

**Sometimes the most
beautiful thing is the
thing standing right in
front of you.**

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This is an evolving exploration of the allure of the VHS tape in the digital era, and the people who love them, most especially my partner of 19 years who is hoarding about 2,000 tapes in our basement.

This is also a meditation on being present while honoring the past, and definitely, *definitely* not worrying about the future.

I've been calling this project a spontaneous process-based work. A performance, even, that is ever-unfolding. It isn't finished, and in fact, it feels like it's just getting started. It's writing its story now, as you and I participate.

What follows are excerpted notes from the process.

MAY 1, 2024

I was a very work-focused person for all of my adult life, one could say a workaholic. In all of this time, I sacrificed my relationships in favor of paid work. My dad tells me there is a long legacy of this in our family. Not one of us ever had a job that was particularly fancy, but we have an innate sense of duty, and maybe we like the control we have over our work that we don't find in human relationships. That's just a guess. I know for sure that capitalist values have encouraged this tendency, and White feminism played a role in my feeling like professional success was what would make me a strong woman.

I came back to artmaking in 2019 out of a desperate need for stress relief, and to reconnect with myself and the world and people around me. I quit my stressful nonprofit job in the summer of 2023 in order to focus on school full time, and I'm currently reimagining my life.

DECEMBER 30, 2023

I'm finally old enough to realize that my first-draft ideas about life's essential truths were either incorrect or dramatically insufficient.

I'm starting over, from scratch. I know that I've learned a few things, but mostly it seems that I know nothing at all.

MARCH 18, 2024

This project started with an inexplicable urge to make clamshell boxes. Without much thought, I grabbed a couple of VHS tapes from my basement, aware of the irony in creating an archival box for an object that most people see as useless. An object that I, perhaps, thought was useless.

These tapes are collected by my partner Kevin, who has not counted the tapes in full, but he estimates he has about 2,000. They live half on disorganized shelves and half haphazardly in boxes, where they have been mostly neglected for the past 10 years. They live in every corner of our basement, and some have wormed their way upstairs. The tapes include mainstream films acquired for cheap or free; TV shows obsessively recorded onto blank tapes by people we've never met; and educational programming discarded by Portland Public Schools.

The tapes have served as a wedge for nearly the entire length of our 19-year partnership, as I was forced to help shlep them through several moves, when Kevin kept them in his studio. Once they came to our home, they became my roommates.

Ultimately, I decided that this would be an art project for Kevin and me first, and I would find ways to let others into it.

The central research question would be:

In this era of rediscovery and increased agency over my own time, I've come to ask myself: how can I be more present for myself, my partner, and my community?

The success of the project would be determined by my ability to stay close to this question, more than anything I might share publicly.

SOME INITIAL QUESTIONS EMBEDDED IN THIS PROJECT (AND LIFE):

- Why do we value the objects we value?
- What makes an object valuable enough to keep and store in one's home?
- Why do people collect things?
- (How) Is physical stuff a metaphor for "stuff"?
- What does it mean to commingle possessions in a shared space?
- What does it mean to accommodate someone else's baggage?
- What does it mean, or look like, to honor someone else's objects?
- How does it feel when someone else honors your objects?
- My hands want to make boxes, but is that what Kevin wants?
- How does Kevin want to archive the tapes?
- By putting his tapes into boxes, am I honoring or controlling the tapes? Is it possible to do both?
- What does it mean to be helpful to someone else? How do you know if you're helpful?
- What does it mean to be a partner to someone through the greatest possible mundanity of life?
- What is the purpose of partnership, particularly when there are no children involved? Where does love fit into it?
- What is the role of home in my life, and where does the basement fit into that, as a neglected space of chaotic storage?
- When must the pursuit of my own needs be tempered by the needs of others?
- How can I rise above the desire for self-sufficiency and embrace interdependence?
- What does it mean for me to quit my paid job and to replace that time with personally elected unpaid domestic labor? What is the difference between work you're paid to do, and work you choose to do?
- What does it mean for me to make objects for fun that I could never sell for a price that represents the time and skill it took to make?
- What is the inherent value of work? Can labor heal?
- How does moving my hands engage my intuition and brain?
- Is the success of my time determined by output?
- Is my human worth reduced to the quantity (or quality) of work I produce?
- What is the value of wasting time?
- How do I make time for contemplation?
- Can I move slowly and still survive in this world?
- What and when is *enough*?

