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Spring 2024

## Simply Butter (one pat at a time)

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# **Simply Butter (one pat at a time)**

Maddie McSweeney

*Simply Butter (one pat at a time)*

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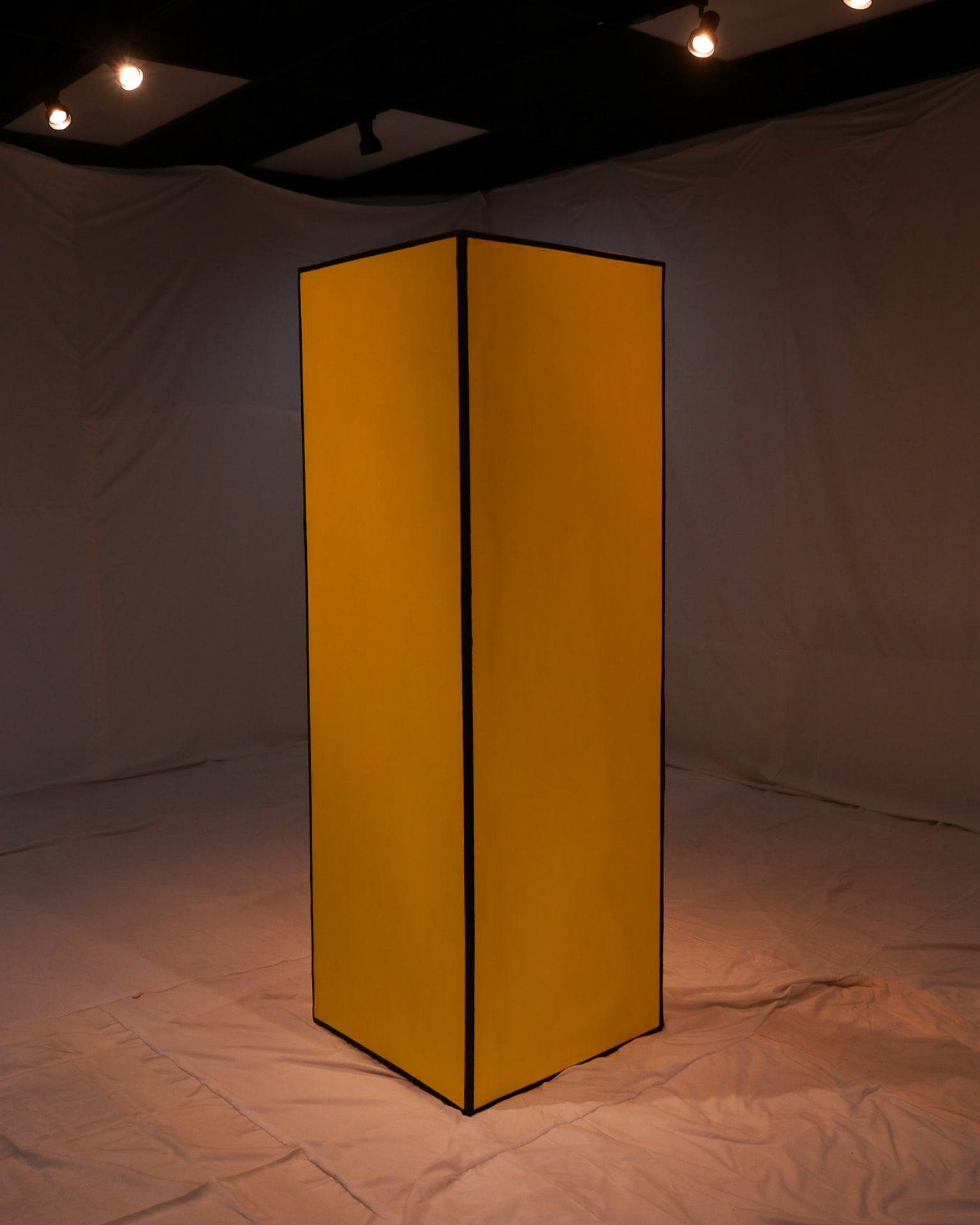
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# ABSTRACT

*Simply Butter (one pat at a time)* is an investigation of food and intimacy through sculpture, installation, performance, printmaking, and recordkeeping. In this series of Happenings, I explore themes of love, loss, and empathy while dealing with emotions related to grief and mental health issues. I look to cultural phenomena and art history figures who are concerned with similar sentiments to make conceptual connections and inform my choices when creating this project. Drawn to silliness and the absurd, I use the rudimentary yet familiar form of a stick of butter to act as a monolithic stand-in for the emotionally, mentally, and spiritually difficult and indescribable. Over a seven-day period, I changed the elements of the space, object, and prompt to examine how participants functioned and interacted in different controlled contexts. By changing position, sensation, sound, and exchange, the project focused on the body and its ability to blur boundaries between physical and emotional interaction. The presence of or reference to a body, real or imagined, is significant to the audience's ability to connect to self and others in an intimate way and to ultimately develop a deeper sense of empathy.

# THESIS

Toward the start of this project, I was struck by the loss of my dog and grandmother. This led to a disconnection with my art practice. As I assembled this project, I found myself overcome with love, loss, and thinking of the fragility of life. *Simply Butter (one pat at a time)* served as a depository where my emotions could reside when they had no other place to go.

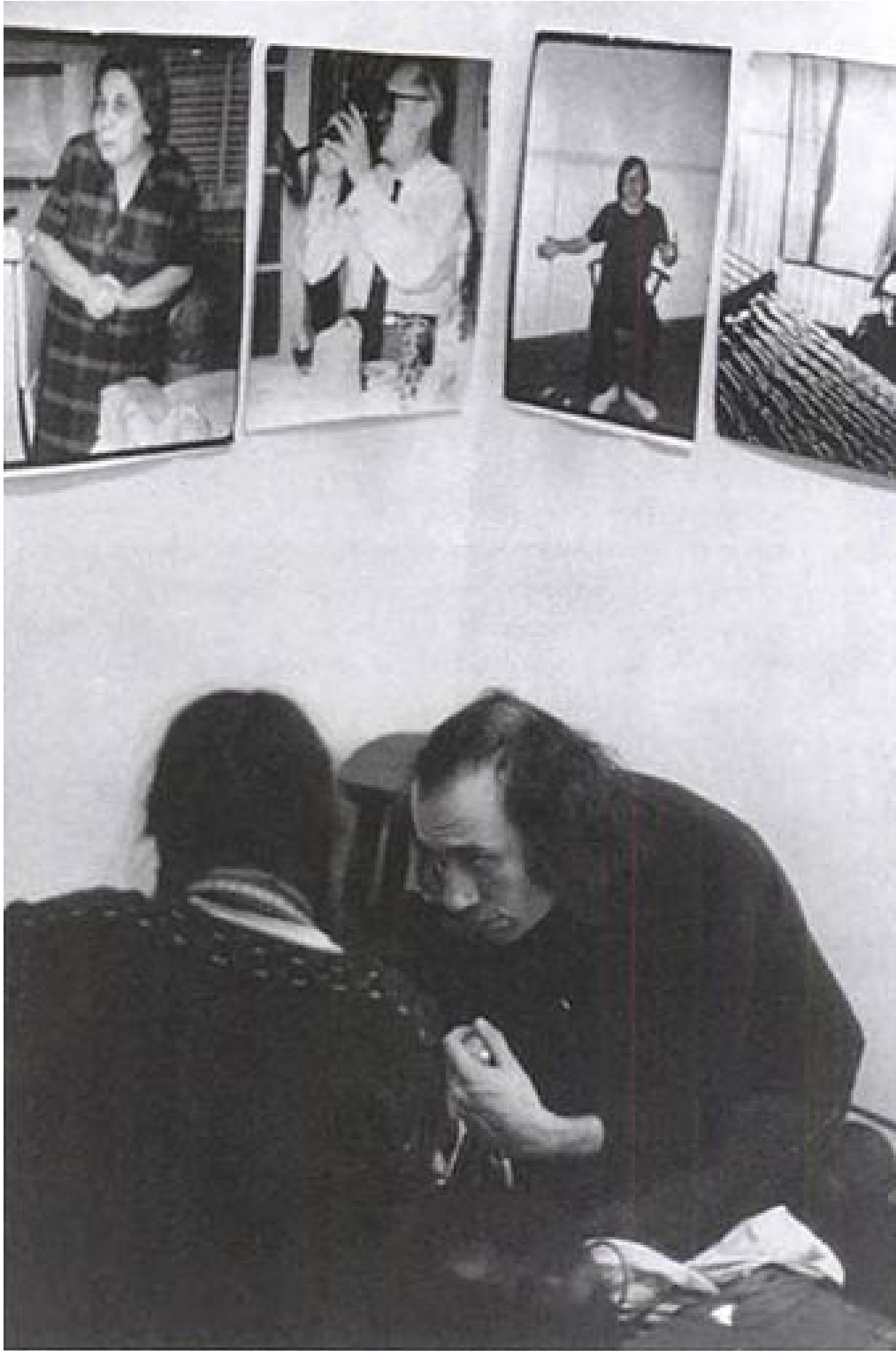
Absurdity and symbolism are effective tools when used to approach difficult topics. Mundane motifs contradict their intended purpose and subvert expectations through caricaturization, allowing one to examine and question the represented emotion itself. In this way, the emotional grieving process can change its form when these concepts are applied in controlled spaces and performative actions. These tools, coupled with the consequential evolution of grief, empathy, and connectivity, interact on both an individual and collective level that can be physically and emotionally experienced. The mask of humor guides the viewer to a darker, looming reality, prompting them to consider the inevitable which lies beneath the surface of everyday life.

