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Mining Memory and Resistance Towards New Documentary Forms

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

Master of Fine Arts

in

Visual Art

by

Sofia Rebeca Valiente Noailles

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Part One: Statement on my Documentarian Practice and Philosophy

I first found myself in the documentary realm when I realized that I could make photographs of people and groups outside of my own immediate circles as a way to be present and create agency in my own world. Making pictures activated my awareness, and awoke the general passivity and disassociation I have always felt as a citizen in society. As an artist rooted in narrative, storytelling, and social practices, I seek to dispel this “distant safety/protective barrier of the subject” that is common in documentary, and therefore to allow the viewer to become enveloped in and immersed in a story that is about someone and someplace else. I am always challenging the norm of what it means to be the maker, to be the subject and to be the audience or the viewer. How can we communicate past the social strata that has been predetermined for us?

In a rudimentary sense, my process is similar to that of a sociologist or anthropologist who might approach or study people in society or a critical issue. I never quite considered myself a documentary photographer, though it is true that I work with stories and subject matter that are at their core, not fictive. While the traditional photojournalist might be more of a fly on the wall — I aspire to be a part of what I’m experiencing, and not just create images that are meant to elude a hypothetical ‘window into worlds’. With traditional documentary images, I’ve always felt physically distanced — behind a glass like at a zoo, looking at some exotic place or thing. I use photography to get inside that metaphorical glass. I don’t want to be an outsider, but a true citizen. I

follow my curiosities and allow them to evolve constantly over time without an agenda. In my practice and research, there is a constant transformation in how I analyze and perceive a social issue.

I have never been interested in exposing a subject/group or issue, but have always been compelled to understand the complexities and nuance of humans and the human experience. I am interested in taboos and in deconstructing stereotypes. With my first project, *Miracle Village*, which was about a community of sex offenders in South Florida, curiosity drew me to the community, but it was the transformation of my perception that kept me there long-term. I saw that there was an entirely different narrative here that had not been told. I thought this issue revealed so much more about our society than it did about the individual people in the community; I referred to psychology's "scapegoat". I reflected on labeling and on keeping a group of people out on the fringes. I also understood that isolation and in particular, what it means to be punished, banished and branded with a simple *one size fits all* label. I realized at the time that I had met people that had committed worse atrocities, the difference was their ability to conceal it which pointed me to power. The history of taboos in society is that they are created when there is the most absence of control. History originates from the dominant class and the narratives that become part of it, exist for the benefit of that class. I believe documentary practice can crack the monolith of power and control— but also be a conduit to its force.

I understood this problematization— that “the truth” is a narrative with a perspective, as soon as I began producing work. As a practitioner, I realized that the supposed objectivity and neutrality of the observer/documenter was a fallacy. How a documentarian frames a work or story can also be a work of fiction. In the creation of a form, there is no single truth, but there are multiple truths and I believe in addressing these structures of power within my work.

In mainstream culture, we can see a documentary film or a set of photographs published in the *New York Times* and not think of the process behind it. We consume them as they are and perceive them, in a way, as author-less. As a society there is not enough questioning of this status quo— of the produced document, or the historical account. In the documentary, the viewer sees the result of thousands of choices— who to feature, and why their “story” is deemed more significant over someone else's (the media is the institution that defines this; what is deemed as an important social issue, and why there are some issues that we can not speak about, i.e. the taboo). Then there's the editing, cutting, and pasting together and the editorializing of a story and the ‘master storyteller’ personage. To document is to subjugate -- and that is a position that I grapple with. I believe in addressing the class hierarchy in practice and challenging this idea of mastery.

In my work, personal histories hold more weight over history with a capital H. Giving the “subject” the space to speak their truth is integral to my practice and my ethics in general. When I built my steamboat replica/photo exhibition, consideration for the

audience was foundational to my decisions on location, accessibility, and form— who is going to see this work and in which context was it going to be disseminated? I knew I wanted to facilitate dialogue outside what is a niche of people in the art or documentary world.

