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UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA SAN DIEGO

DEEP ROLES

A Thesis submitted in partial satisfaction of the requirements
for the degree Master of Fine Arts

in

Visual Arts

by

Sophia Cleary

Committee in charge:

Professor Alexandro Segade, Chair
Professor Julie Burelle
Professor Ricardo Dominguez
Professor Mariah Garnett

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University of California San Diego

2026

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ABSTRACT OF THE THESIS

DEEP ROLES

by

Sophia Cleary

Master of Fine Arts in Visual Arts

University of California San Diego, 2026

Professor Alexandro Segade, Chair

DEEP ROLES is a thesis exhibition that investigates performance as both subject and inheritance. At its center is *A Doll's House*, a 23-minute documentary film in which I direct my parents, both former actors, as they return to the Henrik Ibsen play they performed together thirty years prior, using the script as a starting point for examining our family dynamic, and the distance between former and currently performed roles. Drawing on psychoanalyst Avgi

Saketopoulou's theories of "limit consent" and "exigent sadism," I argue that discomfort and risk are the primary strategies in my practice; notably in the documentary process itself, where the act of filming becomes a form of exigent sadism that imperils all parties in the service of transformation.

I situate these works within a broader inquiry into the mechanics of liveness, improvisation, and scripts – both theatrical and behavioral – to think through how they structure our encounters with one another. My training in clown, specifically through the pedagogical practice of *via negativa*, informs my aesthetic sensibility throughout, as does group relations theory, which illuminates how power, projection, and authority are negotiated within any working group. The works of visual and performance artists Andrea Fraser and Nikita Gale, both of whom engage group relations as method and aesthetic, serve as key points of reference in my research, alongside filmmaker William Greaves's *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm* as a predecessor for meta-theatrical, destabilizing documentary practice. Through this constellation of psychoanalysis, performance theory, and autobiographical inquiry, *DEEP ROLES* asks what it means to perform for, with, and against the people that came before you.

INTRODUCTION

I. The Stage

It's mid-August 2025, and I am visiting my parents at their home in Maine. My mother and I sit down at the kitchen table and look at each other, almost shyly. "Five weeks," I say with a hint of surrender. My mother laughs, then adds with trepidation, "It's a long time." We aren't discussing a pregnancy; we're discussing how long we will be together, and her discomfort seems mutual. I reassure her, "If it's too much, I will book a ticket home. No need to force anything." There's a sense of nervousness and excitement—the terror of intimacy. "Fun!" my dad interjects, standing inside the doorway, at a calculated arm's length.

It's the most uninterrupted time we've spent together in twenty years. It's intimidating, but realistically, I'm broke and can't afford my apartment in San Diego, nor can I stay with my partner in LA – we're "on a break." I need my parents right now. Historically, I've only been able to spend a few days with them at a time. It's always been too overwhelming. The emotional outbursts, self-neglect, illnesses, alcohol abuse, and the person I become when faced with such issues – defensive, mean, controlling – it's not who I want to be anymore.

And now, Mom reveals that Dad had a bad fall a few weeks ago, but they didn't want me to know. I'm angry that they kept it from me for so long, but I soften when I see how much they've aged. It's time to be nice and make up for lost time.

I'm open to change, and I want transformation. I just did a closing session with my therapist of ten years. He tells me I've "integrated" him, which I try to appreciate and not make into a perverted joke. I feel prepared to use my tools—I've stopped drinking, and I'm on medication. I think I'm ready to take on this chapter with newfound sanity. I guess this is

the culmination of the so-called re-parenting process. *But am I approaching this right?* I'm not exactly coming in peace. I'm making a documentary. ☺

II. This Thesis Is Not a Performance

At first, I thought, this thesis is *not* a performance. But then, I realized – there are parts of it that are very vulnerable – a feeling, for me, that accompanies performing. It might even be masochistic (it is). And the vulnerable moments aren't confined to the autobiographical – just as exposing is my engagement with psychoanalysis and theory. I'm not an academic, but I'm trying to make connections. And, in true form to the way I work, I set myself up in wait for the audience to throw tomatoes at me.

In this paper, I discuss some of the drawings, installation, sculpture, and films I've made at UCSD, all of which center performance as its subject matter. I draw heavily upon theorist and psychoanalyst Avgi Saketopoulou's book *Sexuality Beyond Consent* to help me name some of the discomfiting tactics I employ in my practice, specifically her terms "limit consent" and "exigent sadism." I connect my experience training in clown school with my current artistic methods, specifically the pedagogical practice of *via negativa* to gain a greater understanding of how the negative, or void, plays out as a method and aesthetic sensibility in my stripped-down performance work. I explore this constellation through the work of artists with whom I am in conversation, who each engage performance as a subject, whether working with institutional systems, social structures at macro- and micro-levels, or interpersonal dynamics. Specifically, I refer to the works of visual and performance artists Andrea Fraser and Nikita Gale, who both draw upon group relations throughout their respective practices. I also introduce filmmaker William Greaves's experimental film

Symbiopsychotaxiplasm as an important predecessor for meta-theatrical work, and as a text for thinking through how authority is granted or rescinded by members of a working group.

My exhibition, *DEEP ROLES*, consists of a 23-minute documentary video titled *A Doll's House* and a suite of drawings titled *Celebrity*. *A Doll's House*, which takes its name from the Henrik Ibsen play, follows two actors as they return to reading the play together for the first time in over thirty years. These actors are my parents, and the film is inspired by my childhood memories of watching them perform as the central married couple, Nora and Torvald.¹

The documentary captures our real-life dynamics as parents and child, as well as the layered working dynamics between a director and actors. At its core, this short gets to the heart of my obsession with performance as a subject and pathway. I explore how performing affects our memories, self-perception, real-time behavior, and finally, my family system. The piece addresses the intimacy inherent to being witnessed, the group dynamics of a triad, and the act of performing when the audience is your family. It hasn't exactly been pleasurable to work on.

In addition to the film, I present *Celebrity*, a suite of colored-pencil drawings that I exhibit inside the projection booth of the performance space. The title derives from hybridized, genetically modified tomatoes first created in the 1980s. The Celebrity tomato is not true to seed, meaning that it cannot reproduce without intervention,² which, to me, is entirely relatable.

¹ I auditioned for the role of one of the children and didn't get cast.

² "The Celebrity Tomato: A Texas Superstar in the Garden." Bexar Master Gardeners, February 26, 2024. <https://bexarmg.org/2024/02/26/the-celebrity-tomato-a-texas-superstar-in-the-garden/>.

Before I discovered that the tomatoes are named “Celebrity,” I had already been drawing them, thinking about them as shame projectiles thrown at performers when the audience is upset. I am thinking about the tomato as a symbolic object, like Eve’s apple in the Garden of Eden—or a threat, a gift, a source of danger, and sustenance. The red nose of a clown. Pressurized, full of potential, waiting to rupture.

In a certain sense, creating a performance for my thesis would be the sensible choice – a concluding distillation of my research in the format in which I am most comfortable. However, for *DEEP ROLES*, there is no explicit performance. Yet the work is saturated with it. This exhibition is a first attempt to address performance through experimental documentary film, drawings, and installation gestures. It is not a culminating body of work, but rather, an opening, and a new way of making that extends my practice and imagines different ways of addressing the stakes of liveness, theatricality, and script. What you see in this exhibition is an expression of how performance has affected me, and of the legacy of growing up in a home where it functioned as a connective, and sometimes restrictive, tissue.

Chapter 1 METHODS & ORIENTATIONS

I. Psychic Scalpel, Scripting the Unknown

I have been told that my work has a violent or aggressive energy.³ I don't disagree. Whether it's my meta-theatrical performance works, delicate pencil drawings of medical exam tables and pillories, or the re-presented uncirculated actor's headshots of my mother, I know that the work I do is connected to discomfort and to pain. I want my audience to sit in the shadow, in the negative, in the lack. Yet I want this very same discomforting void to ultimately provide some level of solace. And you know what? I want eye contact, too!



