



BY WENDY VOGEL

GOING VIRAL

ALIZA SHVARTS'S DARING PERFORMANCE WORK

“ACTRESS SHOOTS ANDY WARHOL” proclaimed the front page of the *New York Daily News* on June 4, 1968, the morning after Valerie Solanas opened fire on the Pop artist. Solanas, the radical feminist author of *The SCUM Manifesto* (SCUM stood for the Society for Cutting Up Men), wrote to the newspaper with a correction: “I’m a writer, not an actress.” Solanas’s statement has become an oft-repeated but incidental detail in the story, a declaration attesting to her deranged mental state. But it could be read another way: the writer was not denying her crime but asserting her own agency.

She went to Warhol’s Factory with intent to kill on June 3. She unloaded four shots, one of which ripped through Warhol’s abdomen and another that grazed the critic and curator Mario Amaya. Several hours later, Solanas confessed her crimes to a rookie traffic cop. In doing so, she proved that she was not the interpreter of a script but the author of her own life. Her assassination attempt avenged what she believed was the potential theft of her intellectual property—a play called *Up Your Ass*—that she gave to Warhol for consideration. As she explained to the police, “He had too much control over my life.”

We might think, for example, of Chris Burden’s iconic piece *Shoot* (1971), which interwove questions of physical and aesthetic violence into a single act.



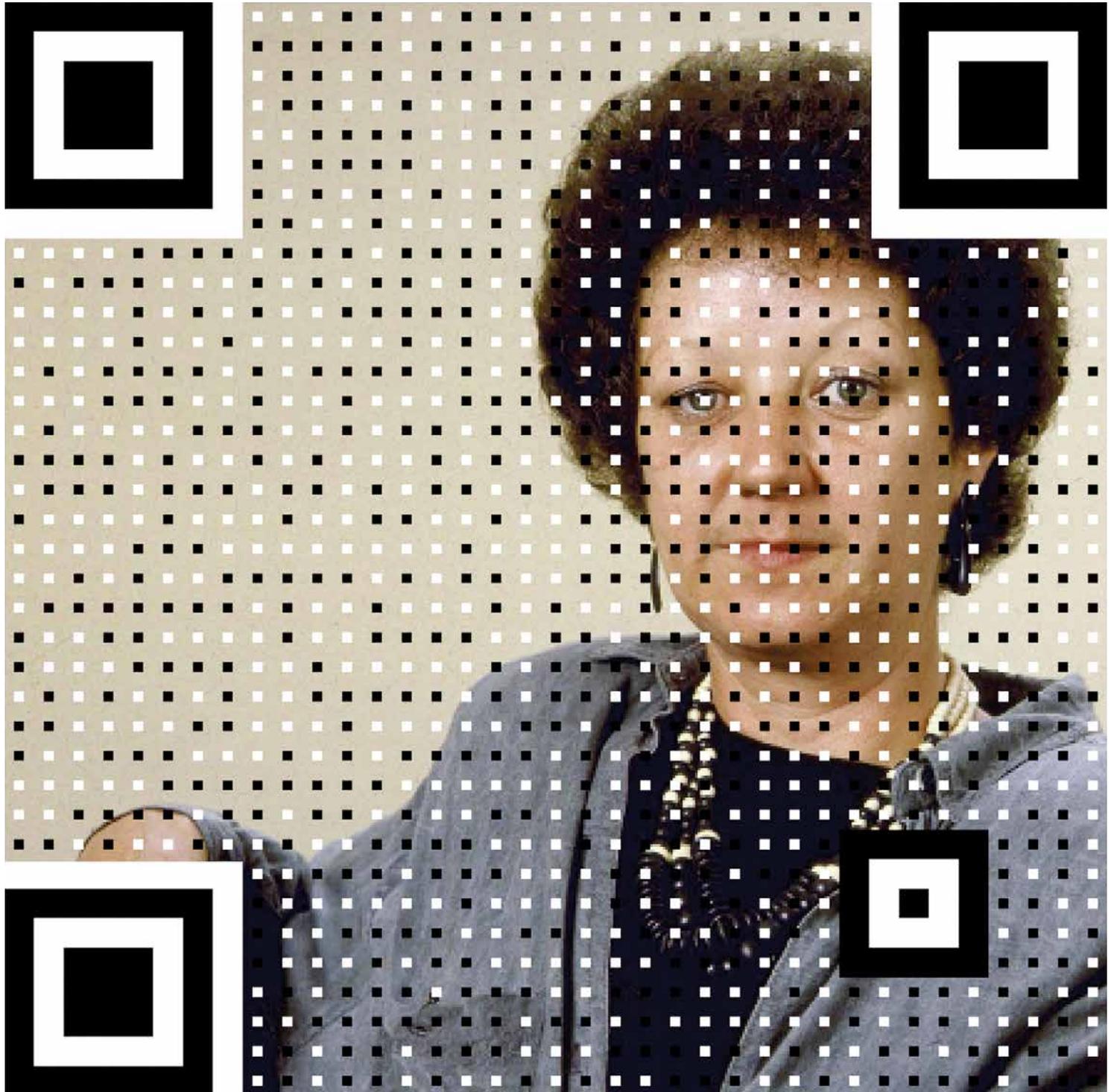
The work of artist, writer, and scholar concerns whose testimony is believed, whose story is legitimated. She asks repeatedly, “How does it feel to live as a fiction?” Shvarts argues that fiction “covers over the space left behind when real existences are jettisoned from political and social visibility,” when bodies are reduced to mute landscapes from which physical evidence of violence can be collected. Women’s testimonies are fictionalized in debates around reproductive rights and sexual assault, subordinated to hard DNA evidence; the rights of black and brown people are fictionalized through police violence, even as images of their tortured bodies are fetishized in the media; indigenous peoples become fictionalized to colonialist governments, while their land and their knowledge are expropriated. As Shvarts has written, “Through fiction, we are mobilized not as subjects, but as objects of discourse within those structures of power from which we have been historically excluded.”¹ A queer Jewish woman and self-declared feminist, Shvarts lives at the intersection of several fictions.