JANUARY 7, 2024

Kevin and I went to the Brooklyn Park Pub last night to check in about the project and have burgers.

We talked mostly about why he likes the VHS tapes. It was a slow conversation because he actually hasn't analyzed it very carefully, but I learned that the blank tapes with recordings from TV are his favorites. He likes old commercials and local news reports. He likes thinking about the people who made the recordings. Through a snakey path, he started talking about growing up in Connecticut, he told me some really happy stories about his dad that were new to me. It was moving to learn something about Kevin's life that I didn't already know; I thought for sure I had heard all his stories.

It then became a conversation about how much happier I have been since I quit my job, and we talked a lot about the future. We talked about what it looks like for me to be present with him, and while I don't think we finished that conversation, but we made a good start; and he was charmed by the question.

I am starting to see how this project may reveal much more insight than coming to understand the tapes.

MARCH 1, 2024

This is an analysis of my studio practice submitted for my Theory of the Object class in connection to class readings.

When I say that I am researching life as performance, I now know that I mean this in the Adrian Piper sense. That is, Adrian Piper when she performs the most mundane everyday activities that "couldn't have interest or impact for anyone besides me," as she writes. I channel Piper when she chooses to investigate "the artistic possibilities of being itself."¹ Like her, I am also engaging in performance as a container for intentional investigation of daily life, to explore my relations with other beings in my environment, and self-consciously documenting the process. This is a project with a structured beginning and end, led by clear questions, and conducted during a defined timeframe. I know that this inquiry won't ever end, but it will eventually become folded into the non-documented and probably less intentional aspects of my day-to-day.

In this case, the performance is the process of understanding. I don't yet have many conclusions to draw, but I make this writing part of the performance in order to examine how

¹Adrian Piper, "Talking to Myself: The Ongoing Autobiography of an Art Object, 1970-7," in *The Object*, ed. Anthony Hudek (London: Whitechapel Gallery, 2014), 32.

object theorists are impacting my thinking and shine light on my existing questions.

I'm calling my thesis a durational and improvisational performance. It began as a desire to make any kind of sense of the 2,000 VHS tapes maniacally collected and haphazardly stored in my basement by my partner, Kevin. This investigation began in the fall when I had an inexplicable desire to construct clamshell boxes, and I made an intuitive decision to make boxes to protect and store the tapes, without fully knowing why. Since that time, I've been creating these boxes with the understanding that they are a means to honor and connect with the physicality of the tapes and, by extension, to honor Kevin and the entirety of what he brings to our relationship. Part of the performance, here, is the construction of the boxes. Another part is the communication between Kevin and me, which is generated or mediated by the objects under investigation. We set aside time each week to discuss and review the tapes, so I can learn what he loves about them, and how he wants to preserve and share them with the public. We have been exploring the tapes as objects, as well as the media content housed within the tapes. I'm keeping a journal to document the actions and conversations and changes in my thinking.

In Adrian Piper's performance, the object is

no longer the intermediary between herself as subject and the environment. She simply removes the need for the object; and she *becomes* the object, That makes it easier to understand her impact. Here's how she describes it:

"As an artist separate from my art I saw the effect of my existence in the existence of the work: The work changed the world for me by adding something new that wasn't there before. Thus in the existence of the work, I saw my effect on the world at large. But now I become identical with the artwork, and the sequence is shortened; as an art object, I want simply to look outside myself and see the effect of my existence on the world at large, rather than first in another, secondary object."²

Like Piper, may be objectifying myself and my relationship in this work; but unlike her, I continue to incorporate other allied objects, with which I am building an intimate relationship and understanding of.

I believe I am melding with the objects in my performance, rather than replacing them. At times, we are part of the same cast of characters that create a full dialogue; at other times, our material is melding, and we become indistinguishable from one another.