Figure 1 Sophia Cleary, *Performance Practice*, installation view, 2024

Sigmund Freud describes psychoanalytic treatment as an exacting method to transform his patients' lives. He describes analysis as potentially curative, yet dangerous if practiced in

³ I first started hearing this during studio visits at Skowhegan in 2015 specifically from the contemporary artist Sarah Oppenheimer.

the wrong hands. But “no medical instrument or procedure is guaranteed against abuse,” he says, of his profession. Implying that anything worthwhile carries with it some level of risk, he concludes, “...If a knife does not cut, it cannot be used for healing either.”⁴

My work does something like this, too. The gestures I make have the dual capacity to feel both sobering yet unserious, gentle yet pressing. I impose upon *and* hold space. The gestures are cutting and penetrative. I cleave, sculpt, and construct new experiences. One doesn’t have to be a medical professional to take up this authoritative role.⁵

There is always a terror of going too far, of becoming the person abusing her tools. I work to prevent this from happening by remaining vulnerable in my role. Because, you see, the “knife that cuts” is not always monodirectional. I am exposed, too. My intention is not to inflict harm, but to transport us to a new experience of the self. We go there together. As for Freud’s adage, it seems like the promise of “healing” is the saving grace of such potential violence. But I must admit, healing is not my goal.

The word “abuse,” like “sadism,” conjures fear, disgust, and horror – they are topics that loom daily, from the never-ending Trump-Epstein news cycle to the more banal libidinal-algorithmic true crime documentaries that permeate our screens on various streaming platforms. I’m drawn to psychoanalyst and theorist Avgi Saketopoulou’s different conceptualization of sadism, as what she terms “exigent sadism”—a dynamic exchange in which both parties are rendered vulnerable. She reimagines sadism not as something

⁴ Sigmund Freud, "Analytic Therapy," in *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, vol. 16, *Introductory Lectures on Psycho-Analysis* (Part III), trans. and ed. James Strachey (London: Hogarth Press and the Institute of Psycho-Analysis, 1963), 462–463.

⁵ Perhaps I do have a fantasy of myself as a surgeon. You will see in my works a fascination with medical imagery and the medical space as a theater for the performative. Within the medical system, there are relationships centered around looking, being looked at, inspecting, exposing, and more. I am fascinated by medicalization and specifically the medicalization of birth. Before UCSD, I worked as a birth doula, where I witnessed humans giving birth to humans. This work made a profound impact on my feelings around collaboration, control, and surrender. Birth is a non-consensual collaboration.

“wielded over another,”⁶ like in our common understanding of sadistic acts, nor as the type of sadism found in BDSM sex communities, which is mimetic in nature.⁷ Instead, like Freud’s surgeon, its potential lies in its role as an offering, a modality of care – one that may be ruthless, but one that can also transform.⁸

~

In my performance work, I am concerned with the relationships between script, improvisation, and the management and collaboration with the unknown of live performance. I take up questions of intimacy, control, consent, visibility, and labor through theatrical scripts, as well as through what I think of as immaterial scripts – the behavioral changes we make when we enter certain architectural spaces, or social situations that demand explicit codes of conduct. I value performance most highly out of all art forms because of its technological, economic, and linguistic independence from mass reproduction.⁹ I love performance for its potential ability to destabilize our sense of reality and of ourselves.

In my play, *Read The Room*, written in my second year at UCSD, I create a performance about a theatrical rehearsal that spirals out of control and culminates in a violent

⁶ Avgi Saketopoulou, *Sexuality Beyond Consent: Risk, Race, Traumatophilia* (New York: NYU Press, 2023), 182.

⁷ Saketopoulou, *Sexuality Beyond Consent*, 173.

⁸ I can’t resist pointing out how Antonin Artaud utilizes the words “cruel” and “cruelty” for the type of theater he proposes in *The Theater and Its Double*. He states: “That is why I propose a theater of cruelty—With this mania we all have for depreciating everything, as soon as I have said “cruelty,” everybody will at once take it to mean “blood.” But “theater of cruelty” means a theater difficult and cruel for myself first of all. And, on the level of performance, it is not the cruelty we can exercise upon each other by hacking at each other’s bodies, carving up our personal anatomies, or, like Assyrian emperors, sending parcels of human ears, noses, or neatly detached nostrils through the mail, but the much more terrible and necessary cruelty which things can exercise against us. We are not free. And the sky can still fall on our heads. And the theater has been created to teach us that first of all.” (p. 79) Artaud and Saketopoulou share a desire to jolt their audiences by introducing provocative terminology to, in a way, seduce us. And at no point do I find their use of such language repellent – however, I think both potentially make more work for themselves by choosing language that necessitates such undoing and unpairing from our associations with the terms. We have to do a lot of work, as readers and viewers, to re-frame the terms “cruel” and “sadist” – and to what end?

⁹ Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London: Routledge, 1993), 146.

reversal of roles.¹⁰ An actor, playing my director, live-directs me on stage as I attempt to recite a monologue. At one point, he interrupts:

DIRECTOR. What would happen if you didn't know the line? And you didn't have the script to protect you?

SOPHIA. I'd call for line.

DIRECTOR. Like an idiot.

SOPHIA. Isn't that standard?

DIRECTOR. I don't know, is it? Try it right now.

SOPHIA. Try what?

DIRECTOR. Call for line.

SOPHIA. You want me to call for line?

DIRECTOR. Call for line.

SOPHIA. Line.

(long beat) SOPHIA looks to the audience...

DIRECTOR. Don't put it on them to save you.¹¹

Throughout the whole play, and especially in this section, I toe the boundary between what might be believably off-script¹² or not. The line "*What would happen if you didn't know the line? And you didn't have the script to protect you?*" refers directly to the experience of "knowing one's lines" as a form of safety. It points to my belief that improvisation is a form of risk. In this instance, the Director asks my character what it would be like to not know one's line – to truly improvise – to take a leap into the unknown.

I script a tense negotiation about what would happen if my character didn't remember her line. My director heckles me into calling for "line," like some bizarre test, to see if I'm willing to do it. Yet only he, ostensibly, would be able to help me with my forgotten line. So why is he egging my character on so intensely? (As the playwright, I'm really scripting my own bullying.) Sometimes, the audience responds (!) when my character calls for "line."

¹⁰ I'll get to the specifics of the role reversal later in this paper.

¹¹ Sophia Cleary, *Read The Room*, performed by Sophia Cleary and Joshua Kilcoyne, REDCAT, Los Angeles, CA, November 2024.

¹² Off script meaning that the actor has betrayed their memorized lines and is improvising – unlike off-book, which means they are fully memorized and no longer need to use their script.

There have been instances in which an audience member calls out, “*Isn’t live performance so amazing?*”—a question my character asks repeatedly throughout the show. It is a truly magical moment when it happens.¹³

In this work, I attempt to script the unscriptable – the undesirable negotiations that seem like mistakes or “flops.” In doing so, I craft something entropic, destabilizing what the audience might expect from writing, rehearsal, and performance. The point at which scripted and unscripted intersect I view as a kind of vanishing point – a nexus that is promised but is always in the distance, ahead of what we are doing in the present moment.

Performance is a medium that, at its most basic level, offers a certain immediacy and risk that you cannot replicate. It upends value systems. A limited number of people—the audience—have an experience that leaves no visible remnant. It is in the immediate present and, later in our memories, that performance makes its impact.

II. The Negative Clown

Before I came to UCSD, I worked as a comedian and clown in the Los Angeles performance scene. Whatever you know about clowning? Already, please try to suspend. Clowning, as a method, shows up in my work through humor as a device to seduce and confront, and as a weathervane guiding me toward the unknown. All I need you to know about it and its relationship to my practice is that it holds space for the void, and the act of venturing into the terrifying, unplanned, uncontrolled abyss of not knowing.

In my training at École Philippe Gaulier in Étampes, France, and The Idiot workshop in Los Angeles, the pedagogical practice I have the most experience receiving/enduring has

¹³ And a collaborative one, at that!

been that of *via negativa*. *Via negativa*, which literally means “negative way” or “by way of denial”¹⁴ is rooted in the theological concept of the same name. In theology, *via negativa* implies that we cannot know God by describing God, but only by describing what God is not. It is a way of using negation to arrive at understanding. It is non-descriptive and non-prescriptive. It resists scripts, language, and form. It accentuates the unfamiliar.

