Transitional spaces: Investigating the role of collaborative art practice in generating self-representational genderqueer narratives

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Bachelor of Art & Design (Honours) (First Class)

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

ABSTRACT

The aim of this research is to consider the role that collaborative arts practice can have in supporting the development of self-representational genderqueer narratives. Stemming from Bornstein's (1994) assertion that genderqueer people experience misrepresentation and invisibility in popular culture and historical records, this project proposes that the development of self-representational genderqueer narratives is an ethical way of developing accounts of genderqueer identity. This research investigates how working alongside other genderqueer creative practitioners can enhance creative practice, reduce anxiety related to public exhibition, and empower the individual through community. Grounded in action-based research (cycles of reflection in action), this project culminated in a public exhibition, a focus group with the artists involved, and an exegetical statement addressing the research question: "How can collaborative arts practice be effectively used to support the generation of self-representational genderqueer narratives?"

INTRODUCTION

This practice lead research project investigates the role that collaborative arts practice has in supporting the generation of collective self-representational genderqueer narratives. This work builds on my honours exegesis "Self-representational narrative as a means of exploring genderqueer identity" (McArdle 2013).

The thesis is divided into two parts: The written exegesis (20%) and the collaborative art project that supported and informed the development of five sculptures, entitled 'Skin/Shell' (80%). This exegesis is divided into three chapters: In chapter one I evaluate the theoretical and contextual frameworks of this project, including contemporary genderqueer identity, the misrepresentation and invisibility of genderqueer people, self-representational narrative, collaborative arts practice, and collective genderqueer identity. In chapter two I explain my research design and methodology, including the recruitment of my research whānau, the collaboative project, and reflective practice. In chapter three I explain my focus group methodology, and draw together the research findings through a discussion of the project development, the collaborative exhibition, and the findings from the focus group.

In this document I have used gender-neutral pronouns (unless specified within a quotation) as part of my commitment to an inclusive research practice.

POSITIONING STATEMENT

I am grounded in this project as a Pākehā genderqueer person of Celtic heritage living in Auckland, New Zealand. I prefer gender neutral pronouns and I legally changed my name by statutory declaration to 'Aych', a nickname my family have called me since I was young.

These statements of identity are familiar to me and are a framing narrative that I tell in spaces where I can share stories of the way that I see and inhabit the world.

I see parts of this narrative represented in the public sphere of popular culture and in accounts of history but it is the most private of these sites - of identity, my gender, - that I rarely see reflected in public narratives. Culture, history, religion, class, language, and space are all gendered experiences. Or should I say, *normatively* gendered experiences.

This tension between what is seen, what is unseen, and what is misrepresented is a site of confusion and frustration for many minority identities. Genderqueer identity is often experienced as a minority within a minority - that is to say a minority group sitting under the LGBTI (Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Intersex) umbrella. Within rainbow spaces, Bornstien (1994) identifies that genderqueer people are often misrepresented and invisible. This has also been my experience of rainbow communities in the city I live in - trying to negotiate a position for myself somewhere under the 'T' for 'transgender' which, in itself, is an umbrella term encompassing a multitude of gender variant identities.

As I explored in my honours exegesis, I found self-representational narrative to be a powerful tool for the genderqueer individual to use to begin to overcome this misrepresentation. Extending the scope of my honours investigation, I began to wonder if the creation of collaborative genderqueer narratives would become a more powerful tool than singular self-representational narratives - or at least a stronger, louder tool and a meaningful step towards generating understanding of diverse gender identities within Auckland rainbow spaces, and within our city as a whole.

This research is based within a collaborative art project between four genderqueer identifying artists living in Auckland, New Zealand, and seeks to understand the way in which genderqueer narratives could be effectively supported through a collaborative framework.

CHAPTER ONE:

Literature Review and Contextual Frameworks

In this chapter I discuss the key ideas explored in this research and I provide a review of current literature on this topic. I provide an introduction to the ways in which these ideas are employed in my practice, and articulate why engaging with these ideas could be important or useful for other creative practitioners.

Understanding gender: Gender pluralism

Genderqueer identity

Misrepresentation and invisibility of genderqueer people

Self-representational narrative

Collaborative arts practice

Collective genderqueer identity

Figure. 1. Gender as three intersecting spectra
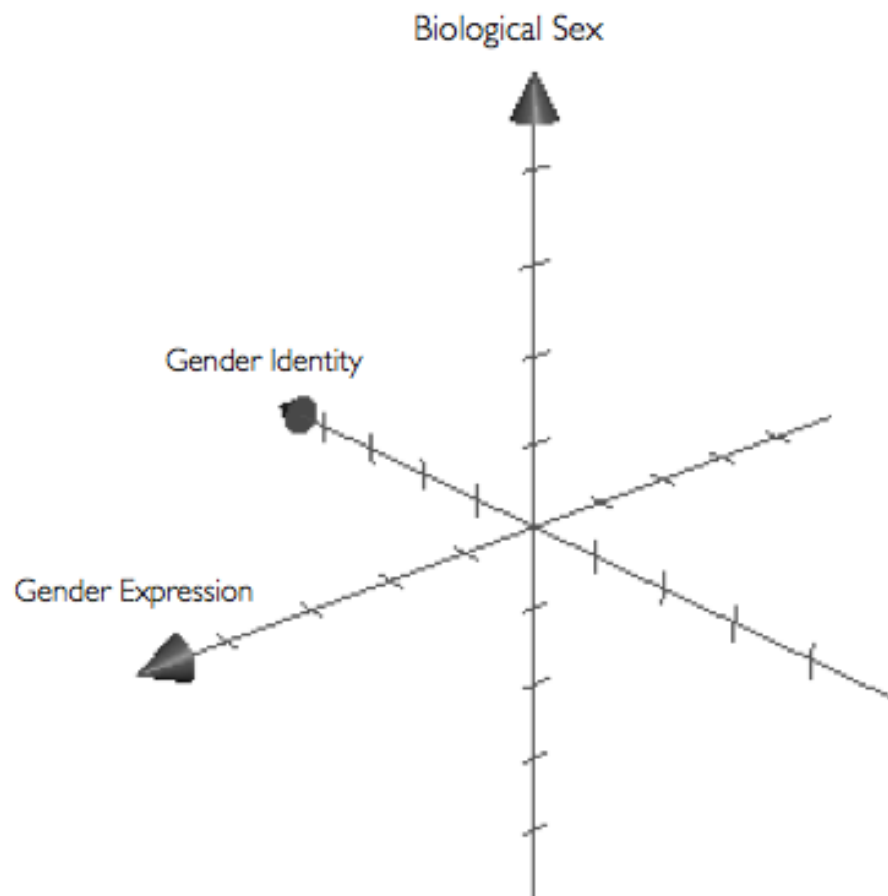
UNDERSTANDING GENDER: GENDER PLURALISM

This understandings of gender discussed in this research are grounded in Munro's 2006 explanation of sex and gender as the interplay between "intersecting spectra or continua" (p.16). As I illustrated in my honours exegesis (McArdle, 2013), our identity consists of a series of spectrums that are interconnected, and do not exist without the other. I use the illustration (pictured) to explain how someone might understand the relationship between their gender identity, biological sex and gender expression.

At each end of these intersecting spectrums, absolute saturation occurs. For example, the spectrum labelled biological sex would span from "fully male" to "fully female", with varying shades of intersex identities between. The spectrum labelled gender identity spans from "man" to "woman", with a variety of gender variant identities between.

We cannot understand ourselves on disconnected parallel spectrums without understanding their relation to each other. Of course, these three intersecting axis are just a few of the many layers of identity that exist in relation to each other. Our experience of our gender relates to our experience of our age and our age is experienced in relation to our culture - we cannot fully understand the reality of any one part without recognizing the influence and interplay of others.

This image has been removed by the author of this thesis for copyright reasons

GENDERQUEER IDENTITY

Within this research I refer to the term genderqueer as a place within this 3D model of intersecting axis in relation to gender identity that sits away from the absolute end points of the intersecting spectra of gender identity and gender expression (Nestle, 2002).

I affirm Bornstein's (2006) proposition that the genderqueer identity is one that can move and shift in different times and spaces "…like a chameleon skillfully morphing its colors and markings to accommodate an ever changing environment". This mirrors Knauer's (2007) explanation that "Genderqueer recognizes that gender matters. It rejects, but does not deny the binary…genderqueer allows for the realness of gender, but declares it to be ultimately malleable and fluid." All of the participants in the research whānau (see chapter two) identify with this explanation of the term genderqueer. While we embody, perform and "do our gender" (Butler, 1999) differently, we all relate to an experience of fluidity that sits outside a binary construction of gender.

Figure. 2. "Are you a boy or a girl?"

"We have looked for myths that include us in great novels, music, the latest comic book, or even some stupid advertising campaign. We'll look *anywhere* for a mythology that embraces people like ourselves."

- Kate Bornstein

MISREPRESENTATION AND INVISIBILITY OF GENDERQUEER PEOPLE

Kate Bornstien (1994) identifies that two issues that genderqueer people face in media and popular culture are misrepresentation and invisibility. Bornstien also identifies the entrenched gender binaries that exist within queerdom and comments on and the harmful effect this has on gender minorities:

> *"[They] demand the need for an orderly gender system; they're two sides of the same coin, each holding the other in place, neither willing to dismantle the gender system that serves as a matrix for their (sexual) identity" (p. 133)*

This project acknowledges these issues and seeks to contribute to an accurate representation of contemporary genderqueer identity.

SELF-REPRESENTATIONAL NARRATIVES

Fienberg (1996) comments on the importance of gender minorities claiming space to have their perspectives heard: "It is time for us to write as experts on our own histories. For too long our light has been refracted through other people's prisms". This call for self-representational narratives by Fienberg resonates with the heart of this project.

