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BFA Sculpture '25
Thesis Speech - *synovia*

Hello! Thank you all so much for being here.

Before we dive in I do want to take a moment for gratitude – I've had tremendous help on this project, too many folks to name, but there *are* a few people that deserve a special shout-out. First of all, Ran Sheng, who fielded countless emails from me and always went above and beyond to find solutions to my tech problems, or to find other options when no solutions could be found. Similarly, Chris, Danny, and Griffin in IT spent so much time helping me patch together tech that I only sort of understood. And of course, thank you to Seth, for all of the above and everything else.

Now on to the project itself...

This project is a sculpture and sound installation exploring experiences of embodied presence and radical intersubjectivity, inspired by the dancefloor as both a physical sensory space as well as a conceptual framework. The installation consists of 18 ceramic sculptures suspended throughout the gallery, with a sound installation carried through a subwoofer and six small speakers which are hung within the sculptures.

The sculptures are the products of a clay practice I have been engaging in for about a year now, where I work with the clay with my eyes closed. I started working this way for a couple of reasons: first, to overcome the self-consciousness and decision paralysis that I felt was getting in the way of my creative process; and second, as an experiment in bringing dance into my clay practice, as a way of achieving an in-between state, similar to the "flow state" that we talk about in creative practice. This state, and how to access it, is something I've been curious about, and hungry for, for several years now.

For a long time I wanted to get out of myself. I spend a lot of time in my own head, processing and ruminating and analyzing. Eventually, though, I recognized that all this thinking was getting in the way of living – of experiencing things outside of myself, things that I hadn't already figured out. And for a long time I didn't particularly like myself, my head, my nature – I wanted to escape myself. I craved something transcendent, ecstatic; I wanted to be subsumed, I wanted the edges of myself to dissolve into something greater. I wanted to destroy myself as I was and still live, within a realm of pure experience. I wanted to stop thinking so goddamn much, and I wanted to feel. I wanted to get into that in-between – the space of interpermeability with everything outside myself. One way that I found this was through dance, especially the kind of free, unencumbered movement I found through ecstatic dance spaces, raves, and clubs.

I wanted to see if I could bring this feeling into my clay practice, so I began working with my eyes closed. I prepared some clay, took it in my hands, closed my eyes, and traversed the material by touch alone. Immediately I found myself in a completely new experiential realm. I became sensitive to the weight of the material, and the forms as they seemed to my hands. I had to remain consistently present, reading the tactile information as it passed through my skin and muscles and bones in order to feel what was necessary for the piece. A thick, heavy area perhaps called to be thinned or opened up, while tender parts

told me of a fragility that asked for care. And having no visual sense of the form's dimensions and boundaries, I had to keep in constant physical contact in order to find my way around the piece without accidentally damaging the developing form as it emerged. There came to be a relationship between myself and the clay, a dialogue of bodies much like that of dancers or lovers. Without the hangup of intellectual judgement restricting my actions, I felt into what the material needed and wanted, as well as my own desires and intentions. I was able to find forms that were utterly new and exciting, that I may never have been able to find otherwise. So the sculptures are dancers, dance partners, and results of a kind of dance, and dances in themselves.

From the beginning I knew these sculptures wanted to be suspended. There was no clear top or bottom to the forms, and they seemed kind of strange and otherworldly, and having them floating in mid-air gave them a sense of vitality and movement that felt appropriate. Suspending them also gave people the opportunity to engage with them from almost any angle and any level of proximity. I also feel that this presentation disrupts the hierarchy of the sculpture-viewer relationship, making the sculptures almost like fellow-beings in the space alongside you.

So I had my line of inquiry – an exploration of this in-between state – and I had these sculptures and this clay practice, but the project still felt very amorphous. Initially, I was experimenting with documenting my own private movement practice, and had the idea of projecting this video documentation alongside the sculptures. I knew I wanted to make an installation with the sculptures, and planned to incorporate some form of video projection and possibly performance.

A very pivotal element for this project came about entirely by chance, or fate, or whatever you want to call it. I had an elective credit I had to fill last semester, and the least-unappealing class that fit with my schedule was Fundamentals of Sound Design. I figured, hey, I love music and I think sound art is a vaguely interesting concept, so what the hell. I ended up absolutely loving this class, and it's no exaggeration to say that it changed the course of my art practice and dare I say my life. A whole new sensory framework opened up for me – I started to listen differently, to notice the complex soundscapes around me, and to think about sound as a material, even a sculptural material.

My new fixation on sound paired well with how I was already moving away from sight in my clay practice. I started to think a lot about how we interpret the world based on our senses, and how most of how I understood the world was in terms of sight, which felt very closely connected to cognition, to my brain, to coherent thought and language. But this in-between state that I was after, that I had found through dance and through sightless sculpture, was more abstract than this. This in-between state was sensory, tactile, pre-linguistic, intuitive; it was strange, primal, bodily and almost inexplicable. Typically, our day-to-day interaction with sound is causal and semantic: we hear something and immediately look to see what made the sound, where it's coming from, and what it means for our material environment. But when sound becomes divorced from this duty of information, when it becomes an abstracted sensory texture – it moves into this strange pre-linguistic realm. Without immediate meaning attached, sound acts on the body directly, and makes us feel in ways we can't always explain.

