MAYBE SHE'S BORN WITH IT, MAYBE IT'S NEURODIVERGENCY

A thesis submitted to the College of the Arts
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Master of Fine Arts

by Brittany Gorelick May 2023

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INTRODUCTION

Maybe She's Born With It, Maybe It's Neurodivergency (fig. 1) is an homage to my lived experience as a Queer-Neurodivergent individual navigating a world that was not made for me. It challenges the hegemonic notion of 'normalcy' and opens up a dialogue about the oppressive structures that we live within and are confined by. I impart the meaning of the grid as a symbol for neurotypicality, white supremacy, heteronormativity, and patriarchy. Alongside the grid is a hieroglyph of my own creation, a tight yet explosive gestural mark, a visual metaphor for my neurodivergent physical, mental and emotional discomfort. Combining these seemingly oppositional forms, I disrupt the grid visually and physically through a variety of print and papermaking processes.

Through an interactive installation, the work calls attention to the importance of embracing intuition, relinquishing control, and audience participation in contemporary art—providing a platform to challenge the status quo both within the conventional art world and beyond.

TO QUEER OR NOT TO QUEER? THAT IS THE QUESTION

The correlation between neurodiversity and queerness should not be ignored or dismissed. Neurodivergent individuals are three to six times more likely to identify as gender diverse—meaning we identify as transgender, nonbinary or gender queer, than our neurotypical counterparts. In my thesis exhibition, *Maybe She's Born With It, Maybe It's Neurodivergency*, I use an interactive installation of print and papermaking to explore this phenomenon through the context of my own Queer and Neurodivergent identity.

In Dr. Nick Walker's essay *Throw Away The Master's Tools: Liberating Ourselves From The Pathology Paradigm*³, she asserts:

Of the master's tools... the most powerful and insidious is the concept of 'normal people'. In the context of human diversity (ethnic, cultural, sexual, neurological, or any other sort), to treat one particular group as the "normal" or default group inevitably serves to privilege that group and marginalize those who do not belong to that group. ⁴

Because we live in a capitalist, white supremacist, heteronormative, patriarchal society, all of these things are deemed as the default. As contemporary art historians such as David Getsy and Jonathan D. Katz are "Queering" art history, questioning and challenging the art historical cannon by examining it through a Queer lens, the same can be done through a Queer-Neurodivergent lens.

¹ Kallitsounaki and Williams, Differences Between Autistic and Non-Autistic Cisgender and Transgender Adults.

² Maybe She's Born With It, Maybe It's Neurodivergency is a play on the 1991 ad campaign for the makeup company Maybelline Maybe She's Born With It, Maybe It's Maybelline. As with many things in my thesis this is a subtle nod to my own existence, being born in 1991 myself.

³ Dr. Nick Walker, is best known for her work on Neurodiversity and Neuroqueer Theory. Her book, *Neuroqueer Heresies* is a collection of essays written over the span of nearly a decade.

⁴ Walker, Neuroqueer Heresies, 22.

Examining art history with a Queer-Neurodivergent lens does not erase the experiences of cisgender neurodivergent individuals or neurotypical queer individuals, but instead unites the abilities of neurodivergence and queerness to break any expectations of normativity.

The three definitions of queer from Oxford Language are as follows:

- 1. strange; odd.
- 2. denoting or relating to a sexual or gender identity that does not correspond to established ideas of sexuality and gender, especially heterosexual norms.

And the dated/informal definition:

1. spoil or ruin (an agreement, event, or situation).⁵

When considering what Walker refers to as the insidious concept of "normal people", this third definition of queer as a verb of disruption is poignant. Both Queerness and Neurodivergence can challenge hegemony. The societal expectations of Heterosexual Cisgender Neurotypicality are "spoiled" by my Queer-Neurodivergent existence and art practice.

YOU'VE GOT SOME NERVE!