In clown school, the director acts as the helmsman of the audience and distributes negation (*via negativa*) to the performers as they attempt to discover “their clown.”¹⁵ Imagine: You go out on stage, barely even taking two paces out from the wings, and the director says, “No, that’s not it, start again.” You come out again, maybe trying something more physical this time – “No, that’s not it,” the director barks. Again, you enter and, taking a big swing, you start gyrating, dancing, grinning, screaming. The director replies: “Goodbye immediately.” Again, and again, and again you enter, you are told “No.” How about a giggle? No. A high kick? No. Running in circles? No. Pretending to vomit? No. Blaming the audience? No. Crying? No. Slapping yourself? No. Galloping? No. Untying and re-tying your shoes? No. Pratfall? No.

You are exhausted. Ashamed. But you keep trying new things.

No.	No. NO.	No. No. No.	No!
No.	No.	NO.	
No. No. No. No, No, No.	No. NO! NO! NO! noo. No.		
	No.	No.	
No.			

¹⁴ Veselin Kesich, "Via Negativa," in *Encyclopedia of Religion*, Encyclopedia.com, accessed March 17, 2026, <https://www.encyclopedia.com/environment/encyclopedias-almanacs-transcripts-and-maps/negativa>.

¹⁵ I put this in quotes here because that is the language used by the teachers – everyone has their own clown. They are often telling you to “find your clown” – which is specific and unique to each person. No one has the same clown.

No.

No

NO.

No.

No. No.

But then—oh my god. After what feels like hundreds of attempts, you hear nothing. The “No” is looming. Yet, it is in this moment, when, on a razor’s edge, you continue searching, you look out toward the audience. You’ve barely passed the center-stage precipice... You’re waiting for the other shoe to drop, to be pelted with the “No.” It doesn’t come. It makes no sense; you’re barely doing anything. What kind of psychedelia is this? You’re simply standing there. You are at your most vulnerable, most raw, tired, forsaken, confused, and desperate. You have lost your dignity. You have nothing left to lose. You shrug. The audience bursts out laughing. You have found your clown.¹⁶

The clown cannot be prescribed; no formula can help you become it. It’s through seeing what it is not that you find what it is. This crucial defining of the thing through sculpting with the “no”—the absence, the lack—feels central to the spirit of my work.

In my scripted pieces, like *Read The Room*, I try to find the edge of how far I can imagine the various possibilities of liveness – especially in the mistakes, missteps, and confusion – and I also try to predict how the audience might respond, until I can’t. It is at that abyssal vanishing point and void that I strive to reach.

III. The Fragility of Consent

In *Isn’t Live Performance So Amazing?*, a monologue I wrote during my first year at UCSD, I directly address the problems inherent to consent agreements.

¹⁶ If this isn’t masochism, I don’t know what is...

*Ostensibly, you came here of your own volition, and you consented to being here.
Did you consent to being here?
Do you consent to being here?
How do you know what exactly it is that you're consenting to?*¹⁷



Figure 2 Sophia Cleary, *Isn't Live Performance So Amazing?*, performance, 2024

I play with the tacit compliance agreement inherent in sitting in a theater. I try to bring attention to that contract between performer and audience – and while it isn't explicitly sexual (or is it? I've always thought of performing as the ultimate experience of bottoming...), it does demand a particular kind of mutual surrender, and trust. You trust the performer won't harm you,¹⁸ and I trust that my audience won't hurt me. Note the staging of audience seats in Figure 3, which surround me entirely, as though I am prey, which seems to me like an expression of an unconscious fantasy that I'm working through in the piece. I want my audience to devour me.

¹⁷ Sophia Cleary, *Isn't Live Performance So Amazing?*, performed by Sophia Cleary, VAF Performance Space, University of California San Diego, San Diego, CA, March 2024.

¹⁸ I've witnessed Ann Liv Young verbally abuse her audience members, cast, and venue staff.



Figure 3 Audience seating arrangement for *Isn't Live Performance So Amazing?*, 2024

Saketopoulou offers the paradigm of “limit consent” as a more realistic substitute for “affirmative consent,” the latter established as the prevailing heuristic through which we collectively negotiate our intentions and desires. As Saketopoulou states so refreshingly, “there is no such thing as consent, at least not in the way that affirmative consent paradigm imagines it or in the way it is sold to us.”¹⁹ Of course, she doesn’t mean that “No” doesn’t exist. Or that betrayals against it don’t occur all the time, causing deep harm to people in a wide variety of instances. Yet her point here is – how can you truly know what it is precisely that you are consenting to? How can we really account for our future experiences through language alone, given our limited understanding of what we like or feel when confronted

¹⁹ Saketopoulou, *Sexuality Beyond Consent*, 3.

with things we may have never experienced or been exposed to? How can I be sure that your description of what we are about to do aligns with my knowledge and interpretation? As Saketopoulou reminds us, we cannot live to prevent trauma and harm at the expense of experience—those outcomes are never within our power, anyway. We must, therefore, imagine new ways to take risks together and reorient our attitude toward those experiences more broadly.²⁰

Pointing out this dynamic is a significant theme in my work. While it may seem like I have all the power when I'm under lights and holding a microphone, I am ultimately rendered non-existent without my audience. Alternatively, as an audience member at a performance, I sometimes feel held hostage. But I must remember—I can leave at any time. All this to say, we are at the mercy of each other. It's exciting to point out these shifting power dynamics in real time—it's like watching an energy flow and change through the room, as authority and power are taken up and granted by the collective bodies in a room.

Saketopoulou's "limit consent" entails nuanced negotiations of limits that belong "neither to the domain of activity nor to the sphere of passivity ... it is not something we 'exercise' or something that is 'done' to us: it has more to do, rather, with surrendering *to* an other, or more precisely, with surrendering to the opacity²¹ in the other and to the opacity in

²⁰ Saketopoulou, *Sexuality Beyond Consent*, 133.

²¹ The "opacity in ourselves" to which Saketopoulou refers is the "otherness within ourselves" that affirmative consent cannot account for. As a paradigm, affirmative consent imagines that we are all psychologically available to ourselves, so much so that we can plan out all our engagements with each other through mutually agreed-upon contracts and transactions, as though our desires have all been thoroughly discovered and evaluated, and remain legible within our consciousness. It strives to eliminate all risk and liability through planning out the future as though we truly have that control or power. Limit consent, on the other hand, acknowledges that we are not necessarily acquainted with all our own desires, with ourselves. Just as we might arrive on stage in clown school, unfamiliar with our inner clown because of its opacity to us, it is only through an experience with another that these veiled parts of ourselves may become revealed. Put another way, our opacity is like the unconscious – it is what cannot be known about oneself without applying excavating measures – measures like the analytic experience, or measures like theater and performance. Yet, the unconscious can never be fully mastered, only contended with.

ourselves.”²² Limit consent is what I believe takes place inside the theater when I perform. It’s as though my audience and I meet inside or upon the fourth wall. I use the concept of limit consent constructively as the agreement we make in order to avail ourselves to each other so that we may be changed.

The psychoanalytic lens that I’m seemingly so committed to in this thesis isn’t meant to exclude other discursive approaches to the work. It’s not intended to justify my choices or provide tidy avenues for thinking through sexuality, power, or affect. The reason I find it so seductive is that it can hold a certain amount of ambivalence within the work and process. It allows me to pose new questions and, as Andrea Fraser describes, provides a “model for transformative practice.”²³

²² Saketopoulou, *Sexuality Beyond Consent*, 3.

²³ Andrea Fraser and Thyrza Nichols Goodeve, “In Conversation: Andrea Fraser with Thyrza Nichols Goodeve,” *The Brooklyn Rail*, April 2016, <https://brooklynrail.org/2016/04/art/andrea-fraser-with-thyrza-nichols-goodeve/>.