With my film *Ivy Ridge*, I have taken the role of the subject as I have pointed the camera on myself and past. To tell the story of the former behavior modification program, I chose to focus on the depicting the psychological atmosphere of the place, which is the component that outsiders most struggle to grasp. In resistance to the secrecy of the program, and its power mechanisms as an institutional, carceral system, I reactivated memories through a collaborative process with former students through re-enactment. The film commemorates this past experience and produces a collective memory, mourning the destruction of our autonomy. The non-linearity of montage imagines other possible states and breaks in and out of the loop of pathologized memory (i.e. trauma). I use montage and juxtaposition to break the script and to destabilize the viewer— cutting scenes and interrupting the timeline while using the text, or audio, in the form of Voiceover, eliciting different forms of affect from the viewer. This is to immerse them, and make them a participant in the loop, not just a consumer, and to place them in the active role of figuring out the story, leading to comprehension of the psychological ramifications of the institution.

As a documentarian, I seek to transcend the dominant form of informing that is central to documentary practice and provide an ambiguous framework for the spectator. I try not to impose overall attitudes or beliefs or make assertions on a subject to give the viewer the freedom of interpretation so that they can participate in the construction of meaning. The boundaries of perspective and truth, and of subject, maker, and viewer are blurred in my practice.

Part Two: Disciplinary Power and Documents From Ivy Ridge

In September of 2022, four former students from a teen reformatory boarding school returned to an abandoned building in upstate NY that was formerly known as Ivy Ridge, a behavior modification program that operated from 2001-2009. This was the site where two of the students spent between 19-24 months in 2003-2005 during the ages 13-16. The other two students attended a sister program in Montana during the same time-frame. The building in NY was purchased but never repurposed and many personal letters and testimonies, documents and other physical remnants were left within the building. The plan was to reactivate the space with bodies and create the documentation that never existed using memory and verifiable accounts and also referencing the extensive paper trail of records that were uncovered in the building. These internal documents were never previously seen by students, parents or outsiders and they reveal a detailed system of recoding and accounting for the procedures of the maintenance of the school and its students.

The program was part of what is known as the troubled teen industry which is composed of therapeutic boarding schools, wilderness programs and other youth residential treatment facilities. These private, for-profit institutions are not regulated such as a public school or hospital. There is no government oversight. Students become an entity to the facilities through a contractual agreement that transfers parental rights to the schools. These forms are produced by the facility. Many implement a military-like disciplinarian structure and most are isolated, located in sparsely populated areas across

America. Students are sent from several hundred to thousands of miles away from their home towns and they do not have contact with parents, family members or anyone that is outside of the school. In addition to the many rules, there is the behavior modification program students are expected to graduate from. The cornerstone of the program are seminars which are multi-day training workshops that use various processes and encounter groups where sharing intimate details of one's past is expected and the common practice of attack therapy is taught. Students must participate as an integral part to advancing through the different stages of the program which implements six levels including 8-10 seminars. Behavior modification and a complete adoption of the ideologies taught in seminars are to be internalized by the students for the student to earn their way back home. The practice of self-blame and taking responsibility for the events in ones life is a central ideology.

Much of what occurred in the confines of the property was confidential. In preparation for the project, we excavated and collaboratively pulled together our memories, along with the stories and anecdotes from other survivors on social media groups. Two of us retrieved our own personal files from the building which contained handwritten accounts from seminars and private information about our past and our personal issues. To revisit, de-centralize and to re-process with our adult minds was our main purpose. In an effort to make public what was intentionally kept secret, we re-enacted the "therapeutic" processes along with the routine activities that pertained to the

daily life inside the program. Using our bodies, which store memory as well, we put on the old uniforms and relived the experience.

The enrollment agreement transferred parental rights and control over to the program. It also marked the commodification of an individual for profit.

Upon arrival at the program a full-body strip search was performed on the student. Each individual had their clothing removed and catalogued, along with the other belongings they arrived to the facility with. Students were given a pair of sweatpants and a sweatshirt to replace their street clothes. Each new student was then brought into a room with a staff member and another student. An intake form was completed per each new arrival. The student inventory included a check list that notated drug use history and sexual activity and marked down any tattoos, piercings or cutting marks on the body of the student.