The language surrounding Neurodiversity is relatively new, having been coined and academicized in the last thirty years. The term *Neurodiversity* is often attributed to Judy Singer, an Australian autistic sociologist in the late 1990's; The terms *Neurodivergent* and

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⁵ "Queer Definition - Google Search."

Neurodivergence are credited to Kassiane Asasumasu, a Hapa and Asian-American autistic-rights activist, in 2000.⁶

In a blog post from 2016, Asasumasu reinforces the claim that the term neurodivergent is meant to be inclusive.

Neurodivergent refers to neurologically divergent from typical...Neurodivergent just means a brain that diverges. Autistic people. ADHD people. People with learning disabilities. Epileptic people. People with mental illnesses. People with MS or Parkinson's or apraxia or cerebral palsy or dyspraxia or no specific diagnosis but wonky lateralization or something. That is all it means. It is not another damn tool of exclusion. It is specifically a tool of inclusion.⁷

Walker's essay *Defining Neurodiversity* expands on these ideas, explaining that the prefix, *neuro*,- does not mean brain, which is a common misconception, but *nerve*, referring to the entire nervous system. "Mind is inextricably intertwined with brain, and brain with body; thus, mind is inextricably entwined with body in a single complex system and in a continuous stance of mutual shaping. We're not minds riding around in vehicles of flesh and bone; we are *bodyminds*, bodies that think and perceive." This connection between body and mind, or the experience of the *bodymind* is the basis of the visual language I have created and explored throughout *Maybe She's Born With It*.

MARK-CIA, MARK-CIA, MARK-CIA

⁶ Walker explains Neurodivergence as "a value-neutral term that encompasses any significant divergence from dominant cultural norms of neurocognitive functioning—…" and cites Asasumasu's origination of the term, "Kassiane has repeatedly stated, in public and in private, that she intended the term to be as broadly inclusive as possible."

⁷ Asasumasu, *PSA from the Actual Coiner.*

⁸ Walker, *Neuroqueer Heresies*, 55.

The genesis for *Maybe She's Born With It*, was a single, sporadic mark (fig. 1). It was tight yet explosive; controlled yet gestural. This single movement, a physical and violent mark created by damaging a physical matrix with a blade, became the point of origin for the catalog of matrices I have accumulated. Through experimentation, I scaled this mark down, then repeated the mark over and over again, placing it within a familiar structure— the grid (fig. 2). Through repetition and linear composition, these sporadic marks act as a hieroglyph: a visual expression of feelings, anxiety, or emotional dysregulation that I experience.

When viewed from afar, the small marks making up the larger grid lose their individuality. It is only by examining the work closely that the viewer realizes what appears to be a singular, unassuming pattern is actually made of many individualistic iterations. The iterative nature of the marks acknowledges my neurodivergence as a lifelong experience and creates a mapping of time. Attempting to count the marks would be an arduous task, the overwhelming number of them harkens to the longevity of my lived experience; My neurodivergence is and always will be a part of me, shaping the way I navigate and experience the world.

Mirroring their printed counterparts, my three-dimensional marks are created by recalling how the two-dimensional ones were made on the matrix, but articulated using sewing thread or floral wire, then submerged in paper pulp. The wire used to make these three-dimensional marks are cut in lengths of 5'4", mirroring my height (fig. 3). They are a subtle yet intensional nod to the bodymind. These three dimensional marks possess a tactility; a tangible representation of the intangible—something felt within my body, through the nervous system, and from the mind.

OOPS!... I GRID IT AGAIN

The art critic, Rosalind Krauss, wrote an appropriately titled essay, *Grids*, in 1979, wherein she describes its use as "the armature of …organization." In this essay, Krauss argued that the grid functions in two ways, spatial and temporal. Her understanding of the grid in the spatial sense was that it was "flattened, geometricized, ordered… anti-natural, anti-mimetic, anti-real. [The grid] is what art looks like when it turns its back on nature." Krauss described the temporal use of the grid as "the form that is ubiquitous in the art of *our* century." Grids are a structured, controlled, and analytical system to build off of. Whether in urban planning, graphic design, or geometry, the grid is the basis for order.

