nervous. I want to talk to my family because I really love them and need them, and they are completely why I am who I am in many ways, but last night it was not like that. It felt so special and my dad looked, my dad was just so warm and felt so open and curious and imagining in ways that made me feel really great and calm and cared for. And I remember when I was much younger, there was a time when I didn’t know if that was possible. So silly because of course it always was but I just wasn’t imagining that. It is pretty amazing what imaginations can do. It was really special to me that my aunt and uncle came with them. I know my dad didn’t want to leave. I know he wanted to hang out more, I could tell. I really want to get to hang out with him soon because I think that we need each other while we have each other. We really should revel in that. I think I felt loved pretty strongly these past few days. Within different contexts. I’m going to leave it at that.

The transcription above is how I have come to understand my experience of The Confessional’s first move into the world. The text reads like a stream of consciousness and a bit of rambling. I do not believe that the experience of the weekend can be summarized or
condensed to a linear narrative the way we sometimes attempt to do when retelling the story of what happened. Because I do not believe this is possible I have chosen a format which requires more weeding, it is messy, and it shows its holes. There are a lot of pieces to the story, some taking place in time and space and some less definable, relational, and situated somewhere between what we claim to know and uncertainty.

When *The Confessional* was being built I knew that I would likely reach out to an artist and ask them to be the first to show in the space rather than wait for an artist to show interest in the idea and come to me. I decided this would be the best because I could pick work that resonated with what I had in mind for how the space would function, but also because I could effectively develop a relationship with an artist I had already spent time knowing and working with. I believe that all of the time I spent getting to know the artist Erin Hayden before asking

![Figure 12: Erin Hayden (2018). *Digital Concept Sketch*. [digital drawing]](image-url)
her to show in *The Confessional* was key to the ways we navigated our collaboration as artists and as friends. Because I believed in the pedagogical function of the work Hayden made prior to the pieces which were shown in *The Confessional*, I was confident and trusting of the conversation that I imagined would happen between the spaces and the peoples I was asking her to engage with. Before working with Erin on this specific project we had attended undergrad together and spent several years working in neighboring studios. We shared conversations about our favorite artists, meals, parties, a road trip to a funeral in loving support of our dear friend, and many celebrations including birthdays, holidays, and her unforgettable wedding which included hours of dancing – stretching limbs and grins throughout the night. There is this story that we often hear when social practitioners and researchers talk about the responsibility they have to get to know a community before making move to change or introduce their ideas in new spaces. I think that the way in which Erin and I worked together was particularly influenced by the time we spent knowing each other before this specific work happened. I think that this relationship was key to how the work was interpreted once popping up within a space that we had not collectively come to know together. The tie I am making here is to time. I am not arguing that collaboration would not have been possible with an artist that I do not know as well as Erin, but I am certain that it would not have been possible to work with another artist with so much ease. I emphasize this and include this back story because I understand that because of the energy it takes to bring a project like *The Confessional* into spaces – the planning, and the amount of improvising once plans are forced to change. It would have been much more difficult to do all of this with someone who I did not know as well, and thus trust the same, as Erin.

The initial project planning for *Ask Questions* was developed with the idea that the show would take place at the Sipyard in Urbana, Illinois. I had been in contact with the owner of the
Sipyard while working on the grant proposal for the space in the spring of 2018, but had not proposed a specific show. Since, Matthew Cho, the owner of the Sipyard had showed interest, I reached out again and confirmed a date for the show to take place. Coincidentally, Erin had been invited to collaborate with artist Allison Lacher the following day in St.Louis, Missouri at the artist-run space Monaco. When asked to do a pop-up kind of intervention in Lacher’s solo show *Full Sun*, Hayden reached out to me asking if I would be interested in taking *Ask Questions* to Monaco. Without hesitation I said yes, and we started working together to plan the two-day event. This process involved applying for multiple grants which would end up making the travel from one place to the next possible financially, but also reaching out to friends in both cities for their assistance with moving the space. While all of the logistics of planning, scheduling the van rental, booking hotels, and establishing a moving crew ended up being a series of tedious little tasks, what came to be the most difficult tasks were those which involved interpersonal relationships. For instance, once the space was asked to participate in a gallery new questions were being asked. These questions were not always so clearly presented to me or Erin and individual uncertainties were revealed slowly, with time. The uncertainty of what *The Confessional* is has been initially discomforting for participants. This was most noticeable when the space entered the gallery. Because *The Confessional* questions the structure, purpose, and accessibility of galleries including ways the art world establishes difference between the artist, curator, and participant, there was more tension bringing it into Monaco then there was bringing it to the Sipyard. I think this is in part because of what is known and understood about artist-run spaces compared to a space like the Sipyard – a space that establishes itself as an experimental outdoor bar existing between buildings and occupying shipping crates. The other part of the tension definitely came from the communication that was able to happen between myself, the
places, and people that live locally and relation to me compared to those who live in another city and had never seen or interacted with the space before. I believe that the only reason *The Confessional* was still invited to go to St. Louis was because of the longer personal relationship that had developed between Erin Hayden and Allison Lacher prior to the invitation. Without this relationship I feel as though the project would have felt too ambiguous, even more risky, and particularly confusing for the group of artists who make up the board of directors at Monaco. Upon a closer look these things often happen because of who you know as much or more than what you know and how you are able to describe the value of that knowledge.

At the end of a long weekend I felt as though the relationships between me, the people who came to both openings, and the people who helped make the project as a whole happen changed. While I still feel as though I am in the process of understanding what the changes mean and how the experience has affected other people, I know that there is something powerfully present once the object temporarily occupies a new space. It is as if the space it occupies becomes aware of its materiality and *The Confessional* can begin to be understood through different kinds of materiality when thinking about through its mobility – materials such as time, motion, and wonder. Once the space moves again it can only be understood in the place it once was through the story that is told, the documentation that is presented, and the memories of those who experienced it. Like many conceptual art projects, *The Confessional’s* reliance on documentation is what makes the way it is documented so important to how it is understood.

Before looking through the documentation of the project I invite you to read the statement written by artist Erin Hayden and myself to promote the event.
Ask Questions (2018)

Fins, caves, drawings, recollections, where do secrets go to hide? I want to wonder about mermaids’ missions and gnomes hiding underground. Do salamanders control fire and lightning? What we perceive might not be all that’s there. I’m searching. Maybe fairies will tell us the truth.

Ask Questions is a mobile exhibition concerning the supposed kings and queens of nature. Myth and folklore seem like more appropriate ways of parsing through the unbelievable happenings that we encounter within the news and our day to day experiences.