Chapter 2 INDIVIDUAL & GROUP POV, Case Studies

I. Diagramming Scopophilic Power

I find it difficult to identify how some of the methods I bring to my performance work show up in my other pieces, like drawings or sculpture. I don't find that objects themselves, or at least the ones I make, demand as much from the viewer directly or place them in uncertain positions that force them to reckon with their roles. Or maybe they do, but I'm so used to how performance does it that I can't see it yet. It's much more subtle.

I find that the act of drawing takes on its own form of push-and-pull. When I draw, I render a part of myself visible. In real time, I see a mark left by my hand that directly expresses how I may be seeing and interpreting what is in front of me or inside my head. Like a humiliation ritual, I am left with such thoughts as – *THIS is how I see the world?* *THIS is my "perspective"!*?!? There's vulnerability in that – that process feels close to performance. I may try to make an erasure, or some type of corrective measure, to push back against my drawing, and against myself – but the drawing, the materials, and my limited capacities, remain in charge.

For my second-year show, *Table Read*, I focus my energy on exploring performance through staging, drawing, and found objects. *Table Read* employs the protocols of a figure-drawing class as my script, but instead of a nude model and a circle of artists rendering a figure, the exam tables take on the role of model. My drawings depict the exam tables in various positions and physical relationships to one another, and many are rendered directly on the medical exam table paper. The installation explores the absence of the body, the

theatrical as material, and positions staging as a sculptural gesture. It represents the journey from first encounter (cold read)²⁴ to intimate study.



Figure 4 Sophia Cleary, *Table Read*, installation view, 2025

The pleasure of looking (scopophilia) and the directional vectors inherent to such activities are central to this work. Artist Nikita Gale, whose expansive, interdisciplinary practice approaches performance and the absence of the human figure through mechanisms such as lighting, staging, atmosphere, and sound, makes similar intervening gestures in her work.²⁵ Gale takes up the language, imagery, and architectures of performance – arenas,

²⁴ A “cold read” in the theater is the practice of reading a script with little to no prior preparation or familiarity with what they are about to read.

²⁵ Nikita Gale, “End of Subject,” [nikitagale.com](https://www.nikitagale.com), accessed March 2026, <https://www.nikitagale.com/end-of-subject>.

speakers, audiovisual equipment, instruments, audience seating, curtains, and more – and represents them in ways that redirect the viewer’s gaze.



Figure 5 Nikita Gale, *NOSEBLEED*, installation view, 2024

In her 2024 show *NOSEBLEED*, a large vinyl floor covering depicting an aerial view of a massive stadium arena lies beneath the viewer’s feet.²⁶ In fact, all the work is on the floor, aside from the large mirror angling over the viewer. Taking its title from the so-called “nosebleed” section of the theater, arena, or stadium, where the audience is seated farthest away from the spectacle, *NOSEBLEED* “presents an uneasy social arena, refracting the spectacle of performance and visibility onto the audience.”²⁷

²⁶ Nikita Gale, “NOSEBLEED,” [nikitagale.com](https://www.nikitagale.com/nosebleed), accessed March 2026, <https://www.nikitagale.com/nosebleed>.

²⁷ Gale, “NOSEBLEED,” <https://www.nikitagale.com/nosebleed#4>.

While Gale focuses on the arena and the power distributed by its architecture, seating, and access to spectacle, I am thinking through the exam table as its own kind of seat, or rather, stage, that positions the body. What unfolds is that the tables become bodies themselves, anthropomorphized through their arrangements together, appearing in configurations that are confrontational, harmonious, oppositional, or intertwined.

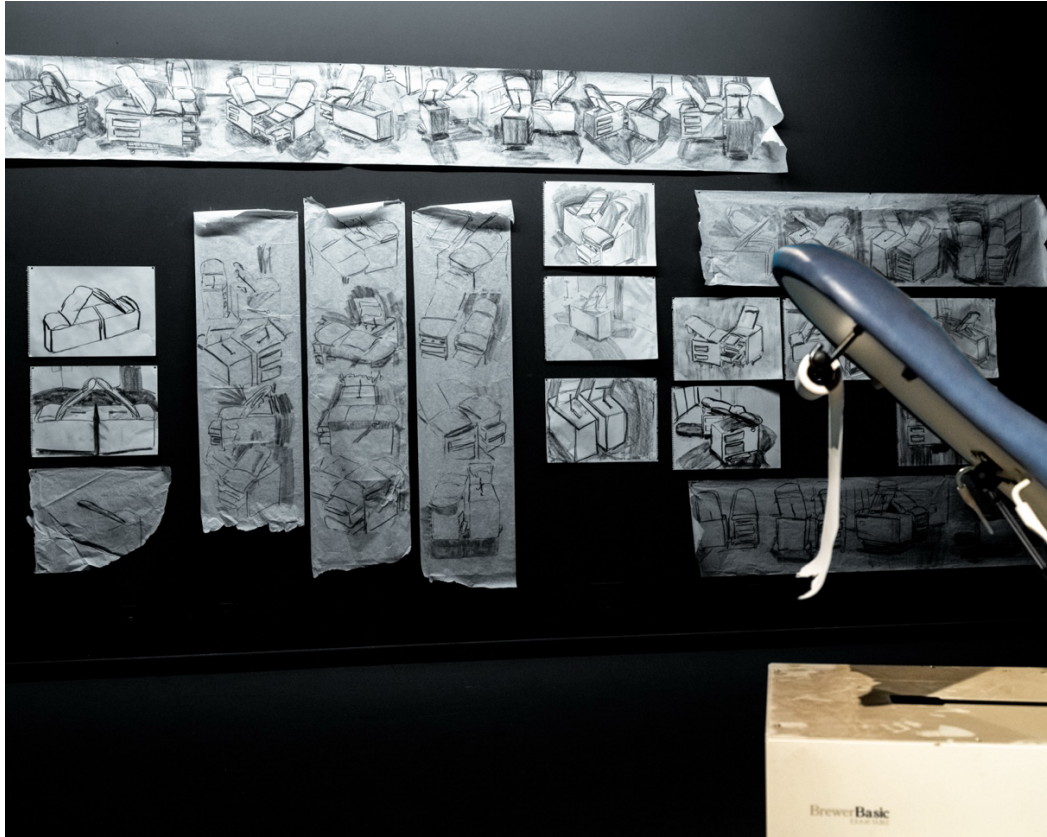


Figure 6 Sophia Cleary, *Table Read*, detail, 2025

Table Read is situated in a black box theater because the theater space itself is a part of this installation's material. An exam table that is used as a stage for the body receives its own stage, and where we would imagine cold medical lights focused on the body, we now see warm, incandescent, theatrical ones. I engage with the lighting booth in the space – a room

that is usually meant to be hidden or “behind the scenes.”²⁸ I hang the drawings directly behind the glass to highlight the theater’s architecture. In doing so, the resemblance between the black box and the medical operating theater begins to emerge.



Figure 7 Sophia Cleary, *Table Read*, detail, 2025

Thinking of medical space as beset by a regime of authority that we internalize and obey without question has long fascinated and disturbed me—a reflection accentuated by many years working as a birth doula.²⁹ But such work isn’t just about the medical. If anything, the medical is a stand-in or a launchpad for thinking about systems and spaces that feel both beneficial and harmful to us, like most institutional entities. Artist Andrea Fraser discusses this capacity for ambivalence in her own practice and cites psychoanalyst Melanie Klein’s

²⁸ I do this in *DEEP ROLES*, as well. I’ve placed drawings inside the projection booth, but not in the window. Visitors have to enter the booth themselves to be able to see the drawings. I bring people *into* the “projection” space.

²⁹ A birth doula is a non-medical, labor support person who ushers families through the experience of childbirth. Doing birth work has become its own model of training through which I approach creation, education, and collaboration. But that’s not the topic of this thesis.

theories on infantile “splitting” and the subsequent capacity to integrate the split entities as an evolutionary feat for humanity, in which we learn to hold both wanting and hating something simultaneously.³⁰ My work holds this tension and does not attempt to resolve it.