My use of the grid is spatial¹² and temporal. Consider the grid as a visual representation of neurotypicality which reflects the structures of the world around us as built for those who conform to a specific (neurotypical, cisgender, heteronormative) mold. This grid holds all the weight that Krauss placed on it as anti-real. These hegemonic structures place undue restrictions on individuals in a society and thereby limit the joy that comes from embracing deviations from that structure. My grid is self imposing. I use it as a map of the unmappable, an attempt to control what can feel uncontrollable, mimicking the undue pressure to conform, but instead breaking away as a neurodivergent queer individual. My grid also relates to literal methods of mapping time. I place my marks within the confines of the grid referencing my own self-regulatory tools such as planners, calendars or scheduled reminders.

⁹ Krauss, *Grids*.

¹⁰ Krauss, *Grids*.

¹¹ Krauss, *Grids*.

¹² Using physical grids such as plastic canvas and handmade paper grids relate back to the "spatial."

I have worked through placing the mark on several iterations of the grid: perfect grids, imperfect grids, and various shifts in scale. I have worked through a variety of print processes, such as intaglio and monoprinting, but the static nature of these traditional matrices did not adequately disrupt the grid.

WHERE HAVE ALL THE MEN GONE?

This installation is largely influenced by the work of Agnes Martin and Yayoi Kusama.

They both represent the marrying of identity and art. Martin is the reference for

Queer-Neurodivergent Abstraction where Kusama represents Neurodivergent Abstraction.

Yoyoi Kusama is a Japanese artist whose work is determined by her Mental Health. In a 1999 interview with Grady T. Turner for *BOMB Artists in Conversation*, Kusama stated:

My art originates from hallucinations only I can see. I translate the hallucinations and obsessional images that plague me into sculptures and paintings. All my works in pastels are the products of obsessional neurosis and are therefore inextricably connected to my disease. I create pieces even when I don't see hallucinations, though. By translating hallucinations and fear of hallucinations into paintings, I have been trying to cure my disease. ¹³

Kusama leans into her compulsions, recreating the same patterns over and over in her work. More specifically she uses dots, a common visual hallucination she experiences. *Obliteration Room* (fig 4.) is an interactive installation wherein the visitors become contributors. The installation began as a series of rooms— the walls, floors and furniture all painted white. The contributors then disrupt the pristine space by placing round stickers, Kusama's dots, on every surface. Over the duration of the exhibition the space transforms the white cube from a

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¹³ Turner, *Kusama*.

neurotypical world to a neurodivergent one. Kusama uses her dots to visually allude to infinity, not just the visual infinity of her hallucinations but also her endless diagnosis, I use my marks in a similar way.

Leaning into the mental compulsion to physically create the same thing over and over again is not just a parallel of printmaking's use of the multiple, but also of Kusamas— and my own compulsion to explore the same mark over and over again. The creation of the monoprint does the same thing. I am using the same source material repetitively, constantly exploring and navigating the ways it changes but also stays the same.

Kusama is one of the few female-identified Minimalist artists to achieve mainstream acclaim along with Agnes Martin. Martin also had visions, and dealt with "recurrent fulminant psychotic illness." Johnathan Katz in his essay *Agnes Martin and the Sexuality of Abstraction* posthumously examined Martin's life and queerness through her art and writing. He claims that her work "is a call to attention and a reminder of alternative existential possibilities... straddling pre-Stonewall repression and modern queer liberation—paradoxically proffered a replete binarism in order to defang the binary: that binary under which she, a lesbian, was contained." ¹⁵

I coexist in similar binaries, straddling the struggles of conformity both from my neurodiversity and queerness. Adversely, my work does not aim to "defang" these structures but instead call attention to them by placing my distorted grids in front of vinyl-cut grids, creating an oppositional hierarchy that is both visual and physical.

