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Hallie Ayres: First of all, thank you so much for being here virtually. My name is Hallie and today I'm joined by Aliza Shvarts and Emily Apter. The podcast came about on the occasion of Aliza's exhibition Purported that opened at Art in General back in February and was meant to run until May but is temporarily closed. So I'll just read your bios by way of introduction.

Aliza Shvarts is an artist and theorist who takes a queer and feminist approach to reproductive labor and language. Her current work focuses on testimony and the circulation of speech in the digital age. She received her BA from Yale University and PhD in Performance Studies, NYU. Shvarts was a 2014 recipient of the Creative Capital | Warhol Foundation Arts Writers Grant, a 2014-2015 Helena Rubinstein Fellow at the Whitney Independent Study Program, a 2017 Critical Writing Fellow at Recess Art, and a Joan Tisch Teaching Fellow at the Whitney Museum of American Art (2015-2019). Current and upcoming solo exhibitions include *Purported* at Art in General, which surveys the last decade of her practice; and *Potfuch,* a new commission on view later this year at A.I.R.

Emily Apter is Silver Professor of French and Comparative Literature and Chair of Comparative Literature at New York University. Her books include: *Unexceptional Politics: On Obstruction, Impasse and the Impolitic* (Verso, 2018), *Against World Literature: On the Politics of Untranslatability* (2013), *Dictionary of Untranslatables: A Philosophical Lexicon* (co-edited with Barbara Cassin, Jacques Lezra and Michael Wood) (2014); and *The Translation Zone: A New Comparative Literature* (2006). She is currently working on a project (*What is Just Translation?*) which takes up questions of translation and law, sexual safety, and transmediality. Her essays have appeared in *October, Third Text, Paragraph, boundary 2, Artforum*, *Critical Inquiry, Comparative Literature* and *Art Journal*, In 2019 she was the Daimler Fellow at the American Academy in Berlin. In 2017-18 she served as President of the American Comparative Literature Association. In fall 2014 she was a Humanities Council Fellow at Princeton University. And in 2003-2004 she was a Guggenheim Fellowship recipient.

So thank you both so much for being here. And I think maybe a good way to start off is Aliza, if you wouldn't mind just kind of giving a brief synopsis of the show at Art in General. And from there we can dive deeper into the work and the questions and conversations that it provokes.

Aliza Shvarts: Absolutely, and thank you Hallie so much for having me and Emily so much for being here in conversation. It's, yeah, something I've been really looking forward to. Purported covers the past 10 years of my artistic practice, a little bit over 10 years, and the title actually comes from one of the works, which is called Cite/Site and felt like a good way of succinctly describing something I've been interested in for a long time, which is the question of how we represent and reproduce ourselves. Specifically I've been focused on this as a question of testimony: who speaks for whom, who speaks and is believed, whose voice matters. And this is something that I've been exploring in different ways through different kinds of projects that take a lot of different forms, some material and some quite immaterial.

So the exhibition itself is bounded by a work that I made a little over 10 years ago in 2008, which was my senior thesis project for the art major when I was an undergrad. And it's a work that has in a lot of ways set the boundaries or terms for this mode of inquiry. I'm sure we'll get into it a little bit more in as we continue talking but maybe I'll just briefly summarize it now, which is a, it was a year long performance of self-induced miscarriages. I can talk a little bit more about the details of it, but the outcome was because of the controversial nature of the subject matter, because of the content, the work was actually banned from exhibition by the university. So for 10 years it was something that no one had ever seen. But because there's quite a lot of media fear around it, it was something that nobody had ever seen but had heard about. So I became really interested in this question of what that means for someone who deals in visual representation like artists do. And that I think in a lot of ways outlines the terms of the other projects. What does it mean to kind of be overexposed in that sense, at the same time not really have the means to represent yourself? What does it mean to be called a fiction? Which is what the university said in their press release sort of denouncing the existence of the work. So in a lot of ways these are just questions I've returned to again and again through different kinds of practices and that's what you can really see in this exhibition.

HA: Amazing. It's a very beautiful exhibition. I'm grateful I was able to see it before the quarantine. One of the things that struck me initially upon entering this space, and I think a good piece to start off the conversation is maybe the Banners piece because it's so visually arresting kind of immediately upon entrance. And so maybe if you could talk a bit about that and then we can kind of go from there also.

AS: Absolutely. So the banners are continuous digital scrolls that have been printed on 13 ounce vinyls. There's a set of them and it's actually a series I think I'm going to be continuing working on, as you know, different things happen on the internet. But what you see on each banner is a moment of overexposure in somebody's life. So a tweet that went viral, a YouTube video that, you know, sort of got a ton of comments. So what you see in the space is that content at the top followed by an enormous amount of comments or retweets, which are the kind of path of the viral circulation of that particular speech act. Some of them are very, very long. I believe the longest one is almost 1500 feet. And as with a lot of the works, this is something that began with my own experience. It again began with that work I made as an undergrad for the senior thesis.
I wrote an article for my college newspaper just trying to clarify some of the things that had been sort of circulating in the media about the work. You know, there's all of these sort of hysterical articles about the idea that I was aborting nine month old fetuses, which was not the content of the piece. So I wrote, you know, in a very naive undergrad way, this article that I thought would just clarify that this had a very precise score. The entire point of the piece was that I never knew if I was really pregnant or not. It really came down to this act of reading and this question of authorship on the feminine body. The piece got so many comments, that is the article, that it crashed the college websites' newspaper. And forever after that, a few years after that, whenever I was asked to lecture on my work, I would use that article because it's pretty descriptive. And sometimes I would forget to cut off all of the comments. So it would be this enormous PDF with all of those comments attached to it. And it was just a source of incredible shame for me. It's hard