In a different exhibition, *Blur Ballad*, 2023, Gale focuses on performance and visibility – looking and being looked at – through the subject of vision itself. In her sculpture *PEER PRESH*, layers of prescription lenses are pressed together with a steel clamp, like those of light rigging on set, and “corrective technology is tightly compressed into an embodiment of its restrictiveness.”³¹ Her title lends humor to the work when we think about “peering,” voyeurism, watching, and the ways we get to enact these activities, alongside the “presh” or *pressure* of a restrictive clamp that we might see used in the theater.



Figure 8 Nikita Gale, *PEER PRESH*, prescription lenses, steel clamp, 2023³²

³⁰ Fraser and Goodeve, “In Conversation: Andrea Fraser with Thyrza Nichols Goodeve.”

³¹ Nikita Gale, “Blur Ballad,” [nikitagale.com](https://www.nikitagale.com), accessed March 2026, <https://www.nikitagale.com/emalin-blur-ballad>.

³² Gale, “Blur Ballad,” <https://www.nikitagale.com/emalin-blur-ballad#6>.

In my piece, *Teaser & Tormentor*, 2023, I see similarities between Gale’s playful approach toward scopophilia and my own. In this piece, I pair a stainless-steel speculum with a clown nose that I received during my training at clown school. I use the language of theatrical curtains in its title – literally the upper “teaser” curtain and the “torm,” short for the “tormentor.”³³ They are the curtains that restrict an audience’s view of backstage.



Figure 9 Sophia Cleary, *Teaser & Tormentor*, speculum, clown nose, Kleenex, elastic, 2023

My fascination with the speculum comes from my own interest in the medical regime of looking into a person’s body, at their reproductive organs (I credit the birth doula work, as well as my own experience being examined through these objects). The word speculum comes from the Latin *specere* – “to look at, view.”³⁴ In this way, the speculum, like a pair of

³³ “Tormentor” is also famously the title of Gaulier’s book about teaching clown.

³⁴ “Speculate,” Merriam-Webster, accessed March 2026, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/word-of-the-day/speculate-2014-05-22>.

“specks” or eyeglasses, is an instrument for looking. I pair it here with a clown nose to root it in a state of play – anthropomorphizing the object so that the clown nose becomes its own mask. Alternatively, when the speculum’s function is foregrounded as the device it’s assigned to be, the plastic nose becomes the subject being pried open, rendering it as an extension of the body – Not the nose, no, but the womb, perhaps.

While some of my work appears to concern the medical-industrial complex as its subject, it is really performance that I wish to center with these gestures. Medical objects serve more as a case study through which I examine visibility, staging, and performance. Gale’s work helps me clarify this aspect of my own practice. However, where I depart from Gale is that I am a trained and experienced performer. Gale’s academic background is in anthropology and archaeological studies.³⁵ The questions and experiences I bring to this research will always be informed by my own experiences of being center stage.

II. Playing Our Roles

Visual and performance artist Andrea Fraser, whom I’ve mentioned only briefly thus far, was one of the initial catalysts for my attending Group Relations Conferences (GRCs).³⁶ Fraser and Gale (Gale was one of Fraser’s students at UCLA) both reference group relations in their respective artistic research, whether through methods such as working in “study groups” or through formal characteristics, such as chairs arranged in a spiral to destabilize group hierarchies.³⁷

³⁵ “Nikita Gale,” Petzel Gallery, accessed March 2026, <https://www.petzels.com/artists/nikita-gale>.

³⁶ Group Relations International, accessed March 16, 2026, <https://www.grouprelations.org/>.

³⁷ When I began researching how to attend these events at the start of my MFA program, I quickly realized that San Diego is where Group Relations International is headquartered, a funny coincidence that lent greater meaning to my move to San Diego for school and my pursuit of this research path.

GRCs are experiential learning events designed to provide members with an opportunity to work through their relationship to authority in real time. The conferences eschew lectures, presentations, and other typical events we might expect from such an event. Instead, members attend small-group and large-group study sessions, where the group's task is to examine the experience of the "here and now." There are a handful of designated and trained consultants who intermittently participate by reflecting to the group what might be occurring on an unconscious, group-as-a-whole level.³⁸



Figure 10
Group Relations Large Group Study seating
arrangement (spiral)



Figure 11
Group Relations Small Group Study seating
arrangement (circle)

In *This Meeting Is Being Recorded*, 2020, Fraser brought together an intergenerational group of seven white women, all of whom are experienced group relations members, to meet for six 90-minute sessions over Zoom to explore their relationship to whiteness.³⁹ Fraser then

³⁸ Group Relations International, <https://www.grouprelations.org/>.

³⁹ Andrea Fraser, Connie Butler, and Ikechuku Onyewueni, "Conversation with Andrea Fraser," Hammer Museum, 2022, https://hammer.ucla.edu/sites/default/files/2022-05/AndreaFraser_conversation%20%28%29.pdf, 4.

adapted the conversation into a script and performed as each of the participating members, culminating in the final video piece.

In group relations, whatever individual members may express during group study sessions is often characterized as an expression of the group itself. In Fraser's work, her performance and embodiment of each woman reflect this idea – the individual becomes an expressive siphon for the group's work together. For her video installation, Fraser appears as a single group member, with us, as the viewers, positioned as other group members in attendance.

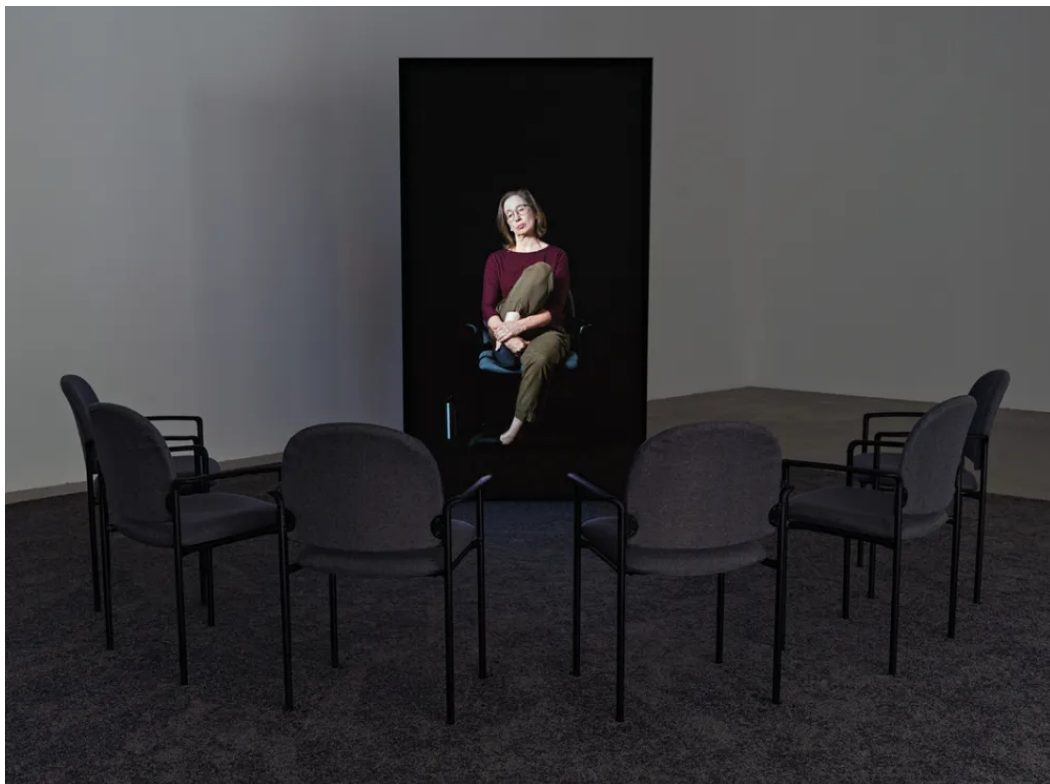


Figure 12 Andrea Fraser, *This Meeting Is Being Recorded*, video, 2020

Gale employs the spiral seating arrangement found in Group Relations Large Group Study sessions in her piece *AUDIENCING*, 2020. In this piece, she places a spiral of audience seats below a vaulted stage. The position of the stage above the audience

“undermines the stage’s function as a frame for performance, recasting the stage as a framing device for the audience.”⁴⁰ The core of the work is an original score comprised of speeches, pop music, voiceovers, and experimental noise. There are no live performers, but a programmed, automated sound and lighting system transforms the experience into a performance-like one.⁴¹



Figure 13 Nikita Gale, *AUDIENCING*, installation and performance, 2020

Both artists utilize group relations as a method and/or aesthetic. In doing so, they introduce ideas around group unconscious and power distribution as it is negotiated within specific spatial frameworks. Gale’s use of the spiral seating arrangement, specifically, forces

⁴⁰ Nikita Gale, *AUDIENCING*, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2020, <https://www.nikitagale.com/audiencing>.

