

A Thesis Presented to
The Faculty of Alfred University

Disidentification

By
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In Partial Fulfillment of
The Requirements for
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“Disidentification focuses on the way in which dominant signs and symbols, often ones that are toxic to minoritarian subjects, can be reimagined through an engaged and animated mode of performance or spectatorship. Disidentification can be a world-making project in which the limits of the here and now are traversed and transgressed.” - Jose Esteban Munoz, “Cruising Utopia”

Prologue

Having spent the better part of three or four years seeking concrete identity, I am pleased to report this is no longer the case. I have come to a point in my artistic practice where I recognize and allow for complexity, shift, and play. I understand that these are qualities of making art, making sense of things, that I am drawn to. Quite literally, as a sculpture and media artist, I make objects, analog or digital, that tell stories or express ideas. But alongside that very physical making is years of personal research. Artists are a particular kind of researcher. In my case, it has meant seeking out a blend of blogs, Tumblr posts, Twitter feeds, academic journals, essays, zines, poems, books, conversations, artworks, etc. This research occurs simultaneously and in conjunction with my studio practice. It is a paper compass, a handwritten field guide for the landscape I contribute to every day. *It is a part of making art.* As much as I allow for the use of play, color, imagination, and mixed media in my artwork, so too the volume of text that supports my work is allowed.

But in what way could I express the many connections and thoughts between all of these creative minds that I am in dialogue with? How do I describe the fluffy webbing of ideas that permeates my sketchbooks? I feel as if I am trying to snatch balloon strings in mid-air, gathering individual voices into one magical bunch, one that could lift my feet off the ground. I knew in addition to working on the artwork, I needed to work on the writing as well.

I do not want to write a research paper to validate my artistic concepts. I do not want to wave off the task, or reduce it down to a thin artist statement. I want to serve the meat of the words and images that helped get me to this point in my art practice. I do not want to explain or prove any specific point. Rather, I want to shed light on the origins of my artistic content. It is support. With this in mind, I arrive at a series of drawings.

Not Gay as in Happy but Queer as in Hungry

I take a word from Munoz, and tenderly label my written, or drawn, thesis ‘Disidentification’. It is, primarily, about the relationship between queerness and the imagination, specifically the ability to imagine worlds or friends separate from the ‘here and now’, often using the signs and symbols of the here and now.

I disidentify because where I am and where I have been and who I was, is not enough. I desire more. It is hungry tears and they only go away when they are fed. For me, being queer and nonbinary is hungering for a something more. I have this hunger because my current experience of reality is not enough. I have this hunger because I glimpse the other side every time I lose myself at a dance party, when I shriek at a drag show, when I applaud a musical, when I turn cardboard into art, when I put on a costume and become another person. I have this hunger because marginalized people have this hunger, because people I will never meet have this hunger, because I am not the only one with has this hunger. I have this hunger because I want to be better for my friends, to contribute more concretely to my communities. I have this hunger because the here and now doesn’t nourish me completely. Adult make believe, for queers and trans folks, is a life line.

Why do I (we) make up stories, friends, places, universes? We’re not naive. We know that we are playing with pretense. We’re not naive. We know that pretense and fiction have real weight and real affects to our lives and cultures beyond our own. Why do I care so much about my own fictions? Why do I sacrifice, save, set aside for imagination? For twenty two years and counting, the lure of the tide of fantasy pulls me in again...and again...and again. I love those who I find near this tide. I love the misshapen treasures we form with flotsam. I love our creative ability to birth something different from what lies around us. I love that we care enough to collectively believe in the meaning of our objects, performances, words, songs, and images, in world-making.

What is world-making?

A world-making project can take many forms. It is the “engaged and animated mode of performance or spectatorship” in Munoz’s quote. How I define world-making is not fully visible in my drawn thesis, and here I’d like to speak to three types of world-making.

World-making: Solo

As a kid, lacking any co conspirators, a.k.a friends, I could call the shots safely. Certainly, there were alter egos, and not just my own. Stuffed animals, pillows, walls became humans, aliens, villains, love interests. Costumes are a must. Props, songs, catchphrases, and soundtracks could all come into play. Sometimes it was even the play of a play - a favorite world-make I had was rehearsing for a Broadway revival of the hit musical *Cats*- one world-make session for playing the boy cats, and one world-make session for the lady cats. The benefits of the solo world-make structure are this - Lack of judgement. If I can't cartwheel or ride a horse or read Latin or be a tomboy, then certainly I can pretend it in whatever manner feels authentic. Utterly convinced that these desires would be misunderstood by my peers, asserting control over stuffies and my furniture was therapeutic. It was transcendent. In this space without peer feedback, one can practice or play through ideas and identities. Playing through struggles or uncertainties to emerge on the other side built confidence in my small self. I knew I could always rely on my solo world-makes if need be.

Where this is present in my art practice: testing materials, paper mache-ing, sewing, sketching, editing video, scavenging for materials, therapy, reflection, paperwork, painting, glittering, glueing, writing...

World-making: Tag Team

Getting one or two co-collaborators adds new possibilities, and potential for heartbreak. There are more opportunities for ideas to be challenged, skills to be shared. Having a 'one and only', a sidekick, a best friend, a dynamic duo, eases a transition. You may feel less alone. You may feel alone, but together.

My middle school best friend, Clare, was the other bookish oddball. Ostracized by our classmates, we tucked in to fantasy novels, Victorian literature, and Shakespeare. We acted out our favorite scenes in her moor-ish, gloomy backyard. We slayed enemies and made pretend medicines out of berries and mud. We mixed Pepsi, iced tea, root beer, and cranberry juice, hoping it would taste something like a rich mead. The official title was 'un-biological sister'. Today we might have called it 'chosen family.' I've lost track of Clare, and she of me, and this is okay. Your tag teamer might fall away naturally. Others have stepped into this light. There's an

intimacy, a secret. You and only one other have stumbled upon something glowing in the woods, you are the only two who can speak the language. When a multitude feels overwhelming, with too many voices, faces, thoughts, opinions, a trusted hand slips into yours.

Where this is present in my art practice: helping other artists, asking for advice or feedback, showing music videos to my roommate, supportive text messages, one on one collaborations, filming with one actor, cleaning...

World-making: The All Along Dream, the Dream Still Dreamed Of

Collective fantasies bring rapture. When the world-make is shared by any more than three, the potential skyrockets (the potential for...anything). A film crew, a lunch table, an audience, a cast, a collective, coffee date friends, colleagues...this was the world-make that I crave the most. Or, rather, I wish that it came with more permanency. My circles tend to break open and scatter with the wind.

It is the feeling when five or six or seven or twenty or fifty of your favorite people, your disparate friends, a blend of colleagues who you see in separate corners, are suddenly across from each other at a dinner table. A moment of reflection - you're eating and someone cracks a joke, a response calls out from down the table, the room sparkles in laughter you have never heard before, because it is the laughter of a collective. And you are able to love these people, their ideas, their own world makes, at once, in the same space! This is something you have only done with blood relatives, which is to say that perhaps, in a different way, these people could also be a family to you and each other. This feeling permeates my friendships, my chosen families.

Where this is present in my art practice: Group critiques, dinner parties, art shows, gallery openings, screenings, large collaborations, drag nights, protests, filming with multiple actors and a crew, having a group show, sharing a large studio space, dreaming about an artist collective, having a book club, making work inspired by other artists...

Signs and Symbols*

As Munoz mentions, a marginalized person or persons turn to the symbols and signs of a dominant, oppressive culture as a site of reimagining. It is a powerful act of reclamation, to take what causes you suffering, and create a portal into another place. In this other place, the limits of your world, your family, your coworkers, strangers, government, bodies, ideas, language, dress, gender, and sexuality shatter. This is how I/we can heal.

