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BIO

Katy Itter was born in 1987 in Seattle, Washington. Itter’s work has been exhibited in galleries in Seattle, New York and Rome. Recent exhibitions have included Open Engagement curated by Linda Weintraub at the Queens Museum and her thesis exhibition, Cherished Cavities and Intimate Hollows, at the Samuel Dorsky Museum of Art. She received a BA in Interdisciplinary Visual Arts at the University of Washington, and is a recent graduate of the Master of Fine Arts Sculpture program at SUNY New Paltz.

ARTIST STATEMENT

I am interested in the way we form relationships in a current digitally enhanced society and what those relationships mean to us. I use casts from my own body as well as digital media in my work to create spaces that ask the viewer to identify comfort zones and boundaries. This allows me to force an interaction with the viewer that is both invasive to their space as well as my own. I aim to create space that builds tension between the viewer’s personal boundaries and mine.
Katy Itter
MFA Thesis Exhibition

Opening Reception
May 8th 5-7pm

Samuel Dorsky Museum of Art
State University of New York at New Paltz
1 Hawk Drive, New Paltz, NY 12561

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Introduction

Today’s most popular methods of communication require little face-to-face contact with the world around us. We can talk to our friends without hearing their voice, shop for and send gifts for special occasions with the click of a mouse, or even play games with each other, without even seeing one another in person. This technology has had an effect on the way we relate to one another, and it won’t be long before our relationships are just simulated extensions of social media outlets.

As technology expands, our personal space bubble is expanding as well. Technology, or more specifically social media, is both the means and the mechanism to increase the space around us, meaning the physical and emotional distance we keep from the people in our lives. How can I capture that space and make it visible or even tangible? How do these spaces affect the way that individuals and society as a whole function? My work explores the interactions within these spaces and how we communicate through them.

Social media brings this generation a sense of connection, but in reality it provides users a larger physical distance from others. Rather than meeting friends in person or even calling to say hello, most would prefer to connect on the internet, look at recently posted photos, and leave a comment or two to be read by the photo’s owner at a later time. In a society that craves instant-everything, the only instant interaction we’re afraid of is the immediacy of genuine human contact, as it robs us of the ability to carefully cultivate the perfect witty response or a “perfect” filter-laden photograph. In an era where we are more connected than ever, ironically the distance between humans has never been so cavernous.
Narcissism

Technology has presented American culture with a marked paradigm shift from the postmodern era. Where postmodernism placed the author in the position of god, we now live in a culture that gives the power to the viewer (Kirby). Technologies have restructured the relationship between the ‘author and the reader’ (Kirby). In postmodernism, contemporary culture was a spectacle with the viewer being separate from the entertainment; today, our entertainment frequently relies on the viewer’s input in order to be successful. Contemporary television shows mostly consist of cameras following around real people as opposed to fictional characters following a script. Sometimes we are even encouraged to call in and vote for the outcome of the show (American Idol, Big Brother, etc.). The barrier between the artist and the viewer no longer exists, and we control our media with the same hands-on approach with which we control our personal spaces (Kirby).

The selfie is a major part of the digital carnival we call social media. It is a symbol of identity and the plasticity that digital culture affords us. With the aid of photo editing software and Instagram filters, we are able to create an ideal image of ourselves, giving us the ability to write our own identity and to share that identity with the rest of the internet.

In *Portrait of us*, a three-foot, square mirror reflects the image of the viewer, allowing for a prime opportunity for selfie taking. The shape reflects the iconic Instagram photo proportions, while a square, 6-inch QR code sits in direct competition with the viewer’s reflection. As the viewer scans the code on a smartphone, their phones take them to a website where a gallery of previously taken selfies is collected, while a “submit” button at the top of the gallery allows for each viewer to upload their own selfies. This piece provides temptation to an innate desire in all of us to capture and share our image and likeness, and therefore ourselves, with the masses, laying bare the self-important nature millennials have been encouraged to cultivate.
Obsession

In contemporary American culture, we have become obsessed with obsession. Lennard Davis explains that we are an obsessive culture (5). We idolize people who passionately or obsessively create in a variety of fields, whether it be achievements in art, music or medicine. To be obsessive is to be devoted and hard working, and these obsessed individuals are consumed with discovering and walking forthrightly down the path of perfection.

We are a perfection-seeking culture, and with that image of perfection comes criticism. Today’s standards for beauty are so high that even our celebrities—people who are famous for being beautiful—not only tweak their appearance in images, magazines, websites and virtually through Facebook, but they alter their appearance physically with plastic surgeries, makeup contouring, tanning, etc. Celebrities do this in order to either keep up with the rest of their peers or to set the aesthetic bar even higher. Growing up in a perfection-seeking society can have an unhealthy effect on people coming of age. In reaction to these aspects of society, I have struggled with obsession through an eating disorder.