Both Harding (2004) and Capous Desyllas (2013) affirm this perspective of the marginalised as expert in their writing on situational knowledge and stand point theories. Specifically addressing feminist stand point theories, Capous Desyllas explains:

> *"Feminist stand point theories grant epistemic privilege to women and others who are marginalized since these individuals may know different things than those who are privileged by virtue of what they experience and how they understand it"* (p. 365)

This project reflects this positioning of the minority as expert on their own identity and lived experience. In this case, the genderqueer person as expert on genderqueer identity.

COLLABORATIVE ARTS PRACTICE

> *"Arts-informed methodologies honour diverse ways of knowing, inviting wider communities to engage with subject matter through minds, hearts, and bodies. Moving beyond exclusive academic language and analysis stories and bodies inspire embodied empathy, the imaginative capacity to see as another."*
>
> *(Cameron, 2011, p.190)*

These 'diverse ways of knowing' that Cameron articulates mirror the heart of feminist stand point theories, and place the participant in collaboration as the expert of their experience. Kester (2013) comments on this in their writings on collaborative arts practice and explains that "…new and unanticipated forms of knowledge can be produced through dialogical encounters with politically coherent communities".

This acknowledgement of the artist as expert and the importance of collaborative arts practice - both within and authored by - minority communities form the foundation for this research.

COLLECTIVE GENDERQUEER IDENTITY

Polletta and Jasper (2001) explain collective identity as "…an individual's cognitive, moral, and emotional connection with a broader community, category, practice or institution." They explain that collective identities are expressed through 'cultural materials' that include, but are not limited to: names, narratives, symbols, verbal styles, rituals, and clothing. In this project, we seek to represent our shared experiences through collaborative practice, utilising the mediums of 'cultural materials' that Poletta and Jasper list, and adding the extra cultural material of art making.

By moving toward better understanding ourselves through models of collective identity, this project seeks to investigate how we can create narratives of genderqueer identity. These narratives, while self-representational in nature, can also be read by a wider group of genderqueer identifying people as an accurate representation of shared experience - a manifestation of our collective genderqueer identity.

CONCLUSION

In this chapter I have discussed the role of genderqueer identity, the misrepresentation and invisibility of genderqueer people, self-representational narratives, collaborative arts practice, and role of collective identity in this research project. I believe that art and design practice offers a 'cultural material' or a cultural medium for telling self-representational narratives that provide an accurate and much needed record of our diverse gender identities. I propose that working alongside other genderqueer practitioners in a collaborative dynamic can allow for the emergence of previously unrecognised truths about our shared experience, which in turn allows us to develop a representational narrative of our collective identity that is beyond our own singular experience - one that more accurately reflects the identity we share. I investiagate this hypothesis through the collaborative arts project and detail my findings in chapter three.

CHAPTER TWO:

Research design and methodologies

This project is grounded in action based research (Schön, 1983) by a research whānau (Gorman-Murray, Johnston and Wait, 2010) engaged in arts-based research (Leavy, 2012).

In this chapter I explain the design of this research project and discuss the methods employed with illustrations from the practice:

Research whānau

Recruitment

Action research and reflective practice

Sketchbooks and journals

Developing a collective narrative

Practice

RESEARCH WHĀNAU

Participants in this research are co-researchers, and formed - along with myself as the primary researcher - the research whānau. The central focus of this collaborative process was the sharing and telling of personal stories and experiences, and the research whānau worked together to generate genuine artistic representations of their genderqueer identity that was showcased in a public exhibition.

Utilizing the research whānau framework - as explained by Tuhiwai Smith (1999) and utilized by Johnston (2010) - this methodology invited the participants to become co-researchers, and aimed to acknowledge their status as experts of their own experience. This framework recognises the communities that members of the research whānau belong to - both familial and social - and encourages voices from those broader communities to be heard through the art practice of the research whānau. This structure allowed the practitioners to access the support of their peers in both formal and informal discussions about their work, and through their shared experience as genderqueer people. This framework enabled us to consider our collective narratives and how we might infuse these in our practice to develop a body of work that reflected our collective identity.

RECRUITMENT

The snowball technique that Crouch and Pearce (2012) illustrate was used to recruit participants for this project. I identified participants through my social networks within the Auckland queer and trans* community, and asked potential participants to pass on my contact details to other potential participants that they thought might be interested in being involved with this project - we recognised that finding a synergy or kinship, within the group was a very important element to the project's success. It was hoped that this method would allow the gathering of a diverse sample of genderqueer identifying Auckland based artists, and would take into close consideration the complex gendered, classed, ethnic and social layers of our diverse community. Originally six genderqueer identifying Auckland based artists were identified and set to participate, but due to personal circumstances for two of the artists they had to pull out in the initial recruitment round. When participants were approached they were given a copy of the 'Participant Information Sheet' which can be found in Appendix 6. The final group comprised of four genderqueer Auckland based artists interested in self-representational narratives, working across four different disciplines.

ACTION RESEARCH AND REFLECTIVE PRACTICE

This project is grounded in action-based research, and is engaged with reflective practice in the development of creative outputs and collaborative relationships. Schön (1983) explains the power of tacit knowledge in reflective practice and notes that:

> *"When we go about the spontaneous, intuitive performance of the actions of everyday life, we show ourselves to be knowledgeable in a special way... Our knowing is ordinarily tacit, implicit in our patters of action [doing] and in our feel for the stuff with which we are dealing. It seems right to say that our knowing is in our action"* (p.69)

As artists and designers, our intuition and tacit knowledge is an important tool that we bring with us to our research. Members of the research whānau had a specific artistic practice that was already established and they brought with them to the research along with their lived experience of genderqueer identity.

We scheduled three official check-in points over the course of the project to share ideas and work more closely with each other. These times acted as a space for both individual and collaborative reflection and feedback. More informal conversations between artists occured over the course of the project as work was in development. This cycle of making, checking in with the group, reflecting, and developing the work further (repeat) is what Scrivener (2000) calls 'reflection in and on action' and aligns with Schön's illustration of action-based research as one that is cyclical in nature.
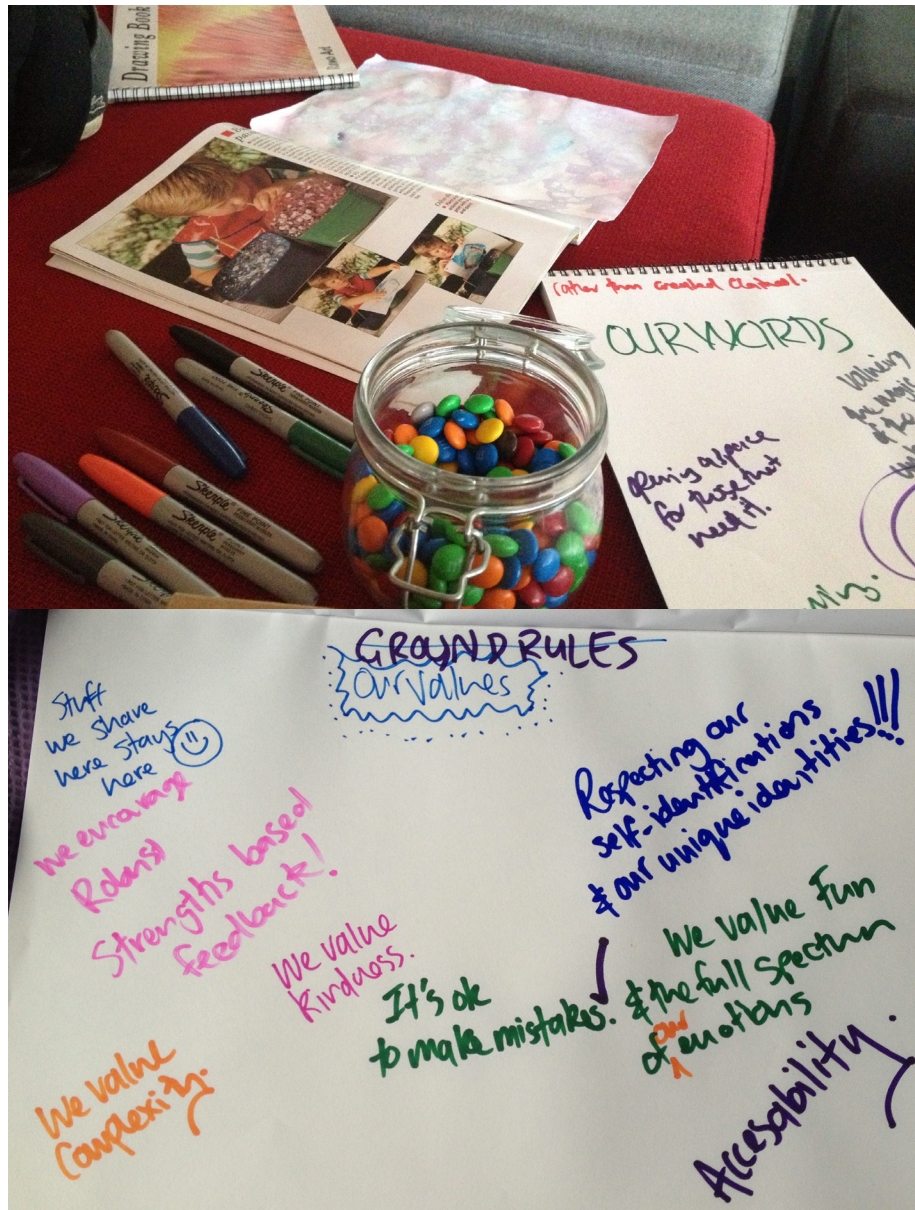
Figure. 3. (Top) Journals and sketchbooks at group meeting
Figure. 4. (Bottom) Brainstorm of 'Ground Rules' for the project that
were renamed 'Our Values'

SKETCHBOOKS AND JOURNALS

Another important tool used in the action research process was the use of a journal and sketchbook. As a small thank you gift at our first meeting, I gave artists a sketchbook to use over the course of the project to document their thinking. Large pads of A3 drawing paper, felt pens, crayons and other markers were always available during our sessions (pictured left). Newbury (2001) notes the importance of documenting the research process in the form of a 'field diary' and notes that:

> "The research diary can be seen as a melting pot for all of the different ingredients of a research project - prior experience, observations, readings, ideas - and a means of capturing the resulting interplay of elements" (p.3)

As you can see from the photos on the next page, my sketchbook acts as a visual record of my thought process throughout the different stages of design including: gathering visual inspiration, silhouette development, reflections on designs, alteration notes, fabric samples, embellishment development, and to-do lists. The use of the designers sketchbook is an important tool in action research for the reflective practitioner, as Newburry (2001) notes, to "stimulate reflective thinking about the research" (p.2). Throughout the creative process I would flip back and forwards between pages, making extra notes about my notes and extending these reflections into my practice.
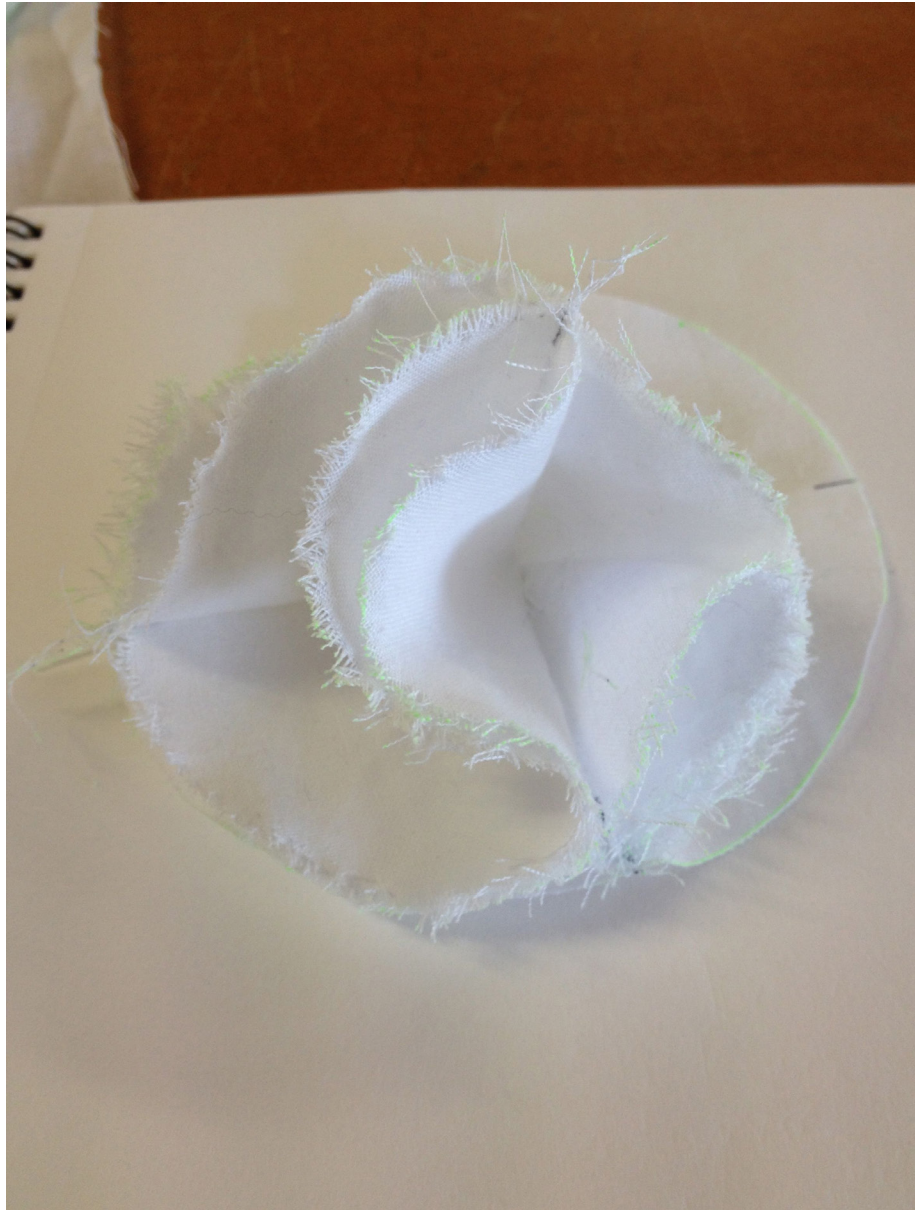
Figure. 5. Experiment of 3D structure secured in designer's journal
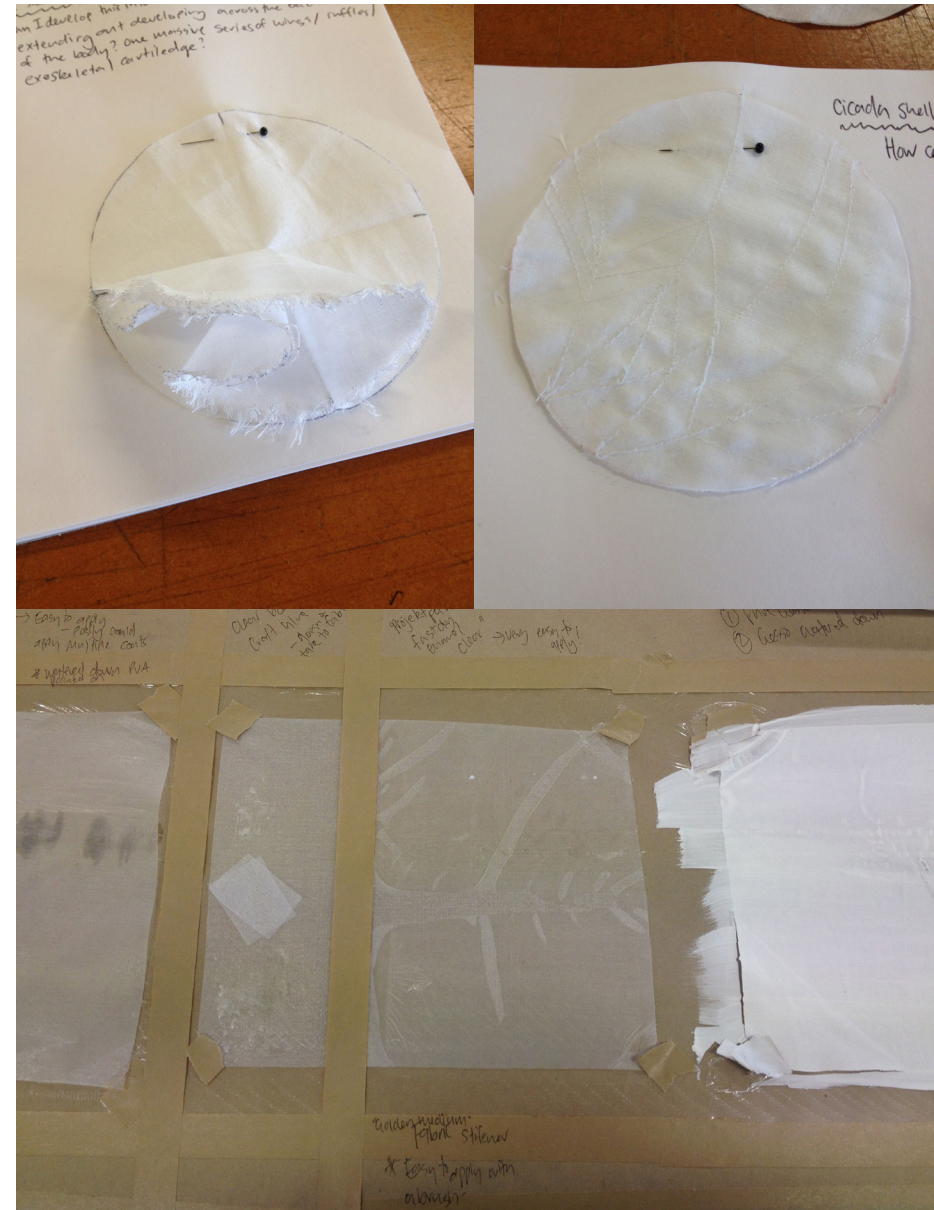
Figure. 6. (Top left) and Figure. 7. (Top right) Experiment of 3D structure secured in designer's journal with annotations

Figure. 8. (Bottom) Experiments with surface treatment in designer's journal with annotations

DEVELOPING A COLLECTIVE NARRATIVE

While this project was self-representational in its conception it was envisaged that by working alongside other self-identifying genderqueer artists that, as a group, we might form a collective narrative within our individual work. I was, however, wary of working in a way that policed what it means to be genderqueer or assumed that we all had the same experiences of our gender identity in relation to our culture and socio-economic backgrounds. In the development of this research project I was sure to remain conscious of the power dynamics that can exist between researcher and research participants (hooks, 1990).

As Tuhiwai Smith (1999) notes, the dynamics of researching minority communities often results in an 'insider' and 'outsider' dynamic at play between the researched and the researcher. It was intended that by joining the group as a member rather than being the leader that the power dynamics between researcher and research participants could be acknowledged and dismantled. Tuhiwai Smith (1999) explains that when the researcher is part of the community being researched and becomes an active participant in the research group, that the research outputs better reflect the needs of the community.

In an effort to break down this hierarchy, I adopted the research whānau methodology (with participants as co-researchers) and as the primary researcher I joined the research whānau as a member participating in the research myself. I came to the research project with the role of facilitator for our first meeting and from then on I took the role of group member. In attempting to generate a collective narrative, it was important to understand this relationship from the very beginning of the project.

In developing a space for collective narrative of our genderqueer identity to occur, we felt it was important to understand the various spaces that we occupied in our lives outside of the group meetings. Understanding my role as a Masters of Art and Design candidate who was invested in a 'successful' outcome of the project was one of many layers of my commitment to the group. Over many cups of tea, we shared our stories of working collaboratively within our disciplines, and shared experiences of exploring our genderqueer identity through creative practice. As these stories weaved towards each other and away from each other, we came to recognise some experiences we had in common. These shared experiences were then embedded into each of our creative practices.