Erin Hayden enters The Confessional to explore hope within the experience of beliefs. Does seeking truth provide relief, and if so, for who? Can truth in imaginaries set us free? Hayden juts text and images together asking differing interpretations to be questioned. Here, together, we perform the things Hayden wishes us to consider. Imagine these secrets shared, if only for a moment.
Figure 13: Erin Hayden and Angela Inez Baldus (2018). *The Confessional* featuring *Ask Questions* at the Sipyard in Urbana, Illinois, photo by Jeff Robinson.
Figure 14: Erin Hayden and Angela Inez Baldus (2018). *The Confessional* featuring *Ask Questions* at Monaco in St. Louis, Missouri as part of artist Allison Lacher’s solo exhibition *Full Sun*, photo by Jeff Robinson.
Figure 15: Erin Hayden (2018). *Digital concept sketch.* [digital drawing].
Visiting Artist Proposal - Erin Hayden

October 18, 2018

Erin Hayden is an interdisciplinary artist working in painting, performance, poetry, video, and installation. Her work has been exhibited in various cities across the US and abroad including at Stony Island Arts Bank, Galleria d’Arte Moderna e Contemporanea Torino, and currently at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago. Solo exhibitions of her paintings and video work has been shown at Mona Contemporary Chicago and Randy Alexander Gallery. She has been an artist resident at the Ragdale Foundation, the Banff Center for Arts and Creativity, and is both a Bolt Resident, as well as, a Luminarts Fellow. She has been featured in reviews and publications such as, Frieze, Chicago Tribune, Art News, Lori Waxman’s 60 wrd/min art critic, and New City Art as a 2018 Breakout Artist. She received her MFA in Art Theory and Practice at Northwestern University and is currently living and working in Chicago.

website: http://erinkhayden.com

Erin Hayden is coming the Champaign-Urbana to show work and collaborate in The Confessional – a mobile gallery space built by Angela Baldus, Walter Wilson, Ahu Yolac, and Henry Wilson in the summer of 2018. The activation, transportation, and utilization of this space is part of Angela Baldus’ thesis research in the completion of the M.A. degree program in Art Education at UIUC. The space has received funding from the Urbana Public Arts Program and the Illinois Program for Research in the Humanities and is scheduled to feature several artists throughout the 2018-2019 school year. Hayden’s work will first be shown in The Confessional at the SipYard in downtown Urbana on October 18th. The following day the space will travel to Monaco located in St. Louis, Missouri to participate within Allison Lacher’s exhibit Full Sun. While Hayden is visiting the university, she will present the School of Art + Design to the Art + Design community and public at on her work, artistic practice, and recent exhibitions. At the talk Erin will open the floor to speak with students answering questions about her work, the challenges of an emerging artist who recently graduated with her MFA, and the possibilities of working with other artists both collaboratively in artist-run spaces and within the context of commercial gallery spaces. The evening of October 18th Hayden will spend time with undergraduate and graduate students at the opening and join a group graduate students and faculty for dinner.

TRAVEL $54/mi. = $174.96
Evanston-Champaign-Evanston

LODGING $100

MEALS $75

HONORARIUM $350

TOTAL $700

Costs of travel & meals estimated using university expense limits from https://www.obfs.uillinois.edu/bfpp/section-8-payments-reimbursements/determine-allowability-business-meals-refreshments

Figure 16: Visiting artist proposal made by Angela Inez Baldus’ in support of Erin Hayden’s visit to UIUC and artist talk.
Erin Hayden is an interdisciplinary artist working in painting, performance, poetry, video, and installation. Her work has been exhibited in various cities across the US and abroad including at Stony Island Arts Bank, Galleria d’Arte Moderna e Contemporanea Torino, and currently at the Museum of Contemporary Art Chicago. Solo exhibitions of her paintings and video work have been shown at Mana Contemporary Chicago and Randy Alexander Gallery. She has been an Artist Resident at the Ragdale Foundation, the Banff Center for Arts and Creativity, and is both a Bolt Resident, as well as, a Luminarts Fellow. She has been featured in reviews and publications such as, Priests, Chicago Tribune, Art News, Lori Weisman’s 60 wrd/min art critic, and Newcity Art as a 2018 Breakout Artist. She received her MFA in Art Theory and Practice at Northwestern University and is currently living and working in Chicago.

Noon to 1 PM
OCTOBER 18th
RM 316 A+D

Sponsored by the
School of Art + Design Visitors Committee & the Illinois Program for Research in the Humanities.
Dear Angela,

It is my pleasure to extend an invitation to you to present your traveling project, The Confessional, at Monaco, an artist-owned contemporary art gallery in St. Louis, MO. We are especially excited that The Confessional will serve to present the work of artist Erin Hayden, and her project: Ask Questions.

The presentation of The Confessional/Ask Questions will serve as a closing or culminating event for our exhibit, Full Sun. As a contemporary and sometimes experimental space, we are excited about the nature of this exhibit-within-an-exhibit-within-an-exhibit to take place on Friday, October 19th.

Thank you so much for working with us! Please let me know if you have any question or needs, and we are thrilled to have The Confessional featured at Monaco.

Sincerely,

MONACO artist-owner

Figure 18: Letter of support for travel grant funding award from UIUC School of Art + Design written by Allison Lacher.
Figure 19: Erin Hayden and Angela Inez Baldus (2018). *Ask Questions Show Poster Progression*. [risograph], ea. 11” x 17”.
Figure 20: Erin Hayden and Angela Inez Baldus (2018). *Ask Questions Show Poster Progression*. [risograph], ea. 11” x 17”.
Chapter Three: Story Three of Three: Co-Constructing Truths

Over the first weekend of March in 2019, The Confessional travelled from South Studio Building One to the Link Gallery – a long cylindrical space that extends from the Krannert Art Museum’s Main Entrance and Lobby to the School of Art + Design. The Link Gallery looks somewhat like a stationary rectangular observation car from a vast and modular futuristic train. The space is used for rotating exhibits by artists from within and outside of the School of Art + Design but is most often used in exhibits related to students and faculty attending the university. During the day the space is used as study space. Sometimes it hosts small celebrations, banquet tables, and hors d’oeuvres. Ultimately its purpose is to function like a communal shared space for use by people from all over the university in events related to art, the museum, or related creative practices. It is the commons.

When you approach the space from outside it is often as though you are surveilling the people inside. The people, whether studying or looking at art, rarely express awareness of their visibility from the street. Because of all of these characteristics, the meaning and appearance of The Confessional shifted when it entered the Link Gallery as a mobile gallery inside of a modular gallery existing between two distinct institutions within the institution of the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign – the Krannert Art Museum and the School of Art + Design. From inside and peering outside, throughout the entirety of the weekend, it was possible to see the long, horizontal, and ribbon-like signage that traces the bushes lining the sidewalk running along the side of the Art + Design building and the museum. The banner advertises the new Siebel Center for Design which will forever change the dynamic of how the Link, the museum, and the School of Art + Design function. I anticipate that once the center is built the Link could
potentially find itself living in the shadow of what it means to be common – buried in the history of the ordinary or unremarkable. I fear this, anticipate it, and yet, hope there are many who value its potential as a space of mediation for as long as it is an active bridge.