At this point the students were left with only allowable items such as underwear, socks, sweats, a hair tie, shampoo and other toiletries, sneakers without shoelaces and a winter coat. This marked the beginning of documentation and criminalization. The gathered information was exploited and used as reasoning for keeping a student enrolled longer in the program.

There were five categories of rule violations that resulted in different amounts of demerits. The first group of violations included a late which was given for not getting into line formation quickly enough or for taking longer than five minutes in the shower.

A dress code violation could be given for not having a neck tie tucked into the uniform vest. A rude comments violation was given for speaking negatively of the program or an authority figure usually in a letter sent home to parents. This was also a manipulation rule violation. Category two violations included disrespect to property which was given when forgetting items in the bathroom or classroom such as toothpaste or leaving a water bottle, which was to be kept at all times with oneself. A breaking confidentiality violation was given when speaking about anything deemed confidential such as processes within seminars. Talking without permission was a violation and talking at all was only allowed at specific times such as family group or to ask a question during class. One could not speak in line, in hallways, in dorm rooms or in the cafeteria during levels 1-3. Category three included shut down violations, one was to be in bed with eyes closed (eyes opened was a violation). Blatant rule violations which constituted breaking any rule in general, it was also given for looking at oneself in the mirror. Category four included a refusal rule violation which was given if a student who refused to speak to staff or follow the daily structure. Run away plans was also a violation, which constituted anything from looking outside of a window, to having another student's phone number or address. Category five was given for a self-inflicted injury which included picking at one's skin or popping a pimple. It was also given for attempting to run away.

Violations from the latter category caused the loss of all status levels and all points, defaulting to level one of the program.

The self-correction form was used to amend a broken rule violation and to deduct points from an individual. They were filled out with the following language: “I am taking responsibility for the following rule violation” and “I will make the following correction in the future”.

I am taking responsibility for the following rule violation, a blatant rule violation because I was reading in the computer lab and my buddy told on me so I got in trouble. I will make the following correction in the future, I will not read my book in the computer lab. I will make sure I take paper and do my book report while I’m reading.

I am taking responsibility for the following rule violation, non verbaling, because I was non verbaling on the bus with another girl by smiling at her when she smiled at me. Therefore, I got a non verbaling on the bus. I will make the following correction in the future. I will not smile or make any kind of faces anyone on the bus. That way I won’t get a non verbaling.

I am taking responsibility for the following rule violation, a blatant rule violation because I stepped out of line to ask an upper level a question when we were in gym and our family was on probation. In the future, I will never ask an upper level a question

when we are in the gym and when we are on probation ever again. That is how I will make the following correction in the future.

I am taking responsibility for the following rule violation, a blatant rule violation. I was walking and I jerked my head and it happened to be faced at the intervention room. So I got a BRV for “looking” in there. I will make the following correction in the future, I will not jerk my head at anything, that way I won’t look like I’m looking at something I am not supposed to.

The facility used a system of points and levels to assimilate the students into the program. Level six was the last stage before program completion and thus signaled the return home for the individual. Points were accumulated each day, based on cooperation and participation, overall attitude and behavior. Once the individual had enough points, they could “vote up” to the next level. There were rewards and privileges for each level beginning with level two, which gave the student a candy bar once a week. At level three, the student was awarded their first monitored phone call of fifteen minutes with a parent and they were also allowed to possess a watch. Levels four, five and six allowed students to be free from the military line structure, walk freely among the hallways and speak to one another without permission. There was also the opportunity to leave the grounds supervised with visiting parents for a day.

There were fifteen total possible points per day. Corrections, which took away points, were between five for a first category, twenty-five for the second and fifty for the third. Multiple corrections a week were common for the student, especially during the first several months which were the most restrictive. It took on average one year to reach the upper levels.

