Rules for Living and How I Began to Break Them: The Influence of Creative Practice and Cognitive Dissonance on Personal Growth

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RULES FOR LIVING AND HOW I BEGAN TO BREAK THEM:
THE INFLUENCE OF CREATIVE PRACTICE AND COGNITIVE DISSONANCE
ON PERSONAL GROWTH

by

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A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements
for the degree of Master of Fine Arts
in the School of Visual Arts and Design
in the College of Arts and Humanities
at the University of Central Florida
Orlando, Florida

Spring Term
2021
ABSTRACT

I create experimental films and installations that challenge the belief system I inherited from well-intended people who believed they furnished me with the “right” answers, behaviors, and expectations for a good and proper life. Applying the theory of cognitive dissonance as a philosophical framework to this formative and enforced messaging helps me appreciate why it is so difficult to accept new information incongruent with one’s previously held beliefs.

Through parallel efforts of self-reflection, research, and creative practice, I have begun to reexamine my upbringing and the ensuing insecurities, contradictions, and feelings of hypocrisy they engendered. My work aspires to transform my fears, anxieties, and mistakes into meaningful digital and tangible visual expressions; informed by and in response to, reflective work by contemporary artists and my personal reflexive experiences with relationships, death, and grief.

Fueled by the practice of forgiveness, both of myself and others, I believe the creative process is helping me become a more compassionate person who is willing to reconsider, release, and accept my past and welcome new internal and external perspectives. Likewise, I hope presenting my artwork allows viewers to consider my struggle; and whether, and why, we may have common or divergent life experiences and perspectives.
For Marlenys
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

To my parents, who set me on a firm foundation to navigate this life, and who have remained unwavering in their support, especially when my choices did not align with their own.

To the Reid family, who remind me that even though nobody is perfect, there is such a thing as perfect love.

To the Rojas family, who welcomed me in and loved me without reservation.

To my friends, inside and outside the studio who have laughed with me, cried with me, and encouraged me.

To my thesis committee, who asked probing questions, challenged me in critique, and helped me expand my understanding on this extended journey.

To my committee chair, Byron Clercx, whose first words to me were “I don’t think you’re getting uncomfortable enough” and then spent the last few years helping me figure out what that means.

And to Ones who changed my life by loving me despite all my flaws and showed me there’s always the potential for something more.

Thank you.
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INTRODUCTION

The Setup

Like many journeys, mine starts at the beginning. Though, from my position in the present, I now have the advantage of hindsight. I can see that major formative events like my upbringing, my relationship with my wife Marlenys, and her cancer diagnosis and death all forced me to confront opposition to my previously held beliefs. I can see that these experiences guided me to accept and embrace a life of inquiry, where ideas of the past are free to be overwritten and questions are free to remain unanswered. Such a life requires the ability to become comfortable being uncomfortable, to be able to process pain as well as pleasure, heartache as well as joy, and failure as well as victory. It’s a journey that requires work.

From my earliest memories, my parents shared with me the value of integrity, discipline, and pride in a job well done. These ideas came as a response to their own experiences, understanding, and context. To the best of their abilities, they prepared my siblings and me with tools and awareness to make our way in the world. Part of that toolset included the importance of obedience and following the rules. As practitioners of the Christian faith, this included rules as presented in the Bible and through the church. But like all humans, my parents' understanding of the world was incomplete.

A core tenant of Christianity is that God loves people and demonstrates that love through acts of forgiveness when we make mistakes. But I came to believe that following the rules was paramount and internalized the idea that the evidence of love was obedience. A life of obedience was a life of rules and so I built my life around following the rules. Some rules I learned from family and church. Some I made for myself. Some I followed without realizing it. I passed
judgment on myself and others based on how the rules were followed. Obedience to my understanding of the rules was prized. Disobedience was cause for disdain. Those who thought like me, who valued the rules, and my interpretation of the rules were welcome. Those who I thought ignored my rules or lived by an alternate set were set aside. But like all humans, my understanding of the world was incomplete.

Roland Barthes, a French essayist and social and literary critic, argues in his essay *The Death of the Author* that the primary meaning of a text (or any other work) is created by the reader as they interpret what they’ve read. Because each reader brings their own experiences and understanding into their encounter with a work, there cannot be a definitive interpretation. Barthes argues that holding the Author as the prime authority of meaning is a fundamental misunderstanding of how communication happens. But in my understanding of life, I was following what I believed to be the authoritative version of the script and had a hard time admitting that it could be wrong.

When I left my parents' home and familiar community, I quickly encountered many new perspectives. It was a challenge to know what to do with all this new information. I met many kind, generous, and loving people whose way of thinking didn't align with mine. How could I process the discomfort I felt as I tried to reconcile disparate viewpoints? What I didn't understand then, is that I was experiencing cognitive dissonance and so began a journey to understand, accept, and manage this dissonance.
A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance

In 1957, Leon Festinger published his book, *A Theory of Cognitive Dissonance*, in which he defines, develops, and tests the theory. Festinger observed that humans seek to exist in a state of behavioral, emotional, and psychological harmony, where the things we do align with our "knowledge, opinion, or belief about the environment, about oneself, or about one’s behavior."¹ But this isn't always possible. One can easily be exposed to new information that is inconsistent with a previously held position. Festinger defines this relationship where elements of knowledge do not align as dissonant and suggests "under such circumstances...there is psychological discomfort."² He proposes that in the presence of this discomfort, we will engage in dissonance-reducing activities, just as in the presence of hunger we engage in "hunger reducing" activities.³ Festinger describes two primary ways of reducing dissonance: by changing our cognition through adding, subtracting, or re-interpreting information or by changing our environment. Since changing the environment is typically difficult or impossible, changing our cognition is the common dissonance-reducing activity.⁴ Changing our cognition can happen by changing our beliefs to align with the newly acquired information, acquiring more new knowledge that supports our existing belief and refutes the dissonant information, or degrading the source of the dissonant information to remove its validity. For example, I was preparing to cast a vote for my preferred political candidate based on apparent qualities. But then I encountered new information that showed the candidate had significant negative qualities that went against many of my moral foundations. To reduce dissonance, I could have changed my behavior and supported another

candidate or looked for information that downplayed the negative qualities to justify voting for
the immoral candidate anyway. But dissonance doesn't only exist in imbalanced situations. If I
have two equally attractive job offers, which by their nature are mutually exclusive, I can only
choose one. When choosing option A, dissonance is present because I have rejected option B
even though it was attractive. To reduce dissonance, I can change my cognition by minimizing
the attractive qualities of option B and magnifying the negative qualities of option B. I will
simultaneously maximize the attractive qualities of option A and minimize the negative qualities
of option A.

Through my artistic practice, I am interested in understanding what it takes for someone
to accept a new perspective and how they can be influenced to change their mind. My work
reflects my own experiences of needing to be right, wanting to be safe, the difficulty of
communication, and the struggle to change deeply held convictions. I believe the theory of
cognitive dissonance sheds some light on this area by showing how the presence of
psychological discomfort drives one to find equilibrium. When the discomfort surrounds deeply
held beliefs that have had a considerable investment of time and energy in their creation,
abandoning those beliefs to accept new knowledge is usually the more difficult path.⁵

Artwork that inspires and resonates with me is work that forces me to resolve cognitive
dissonance. According to Festinger, if one expects to encounter new knowledge that aligns with
previous beliefs but finds that the new knowledge is actually in opposition, this causes a
considerable amount of dissonance. Because of the sudden spike in dissonance, it's more likely

⁵ Festinger, Cognitive Dissonance, 158.
that one can accept this new information and release the previously held beliefs than if dissonant information was expected in the first place.\textsuperscript{6} I think many of the beautiful, wonderful, compelling aspects of art are found in the unexpected. Artwork that stimulates me often uses familiar or inviting methods, materials, and mediums in service of a deeper, surprising, or challenging message. I propose that the theory of cognitive dissonance is a powerful and relevant tool for understanding how art and artists can influence individual and collective cognition.

\textbf{I Like Rules}

One of the foundational influences that helped me to accept changes in cognition was the creative work of others. As a teen and young adult, this was primarily found in music and film. Listening to a band like \textit{Rage Against the Machine} was a provocative choice as a teenager but was a visceral exposure to artists as activists. Even a straightforward film like \textit{The Princess Bride}, in its use of a band of misfits as heroes, helped to give me some sense that strength and success wouldn’t always look as I imagined.

Another great influence was friendships with people who loved me and could see that I didn’t have everything figured out. Festinger notes the effectiveness of social pressures both to persuade one to accept new cognitions and as a tool to maintain existing cognitions in the face of new information.\textsuperscript{7} The more attractive a group or individual is that holds a conflicting view, the more intense the dissonance and likelihood that one will change existing cognitions to match.\textsuperscript{8}

\textsuperscript{6} Festinger, \textit{Cognitive Dissonance}, 161.
\textsuperscript{7} Festinger, \textit{Cognitive Dissonance}, 183-184.
\textsuperscript{8} Festinger, \textit{Cognitive Dissonance}, 184, 188.
For me, the most attractive and important of these was my friendship with Marlenys: a friendship that became a relationship that became a marriage. Though we were drawn to each other because of a continuum of shared passions, we came from very different contexts. Marlenys and I spoke different languages, had different cultural histories, had different expectations for life and relationships, and different approaches to problem-solving. I quickly discovered that many of the things I knew to be true were incompatible with her experiences. Suddenly, the foundation of my rules wasn't so stable anymore. Looking back, I can see that Festinger would say that I encountered new cognitions that didn’t match with my previously held beliefs. Barthes might say that I had bought into the myth of the Author’s god-like supremacy. And in this case, I was the Author, but I wasn’t ready to release control.

Marlenys had a completely different relationship with rules. She was willing to challenge the rules. To ask who set them up and for what purpose. To freely break rules she perceived to be arbitrary or unhelpful. Relationships were much more important to Marlenys than any rules. It's why she didn't hesitate to come alongside someone who was marginalized. If she could be an ally, provide support, or meet a need, it didn't matter if she crossed rules of society or culture or any other arbitrary construct. It also allowed her to freely communicate her own needs. Marlenys knew she wouldn’t get what she wanted if she didn't ask, and she wasn't shy about asking. With confidence in her value, she saw no reason why she should be considered unworthy of receiving the things she wanted.
RULE #1: SELF-PRESERVATION

In my early artwork such as *Don’t Make A Scene* (Figure 1), I used my skills as a video producer, musician, and audio engineer to create technically proficient, but conceptually thin experimental films. I explored concepts of perception, but in a general sense with the focus on how other people could or should change. I was using the mediums and techniques over which I had fine control without questioning if they could or should be used differently. I can see now that I was approaching my art as the Author who had the authority to convey a specific perspective to my audience.