Shvarts’s first experience becoming a fiction—and viral media sensation—happened in 2008, when she was a twenty-two-year-old undergraduate art major at Yale University. For her untitled senior thesis project, she engaged in a nine-month performance work where she used the female body’s reproductive cycle as aesthetic material. Each month, during her estimated ovulation period (the ninth through fifteenth days of her menstrual cycle), she self-inseminated with sperm from anonymous donors. On the twenty-eighth day of her cycle (when she expected her period would begin), she checked herself into a hotel room and ingested abortifacient herbs to induce a miscarriage. She experienced cramps and heavy bleeding but did not know whether the blood her body expelled was that of an abortion or menstruation. Shvarts never revealed the number of her donors, the specific herbs she used, or the frequency of her insemination process. In a statement she wrote, “Because of these measures of privacy, the piece exists only in its telling. This telling can take textual, visual, spatial, temporal and performative forms—copies of copies of which there is no original.”²

Until recently, no aspects of the thesis project had been shown at all. After a meeting with her thesis committee in April 2008, a month before her exhibition opening and graduation, the *Yale Daily News* published a story about Shvarts’s “abortion” work. The article reached the national news media, turning Shvarts’s art into a headline that elicited outrage across the political spectrum. In a paradoxical move, Yale’s deans called the thesis work a “creative fiction,” yet forbade Shvarts from showing it. The artist responded to the *Yale Daily News* on April 18, 2008, with a rebuttal statement, which defended the facticity of her work and its intentions. The university’s website crashed as hundreds of reader comments poured in.

Ten years after graduating, Shvarts is enjoying a New Haven homecoming of sorts. This spring, she has opened a solo exhibition, *Off Scene*, curated by Sarah Fritchey, at the nonprofit Artspace. The art center is located blocks from Yale. It is also the first time that Shvarts’s thesis work has been exhibited to the public. *Player* (2008/2018) is a VHS video shown on a variable-speed media player. It documents Shvarts ingesting her abortifacient drug cocktail in various hotel rooms. Slowed down to 1,231 hours (the duration of the six-week Artspace exhibition), the footage renders any salacious scenes ordinary. The video crawls along like a series of blurry stills; one frame might reveal a trickle of blood as she sits in a bathtub, but often entire minutes pass with nothing in particular happening.





Above - *How does it feel to be a fiction? New Haven Virus*, 2018.
© Aliza Shvarts. Courtesy: Artspace, New Haven
Opposite, top - *Banners*, 2018, *Off Scene* installation view at Artspace,
New Haven, 2018. © Aliza Shvarts. Courtesy: Artspace, New Haven.
Photo: Phoebe d'Heurle
Opposite, bottom, from left to right - *Player*, 2008/2018; *Posters*, 2017.
Off Scene installation view at Artspace, New Haven, 2018. © Aliza Shvarts.
Courtesy: Artspace, New Haven. Photo: Phoebe d'Heurle

Aliza Shvarts is an artist and writer whose work deals broadly with queer and feminist understandings of reproductive labor and temporality. She was a 2014 recipient of the Creative Capital | Warhol Foundation Arts Writers Grant, a 2014-2015 Helena Rubinstein Fellow in Critical Studies at the Whitney Independent Study Program, and is currently a Joan Tisch Teaching Fellow at the Whitney Museum of American Art. She currently teaches at Parsons School of Design and is completing a PhD in Performance Studies at New York University.

