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The Artist Making Installations Out of Rape Kits

By Osman Can Yerebakan

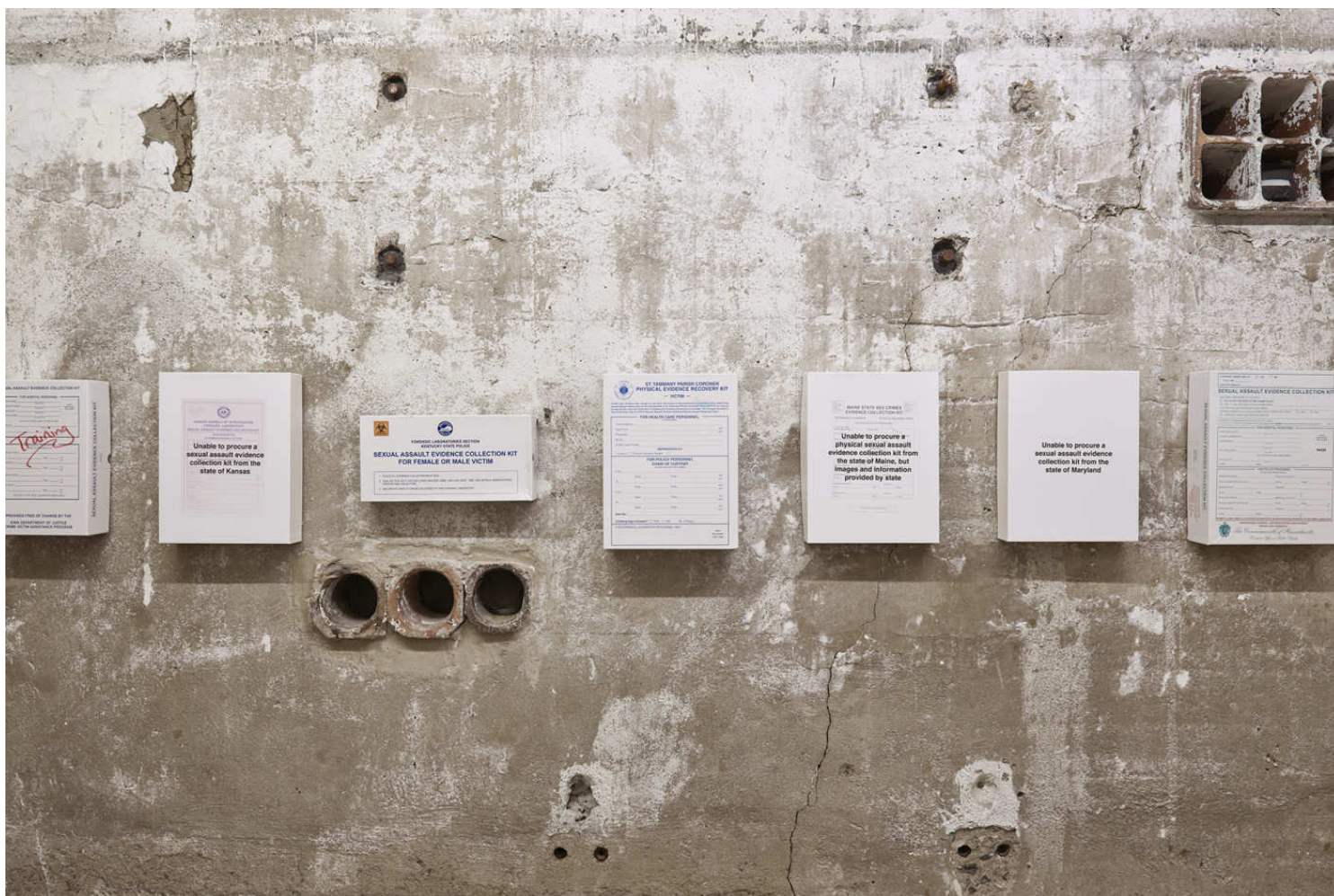


Photo: Courtesy the artist. Photo: Kyle Knodell

Brooklyn-based artist Aliza Shvarts began collecting rape kits — formally called sexual assault evidence collection kits — from each American state more than a year ago as part of an art and research project that compares their physical and linguistic differences. The striking result, titled *Anthem*, is currently on view at Long Island City's SculptureCenter as part of a group exhibition called “In Practice: Other Objects,” where the installation, which consists of 50 different cardboard box or envelope kits in various sizes and shapes, guides viewers through the process of how evidence is collected after a sexual assault. (Twenty-two states, including

Delaware and Oregon, refused to send their kits, or Shvarts never received the promised package — in those cases, she printed an image of the absent kit from the internet onto a box.)

What's most remarkable is how much is communicated by the slight differences in the kits' language. New Jersey calls its kit a "Sexual Assault Forensic Evidence Kit," New York calls its a "Sexual Offense Evidence Collection Kit" but Virginia refers to its as "PERK (Physical Evidence Recovery Kit)" and it uses the outdated word "buggery" to describe penetration.