While considering the relatability of ordinary objects, the central concerns of my work are intimacy and food. Intimacy is the intangible closeness between people whereas affection is a gentler feeling of liking. This project surpasses affection and creates the vulnerability and allowance—the amount of something (i.e., discomfort) that is permitted—found in intimacy. In this work, I examine emotional, physical, mental, and spiritual intimacy. These are explored through object, body, and space. The object represents a recognizable food that can be broken down into simple forms. This shared familiarity in an unserious object creates a degree of comfortability and commonality between people. Through proximity and association, I analyze how a mindful presence within one's body or surrounding environment, including awareness to objects and people, can deepen the relationship to self and others. Additionally, I change space and sensations as a form of performance to create controlled contexts that allow the viewer to place themselves at a distinct time or place (or lack of). Silliness is used as a vehicle for exploring more serious and intimate issues, and visual elements are pared down in the installations to emphasize this. Situation-making plays with and changes the dynamic between person and monolith, evoking a physical and spiritual presence from the object. *Simply Butter (one pat at a time)* investigates how absurdity, symbolism, and food can create an extension of self and a vessel where my conflicting emotions can be stored, and how these elements under change and social practice may influence greater individual and collective intimacy.



*Simply Butter (one pat at a time)*, view of installation from day six Happening





polaroid from Vito Acconci's *Transference Room*, 1972, Sonnabend Gallery

# INTRODUCTION

Vito Acconci and Anne Truitt work with similar sentiments to the conceptual framework of this project. Acconci's work in the 1960s and 1970s placed the viewer in situations that crossed boundaries and created discomfort, reflecting his own existential unease. In *Transference Zone* (1972), he reminisced over photographs before sharing a chamber with a stranger.<sup>1</sup> He believed if he convinced himself enough, the participant would be able to transform into a lost "prime person" in his life, such as his mother. While creating my project, I was not concerned with recreating what had been lost, but rather with processing and reconciling my conflicting emotions and impulses. When participants were in the space with the butter, I hoped for my sense of urgency and existential distress to be recognized and reciprocated with compassion or sensitivity. The work originates as a self-portrait and representation of the immutable feeling of being on display. Despite potential discomfort, I yearned for others to share in the burden with something, or someone, even when they may not fully understand.



sculptures from the *Anne Truitt: Intersections* exhibition, 2016 (photo: The Baltimore Museum of Art)<sup>ii</sup>

Similarly, Truitt relied heavily on her life experiences and personal writings for artistic ground by abstracting memory and the subconscious in her sculptures. Her body of work is described as

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1. "Vito Acconci: Seedbed," Tate, accessed December 15, 2023, <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/acconci-seedbed-t13176>.

“monoliths of memory”.<sup>2</sup> These human-sized wooden columns covered in flat, vivid color, allowed her to communicate private memories and emotions without depending on more literal imagery. In her diary *Daybook*, she analyzed the significance of color and her evolution between painting and sculpture. Truitt wrote, “This [color] was analogous to my feeling for the freedom of my own body and my own being, as if in some mysterious way I felt myself to be color.” In the way that she compared form and color as a vehicle for freedom, I wanted butter to be a way to liberate myself from my difficulties. Early in my process, I created two- and three-dimensional paper objects representing food. Initially, the project was meant to be indicative of symbolic play and childhood. It would use real and cartoon food objects to allow participants to exercise play and abstraction whilst creating a point of entry for intimacy.



printed food objects, prototype for *Simply Butter (one pat at a time)*

2. Megan O’Grady, “How a Sculptor Made an Art of Documenting Her Life,” *The New Yorker*, June 15, 2022, <https://www.newyorker.com/books/under-review/how-a-sculptor-made-an-art-of-documenting-her-life>.

This concept, however, became challenging because I had no emotional attachment to it, and I couldn't set aside the emotions I was dealing with. Shifting away from this, I found myself deeply humored and troubled by the small paper stick of butter I had made using screen printing. For some reason, it was so well liked and appreciated by others for its simplicity—its form too perfect. I wrote in my journal, "I yearn for a life distant from active grief. I do not know if such a life has ever existed for me (or anyone), or ever will. I yearn for purity and simplicity, unchanging acceptance, love, and forever. The beauty (and joke) is that it [life] is not simply butter, and I resent it." Although difficult, I try to embrace that love cannot exist without grief, and I reflected this notion of an impossible perfect using butter's similar cultural contradictions.

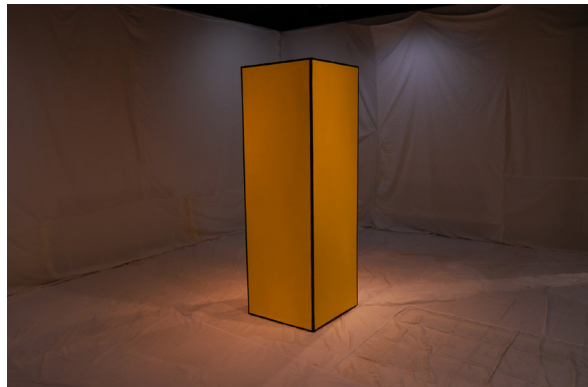
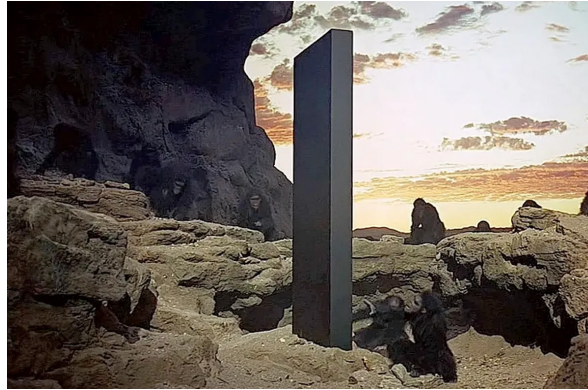


*I Can't Believe It's Not Butter!* advertisement with actor and spokesperson Fabio<sup>iii</sup>

Through commercialization, butter is advertised as a symbol for love, family, and simplicity with phrases like "butter, the secret ingredient to happiness" and "butter that makes memories".<sup>3</sup> Unfortunately, it can also represent poor health and living, such as the metaphor "spreading yourself thin." Advertisements treat fleshy fat in a similar way. Beauty, clothing, and nutrition companies promote idealized forms of the human body as the standard for beauty and ultimate happiness, but this unachievable standard creates the opposite—a decline in self-esteem and mental health. The duality of these two experiences is a part of the investigation. Performing acts of self-care like getting adequate sleep and nourishing my body to be my "best self" felt impossible and frustrating. Butter and greasiness are often used to unstick something, suggesting that I could use it to squeeze myself

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3. Rahul Panchal, "731+ Best Butter Slogans and Taglines (Generator + Guide)," BrandBoy, August 7, 2023, <https://thebrandboy.com/butter-company-slogans/>.