While I had considered the Link gallery before as a possible location for The Confessional to travel to, I was not actively pursuing the use of the space prior to being approached by Alyssa Bralower, my friend and PhD candidate in Art History at the University of Illinois. Alyssa came to me representing SAHA (the Society of Art History and Archeology) asking if The Confessional would be interested in participating in the SAHA graduate student conference Fictions and Frictions: The Power and Politics of Narrative. Once I was approached with the idea, I immediately agreed before knowing exactly what would happen. I knew that I was up for the challenge of finding artists that would be ideal for the space, the event, and the focus topic of the conference. I had not originally expected to only work from within the field of candidates in Art Education, but when considering the collective interest and buzz around the conference this idea came to be a particularly rich possibility. By exploring collaborations between myself and my colleagues an energy began to echo and then ripple from concept to form. Just as the space was to be a space within a space within a hallway between two distinctly different places of learning, the collaboration between the artists was to function as a collaboration within a collaboration between departments and understandings of forms which inform what we know – the fictions and frictions which happen between different kinds of scholarship which define different ways of knowing and embrace varied narrative forms. For The Confessional to move within these enabling constraints it must counterintuitively exist with the frictions of truth making. All four artist pedagogues who were in dialogue and performed with The Confessional over this weekend approached this idea differently. The descriptions provided
show how the artists engaged the conceptual backbone of *The Confessional* in relationship to their own practices as artists and their understanding of what they know which has been shaped by their individual life experiences.
Figure 21: Angela Inez Baldus (2019). *Co-Constructing Truths* [editioned risograph]. 11” x 17”.
Figure 22: Angela Inez Baldus (2019). *Co-Constructing Truths* [editioned risograph]. 11” x 17”.
Figure 23: Angela Inez Baldus (2019). *Co-Constructing Truths* [editioned risograph]. 11” x 17”.
Figure 24: Angela Inez Baldus (2019). *Co-Constructing Truths* [editioned risograph]. 11” x 17".
Co-constructing Truths

Five artist-pedagogues engage within the conceptual and physical constraints of The Confessional (a mobile gallery space that aims to move, become, and imagine truths amongst and between difference).

The Confessional will occupy the Link Gallery located at 408 E Peabody Dr, Champaign, IL between the School of Art + Design and the Krannert Art Museum on the University of Illinois campus March first and second as part of Fictions and Frictions: The Power and Politics of Narrative – a graduate Art History conference and exhibition organized by the Society of Art Historians (SAHA) and sponsored by the Modern Art Colloquium, the School of Art + Design, the School of Art + Design Visitor’s Committee, and the Student Organization Resource Fund. Don't miss out on the four performances listed below and all of the amazing scholars coming to present their research and work including a keynote address Friday evening by Hannah Feldman (Northwestern). Find more information about conference specifics and presenters here.

Friday, March 1, 2019, 3:30 - 5:00 pm
A Counter-Intuitive Trio
A site-specific improvisation duet, investigating the questions: How to dwell in tension? How the contradictory becomes a strength? How to enact and embody a counternarrative?
Catalina Hernández Cabal and Lila Ann Dodge

Saturday, March 2nd, 8:30 - 9:00 am
De cosas no se habla
This piece considers the tensions between the narratives families construct around forbidden topics and the ways in which we sweep things under the rug and make excuses for unacceptable behavior for the sake of appearances.
Paulina Camacho Valencia

Saturday, March 2nd, 12:30 - 1:30 pm
Flashpoints: Critical Frictions in the Arts and Education
Participants will be invited to engage in a method of embodied reflection on flashpoints around their experiences in the arts and education. Flashpoints are particularly vivid moments of friction when sociocultural differences carried in the body make themselves manifest in conscious experience. The anticipated outcomes are that participants will gain increased sensitivities and skills as reflective practitioners as artists and/or educators.
Sarah Travis

Saturday, March 2nd, 5:00 - 6:00 pm
Exo
A piece that explores the exotification and consumption of Latin American culture, bodies, livelihood, and/or spaces.
Alicia De León

Figure 25: Program materials and description of “Co-Constructing Truths”, screenshot from www.theconfesssional.space.
Figure 26: Picture of the Link Gallery taken from the breezeway between the gallery and the School of Art + Design

Figure 27: Picture of the Link Gallery taken from the breezeway between the gallery and the School of Art + Design
Figure 28: *The Confessional* assembled in the Link Gallery March 1, 2019.
Figure 29: Angela Inez Baldus (2019). The Confessional documentation from Co-Constructing Truths
Since the life of any performance is certainly linked to moments in time, the way we document, remember, and retell the story of what happens is important to the way we understand the narrative. As people started to gather in the Link Gallery, in anticipation of the first performance beginning at 3:30 p.m., there was some uncertainty as to where we should all position our bodies. Were we to enter The Confessional? Were we to sit outside of it? Stand? Was there going to be a performance? No one seemed to be around setting up or in the vicinity. No one was really directing anyone to behave in any particular way. I was reassuring the people present that there would indeed be something happening shortly, but it was simply up to them...
what to do with their bodies while they waited. Maybe ten or fifteen minutes after the
performance was scheduled to begin, the three performers who would proceed to command,
move, and make malleable the materials of the space, entered the room. I moved to find a chair
suitable to hold the musician who carried their stringed instrument holding it dear as the three
found their place in room.

A sign was hung on the outside of The Confessional inviting the viewers to Come Inside
where Catalina Hernández Cabal and Lila Ann Dodge had become a pile, their bodies entwined
into one form, constrained within the walls of the gallery space. People began to walk around
The Confessional, approach it, and find ways to see inside – peering through the screen on the
back wall and pulling the curtain to the side. People were careful to get too close and eventually
decided to make way back to their seats when suddenly the Link Gallery as a whole became a
stage for the audience, the performers, and The Confessional to sit. In this moment The
Confessional moved from feeling like an art gallery to appearing and functioning much more like
some monolithic architectural piece of set design. The dancers pushed and pulled breaking
outside of the cell-like form and finding their way into the space between The Confessional and
the musician seated outside in chair facing the curtain. The form began to be considered as an
actor in the play which was folding and unfolding like a repetitious call and response between
the two dancers, the musician, the sculpture, and all of the bodies, architectural forms included,
that made up the space. The sound of the viola which followed the movement of the dancers like
a film score seemed to add a fullness to the experience of watching the scene unfold expanding
that experience to be a conscious consideration of sound and vibrations between our bodies and
all things that surround them. The intensity of these moments continued to rise and fall for the
next hour as some people stopped to watch shortly, usually in transit from one place to another,
and others found a seat and stayed in conversation with the performers for the entirety of their activation of the space.