‘Disidentification’ is loosely organized by symbols present in my artworks, foci whose gravity can pull together some strains of thinking. The structure of the drawings is related to the many flow charts, diagrams, figures, and illustrations used in the sciences and social sciences. The purpose of such an image is to relay complex information visually, so that it becomes easier to understand, and thus, manipulate. In terms of queerness, sexuality, anatomy, and gender identity and performativity, charts upon charts are used to draw conclusions and make decisions. These are the charts used to argue over my humanity, legal rights, right to bodily autonomy and self-determination, and my very existence.

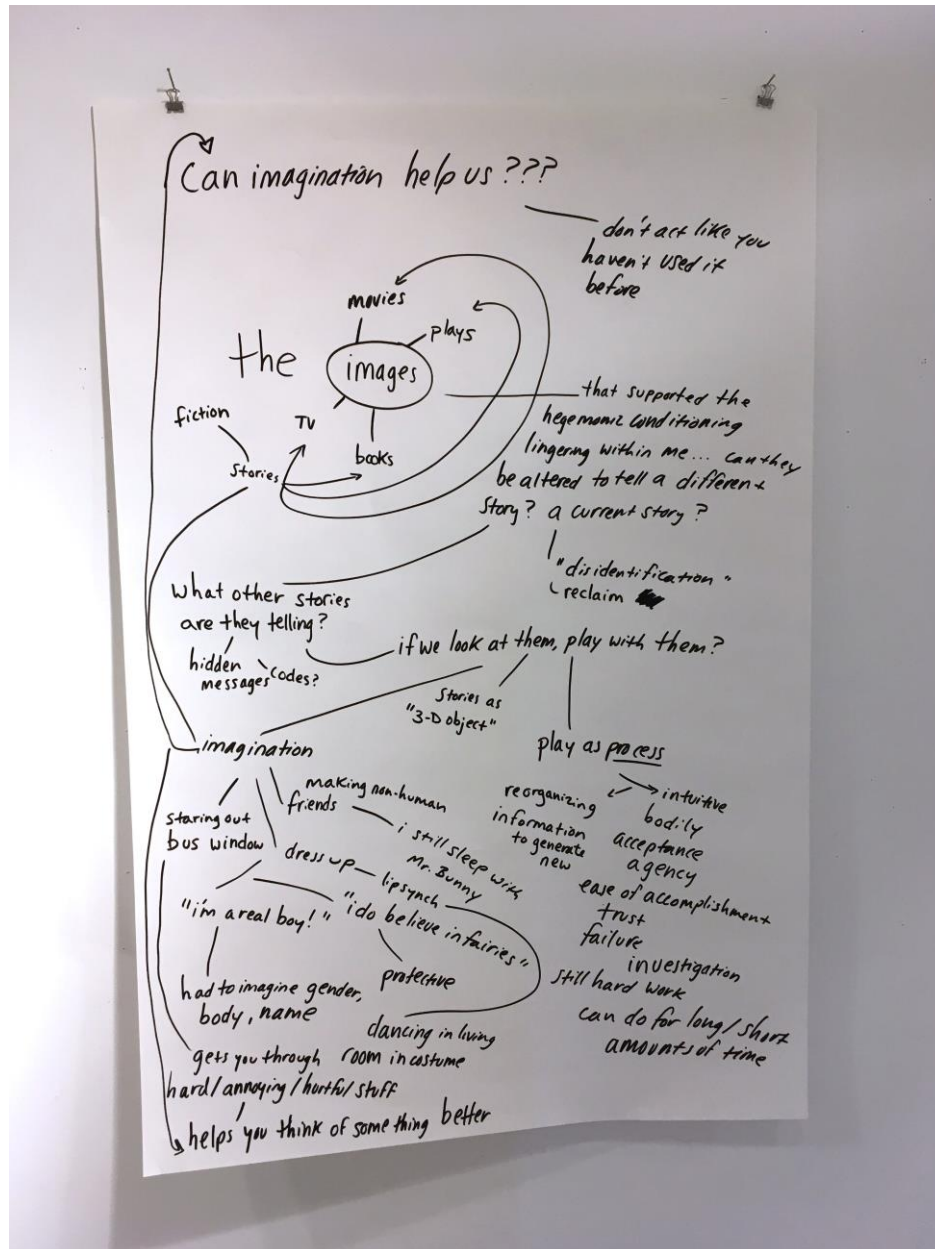
While I do believe it is important for information for sexuality and gender to be accessible, I worry that each time we seek to make the information easy to understand, we are ignoring and forgetting how complex and difficult these identities are. My body, my art, and my experiences are not charts that show an easy way through to understanding. And the charts I draw do not function in this way either. It is in the nuances of my sexuality, gender, politics, and art that I disrupt the limitations of the here and now. The drawings are approachable, but I am not afraid to get confused while making them. I am not afraid to get you lost either. I think it does us all some good. In the reimagining of form, there is healing and there is joy.

Time after time

After going through the drawing and the world-making, I am ending up in a place different from where I started. I am still hungry, and I am still learning. What I know now is how to hold complexity better. I feel as if I’ve finally learned how to build the boat that might carry some world-makers and myself off somewhere, that we might ride the lure of fiction into stranger waters. And who knows what will be there.

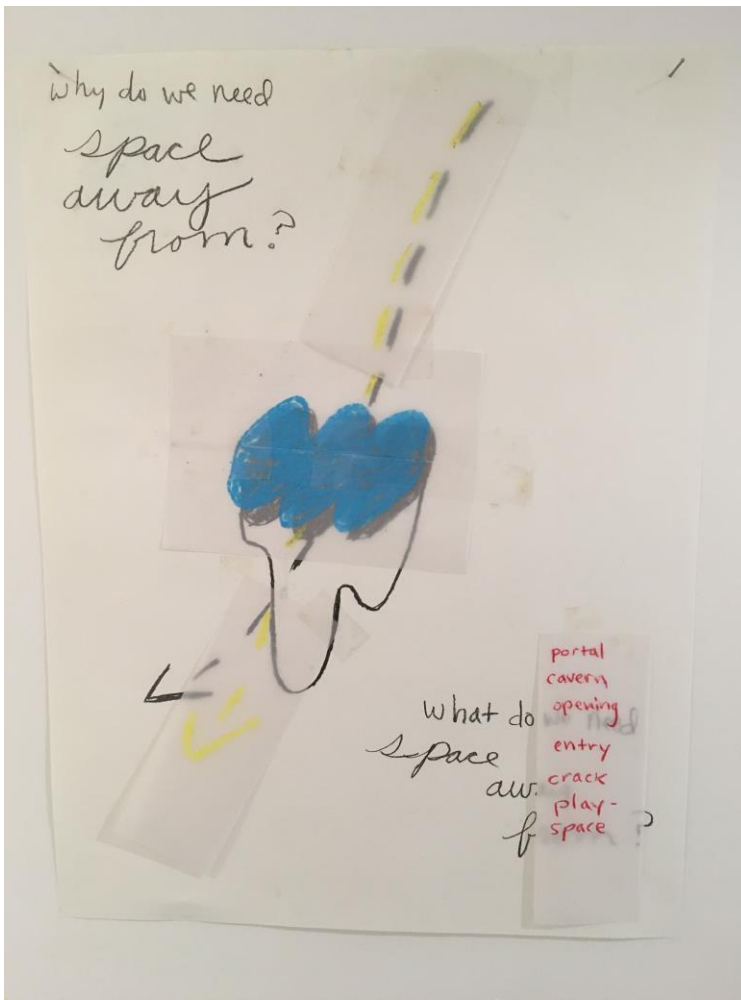
Images from the drawn Honors Thesis work, *Disidentification*, accompanying the B.F.A. installation, *Confetti*