to describe. It's very palpable. You know, it's just the weight of that continuous scroll, the weight of that enormous PDF. But it occurred to me a couple of years ago that actually a lot of people probably have a kind of monstrous PDF like this or some equitable version of that in their past. As our life on the internet continues to intensify, a lot of people have this experience of overexposure and it actually leaves a kind of material trace with this chain of comments or retweets or you know, some kind of some kind of discursive artifact. So the point of the banners is to sort of print these out, materialize them. There's a way that turning the immaterial into something material can be quite calming or healing, or at least that's how it felt for me. And also, this is kind of the bigger point of the work, is that these events don't exist in isolation. So it was the kind of banner of shame becomes this banner of commonality. You know, when you go viral, you are overexposed. You're made to feel, this is something that only has happened to you and you are the worst person in the world, totally alone and out there. But actually this probably the future for many of us or, or the present or the recent past, you know, if Warhol's axiom is that we're all going to be famous for 15 minutes, I think we can update that and say that we'll probably all go viral for 15 seconds at some point in our lives.

HA: Right. And it's also challenging the quasi-anonymity that exists on the internet where we are kind of typing these comments out into the ether in relative isolation, but now you've transformed them into something that's very material and actually it's participatory, right. Viewers are meant to touch and kind of go through the scroll as if we were ourselves scrolling on the internet.

AS: Yeah, exactly. Yeah. and you know, as they kind of changed shape over the exhibition, it sort of, you know, people also continuing to leave a little bit of a mark. Yeah, absolutely.

Emily Apter: I will, I will come back and pick up on some of what you've just said, but let me start a little bit with the piece Cite/Site which you encounter—I too was fortunate enough to be able to be at the opening and see the show in person and I was very struck having seen an earlier iteration of that piece in, I believe in the little show in the artist space in New Haven, how different it looked when you could approach it from outside, even though it was nighttime. Seeing, it actually now reminds me of working in tiles, right? So you know, you have these images perceived on the windows of the gallery space and so the whole way you encountered the piece and met the piece was quite different. And actually it brought to mind a phrase from Sarah Ahmed's Living a Feminist Life where she talks about the repetition is the scene of feminist instruction. And the reason I bring that up is that she's referring in that moment of the text to her own reliance on what she calls a citational policy, a citational policy that pays homage to feminist memory and affirms a kind of alternative genealogy for theory and for history. And I kind of, so I guess I had a question for you Aliza. When would you say your work pays homage to, or that particular piece—this is certainly one way I came to it—as paying a kind of homage or engaging with feminist memory, and I'm thinking here specifically of the way that we see images of work by Mary Kelly, Adrian Piper, Andrea Frasier, Coco Fusco, Suzanne Lacy, Ana Mendieta. They're either referenced visually or in the notes that accompany the piece there. And so the visual archive kind of sits in relation to a longer larger archive of referenced writings and theoretical works. So I guess my question was your relationship to that that past.

AS: Yeah, absolutely. It's actually a piece I think a lot about alongside Banners cause they really come out of this similar impulse, which is to consider oneself as part of something larger. And I think in a lot of ways this is such a core idea in feminist politics is this idea of a collectivity or a community. And I think both of them are trying to think about, both of those pieces are trying to think about a collectivity or a community across time and across digital space.
So Cite/Site is also a piece that even though it's kind of a really historical work, I mean it's a citational practice of accruing all of these different feminist works, works by people who I really care about. I actually have a kind of phrase I like to say about that piece, which is it's a poem of feminine interdiction. It consists of 72 fragments of images or short pieces of text that have a life of circulation. And some of them far pre-date the internet. Some of them are early 20th century. So it's different modes of speculation. But what you see across all of them, and there's 72 panes in total, and the way it's installed in the gallery is it's installed in the, in the windows that surround the gallery. So they're actually kind of translucent panes that you can see through into the exhibition.
What you see across them is not only an enormous amount of difference, I mean each circumstance is completely irreducible I'd say to a larger, you know, kind of general idea, but at the same time a kind of repetition of this idea of not being believed in many ways or not being able to speak for oneself or speaking for oneself and not being heard. And in a lot of ways that's really what's common to a lot of the works. And some, some of the panes have just single words in them. So some of them are words that are themselves infused with a kind of historical moment. So malanchista and babaties are words that we use, you know, in somewhat common parlance, but they actually are the names of women. So the way a name of a woman in her story can be turned into an adjective or a verb is really interesting to me. And then of course one of the words is purported, which I've been thinking a lot about is such a useful word because it encapsulates this question of what it means to, to live in a subjunctive mood. I think that's the right term for it. But Emily, you'll have to correct me if it's a little bit off, but as far as I understand, the subjunctive mood is a kind of a mood that cannot be corroborated. So when we speak, it's, it's wishful thinking, things that we don't really know if they're true or false, so they can't be indicative or imperative. It's a sort of other space of imagination, possibility, but also doubt. And I think a lot of us live there. A lot of us live in a subjunctive mood where things we say don't really land. They are doubted; they are wishes when we iterate them, and we're not really sure where they're going to go. So just as much as this is the kind of, you know, visual poem of feminist interdiction, it's also kind of a glimpse, I think, of this kind of history of, of subjectiveness, right? This history of interrelations, which I think are, yeah, deeply entwined with a kind of attempt to figure out a feminist genealogy that's not necessarily anchored in these, in these solid points and imperatives and indicative facts.