⁴¹ Nikita Gale, *AUDIENCING*, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2020, <https://www.moma.org/calendar/events/5944>.

the audience to be among one another and *with* performance in a way that is destabilizing, where they are unsure where to focus.⁴²

The impact of attending GRCs is still unfolding in my practice today. At my first conference, I felt that what I was experiencing was what Polish theater artist Jerzy Grotowski had been trying to do in the 60s with his *paratheatrical* performances, where groups of people would be organized into a space without pre-determined instructions for the actors, or audience, or what they were meant to do or experience.⁴³

Grotowski's work is another important node within the constellation of my practice. In the 70s, after embracing his own form of *via negativa*, Grotowski and his actors in the Theatre Laboratory stripped away masks, disguises, costumes, scenery, roles, and even the actor's defense mechanisms. He describes this process in detail throughout his book *Towards a Poor Theatre*. He eventually went so far as to eliminate the notion of theater itself – an actor in front of a spectator – what remained was “a notion of a meeting.”⁴⁴ I can't help but think that the group relations method realizes some of what he was after, even though his experiments often took place outside and were far more focused on embodiment.⁴⁵

⁴² This will be something I explore in a new play I am writing, *Toward A Vanishing Point*, which will be a meta-theater performance piece inspired by my experiences at these events.

⁴³ Richard Mennen, “Jerzy Grotowski's Paratheatrical Projects,” *The Drama Review* 19, no. 4 (December 1975): 66–68.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

⁴⁵ Ibid.

Chapter 3 DEEP ROLES & POWER DYNAMICS

I. New Forms of Engagement

Like group relations work, “exigent sadism” can also be taken up as a method and an aesthetic. It “initiates something; it puts something in motion, though what exactly and how it will track cannot be known in advance.”⁴⁶ The “exigent sadist” organizes the circumstances and then lets whatever is put “in motion” unfold. This strikes me as deeply improvisational and connected to my work in clown. The clown is committed to not knowing what is going to happen, but continues moving forward, always taking the temperature, ready to adjust – this is something she can only do if she is highly sensitive, wide-eyed, intently listening, and feeling the changes of the audience. She cannot be wrapped up in her projections; she must accept the reality of the moment.

The [exigent] sadist [must] ...remain fully present in a way that forces them to invent. Such invention involves being open to the possibility of new forms of engagement ... When one is required to invent, one has to reimagine: the exigent sadist thus has to say or do things that are not in books, in syllabi, or in workshops, things that do not draw on universals but that derive from her very being.⁴⁷

*And what would happen if you didn't have your script to protect you?*⁴⁸

Here, Saketopoulou describes this role, this actor, as one who must be comfortable improvising. She (the “exigent sadist”) works off-script; in fact, she has no lines. She must imagine new ways of being and interacting. She authors new experience.

As I briefly mentioned earlier, Saketopoulou makes it clear that she is not speaking of the ruthless and inhumane practice of pathological sadism in which a person derives pleasure

⁴⁶ Saketopoulou, *Sexuality Beyond Consent*, 184.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Cleary, *Read The Room*.

from inflicting pain or humiliation on others. Nor is she talking about the “sensible sadism” of BDSM practitioners in which “all involved parties agree to act ‘as if’ the sadist were engaging their cruelty” while the recipient “can trust that the sadist will not be really sadistic.”⁴⁹ Here, Saketopoulou is zeroing in on a method in which one party initiates something with another that is neither predetermined nor planned. It is a form of risk-taking that demands acute awareness and attunement.

I firmly believe that tolerating discomfort is necessary. Saketopoulou’s theory of exigent sadism helps me clarify this drive, especially in the documentary *A Doll’s House*, where the production of the film felt like an ongoing, pressing, “exigent”⁵⁰ negotiation around intimacy within the context of making a film with my parents.

II. Re-making *A Doll’s House*

A Doll’s House explores ideas central to my practice around performance, theater, group dynamics, labor, reproduction, and power. Composed of interviews, performances, and voiceovers, *A Doll’s House* begins as an exercise in capturing what happens when two actors are asked to return to and re-perform parts of a play they acted in together thirty years prior. The script itself serves as a starting point for exploring our family dynamics. But also, the Ibsen play informs the tone of the film, specifically regarding the role of the protagonist Nora, and her desire to leave her circumstances – her role, her script, as housewife and mother.

⁴⁹ Saketopoulou, *Sexuality Beyond Consent*, 173.

⁵⁰ *Merriam-Webster Dictionary*, s.v. “exigent,” accessed March 2026, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/exigent>.



Figure 14 Archival VHS film still, documentation of “A Doll’s House,” 1994

The original play centers on an upper-class family living in Norway during the mid-to-late 19th century. Nora, Torvald Helmer's kept wife, spends her husband's money on macaroons, gifts, and other frivolities. Torvald, a newly promoted manager at a bank, frequently refers to Nora as his “little skylark,” “squirrel,” and “scatter brain.”⁵¹ Act I begins in a light-hearted vein, but over the course of three acts, as a drama unfolds around financial secrets and forged documents, Nora becomes utterly disillusioned with her role as a housewife and decides to leave her husband, children, and former life behind. The final scene of Act III concludes with her exiting the home, into the dark, snowy unknown (void), in search of a new life and greater purpose.

Nora and the “Doll’s House” in which she finds herself are useful metaphors for thinking through aspects of my practice. Nora essentially departs from her script as a

⁵¹ Henrik Ibsen, *A Doll's House: A New Version*, adapted by Christopher Hampton (New York: Samuel French, Inc., 1972), 6-7.

housewife and mother, improvising a new fate for herself. We never learn her fate, but when she leaves her home, she becomes a kind of phallic force, penetrating the unknown and breaking her familiar world. She improvises, she abandons, she ruptures the doll house and catapults herself into the void.⁵²

During the process of making this film, my parents were initially highly resistant to me and the project proposal. They didn't understand why I would be interested in filming them now, after many years, when they no longer strongly identify with the acting profession and are, in my mother's words, "old, fat, and ugly." But this is precisely what I was interested in: the temporal distance between past performances and the affective experience of literally returning to a former script. I was also curious—how does one's identification with a profession like "actor" change as we age or stop performing? Does it dissolve? Or do you remain as much an actor as ever? How do we negotiate our identities in relation to our unrealized dreams of success and "making it"? These are questions I'm grappling with myself, after going back and forth, in and out of the entertainment industry, enduring its constant whiplash of affirmation and rejection. Would my parents have answers that could help me stop longing for the fantasy of an acting career?⁵³

Another layer is also at work in this project. *A Doll's House* addresses the dynamics apparent between parents and child when they are translated to the roles of performers and director. Before looking more deeply into how these roles are navigated in the film, I'd like to discuss in greater detail my play, *Read The Room* (2024), which I mentioned earlier only

⁵² She is a burst tomato.

⁵³ While making the documentary with them, a casting director reached out to my old manager, asking me to audition for a small role in an upcoming film. I decided to do it, and to include the audition tape in the documentary as an example of the "family business." Shockingly, I booked it. It was the first job I ever booked. It is a small role as a part of a new Searchlight Pictures film directed by Tony Gilroy. And no, I'm not joking.

briefly, to provide context for my interest in centering the power dynamics between performer, audience, director, and actor.