a. Importance of Imagination



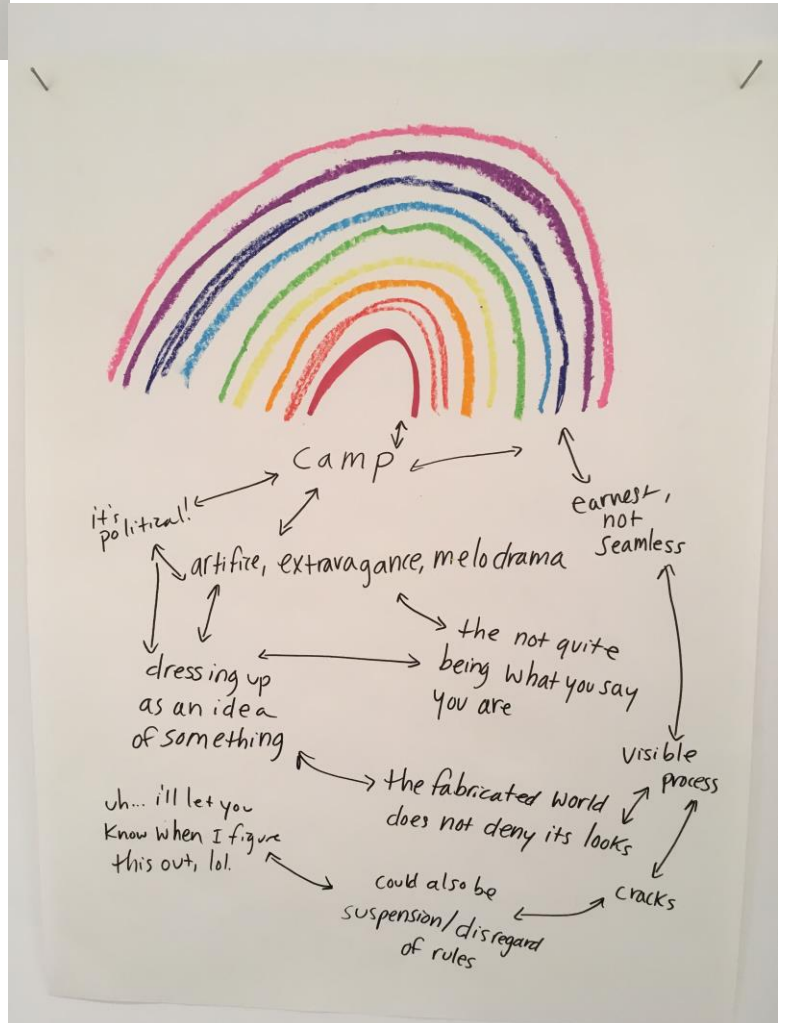
b. *Potent Trust*





c. Slip Away, Inverse Cloud

d. Camp Flow Chart



e. Square Peg Round Hole, Both and Neither

fig. 1

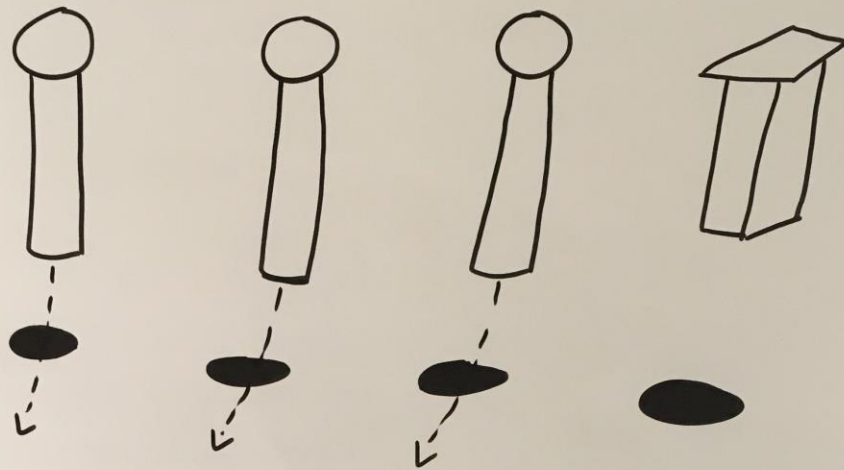


fig. 2

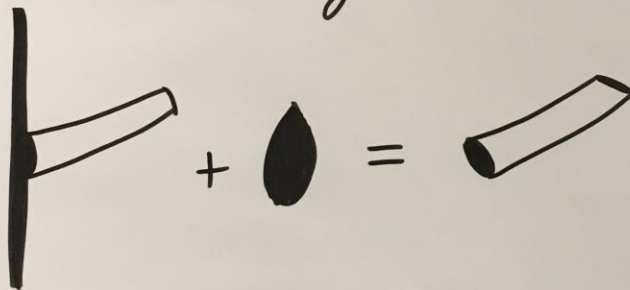
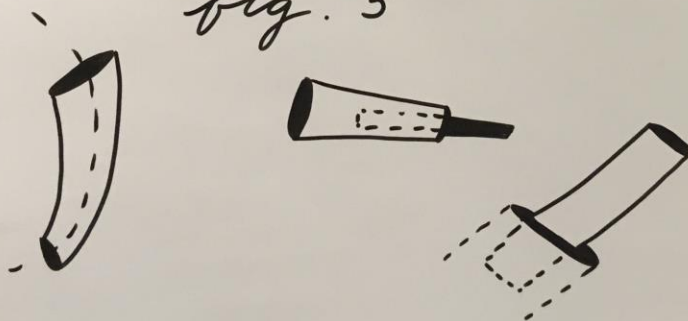
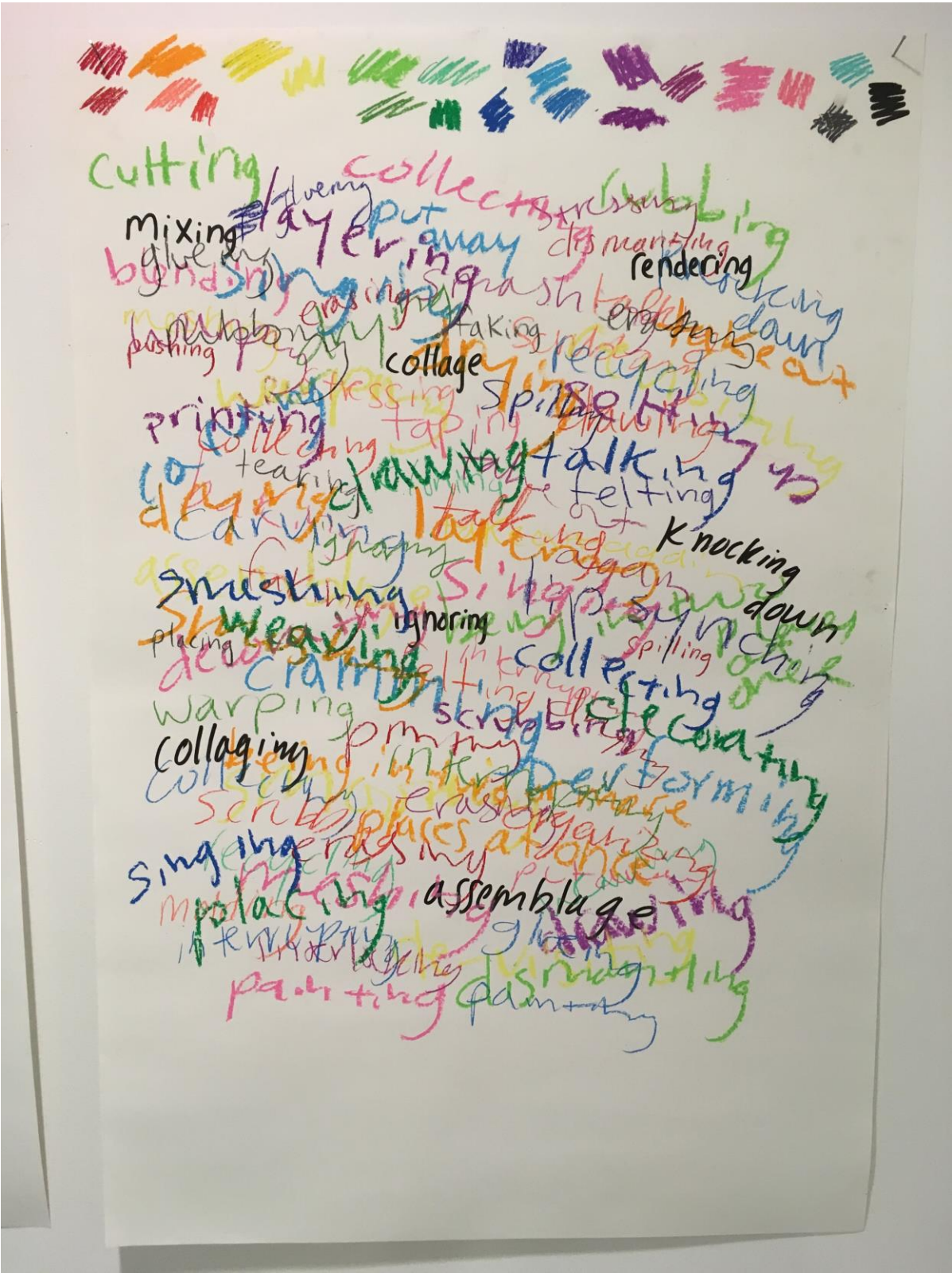