![Figure 1. Tim Reid. 2014. *Don’t Make A Scene*. Video, sound. 3 minutes 16 seconds.](image)

Confronted by many of Marlenys’s ideas that were in opposition to mine, I reflected on how I felt uncomfortable to be in someone else's way, physically and emotionally. In response to this, I decided the best strategy to expand my creative and emotional comfort zone was to put
myself directly in the way of others and created *Excuse Me, I’m In Your Way* (Figure 2). I created this single-channel video with sound by using a GoPro camera to record the crowd as I walked against the flow of people at the Epcot World Showcase in Disney World. It was a physical and psychological challenge for me to do, but a unique perspective is captured. The slow-motion footage of the crowd reveals people who seem to be annoyed, excited, exhausted, or happy. It reveals a contradiction between the appeal of the Happiest Place on Earth and the realities of a crowded theme park. My experiences with Marlenys were forcing me to rethink my rules and get uncomfortable. In the process of making art, by putting myself in an uncomfortable position, the result was something far beyond my initial intentions. Even though I set out to face my fears, I was able to present work that allowed the audience to make their own connections and conclusions, and see a world beyond purely aesthetic concerns. I didn’t realize it at the time, but I had constructed a scenario that purposefully created cognitive dissonance: my action of walking against the crowd was dissonant with my belief that getting in someone's way is bad.
In researching other artists using similar mediums, I found Francis Alÿs, a Belgian-born, Mexico-based artist. His 1997 work *Paradox of Praxis 1* (Figure 3) is documented in a video entitled *Sometimes Making Something Leads to Nothing*. In the video, we see Alÿs as he pushes a block of ice around the streets of Mexico City until it melts completely. The title reveals a seeming contradiction. If you make something, how can you end up with nothing? I resonated with this piece because of how it disputed my existing ideas of the purpose of creating. It challenged my rule that the output of a creative act is the goal. Instead, it offers that the creative process, the work required, the time spent, are as valid pursuits as any tangible "product". I also love its literal meaning: through the process of making this video, a block of ice disintegrated into nothing.

*Lada Kopeika Project* (Figure 4) tells how Alÿs and his brother resumed a journey to Russia together, 30 years after originally starting. They complete their journey to Saint Petersburg whereupon "arrival, we'll crash our car into a tree in the courtyard of the Winter Palace, together with the illusions of our youth." In this instance, the artist explicitly states the metaphor that connects his life experience to his creative practice: "Without an ending there is no beginning." This was a challenge for me, as one who held tightly to my established ways of doing things.
Responding to Alýs and building on the experience of making *Excuse Me, I’m In Your Way*, I looked for other opportunities to get in people’s way and confront my anxieties through my practice. Like many, I often feel overwhelmed with lots to do and less time in which to accomplish it. I have a low tolerance for repetitive sounds like alarms, ticking, and alerts. *Just A Minute* (Figure 5), a single-channel video with sound, is a confrontation of these anxieties through the repetition of timers and clocks. This piece consists of a series of shots of clocks and timers, as a camera slowly moves toward each one. The timers reach zero and begin beeping while layers of clock sounds are added and increase in intensity and abrasiveness. The sound
becomes a great mechanical beast, imposing its will on the audience. It was a little exciting to create work that was intentionally designed to provoke the viewer.

As I considered how the process-oriented approach of Alýs resonated with me, I worked to invest more intentionally in expressing my creative process. I recalled periods in high school where I felt missed and invisible to my group of friends. I had internalized those experiences and formed the idea that if I was more interesting, I would get noticed and be included. I worked to know about and be good at many things. I didn’t realize it, but I had formed a mantra: “don’t be boring.” *Manifesto, Pt. 1* (Figure 6) is a single-channel video with sound that shows the process of using my left hand to repeatedly write the phrase "don't be boring" using charcoal on a white wall until the wall and the words are both obscured. I then wrote the phrase using white chalk.
and white paint until the wall was returned to the initial state. I was responding to the way that a mantra sits right on the edge of uplifting and deprecating, and reflecting on my desire to be seen as clever or creative. I looked to discover if I could record a repetitive, mundane task but use contemporary video production techniques to hold the audience’s attention. I wanted to create a contradiction. I took another private thought and made it public, using my anxiety to confront viewers with their own worries. I used the creative acts to face my mandate to be interesting with the intention of freeing myself from that burden.

Figure 6. Tim Reid. 2017. Manifesto, Pt. 1. Video, sound. 6 minutes 6 seconds.
RULE #2: SELF-JUSTIFICATION

When I first encountered multi-disciplinary, American artist Bruce Nauman, I was surprised at how much of his work resonated with me. I was constantly inspired by his use of language, text, performance, and video and could see a connection to my practice. Nauman said, "...I was an artist and I was in the studio, then whatever I was doing in the studio must be art."\(^9\)

Though it has taken a long time for this to truly sink in, his statement has helped me to untangle myself from the rule that there must be a higher purpose for making things. Or that I should be teaching people or making the world a better place.

Nauman's *Second Poem Piece*\(^{10}\) (Figure 7) is a series of sentences engraved on a piece of steel, 60 by 60 inches. The sentences are made up of the words "You may not want to screw here (hear)" and arranged in columns. In each successive row, one or more words are omitted to create sentence variations like "You may not want to hear" or "You may screw". The piece triggered many questions. Is it poetry? Is it sculpture? It sits on the ground, leaning against the wall like a painting waiting to be hung. But it’s made of metal, maybe too heavy for a wall. The words are engraved, so difficult to erase. The pattern of the words requires some engagement from the viewer, both in the amount of time it takes to read and how quickly the meaning of each sentence must be left behind as the next sentence is read. In this context, the word screw has multiple implications. Suddenly, the malleability of language confronts the rigidity of the

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\(^{10}\) https://www.artic.edu/artworks/146916/second-poem-piece
structure and the permanence of the etched words. I took Nauman's use of humor and wordplay to mean that artwork is serious but doesn’t always have to be taken so seriously.