EA: I'm going to hand it back to Hallie in a minute, but just as a sort of sidebar, as somebody who managed to, I don't know quite how to finish a PhD in performance studies and engagement at the same time as you're very involved with, I would say, you know, various forms and modes of activism across media. You've also been an artist whose work without being, I would say overly indebted or hobbled by it, but it's very involved in some way with theory, whatever that

means. And I just was struck, for example, in a work like Disconsent that there's a way in which you're working almost as a medium with a milieu that's at once distant and critical of a certain kind of academic culture, theoretical set of presuppositions, and dares to sort of open up the spaces of unavowed hostility or resentment or jealousy, you know, this kind of field of affect that infuses the academic milieu at the same time that it's very rigorous. This is something I've always personally very much appreciated in the work, a very rigorous engagement with theory. And I just wondered like how you negotiated this. I mean, have you thought about it or does it just kind of come to you as a way of working or, I mean, you use characters in some of the video work who are drawn from this milieu, right? Students, people who are, and yet none of these, none of them is presented as a subject disconnected from the world of work, from labor, from labor activism. It's not just this self-involved kind of purely cutoff little academic universe in any way. It's people who move in and out of those spaces. But who also, you show them many of them, even if there's a kind of distance, active, actively negotiating for themselves, what a work of theory is. They'll read this passage by Judith Butler. You know, that's just one example. So I have already kind of said a lot about this, but the general question is how have you thought about this, this thing called theory?

AS: Yeah, yeah. And especially alongside—it's funny, I actually just lectured on this a couple of weeks ago in one of the classes I teach—alongside praxis, right? Yeah that kind of, you know, entrenched dialectic, right. Of the, you know, theory and practice, theoria and praxis, theory and practice, you know, sort of always, always at the forefront. So, Disconsent. I'll just describe it cause I guess probably not anyone's going to see it anytime soon, is a video piece that follows a score. So I've asked different participants to relate a narrative to the camera describing consent or dissent in a certain context. And then another participant will take their narrative and flip the terms of consent and dissent, so they can flip the yeses to nos, nos to yeses, they can invent new details. It's really up to them how they want to do that.
And there's been three iterations and I should say two iterations or new commissions for this exhibition at Art in General. So I was really happy to be able to expand on this piece, which I've been thinking about for a long time, but the first iteration is Disconsent: Pedagogy. And for that one I asked four of my former students to describe moments that they've consented or dissented in relationship to school and then tell each other's narratives. And the two new ones are Labor and Care. So for people that I have worked with in some capacity and then for Care, it's actually four curators who I've worked with. And I was thinking a lot about how curate comes from curae, to care. So in a lot of ways they're overlapping contexts. It's interesting how, you know, the labor, that a lot of people in my world are engaged in is pedagogical labor or curatorial labor or artistic labor. So the distinctions overlap in ways that I think are really interesting and in some way it's kind of a portrait of my own life. I mean these are people who have some connections to me as part of the parameter of the piece. So it's also kind of yeah, portrait of a milieu, you a portrait of community, a portrait of the ways in which different communities overlap, intersect, draw on each other in ways that I think are ultimately generative though not without conflict, antagonism, hypocrisy and bad feelings as well as good.
And the reason I was interested in all of these three contexts is because we normally think about consent in the context of sex, but actually our consent is required of us, demanded of us taken to

heart, ignored in a lot of other contexts in our lives in far more regular, in sometimes very violent ways. So I was thinking about in this piece, the relationship between consent and its imperfect opposite, dissent. So that's just a, to set up what the work is. But the question of theory is a really interesting one because it comes up a lot for me because I am so deeply invested in it and I think I became so invested because it became this really liberatory tool for me. It became a way of thinking about how I could say things, how I could describe my experiences in my life in ways that resonated with my experience. Though the way it normally comes up in my life is as a kind of tool of punishment. I'm always being told I'm too theoretical, or I'm always being told to put things in my own words. I'm always being told that the words that I use couldn't possibly be mine because there's an assumption that I couldn't possibly talk like that. And I have always been really interested in, you know, I've always noted when that comes up; it's often in the context of art. Sometimes in the context of what I'm trying to, you know, write things for different venues.

EA: That's interesting cause it kind of comes back to our earlier discussion about reclaiming citationality and appropriating it away from this kind of punitive or reductive withering accusation of it.