The six levels are divided by lower status (1-3) and upper status (4-6). When a student reached the upper levels they also acquired responsibilities, which mainly entailed acting as a junior staff member. This meant they gave corrections and demerits to other students. The upper levels were assigned family groups (troops) and became disciplinarians that helped maintain control of the student body.

The schedule and its tasks were each day the same: wake up at 7 am each morning and leave the bed to get in line formation in the hallway to do the first headcount for the day. After this, there was thirty minutes to put on one's uniform, brush teeth, braid ones hair, make the bed and put away belongings. After this, back into line structure to head to the cafeteria for breakfast. This was followed by family group for an hour which allowed three people to share and speak about their "issues" in the presence of the family representative, who served as the liaison between the parents and students. Then two hours in the computer lab for "class" which was school lessons on a computer-based remote program. Then lunch followed by watching an educational video. Then "class" again for four hours until dinner. One hour for reading or journaling, then each student

would fill out their merit form where they allotted the points for the day. One hour of fitness followed by a five minute shower and finally, changing out of the uniform and into bed at 9:30 pm.

Bodies were to be in line structure at all times which consisted of standing up straight, having one's arms by one's side, feet together, head forward and eyes forward. Individuals were to be at arms distance length, facing the head in front on them. While walking in hallways, lines had to be adjacent to the wall. At the turn of each corner a pivot was to be done and a headcount was to be said out loud in pairs (bunk buddies and bunk leaders), one student said "bunk" and the other called out the number.

When walking outside, students were to walk arm in arm so that if one attempted to run away, the other could prevent them by grasping their arm. For new arrivals, they were to walk in groupings of three to provide extra protection. Proper sitting structure was having ankles crossed at all times while seated.

Shoelaces were removed for new arrivals and students were placed on a "run watch". New arrivals were also placed on a "suicide watch" which entailed sleeping with one's mattress in the hallway and not wearing the neck tie from the uniform ensemble.

Letter writing was conducted for an hour each Sunday and was the only communication with the outside. Letters were not to contain negative comments about

the institution or anything deemed as manipulation such as asking to go home. There was no talking, no making eye contact with anyone, no non-verbal communication and no physical contact with others.

The program contained a series of seminars that were to be completed by the students. They occurred every six weeks and each individual seminar lasted 2-3 days. They consisted of various exercises. Large group sharing and self-disclosure was expected and calling out/criticizing ones peers was expected. Each seminar had an anger release process where students would bang the floor with a duct-taped towel or push against a wall for hours. The seminars were led by a facilitator and upper levels also were on staff. The ideologies that were being taught were based around self-actualization theories and derived from humanistic psychology. The practice of the encounter group, came from a California cult from the sixties called Synanon. In a perverse effort of empowerment, facilitators believed that one could take responsibility for all the events in one's life whether at fault or not and that there were two ways one would see the world, either as a victim or as accountable. Victims are trapped and accountable people are free. The word victim was used as a negative attribute that one should steer clear from- it was seen as a self-loathing that did not serve one and as a mechanism to evoke pity from others. Weaponized self-help language was used in the brainwashing of the students.

Victim language that we were not to use involved words such as: I can't, I don't know, I am sorry, I forgot, it just happened, they did it to me, I had no choice, its not my fault, it was an accident, I did not mean it.

We were instead to use accountable language such as: I choose, I have a choice, my part in this is, how did I set this up? What did I avoid or ignore? How did I create this?

How are you accountable for the death in your family, what were you doing on the day of your abuse? The idea was to find a way to be at fault in order to become empowered and take control of the events in one's life.

One exercise involved laying on the floor while a group of people continue to walk over a body until the individual stands up and exclaims "stop!" That was considered a break through, that the person was learning to finally stand up for themselves.

The major seminar ground rule was to "not disclose the processes of the training with anyone who hasn't graduated this training. What goes on in this room stays in this room." Also, it was forbidden to speak of other people's personal experiences.