Since I was a small child, I have struggled with binge eating disorder. Binge eating disorder is described by the fifth edition of the Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-5) as “recurring episodes of eating significantly more food in a short period of time than most people would eat under similar circumstances, with episodes marked by feelings of lack of control.” A person suffering from this disorder also feels guilt, embarrassment, or disgust and may binge eat alone to hide the behavior. In my experience, this disorder enabled me to use my weight as an excuse to keep a distance from people, and I would restrain myself from developing relationships for fear of rejection. This fear originated from the expectations of a perfection-seeking culture, and because I was bombarded with images of the “ideal” and criticism of everything outside the realm of this “ideal,” the thought of future rejection was understandable and predictable due to my
“imperfection.” The disorder was a way for me to control and predict my experiences in the relationships that came my way.

In the piece, *Binge*, I sit in front of the camera as I force bubble gum in my mouth repeatedly. This mimics the act of binge eating, and becomes grotesque very quickly. The camera zooms in to my mouth as drool drips from the corners of my lips and choking sounds mix with the wet sound of flesh smacking back and forth. There are moments where the camera zooms in, catching glimpses of pain and guilt wash over my face. They quickly diminish in favor of a calm, reassuring expression, conveying my resolve to fit more pieces in my mouth. The wad of gum eventually gets so big that it can no longer fit, and the video ends as I slowly release the chewed sticky mass from my mouth.

**Ritual**

In order to maintain control of the space around us, we have to create rules that govern any invasion that may attempt to pierce these invisible borders. These rules may come in the form of repetitions or rituals. Rituals first appeared as a way to identify a universal feeling of the human experience, usually in the form of religion (Kadar 23). They provide a way for individuals to relate or conform to a group, and help form the identity of both the group as well as the individuals themselves. Rituals can have both negative and positive effects on the relationships between an individual and their community. Negative practices are those that the individual uses to distance themselves from a rejected identity, while positive ones encourage the construction of a chosen identity (Kadar 65). Binge eating was a negative practice in which I distanced myself from a perfection-seeking culture.

The phrase “I love you” can be a difficult thing to say, as the meaning can be very powerful and intimidating for some. For others it might be thrown around so much that it loses its meaning. I was interested in the repetition of this phrase and how its meaning could evolve over time. In the piece, *Meaning, I love you*, I sit with people of different backgrounds and with whom I share varying
levels of intimacy. Our cheeks are pressed together so that our lips are almost touching as the camera is focused in closely to the space, or lack thereof, that fits between us. There is an awkward tension that arises when the phrase is repeated over and over and, as each frame continues, the participants struggle to maintain the same distance. In some of the frames, the participant seems very comfortable with the intimacy, while in others they struggle to keep close.

The Grotesque

All of these subjects have an element of the grotesque in them, whether it’s the visceral physical disgust of visualizing the space in my mouth, or an emotional or moral disgust one may feel about the obsessive and narcissistic aspects of contemporary culture. The grotesque is defined as being abject and makes us uncomfortable. It relates to the body in a form that reminds us of our own materiality, and we find it uncomfortable because it reminds us of our own human fragility and the inevitability of our own mortality (Kristeva).

Susan Stewart explains our relationship with the grotesque in her book, *On Longing*. We see the grotesque because of its ambiguous form, and we become anxious with the ambiguity of the form, especially as it relates to the body. Another factor in the spectacle of the grotesque is the use of space, as “there is no question that there is a gap between the object and its viewer. The spectacle functions to avoid contamination (108). Space plays a big role in our relationship to the grotesque; when we see it, we want to keep a distance in order to protect ourselves (108).

This is a theme I am continually curious about, and each of my pieces present or encourage an act of intimacy. In *Binge* and *Meaning, I Love You*, I am forcing you to watch intimate and private moments. With the *Portrait of Us*, I am asking you to share your own intimate moment. These grotesque spectacles create an intimate moment between the viewer and the artwork, and this theme continues in *From My Mouth to Yours*.
For a recent project, I cast both items and food that I had chewed in chocolate and other edible materials. I gave each chocolate to a participant to eat. This invited viewers to consume space that I once partially consumed, bringing them out of their comfortable space and into mine. I revisited this piece with *From My Mouth to Yours*. In this piece, I cast gum I have chewed in chocolate and placed these chocolates in gold chocolate box trays. The chocolates were displayed at the top of 100 stacked teal candy boxes. The bright colors of the gold and teal commodify the chocolates, mimicking the colors of fancy commercial products on display. This time, rather than consume the chocolates, the viewer is asked to look at the spectacle of the quantity of chocolates on display, and the obsession in its form.

In all of these pieces, I am sharing with the viewer my own anxieties and discomfort, while encouraging them to experience similar feelings. There is also a sense of filling a void that is never fully satisfied. There is repetition in the videos and chocolates while the selfies continue to add up, but we are never fully sated. The videos play on loop, while the chocolates are left uneaten, and the selfie blog will forever accept new entries. I am not only defining the space we keep around us, but I aim to disrupt it, while forcing myself to explore the outer boundaries of my comfort. I find fascination in these borders, and hope to continue investigating the definitions and environments that affect the ways in which individuals interact in contemporary society.
BIBLIOGRAPHY


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