Monolith from *2001: A Space Odyssey* (top)<sup>v</sup>, butter monolith from *Simply Butter (one pat at a time)* (bottom)

out of this stuck place. The physicality of this food, however, more so relates to the clogage of my mental state, and I remain stuck, unable to conform to the standards for perfection and optimal living.

I also found great humor in the absurdity of a stick of butter being at the forefront of complex matters, the rudimentary standing in for the inconceivable. This grants me momentary relief because its ridiculousness appeals to me more than a clearer symbol would. The film *2001: Space Odyssey* explored this in a similar way.<sup>4</sup> The film followed scientists' gradual investigation of an alien monolith. Different cultures share certain symbols because they hold a place in the collective human unconscious. The monolith became recognized as an absurd yet complex symbol for evolutionary progress in the film. My monolith of butter is a physical channel for externalizing intimate feelings without having to rely on an easily comprehensible depiction. It took the form of a human-sized sculpture to relate to my own body and hold the emotional shift I was undergoing. Public interactions with the sculpture suggested how the collective may recognize and respond to my emotions, transpiring in an isolated installation to heighten their attention and sensitivity.

4. Kate Bove, "2001: A Space Odyssey: The Monolith's Meaning, Explained," *Game Rant*, April 5, 2023, <https://gamerant.com/2001-a-space-odyssey-monolith-meaning-explained/>.

## BUILDING BUTTER AND SPACE

In my construction of the box, I used wood stretchers, screws, and wood glue. I scaled up the original 6 x 2 x 2 inch paper box to a 72 x 24 x 24 inch frame. I stretched fabric over the frame and stapled it the same way one would stretch a canvas. I intentionally left an opening at one end to later be secured with Velcro so I could be inside of the box. I covered the surface in a thin layer of gesso before painting it with bright yellow latex paint. The oversized scale and vibrant hue of the box mirrors sentiments found in Truitt's work where her columns were perceived as human bodies emitting emotions.<sup>5</sup> The flat paint created not only an optical but an emotional experience, suggesting a specific sensation found in one's body, or perhaps, being. In a similar way, the butter's size and bright, glowing appearance describes a human form that transcends its physical state to an intangible, spiritual one. Like the prototype paper stick of butter, I included a graphic one-inch black line outlining each edge of the human-sized box to emphasize the childlike silliness I use in my work as an entry point to more emotional responses.



wood frame (left), stretched and painted fabric (right)

Its caricatured depiction also relates to Claes Oldenburg's sculptures of everyday consumer goods in *The Store*; both my work and his are concerned with recognizable, mass-consumed objects with pop art sentiments. Oldenburg emphasizes the environment of his objects by opting to showcase his

5. Megan O'Grady, "How a Sculptor Made an Art of Documenting Her Life," *The New Yorker*, June 15, 2022, <https://www.newyorker.com/books/under-review/how-a-sculptor-made-an-art-of-documenting-her-life>.



installation of the sewn sheets in the Folk Hall Projects Gallery

work in a makeshift storefront rather than a gallery. I felt a need for control over my environment, the Folk Hall Projects Gallery, perhaps as surrogate for my fluctuating emotions. I wanted to build an otherworldly yet minimal space to facilitate reflection and observation. I did this by hanging giant sheets—constructed from thrifted bed sheets and tablecloths—that covered the walls and tile floor of the irregularly shaped gallery to create a uniformly blank, rectangular room. By blocking the floor from the viewer’s eye, it made the space more isolated and the weight of the monolith’s presence more exaggerated. Sewing the sheets together in an uneven, textured fashion became a meditative process in which I focused on the physical act rather than precise craftsmanship. Also, some sheets comforted me because their feminine pattern and dusty, secondhand smell reminded me of my grandmother. Cool-toned lights shone on the walls while the box was illuminated by warm lights. The tone shift between the space and objects caused the butter to glow in a strange and otherworldly way, creating an air of compelling, almost spiritual energy. The butter moved positions over the duration of the project and the lights were adjusted to follow its movements, further emphasizing its command of the space. Designing a spare environment and lighting arrangement also changed the material substance of the space and how viewers interpreted it. Participants compared the environment to a microscopic view of a kitchen table, refrigerator, or microwave and illustrated a mental asylum or space for spiritual purgatory. These comparisons were recorded in a guest book resting on a podium in front of the gallery. Before the participants were invited into the space, I began a series of individual exercises to help me better understand the space; this included walking around the room, embodying the movements of butter, and meditating within the butter box (both solo and guided).



Oldenburg in *The Store*, 1961, 107 East Second Street, New York (photo: Robert R. McElroy)<sup>4</sup>

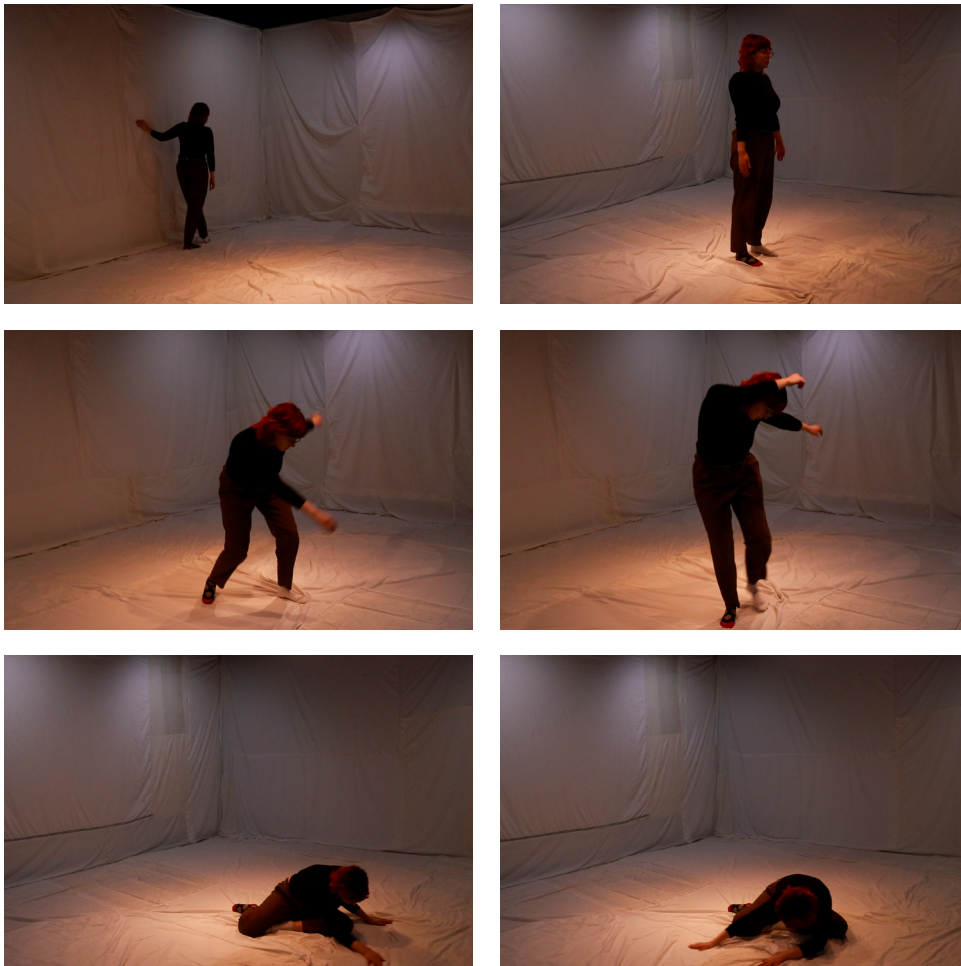


installation view of McSweeney entering the butter object



## INDIVIDUAL EXERCISES

While reading Robert Pasolli's *A Book on the Open Theatre*, I became inspired by the theatre's values on individual relationships to space.<sup>6</sup> The book outlined exercises I considered as I walked through the space to become more aware of my environment and my presence within it. With some difficulty, I attempted to move without thinking about the space to develop "kinetic sensitivity." I imagined the space as a changing substance, like butter transitioning between firmness and grease. I also envisioned myself as a stick of butter and how I would move as such. This created an opening for deeper connection with the butter; if I could understand and relate to its physicality and disposition then it could more effectively serve as an extension of self.