American Jenny Holzer has been using public spaces as her canvas for text-based works since the late 1970s. In her series *Truisms* (Figure 8), Holzer printed sets of sentences on sheets of paper and pasted them up around Manhattan. In her series of projections, which has been
ongoing since the 1990s, Holzer uses the exteriors of buildings throughout the world as a surface on which to project socially provocative statements. Her words challenge systems and societal structures, addressing issues such as gender, racial, and financial inequality, gun violence, immigration, and war. In Holzer's work, text is a subversive device because it challenges the viewer to reconcile their own ideas. The public display of charged topics reacts with privately-held beliefs and causes cognitive dissonance, stress, drama, and anxiety. They become catalysts for personal and societal change. About *Truisms*, Holzer says "I wanted the viewer to make his way through them and maybe gain some tolerance." Her work "deals with life-and-death issues; that's supposedly what politics are about."^{11}

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Inspired by how Nauman and Holzer manipulate text in their work in unexpected ways, I made *I Am Free to Make Mistakes* (Figure 9), a single-channel video with sound. In it, I captured close-up videos of myself looking into the camera and repeating sentences that progressed from "I am always right" to "I am usually right" to "I am not always right" to "I can make mistakes" to "I am free to make mistakes". As I speak, the same words are projected onto my body, and the sound, which starts heavily distorted, becomes clear at the end. Presented in vertical orientation, the reference is to a self-portrait. The piece reflects my struggle to leave behind my identity as expressed by perfect behavior. I project the words onto my body to represent how intentional I
must be to take ownership of the changed understanding, and the video repeats back to the beginning to represent how easy it is for me to revert to old thinking.

I Am Free to Make Mistakes revealed the most personal and intimate of my anxieties, up to this point. I built my identity on being correct, on making the right decisions, and believing in the right ideas. My core fear of being wrong made it almost impossible to admit my mistakes, and it was a regular source of conflict in my relationship with Marlenys. Being unwilling to hear that something I did hurt her, because that would mean admitting I was wrong, meant that I was combative and defensive. I knew, intellectually, that mistakes are a natural part of being human. But my foundational fear of being wrong was so strong, and the cost of releasing so many of my existing cognitions was so great, that I would come up with any excuse for my behavior to prove
it was OK. I saw how destructive this was to our relationship and turned to my creative practice to understand and work through it. By sharing an intimate look into my struggles, and presenting a progression of change, I hoped the work could be a catalyst for personal change in the lives of my audience.
RULE #3: SELF-ASSESSMENT

Korean American Nam June Paik is considered a founder of video art. Paik took tools used for mass communication and modified them to obscure the messaging, configured in a way to overwhelm or to cause the viewer to consider the differences between reality and representation.

Paik’s piece *Three Eggs* (Figure 10) questions how technological communication transforms our understanding of our reality. In the piece, a physical egg is captured by a video camera and displayed on a tv monitor. A second tv monitor is hollowed out with a second physical egg placed inside. Is the egg that is broadcast onto the tv monitor a fake egg? Is the physical egg sitting inside the monitor frame a fake broadcast? When experiencing this piece, I had to consider the way different perspectives change the interpretation of information.

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Electronic Superhighway: Continental U.S., Alaska, Hawaii (Figure 11) consists of hundreds of TV screens that display a cacophony of images and sounds arranged inside neon outlines of the United States. The piece reflects the chaotic nature of mass media, all things vying for attention at all times. When I experienced the piece, by narrowing my focus to specific areas and tuning out others, I was able to become absorbed in the spectacle. But at some point, too many things happening simultaneously became noise. This creates a set of dissonant cognitions: encountering devices intended to communicate but having a hard time understanding.
Bruce Nauman’s *Raw Materials* (Figure 12) is a sound sculpture in the Turbine Hall at the Tate Modern in London. Sets of speakers run the length of the hall and project the audio components of 21 of his works, which range from the repetition of single words to poems to absurdities. The experience is both jarring and illuminating. Sound carves out space like a sculpture in the grand, open area of the hall where the audience is begged, commanded, and at times overwhelmed by the overlapping sounds of chaos. All the content comes from previous Nauman works but is not presented as a retrospective. Instead, they have been repurposed and
reassembled into something new. For Nauman, even previous work is used as material, which reinforces his idea that nothing is ever finished. Likewise, the work of self-assessment is ongoing, with successes and failures of the past disassembled down to their parts, and reconfigured into a new, more complete perspective.


My insistence on being right (according to my rules) and my difficulty reducing internal
cognitive dissonance often manifested through miscommunication. Festinger concluded that
“One would expect a person with low tolerance for dissonance to see issues more in terms of
‘black and white’ than would a person with high tolerance for dissonance who might be expected
to be able to maintain ‘grays’ in [their] cognition.”¹⁴ Understanding (Figure 13) is a 5.1 channel
audio installation responding to this frustration. Inspired by the sensory overload of Paik and
Nauman, this piece consists of a series of overlapping statements like “I don’t understand you”,
“you can’t understand me”, and “I won’t understand you”. Different statements are played
through all 5 speakers to create a three-dimensional soundscape and represent the feeling of
being trapped and disoriented by the confusion. The layering of statements becomes more
complex until the words become lost in the noise. A final statement declares that, ultimately, the
frustration is that I don’t even understand myself.