¹⁴ Buckley, *Agnes Martin*.

¹⁵ Katz, Sexuality of Abstraction, 12.

Martin would have liked to have considered herself an Abstract Expressionist, despite the Minimalists hailing her as their progenitor¹⁶. To her the making of the mark and the creation of a contemplative space that came from it, was justifiably as important as the end result. She came to paint the grid after coming back from plein-air painting mountains.

... it was just like a straight line. It was a horizontal line. And I thought there wasn't a line that affected me like a horizontal line. Then, I found that the more I drew that line, the happier I got. First I thought it was like the sea . . . then, I thought it was like singing! Well, I just went to town on that horizontal line. But I didn't like it without any verticals. And I thought to myself, there aren't too many verticals I like. But I did put a few in there. Finally, I was putting in almost as many verticals as horizontals. But, I assure you, that after looking at the work of students, they think that artists such as myself are involved with structure. Well, I've been doing those grids for years, but I never thought 'Structure.'

This is where Martin and I deviate on our explorations of the grid. I am specifically using it as a visual symbol of control, confinement, and rigidity. The grid is challenging due to its nature, its rigidity, which works with my desire for control and order. This has led me to introduce Risography into the work.

RISOGRAPHER? I HARDLY KNOW HER

The Risograph is a duplication printer based on the mimeograph, a rudimentary duplication created by forcing ink through a stencil.¹⁸ Riso became an extremely popular

¹⁶ Gruen, Everything is about Feeling

¹⁷ Gruen, Everything is about Feeling.

¹⁸ The Risograph makes a new matrix, called a master, each time it is given new visual information. This visual information comes from a scanner built into the printer. Operators then have the option to translate this visual information into halftone, (dots of various sizes and density used in printing to convey value), continuing to mirror the history of halftone usage by screen printing and offset lithography. The confines of the Riso dictate the printable area dimensions; the masters only go up to a Legal paper size, 8.5" x 14".

commercial printer due to its low cost. However, Riso could not keep up with inkjet and laser printers, and eventually became obsolete and too expensive for commercial use.¹⁹

The Risograph should have died, faded into obscurity for its obsolescence, punished for its inability to continue operating under its intended use, but it survived. Riso printers have been adopted by printmakers due to their relatability to the screen printing process and ability to make multiples. I see the Riso's perseverance and popularity in spite of its perceived obsolescence and inefficiency as a symbol of Queer-Neurodivergent resistance to demands for normative productivity within our hetero-capitalist society.

After printing on Legal and Letter sized cardstock, I then disrupt those confines of scale and commercial convention by visually and physically realigning and conjoining the prints. I break down the borders of the rectangle by cutting the prints apart following the newly disrupted grid, either by hand or mechanically.²⁰

I, along with approximately 50% of individuals diagnosed with ADHD, also have an anxiety disorder. A study from 1999, *Childhood attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder in adults with anxiety disorders*, is still used today and states that "Individuals with anxiety disorders who have comorbid ADHD tend to have more severe anxiety symptoms, earlier age of onset of anxiety, and more frequent additional comorbid psychiatric diagnoses and substance use than those who do not have ADHD."²¹ The mechanically cut prints are made by mapping and then abstracting and repeating an electrocardiogram of a panic attack (fig. 5). This connects the work

¹⁹ Risography was developed out of necessity. Following World War II, Japan imposed large tariffs on goods imported from outside the country, which made access to commercial inks and printers costly. In 1954, Japanese inventor, Noboru Hayama, developed Riso Ink, Japan's first emulsion ink, and he eventually founded Riso as a commercial printing company. In 1980, Hamaya released The Risograph.

²⁰ Martin is quoted saying "When I cover [a] square surface with rectangles, it lightens the weight of the square, destroys its power." By removing the confines of the rectangle I too am destroying its power.