"kinetic sensitivity" exercises for *Simply Butter* (one pat at a time)

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6. Robert Pasolli, *A Book on the Open Theatre* (The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc, 1970), 16-7.



McSweeney hugging the butter sculpture

During my meditations inside the butter, I was mostly occupied by my emotions. I thought of my grandmother and the fragility of my body. During one meditation, guided by a friend who practices meditating frequently, I reached what I believed to be Marina Abramović's concept of "suchness," or full emptiness.<sup>7</sup> This seemingly contradictory state of being is conversely one of the most harmonious due to its nature of being so engrossed in something that it transforms into an immersive nothing. I found the most relief and presence in my body because my real and imagined bodies merged in this moment. My energy transferred to the box when I exited it, leaving an imprint of self. At this point, the difficult emotions previously bogging me down were left with the box and replaced with momentary—but immediate—clarity. Though this wasn't a permanent fix, the butter remained as a depository for expelling and diluting undesirable burdens.

In Abramović's *Dragon* series, she made furniture-like objects out of crystals for the public to interact with and feel the shifting states of energy she felt when walking across the Great Wall of China.<sup>8</sup> These transitory objects depended on others' interactions to complete them. Similarly, this project

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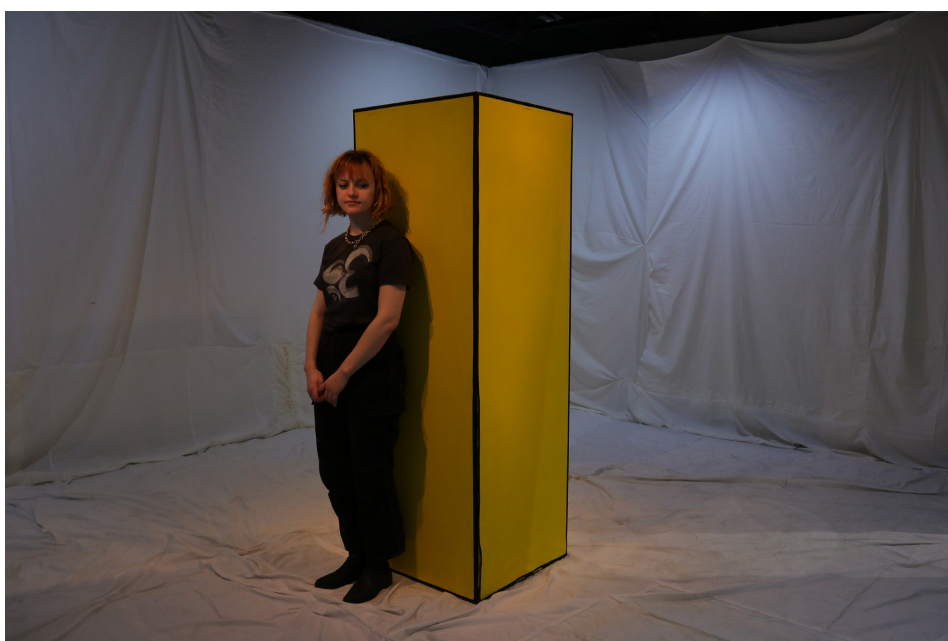
7. David Marchese, "Marina Abramović Thinks the Pain of Love is Hell of Earth," *The New York Times Magazine*, talk from October 26, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2023/10/29/magazine/marina-abramovic-interview.html>.

8. "Marina Abramović: Transitory Objects," Sean Kelly Gallery Online Viewing Room, accessed December 15, 2023, <https://seankelly-viewingroom.exhibit-e.art/viewing-room/marina-abramovic-transitory-objects>.

would be futile without at least one participant. I was curious if participants would sense my energy shifts from the meditations and that which I transmitted to the box when creating and interacting with it. Participants and the charged spirit of the butter may undergo a dual experience—each becoming both the observer and observed. The inquisition of whether my viewers would relate to my work further prompted the series of Happenings within my space.



Marina Abramović's *White Dragon*, 1989 (photo: Sean Kelly Gallery) (top) <sup>vi</sup>  
participant standing with the butter sculpture (bottom)





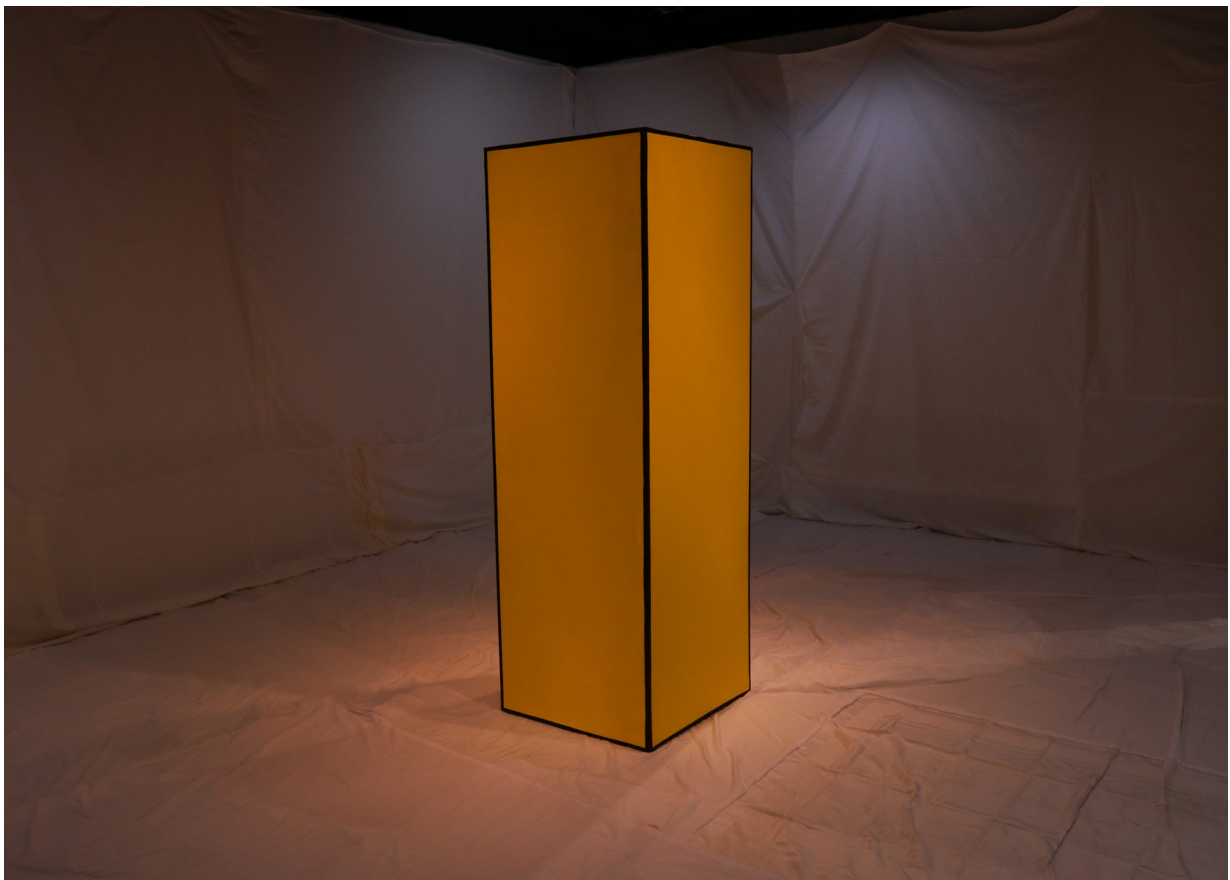
guided meditation between McSweeney and their peer (top)  
view of inside the butter box during meditation sessions (bottom)