fig. 3

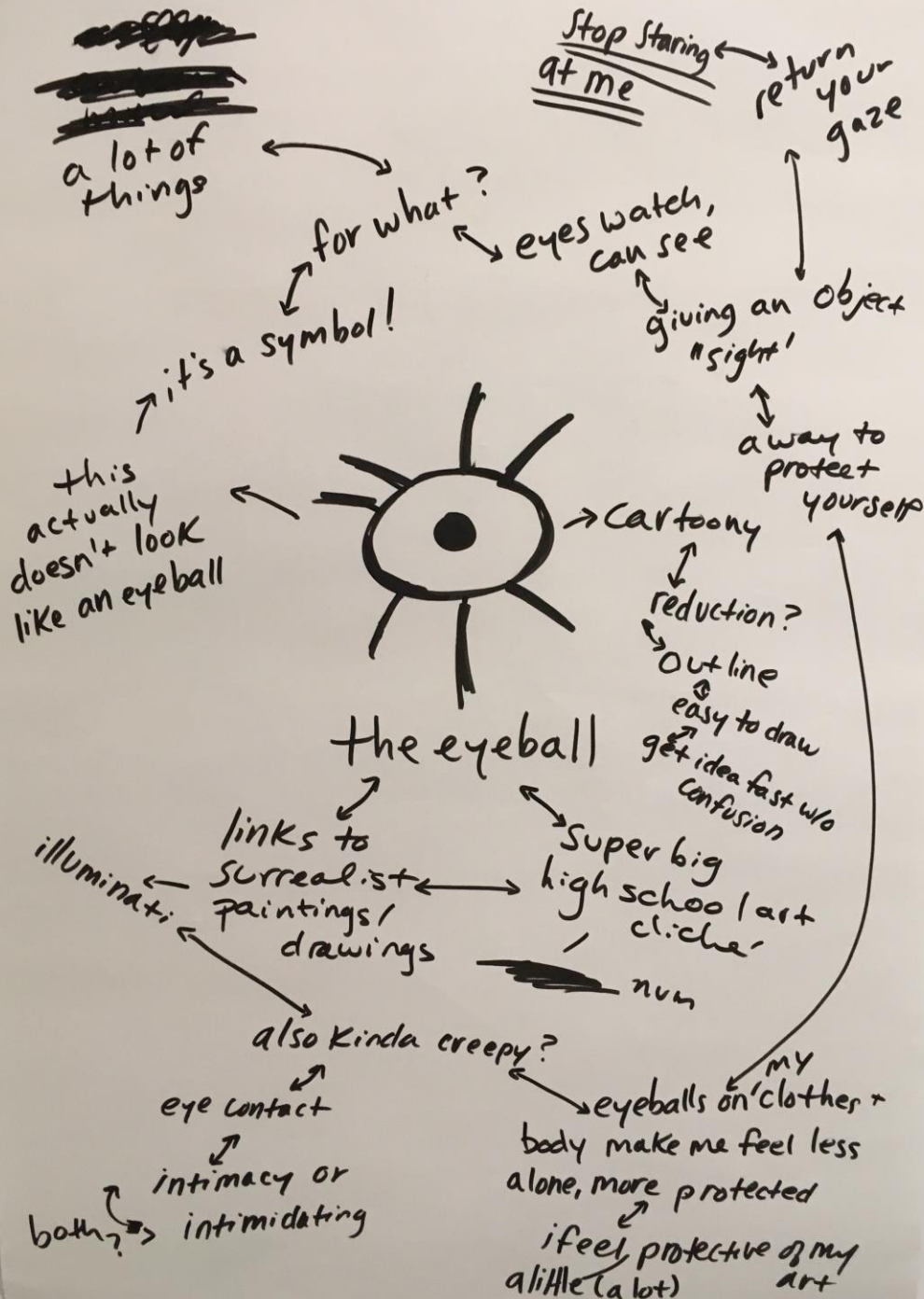


f. List of Possible Strategies for Play as Process

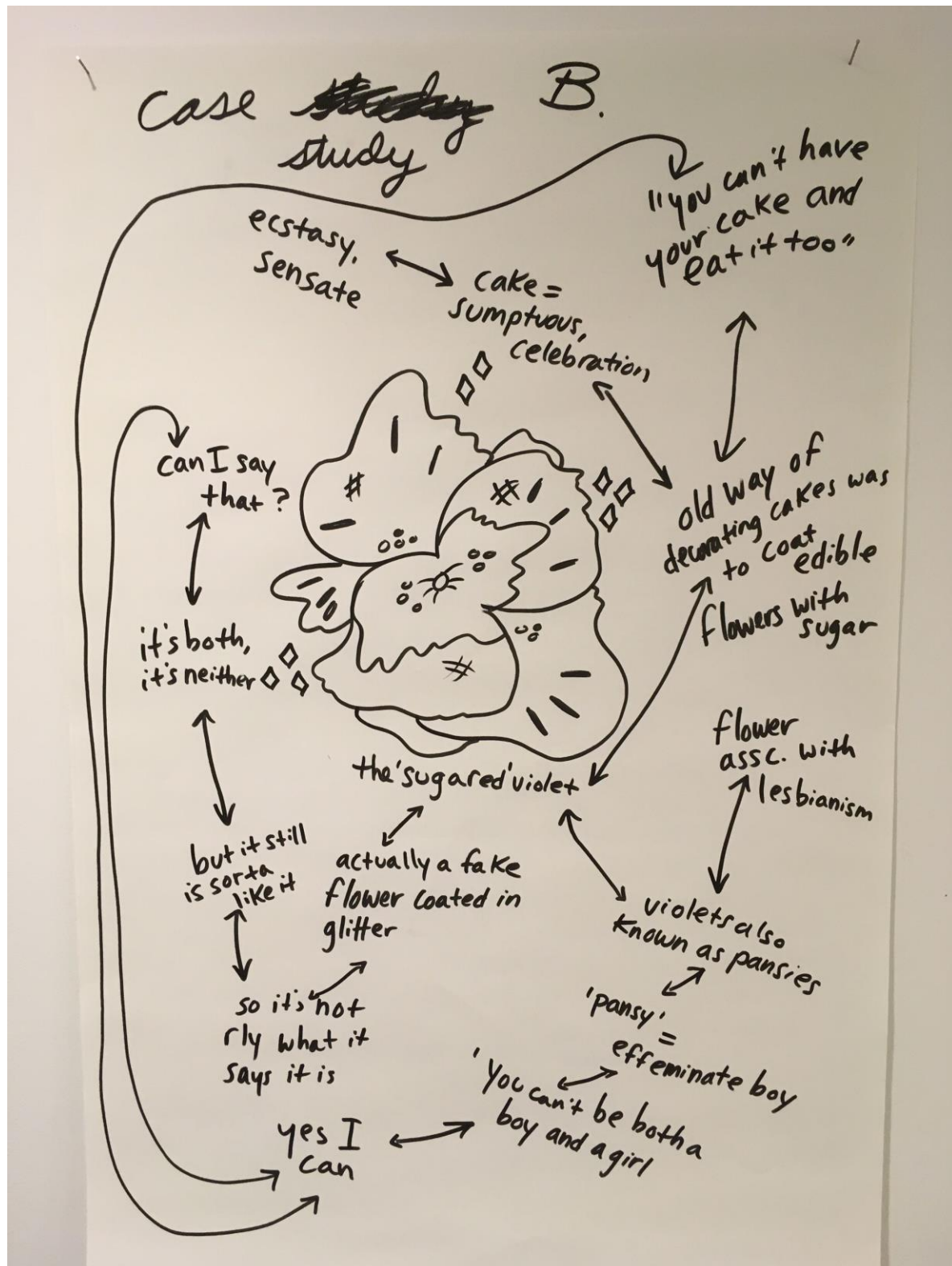


g. Case Study A - The Eyeball

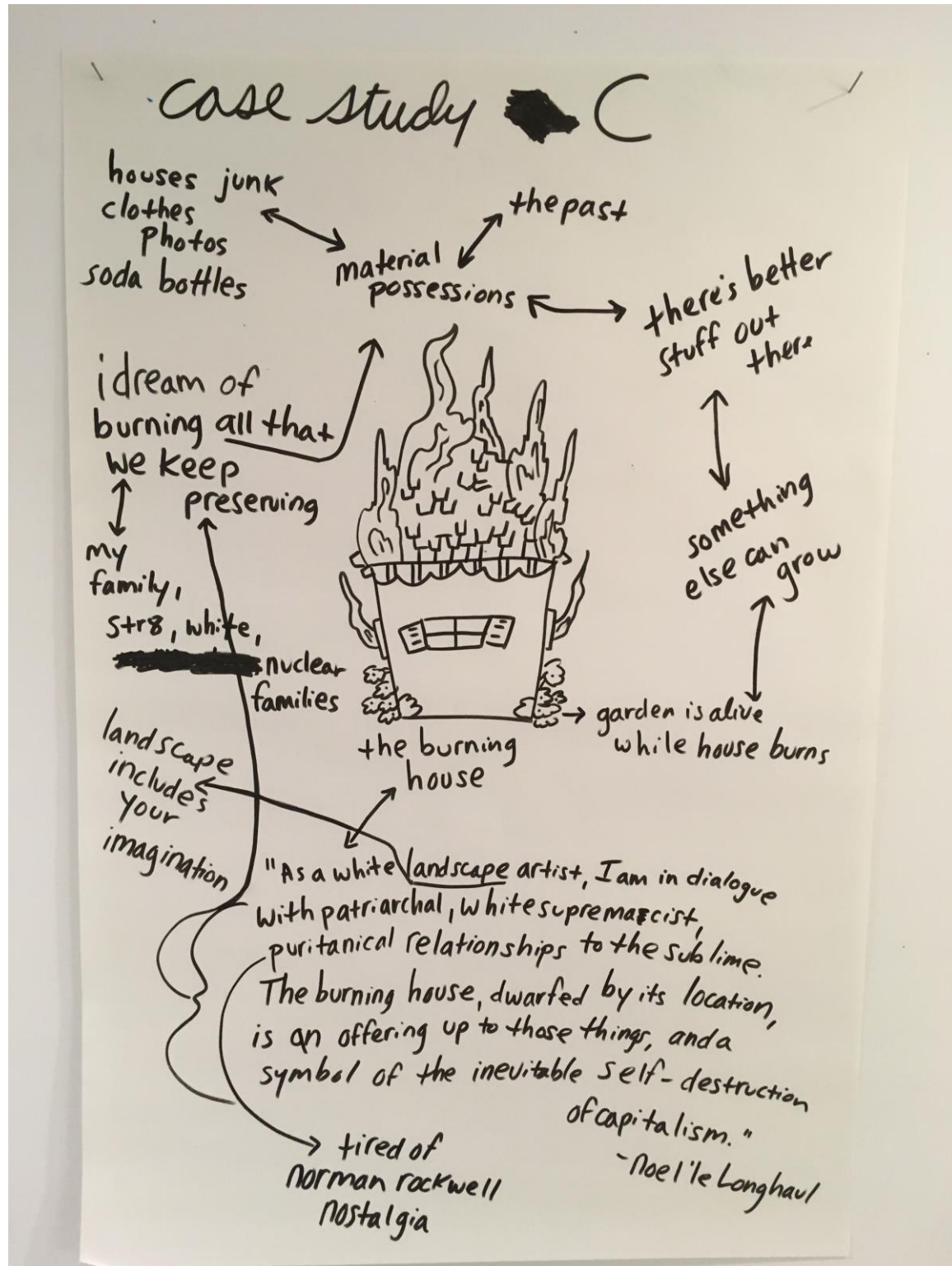
case study A.