Figure. 9. Pregnant dress form

PRACTICE

The works that I contributed to our group exhibition was a series of five sculptures entitled "Skin/Shell". These silhouettes were developed from conversations that we had as a group about our shared experience of shifting identity. The partly translucent bodices allude to the torso of a pregnant man, while employing methods traditionally reserved for women's wear - patterns draped over the form to develop a silhouette that closely fits the curve of the body, utilising darts to cement this shape, and constructing the silhouette from organza which is a traditionally used in bridal wear and evening wear. These bodies morph and shift across the five silhouettes, with shoulders enlarging and the back curving to mimic the pregnant curve of the stomach.

I explored ways in which to make the surface of the organza appear like that of a discarded skin or shell - like the exoskeleton of a cicada - by experimenting with a variety of surface treatments including PVA glue, fabric stiffener, varnish, latex, and resin. These experiments resulted in, through the process of reflection in and on action (Scrivener, 2000), a decision to cast the back pieces of the silhouettes in resin and let them mould to the mannequin as they dried. Upon installing the silhouettes, the resin had cracked and buckled, creating a weathered surface like that seen on a cicada shell on a tree as it bakes under the sun, is thrown around by the wind - much like the layers of our discarded identities.

One particularly poignant theme that developed from conversations over tea, was the recognised collective desire to experience the world through a playful embodiment of our diverse identities. As I reflected on this in combination with the idea of shedding

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Figure. 10. Experimentation with PVA glue in moulding a 3D shape
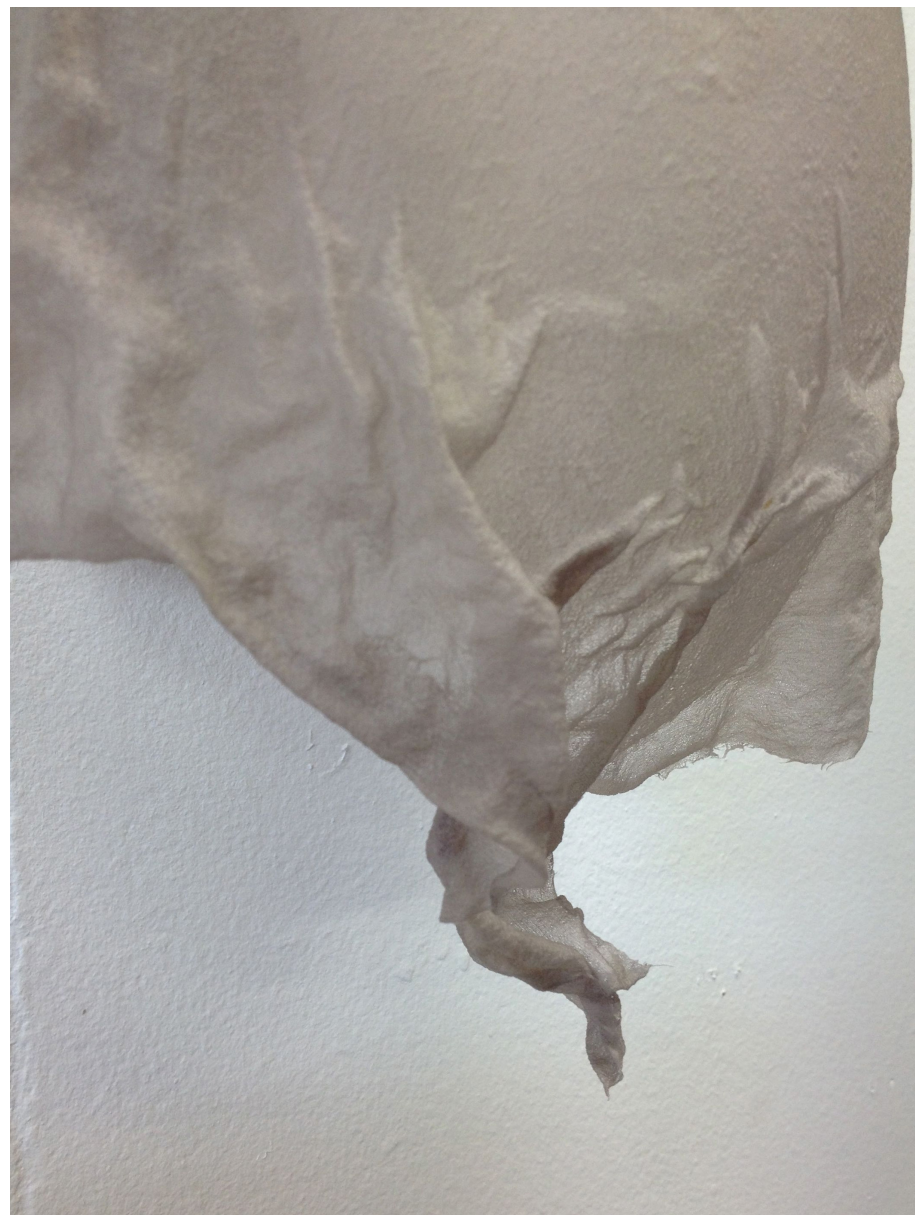
Figure. 11. Experimentation with PVA glue in moulding a 3D shape

Figure. 12. Draping a bodice pattern on the pregnant dress form

Figure. 13. Draping a bodice pattern on the pregnant dress form

Figure. 14. Experimenting with resin treatment on organza. The dress form is first covered in plastic that is cut and sewn in the same shape to minimise disturbing the organza shell

Figure. 15. (Top) First successful resin treatment on organza
Figure. 16. (Bottom) Workstation in the wet lab at AUT

Figure. 17. Experimenting with organza circles

skin and constantly shifting, I came to think about the way in which I quite literally look through my wardrobe and 'try on' old identities - refashioning them in new ways that better reflect my current identity. I investigated ways to refashion these discarded skins I have created, by considering the natural world: how ivy will grow over an abandoned home, weeds sprout between cracks in the foot path, and animals build nests and dens with any nearby materials. After taking a closer look at my garden I noticed the way on some succulents, the smaller offshoots grew in and around the parent plant. The parent plants are known as the 'hens' and the new growth is known as the 'chick'. I was fascinated by the way that these plants seemed to be able to grow in relatively small spaces, with little to no care, and yet could form such perfectly symmetrical but haphazard patterns. The parallel to my experience - and that of the group - was one of 'misaligned' yet perfect gender identity, and this parallel was something I explored further in embellishing and reclaiming the exoskeleton silhouettes I had developed.

To mimic the perfect symmetry found in these succulents, I experimented with laser cutting circles of translucent organza, transparent polyurethane, silver lamé, and lace by sewing them together in a variety of ways in order to produce repetitive 3D structures. After developing a method of sewing in which the circles could be sewn to each other by aligning fold marks with corresponding fold marks, and then shifting these by right angles, I created a structure that resembles a flower or similar symmetrically repeating structure.