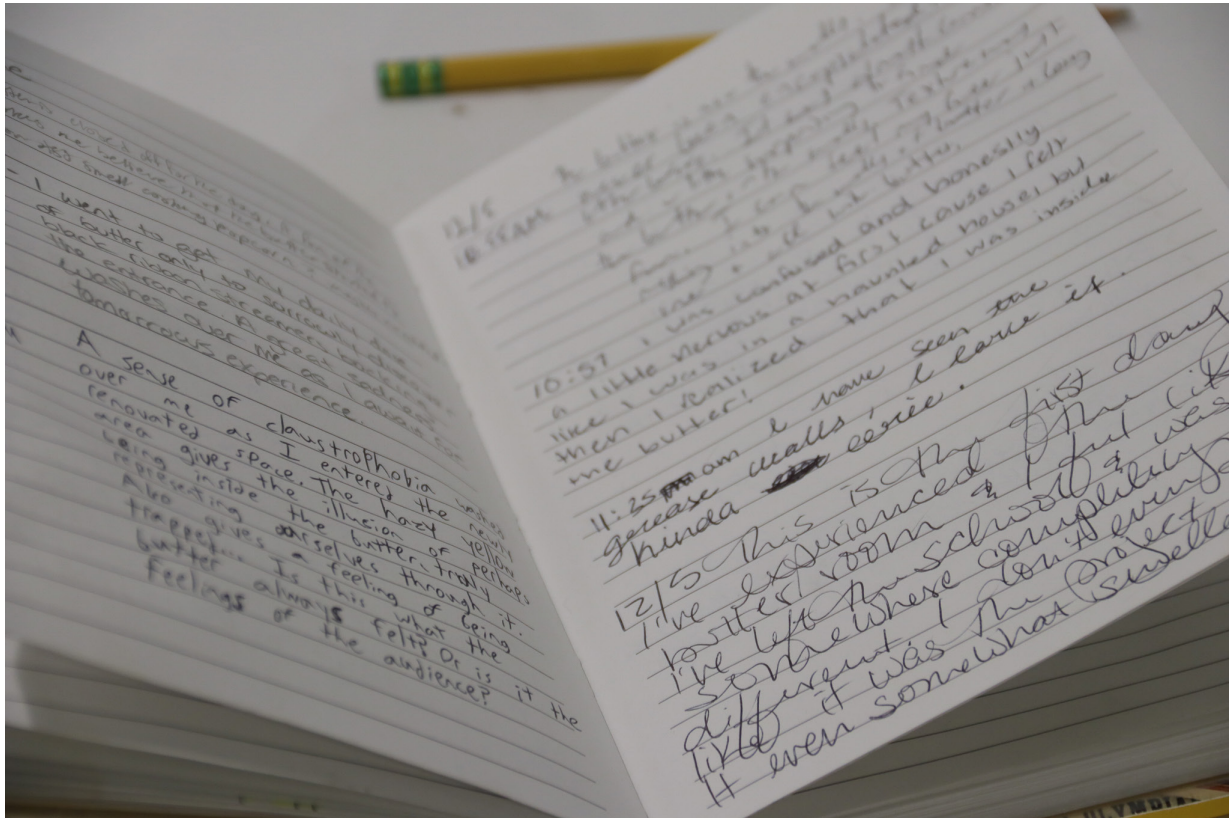
# HAPPENINGS

My objective was variety over consistency. Over seven days, elements of the work changed through the placement of the object and its presence in relation to touch and sounds originating from the butter. Various factors influenced and altered attentive participants' interaction and interpretation of the work.

Since the butter was on display at the Myers School of Art, many of the viewers were college art students. Because of this, I considered class schedules when setting timed sessions. My promotion came from email blasts, contacting professors, and talking to people in the halls. After the first few days, people began to understand it as a series of Happenings, and engagement increased due to word of mouth.



view of the object within the installation on day one



close-up view of the recorded observations and experiences of participants

On the first day of the exhibition, I positioned the box upright in the center of the space to set the object and its presence at a baseline. I experienced some apprehension over how individuals would interpret the work; during the conceptual process, I received many suggestions unrelated to the project. I did not give viewers indications to what I was hoping they would take away from the encounter so that they interacted with as little bias as possible. Participants were encouraged to record their thoughts, feelings, and experiences in the journal placed just outside of the gallery.

Viewers quickly took note of the deafeningly desolate space enmeshed with the sensation of feeling stuck and separated from the outside world. They described the space as “empty yet fulfilling” and evocative of being trapped in time. Reflecting on the lighting’s effect on the object’s appearance, one viewer wrote, “My eyes kept wanting to unfocus, and it made the butter appear to glow—almost like something inside was about to be released.” These initial findings revealed how this form of documentation would later impact my research, in addition to the viewers’ immediate connection to something beyond the object’s physical state. This first Happening introduced the dynamics of presence and absence, stuckness and release.

On day two, the box and its spotlights were moved to the far-left corner of the room. An unsettling sound emitted from inside of the box, and approaching participants heard the noise before seeing the butter in the room. On the evening of the project's opening day, I heard a horribly ominous "clunking" noise echoing through the school. Metal bottles were stuck in the vending machine across from my space. The noise was mechanical and alarming, like a clock foreshadowing death. The sound mirrored my own existential distress. I sampled the sound, altered it through looping, and amplified reverb for it to feel foreign, yet familiar. The custodial workers fixed the machine the next day, but the sound continued to echo from the butter, granting it a new way to draw attention to itself.

The sound and placement of the object elicited different emotional responses. Viewers felt the physical space to be unnerving and otherworldly on day one. With the new sound, some felt the clothed walls to be a calming contrast. Many only felt anxious and threatened when entering the room. One viewer recalled giggling when approaching. The varied emotional and physical responses participants reported may reveal differences in how they respond to another person's grief and even, perhaps, how they process their own fears.



view of the object's new position in the installation room on day two



participant viewing and interacting with the object during the day two Happening



Viewers also began to receive the object as a being on the second day. They attributed the butter as producing its own sound and described the noise as “breathing.” Some viewers related to the object despite their fear or intimidation. One individual wrote, “I do feel emotionally and para-socially attached to the butter now. I feel like I am also butter.” The ridiculousness of the work expanded as the participant, serious or not, expressed resonating with a large stick of noisy butter. This inclination to entertain connecting and relating to the absurd—typified by the anthropomorphized butter—is a psychological tool for developing empathy, a development which grew on an even broader scale as the exhibition continued.





view of the day three Happening outside the entrance of the gallery

On day three, the box leaned against the wall in front of the gallery's entrance. The object physically confronted viewers who were forced to walk around it; however, I observed that many people did not enter the room. They reported feeling unsettled by the butter's position, and, from their reflections, I suspected most were unsure if the space was active. Most opted to view the work from the outside hallway rather than inside the space. This phenomenon led to participants describing the butter's "observant behavior," thereby shifting the butter from observed to observer. One person wrote, "It has moved to the door to stare at the people passing in the halls. Its stare is silent but intense." Another viewer thought that the box was listening to their "every word," implying that participants were confiding in the object as if it were a person. These personifications reveal the necessity of participation for this project; it becomes an investigation of person-to-person relations through an anthropomorphic lens. The relationship between participant and object culminated a shared sense of intimacy between all participants.