Upon program graduation, and the eventual return home and reentry into society, there was a bursting of a bubble. The individual was ejected from the program

community. Students were not allowed to exchange contact information, and once one left the facility, the language and ideologies lost their relevance in the outside world. As involvement dissipated, the memories started to wear thin as they were unrelatable to the outside world.

Fifteen years later, this changed with social media as fellow students found one another, and the memories started to flood back in. The old building, that was never repurposed, is an artifact and testament to the experience. The documents recovered from it are verifiable truths. The intention of the project was to use the power of memory to produce a counter-history of this formative institution. To remember is to resist and to become a narrator is a transfer of power to the author. The body remembers and collectively, the group recalls.

The internalized narrative was that the program had saved each person's life and reformed and re-educated the individual. The foundation of this narrative grew from within the facility by staff members who convinced parents that their child would be dead if they didn't finish the program.

In a document found inside the desk of a former family representative, I recovered a list of rebuttals that served to defend the institution in the event of an accusation from the outside. The list contains discussion points used to dismiss concerns within the facility:

1. Allegations of abuse- they are not credible
2. Physical restraint- any physical restraint is that of a last resort and only done for the safety of all involved and is very rare
3. Isolation- we do not use isolation
4. School closures- the information presented in the media is wrong
5. Licensing and accreditation- all our schools have the appropriate license or approvals required for their type of facility
6. Personal qualification- we have a very qualified staff
7. Brainwashing- these allegations are untrue. We do no “brainwashing”
8. Kidnapping/transport- our schools do not transport new students
9. Money- to think that we are making a high profit margin would be naive
10. Staff training and monitoring- our staff are highly trained
11. Lawsuits- having served thousands of families, we have had ____ lawsuits
12. Living conditions- I would strongly disagree that the living conditions are poor
13. Screening for appropriateness- we outline clearly in the enrollment agreement the student criteria and then the parents who know the child the best and what evaluations or assessments the child has had, are required to certify that the child qualifies to be a student
14. Seminars/workshops- the seminars and workshops that we use for students and parents are some of the finest available
15. Misled parents- this is totally false, in fact, nothing could be further from the truth

Part Three: Anecdote on Process of Making *Ivy Ridge*

With my project *Ivy Ridge*, my research began on Facebook in 2014 when a group of former students from a behavior modification program published photographs of the abandoned building from a former facility which revealed it had been left intact since its closure in 2008. Tall, overgrown wild weeds and flowers covered the entire landscape of what us former students once knew to be a perfectly manicured lawn. All the computers, which were used for remote school had been left in the classrooms. Old “self-correction” forms were laying at the top of desk that oversaw the rows of computers where the staff would sit and also where the “teachers” or tutors would sit. Their fake credentials eventually led to the demise of the school, with many false high school diplomas handed out that became unusable. One chalkboard still had the Accountability Formula— Stop, Look, Choose, Vote, Do It, Step Left— written on it. This slogan was used to take responsibility for any occurrence in one’s life, whether at fault or not. The staff offices were in tact too, with hard drives left on individual computers that were recovered, the contents revealed all the internal communications along with correspondence with student families that showed manipulative tactics in maintaining enrollment for the facility. When a parent wanted to pull their child from the program, a Red Flag form was filled out. “Your child will die if they do not graduate the program.” That idea was stressed to parents extensively. Many parents took out second mortgages— my mother eventually lost her house due to this.

As a documentarian, I knew I had to return and see it for myself. A physical time capsule was standing testament. I decided to drive up from Florida with my partner at the time and figure out who owned the building currently to get permission to access it. If it had been any other abandoned site, I would have just gone inside. Once I got to the property, I felt as though I was being watched and that I needed to prove myself, do things “the right way”. It was a most bizarre experience looking into the windows— I saw just glimpses of the rooms, like the former isolation room which had handwriting on the walls with generic positivity language. Peeping into the graded/barred windows of the former dorm rooms that we were not allowed to look outside of, I saw my reflection and with it, a ghostly new perspective. It’s strange to want so badly to go inside a place I wanted more than anything to escape as a young 13 year old. I stayed with a former staff member whom I was close with in the program. She was the director of the girls side of the boarding school, and I was her favorite at one point, becoming a poster child that gave tours to parents and even an interview with the NY Times about how great school was there (I was failing before I got there, but as the unaccredited school was so easy, I was able to jump through several semesters during my 19 months stay). I don’t recall ever doing that interview and my voice didn’t sound like mine. It sounded like I was reading quickly from a piece of paper the way one might do to not leave a gap of silence for the interviewer to challenge an answer. Robotic.