Shvarts is a 32-year-old performance artist whose controversial 2008 Yale graduation thesis included her repeatedly inseminating herself and later taking miscarriage-inducing herbs as a commentary on reproductive labor. She is preoccupied by the concern of governance over one's own body. With *Anthem*, she is exploring the stark differences between the experiences imposed onto individuals through the documentation of their bodily traumas. By showing the kits with a clinical aesthetic, Shvarts gives a sense of the process that victims encounter, while making clear that even the iciest, most bureaucratic legal language is infused with bias.

At a time when more people are thinking about and examining the way we discuss sexual assault, the artist is making the overlooked and private aspects of sexual assault visible. Below, the Cut spoke to her about her work.

***Anthem* is a project with many years in the making. Could you give some background for the work?**

A friend once told me my work always begins with me asking questions about my own body and that touches a nerve. In 2010, I started thinking about the kit through speech action theory and what consequences of language achieve for believability. The initial stage of the work ended up being my Master's thesis for my performance studies education at NYU. I plan to distribute the final work to those who helped me with the project, including sexual assault examiners, forensic scientists and nurses.

How did you have access to a kit from each state?

Finding the proper contact person to request a kit involved many hours over the phone and doing online research for state attorney general offices, public-health services, and nonprofit organizations. I described the project as a comparative analysis which would eventually result in a public display. If a state wasn't willing to send a new kit, I'd ask them to send a damaged one that cannot be used for an actual test. There are a few kits previously used for training purposes.



You've examined so many kits at this point. What are some of the most generic or particular parts among them?

Sirchie and Trittech are two main commercial companies making almost all the kits. They also have versions not specific for a state, but for commercial purchase. There can be wild differences between two states' kits both manufactured by Trittech. I am interested in elements maintained in every version or specific to certain states. Other than size, the biggest variety is the number of steps required to qualify for rape examination. Arkansas's kit has seven steps and Mississippi includes 22. There are differences between medical and legal languages. Someone can be referred as a "patient" or "victim" or a physical object can be named a "sample" or "evidence." The word "sodomy" can be used instead of "assault."

The work allows the audience to interact with each kit. What kind of physical and emotional bond do you expect to achieve from these interactions?

An important component of this work is to familiarize people with the kits' content. I exhibit

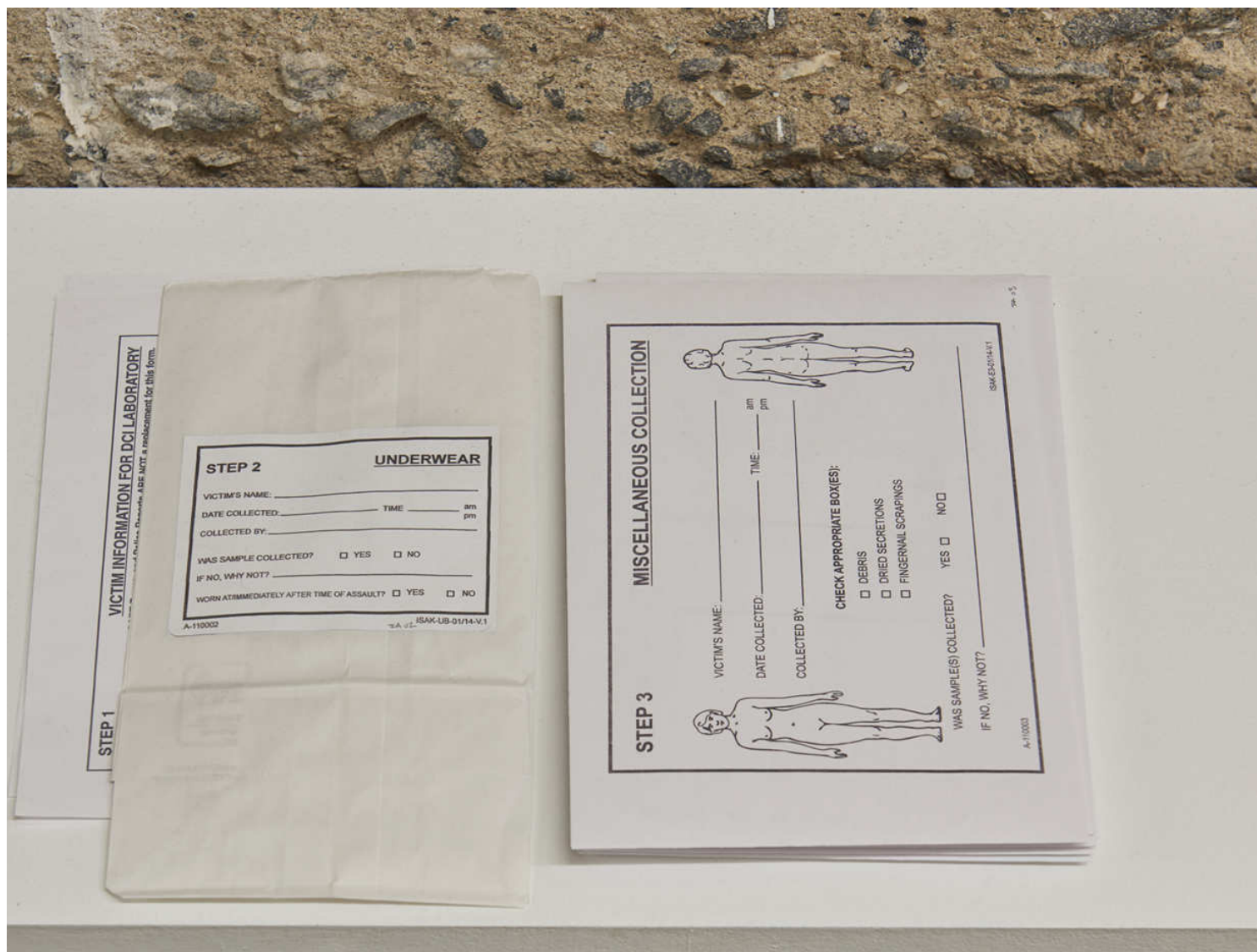
scanned versions of physical objects or questionnaires used for steps in each kit. These include swabs, nail clippers, combs, or diagrams. People can examine what each step requires and how a step is included. Swabs, for example, come in a sealed bag only in some states. Tools used during examination have faith put into them as bearers of truth and representers of someone's voice. I want people to feel alarmed or numb or included or excluded.