Upon asking Catalina Hernández Cabal (2019) to provide a description of the piece she stated the following:

This piece will be a site-specific improvisation duet, investigating the questions “how to dwell in tension? How the contradictory becomes a strength? How to enact and embody a counternarrative?” These broad questions address multiple tensions emerged from operating within a model of Patriarchal-Western spaces and modes of relation, and constantly trying to resist it. By moving together—and with The Confessional—we will perform a shared figuring out of gestures, and of relationships with the space and with each other, through which we take political tensions and their grappling to our bodies. Through this duet—which attending to The Confessional becomes almost a trio—we will work in finding a language, muscular tone, orientation and disorientation which enable us to interrogate assumptions about our bodies, our relationships with one another, with the audience, with the space, and with the space of art in which the piece is embedded. The space with which we will converse in the site-specific piece refers not only to The Confessional, but to The Confessional within the Frictions and Fictions symposium. This includes the entanglement of participants and motives that kind of encounter entails. As intended through experiencing art in The Confessional, this piece not only enables but supposes collaboration: between the audience, the art piece—in this case composed by bodies in movement—, and the space itself. We become visible, become present, attend the space while generating one, we recede to allow the other to move, to hide and to be. We ground the theory in our bodies. We theorize from the flesh.

Performers: Lila Ann Dodge, Catalina Hernández-Cabal, Adrian Wong, The Confessional
Figure 31: Artist and pedagogue Catalina Hernández Cabal performing in “A Counter Intuitive Trio” with The Confessional, photo by Patricia Leon Quecan
Figure 32: Lila Ann Dodge (left) and Catalina Hernández Cabal (right) performing in “A Counter Intuitive Trio”, photo by Patricia Leon Quecan
Figure 33: Lila Ann Dodge (top) and Catalina Hernández Cabal (bottom) performing in “A Counter Intuitive Trio”, photo by Patricia Leon Quecan
“I’ve been trying to remember how to listen and be in tune with the voices of my ancestors quelled down to a low frequency. But the voices and the ancestral knowledge cannot be silenced. They course through me at all times. My hair, my skin, my fingers, hold secrets sometimes unknown even to me” (Camacho Valencia, 2019)

Upon entering The Confessional artist Paulina Camacho Valencia confronts the viewer, back turned and in the midst of sharing a story. The words push and pull like the truths she unravels and the secrets she is keeping her own. It is as if these secrets are being weaved into her hair while she follows the memory of the pattern she is making preparing to turn, face the viewer, and hold her head high. At moments she speaks to her individual experience but is actively reaching to recall the narratives told and untold by her ancestors. Stories of her grandmother and her grandfather are outlined, but there remain gaps. These gaps echo those which have been caused by colonization, displacement, and loss. The difficulty of doing the work to uncover, learn, and unlearn what she was taught becomes apparent through the struggle to hear the answers to her questions. The artist reminds the viewer that the stories she knows are often fragmented and pieced together from overheard conversations and memories linked to the senses – smells, textures, tastes. It is unsaid why certain questions are diverted, but the feeling is heavy, and the sense is that some memories are difficult to recall, and the stories are harder to tell. Camacho Valencia’s listening is emphasized as an extremely important part of telling the story. Believing in the support and guidance from her ancestors she avows that the making and sharing of what she knows through her life and her ancestors is interlinked to the importance of knowing and finding her truths. This is a fight against the erasure of her people. It is a taking of space. And it is Camacho Valencia proclaiming to be part of a family and home created by the people who she lives with, keeps close, and continues to fight to know.

The story that artist and pedagogue Paulina Camacho Valencia tells us is encapsulating in its form alone which is then accentuated by how the artist presents the video in the space of The Confessional. Making use of the space for its intimacy, the video was placed right above the
screen which represents the place where truths travel from the inside to the outside. Without entering the space, one would never know what was being shared inside. The viewer is invited to be alone with the artist, made aware of the kind of voyeurism that is always present and the power dynamic between the listener and the teller of the story. The vulnerability of the artist is highlighted by the way the space feels similar to a dressing room. The story is clear, poetic, and engaging. The presentation is beautiful, and the artist embraces what could be interpreted as vulnerability and transforms it into an act of resistance and an assertion of power – from her hair, her skin, and her fingers which hold the secrets that cannot be silenced even if they are chosen not to be shared.

Figure 34: Paulina Camacho (2019). De Esas Cosas No Se Habla. [video essay]. Documentation in The Confessional. Champaign, IL.
Flashpoints: Critical Frictions in the Arts and Education, Saturday, March 2\textsuperscript{nd}, 2019, noon, performative activity by Sarah Travis

During the lunch hour of the Fictions and Frictions conference on Saturday, artist and pedagogue Dr. Sarah Travis presented a topic for deeper reflection and discussion. Utilizing a format similar to a lesson used in Dr. Travis’ classroom spaces, she invited conference attendees and others who joined for lunch in the Link Gallery to enter The Confessional and engage with ideas related to a book she co-edited with Ameila M. Kraehe, Emily Jean Hood, and Tyson E. Lewis called Pedagogies in the Flesh: Case Studies on the Embodiment of Sociocultural Differences in Education(2018). When presenting the work, Dr. Travis explained the reasons she
became interested in working with these other scholars to edit the book included her own experiences in classroom settings when race and ways that racism manifests – as specific embodied and emotional moments – relates to knowing and has affected her curricular, political, and personal research practices. Travis made it clear that it is important to address these moments, sit with the discomfort that is often felt and not addressed, and create conversation around how educators, students, and the systems we work within either work against or enforce racism, sexism, and ableism creating friction and affecting what we know about the self, identity, and social inequality. This performance relied on the audience to consider and become part of the piece through interacting with a prompt. Participants were asked to write or draw on sheets of paper and if they chose to do so they could then hang the response on the walls of The Confessional to allow others to read and consider experiences which described specific moments of embodied experiences that Dr. Travis explained are referred to in the book as flashpoints.