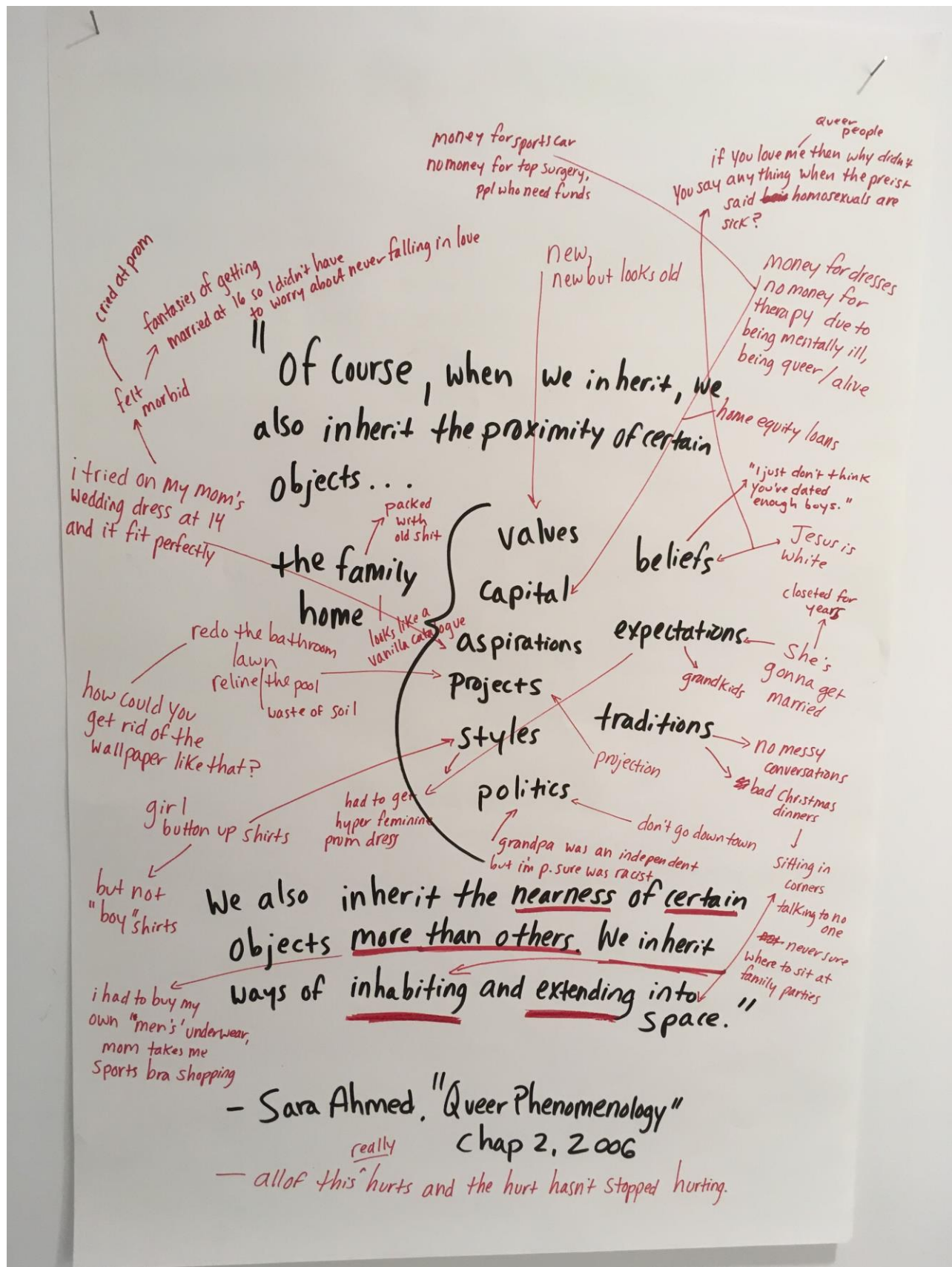
h. Case Study B - The Sugared Violet



i. Case Study C - The Burning House



j. Comparative Essay Between Sara Ahmed and My Own Queer Phenomenology





Hey im really curious ~~about~~ what you mean by queer as in process, not as in identity, if you don't mind saying why of course.

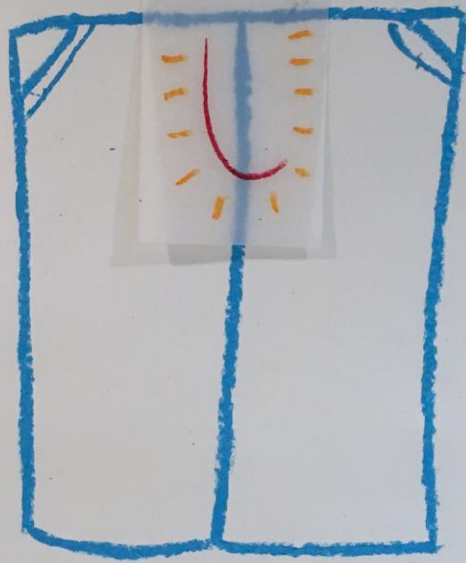
laughing loone:

Hey there! I think most of what I mean has to do with thoughts about queerness not being a solid, crystalline, tangible thing, and that holding power for me. Some of it has to do with an aversion to identity politics being an end-point: I think a lot of why I care about queerness is because of its mechanisms, and that it is a dynamic architecture for generating new movements within, and has the potential to be birthing a liquid language that resists