Media scholar Kevin Chabot writes that the VHS tape is inherently an impermanent

² Adrian Piper, "Talking to Myself," 32.

means of media storage, which means that we're now in a race against time to determine how, or whether, we need to rescue the content on those magnetic tapes before it vanishes.³ Mainstream movies from major studios are already preserved and stored. It's the more minor content that is in question: the Reagan-era commercials, the regional news broadcasts, the B-movies that never had a theatrical release. And yet, he says, It is also a matter of debate—amongst those who think about these things—whether the content is actually getting better and aesthetically more interesting as it degrades. Maybe there is no saving needed; maybe we are actually all together on a beautiful joyous ride of natural decomposition.

I was born in 1981, and it has occurred to me that I am between 4 and 15 years older than the VHS cassettes I am learning about. We are aging in unison, and as these magnetic tapes erode, so does my own body. As the footage develops increased visual noise over time, detritus has also presented itself inside me. Many medical professionals track my insides every six months through mammograms and breast ultrasounds, and MRIs, which determine whether this detritus is destructive, whether it is changing or growing. This matter feels out-of-place but I am told it's the nat-

³ Kevin Chabot, "Tape: Videographic Ruin and the Lure of the Tangible," *Quarterly Review of Film and Video* 39, no. 2 (November 2020): 442-62.

ural result of excess estrogen. Some of this organic junk was surgically removed in September—in an abundance of caution, just in case—but Chabot makes me wonder whether it belongs inside my body for the purpose of my own beautiful degradation.

As the tapes become worn, so do my knees; they click just like an old cassette when I walk down stairs and when I lower myself into a Warrior II. As the magnetic tapes decompose, so do my teeth and gums, and the dentist tells me they need immediate attention and probably multiple surgeries. The dental work is expensive and I am a full-time student, so we are in our own race against time as we prioritize the most urgent work and put off the rest. Is my own material degradation at once both visual noise and also beauty? To what extent do I allow myself to decompose without intervention, knowing that my unraveling has its own aesthetic value?

Chabot also writes that the physicality of the tapes is much of their appeal in the digital era. A VHS tape, he says, can become an extension of the body. I make boxes to hold and protect the tapes; each one takes at least four hours to create. I must cut the boards precisely, making two trays each and a cover, carefully assembling the boards into three dimensions, covering them with cloth, ensuring perfect alignment, as there isn't much

room for error. The level of care and attention required, and cooperation from the materials, is at a peak. In this work, where do my hands end, my tools end, the board and cloth end? The answer, I think, is that we are one and the same.

In her book *Vibrant Matter*, Jane Bennett tells us with great exuberance and optimism that we must more fully honor the basic material that creates us all – subject and object alike – and understand that this matter puts us all in close relation with one another. She writes:

“Each human is a heterogeneous compound of wonderfully vibrant, dangerously vibrant, matter. If matter itself is lively, then not only is the difference between subjects and objects minimized, but the status of the shared materiality of all things is elevated. All bodies become more than mere objects.”⁴

I take this to heart: we are all just atoms in different configurations. A collision of matter that causes varied reactions over time. I have scoffed at these tapes for so many years, but who is to say that my atoms are any different or better than theirs?

In my work, subject becomes object and object becomes subject, and back again, toggling on and off constantly. We are both

⁴ Jane Bennett, “Vibrant Matter, 2010,” in *The Object*, ed. Anthony Hudek (London: Whitechapel Gallery, 2014), 40.

one and apart from each other, depending on the moment. Thus, all beings must operate with mutual respect, influencing each other in constructive ways. Like Bennett says, all parts of the network must work carefully together or the entire system is at risk.

Looking more deeply at this subject-object relationship, psychoanalyst D.W. Winnicott writes that objects carry us from one stage of development to another. We first come to identify with the objects, and in learning to use them—to engage with them directly—we must accept that they are outside our control. As we use them, we also destroy them. Through the degradation of the object, it becomes autonomous. Here are his words:

“From now on the subject says: ‘Hello object!’ ‘I destroyed you’, ‘I love you.’ ‘You have value for me because of your survival of my destruction of you.’ ‘While I am loving you I am all the time destroying you in (unconscious) fantasy.’ Here fantasy begins for the individual. The subject can now use the object that has survived....In these ways the object develops its own autonomy and life, and (if it survives) contributes-in to the subject, according to its own properties.