When asked to provide a synopsis of the piece Travis (2019) stated,

Manifestations of inequality and exclusion are related to asymmetries of power related to sociocultural difference in race, class, gender, and sexuality, sometimes taking the form of microaggressions. Although always present on a macro level, power asymmetries can become explosive in the midst of routine activities. These occasions are flashpoints that manifest through the body as visceral sensations of disorientation, causing anxiety. In this activity, participants will be invited to engage in a method of embodied reflection on flashpoints around their experiences in the arts and education. Flashpoints are particularly vivid moments of friction when sociocultural differences carried in the body make themselves manifest in conscious experience. The anticipated outcomes are that
participants will gain increased sensitivities and skills as reflective practitioners as artists and/or educators.

Through the activation of *The Confessional* as a gallery space and mirroring the conceptual strengths of the space to consider the complexities of truth making, experience, and conversation Travis embraced the ways that teaching and artistic practice, specifically social practice in art, are related to and exist in conversation with one another.

Figure 36: documentation of Flashpoints: Critical Frictions in the Arts and Education in The Confessional.
Artist Alicia De Léon greeted guests promptly at 5:00 p.m. in the Link Gallery for the culminating performance in *The Confessional* and the last event of the *Fictions and Frictions* graduate student conference on Saturday, March 2nd. Dressed in a leopard print one-piece leisure suit of sorts complete with a hood, ears, eyes, and nose, large hoop earrings stringed through ammunition, vibrant turquoise eyeshadow, and bright red lipstick, De Léon asked those who came to the advertised performance to please not film her, take photographs of her, or clap for her while she read the important words of carefully selected women of color between playing music she proclaimed problematic despite its popularity and mainstream recognition. De Léon
did not just stop about saying the music was problematic however, a saying that often leaves us asking more questions, she explained that this music objectified women and more specifically objectified Latina women. The artist proceeded to jut up and cut into the music with the words of powerful Latina women who stand strong in opposition to the oppressive words of the songs. The music was paused before the artist began reading confidently, clearly, and loudly into the space. Alternating between poems written in Spanish and English, whether you knew both languages or not, the message felt clear. The artist had invited the audience to be with the discomfort of their voyeurism as she presented and claimed the personhood behind the texts to be read, heard, and seen. She embodied the representation and the critique by setting a mood and creating a space that could be entered but not without asking yourself, “Is this okay?” and eventually figuring it is not okay and yet we are all here resulting in the follow up question, “what do we make of it?”. *The Confessional* loomed behind her, filled with exotic textiles, artifacts, and other souvenir-like objects that have been describe as tropical or ethnic.

Eventually, people approached the space, but not without finding themselves reluctant to enter. The artist had made mention to me before the performance that she did not want people to enter and although that request was not made explicit, the energy of the room predicted the outcome – no one entered. The tension of this experience was particularly present once De Léon announced that she was finished reading and she would play music would continue to play. De Léon (2019) described the work as, “A piece that explores the exoticization and consumption of Latin American culture, bodies, livelihood, and/or spaces,” as well as, “a performance of tension, inviting the audience to contemplate the popular culture that thrives on objectification of colored bodies with the empowered voices of the female poets such as those channeled”.

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Figure 38: Alicia De Léon (2019). Exo [performance documentation]. Champaign, IL.
Figure 39: Alicia De Léon (2019). Exo [performance documentation]. Champaign, IL.

Figure 40: María de Villarino’s Alfonsina Stroni (book read during Exo.)
Figure 41: Naomi Quiñonez’s Sueño de Colibí (book read during Exo)

Figure 42: Participants and collaborators in Co-Constructing Truths, Paulina Camacho Valencia, Alyssa Bralower, Angela Inez Baldus, Sarah Richter, Catalina Hernández Cabal, Sarah Travis, Elisabeth Horan, Alicia De Léon (left to right, top to bottom).
Chapter Three: Future plans for work with no end. [When taking the form of an object that is held, this specific work must understand its forthcoming destruction and welcome that day with celebratory open arms, dropping the thing into the hands of others, the unknown, the dark.]

It is difficult for me to think about everything that has happened around The Confessional as a linear narrative. I stress this because I do not believe that the way it has been activated is unique to a specific and singular narrative of its own, but instead it has been influenced by many and within each moment that I have described thus far, it situates itself within much larger conversations. These conversations, by nature of their intensity, importance, and relevance, require continuation outside of the events and their descriptions. For The Confessional, as an object with a narrative of its own, these conversations started with each collaboration described. For myself and others who have come to know and understand The Confessional, it is a platform materialized into a literal form which can be used to contextualize, visualize, and conceptualize our experiences together. It is a manifold tool. There are openings to enter and know the thing
made by the ways it has come to be understood and held onto theoretically, metaphorically, and physically. The ambiguity I hold onto when describing *The Confessional* is analogous with the forms it fits, folds, and finds in the process of its making. All this said, it is a thing, that for me, has allowed many moments to happen. While each moment will live with me distinctly and differently than it will live with anyone else, as most works (of art, of research, of revolution, etc.) do for those who are most intimately in relation with them, I know that *The Confessional* is only one of many forms I will engage as I move on and past the time I have spent with it. My proximity to the form will soon come to an end as I move to be with and in relation to new places, peoples, forms, and platforms. *The Confessional* as a greater signifier for the relations it has inspired I hope will not cease to exist in other forms. As an object, a sculpture, and a gallery space run by me, it will as much die. This is what I anticipate, and I look forward to celebrating the life of *The Confessional* as I have known it.

This said, there is one more collaboration in store for *The Confessional*. In the previous chapter I explain that as a student I approached my advisor asking for a recommendation and advice about taking a course on poetry. This recommendation led me somewhere I would not have predicted and on the path towards listening – perhaps one of the most important pieces to knowing the ways of a poet and certainly an important piece to loving, learning, and acting with integrity, respect, and reflection. Like all the collaborations described in this chapter, this collaboration would never have been possible by assuming that it would work. Attempting to measure its success by prescribing meaning and projecting my own desires about what it would be or the purpose of what it does would mark it a failure from the beginning.