culturally enforced repression. As a house, it is always crumbling and then blooming into new rooms. Some of pushing back against ~~an~~ queerness as an identity is a desire to be pushing back against conditioning under capitalism to treat things as objects: I don't want my experience of queerness to become a resource that I extract for meaning and value. My queerness is a strange, gross, heaving, twinkly, half-misted-over place that is scary and bright, and not a thing that I want to use to attempt to become whole through the construction of a cohesive identity that has defined borders.

from anonymous to Noel'le Longhaul
June 22, circa 2010
laughingloone.tumblr.com

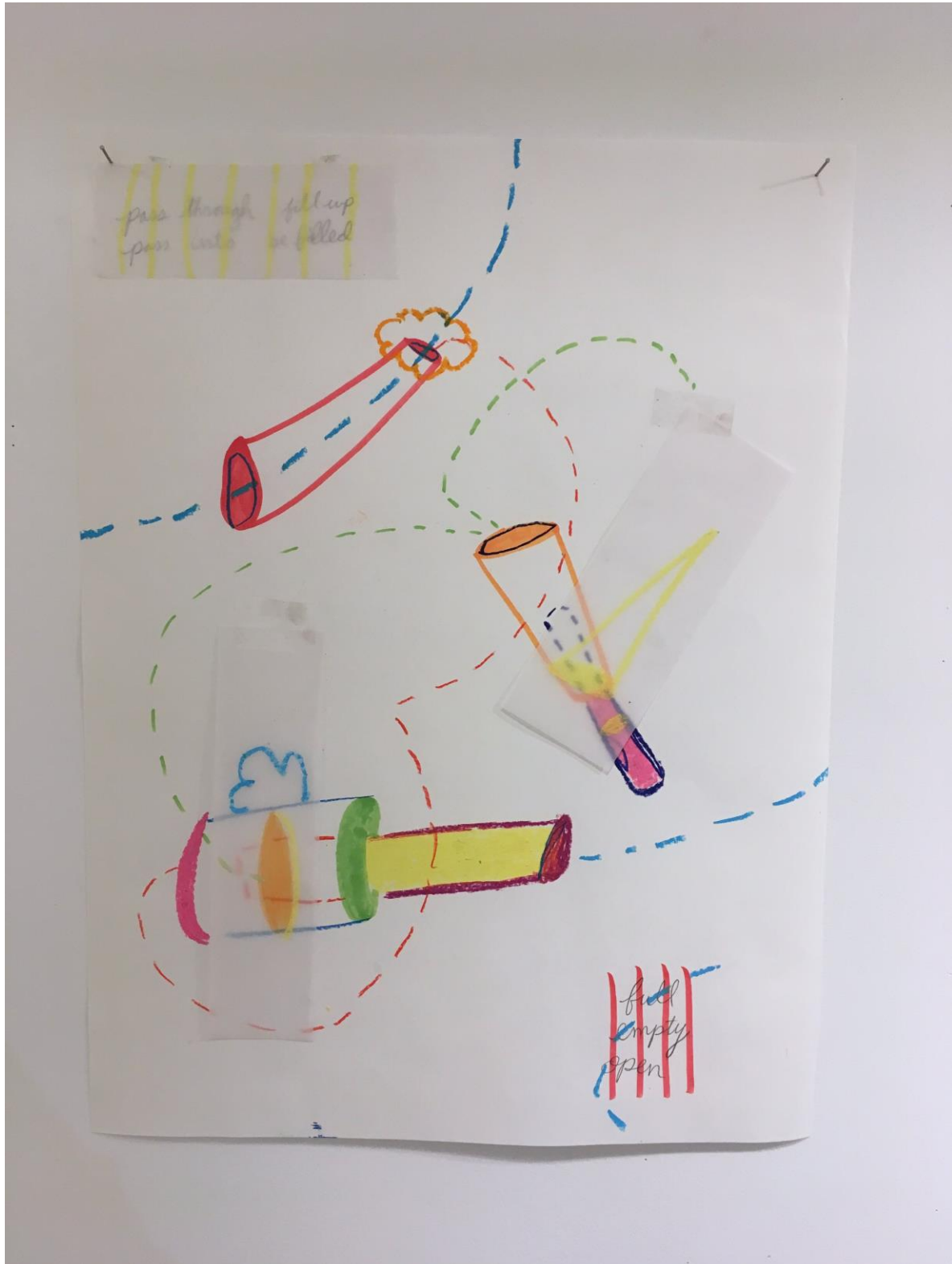
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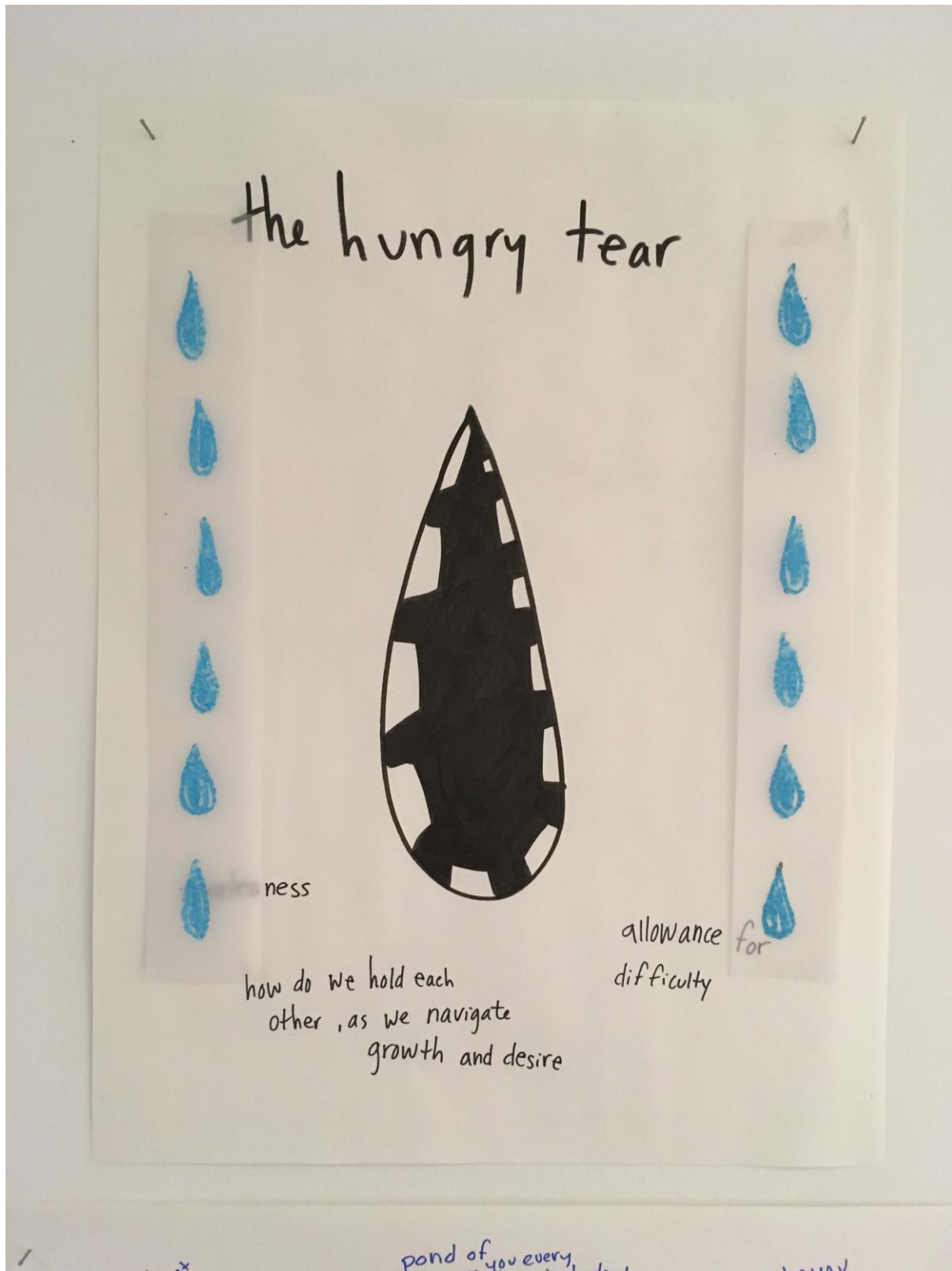
m. Diagram 38562028423



