Interdiction is the state or condition of being prohibited, forbidden from existing. It is a word that Aliza Shvarts uses to define her work as an artist, punctuating questions of legibility, representation, collaboration, and consent as they appear in social and artistic entanglements. Shvarts's project *Non-Consensual Collaborations* (2012 – ongoing) approaches the notion of consent through a queer and feminist framework, pressing at its seams to demonstrate its inability to accommodate nuanced responses and relational frameworks.

Drawing on experiences that were not initially conceived as part of an artistic project, Shvarts claims the mantle of performance retroactively — questioning the authorial prerogatives and the presentational mechanisms to which performance is largely beholden. The extended temporality of this work echoes Shvarts's in-progress dissertation in Performance Studies at New York University, which explores doom as a prophetic and juridical force whose full scope is enacted over extremely long periods.

Shvarts is currently preparing a solo exhibition at Artspace in New Haven, CT, on the tenth anniversary of her senior thesis project at Yale University, which was banned and disavowed by the school's administration. This experience functions as an epistemological undercurrent in Shvarts' work: How does one make work as an artist if one's work is unable to be encountered, its legibility intercepted, its attention to reproduction effectively aborted?

In this interview, Andrew Kachel discusses Shvarts's *Non-Consensual Collaborations* in the context of her dissertation, her past and future work in New Haven, and the contexts of queer theory and performance studies.
AK  I find this sort of self-destructive but also analytical and self-aware trajectory of your Non-Consensual Collaborations project to be really encouraging.

[subject]

AK  Well thank you, that is what I have to offer.

OOO  But also the consensus... I don’t know if I’d say refrain, but the stepping aside from conventional social protocols — this is a very interesting motivating element of the project, especially in relation to its particular strand of feminism and how that registers at this moment. In a way it’s more agressive feminism, but that the “state of feminism” is different this year than it was last year, I think this is not the most relevant question for a project like yours. It’s more about picking up or recuperating certain kinds of anathema behavior under a feminist gaze.

AS  Right. That reminds me of something one of my friends said about the notation for Women’s Day this year, which said, “To all the women who can’t or won’t talk to each other to get what they feel like they need” but feel it’s an important but overlooked element of feminist solidarity, especially in art practice, which is how you make sense of difficult relationships. Conviviality only goes so far. The whole language of queer and feminist kinship sounds really good and feels really good, but what’s missing is a language to account for the fall-outs and bad behaviors that are part of a shared world too. The Non-Consensual Collaborations project tries to attend to this question of what you do if you like difficult women, or are a difficult woman. [laughter] Or to put it another way, Where is the space of the impossible in solidarity? How do we account for that side of kinship?

OOO  And the models of conviviality put forth by feminist and queer theory often seem to be willfully utopic, or at least don’t offer anything more than a kind of vaguely and intermittently utopian horizon... 

AS  But exactly, and there might be an acknowledgement of negative, but it’s that’s meant to be cured by a “queer world making practice of every nightlife” or some other narrative of survival or salvation.

OOO  Right, the negative is not so often theorized in this context. Other than by the likes of people like Lee Edelman, but that’s sort of... 

AS  It’s anti-social. The negative cuts you off from relation. Or it’s infected by a heteronormative outside. Like in Sara Ahmed’s essay on the idea of the “unhappy queer”, and the unhappy queer is unhappy not because of other queers but because of the happy queer, and because of the family dinner table or wherever. And then in Lee Edelman’s it’s more that your position as a queer subject is inherently death-dealing.

OOO  But even then he doesn’t necessarily seem to think that fun can’t happen there. There’s something so frustrating to me about queer academia which is perfectly epitomized when, at every academic conference, the queer will go do some “queer” activity together and it is often a nightmare. And OMG that terrible abject space of queer karaoke after the conference... 

AS  Of course the queer academics gravitate toward the scene of public humiliation and shame.