AS: Yeah, absolutely. And, and I think at this point in my life, you know, it's taken me about a decade to get there. I've decided to just be fine with that. Yeah. Reclaim it. I mean, this is the way I talk and I can't talk a different way and it, it's okay that it's not plausible or it's okay that it, you know, antagonizes certain people's assumption of how women sound, how women my age should sound and things like that. But that's, that's an interesting confrontation for me to have, which I've actually quite come to enjoy. But the simple answer is I like theory. That's really it. I like it. It does things that I enjoy. It does things that I find enabling and I don't need other people to like it. I don't expect, you know, all the tools that are available to me to mean the same thing, to do the same thing for everybody. But that's also kind of fun.

EA: You know, when you say I don't need other people to like it. So this is something from the very beginning of your work, right? You sure didn't get, have people like the thesis project from 2008. You went head on with the politics of abortion, the control societies, jurisdiction over women's bodies in every kind of aspect of reproduction or social reproduction. You know, this has been there from the start. So maybe a very general question about the, the sort of enjoying the, the role of "you're not going to like this."

AS: The sad thing is, is it does begin from a maybe more misguided, naive place, which is the impulse to share. Because I like it, I like these things and think that others might like them. And I'm often met with quite a lot of pushback sometimes, you know, as with the senior thesis in the form of death threats and you know, terrifying, terrifying things. And you know, there's an immense amount of embarrassment actually and shame about this idea that I like something, I find something enabling. I find something liberatory that other people can find monstrous, which I think is true in terms of my radical feminist body practices and my interest in theory, both of them are, you know, kind of obscene.

EA: But they're connected. Could you say a little more about the radical feminist body practices for those listening.

AS: Yeah. And I should say it's maybe a phase with my work that's over, but it definitely is where my work began. So what I'm referring to is, you know, maybe the most central of these, which was the senior thesis. So just to say the score: the score of the work was over an academic year. I collected semen from a group I termed fabricators and I would use it to artificially inseminate myself around when it was possible for me to get pregnant. And then I would take an herbal abortifacient. I'd been really interested in these histories I'd been reading of how women manage their own reproductive health themselves before the establishment of medical academies. So I'd use an herbal abortifacient to, I would, I would take the herbal abortifacient and then I would bleed. This was around when I was expecting my period anyways. So it was never clear to me what that blood was. And indeed that was the whole point of the piece: was that blood a miscarriage? And I have always called this piece one of self-induced miscarriages rather than an abortion because I was really interested in this idea of carrying something wrongly, right? Using the body, not for the reproduction of people, but for the reproduction of an idea for, for an art practice. And I've been really interested, I actually was coming out of a somewhat formal sculpture education at that point, or culminating a somewhat formal sculpture education at that point. So I was really interested in this idea of the talents of the body. And it only occurred to me recently at that point because I'd taken a queer and feminist performance art class, which was the first exposure I had, but there's quite a masculinist discourse around the talents of sculptors, right? It's quite macho. So I was thinking about what the talents of my body could be and whether, whether I could use them.
So I say radical feminist body practice though the actual physical part of it I should say was not that difficult to endure. It wasn't particularly painful, it was very much like having periods and the documentation which is now on view after 10 years of not putting it on view, as a kind of response to the work being banned I decided to withhold the documentation, shows exactly kind of how boring that process is or sort of, you know, how unremarkable as a bodily feat this was. But that was very much the point. I'd done a lot of research into conception and pregnancies as part of the work for the piece and you know, one in three women have miscarried and don't even know it. You know, a lot of conceptions end in miscarriage in ways that are not necessarily perceptible. It's quite a regular experience. So I was interested also in this question of, of who got to define the sort of edges or boundaries of what is a remarkable or unremarkable bodily experience.
Strangely, actually a big inspiration for it was I was reading all these medical journals and it was doctors writing to other doctors, talking about women who've miscarried. And there was this whole debate about whether the hospitals should set guidelines between what counted as medical waste versus a, you know, a death. And a lot of the doctors were saying this thing that I thought I was just shocked that needed to be said, which is that the hospitals should listen to the parents, let the parents decide. It doesn't need to be a kind of, you know, set in stone temporal cutoff. What if we left that decision, or that interpretation really, up to the people directly involved, which is the parents.

So in a weird way that was also a big inspiration for the piece or something I was thinking a lot about. What if the act of interpretation was framed as exactly that. Right. What if we took these many, you know, one of the, one of the many indeterminate states and along, you know, sort of the process of reproduction and paused, paused our attention there and actually had to think about, had to think about whether what we were seeing or what we were deciding we were seeing was something that we were co-producing in that act of looking.