²¹ Mancini et al., Childhood Attention Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder in Adults with Anxiety Disorders.

back into the experience of the bodymind, using the ECG as a visual map of my experience, depicting the discomfort and physical symptoms of a panic attack and making them tangible to the viewer.

Riso also mediates my practice due to its limited color palette. Each color of ink requires an individual drum that must be manually replaced depending on what color you decide to print. The colors used in *Maybe She's Born With It* are Black, Seafoam Green, Fluorescent Pink and Yellow. The Seafoam mirrors the blue-green I have used in my traditional print processes. This specific hue is biographical, as it was the color of my hair for five years, and I adapted the color into my work during that time. It had become an unconscious, default color choice that I am now reclaiming with intention. Black is used to connect to the color of paper pulp I have submerged string grids and tangible marks into. The inclusion of Fluorescent Pink and Yellow references the colors of Highlighters, another office tool used alongside planners and calendars to draw attention to dates and events of significance.

I view the Risograph's scanner as an opportunity to disrupt, queer and neurodiversity the grid. By physically removing, shaking, or moving what is being scanned, I introduce a visual distortion of the grid and metaphorical destruction of hegemony.²² Allowing the gridded marks to be disrupted in the master making process "ruins" the organized structure that they are confined by.²³ This remediation of the grid through disrupted processes construct a visual metaphor of the breaking of expectations and conventions; the marks are instances of my experience of living a

²² Scanners work by moving a light across whatever object or document is placed upon its surface, reflecting that light through a series of mirrors and lenses, so by moving the material parts are scanned more times or not at all, thereby differentiating and further removing the printed image from its source.

²³ Furthermore, since each master is discarded after each use, the prints from those masters can never be duplicated identically.

Queer-Neurodivergent life and the distorted mapping of those marks is representative of my attempt to navigate a Neurotypical world.

In my practice I disrupt the traditional uses of the Risograph, by interrupting the scanning process and using this commercial tool as a method of creating art, my work mirrors

Neurodivergency's ability to mediate, but not imitate or replicate Neurotypicality.²⁴

BETTER CALL SOL

Maybe She's Born With It is appropriating while simultaneously opposing a multitude of ideas, including Sol LeWitt's definition of what conceptual art is or should be, the visual language of Minimalism, the 'action' of Abstract Expressionism and the automatism of Surrealism.

In Sol LeWitt's 1928 essay *Paragraphs on Conceptual Art*, he breaks down what he considers to be conceptual art's most important aspects.²⁵ LeWitt claims that "[conceptual] art is not theoretical or illustrative of theories; it is intuitive, it is involved with all types of mental processes and it is purposeless. It is usually free from the dependence on the skill of the artist as a craftsman."²⁶ In *Maybe She's Born With It*, while my work is definitely intuitive, it goes beyond just being involved with my own mental processes— my mental process defines the work itself. I have amassed a catalog of prints, handmade paper grids and matrices, without which the source imagery for *Maybe She's Born With It* would not exist.

²⁴ A tool that had a commercial role assigned to it by society but found new purpose in art-making after it was discarded by that society.

²⁵ Sol LeWitt is a Conceptual and Minimalist artist known for his Wall Drawings, artworks that he conceived and then sold the instructions to. LeWitt = the wall/installation. He has others make his work for him with clear instructions where mine are vague.

²⁶ LeWitt, *Paragraphs on Conceptual Art*, 846-847.

LeWitt goes on to say "When an artist uses a multiple modular method he usually chooses a simple and readily available form... Using complex basic forms only disrupts the unity of the whole. Using a simple form, repeatedly narrows the field of work and concentrates the intensity to the arrangement of the form." While my matrices are minimalist in nature, small forms on a simple grid, I am now specifically using complex forms to create a unified environment, one I do not believe loses its intensity by being the sum of many parts.