Read The Room embraces the slippery roles of author, audience, actor, and director. I play the lead actor who attempts to deliver a monologue. Another actor on stage, who plays the Director, chastises me throughout my performance. This relationship is meant to resemble the rehearsal in clown school, where a clown comes out from behind the stage and is told “no” again and again. In my play, the Director becomes highly abusive, sexually harasses me, and assaults me physically. Ultimately, once the abuse reaches its peak, his character says to mine: “YOU WROTE THIS! YOU WROTE THIS!” as I am crying, collapsed on the floor. After a long silence, he sheepishly turns to the audience and says, “Whatever you’re feeling about me right now is because she wrote this” (pointing to me). In this moment, he reveals and radically centers the fact that *I*, Sophia Cleary, not a character, wrote the piece and have manipulated everyone.⁵⁴ This piece tackles the performance of self-victimization and whether the audience can suspend their disbelief about whether the work is scripted or improvised. It also addresses ideas about authority, how it is performed, and on whom it is bestowed.

⁵⁴ In my opinion, the best theater is pure manipulation.



Figure 15 Sophia Cleary, *Read The Room*, performance, 2024

In one of the first scenes of *A Doll's House*, I ask my parents to perform scenes from the original Ibsen script. After they each read a few lines, my mother, attempting to seize the role of Director, insists, “We have to cut this.”⁵⁵ When I ask why, she replies that my father needs to relax into his lines. They haven’t acted in many years, and the air is tense. My father becomes offended: “Relax? Why do I need to relax?” I remind them, “I’m the director.” I ask them to take it from the top of the scene, and my father insists that “she’s not going to want to do that,” which turns out to be an admission of his own feelings. When my mom says she’s willing to start over, he says he wants to take it from where we are. I concede.

Throughout this low-angle shot, my parents become towering figures, with the viewer below them, like a small child looking up, absorbing all the anxiety of their real-time conflict. This was not unlike my experience growing up with them, where I simultaneously

⁵⁵ Her own moment of taking up Freud’s “knife.”

feared and took care to prevent any emotional volatility that might crop up. Through the filmmaking process, I found myself regressing several times to a child-like version of myself. You hear me do this in the film: “I think Dad is doing great.” I say, defending him from my mom, who is criticizing his acting, and trying to soothe any anger on his part. I remind each of them not to direct their scene partner because I’m in charge.

Unlike in *Read The Room*, my directorial role in *A Doll’s House* is uniquely and improvisationally challenged on set and on camera. In *Read The Room*, I script that dynamic entirely, with little to no room for improvisation throughout the play.



Figure 16 Sophia Cleary, film still from *A Doll’s House*, 2026

Insofar as this documentary process offered us, as a family, a space to experience a “mutual touching of wounds,” I believe that what may have been occurring was this idea of “exigent sadism.”

[It] produce[s] an intimacy that goes beyond conventional forms of bonding and closeness ... it imperils both parties in different ways...the exigent sadist cannot guarantee a good outcome... she steps into the fray with the other’s marginal

authorization and takes the leap because she believes that it is worthwhile to put oneself at risk for the sake of experience.”⁵⁶

Throughout filming, I worried that I might harm my parents. Now, as I prepare for their first viewing of the piece, I worry that I might jeopardize the baseline of peace and tolerance I have worked so hard to build with them. But perhaps that is why I’ve embarked on this documentary. Maybe I want more than a baseline of tolerance. I might be toying with a potential rupture because I want bonding... I want closeness.

They trusted me in this process. Will all that trust be broken? Or will we arrive somewhere new together? I’m filled with dread. I’m nervous about the weight and responsibility of their representation. I’m afraid it will all hurt too much.

III. The Family Symbiopsychotaxiplasm

The family, like any group, is an example of an organizational system, and perhaps “the earliest form of human society.”⁵⁷ Psychologist and social theorist Paul Moxnes explains in his essay on deep roles (from which my thesis exhibition takes its title) that “a group must have a goal and a role structure of more than two roles to be defined as an organization.”⁵⁸ Father, Mother, Daughter – our organization.

Moxnes roots his analysis of deep roles in Melanie Klein’s work, specifically in her theory on infantile splitting,⁵⁹ which originates in the infant’s experience of realizing that they are actually separate from their mother, and due to this anxiety about difference, the

⁵⁶ Saketopoulou, *Sexuality Beyond Consent*, 183.

⁵⁷ Paul Moxnes, “Deep Roles: Twelve Primordial Roles of Mind and Organization,” *Human Relations* 52, no. 11 (1999): 1429.

⁵⁸ Moxnes, “Deep Roles,” 1428.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*

infant must “split” her into good or bad parts.⁶⁰ Moxnes reminds us that “the mechanism of splitting-and-projection is not limited to the world of the infant. The mechanism is also applied by adults in social organizations, in groups and work-teams.”⁶¹ This is the subject matter taken up by group relations and by Andrea Fraser in some of her work.

As adults, when there is an intense anxiety about difference or otherness, and when the individuals or groups do not have the capacity to metabolize this anxiety, we split each other into “good” and “bad” parts to cope with our discomfort (like when groups begin to “scapegoat” a member, for instance – aka the “black sheep”). Splitting, to clarify, is an ongoing psychological process that begins in infancy but persists throughout our lives – one moment we can metabolize this anxiety and integrate difference, and the next moment we cannot.⁶²

In my first-hand experiences with group relations, I have witnessed the splitting impulse and participated in it myself. For instance, the director of the conference, who holds great authority over the entire experience, might become, in the group’s eyes, a villain, or, alternatively, a savior. This aligns with Moxnes’s analyses of splitting as a function of the work. Moxnes’s diagram uses the archetypal roles of the family system to illustrate which alternate roles emerge through the splitting process. For example, the “father” is either a God/King or a Devil. He suggests that these roles all derive from the organization with which we are most familiar – the family.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 1430.

⁶¹ Moxnes, “Deep Roles,” 1430.

⁶² Conversations with psychoanalyst Brian Ngo-Smith (who I met at Group Relations) helped me understand this as an ongoing expression of anxiety that we (humans) experience throughout our lifetimes.

		SPLITTING		
		GOOD	BAD	
THE	FATHER	GOD/KING	DEVIL	DOMINANT
PRIMARY	MOTHER	QUEEN	WITCH	⇓
FAMILY	SON	CROWN PRINCE	BLACK SHEEP	
ROLES	DAUGHTER	PRINCESS	WHORE	SUBMISSIVE

Figure 17 Paul Moxnes Deep Roles diagram

Thinking through the (laughably shallow) “deep roles” of organizations, which originate in the family, I cannot help but wonder about the layered issues in the documentary filmmaking process between my parents and myself, and how we function as a group. Not only are we a group attempting to make a film, in which I act as the Director, but they are also simultaneously my parent figures, whose imposing presences disrupted my ability to establish effective direction and control of the piece. For instance, my mother’s incessant resistance to my direction ultimately rendered her, the recalcitrant one—the “witch.” I grew frustrated with her when she wouldn’t give me what I wanted. My mother’s resistance forced me to confront my own unconscious infantile narcissism – I could not control her behavior as the omnipotent director.

Our dynamic, at times, felt unethical. I demanded that she, as my mother, support me, her daughter, by participating in the project. Demands for her support started to feel manipulative coming from me within the professional framework created by the documentary, because it was the kind of thing I would not ask of a subject in any other project – documentary or otherwise.