Figure 13. Tim Reid. 2017. *Understanding*. 5.1 channel audio installation. 2 minutes 12 seconds.
During my research, I encountered the work of American artist Ed Ruscha. His painting *Little Snitches Like You End Up in Dumpsters All Across Town* (Figure 14) consists of several black rectangles of different lengths on a maroon background. At first glance, it appears to be an abstract painting. But upon closer inspection, and reading of the title card, one sees how each black rectangle corresponds to a word in the title. It now appears that the words had been written on the canvas and redacted. It struck me how many elements of information and perspectives exist that create an understanding of the piece. There was the artist, the work itself, the viewer, and this information external to all three of those, the title card. *Little Snitches* has a revelatory new meaning after knowing the title. It seems to elevate the importance of that little thing on the side of the artwork that might be overlooked and required that Ruscha accept that each viewer could interpret the work differently. Barthes says, “To give a text an Author is to impose a limit on that text, to furnish it with a final signified, to close the writing.”

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Responding to the concept of redacting or covering over information, I worked on another piece using repetitive, overlapping voices. *Don’t Do What I Do* (Figure 15) is a single-channel video with sound. Using a common phrase directed at problematic leadership, I repeat “do what I say, don’t do what I do”. Inspired by American composer Steve Reich’s looping audio works, the 10-minute recording was layered on top of itself, with each layer slightly
stretched or compressed in time. The result is that portions of the phrase are accentuated while others are minimized over time as the layers begin to de-synchronize, creating somewhat of an “audio redaction.” Unlike previous works which had shorter run-times and played back in a loop, for this piece, I recorded myself saying the phrase for 10-minutes in real-time. I was responding to the fact that I was asking my audience to endure a lot if I wanted them to watch a long, repetitive video, and this was a way to make the exchange more equitable. The amount of time it takes to watch is the amount of time it took to say.

Figure 15. Tim Reid. 2018. *Don’t Do What I Do*. Video, sound. 10 minutes 24 seconds.

*Don’t Do What I Do* is an indictment of myself and others who, while well-intentioned, are willing to adjust standards or principles if the need arises. It reflects an Author-centric perspective that only allows room for a singular understanding. The statement is a classic
example of hypocrisy and oozes cognitive dissonance, both for the speaker and the hearer. It reveals two cognitions that do not match. I was reflecting on the absurdity and the commonality of the statement. It’s a message I’ve heard blatantly and implied many times throughout my life.

Considering work that specifically creates contradictions, I find a connection with Nauman’s *Get Out of My Mind, Get Out of This Room* (Figure 16) and *Green Light Corridor* (Figure 17), two of his unsettling whole-room installations. The former consists of a plain white room with speakers playing overlapping recordings of Nauman’s voice saying, “Get out of my mind. Get out of the room.” The latter consists of two parallel walls set so closely together that one can only fit between them when standing sideways. The space between the walls is flooded with green, fluorescent light. Both installations invite the viewer into a space only to confront them with an experience that asks them to leave. These two pieces directly create dissonant situations where the viewer is invited and then rejected, almost in one single move.
And to what end? Nauman was interested in “destabilizing the viewer’s perception of space and of the body through works of art that challenge the mind and assault the senses.”\textsuperscript{16} That seems like another way of saying he intended to create cognitive dissonance of such a magnitude that it caused the viewer to reevaluate previous ideas or beliefs. By enticing the viewer into an experience that was so unexpected, Nauman’s work could cause the sudden increase in cognitive dissonance that Festinger shows to be influential in changing existing cognitions.\textsuperscript{17} Through my creative practice, I’m trying to discover why I hold others to standards I can’t meet, even though I know it’s ok to be wrong and can see that my behavior is hypocritical.

Responding to Nauman’s installations, I uncovered the roots of some of my repeated behaviors in my fears of inadequacy. As I worked out what I wanted to express, I followed the thread that I felt guilty when breaking rules because breaking rules got me into trouble. Being in trouble is bad and if I’m in trouble, maybe I’m bad. Being bad is wrong so maybe I’m wrong. If people knew that I was wrong, I’d be judged. And because I care what other people think of me, I can’t let them see that I could be wrong. I had trapped myself in an impossible situation.

Responding to the frustration of not being able to escape, \textit{Rules} (Figure 18), a multi-channel video installation with sound, became a piece to trap the audience inside with me. The installation is built in a room with a separate video image on each wall. As the viewer enters the room, they are surrounded by close-up images of my face as I repeat a sequence of phrases that follow my thought process on rule-breaking. Using the same audio layering technique from


\textsuperscript{17} Festinger, \textit{Cognitive Dissonance}, 161.
Don’t Do What I Do that desynchronizes over time, the phrases become jumbled and twisted as certain words become enhanced while others are obscured. I wanted the audience to experience the overwhelming feeling brought on by this way of thinking, and as they encountered my struggle, consider if there were any connections to their own ways.

Figure 18. Tim Reid. 2018. *Rules*. Multi-channel video installation, sound.

Because my research, creative practice, and experiences with Marlenys unsettled so many of my previously held beliefs, I finally became aware that this was not just about me. I wanted to become a question asker who explored outside of my own experience. I wanted a way to bring
the audience into the experience, not merely as a spectator, but as a participant. Taking a page from American artist Dan Graham’s *Opposing Mirrors and Video Monitors on Time Delay* (Figure 19), I decided to use real-time video feeds. I was inspired by Hong Kong artist Lee Kit, who uses household items in many of his multi-media installations, such as *I can’t help falling in love*¹⁸ (Figure 20), so I used consumer-grade cameras and computer monitors. The result is my installation *I Can’t See Me Like You See Me* (Figure 20) that invited the audience in and included them as part of an unexpected experience.

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¹⁸ https://walkerart.org/calendar/2016/lee-kit
Figure 20. Tim Reid. 2018. *I Can’t See Me Like You See Me*. 4 cameras, 4 screens. Colored Lights.