EA: So your whole thing around the sort of, the way in which various kinds of regional matter, both within and outside the body, whether it's folds of flesh, lips where fingers go, labia. And now we have, you know, the, the classic example of the formless, right, the, what is it: waste matter, is it something that is some fluid form of personhood, which is of course the controversial, one of the controversial issues, and all these things that are to do with the intervention of the social into embodied materialities. And I think that, that your work in general is really interesting in terms of shining a light on different ways those symbolic centers, those zones are, and those materials get scored, get distributed, get legislated. It really puts that into question and this kind of opens the door to discussion of Anthem, which was in many ways the piece that ended up fascinating me the most when I saw it in the show.
These are, because here again you, so whereas in the work you've just been describing, it's the body itself as a, an almost an object that goes in and out of symbolization. Here I got the sense that it's another kind of mediator. It's the rape kit, which is an inanimate object. And yet it is defined by what happens to it and what it does to a body and then its afterlife and how it is reproduced, as an object, both in the law, in medical, in the medical process that ensues in the archiving, in the resolution of criminal cases or lack of resolution, the whole way in which they provide memorials to acts of sexual assault or violence.
And just before I let you run on with this cause it's such a, it's so interesting to hear you talk about it, but I was thinking kit, very word kit has been on our minds because of covid testing kit and the kind of social obsession at the moment with the kit. What is a kit? It means actually in slang, it means drugs. And British slang especially, and a full kit is also a heavy or exciting experience or it can be an outfit, you know, kitting up or it can be in gay slang referred to a super cute gay boy. I mean these are sort of some of the range of this term and I just became fascinated with it in the way you used it as, as an object, which in itself is the most bland bureaucratic object. Right. So maybe you could tell, talk to us a little bit about this particular object as it appears in the installation.

AS: Definitely. Yeah. I should pause here, Hallie, too I'm you also, maybe have some questions about this particular one. So before I launch into a deep thing.

HA: Yes, yeah. Well, and also a component of this work is the variation in language that's used on the kits themselves. And just, it's fascinating to see how state bureaucracy and how power structures within different states come through in that language and the way in which that language is dictating the experience before, kind of, anyone ever judges what that experience may have been.

AS: Yeah, no, absolutely. And that's the part too, that's been of such interest to me is this variation in language and form. So in a lot of ways, right, I mean, yeah, if there's foxes and hedgehogs, I'm definitely a hedgehog. I just kind of stick with the same idea and rework it. In a lot of ways what's interesting to me about rape kits is the same thing that was interesting to me when I was doing my senior thesis work, which is the way that we apply language to a body matters. It's transformative. It produces the reality for that body because of the way language bears a kind of consequential weight. So that's true when we're looking at a very boring video of somebody sitting in a bathtub bleeding a little bit and deciding whether they're having a period or whether we're witnessing a self-induced miscarriage. And it's true when you look at a body that's been assaulted and use a set of, as Emily was saying, very banal objects to decide or adjudicate the reality of that assault and produce the reality for that person.

So I'll just back up and describe the piece again for everyone listening, which is it is a collection of the different sexual assault kits or rape kits that are used in the different, the 50 States. They're all widely different. And even within a state there can be multiple kits used. So one of the things I was interested in is, is how this variation has a kind of impact. Alongside the work itself, or alongside, I should say, the installation, is a linguistic analysis that I've been working on. Emily mentioned I have just finished my PhD; it's in performance studies and I focused on a very esoteric element of that, which is speech act theory.

And I was thinking as I think a lot of artists have been thinking for awhile, especially in the past couple of years about how my particular skills might be useful in a political sense. And I can't think of a more useful way to use speech act theory than thinking about the rape kit, which is itself a speech act. So I was thinking a lot about the way in which these kids produce the kind of reality. And a lot of times the reality is an extension of what we see in the different laws around sexual assault, which are also different state to state. So in some of the kits you see the use of particular language around that it, you know, so for example, the Virginia kit uses the word, and I should say it's not appropriate in any way to use language of sexual language really to describe acts of assault. There's been a lot of interesting work around this in feminist legal scholarship actually around the 1990s. Looking at the way in which we talk about sexual assault specifically. And of course it's assault. It's not a sex act. So to use the language of sex acts is already a kind of mislabeling, producing of an incorrect reality around those assaults. So the Virginia kit you'll see echoes though of Virginia law. So you see things like references to sodomy and buggery, which are words that might really strike us as being non-official sounding. In other instances you'll have the use of medical versus legal language. So you'll see victim versus patient. And that brings up this question about whether this process is a medical or legal process. It's unclear. You'll see also variations that maybe don't necessarily strike us as meaning that much. So for example, underwear can also be underpants or undergarments. And you know, those variations just seem vernacular. They can also be panties. And that maybe gives us a more vivid idea of who this kid imagines to be its subject. So there's lots of really interesting and I should say, you know, quite troubling variation in these. And I think one of the reasons that we have this amount of variation, it's not only because of the variance of state laws, but actually also the lack of legislation around these kits. So there's only one FDA ordinance that actually covers them. And they all have FDA inserts, and this was something that was really interesting to me because yeah, how is the FDA regulating these objects if they are so varied and so different? And the ordinance that covers