I carried this new perspective on sound into my continued exploration of dance and dance spaces. One major way that I felt sound was able to transport me into this in-between state, at least on the dancefloor,

was the bass. I learned that scientifically, low-frequency sound can be felt as a physical vibration in the body, even if it can't be *heard as sound*. Of course I had also felt this through my own experience of being shaken by thumping bass, of being buffeted by wind in front of huge speakers at raves [edit this].

This phenomenon cemented itself as essential during a concert when, feeling exhausted but wanting to stay in the music's embrace, I sat on the bench at the back of the club. I felt my body loosen and dissolve as the bass traversed my bones, shaking apart all tension, relinquishing me of the task of cohesion as I was at once buoyed and compressed by the big big body of the sound. I felt myself dissolve, but in a way that felt synthetic, a subsumption of myself into a larger whole. As my body was held by the sound I looked out at the dance floor through half-closed eyes, seeing partial silhouettes of dancers undulating through the dark and the smoke, sensing them as also part of this whole which was also me, that I was also them, that in this moment we were somehow continuous.

This moment turned out to be key to figuring out what exactly this project would be. I had felt my way into all the elements, the sculptures, the sound, the conceptual concerns, but I still wasn't sure how they would all fit together. Then, as it happens, one good night at the club led to a breakthrough. The sculptures were dancers, and they were the dance themselves, too, and they were also the bones that held that thudding bass, bodies shaped by sound. And the sound, of course, was just what it was: the intangible body that held all bodies within it, giving space and time and meaning to the dance.

Alongside all of this I was also doing a ton of research. Something that was really exciting about my research process was how organic and holistic it felt. It often seemed like the perfect book, or essay, or experience, dropped into my lap like a gift from the universe. One piece of writing that was instrumental early on was Sara Ahmed's book *The Cultural Politics of Emotion*, where she argues that emotions don't come from within us, nor are they something that affect us from some outside source, but rather they are created through our social interactions. She uses the word "contact" to describe these interactions, and I quickly became intrigued with this concept of bodies and selves bouncing off one another and creating what we understand as experience, as a sort of mutually constructed reality. At this point I was fixated on the idea of "contact," and one day while re-shelving books in the library I stumbled upon a book called *Being a Skull: Site, Contact, Thought, Sculpture*. I checked it out based on the title alone and found that it was about an Italian sculptor I had never heard of named Giuseppe Penone. Penone's work explores the sculptural [nature] of natural forces and the effects of physical contact. For example, his project *To Be a River* involved recreating a stone he found that had been shaped by a river over the course of eons. Another work, *It Will Continue to Grow Except at this Point*, involved placing a cast-metal hand around a living tree and watching how that intervening grasp shaped its growth.

As I delved deeper into sound studies, I came across the writing of Brandon LaBelle, and was particularly excited by the book *Party Studies*, a collection of essays exploring the idea of partying through a sociocultural theoretical lens. I started to map this idea of the party onto my ideas about the dancefloor, and began to think about the dancefloor not only as an access point to this in-between state I was obsessed with, but also as a way of thinking about interpersonal interaction in a radical, subversive way, which I'll expand on in a moment.

Aside from *Party Studies*, Brandon LaBelle writes about a lot of different areas and applications of sound studies, usually through a social lens. I picked up another book of essays, edited by LaBelle and Steve Roden, called *Site of Sound: of Architecture and the Ear*. I was particularly struck by one essay in this book, called "Otic Diary," by Loren Chasse, whose name I had heard in connection with local Portland sound and music scenes, so I was excited to have stumbled across this essay by chance. I was floored by the first line: "Betweenity is membranous." This put words to exactly what I was thinking but didn't know quite how to express, and gave me a new, incredibly useful term to describe what I was exploring. Betweenity became a word I adopted and adapted for my own purposes.

For me, betweenity describes this in-between state I've been after: a balance of embodiment, transcendence, groundedness, and interpermeability. Betweenity is concerned with the ever-emergent moment, the reality that is in front of me rather than my preconceptions, assumptions, or sense of certainty. This is related to what LaBelle talks about in *Party Studies*, where the party (or, for my purposes, the dancefloor) is a space where we lower our guard, we become curious about each other and the space we inhabit, and the reality we create together. The dancefloor is a site ripe with possibility and the potential for subversive forms of sociality and connection. Within these shifting sands we can begin to imagine existing orders as less rigid than previously believed. When I see the person who sold me groceries yesterday on the dancefloor tonight, a new facet of their personhood unfolds for me. The unexpected complexities of our relationships, our interminglings as subjects in a given space and time, are revealed in minor glimpses as we meet in this space of rare transparency. On the axis of one shared basic quality – that we are all here, now, and ostensibly because we want to be – I turn toward others with a degree of vulnerability, of generosity, that surprises me; the very nature of the space engenders a belief, a hope, in trust and reciprocity, and the real possibility of genuine human connection – an event that hinges on these same conditions.