The collaboration I am referring to is the one I have been working to facilitate between *The Confessional*, SOLHOT, and artist Bianca Xunsie. The culmination of the collaboration has
been scheduled to happen on April 26, 2019. As of now, I have been working to get to know the space *The Confessional* will enter by attending SOLHOT, talking with homegirls, reading, listening, and emailing. I was introduced to Bianca Xunsie’s work through my friend and colleague Paulina Camacho who has been a participating homegirl at SOLHOT since the fall of 2018 but has known Bianca since they were together in a classroom working through formal and conceptual ways of knowing and understanding art and each other. The experience of being an awkward black girl is the subject of a lot of Xunsie’s work. Her love and dedication towards speaking these truths resonates with a lot of the work of SOLHOT and it is my hope that the conceptual backbone of *The Confessional* and the formal qualities of the space will provide a profound platform for the work of Xunsie and the work of SOLHOT to meet. I do not know what it is like to be an awkward black girl, but I do know and remember what it is like to be an awkward girl, and I like to think that I could learn a thing or two from listening to the truths that Xunsie and SOLHOT live and speak. The meeting of multiple ideas is often a delicate balancing act and while I am actively taking the role of facilitator or planner in this collaboration, I am aware that the collaboration could fail not especially because of my positionality, but because all collaborations have the potential for failure. I do not worry that Xunsie and SOLHOT will fail *The Confessional* in any way, but rather that *The Confessional* could end up feeling like a rather unnecessary piece in the meeting of these ideas. *The Confessional* has never been considered theoretically by such a young audience. The conceptual foundation of *The Confessional* invites one to listen to truths. SOLHOT encourages the girls and homegirls who come together to celebrate and speak their truths loud and proud or in whatever way they decide is fit for what they have to say. SOLHOT is a place for young black girls to be seen and heard if they want to be and in what way they see fit, which is often not how this invitation is offered. I think that
Bianca Xunsie is speaking her truths and being seen in heard in ways that will hopefully expand the imagination of the girls at SOLHOT. In this collaboration it is not my hope that the theoretical backbone of *The Confessional* is celebrated as much as that Bianca is celebrated. The coming together is not about measuring wins and losses. It is not about me bringing something to the party that is not already present. It is about seeing the potential for collaboration to be emergent rather than prescriptive. I do not know what will happen, but I am excited to be on the journey. I have been learning from the process and I am grateful to be welcomed into the space – to introduce and jut different ways of knowing so to see *The Confessional* interpreted again and new.

After April 26th I am unsure of where *The Confessional* will go. Perhaps Franklin Elementary school will show interest in the space using its potential to function as a gallery space within a school. Maybe *The Confessional* will be pursued by another graduate student and I will trust them with reinterpreting its meaning and function. Maybe *The Confessional* will meet the elements outside in a prairie, in the woods, or in someone’s backyard. There are many possible journeys that I imagine the space could move through, but as an idea it continues to move with me, what I understand and know about these moments and the ways they have affected my being and those who have come to hold it with me.
Chapter Four: Conclusion: Considering Conversations Which are Always Already Incomplete.

“Confession frees, but power reduces one to silence; truth does not belong to the order of power, but shares an original affinity with freedom…”

(Foucault, 1980, p.60)

Bound in the quest for knowledge is our desire for truth. How we decipher, define, and decide what is truthful is a process full of questioning and re-questioning (asking questions). Coupling one way throughout history truth has been sought (confession) with another (art)—how may we find new truth(s) and ask new questions (research)? The Confessional as a conceptual artwork is a pedagogical tool for asking questions and seeking truths. The Confessional plays with structures of power and knowledge with the desire to allow new spaces and places to emerge. I believe a conversation about what is inside and outside of these structures of power can led us towards understanding even if we never achieve full certainty. Can a conversation set us free? I am sure conversation is not the entire bit of a key to freedom and know it as a notch or ward that gets us one turn closer to a truth.

Making things visible, even if only for a moment, can perhaps call our attention to why the thing is important, truthful, and of value. The Confessional as a conceptual artwork asks us to consider: What happens when visibility is temporary? Why is visibility important? Who is given permission to hear, see, touch, smell, and know our truths? These questions are rooted in larger questions like: What is art? Why is art important? How does art create new knowledge?

The Confessional is multifaceted and has the potential to be flourished upon and explored
further. For the purposes of this thesis I have chosen several formats as a means of representing what *The Confessional* is, what it has done, and what it can do. I have included different writing styles, forms of documentation, and ways of looking at the object on purpose as I see these differences to be key to understanding both “what” questions. Confession as a concept has been approached by many other artists, scholars, designers, and thinkers before me. I have chosen to credit and describe these projects later on in this thesis because while they are related (as I denote), I was not attempting to make something in direct conversation with these examples or as influenced by these projects when I set out to build *The Confessional*. These confessionals have taken different physical iterations such as PDL’s (PCU), Urban Matter Inc.’s Pop Up Confessional (Urban Matter Inc., 2016), The Truth Booth (Cause Collective, 2014), the Catholic diocese of Lafayette, Louisiana’s mobile confessional in the back of a retrofitted ambulance (LaFleur, 2015), and artist Dan Spiegemann’s Mobile Confessional (Costarangos, 2017). The spaces all meet the concept with a slightly different interpretation—something I argue as being a sustainable function of the conceptual seed which roots this idea. While it is important to acknowledge ways that this idea has manifested before, the critical backbone and call for further investigation is a theoretical discourse which connects and contributes the experience of art to the framework of *The Confessional*. The pedagogical structuring of this experience, and the questioning of freedom that Foucault attributes to confession is unique to *The Confessional* mobile gallery space for reasons that have been explained throughout the entirety of this paper. I argue that when *The Confessional* moves, it is possible to play with power, art, spaces, places, and community in ways that make us reconsider what we know and believe about art, people, and language. Ultimately, this exploration is about humanity and possibility—which faces a great multitude of extinguishing trepidations and impending annihilation. All this said, I think it
is still valuable, after being given the context of *The Confessional* and a description of how it has functioned, to consider what conversations all of these confessionals have in common. Paul W. Kahn states in “On Humanities and Human Rights” a chapter of the book *The Humanities and Public Life* (Brooks & Jewett, 2014),

> “Truth is not something measurable that stands apart from the interpretation any more than beauty stands apart from a work of art. One interpretation can only be met by another interpretation” (p.117).

Our interpretation of what we know about art is sometimes paired with what we know about ourselves and how our specific experiences throughout our lives affect the way we experience art differently from person to person. Again, I will come back to Wittgenstein’s statement, “The *truth* of certain empirical propositions belongs to our frame of reference” (Wittgenstein, pg. 333). I know and believe that there are many different ways of knowing and seeing. I am hopeful that the jutting of interpretations, experiences, and perspectives is how we see things new and different. I think that *The Confessional*, built with the help of many hands, is a theoretical platform to consider these ideas and when put to practice is doing this work. That said, I would like to consider some other work that is similar, yet different than *The Confessional* as a means to better know and reflect on what *The Confessional* is and has done.
Past Confessions

Considering the breadth of projects based on confession, it is easy to realize just how ingrained confession is in much of Western society. As Michel Foucault states in *The History of Sexuality Volume One* (1980),

“the confession became one of the West’s most highly valued techniques for producing truth. We have become a singularly confessing society. The confession has spread its effects far and wide. It plays a part in justice, medicine, education, family relationships, and love relations, in the most ordinary affairs of everyday life, and in the most solemn rites; one confesses one’s crimes, one’s sins, one’s thoughts and desires, one’s illnesses and troubles; one goes about telling with the greatest precision, what is most difficult to tell” (p. 53).