them is the temporary one that was formulated in the 1990s for convenience kits. So convenience kit could be a rape kit, it could be a a gunshot residue examination kit.
There's a, there's a couple of different kinds of kits that are out there. Though the language of the kit is really striking because it is this kind of promise of containment, and that's the entire promise, I'd say, at the heart of the rape kit. If you can isolate and contain, excavate the evidence of a crime from the body, which becomes the crime scene, there's this kind of promise of legibility that is assumed to not be available to that body directly. And this, I think, has everything to do with this question of who we believe historically to testify on their own behalf. It's a legal fact that not everyone was able to bear witness in court, give testimony in court up until fairly recently. It's a legal fact, you know, for example, and this is something that Sidiya Hartman talks about in her book, Scenes of Subjection, around the court case, Celia versus Missouri, that not every woman could give consent, enslaved women specifically were assumed to have their consent already given, right? Or consent was obviated because they weren't counted as people before the law but as property. And of course the thing a kit can never really discover, the thing that can never be captured in the swabs or the envelopes or any kind of, you know, forensic tool is the presence or absence of consent. That's something you have to ask the person about, that's something that, you know, can only be directly testified to through speech. So they just became fascinating objects for me because of all of these contradictions and because of the way they so perfectly encapsulate and depend on this relationship, or I should say maybe you know, kind of incomplete relationship, between the reality of the body and its capacity to transform that into legible testimony.

EA: I'd just say that I think that in terms of medium, that so much of what's come out of the Forensic art group and with Eyal Weitzman and company, and the mobilization of evidentiary materials for certain kinds of political intervention, that is already, I think there's considerable energy and publicity around that. What I haven't seen so much is the conscription of this, of the forensic and the evidentiary for certain questions of sexual justice.

AS: Yeah.

EA: So I would say that one thing I, that your work, correct me if I'm not wrong or if you agree, but I see that as a move in your work.

AS: Absolutely. Yeah. And yeah, I, that is the goal. I mean, really the goal of this is, you know, I would like to produce a document, a database really is what it's turning into, that can be widely available to different people who have different sets of expertise to make these kits if they are going to be part of the legal system better. One of the things that has struck me though, and I've been involved in a lot of conversations with different people, you know, I think there's a lot of energy right now and it's kind of maybe part of this like general kit energy that's in the air, right? This idea of, you know, things that we can take home, meals that come in kits, right? This compartmentalization of all of the messy parts of life is, you know, can we design a better kit?
I think that there's things that can easily be made better. So for example, a lot of the kits still involve a pulled hair step where sometimes it's 10 to 30, sometimes it's as many as 50 hairs are

pulled from their root, from head hairs and pubic hairs. This has been recommended against in the national protocol, which is a set of guidelines, not law, but guidelines, which, you know, said sort of sets the best practices for these objects. And you know, lots of sexual assault nurse examiners and sexual assault forensic examiners are really invested in this kind of work and invested in a lot of activism around this, which is really important. I think those things can be improved. I think the question is given that those guidelines are already out there, what's breaking down in terms of getting them followed in these actual objects. And that I would assume has a lot to do with state liability. If you take out an envelope, if you take out a step, does that open the state up to liability? And again, it gets to that question that's been the central question for me, which is, who do these objects serve? Who are they for? Who are they representing, really?

EA: I mean, it makes me think also of a link to your performance, your interest in performance, performativity and performance, which is that you're saying that these kids are part of a larger narrative fabric that is projective. It presumes a cast of imaginary characters, women as certain roles in certain positions, women underneath. Is there a trace of, of self-defense of a bodily fight and, and the thing in fact kind of reproduces this act of passive, or who has, who's empowered, who's not. They're all a whole set of not just assumptions but really of scenarios, performative scenarios that are almost projected on the screen that gives these kits their ability to act, to be performative right. In their, in, in relation to these imagined performances.

AS: Absolutely. Yeah. And that's, I think why it's so hard to answer that question of how do we design a better kit. I mean it gets to, right, these structural foundational narratives about what justice means. And what justice means if you don't embody this sort of historical subject that has always been able to demand and receive justice. And this is I think particularly important around sexual justice, where we don't have a great imagination of what that, what that means in its realization. And you know, in a lot of ways the kits kind of fold that question of sexual justice into the frameworks of justice in general. You know, they use a lot of the same kind of legal assumptions and forensic assumptions that don't necessarily apply in the case of sexual assault. So yeah, I mean, yeah, I think that that question does have a huge sort of performance aspect cause it has to do again with these kinds of both theatrical imaginations of, of what we imagine victimhood to look like, what we imagined violence to look like. And then also these kinds of scores about how do we phrase our injury, how do we phrase our demand if we're seeking justice? And a lot of times I think that those phrasings, they often themselves constitute acts of, okay,

EA: One of the places that your work goes to, not necessarily Anthem as much as I'm thinking of Nonconsensual Collaborations, which maybe we could get into with Hallie and you could describe a little bit, but always the question for me is, well, it echoes something that is in your writing about this piece, what truths can be discovered, but what harms can not be voiced? What complicated entanglements cannot be understood in terms of harm? And so it seems to me one of the things, the scary places that your work dares to go, and again, I hear this and you may not like it, is to question whether sexual safety, which is the flip side of in a sense the, the fantasy of determining what an assault is or an act of sexual violence is through a kit. But the flip side is to say that we then will turn to the law to adjudicate sexual safety, but the closer we get to be the,

the areas of the law that are charged with dealing with consent and collaboration and the complex entanglements of, and even the, the linguistic formulas for how to determine or articulate what a harm is, what an injury is. And, and you, you take it even beyond that to a place, at least for me, which is that maybe, maybe this is impossible to adjudicate. Maybe sexual safety is a fantasy that we have to kind of hold onto and treat as potentially operative to make ourselves safe. But that, but because of the, even that formula of nonconsensual collaboration, which is a very ambiguous formula, It implies all kinds of things that don't fall into neat categories, desires that don't follow paths that one would like them to follow or, you know, so you, you kind of dare to go there in from the, in a sense the realm of the law and sex, to the problem of the dynamics of intimacy, of encounter, that push up against the boundaries of safety.