Over days four and five, I moved the work back to the center of the room and instructed participants to carefully hug, poke, and pat the object. For two hours each day, I entered the box and anonymously touched participants back through its surface. I chose to extend this Happening over two days because of the excited engagement it yielded early into my session on the fourth day, indicating it would be an informative experiment worthy of an additional day. In my previous work titled *FEED FOLK*, I served printed peanut butter and jelly sandwiches to my community. I used this recognizable



Maddie McSweeney's *FEED FOLK* installation performance, 2023, Myers School of Art, (photo: Dale Dong)<sup>vii</sup>

food in a controlled space with visual devices like childlike painting and simple printmaking to promote connectivity and vulnerability between distant and fearful people in an early post-COVID world. This installation had a clear attachment to me as the face of the work because I handed sandwiches directly to participants. Conversely, in *Simply Butter (one pat at a time)*, I hid behind an anonymous and genderless personality. The butter became a faceless yet timeless monolith that the viewer could authentically respond to with fewer preconceived notions of what or who it was.

The space Acconci created in his *Seedbed* work functioned similarly.<sup>9</sup> He masturbated underneath a constructed ramp on which participants would walk, and used their movements to motivate his sexual fantasies, describing them into a microphone for viewers to hear. My project does not focus on sexual intimacy; the emotions embodied by *Simply Butter* are not derived from pleasure nor satisfaction. Ironically, one of my goals was to self-gratify. Not only would I release tension through mindful actions and controlled happenings, but these interventions would also ideally bring me to a more fulfilled and pleased disposition. Remaining invisible in the box to the participants allowed me to exercise these wishes without placing heavy expectations on those interacting with me. Absent from the full weight of my identity, the audience was able to engage authentically and develop an unforeseen sense of intimacy.



Vito Acconci's *Seedbed*, 1972, Sonnabend Gallery<sup>viii</sup>

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9. "Vito Acconci: *Seedbed*," Tate, accessed December 15, 2023, <https://www.tate.org.uk/art/artworks/acconci-seedbed-t13176>.



participants touching the object during day four Happening (top)  
McSweeney mirroring touch from inside the box (bottom)



While I was inside the butter, participants entered the room with both initial and delayed caution. Externally, the object appeared opaquely yellow. Inside, the thinly applied paint glowed under the spotlights, casting shadows of every close movement. As the viewer met the surface, I silently mirrored their touch, pressing against fingertips, hands, and faces. This follow-the-leader action recalls the mirror images exercise described in *A Book on the Open Theatre*.<sup>10</sup> In this exercise, partners, one “real” and the other the “image,” would define a plane to mirror through touching fingertips. I became the image of the person on the other side of our yellow plane. Some were oblivious to my

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10. Robert Pasolli, *A Book on the Open Theatre* (The Bobbs-Merrill Company, Inc, 1970), 19.

presence until I touched them, and I heard them yelp or laugh in response. Some did not realize or believe there was a person inside the box until they touched it multiple times. Many engaged with apprehension, both I and the participant defensive and unsure of what to expect. Simultaneously, I was pleased to cause these moments of unease, shock, and second-guessing. This mirroring quickly became a delightful exchange and even a game for many participants once they better understood the interaction. They dragged their fingers in zig zags, patted, or poked different sides of the box with growing intention as I imitated their movements. Some wrapped their arms around the box in an embrace, and I pressed my body into theirs. A participant reflected a love for “the most terrifying hug of their life” in the guest book. Many participants also expressed that their unnerving experience morphed into or included an enjoyable and comforting one.

Much of my experiences inside the box were distressing because my senses were heightened to both outside and inside conditions. My perturbing experience related to *Abramović’s Rhythm 0*, where she invited participants to do whatever they wished to her body with access to objects like perfume, feathers, scissors, and a gun.<sup>11</sup> The gun was pulled on her at the end of the six-hour performance. When she moved from her fixed position, many were frightened and ashamed because they suddenly viewed her as a human again rather than a passive object. Like Abramović, I had to exert more control over my emotions and body while under uncomfortable, and potentially dangerous, circumstances. I felt a loss of control when multiple people simultaneously interacted from all sides. I was outnumbered and

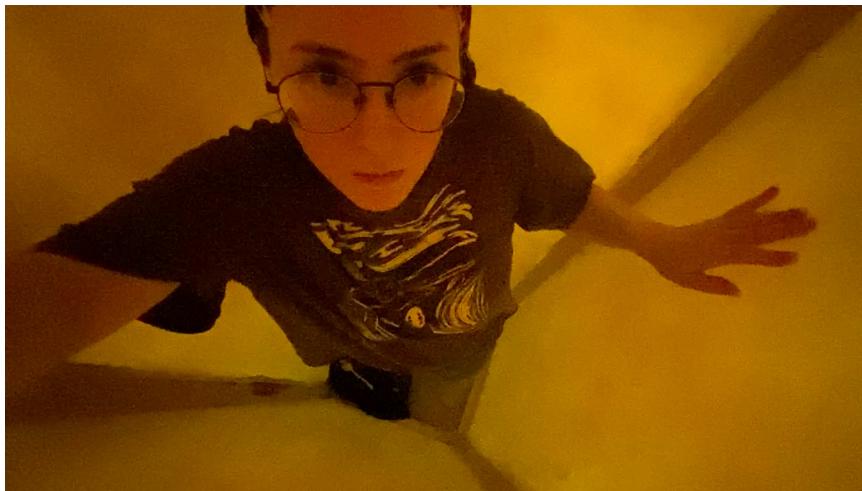


frameshot from video of Marina Abramović’s *Rhythm 0* performance, 1974 (director and editor: Milica Zec)<sup>x</sup>

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11. Grace Morgan, “The Power of Silence: The Art of Marina Abramović,” *Cherwell*, November 19, 2018, <https://cherwell.org/2018/11/19/the-power-of-silence-the-art-of-marina-abramovic/>.

cornered with frenetic, increasingly forceful pokes and pats. Chatter usually soothed me, whilst quiet participants unnerved me. This silent approach rendered me defenseless to a foreboding presence I couldn't see nor hear. My inside environment made my movements slower and my body more vulnerable. I grew disoriented from standing in the same position and being engulfed in yellow. The rising temperature and lack of airflow was almost suffocating, so the anticipation of contact became even more distressing. I responded to this happening with more discomfort than humor. Objectively—unless you possess an extreme, sadistic sense of humor—someone trapped in a box is not funny; however, this context was often met with light-hearted humor. Perhaps the butter's cartoonish nature or the playful mirroring masked the morbidity underneath. Perhaps the assumption of temporary and self-inflicted conditions eased the participant of true concern. The butter's separation from a clear, identifiable person allowed participants to laugh at the interaction, though they knew a real person



McSweeney inside of the butter box during “touch sessions” on day four and five

was “stuck” inside. No one harmed me or the box, but I was ultimately alone, without control, and stuck in a stick of butter. Though the Happening was created to allow these results to occur, I never encouraged the participants to treat the situation with empathy in the way that they did.

All participants interacted with care and mindfulness, and many left the room by saying goodbye to or thanking the butter. These spoken formalities further humanized the butter. Whereas *Rhythm 0* exposed human corruption, this work (especially this specific happening), revealed voluntary empathy found in human nature. Most participants formed a genuine emotional connection to the butter as a being when they were able to physically interact with it. A participant inquired, “Perhaps this is a reflection of a need for physical contact that lives inside all of us.” Some also recorded



view of participants hugging the butter object during the day four Happening

that they felt less alone from the contact and were “falling in love” with the butter. Even more so, one person reflected, “In a way, are we not all stuck in metaphysical butter, trapped in a stick of coagulated dairy that keeps us whole until we are not. That is the butter.” This thought resonates with the concept of the butter acting as a symbol for the struggles of mental health and extends a high degree of empathy or relatability to a seemingly simple object.

After the two-hour session during which I occupied the butter, the prompt to touch the work remained. I was surprised when journal entries expressed similar sentiments to ones responding to the sessions. Participants continued to connect to the object even without a person inside to greet their touch. They described the box as a friend with whom they’d had an emotional journey with. Without full context, they continued to approach it with deliberate care. Since the butter is an extension of self, I viewed this behavior as the audience approaching me with full compassion and sensitivity. The work also connected individuals through their shared experience and created a sense of belonging; the participants and I had all become a part of something larger than ourselves.