I found that I could replicate this method of sewing these structures to each other also, thus creating a more densely packed surface appearance.
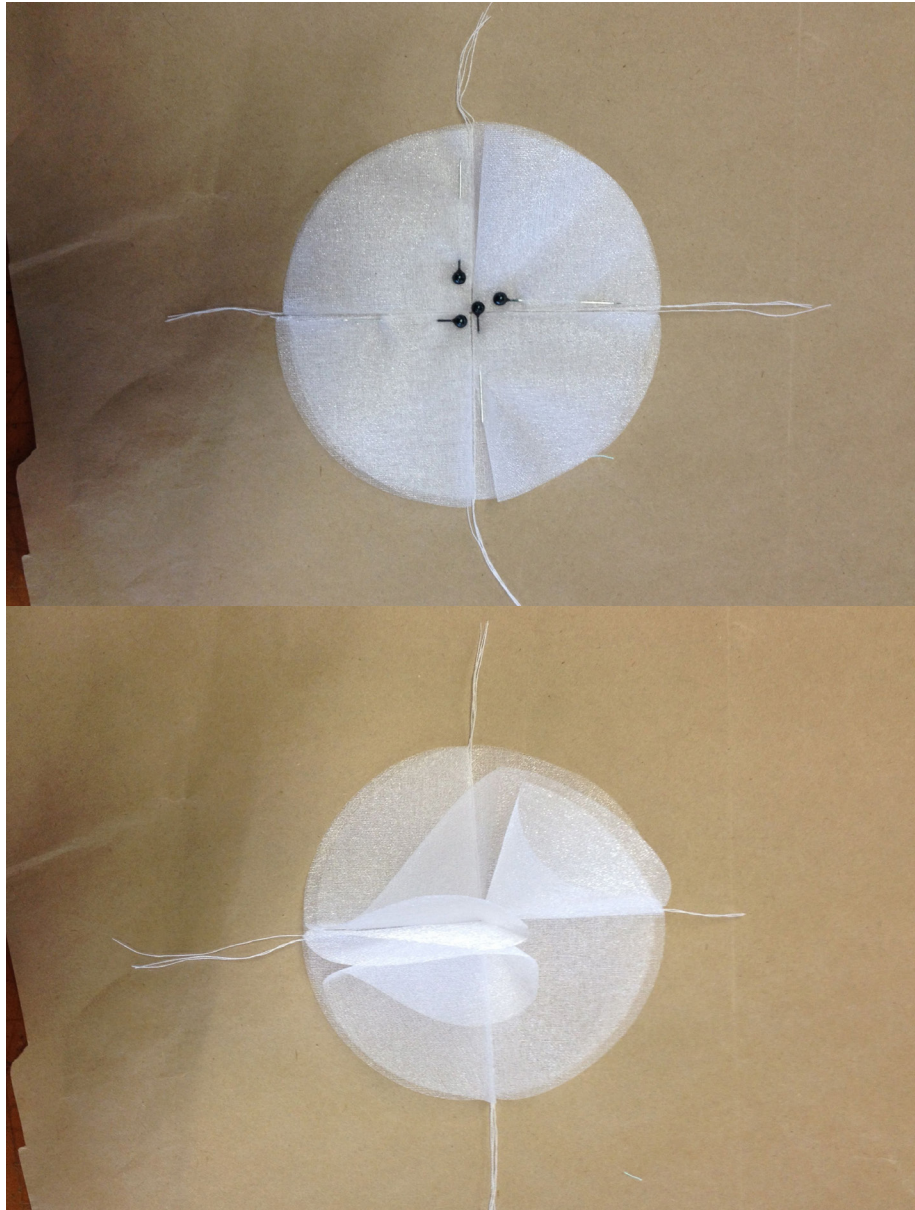
Figure. 18. (Top) Circles are sewn then pinned before overstitching
Figure. 19. (Bottom) Overstitching acts like a spine helping to hold shape
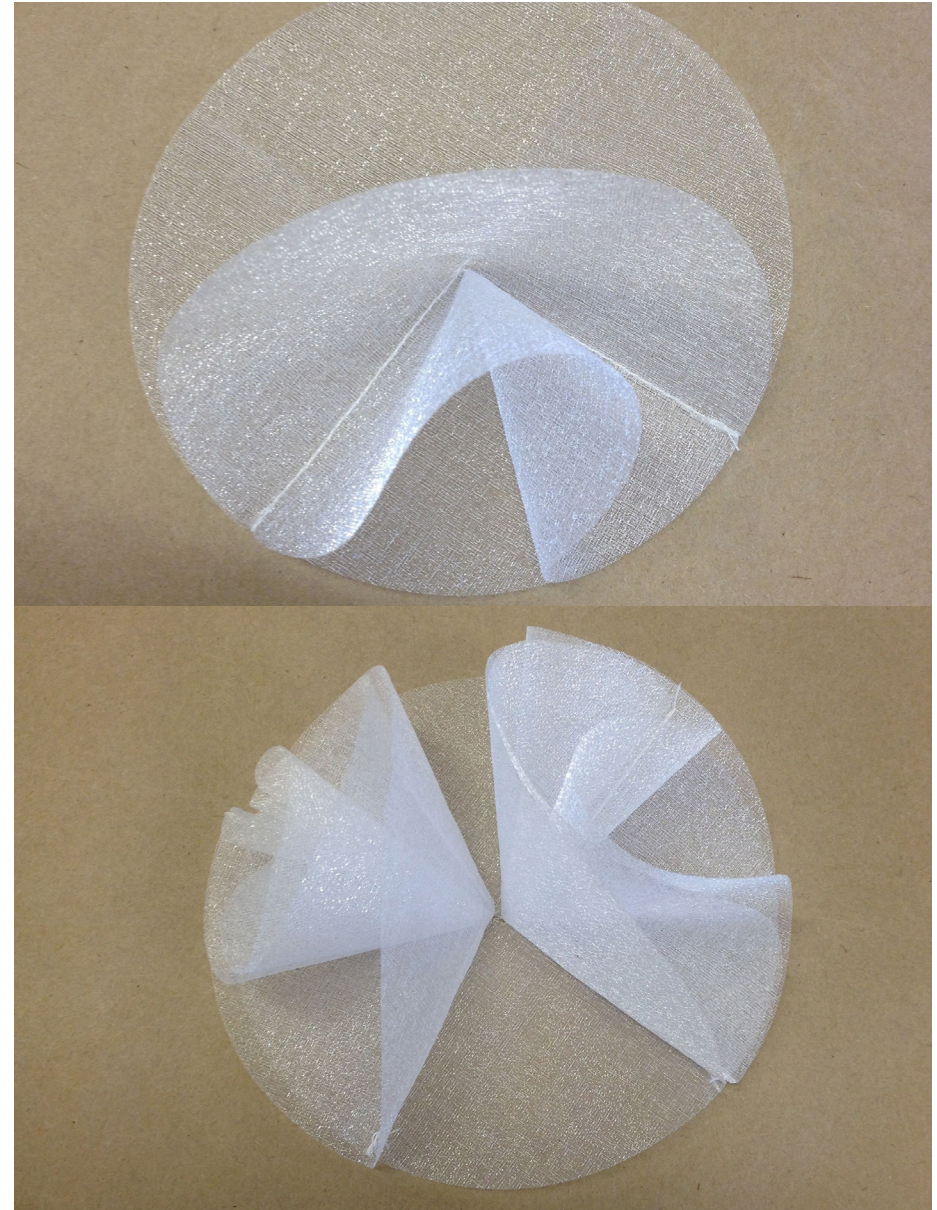
Figure. 20. (Top) Two single layers of organza circles sewn together
Figure. 21. (Bottom) Two double layers of organza sewn together

I explored ways of building these up on the surface of the organza and resin exoskeleton. I considered how I could mimic the way that the succulent plants grow - how they might be planted sporadically or evenly spaced, but soon develop into densely populated areas of growth. I also considered the way that we had discussed in the group how we all desired to live as fully 'present' in our genderqueer identity, but for various reasons - including safety - we will often feel like we have to 'test the waters' in a new environment, or in manifestations of our selves, before being allowed to be fully 'seen' by the world - and by our selves. I joined the different structures together with small white crystals so that they formed a chain that I could easily drape on the skins, varying from spaces of densely populated pockets of 'identity' to more evenly or sporadically fixed growths.

It is important to note here the theme of community that developed in our research group and how safety can be found by 'sticking close to' other gender varient peers. I literally translated this theme through the close clustering of similar shapes.

For the exhibition, these silhouettes were hung from the ceiling with fishing line placed one metre out from a plain white wall. The silhouettes moved as people brushed past them or the air-conditioning was switched on. They hung in silence, as an empty mark of an identity shed, an identify re-embodied and then re-shed, a wardrobe of past explorations.

These physical objects that I created in this project were my personal reflections on the stories of shared experiences of our research whānau and hopefully a narrative that other genderqueer people might recognise or relate to.

Figure. 22. (Top) Strands of varying 3D shapes sewn together
Figure. 23. (Bottom) Close-up of 3D structure with crystal embellishment

Figure. 24. (Top) 'Skin/Shell' as installed
Figure. 25. (Bottom) Close-up of 3D structures

Figure. 26. One of five sculptures from 'Skin/Shell' as installed

lady j laurie / sam orchard
aych mcardle / charlie horse

6 pm - 8 pm / 21 november 2013
level 2 / 40 st paul st / auckland central

Figure. 27. Invitation to the opening night of '(!)(!!)'

CHAPTER THREE:

Collaborative Art Project and Focus Group

Over the course of 10 weeks, the research whānau worked together to develop individual and collaborative pieces for public exhibition. We exhibited our work for this project over three days in November 2013 at AUT University, in an exhibition entitled '(!)(!!) : Queer encounters and mixed magics: a collective exploration of taking up space, playing games and incoherent genderliciousness.'

Hosted within 'Test Space' at the AUT School of Art and Design, 40 St. Paul St in Auckland, the exhibition was open to the public with an opening night party on the 21st of November. Five works were exhibited, one by each of the participating research whānau members, and one as a joint piece between us all. Detailed notes on each of the artworks can be found in Appendix 1.

Figure. 28. (Top) Focus group
Figure. 29. (Bottom) Focus group

FOCUS GROUP

As Crouch and Pearce (2012) describe: "..lived experiences form a valid basis for forming knowledge about the world" and it is this methodology of narrative research that formed the foundation for this project and is heavily employed in the focus group design.

The participants in the project were invited to be part of a 90 minute focus group, which took place two weeks after the work was exhibited, and was intended to allow reflection on the process of generating self-representational works, as well as the experience of showcasing these works in a public space. These discussions were tape recorded, and lead by an external facilitator in order to guide participants discussion and to ensure all participants are able to participate equally.

The focus group discussion centred around the following question:

'Tell us about your experience of generating in a colaborative way self-representational works that reflect on your genderqueer identity for public exhibition.'

I used this one open-ended research question in this focus group, in the hope of creating a space where the participants felt they could share as much or as little as they were comfortable with. One of the benefits of working in this way is that it also lends itself to gathering genuine data as Crouch and Pearce (2012) explain:

"By using open questions you are more likely to obtain unexpected responses and are also less at risk of

unconsciously influencing the participants' responses by framing questions that reflect your own bias or blind spots"

Participants were given the option to answer and participate in the project anonymously if requested.

DATA ANALYSIS: PHENOMENOLOGICAL THEMATIC ANALYSIS

The data from the focus group was tape recorded, transcribed, and analysed for thematic similarities between participants reflections.

Following Butler-Kisber's (2010) model for phenomenological inquiry I read the transcription of the focus group several times to familiarize myself with the conversations. I then 'extracted significant statements' (p. 53) from the text that answered the research question. I then set about to 'formulate meanings about the significant statements that relate to the participants contexts and that bring out hidden meanings' (p. 53). After this I 'cluster(ed) the formulated meanings into a series of themes to reveal common patterns across expereince' (p. 53).

DATA ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

Using a phenomenological thematic qualitative analysis the data gathered in this focus group suggests four findings that are of particular relevance to generating self-reflective narratives of genderqueer identity within a collaborative arts framework:

> 1. Participants felt vulnerable in making art about their genderqueer identity for public exhibition and felt vulnerable expressing their genderqueer identity with each other. Specifically participants felt that their gender identity would face tough scrutiny from other gender diverse guests at the exhibition.

> 2. Focusing on the process of making, rather than on an outcome of a specific task, allowed participants the space to get to know each other better, and they then ended up feeling safer about discussing their genderqueer identity with each other.

> 3. There was a layer of fluidity to the project that mirrored the narrative of gender fluidity within the exhibition, and this was a positive experience for participants.

> 4. Participants felt that the experience of working in a collaborative setting on work centred on their shared genderqueer identity enhanced their creative practice.

DISCUSSION IN RELATION TO MY EXPERIENCE AND PRACTICE

1. In addressing the vulnerability that participants felt in generating a collective narrative of genderqueer identity, it could be proposed that this vulnerability - and the associated anxiety - is a barrier to artists to work in this way. During the recruitment phase of the project, six participants were originally identified, but two had to pull for personal reasons. It is not known if this was due to the pressure related to creating an accurate collective narrative, or if other forces were at play.