In Carl Jung's last published work, *Man and His Symbols*, Jung creates the distinction between signs and symbols. Surrealists (such as Hilma af Klint and André Masson) were using automatic drawing in their work. Shane Eynon summarized Jung's definition of the symbol as "... the primary method of communication for the unconscious, and indeed for the entire psyche." Jung asserted that finding the symbol can be done through the act of automatic drawing, or allowing the subconscious mind to be the driver of the work. Therefore, we can assign the importance of Jung's symbol to my mark, the origin point of *Maybe She's Born With It*.

In Abstract Expressionism, or Action Painting, the physical motion of the artist is paramount. The way the paint is applied, and the bodily actions performed in order to create a painting, are just as—if not moreso, important than the end result. My practice is abstract expressionist in nature due to the importance of physicality behind the creation of each individual mark. This is then pushed further by the embodied actions taken to distort the grid as it is being scanned.

²⁷ LeWitt, Paragraphs on Conceptual Art, 847.

²⁸ Farah, Man and His Symbols in 2017.

PUT 'EM TOGETHER AND WHAT HAVE YOU GOT?

Maybe She's Born With It, Maybe It's Neurodivergency is the sum of all these parts.

Where Martin and I disagree on the analogy of the grid as structure, I agree with her assertion that, "the making of something is not just construction. it's all about feeling . . . everything, everything is about feeling . . . feeling and recognition!" Maybe She's Born With It relies on feeling and intuition as motivation. The creation of my mark relies on a physical but subconscious intuition, harkening back to the Abstract Expressionists and Surrealists. My use of the Riso Printer is dependent on the intuitive movement used during the scanning process, as well as instinctive decisions made on how to layer prints atop each other. The seafoam color ties me to the work emotionally, while the specific measurement of wire, 5'4", ties me to the work physically.

Beyond the parallel of taking feelings and symptoms felt within the bodymind and visually expressing them, intuition also drives the installation process itself. Compositional planning is minimal; how the pieces should be arranged, in what order and to what degree do they overlap is all based on intuition and a desire for control.

I am constantly navigating my own neurodivergence through control. Attempting to conform to neurotypical expectations by gauging the right amount of eye contact, overplanning to compensate for my time blindness, taking medication (fig. 7), controlling my tendency to interrupt others— the list goes on. It is due to this overwhelming desire for an unattainable perfection that I have specifically chosen to include audience interaction with my installation. Two of the gallery walls are fully installed by me (fig. 8), guided by my aforementioned intuition. A third wall is only partially installed, with an assortment of different prints available

²⁹ Gruen, Everything is about Feeling.

for the viewers to add to the conglomeration. Minimal instructions are provided (fig. 9), leaving a myriad of possibilities. They may follow the visual language that I have demonstrated or they may deviate completely (fig. 10). They may place prints on the "completed" installation walls (fig. 11), and they may even go so far as to destroy or take a print home with them; This is out of my control.

Giving this freedom over to the viewer/collaborator serves two purposes. First, it breaks the hegemonic(re: neurotypical) tradition of the White Cube. The long-established gallery and museum etiquette dictating that you do not touch the artwork is disrupted. Second, it relinquishes my own control over the work. Control is entrenched in almost every aspect of my making and assembling process. The fortuitous nature of the monoprint process is the only action that allows me to relinquish that control. I am actively choosing to parallel that release by imparting collaborative freedom upon the viewer.

White Supremacy, Heteronormativity, Patriarchy and Neurotypicality are all structures of violence that deserve to be deconstructed and corrupted. *Maybe She's Born With It, Maybe It's Neurodivergency* invites the audience to interpret the ways harmful systems of control affect us through their disruption of my own "grid", my installation.