AS: Yeah, I mean, Nonconsensual Collaborations is a strange piece. It's a, it's a bit of an older one. I made it between 2012 and 2014 as a young person trying to navigate art and academia. What it really was, is a kind of collection of different exploitative moments, different moments with, you know, artists who are older than me, more established than me, had power over me, that went badly. And I decided after that I was going to be signify, reclaim those moments, as in fact, not moments of exploitation, but moments of nonconsensual collaboration. I decided retroactively that these were in fact, not just shitty things that happened in life, but actually performances where the other participant did not consent to their participation. So it's a strange piece cause I kind of flipped the role where I become the aggressor and I really present myself as the aggressor in these circumstances where in a lot of ways I, you know, I didn't originate as the aggressor. It originated as a kind of more structural moment of exploitation, which I should say also is, is not unique. I mean I think a lot of people who come to New York, you know, and are in these worlds trying to find jobs, do freelance work, it's exploitative. A lot of strange and bad behavior happens and a lot of times from people you really respect. So it, it is this complicated thing that I think a lot of us just have to live through and work through and we don't really have great representational frameworks for voicing. So that's where nonconsensual collaboration became a compelling idea for me. And it was also a strategic one. You know, you feel better sometimes if you decide later that you know you cannot, you cannot claim justice around this thing, right? Someone's done something suspect, you know, made you feel exploited, you know, done something injuring, done something cruel, and instead of turning to the frameworks of justice, so the law or you know, some kind of quasi legal entity, you can turn to narrative to recast those systems of power. And also that recasting kind of, I think, elaborates the more complicated picture of what entanglement looks like.

HA: And I also would like to point out that it's titled Nonconsensual rather than kind of more a straight up opposition to consent, like something that dissent might connote. And dissent is something that is kind of celebratory in nature it has like a certain political prowess that is largely praised most of the time. And it's interesting the ways in which some of the other pieces also kind of play into that political dimension. Also with banners, I mean banner as a form has a certain art historical lineage for sure. But more colloquially it's a form of communication in political and activist spheres. So there are these political dimensions that are coming through in kind of very small moments of speech acts that your pieces themselves are reiterating.

AS: Absolutely. Yeah. Yeah, it's, it's about the kind of ways in which sometimes the framework itself prevents a certain kind of legibility, right? I mean, the thing you actually really can't put on a banner, you know. I'm amazed I actually like found a fabricator willing to work with me to do this is you know, an extremely long, you know, many hundreds of feet, tiny text image. You know, it doesn't work well for the way in which banners are normally meant to function, which are these bold statements either for advertising or for activism, right? This kind of declarative, often imperative, right, sort of announcements. So, you know, kind of putting an enormous amount of text that's all very small, all very you know, sort of messy complicates the frame of what could, or I think in a lot of ways that it rubs up against the frame of what could be said. Same with non-consent. There's certain things, or certain encounters where consent is just obviated. The power structure is such, or the relationship is such, or your need to, you know, get paid is such that it doesn't matter whether you consented or dissented to what happened, right? Your consent is, it doesn't matter in that circumstance and you have very little recourse for trying to make it matter. And I think in a lot of ways collaboration can be a space to make that a little bit more visible in the same way that these kinds of, you know, extremely long scrolls of tons and tons of basically trolls commenting on, you know, very various speech acts that people put out there, various, you know, moments that people have had in their lives, fits badly on a banner. And it kind of extends a banner to its absolute capacity is the material proposition. I think non-consent extends or rubs up or kind of stages a certain failure in the way we imagine collaboration and the way we imagine labor, right? Where do those two things transform into one another? And rather than trying to kind of set clean lines that mark the difference, I think there's value in interrogating those lines and showing how they actually in many, many circumstances don't get to be something that you point to and will hold.

EA: You know, this remark about collaboration makes me think of the, this other phrase that Sarah Ahmed uses: intersectionality is army. And it gets back to, you know, what are the different kinds of political technologies that are now available. Banners are some, perhaps one, but also memes, and I know maybe we can start to conclude our discussion with a little detour into something that's not necessarily foregrounded in this show, but it has been part of your work. And it's a, the jury's out of course, on how to use memes, whether one really wants to go there. But it seems to me that there are, of course, a lot of interesting feminist artists at the moment who are openly embracing the meme, including yourself. You did this really interesting work called Crossings Cruzandos with Carmelita Tropicana and Elsa. Is it Ella?

AS: Ella, yeah.