So clearly the conceptual side of the project had become very robust, and that was exciting. But I also wanted to make sure that the material, formal reality of the project synced up with what I was thinking about. I knew I was creating this space of sound and sculpture informed by the dancefloor, and my interest in betweenity, but the actual work itself was very abstracted. This wasn't going to be a space where someone coming in with no context would immediately think, oh yes, this is about dance, or the club, or anything like that. But I still wanted to make sure that, even subconsciously, the ideas I was concerned with would come through.

I wanted the formal aspects of the installation to provoke sensations of interaction, intimacy, inhabiting your body among other bodies, and feelings of perceptual relation: distance, proximity, and the space between these relations. I've already mentioned how suspending the sculptures puts them on a level of fellow-beings within the space that you are navigating as a fellow-body. There's also the way that you can see the making process, and the touch of my body, in the form of the sculptures, indicating a relationship of contact. The way that I've glazed them, too, with glossy interiors and rough unglazed exteriors, evokes a sense of body.

I've mentioned my interest in the way low-frequency sound brings the body into the sonic experience, so I created a foundation of low-frequency sound to hold everything together and really bring your body into the sense of the space. Within that, there are higher frequency sound elements which provide a formal

counterpoint to the low end, and also help spatialize the sound in order to bring up these feelings of distance and proximity. The sounds move around the space, leading you to notice your own body's relationship to the space and the sound. These higher sounds consist of synth improvisations as well as recordings I've made of radio static and manipulations of clay, both wet and fired. The static provides a textural component while associating with ideas of music and social listening. The recordings of clay help tie in the sculptures, and especially the unique process of creating them, as well as providing their own sonic textures. And with how small these speakers are, the sounds emitted ask you to come in close to listen, inherently creating a dynamic of physical relation and intimacy.

I was also excited by the idea that each person who came into this installation would have their own individual experience based on how they moved through the space. Drawing from Sara Ahmed's ideas of mutually constructed experience, and the idea of the dancefloor as a space that we create and navigate together, I loved the idea that each visitor to the space would be a composer, in a sense – attending to what was near them at a given moment and navigating based on sounds or forms that caught their attention.

The practical side of creating the sound installation was a thrilling – and often frustrating – experience. Countless times throughout this process I thought about how maybe six months ago I had taken a sound design class on a whim, and now here I was trying to make a multi-channel sound installation for the first time. I'm not the most tech-savvy, and there was so much software and hardware to make sense of, even aside from the sound composition itself. But it was all on that exhilarating edge where I was constantly having to problem-solve by my own wits, and also constantly turning to more knowledgeable folks around me for help. I really couldn't ask for a better learning experience. The growth has been exponential. And it was also incredibly exciting to see the project start to really materialize, when I was able to mock up a version of the installation in my studio and get an idea of how the sounds and the sculptures could really interact.

I've talked about my research in terms of books I've read and sort of macro-level contextualization, but it's important to me to note how integral my direct community has been in this process. Going out dancing and going to shows is obviously a big part of it – I've had so many conversations with friends who are DJs, dancers, musicians, and fellow creatives, where we could think around these things together on a personal level. As well, over the past year I've fallen in love with local experimental art spaces like Performance Works Northwest, where I've found inspiration and community among other weird people who make weird art. I've said how integral Loren Chasse's writing was to this project, and I was fortunate enough to have had him serve on my midterm review panel, alongside Marcus Fischer, another sound artist whose work moves me. I am also so grateful to have gotten to work with Seth Nehil as my mentor, who was formative to my sound art journey, has helped me tremendously on this project, and whose work I admire in its own right. I also have to say thank you to David Eckard, who was deeply influential to me as an artist, as a teacher, and as a truly special human being. I joined the Sculpture department after taking freshman 3D Design with David, in large part because I just wanted to spend as much time learning with him as I could, and it's because of him that I am the artist, and person, I am today. David has been present for me throughout this process, and I really wish he could be here now, and maybe in some sense he is. So to all of you who have been a part of this, whether you're here today or not, thank you.

This project has been evolving right up to this moment, and I love that – and I'm already thinking about ways that it might continue to evolve in the future. There are qualities of the sculptures that are under-expressed in this particular iteration – namely the sensory experience of actually handling the forms, as well as what I'm calling the 'modular' possibilities, of how the forms can fit together in different ways, interacting on a physical level with each other, and also the incorporation of movement of the sculptures themselves. I'd love to see future elaborations of this project which are more interactive, or more dynamic, not because I feel these things are missing from this project, but simply as different avenues to explore. It's exciting to think about different ways these elements can be reconfigured to express different ideas and facets of the work.

To return to the work as it is here, now – Last night while I was taking video documentation, something unbelievably perfect happened, which simultaneously showed a way forward, while circling back to past desires for this project, and ultimately marked the culmination of the work's current moment. On short notice, I asked a good friend to come pretend to be a gallery visitor for the video. Without either of us consciously intending it, this turned into a beautiful moment of movement and embodiment within the work. I'd like to end by taking a few minutes to watch this together.