Another barrier that participants experienced was anxiety around the idea of their work being 'policed' by other gender variant people. Social constructionist concepts of gender forward the view that because gender is a constructed reality, that we are subject to the enforcement of the rules regarding succesfully performing 'gender' (West and Zimmerman 1987., and Butler 1999). I offer that it is more so within gender variant communities - when gender policing occurs, it carries a sharper blow. One participant explains:

> *"There was that fear, particularly the fear of that public stuff, of like 'What happens when we show other people?' Will we get mean people coming along and being like 'You are ruining it for the rest of us' or 'This is not really what a gender diverse space looks like'?"*

2. Safety was an important concern of the genderqueer artists, with nearly all of them citing previous experiences of opening up in environments that then became dangerous for them.

To effectively generate work in a collaborative way that is representational of genderqueer narratives requires adequate safety measures be put in place - including setting ground rules, discussing the scope of the project, and the boundaries around it. I believe that doing these three things contributed towards the sense of generosity and kindness felt within the group, and enabled the participants to find space to affirm both their own identity, and the identities of the others. One participant commented:

> "I felt the collective strength of the group. It helped me be more confident in my own practice, and feel safe in terms of making creative decisions that related to my gender identity."

3. It is interesting that a theme of fluidity emerged in our focus group when we reflected on the experience of making collective narratives. I believe this was a natural reflection of participants feeling able to be fully present in the experience. This was a finding that particularly resonated within my practice, as I commented in the focus group:

> "I don't know if it is just that experience of being with 'your people', or finally having space where you can just kind of breathe a little bit and not feel like a tightly spun rubber band like I usually am in creative environments, or how I have to be in the world to survive... I was able to just kind of unwind a little bit, and within that my creative practice was able to loosen up and flow a little bit as well. Yeah!"

I would propose that working within a collaborative framework on themes of fluid identity requires a level of fluidity within the framework for the project.

Having the ability to let the process of identity inform the direction was a significant factor in reaching this project's successful outcome, and it is worth nothing for other practitioners working in this way. I did however find the time frame for our project was limited by the academic calendar, and this project could have been much larger in scale and scope if time allowed .

One participant sums up this fluid movement or 'dance' of our project development:

> *"Yeah, I think it is interesting that we were coming at it from a ground level of fluidity, and that kind of spoke through in terms of the way we worked. It felt like a dance of passing a ball around. Someone would take up one bit, someone else would say 'Oh I like that, and I'm going to take it in this direction.' I quite enjoyed that, and I like that it spoke to the underlying themes of what we were talking about."*

Another participant notes how a fluid environment enabled them to feel fully present in the project and how this was a fulfilling experience:

> *"There is this lovely easy fluidity to be fully myself. So I didn't really think about my gender in terms of that I*

just know I didn't have an issue, like, all of me was able to be expressed. So I guess my own gender identity is pretty fluid so to be in a fluid environment with fluid people was like 'Yeah, I feel great!' It worked."

4. By developing my honours research that explored primarily self-representational narrative and genderqueer identity to this project, I feel that my work has developed as a direct result of this experience. I echo the research finding that concluded that group members felt the experience enhanced their creative practice. I feel the experience of working alongside my peers has enabled me to feel bolder in asserting my own identity within my practice. As I noted in the focus group:

"I feel a lot more confident in my own practice, and I think that happens when you are built up in your community and you are able to stand on the shoulders of others. I have definitely seen that shift in my own self-esteem and confidence in this experience. And I don't feel like I can ever go back from that. Its just one step forward, and I hope I have many more experiences like that."

CONCLUSION

This research sought to investigate the role of collaborative arts practice in generating self-representational narratives of collective genderqueer identity. Expanding from my honours research I was interested in finding how my own work change when shifted from a project that was purely self-representational in focus, to one that explored shared identity and experience. This move was a frightening one - I shifted from standing in a point of being an expert of my own experience, to feeling the burden of accurately representing my community. These feelings of vulnerability and anxiety surrounding this process were luckily lessened - at least to some extent - by the support of the research whānau. I felt that the work we had done at the initial project meeting to define the ground rules for the project (one of the guidelines I stipulated in my ethics application) was successful in creating space in which we felt comfortable discussing our genderqueer identity. Without this project I, would not have seen a shift in my own confidence within my creative practice, and I am grateful for these positive changes gained from this experience.

If this project were staged on a larger scale, would other creative genderqueer people also share these experiences of the research whānau and myself? How would it shift the dynamic within the research whānau if all of the participants did not previously know each other, or if they had some kind of connection to at least one other member of the group? I recognise the need to support genderqueer practitioners in their generation of collective narratives of gender diversity, and I intend to continue to investigate and explore ways in which varying aspects of art and design practice can do so.

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Figure. 30. One of the hangings in 'Immaterial' as installed

APPENDIX 1. 'IMMATERIAL'

At our first session together we explored what it was like to play and take up physical space with each other - we made marks on cloth with powdered fabric dye and bubble mixture, and that formed the base for the work 'Immaterial'. By working on this piece as a group, (including dancing, leaping, concentrating and laughing together) we experienced both how we connect creatively through problem solving, ("How are we going to hang the cloth from the ceiling?") and through play ("Lets just dance in our underwear..."). Creating space to express our genderqueer selves - through mark making in a private space - was a really positive exercise to bond together as a group, and to articulate the energy we wanted our exhibition to embody.

ARTISTS STATEMENT:

Title: Immaterial

Materials: Calico, bubble blowers, detergent, organic plant matter, dye, glitter.

A collaborative work by Aych, Lady J, Charlie Horse, and Sam Orchard, created through physical improvisation with varied materials. Exploring embodiment as an ongoing performative act, manifested through necessary play with materials at hand. How do we bring ourselves into a space? What are the boundaries? Where are our limits? What is material, what is immaterial? Liminality as spiritual practice. Patterning relationships. Processing instead of producing. What is the place between us? Where does play live?
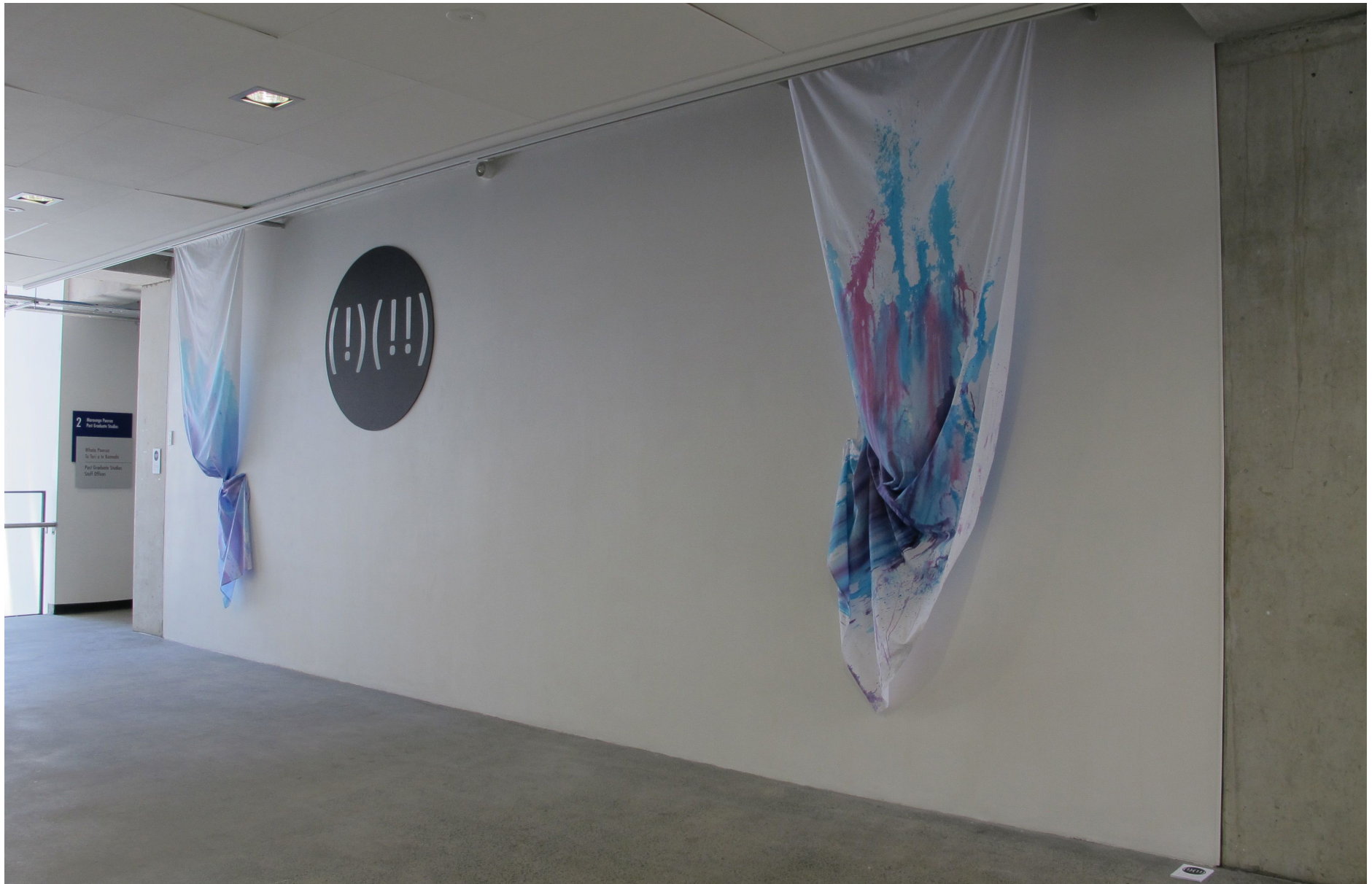
Figure. 31. 'Immaterial' as installed

Figure. 32. (Top) Close-up of 'Immaterial' as installed
Figure. 33. (Bottom) Close-up of 'Immaterial' as installed

Figure. 34. (Top) Close-up of 'Immaterial' as installed
Figure. 35. (Bottom) Close-up of 'Immaterial' as installed

APPENDIX 2. 'GAME'

Lady J Laurie developed and directed the video installation entitled 'Game' where a game of 'Queer Twister' was played in Albert Park and documented via photography and video. The alternative twister board and dial were present at the installation and were marked with layers of identity relating to spirituality, nature, ritual and magic. The core aim of this work was to play in public space with no other intentions other than play. Lead by Lady J Laurie all of the research whānau participated in this work with myself and Charlie Horse as fellow performers and Sam Orchard documented the piece.