AS  But also a total disavowal of the idea that that’s what it is. They all say so earnestly it’s obvious! Or performing earnestly losing it, so it feels like they are performing that myopia that’s in the theory. And it kind of comes through in the writing. The punitive breakdown to every analysis is that despite structural violence and interjection, world-making practices are possible — at the nighfall, which is always an other space, a space of exception or Woman when one doesn’t feel accurate to life. Also part of me (and this is maybe the stoicier feminist part of me) doesn’t see anything as something that’s held in common; that’s actually something we do share. I saw Gregg Bordowitz when he came to speak at the Whitney Independent Study Program, and he made reference to queer utopia. I asked him a question about the reference, kind of asking him to go further, and he said “I hear JoséMuñoz in your question. I know José. I didn’t like José, but I know José. We know who each other were.” And then he went on to answer my question. I said, “Well I was José’s student and that’s why I was interested...” and I kind of choked up a little bit because this wasn’t that long after José’s death. Then Gregg read this really beautiful poem about his mother who had just passed away, and then he choked up, and then everyone was in tears in the seminar. So it was this really beautiful seminar, lots of tears, but the thing I love the most was the idea of that moment where he said “I know José. I didn’t like José. We didn’t like each other, but we knew each other.” Which feels to me actually kind of a more important part of the kinship. We all share a world already, or aspects of something, and it doesn’t matter if we don’t get along. The capacity and the freedom to not get along, to stub each other, to have these spots, feel like an important part of what belonging might actually mean. 

OOO  It also seems like in constructing a nation of an alternative world — because as you said, so much of queer theory is preoccupied with this idea of world-making, an important part would be to move this touchy-feely, warm, friendly idea, past “bodies meeting” and “openness of thought,” etc. to embrace negativity and to somehow fold into the mix seems more consistent with the world we’re potentially building with this theory, and also perhaps more amenable to an appreciation of difference.

AS  Yeah, we don’t have to agree, we don’t have to get along. I think this is really important. How do we maintain difference, even different affects, within this supposedly shared identity? I also think it’s latent especially in the writing of someone like José, who would have on the writing of people who were notably anti-queer, like people Ernst Bloch, these “bad objects” as far as queers working in critical theory have been concerned. I remember meeting José when he came up to Bird to lead a seminar. We were reading Cruising Utopia and it was this period when everyone was starting to wrestle with Object-Oriented Ontology and Speculative Realism. We read Graham Harman and Timothy Morton with him, and of course this response that Jane Bennett had written to them. He started kind of grilling him why one should even waste time responding to Graham Harman and was like “I don’t understand why...” I mean I don’t know what you mean, or why he decided to write about Ernst Bloch. It was also a moment in my intellectual development where one of the first questions would be “Well, how do you account for that?” You know? And he was like “I don’t have to account for that.” It was the wrong question. And that was kind of a watershed moment — I can take things from these people who occupied a certain antagonistic position. I don’t have to accept the specific form of relationality that is implied by that position.

AS  Right, you don’t have to be aligned with a position to find something generative in it. It can be used to say “I’m really loved and which I have since staked: “The cloud is a sport to pick over the bones of old dead white men.” I really liked that about his strategy, and maybe it’s something we really had in common as not just mentor and student, but also friends, not needing to find these good objects, being able to work with these bad objects but also to be able to find a space of flourishing in a context that’s working against you. I think about the whole time — if a lot of these philosophers were alive to know us they’d hate us, you know? [laughter] Like, Heidegger, you know? There’s so many of them, right? But using the grain of someone’s own thought beyond the context that they thought the thought was for. It feels like a very political and creative act. An act of appropriation, but it also insists that queer theory doesn’t need to occupy some marginal position that’s earnestly accommodating for itself. It can also be an actual approach to claiming spaces in larger contexts that aren’t meant for us. This feels more immediate, at least in my experience of navigating the world.