~

Navigating these dynamics is clearly on display in pioneering filmmaker William Greaves's 1968 documentary *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Take One*. In this chaotic, proto-reality-TV filmmaking experiment, we see Greaves set up to film two actors performing a scene in Central Park. What is revealed over time is that there is also an additional cameraman filming Greaves who is filming the actors, and another cameraman who is filming the cameraman who is filming Greaves filming the actors. All of this, of course, is done by Greaves' direction.⁶³

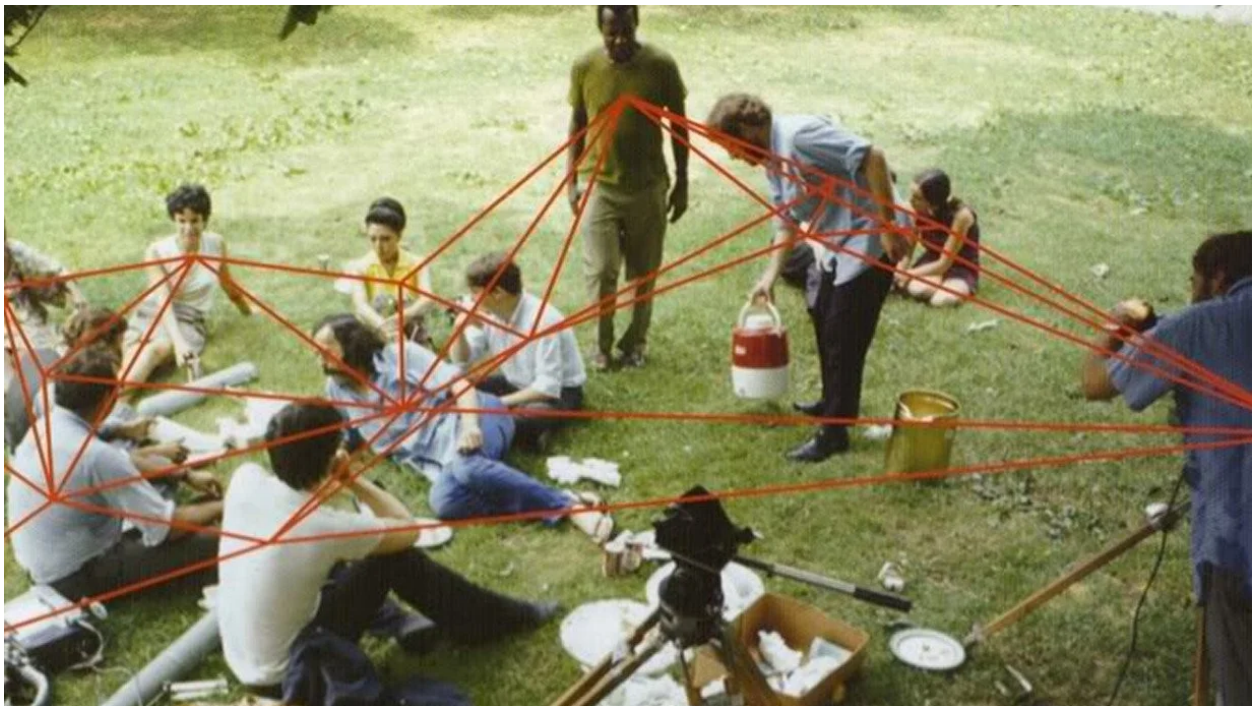


Figure 18 Promotional image for William Greaves' *Symbiopsychotaxiplasm*, 1968

The multi-layered rings of documentation reveal the uneasy power dynamics at play in organizational systems, here specifically on a film set. A mutiny unfolds, and we see meetings with production (without Greaves), where complaints are aired about the project's

⁶³ Amy Taubin, "Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Still No Answers," *The Criterion Collection*, December 2006, <https://www.criterion.com/current/posts/460-symbiopsychotaxiplasm-still-no-answers>.

direction, and Greaves' authority is questioned. The actors, insecure about their own performances and critical of each other's, can't stand each other and start bickering. A homeless man interrupts the final scene in Central Park, delivering a poignant monologue. It's a thoroughly destabilizing experience.

Greaves occupies the highest positions of power in both the foreground and background of the project. Serving as writer-director-producer *and* on-camera protagonist, his role stands out in contrast to the lead actors, who seem to be merely *posing* as the film's central subjects. Greaves plays an overtly stereotypical (seemingly sexist) male director⁶⁴ – yet it's unclear to us, the viewers, whether he is playing a character, or if this is really him.⁶⁵ Race or racism is never specifically named in the film, but it undoubtedly looms when the film crew enacts a coup, doubting Greaves's capabilities as a director, which perhaps is an expression of the group's discomfort with trusting a Black director in such a position of authority. This is the exact kind of work and hypotheses explored in Group Relations Conferences – specifically, when consultants or other conference leadership are people of color, discussions often center on whether the groups are struggling to accept being led by non-white authority figures. Perhaps this was part of what Greaves was trying to communicate.

I immediately thought of my play, *Read The Room*, after I saw his film. I was astonished, horrified, and elated by the similarities.⁶⁶ Greaves's film is a masterclass in artistic methodologies that destabilize the distinction between fact and fiction as discrete categories. Through his trickster-like editing and direction, he renders the roles within a film

⁶⁴ Amy Taubin, "Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Still No Answers," *The Criterion Collection*, December 2006, <https://www.criterion.com/current/posts/460-symbiopsychotaxiplasm-still-no-answers>.

⁶⁵ Taubin, "Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Still No Answers."

⁶⁶ Everything has been done!

production (actor, producer, cameraman, editor, director, etc.) not as separate groups where one is foregrounded over the others, but as equally thrilling characters who negotiate and renegotiate the power differentials imported from professional theatrical and film set structures.

Symbiopsychotaxiplasm, for all its chaos and uncertainty, is ultimately a thoroughly edited-down film, reduced from approximately 55 hours of footage (130,000 feet of 16mm) to 1 hour 15 minutes.⁶⁷ It cannot act spontaneously beyond its filmic container. There's a kind of grief in that for me, because it reminds me that the destabilizations in the crew, or the mutiny within the production, were either all a part of his plan, or ultimately, scripted by him through the process of editing. This isn't to say that I don't participate in this grief-making process, too, or that live performance somehow evades this kind of scripting, which inherently limits certain avenues for risk-taking.⁶⁸ When I edit *A Doll's House*, and when I script so-called "uncertainty" in my theatrical works, I foreclose certain possibilities. I think that foreclosure is more painful when my family is the subject. I suppose I'm realizing I want unlimited access to spontaneous experience, and that as a viewer, or I guess audience member, I think I long for experiences that feel infinite, wild, and veritably unpredictable.

⁶⁷ Taubin, "Symbiopsychotaxiplasm: Still No Answers."

⁶⁸ Here I think of the term, "locked picture," specifically. It's inherent to the medium.

CONCLUSION

This morning, as I am finishing writing up this paper, I received a call from my parents about visiting for the thesis show. There's a nervousness. The Film has become an impending symbol of the moment when we will inevitably have to experience intimacy together again. Will they hate it? Will they be embarrassed and mad at me? Am I making fun of Dad too much? And why the hell am I *so* worried? It's not like I'm going to get in trouble... I'm pushing 40!

I insist that they come for a private screening, so they don't feel on display at the opening reception. But no matter, my mom tells me she's taking the weight-loss drug Wegovy, so she's excited about looking skinny. Dad, on the other hand, won't be joining her on any kind of celebratory weight-loss journey. He received a recent cancer diagnosis last month. I'm grateful he's still willing to make the trip before his surgery.

I feel so much grief. A cycle is ending. I want to be proud and joyful about my accomplishments. But making work always carries with it such intensity, such agony. I guess that's proof that, for whatever forcefulness, tension, or discomfort I may be enacting on my viewers – my audience – I am ultimately rendered very exposed. My thesis advisor says he doesn't see the so-called "exigent sadism" at work as I'd like to think of it, but rather, a portrait of a family of masochists.⁶⁹

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We are, to a degree, a group – a family – that is self-effacing, depressed, cynical, and pessimistic. But beneath it all, we each crave our chance to be in the spotlight. I want to help us get there, though we may only ever be each other's performers, each other's audience.

⁶⁹ Alexandro Segade, studio visit, March 5, 2026.

Thank you, reader, for being my audience in this thesis performance. I'm grateful you could make it to the end with me. I would give you a tomato to throw at me, but – I've already thrown one at myself.



Figure 19 Sophia Cleary, *Celebrity*, colored pencil on paper, 2026

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