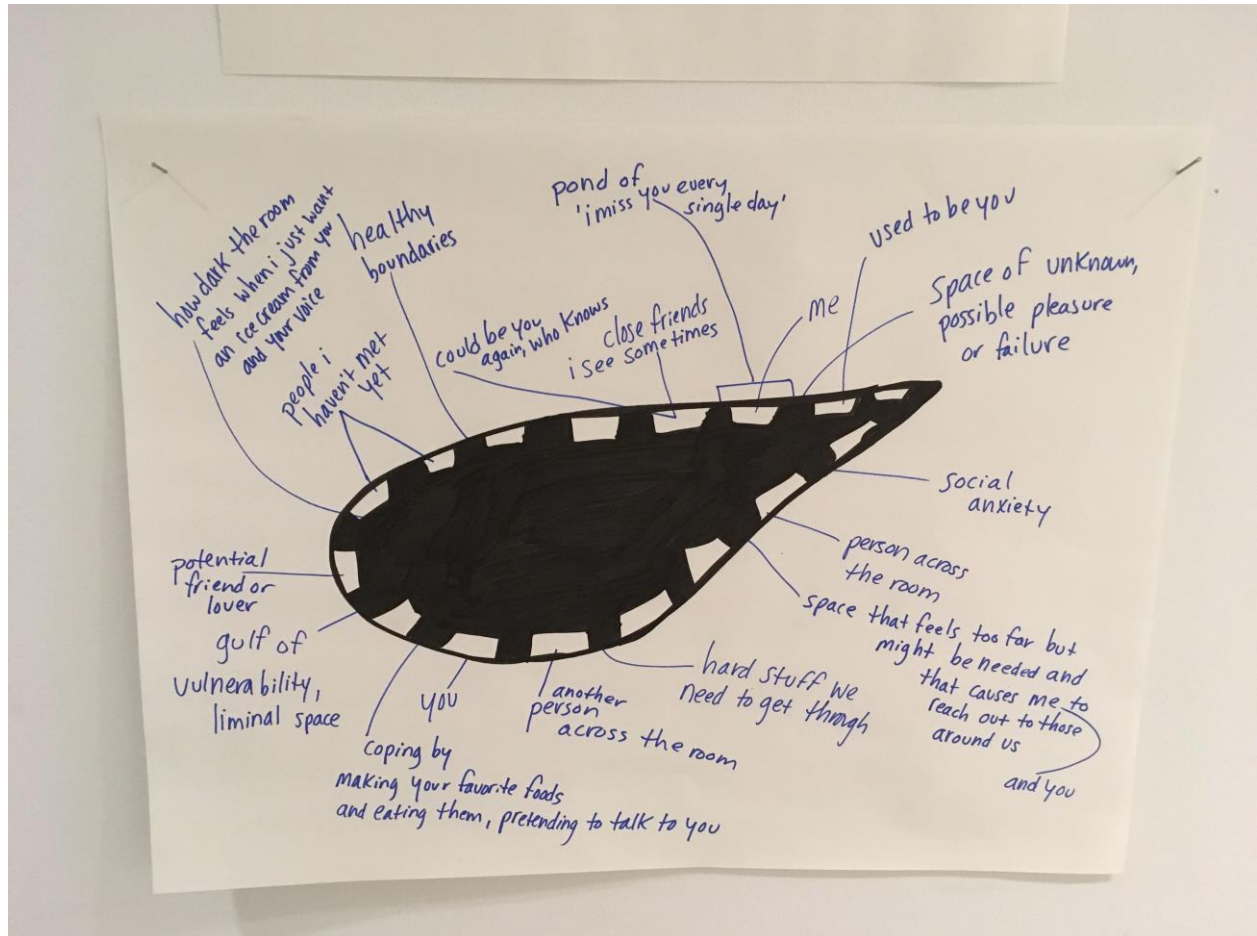
there was a mystery to it.
the soft bundle of socks.
an odd sensation.
I couldn't name it... no one else I knew did this.
to place an imaginary part
on a flesh part.
After a few minutes, both have the
same warmth.