OOO  Exactly. And I think it also implies that queer theory can so something reparative that is not repairing in one’s own project, but also to be able to find a space of flourishing in a context that’s working against you. I think about the whole time — if a lot of these philosophers were alive to know us they’d hate us, you know? [laughter] Like, Heidegger, you know? There’s so many of them, right? But using the grain of someone’s own thought beyond the context that they thought the thought was for. It feels like a very political and creative act. An act of appropriation, but it also insists that queer theory doesn’t need to occupy some marginal position that’s earnestly accommodating for itself. It can also be an actual approach to claiming spaces in larger contexts that aren’t meant for us. This feels more immediate, at least in my experience of navigating the world.

AS  Right, and I think that version of queer theory, as you’re saying, allows for alterity. Before I knew myself as queer I knew myself as a weirdo and an abjected-feeling person from a larger social body. That’s foundational to how I understand myself as a queer subject — through being alone, or not alone necessarily but feeling “othered” in a primary way. And how do you hold that in common? How do you share a feeling of radical alterity with people without erasing that experience? Without it becoming homonormative or just really empty? I think that’s been a bigger project for me with the Non-Consensual Collaborations. Actually this reminds me of another thing José once said. He taught this class called “Queer Belongings” which I took my second year studying with him and I gave me no end of difficulty because “social space” and “belonging” were antithetical. I did not understand the concept. So I learned by the way, we were reading José’s — he was just like “I don’t need this, what are we doing I don’t understand.” And I don’t know if I just said this to get rid of me but he was like “I don’t have to account for that.” And then I really started to try to remember the great theorists of the social and great theorists of collectivity — think of Karl Marx — they were just these radical loner weirdos. It was from the position of being alone in their room that they were imagining the collective.”

OOO  And I don’t know if I meant that, but I do like it. It’s certainly stuck with me.

AS  It’s very sweet but it’s also profoundly sad. [laughter]

OOO  So said, yeah. [laughter] It’s very Lacan, right: “line is thing you don’t have but really want to play. It Can’t but want it.” But at the same time, it’s also about the position in the world that wasn’t a tragic one.

OOO  Would you describe the Non-Consensual Collaborations project as one that is particularly tragic?

AS  As I mean it I don’t think it’s that that’s the project as much as with many of my other work I grapple with this capacity and willingness to play the villain. It lets me explore how queer feminism desires and enactments are disciplined from a patriarchal outside. The position of “being villainous” is historically produced one — there are literally criminalizing, legalizing, and incarceration that condition the figure of the “bad woman.” So I performatively take up these un-recuperable stances in, for example, the Non-Consensual Collaborations project. I believe in consent, but I also believe in the failures of consent. I believe in that moment after you’ve consented to something when you change your mind or something happens, or consent does not hold for the entirety of what transpires. So it’s not a tragic project exactly, but it’s one wherein you see my willings to play the villain and inhabit is a different position. It’s very sweet but it’s also profoundly sad. It’s very Lacan, right: “line is thing you don’t have but really want to play. It Can’t but want it.” But at the same time, it’s also about the position in the world that wasn’t a tragic one.

OOO  Would you describe the Non-Consensual Collaborations project as one that is particularly tragic?
about it as an agreement. And there's also something contractual, at least implicitly, in collaboration. The "collaborations" in this work exceed contractual mechanisms and are usually outside of what is legal as collaboration.

AS And usually that's such a big part of the collaboration, figuring out what those terms are.

OOO Right, what are the boundaries and parameters of how a collaboration is structured? Also, the structure of these collaborations — the fact that they seem to happen organically, they are drawn from various relationships and entanglements in your life, you know all but one of the people personally...

AS Yes, all except…

OOO The incarcerated Norwegian black metal musician.

AS I tried real hard to know him historically.

OOO They're opened-ended and you knew most of the "collaborators" personally, so I wonder where the impulse comes to figure in these relationships.