This practice of telling what is difficult to tell, of which Foucault articulates, is something past confessional projects have in common with *The Confessional*.

*PDL’s Portable Confession Units (PCUs) (2007)*

The Portable Confession Unit (PCU) which was created by artist collaborative PDL (Jason Puccinelli, Jed Dunkerley and Greg Lundgren) operates most closely to that which is intended of *The Confessional*. PDL created 3 PCUs which they inhabited for four days at the 2007 Bumbershoot Festival (2018)—a several day long music and art festival which has been organized and celebrated in Seattle, Washington since 1971. The PCUs were open to anyone at the festival to interact with one of three artists who sat in the PCUs awaiting confession. The
artists were performing in an endurance act as much as they were recognizing and acknowledging conversational trends within the confessions hearing—only leaving the PCUs for bathroom breaks and leg stretching. In reflection PDL (Vital 5 Productions, 2007) states,

“What we learned is that sometimes people just need someone anonymous to talk to and speak to their issues without consequence. We came away believers in the practice of confession, especially when it was devoid of a hefty professional pricetag, societal stigma, or religious shame”.

In PDL’s iteration, the confessional booth aims at inclusivity through the stripping it from the dogmatic, the ritualistic, and the monetary associations which have become power variables at play. The conversations and confessions are not predetermined by the artists inside. Inhabiting arts festivals and communities was a successful temporary exploration in theory and practice as the collective of artists attests to the broader positive effects of conversations and confessions which took place when individuals engaged with what the collective refers to as large sculptural pieces. My major criticism of the Portable Confession Units is not in what was done, but rather the shallow reflection of their impact, the limited scope of their reach, and lack of critical reflection and attention paid to the power dynamic inherent between who are decidedly receiving confession and the confessors. I do not think it is enough for the artists to claim no moral authority, licensure, or expertise other than their own experience, partially because they do not address their subjectivity and also because further measures should have been taken to protect their anonymity if the work depends on it. The power dynamic between three male identifying white people in confessional structures offering a kind of atonement or therapy to those who decide to sit down and confess is too imbalanced. I believe they should directly address what this could mean and how it impacts their experience. This work left me asking the question, now that
the PCUs are all dispersed and inoperable—is it important that the documentation of the project is accessible to those who were not there? The claim about what was learned seems difficult to understand without this documentation. PDL provides limited data to interpret the meaning behind the project in relationship to its intent. I understand the difficulty in describing an experience that is so intimate and I believe this is partially why reading about the PCUs left me wanting to know more.

_Urban Matter Inc.’s Pop Up Confessional (2016)_

The Urban Matter Inc. confessional is another example of a portable confession concept used to engage a public in conversation. As described on their website (Urban Matter Inc., 2016),

> “The confessional encourages people to talk about the hidden and unseen aspects of their lives. The ‘priest’ in this case is an artificially intelligent entity called the ‘Conversational Companion’ or ‘CoCo’ for short. The confessions allow the AI program to build upon its conversational capabilities thereby becoming a better conversationalist. Confessions that fit the directorial vision of Third Party Films will be edited together for an HBO pilot. Participants booked their time slots for confessions online, but there was also a lot of interest from the general public, as several people walked up to the booth and volunteered to take part in this intriguing social experiment” (emphasis mine).

In effort to educate a computer, Urban Matter Inc. created a program that used the concept of confession to “train” a computer to carry on a conversation. While this concept is interesting to think about when considering how a conversation happens and is developed, the framework seems bureaucratic, impersonal, and—ultimately—feels geared towards the production value of
an HBO TV series. While I will refrain from discussing the larger ethical implications of CoCo, I will insist that the structure of this confessional ensues power to the computer, as the receiver of data which is desired to create something new, for those who collect the data: be that HBO, Urban Matter Inc., or another company that may buy or study this programming system. Unlike this confession The Confessional is intended to be run for no profit, situate itself in public spaces (no appointment necessary), and encourage passerby interactions. I admit that so far in The Confessional’s life there have been less passerby interactions than there have been intentional visits from people who knew about the event, someone who was performing in the event, or frequented the space it was in. Perhaps, it is less about the passerby, than it is about catching someone off guard as they see the monolithic structure appear and disappear in a brief period of time. This said, The Confessional, unlike Urban Matter’s Pop Up Confessional, does not operate by appointment which creates an air of exclusivity.

The Truth Booth (2011)

The Truth Booth is a thought-provoking artwork that plays with the idea of the confession as way of truth making much more than the other projects previously mentioned. The Truth Booth is an inflatable structure which takes the form of a large speech bubble encasing the word “TRUTH” in all caps. The concept incorporates the idea of a photo booth (made video booth) and records two-minute-long videos of people responding to the concept of “truth—which seems to simultaneously acknowledge the societal pressures of finding an ultimate and singular truth with the actual construction of multiple truths through recording and compiling many voices and stories. The Truth Booth is a collaboration between Cause Collective (Ryan Alexiev,
Jim Ricks, and Hank Wills Thomas) and different spaces, places, and people globally. The Cause Collective states on their website (Cause Collective, 2014) that they (we) are,

“a team of artists, designers, and ethnographers creating innovative art in the public realm. Our projects explore and enliven public spaces by creating a dynamic conversation between issues, sites, and the public audience. By exploring ideas that affect and shape society, we seek to add the “public” back into public space and art”.

The documentation process of The Truth Booth is one of the most interesting aspects of its design. All of the truths are recorded and can be accessed on a website dedicated to the project (www.insearchofthetruth.net). Once the website is loaded you may search through the videos by country and subject. There is also a map which marks where The Truth Booth has been globally. I find this project to be incredibly interesting in the way voices are documented and nonhierarchically presented to document multiple voices and multiple truths. Although The Confessional is not aimed at doing the same thing through its form, the project shares a similar spirit and acknowledgment of multiple truths.


This Mobile Confessional is a traditional Catholic confession where Father Michael Champagne of the Lafayette Diocese may hear your confession, offer you penance, holy water, and a rosary (LaFleur, 2015). The mission of this confessional is not to play off the concept as a metaphor ridding itself of any strict religious affiliation, but rather to expand and engage more people in the ritual of confession because of its believed spiritual impact on people. What I find appealing about the retrofitted ambulance is the creative spirit Father Michael Champagne engages to think about ways to reach more people – beyond the four walls the typically define
institutional spaces. Father Champagne plays with the confessional structure to open up new ways of thinking about space and place. This playing with structure is what is important to think about here when considering what a confessional can do and how to meet one interpretation with another. While I am not insinuating that the Catholic ritual is good or bad, I do think that the way Father Champagne offers access to the space of confession is important to consider. The lengths that he goes to in order to provide access is something to acknowledge as both innovative and bold. Perhaps taking this space outside of the church encourages believers to be less intimidated by the practice and more willing to participate.