On day six, I wanted to find a new way to immerse the viewers and generate greater synergy. I made a drastic transformation by creating a new installation in the space. Rearranging the sheet walls, I made a dimly lit cloth hallway that led from the gallery's entrance to a room smaller than the original installation. The new room was 216 x 72 x 72 inches, three times larger than the size of the butter box. Once constructed, I painted every inch of the room with the same yellow paint as the butter. This took a great deal of time and energy, and created a level of cognitive dissonance as I shifted between differing emotional states such as pain and exhilaration.



in-progress photo of the second installation (top), McSweeney painting the interior of the sewn sheet room (bottom)







Yayoi Kusama's *Flower Obsession* installation for the National Gallery of Victoria Triennial, 2016-7  
(photo: Eugene Hyland)\*

As I painted the walls yellow, I thought of Yayoi Kusama's obliteration rooms. In *Flower Obsession*, participants covered a common space with fake red daisies and red flower stickers over a four-month duration, building up a dense and expansive red environment.<sup>12</sup> The red daisies referred to Kusama's childhood experience of seeing the kitchen table's red daisy pattern everywhere she looked, causing her to feel a sense of total obliteration of self. Like these flowers, butter was the symbol I used to represent feeling engulfed by emotions. I, too, sought to make an imagined space real, to reduce the viewer and the space to a simultaneous nothingness and everything. I expanded the butter object into a physical space. This allowed the audience to share in my experience of being physically inside the object and metaphorically consumed by something. Participants expressed claustrophobic feelings of being swallowed and even questioned if they themselves had become butter. One viewer wrote, "Yellow everywhere. First it is terrifying and then I assimilate. I start to enjoy it." This mirrored my own experience inside the room.

12. Sarah Barnes, "Yayoi Kusama's Latest Installation 'Obliterates' an Entire Apartment in Red Flowers," *My Modern Met*, April 27, 2018, <https://mymodernmet.com/yayoi-kusama-flower-obsession/>.

This evocation relates to the sentiments in Charlotte Perkins Gilman's *The Yellow Wallpaper*, which follows the mental decline of a young Victorian woman.<sup>13</sup> Instructed to stay bedridden as cure, she instead developed an obsession with her bedroom's yellow wallpaper, eventually coming to believe that a woman was imprisoned behind its pattern. Her fixation eventually led to sleep deprivation and eventually insanity. This story is indicative of my own experience; I had hoped that these new yellow walls would further push my research and relieve me of my emotional ailments, but I found myself disillusioned and further fallen into poor health habits.



interior view of the second completed installation for the day six Happening

Although I experienced physical and mental tribulations during creation of this second installation, it also had a positive payoff. I transformed myself and the viewer as if we were “in another world, maybe on another planet and in another body,” as described in Wolfgang Laib’s wax room.<sup>14</sup> In the

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13. Charlotte Perkins Gilman, *The Yellow Wallpaper*, (London: The New York Magazine, 1892).

14. “Wax room: Wohin bist du gegangen—wohin gehst du? (Where have you gone—where are you going?),” The Phillips Collection, accessed December 15, 2023, <https://www.phillipscollection.org/collection/laib-wax-room>.

permanent installation *Where have you gone – where are you going?*, dim lights activated a room with walls covered in melted beeswax. This created an intense but meditative experience within a cocoonlike chamber; my room functioned in a similar way. Viewers recorded feeling as though they had left the Projects Gallery and the school itself, existing somewhere completely different. This changed space and its new invocations may suggest a continued desire and chase for an “elsewhere” separate from the intensities of my processing. Like Laib’s beeswax, I rubbed buttery grease on the walls after painting. The scent and yellow hue made the viewer lose their sense of self and place within the intimate enclosure. Many participants were disgusted by the smell rather than comforted, like with the beeswax. One participant, however, described a sensual experience with the butter and questioned why it had let them in. This related to the responses from lathering sessions I conducted over the first five days of the project.



Wolfgang Laib’s *Where have you gone - where are you going?*, 2013, The Philips Collection (photo: Lee Stalworth)<sup>xi</sup>



detail photos of grease smeared on the sheets of the day six installation



close-up photos from the latering sessions



During inactive hours, I sat with friends in the room and transferred the buttery grease from my hand to theirs. We interacted one-on-one, or three in a circle, the substance passing from one to the next or simultaneously. This action focused on transference of energy, gaining deeper awareness in body, and intimately blurring lines between self and other—much like the meditations I exercised. Lygia Clark's 1966 *Dialogue of Hands* worked similarly; a white cloth band connected the wrists of two participants, creating a corporeal, intersubjective moment as well as unknown sensorial potentials.<sup>15</sup> Boundaries blurred and fused, and a third being emerged. Our greased hands functioned in this way when we touched and interlocked, our flesh made from the same physical matter. This action



Lygia Clark's *Dialogue of Hands*, 1966<sup>xii</sup>

revealed a new intimate experience for the participants, described as ritualistic, sensual, and surprising. The shift between explained concept and real action formed fluctuations in responses; participants thought the experience would be silly, gross, and straightforward, yet most found it to be uncomfortable, odd, and vaguely morbid. One participant wrote, "The combination of factors created more cognitive dissonance than expected... it drove a psychological response without any initial underlying goal." This seemed to be the overarching consensus.

15. André Lepecki, "Part 1: Affective Geometry, Immanent Acts: Lygia Clark and Performance," The Museum of Modern Art, August 26, 2020, <https://post.moma.org/part-1-affective-geometry-immanent-acts-lygia-clark-and-performance/>.

After participating with hands, two participants lathered my face with the grease. The act offered me a heightened sense of intimacy for myself as my flesh was further disrupted and submerged into this third body. The proposition established a new level of vulnerability distinct from the familiarity and comfort of our interpersonal relationships. The fusion of limbs forged tense dispositions, which opposed the transitory material. Most, however, left the session with curiosity and humor despite feelings of discomfort or wrongness. One participant—who was the most vocal against the action—had the impulse to further submerge their body into the action. They took more of the grease to transfer to my clean hand. This reflects the psychological influence that exchange may have on one’s unconscious or suppressed desire to cross and integrate boundaries.



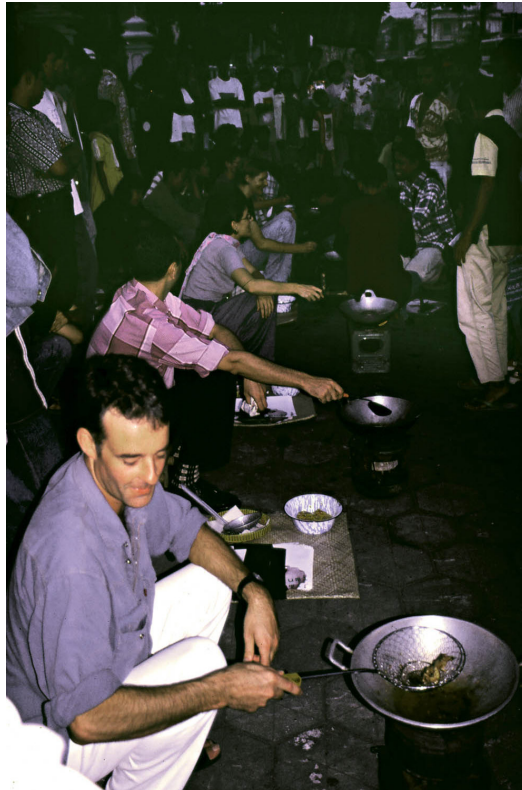
close-up of McSweeney’s lathered face

Similarly, Mella Jaarsma’s *Pribumi* performance changed the way participants interact with one another by inhabiting the “skin of the other” through the consumption of fried frog legs.<sup>16</sup> With both negative and positive preconceived notions, participants processed a range of intensities from anxiety to pleasure. The exchange aimed to dissolve differences between people and create a sense