AS That part interests me most. On one level, it's just my life, right? Unwritten and un-theorized, it's just shit that happens to me. And something that happens in my life is that I do everything dorkily. But I feel like what the piece turns on is this retrospective insistence that what happened is in the realm of the aesthetic. Rather than catch remaining some weird encounter, I insist on it retrospectively so "no, no, this was a collaborative project, this itself was a performance." Even though it was not that formalized. I'm presenting this as performative and transformatively, or at least points to the personal and another layer of meaning is embedded in the everyday. So the temporal aspect is significant. I don't seek to create these situations beforehand. They happen, and then it's through my retroactive discursive framing that they become themselves as performance.

OOO But it seems that during at least one of these relationships there was a structuring paradigm of the relationship in the midst of it.

AS Which one, which one?

OOO The one with the male artist and the text meaning.

AS Oh, right. So that one actually was the first one, even though it comes second in the sequence. When that happened, it made me reevaluate the thing that happened with the Norwegian metal dude. So that was a real retroactive moment. This encounter with the performance artist was sort of the impetus for the whole project because during the exchange I thought we were actually collaborating, I thought we were doing this off, and he was of a different mind. I'm not really sure what that thought was going to happen, I was hoping hoping for art too next to happen, and I think he just wanted to have sex. So it was my own kind of misguided desire for an art friend that led to that whole encounter or misunderstanding. The video footage I sent him as part of our first exchange actually pretty provocatively in that I was like, "Oh, this will freak him out!" but it wasn't intentional in that I was like, "Oh, I think we're having this kind of creative exchange between artists and I want to participate in this with my work." So on some level it was an earnest mistake I guess. But on another level the whole point of the project is that, upon realizing this mistake, I could still insist, "No, no, I don't really want to give my own version of events just because his version of events is different." And the question I had was, well, why should his version of events — that this was a sex thing — trump my version of events, that this was an art thing? Why are those incommensurable? Who gets to insist that their version of events is the true version? And what would happen if it's much more difficult to get people to acquiesce and saying, "Yes, I'm sorry, I misunderstood the nature of this?" I wanted to ask, what if my misunderstanding of this was something that I still get to keep?

OOO And it is, in a way.

AS Yeah, instead of having to live with knowing it and feel embarrassed and feel ashamed, I kind of turned it into an active — even aggresses — reframing of events that allows me to keep a sense of creative agency.

OOO I was really struck in that structure in particular, by the fact that this artist had such a strong resistance to this idea of cooperation. I do have a vision of art and life — being a realistic prospect. Especially for a performance artist and really for anybody who has even a cursory knowledge of the twentieth century avant-garde. It struck me that that narrative is one that people hope to expose but it is actually really scary to most people who make art.

AS I was really struck in that interaction in particular, by the fact that this artist had such a strong resistance to this idea of cooperation — let alone a fusion of art and life — being a realistic prospect. Especially for a performance artist and really for anybody who has even a cursory knowledge of the twentieth-century avant-garde. It struck me that that narrative is one that people hope to expose but it is actually really scary to most people who make art.

OOO And pretty often it is the person who is operating in the domain of the masculine.

AS Even within queer contexts. And it has to do with ideas of expressivity too…

[260]

[261]
I like the idea of a project with an ending that I can’t predict.

Leaping back to what we discussed earlier, the essence of non-consent seems so brilliantly and gloriously odd with much contemporary feminist thought that it seems to offer a way around, for one moment, for my personal and political creativity which I just sort of stepped into — whereas probably we should hold these two notions together. You could sort of see a seamless wedge with which to prof many different ideas.