Figure 1
Brittany Gorelick

Maybe She's Born With It, Maybe It's Neurodivergency 2023
Site Reactive Collaborative Installation
Kent State University Art Gallery, Kent, OH

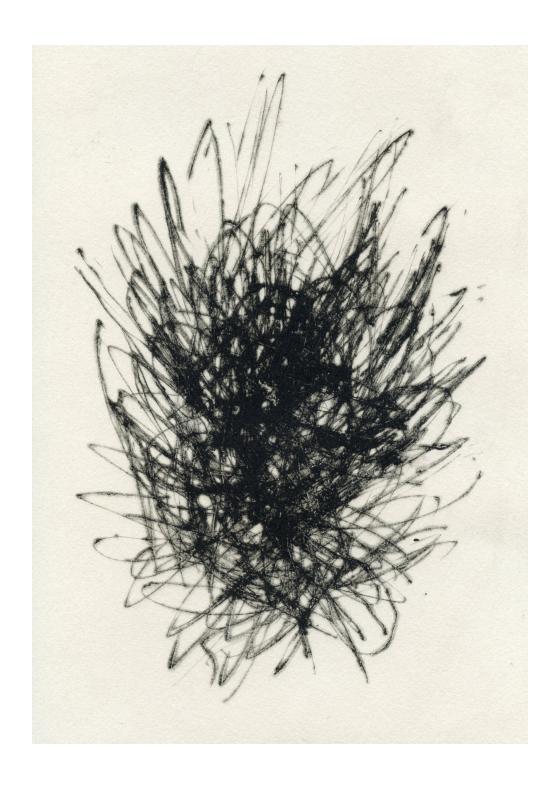
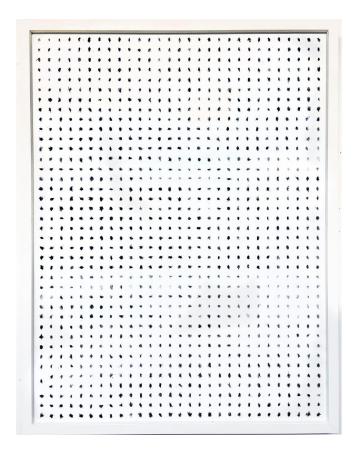
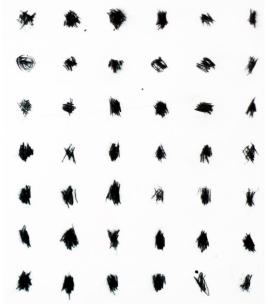


Figure 2
Brittany Gorelick
Origin
2021
Drypoint Etching on Rives BFK





Close Up

Figure 3
Brittany Gorelick
Anxiety Grid and closeup
2021
Drypoint Etching on Rives BFK

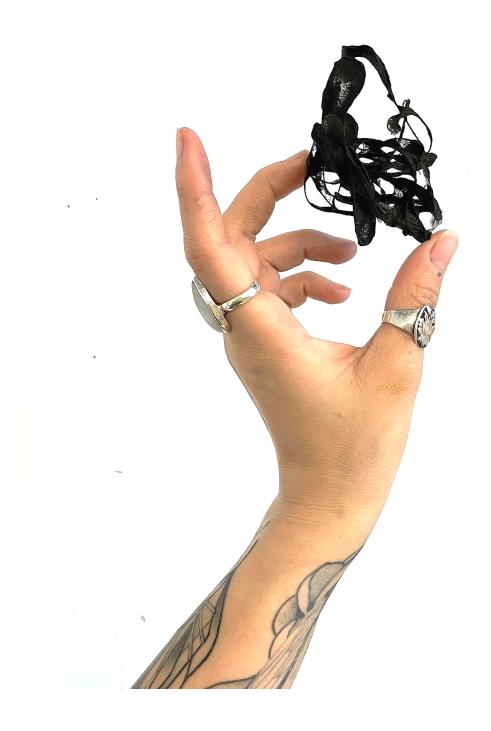


Figure 4
Brittany Gorelick
Single Wire Grid
2022
5'4" wire submerged in paper pulp



Figure 5
Yayoi Kusama
The Obliteration Room
2002
Interactive Installation
Tate Modern, UK