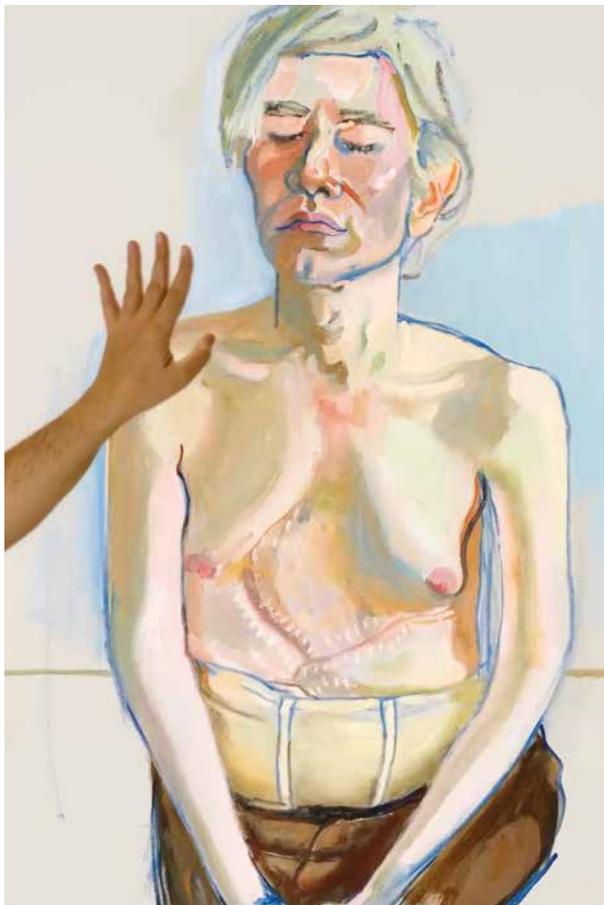
Wendy Vogel is a writer, critic and independent curator based in New York. Her work frequently examines the histories of feminism and identity politics in contemporary art. A former editor at *Flash Art* and *Art in America*, she writes for a variety of arts and culture publications, including *Artforum*, *The Art Newspaper*, *BOMB*, *frieze* and the *Guardian*. She has curated or co-curated projects at Abrons Arts Center, Baxter Street CCNY, bitforms, the Hessel Museum at Bard College, The Kitchen and VOLTA NY. In spring 2018, Vogel was a visiting faculty member in the MFA department of painting and printmaking at Virginia Commonwealth University.

That's not to say that Shvarts's static work in *Off Scene* doesn't pack a punch. *Box Choreographies* (2018) attests to a disturbing collusion of administration, branding, and pathology. The work comprises commercially available rape kits surrounding a blown-out duck's egg, an evocative surrogate for a female body. Emblazoned with state names and agencies—for example, a large Department of Defense seal—the sexual-assault evidence collection kits detail their procedures, or “choreographies,” for use.

Now a PhD student in performance studies at New York University, Shvarts has continued to probe subjects that are taboo, even for feminist artists. Her ongoing performance-based work *Nonconsensual Collaborations* subverts a concept many feminists consider inviolable. The absence of consent, in a sexual situation, is what turns the encounter into a crime. But as Shvarts narrates in an accompanying video, “The subject able to give consent, to exercise will, and to demonstrate injury before the law is neither timeless nor universal, but materially and historically produced.” In other words, consent is not equally available to all subjects—particularly not those who experience multiple intersections of oppression, like female former slaves.

Presented at Artspace as a video with four chapters, the second vignette of *Nonconsensual Collaborations* is the most incendiary. Still images flash across the screen as Shvarts explains how she met a provocative male performance artist at an art afterparty. They had a brief sexual liaison at a bar. Days later, Shvarts received a text message from an anonymous number, with a photo of what she believed was the performance artist's hand holding a cell phone. The phone screen displayed a fictionalized text-message exchange between them. (As it turns out, the artist in question did not send the photo at all). In response, Shvarts texted the artist's real number a video of herself swabbing her vagina with a rape kit. Predictably, the artist flew into a rage. But Shvarts became agitated by his insistence that his art and his life are separate, when his work suggests otherwise. “Who gets to insist on the separation between aesthetic and social life?” she asks the viewer. “Certainly not me; certainly not most women.”³

This idea is further carried out in *Cite/Site* (2018), a work comprising a grid of seventy-two posters, each measuring eighteen by twenty-four inches. Featuring fragments of writing and cropped images by and of women, the work expresses the difficulty of receiving women's truths as evidentiary truth. Solanas's quote—“I'm a writer, not an actress”—joins citations like photographic details of Ana Mendieta's performance *Untitled (Rape Scene)* (1973), a photo of drag queen Venus Xtravaganza (who was murdered during the filming of the drag ball documentary *Paris Is Burning*), lawyer Anita Hill testifying to sexual harassment at the 1991 Supreme Court hearing for Justice Clarence Thomas, and a photo of the so-called “false rape accuser” Tawana Brawley.