As I should, it’s something I got from Fred Moten. He gave this talk at NYU on Edward Glissant and Alan Turing. There was this beautiful part where he was analyzing how Glissant looks at the transatlantic slave trade and his thinking about this state of non-subjecthood — all the people in the holds of slave ships who are denied access to legal, political, and social subjecthood. And he has this moment where he asks could we imagine a capacity to consent to non-consent? This idea of action without the full subject-based dimensions of agency, and how that becomes a necessary position when you are locked in the space of a state of subjecthood. It highlights the impasse of those sorts of interactions and the state of subjecthood, but not all of us fit that mold of the subject very well. The subject is historically raced and gendered and sexed — that is to say, white, male, land-owning and able-bodied. So either one resembles the subject and tries to make one’s self resemble that subject more in order to exercise its privileges, or you’re just kept out of the frame. I think that’s an ambition of this project too — how do you attend to that space of failing subjecthood, or not fitting, or understanding its historical distinction from subjecthood and how do you describe your action? Someday the project has to end. But I keep thinking over and over again, it’s something that’s not sure. I think I will add this other dimension of the ex, but I’m not sure how yet. It never feels great to complain about one’s ex-girlfriends.

In the piece, you talk about this “condition” which you describe as a certain tendency or a propensity for certain kinds of entanglements. It opens up an account in the project that might allow the reader, participant, or viewer to superimpose this artwork onto any sort of existential interaction that could full within this category. You talk about yourself as having this condition and going through similar interactions. So how do you end it? It me seems like you won’t ever end it, really… but maybe you will just stop documenting it?

As yeah, or maybe the documentation will just take different forms. I like the idea of a project with an ending that I can’t predict. I like the idea that I always have to come up to catch it — like my life proceeds at a pace such that the making and do and make things. That’s really how I don’t necessarily know where it’s going. There is some aspect of chance.
operations... I mean, who knows when the next fucking weird encounter will happen. The Condition is a part that I really do want to go back to and spend more time on at some point, because I do believe in this thing that has gone by many different names at different points in time — "witchcraft," "spectra," "gossip," "activism" etc. And I feel like there's a great potential for solidarity in whatever that thing is. It's a solidarity that doesn't depend on conviviality, or doesn't depend on conviviality as only a "feel-good" space... on the terrible academic karaoke where they all think they're having a great time, but, you know, they're not. Or they are and that's worse.

AS That temporal configuration feels like a more accurate representation. Whatever that shared thing in common is, it is best described in these peripheral ways — as a surround, background, or the ground from which figures emerge. I really like that way of thinking about it. It also just seems more comforting to think about the long durée of lineages. Maybe it opens up something unexpected about performance, which is this idea that it can unfold over incredibly long periods of time. Or that performance can be used to represent a phenomenon that takes a very very long period of time to happen. This is kind of what my dissertation work is about: doom. Doom's the feeling comes from the Old English word for judgement — doom, which refers not so much to the act of judgement but to the very long time in which judgement unfolds. The attempt to think about force over extremely long periods of time becomes much more materially resonant when you start investigating these narratives of doom. One of the big Western canonical punishments is the Judgment of Adam and Eve after they transgress in the garden of Eden. Adam is doomed to labor in the fields, Eve is doomed to labor in childbirth. One of the more contemporary sites I've been writing about is Chris Burden's piece Married, which is the famous one where he nearly died, again... He didn't tell anyone what the performance was, he just laid down under a tilted sheet of glass in the gallery, and he continued to lie there until someone interfered in some way. He stayed there for an incredibly long period of time, like forty-something hours, and the performance ended only when a guard came and put a jug of water next to him. But had he not done that, the performance never would have ended and supposedly Burden would have stayed there until he died. So I think that's an important example (although I don't know how I feel about it being Chris Burden's example) of using performance to point to something that is the real stuff of time. Doom is nothing but time itself, enacting its force. I really think that it sounds so scary, which is very interesting.

AS When I had an advisor who wrote about queer utopia, writing about feminist doom made way more sense. Now it's just a downer! It sounds really scary, which I like.

AS When do we conceive of duration? A lot of the narratives we have for reproduction allow us to circumvent encountering its durational aspect — because it's terrifying. I think that's what's useful about doom as a political and aesthetic feeling. Also, it seems way more possible to write about under a Trump administration. Before I was just being a downer but now everyone's down so it's ok. You may have one of the few dissertation topics in the humanities at large that seems more amenable to this awful moment... We don't actually start it but we chip in some how.

AS We don't actually start it but we chip in some how.