I stayed with A. who had moved back in with her parents in Ogdensburg after loosing her last job at another former program. I had never seen the town much, it was

pretty run-down, rust belt, broken America etc. The town is on the border with Canada and has this transient energy, like a non-place. During the same time I was investigating the new owner of the building, J.M., a Chinese businessman who purchased the facility to turn it into a language school for Chinese students. His plan failed according the news articles because he fell into too much red-tape in sorting out student visas. He owned other properties around the town and I got a hold of a realtor that sold him one of his houses. Perhaps she thought I was interested in purchasing his properties because she very casually handed me his cellphone number. I called J. and explained how I was a former student and a photographer, just published my first book and wanted permission to access the building. He was out of town and was hesitant as the building was in bad shape, but he agreed to let me walk around outside. Later, on my drive back to Florida, I met with him at Dunkin' Donuts to attempt to charm him and see if he may give me the future opportunity. I think he wanted some sort of proposition during that meeting.

Photographing the building from the outside, I realized I'd never seen so much of it. I never knew all the doors and entrances. I had no idea about the hiking trails in the back or the outside basketball court. We weren't allow to look outside much. Being too observant might make staff think you were planning to run away. I got the feeling that at any moment a figure might appear in a window. It was very spooky— the building, originally constructed in the 60's has a heavy energy.

Over those first years, through a Facebook group called, I went to Ivy Ridge, many former students got connected, adding one another as friends on Facebook. We we never allowed to know addresses or phone numbers so that when we left we couldn't find one another and communicate. I started speaking with Diana who was there with me at the same time. She was a budding journalist and wanted to write about our experience and we shared some contacts and stories every now and then. She had a terrible time in the program— she resistance for years, never followed the rules and they made her suffer for it. I kinda wished I was that bad ass.

Everything changed during the very beginning of the pandemic, when another former student visited the building and found a basement hallway in the dormitory building which contained stacks upon stacks of former students personal files. Files contained intake forms, comments from staff, self-correction forms, demerit forms, extensive writing from seminar homework were we had to write for several hours in the middle of the night about our past traumas during the days of intensive training. There were confession letters, which were required by each student, where we had to reveal every single secret to our parents (and thus to the staff too)— drugs we did, people we had sex with, lies we told, this and more to demonstrate that we were taking the program seriously and were willing to change. These letters were then used to keep us there longer. If someone's letter wasn't spicy enough they had to re-write it, a lot of people lied about drugs they'd done just to appease the family representative staff. My writing revealed a past that I forgot and buried so deep I don't think I would have ever recovered

if it weren't for these files. And thus a time-portal that could not be shut was opened. A portal to my childhood and the foundation of everything I am and also the through-line that connects all of my work as a photographer. I was put in a box, isolated from society, similar to the subjects in my projects. As a 22 year old, I experienced a connection to sex offenders (my first project), because I knew what it was to be ostracized completely, not given a voice and marked forever, in my case, as a problem child. I was the bad kid, that was my identity. But the school had reformed me. Yet there was always something that brought me back to those themes in my personal work. My huge and unusual capacity for empathy and the ability to understand complex, multiple perspectives.

My mind was reeling reading all of my files. There was a note from night staff about me yelling at everyone in my sleep in the middle of the night. Night terrors. A Statement of Fact where I told on a boy that was trying to communicate with me through another person, it was not allowed. We had to tell on our peers (and ourselves) in order to prove our integrity and worthiness to go home and also to become part of staff and the disciplinary tactics and system. A signed contact signing over parental rights to this facility. My mother committed to one year off the bat, even though she had never been to the place herself. A correction for smiling at someone. A correction for reading a book when I was supposed to be watching a movie, a correction for speaking poorly about the facility in a letter home. Letters were I am begging to be taken home, a quote in my daily reflections "its better to be hated for what you are, then to be loved for what your not."