“In other words, because of the survival of the object, the subject may now have started to live a life in the world of objects, and so the subject stands to gain immeasurably....”⁵

⁵ D.W. Winnicott, “The Use of an Object and Relating Through Identification, 1968,” in *The Object*, ed. Anthony Hudek (London: Whitechapel Gallery, 2014), 94.

In their life outside my grasp, my beloved objects do become autonomous, and I do “gain immeasurably” from this. As I explore the tapes, they increasingly become pulsing entities with their own energy and capacity to change, and ability to impact the other beings around them. As I create the boxes for the tapes, in turn, they are creating me. I am evolving rapidly, moving into and accepting middle age. With all this attention that I direct toward my objects, I am learning how to express unlimited care, learning to be concerned with things that I thought were unlovable. By reviewing the vast and varied content on the tapes, I am discovering how to notice, how to listen, how to find beauty in the most unlikely places. In the way Bennett would want, multi-directional respect and attention is what’s called for, to honor the mutual energy and agency of all beings in the equation, and to continue this act of exchange.

BOX MAKING LOG, JANUARY - APRIL 2024*

Date	Location	Hours + work
1/30	Print Studio	2-3 hours? Cutting board
1/31	Print Studio	3 hours? Cutting board for trays
2/1	Glass + Print	2 hours? Task not recorded
2/3	Glass studio	3 hours Covered trays with cloth
2/5	?	4 hours?
2/6	Glass	2 hours
2/10	Glass	3 hours Covered trays
2/11	Glass Studio	2 hours Cut cover boards and cloth, made sample cover, glued cloth on tray edges
2/12	Print	1.5 hours? Experimenting with foil stamping
2/13	Glass	0.5 hr Finished prototype
2/18	Print + Glass	8 hours Cut board, made a box and filmed the making
2/20	Glass	<i>No time recorded</i> Cut cloth for 8 more boxes
2/25	Print + Glass	6 hours Cutting trays, covering with cloth, cutting more boards

* I feel certain that this log is incomplete, based on my memory of when I did certain things, and also because I keep finding hours recorded in different places, so I clearly had multiple places where I kept this info. As I do.

Date	Location	Hours + work
2/28	Print	<i>No time recorded</i> Made test prints, cut boards
3/2	Glass?	2 hours Made trays
3/3	Glass + Print	8 hours Glued trays and cut more boards
3/4	Glass	2.5 hours Glued trays
3/6	Glass + Print	3 hours? Cut boards, cut cloth
3/7	Glass	2 hours
3/10	Glass	3 hours - Shot video while I made one box, plus made covers and tray beds for 3 more boxes
3/13	Glass + Print	5 hours? Cutting cover boards and insets, covered tray beds, added covers to 5 boxes
3/19	Glass	1 hour Cutting cloth for the rest of the covers
3/24	Print + Glass	5 hours Cut board, covered trays with cloth
3/25	Glass	<i>No time recorded</i> Covered 4 trays with cloth
3/26	Print + Glass	7 hours Cut board, covered 6 trays with cloth
3/28	Glass	1.5 hours Covered two trays with cloth

Date	Location	Hours + work
3/31	Glass	7 hours Covered trays
4/2	Glass + Print	6 hours? Cut boards, covered trays
4/9	Glass	5 hours Made box covers, glued on trays
4/11	Print	2 hours? Testing new foil stamper
4/16	Print	4 hours Made labels for four boxes
4/18	Print	4.5 hours Made labels for six boxes
4/20	Print	4 hours? Made labels for five boxes
4/22	Glass	1.5 hours? Trimmed and pasted labels
4/23	Glass	1 hour? Trimmed and pasted labels, finished spines
4/24	Print	1 hour? Trimmed labels
4/25	Glass	1 hour? Glued front labels
4/29	Print	2.5 hours-ish Printed labels for three boxes
4/30	Print	4.5 hours? Printed labels for five boxes, plus replacements, plus exhibition labels, some trimming
4/30	Expensify	1 hour? Glued labels onto boxes
5/1	Expensify	1 hour? Glued labels onto boxes

FEBRUARY 21, 2024

Kevin and I looked at some VHS footage together tonight. He digitized a tape from his Portland Public Schools collection, a health class video called "Loneliness," featuring teenagers talking about their own struggles with isolation.