Like one of many female ghosts haunting *Off Scene*, Solanas appears again as a kind of eminence in *Shoot* (2016), a two-channel video projected onto canvases. One silent channel details an aborted performance proposal that Shvarts wrote for actor and artist James Franco in 2012, at the height of the actor's engagement with contemporary art. In the proposal, Shvarts requests that Franco let her shoot him. The text operates like a seduction—Shvarts offers the actor legitimation in the art world in exchange for his bodily integrity. Shvarts never sent the score, but as a teaching fellow at the Whitney Museum, she had the opportunity to give Franco a tour of the museum several years later. The opposite channel details a dramatized version of Shvarts's narration for Franco, in which she lingered over Alice Neel's 1970 portrait of Andy Warhol. Shvarts's arm darts in and out of the frame in front of the painting, gesticulating wildly as the camera zooms in and out. Her voice describes Warhol's feminized body, complete with the corset he had to wear after he was shot, as well as Solanas's “trace” in his scars. Veering off the suggested script, much like Andrea Fraser's infamous *Museum Highlights* tour of 1989, Shvarts posits that Solanas's gun “highlights the misogyny which polices the distinction of fine art from everything else.”

Shvarts's provocations of intrusion have most recently taken a digital form, with the viral manifesto-as-performance *How Does It Feel to Be a Fiction?* Originally commissioned as a text for the New York nonprofit Recess following the 2016 presidential election, the piece is conceived as manifestos transmitted through an email virus. In order to read the texts, written by Shvarts, the recipient of the virus must consent (in a series of screens) to have the text forwarded to all their Gmail contacts — from current bosses to ex-lovers. The New Haven “virus,” which is also accessible from a QR code in the gallery, ruminates on how individuals become monumentalized. Shvarts centers her inquiry on Norma McCorvey, aka Jane Roe, the plaintiff in the landmark abortion-rights case *Roe v. Wade*. The successful 1973 lawsuit legalized abortions for women in the United States. Yet McCorvey, who identified as a working-class lesbian, turned her political efforts to anti-abortion activism in the 1980s. Shvarts's text explains how McCorvey came to see her individual experience as trivialized in the larger debate. Rather than helping her find an abortion provider, McCorvey claims her lawyers feigned ignorance about her options to help give credence to her case. She gave birth before the trial was concluded.

Above - *Shoot* (2 channel film, channel 2 still), 2018.
© Aliza Shvarts. Courtesy: Artspace, New Haven
Opposite - *Nonconsensual Collaborations* (stills), 2012-2014.
© Aliza Shvarts. Courtesy: Artspace, New Haven

In the United States, controversy continues to swirl about monuments—from the statues of Confederate soldiers to more recent memorials dedicated to the victims of slavery. Shvarts, who herself became monumentalized in a fractious conversation about reproductive labor and artistic ethics, does not proselytize. Instead, she concludes her text (and exhibition) on an ambivalent note about the violence that can occur when individuals become symbols of a larger cause:

“They might even come to stand for things that were anathema to their original intents. There is a slow peeling of the person from their representation, and it is the latter that lives on in a discursive afterlife. In this sense, time presents a strange double-bind: we will either be produced as fictions to a historical record because we never mattered, or we will be produced as fictions because we did.”⁴

1. Aliza Shvarts, “How Does It Feel to Be a Fiction? New York Virus (April 13–June 11, 2017), Recess, New York,” in *Off Scene*, exhibition catalogue (New Haven, CT: Artspace, 2018), 44.
2. Aliza Shvarts, “Shvarts Explains Her ‘Repeated Self-Induced Miscarriages,’” *Yale Daily News*, April 18, 2008, accessed May 15, 2018, <https://yaledailynews.com/blog/2008/04/18/shvarts-explains-her-repeated-self-induced-miscarriages/>.
3. Aliza Shvarts, “Nonconsensual Collaborations, 2012–present,” in *Off Scene*, 28.
4. Aliza Shvarts, “How Does It Feel to Be a Fiction? New Haven Virus (May 11–June 30, 2018), Artspace, New Haven, CT,” as part of a consenting digital performance at howdoesitfeeltobeaufiction.org.