_Dan Spieglemann’s Mobile Confessional (2017)_

Known as the ‘Mobile Confessional’, Dan Spieglemann designed this project as part of a hospitality course at the Bezalzel Acadmeny of Arts and Design (Costarangos, 2017). The project folded up looks like a cart on wheels which can be transported by Spieglemann himself. Once situated in a chosen location the structure expands into what looks similar to a voting booth. Placed in a public space, a passerby may stop and enter the booth to “confess” by writing down a secret or burden onto a post-it note and sticking it on the walls of structure. The walls are transparent allowing people on the outside to watch an individual while they are confessing. The mobility is intended to be used to draw comparisons between the confessions collected in different spaces and places. Spieglemann, an Israeli industrial design student quotes a Jewish saying when describing the project, “a sorrow shared is a sorrow halved” (Spieglemann, 2017). While the mobility and design of this confessional space is alluring, it does not blur the lines of who is confessing as much as _The Confessional_ intends with its inclusion of other variables. That
said, this project is beautiful in its simplicity, achieving a friendly and inviting presence which engages the public. Conceivably this could be in part because of the transparent walls.

Reflecting on these confessional spaces, perhaps, of the examples, PDL’s PCUs are the closest to The Confessional in theory, still, all of the projects listed aim to achieve different means through the process of confession. The Confessional explores art and social engagement in congruence with social practice projects, artist-run spaces, and theoretical philosophies about art, education, and public versus private spaces. Making distinctions between past confessional spaces and The Confessional is necessary to the mapping of historically related projects but these other spaces are not at the forefront of my research and never guided my original interest in building the space. I believe it is important to note that after reflecting all of these spaces together, it seems, usually, there is a hierarchical power structure that is implicated in confession. Each of the projects mentioned plays with this power structure. Of course, I believe that this structure can be played with even more and through introducing new variables. In The Confessional’s case, the conversation of confession is activated by engaging texts—theory, art, and practice—in spaces which challenge us to consider how meaning is made and what we know. Pablo Helguera states in Education for Socially Engaged Art (2011),

In setting a curriculum for socially engaged art, mere art history and theory won’t do: while they are critical to providing a historical and contextual framework of the practice, socially engaged art is a form of performance in the expanded field, and as such it must break away, at least temporarily, from self-referentiality. One is better served by gathering knowledge from a combination of the disciplines—pedagogy, theater, ethnography, anthropology, and communication, among others—from which artists
construct their vocabularies in different combinations depending on their interests and needs (p. x).

My interests in education ultimately stems from the study of art. *The Confessional* is a manifestation of this interest. However, it is in relation to thinking with Foucault, Wittgenstein, Lorde, Helgeura, Bergmark, Camnitzer, Wilson, Hernández, Camacho Valencia, Yolac, Travis, Lucero, Hayden, De Léon, SOLHOT, the institution, school, life, and our truths, that I am also asking the question, “what is art?” and what is its role in the communicating of ideas. By inviting practitioners, from Hernández to Travis to Hayden to SOLHOT, to consider their practices as artistic practices I have sought to make *The Confessional* about more than just the art world and its history. Texts that have held me have been those which speak to the importance of art in communication, education, and interpretation. I am interested in confession as poetic metaphor and a conceptual through line. I have tried to draw this line through interpretation and discourse within art, showing the power of art to educate, imagine, and create change. With *The Confessional*, I have found much broader possibilities for learning than originally anticipated. I believe these connections to be rich. I imagine these connections to continue to reveal themselves in time. *The Confessional* is my way of bringing making, theory, and doing (practice) together. When asked about art as a pedagogical tool, Luis Camnitzer (2014) states in an interview with Alexander Alberro titled *The Pedagogical Function of Art*,

“Being a realist in these matters, I am aware that it is rather unlikely that I will change the world. So what is left for me to do is give hints about things that are obstacles to those changes and more hints about how I would like the world to be” (pg.96).
I like to think that *The Confessional* is a pedagogical tool which functions similar to how Camnitzer describes his work – giving hints. It is through thinking with Camnitzer that I am reminded of the importance to embrace both an ambiguity and a criticality. And with Helguera that I am reminded to think about time, because I care about people, but also because time tells truths.

One thing I have found as an artist and someone who is just now understanding my identity as an educator is that I am often wanting to respond to texts through making. Often this process seems somewhat ambiguous, but through discourse and interpretation, the meaning behind what I make becomes clearer. Artists must embrace the risk of failure because their work relies on a shared interpretation and sometimes, because of this, art fails, but sometimes another’s interpretation may also become an important part of what is learned through experiencing the work. Additionally, art—through interpretation and experience—requires a public or an audience. When asked, “who is your audience?” over and over in my undergraduate mentor I did not imagine what that meant in a larger context. I now understand this question as an important piece of knowing what questions to ask, how to critique the work I make, and how to imagine its possibilities for larger social change. Donna Sommer (2014) states in *The Work of Art in the World*,

“Literature is recycled material, a pretext for making more art. I learned this distillation of lots of literary criticism in workshops with children. I also learned that creative and critical thinking are practically the same faculty since both take a distance from found material and turn it into stuff for interpretation. For a teacher of literature over a long
lifetime, these are embarrassingly basic lessons to be learning so late, but I report them here for anyone who wants to save time and stress” (p.107).

The connection between creative and critical thinking is an important place to sit while considering the possibilities of art as a pedagogical tool and practice. Taking distance for interpretation is done at various moments throughout the making of art. Artists who embrace a critical creative practice are in conversation with the world continuously asking new questions and starting new conversations. Perhaps what The Confessional has successfully accomplished in the end is this – I now understand more deeply the complexities that are involved in the process of communicating through multiple languages and experiences. I believe and know beyond my understanding that interpretation, conversation, and truths are constantly being negotiated through relationships between people and things. If I am to live and speak as an educator and an artist, it is important that I continue to search for and listen to new truths along the way. The Confessional has taught me that collaboration is work. There is labor hiding in unpredictable places, usually not visible to the eye and not celebrate by the masses. There are artists who define themselves in relationship to who they know and where they are and artists who creatively interpret the world in accordance to what they have in any given moment. The Confessional is the first large scale collaborative artwork that I have made. Because of The Confessional I know and believe that collaboration is rough, imbalanced, easily slipping into places of not knowing, and yet, entirely worth all of these moments of struggle, because it is affirming, opening, connecting, and ultimately about imagining things which seem impossible without working together.
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