We pulled some stills from this video, places where the frame transitioned from one face to another. We couldn't believe the images manifesting before us, miraculous with their vibrant colors and ambiguity of form. The capture of adolescent uncertainty in the midst of growth and change. It feels like this whole project is starting to get *real*.

Kevin explained that *this* is exactly the appeal of the tapes, digging through the content – much of it absurd and/or forgettable – mining for incredible and brief moments of beauty.



DECEMBER 30, 2023

At some point after many years, I think that family members just stop listening to each other. I'm thinking mostly here about parents and siblings and other close relatives, as well as long-term partners and spouses. But I have seen this happen with friends and close co-workers.

This may occur on one level because we take each other for granted, these people that we are tied to in formal and seemingly inextricable ways.

We have also spent so much time together that we think we know how the other will react in most any situation. We don't actively listen, as we would to someone we're first building a relationship with, we're simply looking for confirmation of the expected response.

This makes it hard to communicate on the most basic levels, and it also eliminates the possibility for change or surprise. It keeps the people closest to us stagnant in our own minds, when they may, in fact, be evolving rapidly. Or perhaps we never heard them in the first place because *really listening* to another person is one of the hardest things one can do.

MAY 1, 2024

One result of this project is that I am seeing Kevin's creativity in a way I haven't in a long time, or maybe I have never quite seen it in this way. I unfairly tend to relegate his artwork to the realm of playing around with humor and irony, playing to the crowd, wanting to make his friends laugh. But the reality is that his artistic sensibilities have always had a lot of emotional depth and poetry, and I haven't allowed due space in my mind for that.

On top of this, I have realized that all of the life challenges I'm trying to focus on right now are Kevin's areas of greatest strength. Being vulnerable enough to be totally open to another human, maintaining the flexibility to show up for someone when it's not easy or convenient, devotion to his own learning and exploration of personal curiosities, worrying so much less about having tangible output to attach to his time. Paying close attention to his environment.

Not only do I understand the appeal of the tapes so much better than I did before, I feel like I'm seeing and hearing Kevin in a new way, after 19 years. He isn't the one who changed, it was me who is it me who is learning how to pay attention.

FEBRUARY 1, 2022

This is a writing fragment submitted for my Creative Nonfiction class.

I'll clean that mess later, when I want to. And secretly, I have no plans to do it at all. I need those tragically ripped blue jeans, I'll probably never mend them. I need the brown foot-prints and the dust I'll never sweep away. The emails I'll never reply to. I need the mistakes I've made. The glimmering opportunities I've missed, my lack of preparation. The uncertain reactions and unforeseen outcomes.

I worship my slowly rising tower of paper-work. I won't read any of it. I'll simply watch as it grows higher and higher and the towers multiply, creating their own tiny universe. This alternate portal will be filled with soaring skyscrapers and streets, all made of white paper and black ink. We can walk amongst these structures, tenuous and sturdy like a heron's long legs.

The ground will crinkle with each step. We'll discover ourselves here, and I'm certain this reality will contain answers to all of our life's questions if only I can let it grow as it was destined to. How can I keep this mess from living its full potential?

I sit at the soft, silty riverbank and dip my

hands deep into the warm gray mud. I knead and smooch it between my fingers. As I breathe into the wet clay-sand, my rings become caked, my arms stained brown. No one can dampen my enthusiasm as I get up to my elbows in fresh nature and intuition and all of the delicious possibility of ambiguity.

I sit on the bank, wishing for exuberance, for texture. Wishing for metaphor. Wanting to play with words and sounds and images. Wanting to trust despite all red flags. Ready to learn all about my own guts.

I revel in the discovery of the mess, and it cannot be held down or held back. From rubble comes possibility and surprise, and then wonder and triumph.

Every time my heart has been broken, it has regenerated itself anew.

Get the full version of this zine by signing up for a casual 30-minute 1-on-1 conversation with Rebecca in May at Expensify to talk about the process and intention behind this project, and to screen tapes. Sign up here:



Learn more about this project at rgbbb.com/portfolio/sometimes or on Instagram @rgburrell