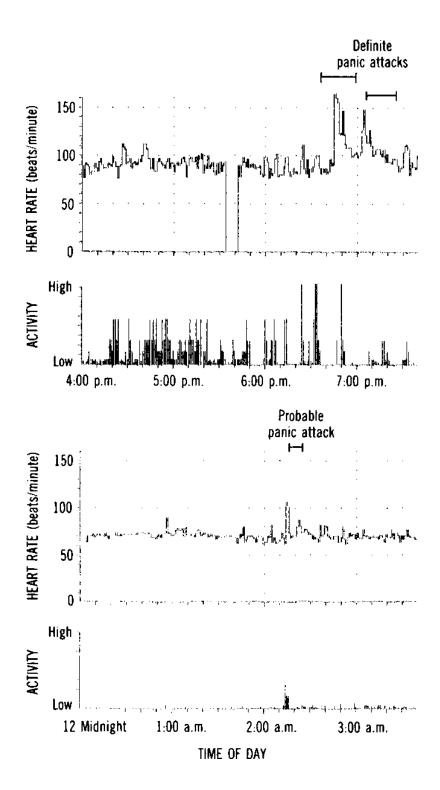


Figure 6
Results from Ambulatory Heart Rate Changes in Patients with Panic Attacks 1986

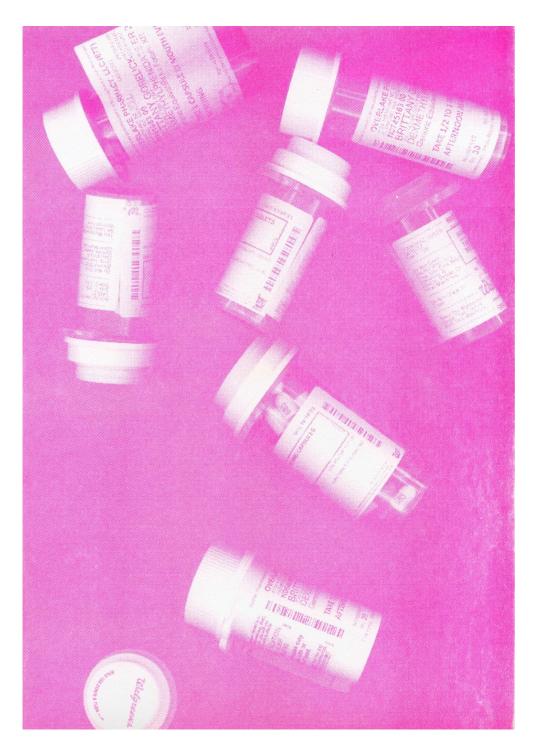


Figure 7
Brittany Gorelick *Medication*2023

Risograph of artists medication, the only un-distorted image in the installation



Figure 8
Brittany Gorelick
Maybe She's Born With It (pre interaction)
2023
Site Reactive Installation
Kent State University Art Gallery, Kent, OH



Figure 9
Brittany Gorelick
Maybe She's Born With It (instructions)
2023

Collaborator Interaction instructions for Installation with reservoir of prints Kent State University Art Gallery, Kent, OH





Figure 10 Brittany Gorelick Maybe She's Born With It (collaborator obstruction) 2023

Collaborator hung prints on the wall of gallery (left) and off rafters (right). These prints demonstrate the deviation from my own visual language including placing teh distorted grids on the ground, vertical as opposed to horizontal, and in the air.

Kent State University Art Gallery, Kent, OH



Figure 11
Brittany Gorelick
Maybe She's Born With It (corner)
2023

Site Reactive Installation pre interraction (left) and post collaborator interaction (right). The collaborators added a multitude of prints both interacting with and obstructing my original install. In particular the collaborators bridged the gap from one wall to another where I intentionally did the opposite. Curiously, the collaborators disproportionately placed prints vertically or angled as opposed to horizontal.

Kent State University Art Gallery, Kent, OH

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