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16. Francis Maravillas, Michelle Antoinette, and Caroline Turner, “The Unexpected Guest: Food and Hospitality in Contemporary Asian Art,” in *Contemporary Asian Art and Exhibitions: Connectivities and World-Making* (ANU Press, 2014), 164-6, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt13www81.12>.

of belonging to a harmonious world. Likewise, I provided my observers with a pile of handheld paper butters—multiples of the original paper stick of butter made with screen printing—in the yellow room on the last day of the exhibition. Participants were invited to exchange something for a stick of butter; I left it open-ended because I was curious how people would assign value to the trade. Most



Mella Jaarsma's *Pribumi* performance, 1998<sup>xiii</sup>

exchanged what they had on them, such as writing tools and plastic, while others left and returned with small toys, trinkets, and handmade goods. Some participants attached a written explanation to their item or left sweet notes as their offering. One memorable item was a long chain of intricately folded and interlocked gum wrappers. Although materially simple and invaluable, the participant had spent months building this chain and added to it each day. They wrote, "I left a gum wrapper chain. I'll start a new one now. It feels good to start fresh—not get bogged down by the old stuff chaining you to the past." This trade-off became a mutual unleashing of burdens, one supporting the weight of the other. The entire exchange process tangibly linked participants to one another and extended an opportunity to commemorate and remember this experience through substance.





pile of printed paper butters next to a pedestal for offerings (top)  
participants interacting with the day seven Happening (bottom)





The most impactful exchange was with a seven-year-old boy who visited on the fourth day and seventh day. His mother created a video on Instagram documenting his deep attachment to the human-sized butter object; other participants also shared their experiences on social media. When finding the butter gone and replaced with the yellow room, the boy was very upset. He left a note saying, "dear butter. I will miss you." In the video, he went to bed with his paper stick of butter in hand. He established an intimate and pure relationship not with a toy butter or real stick of butter, but with a wood and fabric sculpture vaguely resembling a stick of butter. This deep connection and empathy for this symbol relied on the theatrical, action-based process of the happenings. The audience was given an unknown amount of time to become familiar and close with the butter, only for it to be energetically obliterated and transformed into something new each day. Something (or someone) they grew to care for and empathize with was taken away, and they were left to remember and process. This is loss.

Fortunately, the collective was able to take away pieces of the work, or pieces of me, as a final gift. This transcended my emotional burdens beyond the confines of the room and transmuted them into something new, something better. Parts of myself are scattered among the collective, physical objects emotionally and materially connecting these individuals to me and to one another. And through their exchange, I am left with reminders of the mutual gentleness and support found in community.



the written note left from the boy in exchange for a piece of butter



young boy with paper butter object (top) and with installed butter sculpture (bottom) (photos: Julie Cajigas)<sup>xiv</sup>



## CONCLUSION

*Simply Butter (one pat at a time)* successfully and unsuccessfully acted as a vehicle for emotional processing. Ambition in creating two installations and multiple Happenings led to in a compacted timeframe led to emotional and physical exhaustion. I had to constantly sit in my emotions and be “on,” actively responding to myself, others, and the space. In the yellow room installation, I effectively communicated my feelings of disorientation and consumption, viewers, too, finding themselves stuck in the butter. I was satisfied when creating shared experiences and controlled environments as a stand-in for my seemingly unmanageable emotions, though I found the gratification was often temporary and at the expense of my well-being. I set the unrealistic expectation that my actions would liberate me of my emotional ailments and bring contentment. This resulted in self-inflicted disappointment and pain. Many times I left the work further depleted rather than restored. Symbolism, absurdity, and interaction granted moments of humor, relief, and a way to indirectly convey my struggles. I forged a deeper connection to my butter symbol, and actualized extension of self, through the initial silliness of the kinetic sensitivity exercises and meditations. Participants extended empathy in their interactions with the object, and ultimately to me. This gave me comfort and a sense of belonging. The reminder of community, compassion, and being a part of something larger than the individual brought me greater emotional, mental, and spiritual relief than the butter object itself, or any other material component or individual action. The work gave as much as it took.



close-up of McSweeney embracing the butter object



peeking view of the day one Happening from outside the gallery

The project started with a therapeutic purpose but eventually took a life of its own, distinguishing itself from “therapy.” Art and therapy share components of the other but aren’t inherently the same. Like art, therapy can use creative tools to explore and resolve conflicted feelings and issues. Like therapy, art can be a psychological tool for expression, communication, and understanding. Artistic processes may be therapeutic but are self-prescribed and not equivalent to clinical therapy. As an artist and 2-year-long therapy patient, I find this to be true, generally and specifically, to this project. Art is observed and becomes the observer. It transcends, spreads, and seeps into the world, taking root in the human unconscious collective. It simultaneously belongs to the individual maker yet becomes its own entity. *Simply Butter* ultimately isn’t for me. Not entirely. It lives with those who sensed my meditated energy shifts and grew an attachment to the butter object’s spiritual form. It manifests through entertainment of the absurd, where viewers recognize the butter as a being relating and belonging to their own. It scatters—fragmented in the halls of the Myers School of Art, the homes of my peers, and beyond. It rests, deeply loved, at the bedside of a young boy. This project is art, not therapy; humanity, not individual.

Absurdity, symbolism and situation-making were essential tools to the anthropomorphism and acceptance of the butter, as well as for observing the sociocentric, empathetic, and overall curious behavior of the collective. I found, when given the opportunity, many people will cross socially established boundaries. Participants became physically intimate with an object in which they—up until that point—had only observed; though unsure of what to expect, they remained open nonetheless. When expectations were subverted and touch was reciprocated, many embraced the unorthodox experience. This physicality bred deeper emotional investment. Emotional intimacy progressed as participants left each Happening with a new sensory experience. Despite the public nature of the work, most recorded having a one-on-one, intimate relationship with the project. These private symbioses



participants lathering McSweeney's face with buttery grease

do not negate the collective resonations participants discovered as they shared their experiences with one another. I am personally motivated by the level of vulnerability and community-building this project created. These responses helped with my emotional processing and engagement with my art practice, but evidently the true goal or outcome was never meant to feel therapeutic. I knew there was no quick fix to my grief and that forcing a fix could potentially cause more damage. Love is hell

on earth, and I was burning alive—but I kind of liked it.<sup>17</sup> I do not let myself sit too comfortably in my life or in my art practice. The degree of discomfort from this project is not a healthy or sustainable standard for my creative process; however, without struggle there is no reward. There would not have been shared experiences and new conversations if I was not the first to expose myself. I would not have unlocked newly sensitive relationships with my friends if I hadn't lathered them with grease.

*Simply Butter (one pat at a time)* left me curious of the sensorial potential of my work and how the participant's body further engages with works that rely upon another being's involvement. I wonder how various materials and substances can merge bodies to create new entities, like with the private lathering sessions, but in a more public way. Participants could merge through a work that provides a secluded interior space. Concurrently, this orchestrated connection has the potential to arouse differing perspectives from external witnesses. Perhaps the observed would oppose that which is experienced. I also wonder how I can further utilize sound, tactile, and visual immersion to heighten the types of intimate interactions from this project or in new ones. The lathering session was the only action that walked on the line of sexual intimacy, and it sparked excitement to lean back into this side of my practice. My previous work, related to childhood; gender; sexuality issues; and playfully grotesque motifs or innuendos (i.e. tongues, oral fixations, and food), is often visually vibrant and humorous. This project could not totally and authentically be as flamboyant nor funny given the circumstances. But as time shifts, my wounds begin to be licked and my silliness rekindled. I slowly move forward with a newfound desire for mischief in performance, situation-making, and boundary-pushing; and perhaps my audience will respond to this in the way I anticipate, or—even better—reveal something I never could imagine.

*Additional documentation is available on YouTube at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nVZNaZb95dY>*

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17. David Marchese, "Marina Abramović Thinks the Pain of Love is Hell of Earth," *The New York Times Magazine*, talk from October 26, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2023/10/29/magazine/marina-abramovic-interview.html>.



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