In a room approximately 8’x8’, I installed four sets of video cameras and video monitors in various locations in the room. I oriented some of them in a familiar setup, with a camera on
top of a screen. The room was lit with yellow and blue lights which cast an unusual shadows and hues into the space. Upon entering the room, the cues lead participants to step in front of a screen with the expectation to see themselves but can only see the back of their head. However, when more than one person is in the room, each person can see the other. To be seen, one needs partners (Figure 21). Through my creative practice, I discovered that the difficulty of self-reflection is universal, and we all need those who can see our blind spots and help us deal with them, in love.

Figure 21. Tim Reid. 2018. *I Can’t See Me Like You See Me* (detail). 4 cameras, 4 screens. Colored Lights.
My experiences with Marlenys and my creative practice helped me to understand that there was a way to begin to break free from the rules. Something I had been misunderstanding this whole time. In contrast to my tendency to withdraw and isolate in the face of failure, when I engaged with those I’d hurt, I could experience their forgiveness. Because it’s in that forgiveness that guilt can be released from its mission to remind me that I caused pain, which can easily become a mission of condemnation. Once guilt moves out of the way, grace can enter the room, and healing can begin. Desmond Tutu writes in *The Book of Forgiving: The Fourfold Path for Healing Ourselves and Our World*, “Forgiveness is simply about understanding that every one of us is both inherently good and inherently flawed. Within every hopeless situation and every seemingly hopeless person lies the possibility of transformation.”19

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Four weeks before our 10th wedding anniversary, we found out that Marlenys had metastatic pancreatic cancer. The next 10 months would test the limits of our relationship, and our spiritual, emotional, mental, and physical strength. When face to face with the possibility of death, there is a reckoning of priorities and perspective. When the disease ultimately took her life, my ideas of the way the world works and my place in it were dismantled. Suddenly, in a world without Marlenys, being right wasn’t so important.

Even though my physical reality was undeniably changed, I looked for answers in familiar places. I thought maybe I had just misunderstood the rules and needed to find a different interpretation. It continues to be a slow, gradual process of releasing my past beliefs and my future plans, but I eventually had to accept the reality that I don’t know much. I didn’t know what it meant to be in pain. I didn’t know what it meant to put someone’s needs before my own. I didn’t know how many people could use a kind word or a listening ear. I didn’t know how much I relied on another person to tell me I was ok, that I was doing the right thing. I didn’t know how much I needed another person to feel things so I didn’t have to.

I had spent so much time poking and prodding at the problem of how to let go of my preconceptions so I could be receptive to new ideas. In one fell swoop, my preconceptions were obliterated for me. My beliefs were a place of security. Bad things don’t happen to me. And if they do, it’ll all work out. But a dead person doesn’t stop being dead. Marlenys, that unique spark, the only one-of-a-kind being, is gone and no amount of wishing it was different changes that. I was angry. My plan for life was erased when Marlenys died. My heart disintegrated at the
moment her body stopped. I tried to regain my emotional footing just to find a new heartbreak daily. We hide death in our culture. We talk about it in euphemisms and doublespeak. We change the subject. The one who always talks about their loved one is obsessed. The one who never does is cold. It kind of makes sense. It’s awful when someone you love dies. And like so many other aspects of our lives, we distract ourselves into numbness. We don’t grieve. And we certainly don’t allow others to see us grieve. I decided I would bear this burden in the public sphere as a testament to the wholly unique individual Marlenys was, how her way of living compelled me to face my incomplete understanding, and how difficult it is to navigate this world without her.

I think One and Three Chairs (Figure 22) by American conceptual artist Joseph Kosuth is relevant here. The work consists of a physical chair in the room, a photo of the same chair in situ, and the denotative text that describes a chair. Kosuth was concerned with questioning the nature of art. The artist, he says, “is not directly concerned with the physical properties of things” because there doesn’t need to be a physical object for art to exist.20 Kosuth argues that the assertions art makes are primarily definitions.21 I believe that One and Three Chairs works to disassemble the construct of “chair” and forces the viewer to consider the concept from multiple perspectives. At first glance, one might conclude that the physical object is the primary representation. But that object is a specific representation of the concept of chair that is familiar to a specific subset of people. The photo of the chair can represent the physical object but cannot

21 Kosuth, Philosophy, 21.
perform its functions. It serves to acknowledge that some object in this configuration exists. The
definition of chair, however, triggers the viewer to recall a personal experience with “a seat
typically having four legs and a back for one person.”\(^\text{22}\) That experience with a chair will be
unique to each viewer and is what informs their understanding of the purpose and function of a
chair.

Figure 22. Joseph Kosuth. 1965. *One and Three Chairs (Une et trois chaises)*. Installation.
Place: Musée National d’Art Moderne, Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, France.

webster.com/dictionary/chair.
Likewise, I was searching for the nature of Marlenys and realized my understanding of the ultimate meaning of Marlenys comes from my experiences with her. Especially now that her physical body is gone, I rely on my memories of those experiences to keep the idea of Marlenys alive. Marlenys was defined by the things she believed, the way she understood life, and how she built relationships.

I concluded the best way to approach this was to return to my use of text and looked to the work of Jenny Holzer and Barbara Kruger. Jenny Holzer has been projecting text onto the exterior of buildings since the 1990s. Her latest works are lengthy statements addressing social issues, like 2019’s projection in New York City exposing the devastation caused by gun violence. Other pieces, like 2009’s projections in Basel, Switzerland called *Projections in Basel* (Figure 23), take content from or share textual similarities to her *Truisms* in that she presents a series of short declarations. In Basel, Holzer projects statements like “Routine Is a Link to the Past,” “It is Man’s Fate to Outsmart Himself,” and “Ambivalence Can Ruin Your Life.” As beams of light carve words on structure, the work becomes part of the environment, as inescapable as the sounds of nature or city, and as unavoidable as encountering other people in the area. Such a public venue is not the normal place one encounters poetry, which must elicit a range of responses from surprise and delight to anger and frustration. This “puzzlement is part of the imaginative experience she intends, while a powerful light is illuminating lines of poetry about sorrow or love.”