ARTIST STATEMENT:

Title: Game

Materials: Human limbs, plastic sheet, coloured paper, sunlight, grass, willingness, marker pens, double-sided tape.

A collaborative piece led by Lady J, in which the artists explore public space, gender improvisation, and ritual play. Inspired by a dream sequence, the game took place on a sunny afternoon in Albert Park, with the intention of holding open creative space and inviting passersbys to participate. Rules optional, willingness essential.

Lady J: *"No need to explain myself, no need to explain what's going on here – I wanted to take up space without requiring a specific audience, just to exist as myself and assume that the space I inhabit is sacred, playful, and porous."*

Figure. 36. (Top) 'Queer Twister' board as installed
Figure. 37. (Bottom) 'Game' video playing at exhibition

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Figure. 38. Still image from the video 'Game'

APPENDIX 3. 'OBSERVATION'

On the opening night of the show, Charlie Horse performed a painted visual response to the answers given when guests were asked the question "What is a word that comes to mind when you think of gender?" Entitled 'Observation', Lady J lead the guests through the process of writing their response on a piece of white A4 paper pinned to the wall next to Charlie Horse's workspace, and stood with them while the work was performed. This serious 'don't talk to the artist' energy was juxtaposed with both Charlie's fun and free visual association with the words created, and with the earnest and celebratory energy that this produced between Charlie and the guests.

ARTIST STATEMENT:

Title: Observation

Materials: Paper, acrylic paint, duct tape, nails, calico.

An interactive performance piece led by Charlie Horse. Pursuing themes of self-representation, relationships with others, and the on-going interpretations we make about bodies, language, and personhood. Gendered embodiment is deeply internal-personal as well as simultaneously external-social. We make an offering of ourselves to the world, and wait for a response. Are we seen as ourselves? Are we listening to each other, are we seeing each other? What does it mean to deeply observe another person, to engage with them, to recognise our loneliness and interconnectedness?
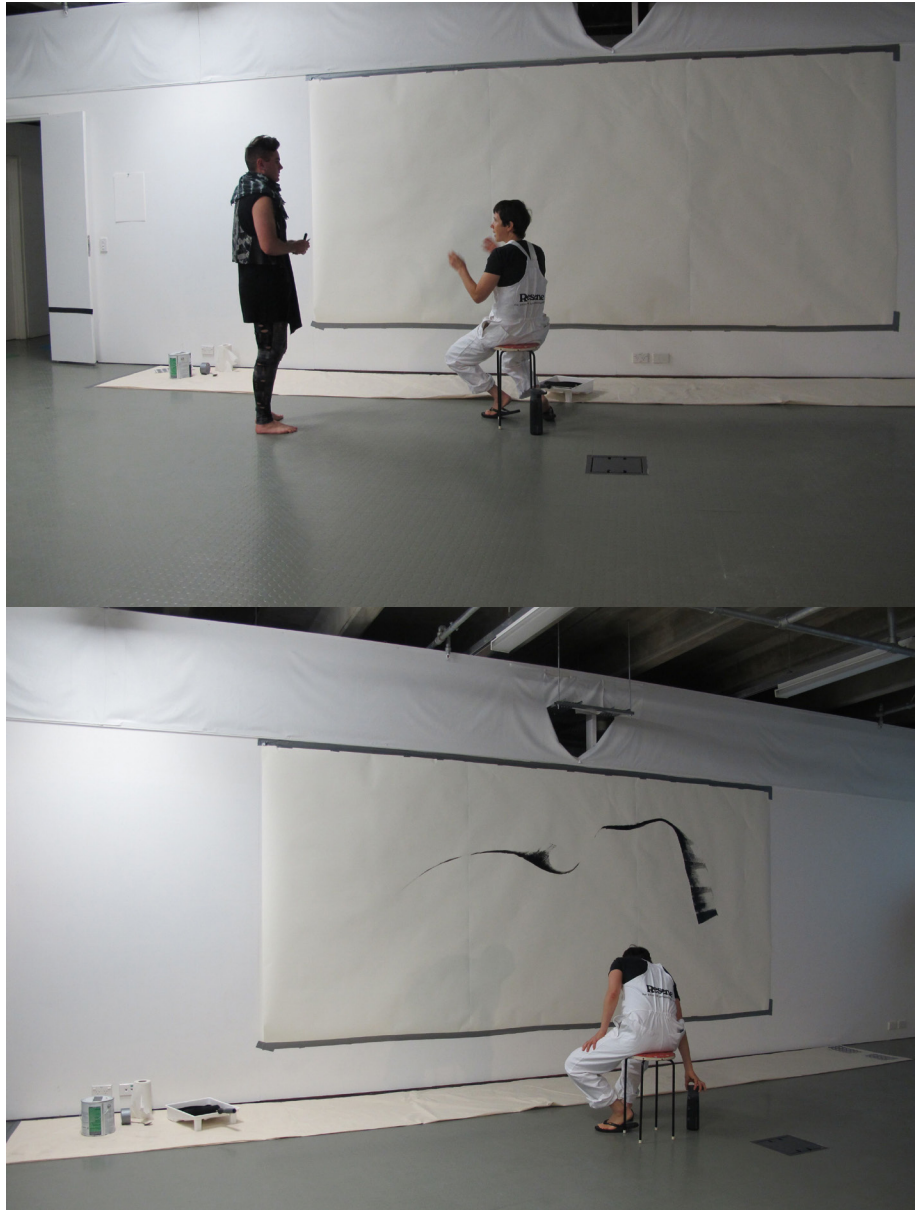
Charlie Horse: *"I just want to have fun!"*

Figure. 39. (Top) At the start of the performance piece 'Observation'
Figure. 40. (Bottom) Charlie Horse performs 'Observation'

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Figure. 41. Charlie Horse performs 'Observation'

Figure. 42. Artwork created by Charlie Horse while performing 'Observation'

Figure. 43. (Top) Sam Orchard performing/making 'Work in Progress'
Figure. 44. (Bottom) Sam Orchard performing/making 'Work in Progress'

APPENDIX 4. 'WORK IN PROGRESS'

The other live installation on the opening night was our comic artist in residence, Sam Orchard, drawing a response to the themes of the show as the guests filed through the space. This work was entitled 'Work In Progress' and sat alongside a series of previously exhibited works: 'Labels', 'Queer Haiku', 'A Poultry Tail' and 'Explain Yourself'. The way that Sam generates self-representational narrative is through comics and this is usually done in the privacy of a studio. Exploring the creating this private work in a public space was Sam's response to engaging in embodied performance of self-representational narratives.

ARTIST STATEMENT:

Titles (from left to right): 'Work In Progress', 'Labels', 'Queer Haiku', 'A Poultry Tail', 'Explain Yourself'

Materials: Paper, pen, person.

Sam has been drawing comics since he was a little girl. He is passionate about telling stories that celebrate the rich depth and diversity of our communities. In this series of comics he explores his experiences of gender and sexuality, the values and limits of labels, and the importance of self expression. 'Work in Progress' is a piece that has been made specifically for this exhibition, and is completed using inspiration and energy from the exhibition's opening. Sam hopes to demonstrate the process of illustrating a comic through this live action piece by putting himself on display, and to serve as a reflection of the end result of his comics.

Sam Orchard: "..."

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Figure. 45. Photograph of 'Work in Progress' as it developed over the course of the exhibition

Figure. 46. Final panels of 'Work in Progress' by Sam Orchard

Figure. 47. Final panels of 'Work in Progress' by Sam Orchard

Figure. 48. Detail photograph of 'Skin/Shell' as installed

APPENDIX 5. 'SKIN/SHELL'

This was a self-representational work of my own genderqueer identity and a comment on the inner and the outer embodiment of identity - I sought to explore the shedding of identities. The growths that form the other structural surface on the organza base are a series of 2D laser cut organza circles that morph and become more elaborate across the development of the sculptures. These sculptures were constructed from white organza and with layers of resin - with the resin making parts of them translucent and the layers of the organza flowers making parts of them opaque, these shapes acted like shadows of discarded identities past. These shadow shapes remember manifestations that have come and gone, bodies that have found a new way of being. Somewhat akin to the way a butterfly leaves a chrysalis, or a lizard sheds its tail, or atumn branches shrugging loose their leaves.

ARTIST STATEMENT:

Title: Skin/Shell

Materials: Organza, resin, gloss spray, pin pricks, adoration, CNC laser cutter, acrylic crystals.

Exploring the inner and the outer embodiment of identity, this work also seeks to explore the shedding of identities. This piece asks "What happens to those parts of ourselves that we leave behind? Do we leave them forever? Or do we find that they have taken on a life of their own without us? What happens if we want to reclaim those old identities? What happens when we try to merge them with current manifestations? How does the skin stretch, grow, shrink, and crinkle?"

Aych McArdle: *"I seek to embody a feeling of quietness in my work."*

Figure. 49. 'Skin/Shell' as installed

APPENDIX 6. ETHICS LETTER OF APPROVAL AND PARTICIPANT INFORMATION SHEET

AUT UNIVERSITY
TE WĀNANGA ARONUI O TAMAKI MAKAU RAU

AUTEC SECRETARIAT

27 June 2013

Angie Finn
Faculty of Design and Creative Technologies

Dear Angie

Re Ethics Application: **13/147 Investigating the role of collaborative art practice self-representational genderqueer narratives.**

Thank you for providing evidence as requested, which satisfies the points raised by the AUT University Ethics Committee (AUTEC).