Through the files, I could experience the lose of my autonomy and whatever sense of individuality I was beginning to discover as a young teen.

In September 2020, I decided it was the perfect time to visit and break into the school to photograph the inside. Things were pretty locked down still from the major initial shutdown of the pandemic. I conversed with a few that had gone, and they told me which doors were open. I drove into the driveway of the property all the way to a back maintenance building and tucked my car inside a bushy parking spot out of view. I walked inside, this time with a new partner. I entered through the large gymnasium through what was the upstairs therapy offices (this service was an extra cost from the \$3,000 a month tuition, I had actually only seen a therapist once). It was pitch black inside but with the light from my headlamp I saw a tag that read “The Rapist” (therapist broken into two words). One of the rooms contained several unused old uniforms. I put one on with the idea of doing self-portraits. When I put the final piece on, the neck-tie, I threw up.

I walked through the gymnasium hallways to the library building which is where the girls had their daily activities. I began to photograph each room, classroom, computer lab, isolation room, and the seminar room, where the trainings were done, setting my camera on a tripod and getting pictures of as many of the areas as possible. I photographed myself in the solitary confinement room and then in the seminar room. I wanted to create documentation of this place as evidence of the former behavior

modification program, the documentation that never existed. So much was still in tact though it felt smaller to me as an adult. Then I photographed the main building which housed the boys. I had never seen much of it as we were kept separated. I continued as much as I could, systematically capturing each room. The mold and asbestos were so bad, I have never breathed air that is so heavy. I did as much as I could. I didn't want to risk leaving to go outside and getting caught. I imagined a voice of judgement from the former staff like an internalized critic the entire time. What was the validity of this work? The mind chatter was explosive. But I pushed through for the sake of the process.

After that trip, I knew I wanted more. As a storyteller and mainly a portrait photographer, I needed people in the shots, the space needed to be activated otherwise it was just another building or some kind of urban exploration. It had to embody the story. I moved out to California for grad school and connected with a group of girls that I was at the program with. A week after moving here, I decided to join them on their first trip back to the building. I asked if anyone was willing to put on the old uniforms and let me photograph them. Diana and some of the other girls were up for it. I photographed them entering the building and going through files in a more traditional documentary way. This was pretty wild— being back there together 16 years later. Everyone's memories together, made for a full recounting of the experience of Ivy Ridge with new memories that flooded back.

I made some photos that re-enacted the processes of the seminars. I took a portrait of Diana, holding a duct-tape wrapped towel that we used to beat the floor to release our anger. She has this disassociated gaze and all of a sudden I knew this was exactly how I wanted to retell the story of Ivy Ridge. It became clear that the seminar re-enactments would be the most impactful as subject matter, because seminars were the foundation of the program's ideologies and also impactful in its visual weight— the ritualistic activities we had to do were so bizarre.

I returned to California and slowly started planning my return with Diana and two other girls that were willing to collaborate. The process of remembering began as such. When I was at the building by myself, nothing came back to me. But reflecting on our memories together, everything came rushing back in. All the rules, the seminars, the incidents. So with Diana, I began making zoom calls and together we read the seminar timesheets/scripts and we began the act of recalling and filling in the blanks. Hours of conversations led to more and more memories surfacing, and documents were there to verify them as true.

The memories existed like a film in my head. So many vivid details like the untouched snow from no one going outside, the constant silence from not being to speak to one another. I could watch my experience as a third person thinking back. From this I realized that the re-enactment should be a video; including sound and moving image. We made the plan to go shoot over a couple of days. I roughly sketched out twenty-five

scenes/situations that would be sort of vignettes of the film. I drove across the country with my car filled with production gear— lights, stands and cameras. A friend of mine agreed to be the cinematographer, as I'd never shot video before. I got to the farm/artist residency where I stayed for a month. Diana and two friends, Kia and Val, that she met at the second program she was sent to in Montana, met me there.