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I first saw Barbara Kruger’s work at the NSU Art Museum Fort Lauderdale in 2013. It was her 2008 print of \textit{Belief+Doubt=Sanity} (Figure 24). I didn’t realize that her work would be so influential and that those three words would become personally applicable to my life. When I saw her installation of \textit{Belief+Doubt=Sanity} (Figure 25) at the Hirshhorn Museum in Washington, DC in 2017, I was in awe. Every surface you see is covered in words. The succinct statements and questions are general but confrontational. Messages like “Believe Anything”,

Figure 23. Jenny Holzer. 2009. \textit{Projections in Basel: Swiss Railway Station}. Projection. Place: Bahnhof Basel SBB, Basel, Switzerland
Flickr, accessed April 16, 2021, \url{https://www.flickr.com/photos/ninastoessinger/4113783564}, "Ambivalence" (CC BY-SA 2.0) by ninastoessinger
“Who Prays Loudest?”, and “Admit Nothing, Blame Everyone”. Certain phrases reinforced my ideas while others challenged my understanding. Her statements contain the minimal words required to communicate the idea. "Direct address has really been a motor of my work," Kruger says. "A lot of these are questions we should all be asking ourselves, just about the struggle to try to live an examined life."  

Figure 24. Barbara Kruger. 2008. *Untitled (Belief+Doubt=Sanity)*. Chromogenic c-print. 70x80 in. NSU Art Museum, Ft. Lauderdale. Photo by author.

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The overarching title of my current body of work is I Thought I Knew Everything. It’s intended as an indictment of my past way of living and a pivotal step in my quest to become a person available to change. Like the work of Holzer and Kruger, the content of the pieces in I Thought I Knew Everything consist of direct sentences using the minimal number of words necessary. In them, I share my experience now that Marlenys is gone and contrast our different approaches to life. To embody who Marlenys was, I chose to make the work using materials she had left behind. Top Down View, first edition (Figure 26) is a single-channel video that shows six
statements printed on transparencies that are successively placed onto and removed from Marlenys’s overhead projector. The typeface is a font Marlenys often used in her job as a graphic designer. Each statement remains on the projector for approximately 5 minutes, which was marked using her tea timer. A video camera was aimed at the wall and recorded the output of the overhead projector. The statements convey a series of events Marlenys and I experienced through the course of her illness and my reactions to her death. The blemishes in the transparencies, the skewed alignment of the projector lens, and the shifting movements of each page as it is placed on the projector are meant to expose the rawness of each statement. The visible hand that places each transparency reveals a person behind the words so the viewer can make a personal connection. Each statement is constructed in the present tense to indicate the ongoing nature of grief and remembering. While some statements reference events that happened at a specific moment in time, I continually return to those memories as I think about what I’ve lost and the struggle it takes to move forward. The sound is designed to transport the viewer into the moment. Recorded in sync with the images, the drone of the projector fan is cut by sharp cracks as the transparencies move. The elements of the piece are intended to present a series of contradictions: dark and bright areas to indicate letters, the sound of a still room punctuated by sudden movement, the text in all caps but words that are meant to be kept inside, statements that are specific to my experience yet universal.
Looking for ways to embody more of Marlenys into the work, I began to create physical objects. I created a series of diptychs of handmade, cotton paper. The cotton came from her bath towels and was a mixture of pulp she had prepared for her own work before she died, and pulp I made from unused towels. Each diptych consists of two, 12”x12” sheets of paper and each page has a statement written on it. In *I Thought I Knew Everything 1* (Figure 27) and *I Thought I Knew Everything 2* (Figure 28), these statements are embossed into the page. In *I Thought I Knew Everything 3* (Figure 29) and *I Thought I Knew Everything 4* (Figure 30), these statements are screen printed on the page.
Figure 27. Tim Reid. 2021. *I Thought I Knew Everything I*. Embossed, handmade cotton paper. 2 panels (each 12x12 in.)
Figure 28. Tim Reid. 2021. *I Thought I Knew Everything 2*. Embossed, handmade cotton paper. 2 panels (each 12x12 in.)
Figure 29. Tim Reid. 2021. *I Thought I Knew Everything 3*. Acrylic on handmade cotton paper. 2 panels (each 12x12 in.)
Marshall McLuhan argues in his book *The Medium is the Massage* (sic) that the invention of new forms of media completely transforms a society. “All media work us over completely. They are so pervasive in their personal, political, economic, aesthetic, psychological, moral, ethical, and social consequences that they leave no part of us untouched, unaffected, unaltered.”[^25] The introduction of written language, McLuhan says, caused humanity to prioritize

a linear, methodical way of experiencing life. Before the alphabet, sound was the way we communicated and experienced the world, and we experience all sounds in our environment at once. The acoustic space is “boundless, directionless, horizonless.”

But individual letters grouped together to form words in a sentence must be read in the correct order for the reader to have any comprehension of what the sentence means. This is ordered and specific. When it was possible for words to be printed, “the private, fixed point of view became possible.”

But the advent of electronic media has brought us back to an everything all at once society. This certainly presents challenges but moves us out of a uniform, linear experience back into one that requires flexibility and interactivity.

Would McLuhan say that I have regressed, then, by moving from electronic media to print? And if print is linear and logical, with a singular point of view, have I reverted to my previous, Author-driven perspective, despite Barthes’ persuasive argument? In this case, I don’t think so. If “the medium is the message” then I believe the orderly nature of print is appropriate. The work of I Thought I Knew Everything is intended to show a cause and effect: I thought or acted a certain way, I encountered Marlenys’s alternative way, and I had to respond. I also see the public display of these texts subverting the way a book can be read in private, as McLuhan notes.