o. Tube Studies

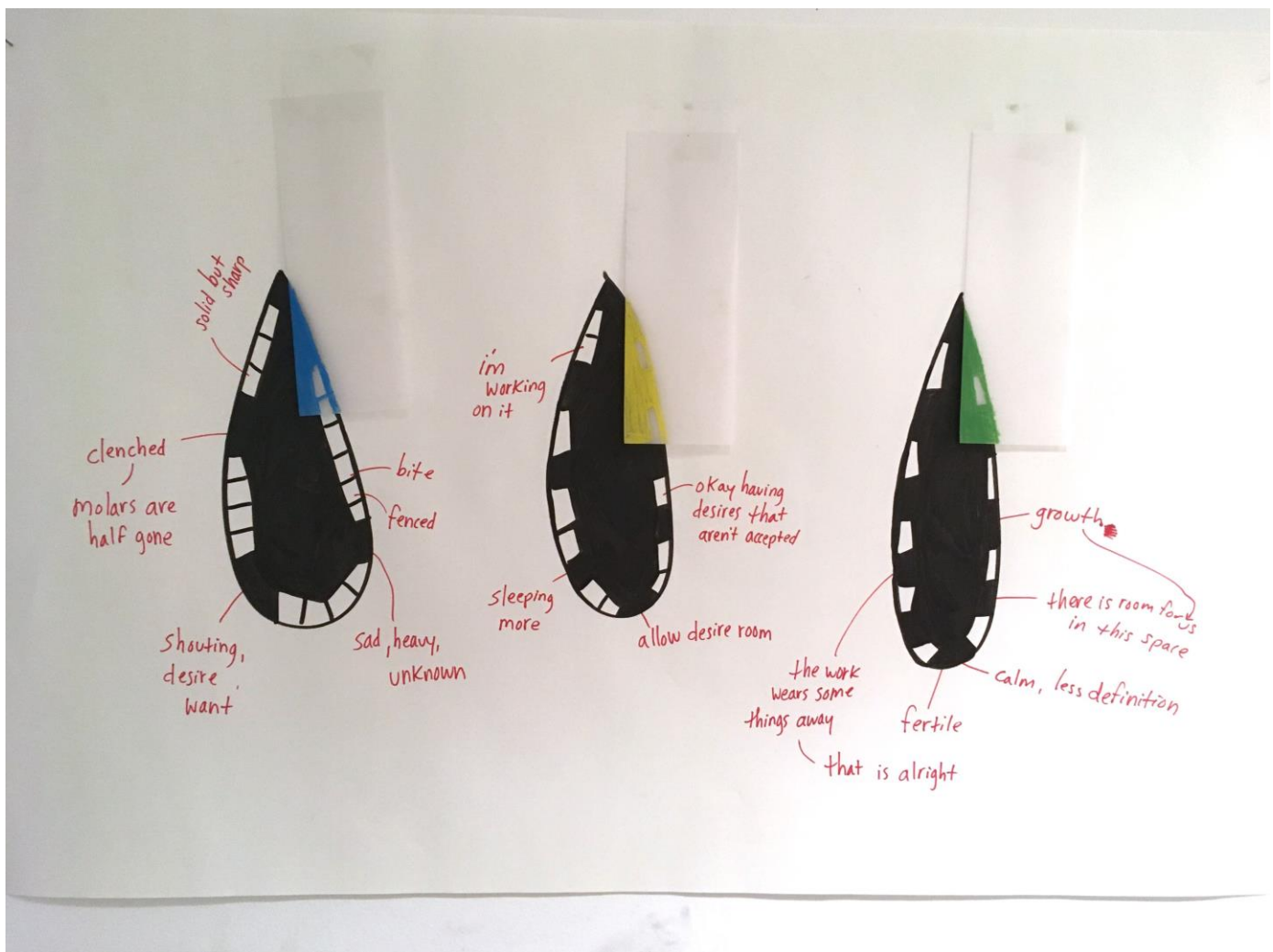




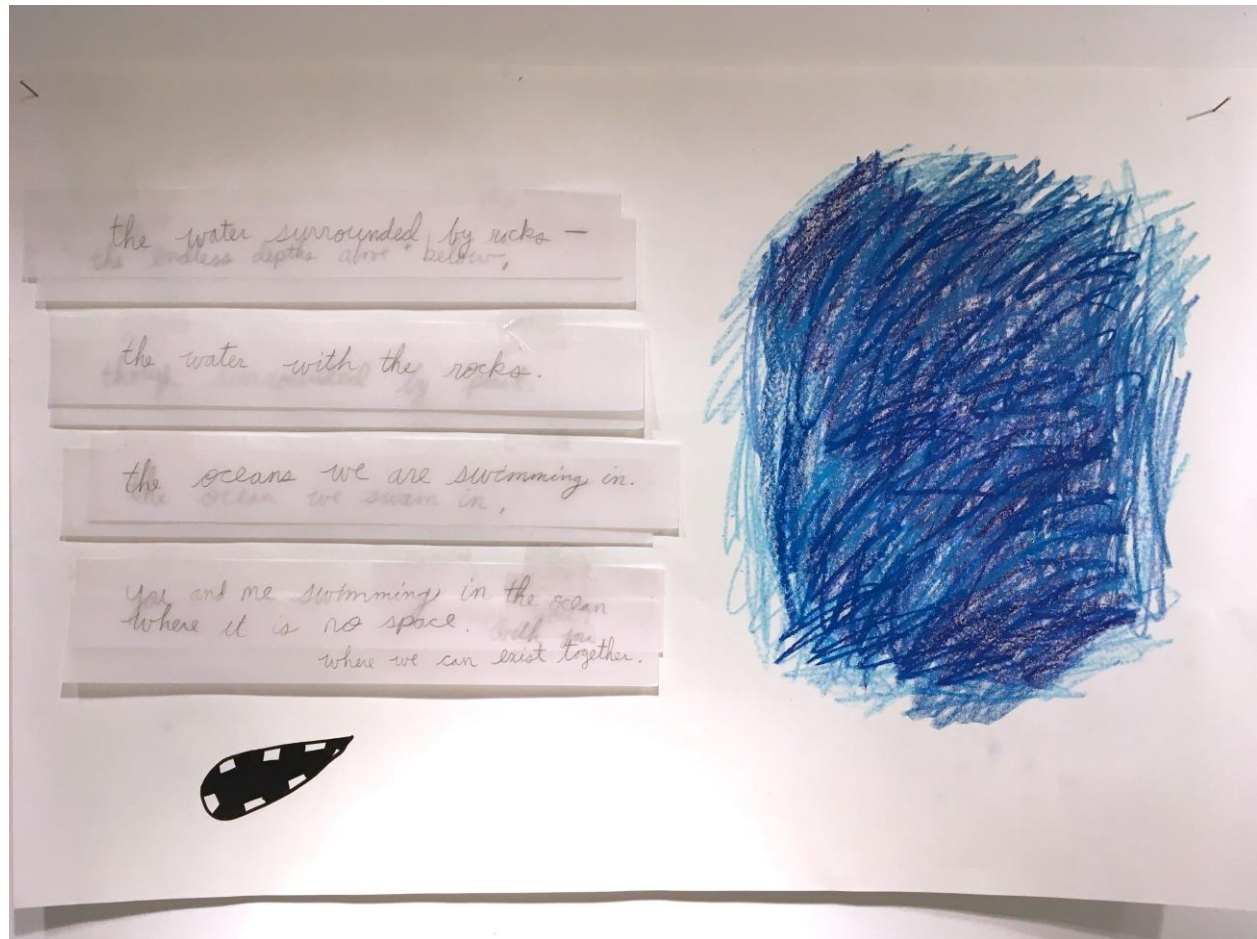
q. Hungry Tears 2



r. Hungry Tears 3



s. Hungry Tears 4



t. Affirmation

I can't be found in any system

I do not exist to the state

The people I love know me

It is not that I am invisible...

It is that there are some parts of me

that you will never get -

get to have, see, understand.

I am all parts, so I am

always whole and not whole.

Even undone, I am together.

Even undone, I am together.

Selected images from the B.F.A. Thesis Exhibition, *Confetti*

Three sculptures house CRT monitors playing video work with sound. Curtains and painted flooring obscures the room's dimensions.



full installation



inverse cloud



inverse cloud, detail



burning house



burning house, detail



burning house and rainbow cake



rainbow cake, front



rainbow cake, detail



floor, detail, far end of room



floor, detail, middle of room



carpet, entryway



curtains, detail