EA: And maybe so, so here, the question of also the meme as a medium of humor introduced into kind of feminist, and something between a banner or poster, street art and something viral, virally circulating medium. So maybe you could just come back to that.

AS: Yeah, absolutely. Yeah. So the project with Ella and Carmelita was a bit more humorous, it is actually also invested in this question of feminist generations. They both call themselves my art

mothers, which is a term I, you know, just love. And you know, we found each other, and Carmelita has this great joke, you know, like, I was such a painless birth. I came to her already with a bachelor's, you know, like how great. And I really, you know, we were thinking about it as these kinds of vehicles for producing genealogies as a way of, you know, thinking about an idea that can travel, and in its traveling from one context to the other create kind of moments of kinship or creates moments of community with that piece.
I've also been thinking a lot about just virality in general. It's a, you know, structuring metaphor of the internet for better or worse and in ways that I think are quite unfortunate given what's going on right now. I don't, you know, there's a lot of ways and a lot of reasons to turn away from the virus as metaphor. The one thing I've been thinking a lot about is the way in which a virus, even in its biological sense, right, as an actual virus and not metaphorical, it's a vehicle of reproduction. I've always been really interested in how a virus and in this way I think, you know, there's a lot of reasons to think about the relationship between viruses as biological, physical things, and the way an image or an idea can travels through this kind of metaphor. They don't quite meet all the criteria of being alive except a really important one, which is that they can reproduce themselves. And that's in fact all they do; all they do is reproduce themselves, which is the source of their pathology.
I've been trying to grapple with this in a lot of different ways. And I've just been thinking a lot about it now in terms of what art can do. You know, it's sort of what, what's the point of art right now, is a question that many people have been thinking about. And in some ways I think trying to get a handle on these ways in which we think about reproduction, the time it takes, the space it takes, what kinds of physical entities is it consigned to, what kind of physical entities only reproduce and yet are never represented. Right? I mean, that's kind of true insofar as we don't really like see viruses in it, you know, daily life. Right? We have a kind of, I think very vivid illustration of one that's come to dominate our imaginations of this particular moment, but we don't really see them when we're out there walking on the street trying to be careful.
So the, the meme has been really interesting to me as a kind of embodiment of this mode of reproduction. And I think in the same way, you know, lived experience can be images and art practices, even popular ones like memes and especially popular ones like memes can be this kind of opportunity or platform for rethinking the narratives we tell ourselves about what it means to matter. What if reproduction was suddenly the kind of seat of agency rather than representation? How might that reorient the world? What if we took its power a bit more seriously? So yeah, I don't know that I have much more to say about that, but, but it has been something, yeah.

EA: So, I mean, you did this piece in 2020, How Does It Feel to be a Fiction (New York Virus Two) so, well, what was New York Virus One and are we now in chapter three, New York virus three? Are you going to do work about that?

AS: I don't know. I mean..

EA: It's not funny of course.

AS: No, no, it's, you know, I think it's, it's too soon in so many ways to think about making work. At least for me, I'm, I'm slow. You know, I just, I do the same thing in a very slow way in changing contexts. So yeah. How Does It Feel to be a Fiction is actually a piece that's in its sixth iteration. It is a digital piece that takes the form of a highly consensual email worm. So the way that you would encounter it is either through a QR, an image QR code, which is in the gallery, which I guess it's not how you'll encounter it. But what might happen is might get an email from somebody you know, that's their name@afiction.org inviting you to participate in a performance. So if you follow the link, you decide to participate and it's just that you have to consent a lot.
It's explained to you before you consent, it's like three different consent screens, that as soon as you consent to participating in this digital performance, you will be taken to a theoretical text that examines this question of what it means to live as a fiction. So that gets back to these themes of what it means to not be legible in certain frameworks. And at the same time, that email invitation will be sent from your name to everybody stored in your Gmail account. So this current iteration is actually, so the piece began, it was originally a commission from Recess asking me to respond to the 2016 US presidential election election and fake news. And I got to thinking, well, why, why am I being asked to respond to this? And I was like, Oh, right, I was fake news in 2008. So it begins from this place of what it means to be discounted or told that you're not real, a fiction, fake in that way.
But each iteration responds to the hosting institutions. So as I said, this is the sixth and it's come back to New York. It was in Bogota, new Haven, Athens, and Zurich before then. So this is the sixth iteration and the piece is actually about now recursive time. Again, we're on the eve of a kind of, you know, moment in US politics and the election. Again, right, so many things come back, and that I think in many ways it's characterized this kind of moment for us politically as you know, so many of the things that we've been talking about as feminists, so many things we've been talking about in queer activism, so many things we've been talking about anti-racist politics, are feeling recursive, right? They come back again and again because they're not yet resolved. And I was thinking about the kind of viral mechanism of an email worm to be a good way of representing this sort of recursive time. Right? It only reproduces itself. It only comes back

HA: Well on the very relevant topic of virus, I hear that we may have to close on out, but hopefully, given recursively, we'll meet again sometime. Thank you both for joining us today. It was an excellent conversation.

AS: Thank you so much for having us.

EA: Thank you so much. It was really fascinating to talk and I really enjoyed it.

HA: Stay safe!