Your ethics application has been approved for three years until 27 June 2016.

As part of the ethics approval process, you are required to submit the following to AUTEC:

- A brief annual progress report using form EA2, which is available online through http://www.aut.ac.nz/researchethics. When necessary this form may also be used to request an extension of the approval at least one month prior to its expiry on 27 June 2016;

- A brief report on the status of the project using form EA3, which is available online through http://www.aut.ac.nz/researchethics. This report is to be submitted either when the approval expires on 27 June 2016 or on completion of the project.

It is a condition of approval that AUTEC is notified of any adverse events or if the research does not commence. AUTEC approval needs to be sought for any alteration to the research, including any alteration of or addition to any documents that are provided to participants. You are responsible for ensuring that research undertaken under this approval occurs within the parameters outlined in the approved application.

AUTEC grants ethical approval only. If you require management approval from an institution or organisation for your research, then you will need to obtain this. If your research is undertaken within a jurisdiction outside New Zealand, you will need to make the arrangements necessary to meet the legal and ethical requirements that apply there.

To enable us to provide you with efficient service, please use the application number and study title in all correspondence with us. If you have any enquiries about this application, or anything else, please do contact us at ethics@aut.ac.nz.

All the very best with your research,

Participant
Information Sheet

AUT
UNIVERSITY
TE WĀNANGA ARONUI O TAMAKI MAKAU RAU

Date Information Sheet Produced:

18th May 2013

Project Title

Transitional spaces: Investigating the role of collaborative art practice in generating self-representational genderqueer narratives.

An Invitation

Hello! My name is Aych McArdle and I am in the final year of my Masters of Art and Design. I am interested in finding out how self-representational narratives as told by genderqueer Aucklanders can be used to address issues of misrepresentation and invisibility within the LGBT community and in wider Auckland spaces. Self-representational narrative is a term used to describe the way we tell our own stories rather than the way others tell our story for us (like through movies or music). For my Masters research I will be investigating how collaborative art practice and self-representational narrative can be used to address these issues of misrepresentation.

If you are reading this information sheet it is because I think you would be someone who would be awesome to work with and who might be interested in participating in this project.

Participation in this project is voluntary and you may withdraw at any time prior to the completion of data collection. If there are any potential conflict of interest issues whether you choose to participate or not will neither advantage nor disadvantage you.

What is the purpose of this research?

This research aims to identify the ways that self-representational collaborative art practice can be used by genderqueer identifying artists to overcome issues of misrepresentation and invisibility (Bornstein 1994).

This research project is being conducted as part of my Master of Art and Design thesis.

This research may be published in a conference paper, conference presentation, journal article, research paper and other academic publications or presentations.

The creative outputs of this research as developed by the participants will be exhibited in a public gallery exhibition.

How was I identified and why am I being invited to participate in this research?

Recruitment for this research project has been conducted using a "snowball technique". This means that at some point our social networks have over lapped and we are either known to each other or one of our mutual contacts has recommended you as a potential participant. You have been invited to participate in this research because you are a genderqueer-identified Aucklander involved in art practice.

In the case that we already know each other I have contacted you directly. If a mutual contact of ours has indicated that you might be interested in this project, you have been given my contact details and have contacted me.

I will not pass your contact details on to anybody else without your permission.

What will happen in this research?

This project will involve the development and exhibition of artworks (painting, performance, sculpture, sound installation…) in a collaborative way by the research participants. It is expected that some individual artwork may be produced while some collaborative works may also be developed.

Participants will be required to attend three project briefings, the opening night of the gallery exhibition and 90minute focus group two weeks after the exhibition.

At all of these sessions food, tea and coffee will be provided and assistance with transport, parking and childcare costs will also be available.

What are the discomforts and risks?

You may feel vulnerable creating artwork that explores your genderqueer identity but you are encouraged to only share the thoughts and artwork that you feel comfortable in doing so.

How will these discomforts and risks be alleviated?

If at any point in the project you need to talk to someone about how you are feeling both myself (027) 3306771 and the team at the AUT Health, Counselling and Wellbeing centre are available to talk to (09) 921 9992

At our first project briefing we will talk as a group about the things that we all need to make us feel safe as we make art. This discussion will help us develop a set of ground rules that we will observe as we work together to assist in creating a safe and creative working environment.

The creative outputs of this research as developed by the participants will be exhibited in a public gallery exhibition.

How was I identified and why am I being invited to participate in this research?

Recruitment for this research project has been conducted using a "snowball technique". This means that at some point our social networks have over lapped and we are either known to each other or one of our mutual contacts has recommended you as a potential participant. You have been invited to participate in this research because you are a genderqueer-identified Aucklander involved in art practice.

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At our first project briefing we will talk as a group about the things that we all need to make us feel safe as we make art. This discussion will help us develop a set of ground rules that we will observe as we work together to assist in creating a safe and creative working environment.

What do I do if I have concerns about this research?

Any concerns regarding the nature of this project should be notified in the first instance to the Project Supervisor, Angie Finn, angie.finn@aut.ac.nz, (09) 921 9999 ext 8284.

Concerns regarding the conduct of the research should be notified to the Acting Executive Secretary of AUTEC, Madeline Banda, *ethics@aut.ac.nz* , 921 9999 ext 8316.

Whom do I contact for further information about this research?

Researcher Contact Details:

Aych McArdle

Email: aych@aychblog.com

Phone: (027) 330 6771

Project Supervisor Contact Details:

Angie Finn

Email: angie.finn@aut.ac.nz

Phone: (09) 921 9999 ext 8284.

Approved by the Auckland University of Technology Ethics Committee on 27th June 2013

AUTEC Reference number 13/147

Figure. 50 Detail photograph of 'Skin/Shell'

The viva for this body of work asked questions about this project and in this appendix I aim to bring to life my responses to the questions asked.

As explained in Appendix 5, the work entitled "Skin/Shell" explores themes the shedding of identities, the embodiment of our identity and manifestation's of identity that we currently embody and those that we have shed or let go of. The creative decisions made in the development and construction of this body of work (as outlined in Chapter Two: Practice) directly speak to the themes explored in this work.

The decisions made in regards to fabrication, fabric treatment, pattern making, construction and installation embody the voice of the work as detailed below.

Fabrication and fabric treatment

The translucent sculptures are made from a white polyester organza with a pearlescent finish. In their final manifestation these sculptures are delicate and have a luxurious finish. The fabric is one that when analysed in its raw form might be considered cheap or tacky. It was my intention to take a textile and through fabric manipulation and embellishment transform the textile into another material entirely. This speaks to the concept that our identities are fluid, and that they can shift, develop and that our original "form" isn't one that we must embody for a lifetime.

Figure. 51. Detail photograph of 'Skin/Shell'

There is also a narrative of playfulness that runs through this fabric manipulation speaking to the idea that gender is, for many of us, a costume that we wear as we inhabit a world that requires such strict binary gender presentation. I wanted to portray this energy through the use of a textile that had been relegated to the "party fabrics" end of my local textiles emporium.

The casting of the backs of these sculptures in resin mimics the shape and texture of a discarded insects shell such as that of a cicada. This speaks to the concept of our morphing genderqueer identity as explained on page 30.

Silhouette development

The silhouettes subtly develop along the line up of sculptures with developments in shoulder shaping and back curves adding to the narrative of evolution of identity as explored in this project. This work specifically addresses the concept that the manifestation of genderqueer identity can, for some people, be a very fluid experience. Rather than presenting one sculpture and one manifestation, I presented five sculptures that reflect each other but are separate unique manifestations of genderqueer identity.

Pattern making and construction

As discussed on page 30, I constructed the bodices that form the foundation for these sculptures using traditional women's wear methods on a male dress form. The foundational garment was draped and constructed by creating a bodice block, a method traditionally used in women's wear, as opposed to a shirt block that would usually be drafted to create a foundational pattern for a male-bodied person.

Figure. 52. Detail photograph of 'Skin/Shell'

Darts were used to sculpt the bodice around and over the pregnant male belly and back of the bodice, a shaping technique reserved for women's wear. The utilisation of traditional woman's wear techniques in the design, development and construction of these sculptures of a dominantly male form was a technical method used add to the narrative about diverse bodies and the skin/shell that encases them.

Installation

The sculptures hung at a height at eye level indicating that they could be human torsos floating through the gallery space at the same level as the other people in the room. They moved slightly as people moved past them or touched them. The works were unobtrusive in the gallery, sitting 1m out from the back wall of the space. They embodied a sense of quietness and stillness, gently swaying as movement escalated in the room.

This series of sculptures are not a linear evolution of one look or beginning/end point but rather a series of sculptures that reference each other but are unique, filled with infinite possibilities for future manifestations and developments. Through this reference to development but not direct evolution of shape, I aimed to discuss that multiple futures are possible for all of us. These works were designed to create space to reflect and quietly sit with our own diverse identities.

The meaning the reader gained from the works developed and changed depending where in relation to the works the reader stood. From one end of the line up the reader might feel they are looking at the beginning or end point of the linear presentation.

Figure. 53. Detail photograph of 'Skin/Shell'

It is unclear in which direction the reader should "read" the works, alluding to the ideas discussed above about our identities often have no fixed beginning or end, but rather we are filled with infinite possibilities. From behind the reader would see light fragmented through the resin casting, noting scales and cracks on the exterior, and might consider the surface to be caught between a shell and a skin. From the side the reader would see the join between the resin back and the embellished front and would be left with a clear view of how the shape of the back and front relate, contradict and talk to each other.

These works through their exploration of non-opaque white organza capture, reflect and play with light and create a feeling of stillness through their ghost like presence in the white walled gallery. They invite the reader to reflect, sit with and embody their skin and shells quietly and boldly.