In terms of Authorship, while the texts were written from my singular point of view, the use of broadly applicable concrete language leaves room for each viewer’s own experience. I think Barthes argues that it doesn’t matter what my intention or expectation is, the Reader is the one who disentangles meaning. Furthermore, the very act of creating this work has taught me

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26 McLuhan, Medium, 48.
27 McLuhan, Medium, 50.
28 McLuhan, Medium, 63.
29 McLuhan, Medium, 50.
what it looks like to embrace the mystery, try something new, and expand my own understanding beyond what I initially imagined.

The process of papermaking is time-consuming and labor-intensive. It’s a physical illustration of what is required to resolve cognitive dissonance. The towels had to be disassembled into their pure essence of cotton fiber, through a brutal process that ripped apart all the connections that had made them a towel. And then the base components of the raw materials are reassembled into something brand new (Figure 31). And as in grief, the process required time, flexibility, and had to withstand significant pressure.

The choices to emboss and screenprint were made with similar goals in mind. The statements on each page represent the different ways that Marlenys and I approached life. Throughout our lives together, and since her death, Marlenys continues to make an impression
on me. Likewise, through the process of embossing and printing, the message is transferred to the page in a way that permanently changes it. The modification isn’t always obvious, either. The light must hit the indentations the right way and you need to be at the right angle and distance. Otherwise, it might just be mistaken for a blank square. Similarly, with the screen prints. By using a very light, gloss ink, the viewer must be positioned at the right spot to see the message. Sometimes, this takes a change in perspective. A willingness to move from a place of familiarity into one of uncertainty.

How does one make that move, though? Especially one like me who listens to the condemnation of guilt that has me stuck in my ways yet wishing for a do-over. I think the key is forgiveness. Tutu says, “the ability to forgive...comes from the recognition that we are all flawed and all human.”

So, I Thought I Knew Everything is not a body of work reinforcing self-condemnation. It is a public acknowledgment that, “I used to think this way, but now I don’t.” I made this move, not because of some inherent, self-generated strength. But because I had the most momentary brush with someone who thought differently than I did, who loved me with so much grace, who made the decision that her suffering would ennable her and not embitter her, and ultimately decided “there is nothing that cannot be forgiven, and there is no one undeserving of forgiveness.” Accepting that forgiveness is how I began to break the rules. Forgiveness makes the requirements obsolete and breaks me free from the past. In the presence of forgiveness, my past behaviors and cognitions lose their power. Many of my rules were created because I felt so

30 Tutu, Forgiving, chap 1.
31 Tutu, Forgiving, introduction.
guilty for a mistake (real or perceived) that I wanted to ensure the wrong wouldn’t happen again. But that’s a losing strategy that keeps me bound to the lie of redemption through good behavior. It’s why these words of Desmond Tutu were so liberating for me:

“The reasons for forgiving ourselves are the same as for forgiving others. It is how we become free of the past. It is how we heal and grow. It is how we make meaning out of our suffering, restore our self-esteem, and tell a new story of who we are. If forgiving others leads to an external peace, forgiving ourselves leads to an internal peace. It can be so very difficult when you are both the victim and the perpetrator in your own story.”

Tutu, *Forgiving*, chap. 9.
CONCLUSION

By engaging in new processes using unfamiliar materials, I’ve had to stretch my understanding of what it means for me to be an artist. I created my early work using processes I had mastered which reflected a misguided intention to teach people how to be better, according to my perspective. New processes of turning my digital work into installations and forming paper into tangible objects helped me to understand that the goal of artmaking is discovery, not disseminating conclusions. By taking a new approach to my creative practice that prioritizes patience and a posture of self-forgiveness as I explore unfamiliar territory, I have gained a more complete understanding of what it means to navigate a world outside the studio that does not always conform to my hopes or desires. I found the symbiotic relationship between my artistic practice and my “living life” practice. Every step of my journey has been an essential part of dismantling my belief systems and shattering my myth of control. The timing of every experience, my relationship with Marlenys, and the commitment to my creative practice have all worked together to influence my perception of myself, the world around me, and my artwork.

My early work was born out of frustration and misunderstanding, reacting to fear and anger that neither I nor those around me could live up to my expectations. By facing the discomfort, I developed a practice that gave me the courage to reveal my internal questions in an external form. I practiced disassembling the components of my materials and reassembling them into something new. I encountered other artists and work that caused an increase in my cognitive dissonance and saw the skill with which these artists suggested a different way forward. I
practiced emulating that in my work as I attempted to provoke my own audience by causing cognitive dissonance.

Accepting Marlenys’s forgiveness is how I began to break the rules. Forgiveness makes the requirements obsolete and opens a path to reduce cognitive dissonance. It opens doors to new creative opportunities that would have seemed out of my reach in the past. It frees me from the fear of mistakes and like Bruce Nauman, I can say "I'm an artist in the studio, whatever I make is art.”

My upbringing prepared me to have certain expectations from life. My relationship with Marlenys upended those expectations and forced me to confront cognitive dissonance. My research, creative practice, and reflection on Marlenys’s life and death led me to embrace a life of inquiry. Guided by forgiveness, such a life offers permission to ask questions, and requires understanding that there won’t always be answers and the acceptance that some questions are unanswerable. It means recognizing my belief systems will be undermined and I need a balanced approach to reduce the cognitive dissonance that comes with the upheaval. It exchanges a life of certainty for a life of mystery. It means becoming comfortable being uncomfortable.
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