How about empathy? Guilt and shame are effective in someone's decision to come out as a sexual-assault victim.

Definitely. Sexual assault is a polarizing issue between those believing in the assaulter or the victim. Encountering these kits can make someone empathize with the heft of going through one of these exams. Realizing the physical challenge of using these objects can create a moment of empathy for the audience. One of the issues with assault is that we don't believe in the language coming from the assaulted, so we need an intermediary speaking on their behalf with the power to corroborate or undermine the truth.

The kits include physically and emotionally challenging steps. Who can perform the test on a victim?

A specially trained forensic nurse examiner performs the test. In some states, they are called SANE (Sexual Assault Nurse Examiner) or SAFE (Sexual Assault Forensic Examiner). These are of course abbreviations with very apt meanings in this context. Looking at my performance studies background, I see these kits as directions for action, almost like guidelines in a performance. The nurse examiner and the victim move their bodies in ways directed by the manual. There are set gestures performed. They not only capture bodily experiences, but they also demand bodily experiences. They are parts of a choreography with weight and consequences attached.



The trans community has a high risk of sexual assault. Is the language used in kits more inclusive in blue states?

I thought I would see a correlation between how conservative a state is and the language, but that is not really the case. How gendered these tests are is one of the most important elements. The language frequently refers to woman. Virginia's kit has descriptions of acts, which is disturbing. They use the archaic term "buggery," for example. States have different legal language around assault, rape, sodomy, attack. Forced oral sex may not fall under rape and have different legal procedure. Diagrams are often gendered, but if not, they will use a masculine body with no penis. How accurate could the result be when a transgendered person gets a test done with a kit designed for a cisgendered body? In this case, their experience is already becoming twisted and abstracted. They have to meet the demand to squeeze their experiences into a rigid system with reductions. Making reductions on one's experience also prompts inaccuracies.

Let's talk about New York state's kit, because it looks pretty different from any other state's.

It is the only clamshell packaged one, made by a company called PWI, which is affiliated with the nonprofit Allegany Arc. They're an organization supporting people with mental disabilities, and PWI is the name of their work program providing job opportunities, such as fabricating these kits, for the mentally disabled, which is another heightened risk group. It was reported recently that a few New York hospitals double-billed the state and the patients [for the evidence collection services], which is illegal. They were even sending these bills to collection agencies to harass the patient.

How about the aesthetics of the kits? They are minimal and utilitarian, but knowing their content and purpose, I am alarmed by their simplicity.

They have this language of modernism, which ties to objectivity. This is about how art can go beyond encapsulating aesthetics but help form the society. There is someone out there who designed the diagrams or boxes for these kits. I don't want to aestheticize the work people put into creating these objects, but I hope to reveal how they function through formal relationships and speech action.

We are in a crucial period for open discussions around sexual assault. What do the kits say about our times and body politics in America after #MeToo?

The work is called *Anthem*, because it's another portrait of the nation; the kits overall represent the stars on the American flag. An anthem is meant to make somebody's voice heard, but the kits ask on whose behalf does that voice speak. They manifest the ways in which women are believed or made believable. I watched many episodes of *Law & Order: SVU* where a kit is not always shown but frequently mentioned. There is a promise on a kit revealing the truth. I came across an online training video for nurse examiners on how to perform the kit. Mariska Hargitay, who is also a sexual-assault activist, gives the introduction for the video. That was an interesting moment for seeing this social narrative about what these kits promise. The belief on them, however, displaces the belief for people; the object supersedes the voice of the survivor.

"In Practice: Other Objects" is on view at the SculptureCenter through March 25, 2019.

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