In August of 2022, we woke up at three am, put on the old uniforms and drove to the school. I dropped Diana, Kia and Val and Brandon (my cinematographer) off before sunrise to avoid being seen. Then I drove to a nearby trail head where I parked my car and took my foldable bike out and rode up to the school. Once we were in the building, we were in the clear. I had heard of a security guard that had been patrolling the property so I knew we needed to have no outdoor visibility. The site also acted as an unofficial station/viewpoint for Border Control which we had to sneak past a couple of times too.

We set up the seminar room with the props we prepared and put the chairs in rows and went through each of the storyboard re-enactments. We went through it mostly chronologically like a seminar, building up to the intense moments towards the end of the day. We started with small group sharing (sitting in circles), we squished a stress release brain chanting “no, no, brain thats not fear, thats excitement!” We filmed us making charts with the language and teachings from the seminars. Then went into the anger release processes, Diana chose to be the most vocal, she claims she knew how to fake scream and cry to get through the seminars since she had to repeat them several times.

We walked in line structure and were amazed how our bodies remembered and maintained perfect formation. Then we put on costumes to re-enact the “stretches” we were each assigned that were meant to get us out of our comfort zone. Playing dress up became fun. Being able to control the extent of the re-enactment and how we wanted to approach it gave us agency and was liberating. We had hard conversations about our families, why we were sent away, then we had gibberish, nonsensical conversations while we appeared serious in the video to lighten the mood.

We hid all the gear in a closet and returned for two more days. One of the seminar ground rules was “what happens in this room, stays in this room” thus we were determined to create a visual record of all of it. We used our memory as a tool of resistance. These were sacred rituals at the time but now we’ve transformed them into theatrical performances, both silly and piercing. Because they never let documentation exist, for me the images hold just as much weight as if they were done during the actual time of the seminars. Originally marginalized and subjected, as adults we are given back the rights to our voices and we transform the narrative into a production of counter-history.

After everyone left, I spent a couple of weeks rummaging through the remaining documents and materials on the grounds, amassing even more of the internal, staff paper trail. Like a call script of rebuttals on what to say to parents in doubt of the program—

“allegations of abuse are not credible, we do no brainwashing, we do not use isolation.”

The challenge of the project wasn't in the investigation or retelling of the rules and structure/overall system, or explaining the industry/origins. The difficulty lies in the relaying of the psychological ramifications of the place on the individual. How can one relay the trauma and the hyper-vigilance, the manipulation and gaslighting. The stunting of the growth of an individual and the relentlessness of that interruption. The individuals in the project are clearly adults, but here they stand in school uniform, walking in line structure, still active in the building- the apparatus for discipline- that still exists. Trauma is pervasive, it is repetitive and it is rhythmic. Trauma marks the individual with infamy.

For me, it's very important to not just be a vessel and work in a purely didactic, explanatory form of storytelling mainly so that I can activate the viewer. My goal is for the work to not just become a consumption of content, but a vehicle for participation in the story and the issues that are central to it. The balance of the fact and the re-enactment and blurring of boundaries of subjugation— the “other” and the “audience”— I believe, makes that participation possible. With *Ivy Ridge* authorship is shared as we all wrote the “script”. Instead of “subjects” to the viewer, we are guides in the experience of this place.

The work of playwright Bertolt Brecht, and his book *War Primer* specifically, was very influential to me in learning about montage and how I eventually decided to edit the film from the 14 hours of footage and subsequent audio recordings that were produced

after filming. During World War II, Brecht collaged newspaper images and their captions and juxtaposed them with his poems that suggest alternative meanings. The purpose was to teach the viewer to learn how to read images versus the passive practice of taking them at face value. In my film, the tension between what one hears and what one sees and the splicing of images and scenes, produces a unique experience for each individual that is their own. In a way, this subjugates the viewer breaking the boundary between “us” and “them”.