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BUGCHASER: PROTECTIVE MEASURES

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A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

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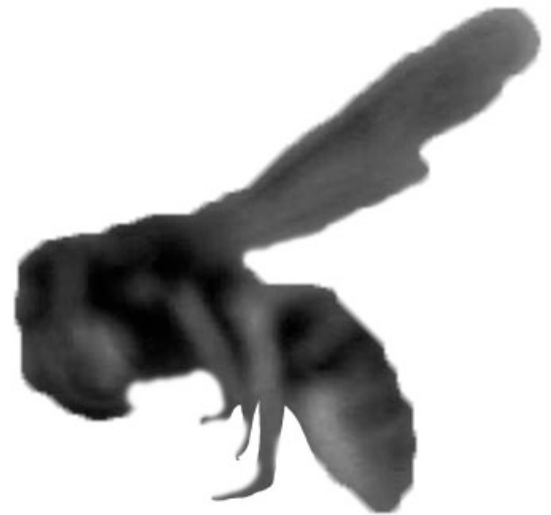
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This thesis is dedicated to queer people
and all those who embrace risk.

BUGCHASER: PROTECTIVE MEASURES

Scott LaForce

ABSTRACT

Using photographic installation and new media, *Bugchaser: Protective Measures* examines risk in response to perceived danger as engaged by bug chasers (or bugchasers) and suburbanites in the United States. The work explores this theme through the contrasting nature of queer social networks and the physical boundaries of the suburban landscape.

Ultimately, this work uproots conventional notions of intimacy as conscribed by the suburban middle-class and de-stigmatizes unconventional behaviors by challenging boundaries that needlessly divide. I have taken liberty with metaphor and used it in an attempt to reverse some of the damages brought forth through historical practices. If the viewer has a chance to observe suburban boundaries—contextualized by me, as a queer man raised in a suburban environment—set against the ends to which some queer men will go in order to defy other enforced physical and social boundaries, then perhaps a dialogue will open up questioning current solutions to dilemmas of danger and risk.

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...AIDS gave gay men new reason to be curious about what's inside our bodies and how it got there... HIV entered [gay men's] bodies, via a sexual means, before they knew it. I'm not sure that the traumatic significance of this historical sequence has been fully appreciated: HIV got inside the bodies of individual men and inside the gay community before we were aware of its existence. Bodily and psychic barriers thus were breached on a massive scale... Irrespective of his own serostatus, every gay man was urged to erect and maintain prophylactic boundaries between his body and others, especially those with whom he was intimate. But what kind of intimacy insists on maintaining an impenetrable boundary between the persons involved? And what is at stake in maintaining a barrier against something you cannot see, something that thereby becomes particularly susceptible to fantasmatic investment? ¹

¹ Tim Dean, *Unlimited Intimacy: Reflections on the Subculture of Barebacking* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2009), 112.

INTRODUCTION

Growing up as a queer person in the suburban United States of the 1980s and 1990s was like being trapped in a foreign country. The Catholic tendencies of my surrounding family structures did not support or validate a healthy sense of sexuality. Prudishness was a badge of honor, and anything outside the norm of heterosexual dogma was either vilified or neglected altogether. This resulted in an insufficient source of, or model for, intimacy. With a prescient sense of my queer sexual self, I felt as though I were an intruder, unable to expose myself as an outsider for fear of ridicule, or worse. I felt unloved at best, feared and hunted at worst. The disparity encouraged me, as an adult, to redefine my surroundings or to create my own, seemingly more hospitable spaces, incorporating a sense of intimacy that is celebratory of how radically different I have felt. I did this through seeking out queer subcultures and eventually expressing my experience through artistic representation.

Creating a domain antithetical to the suburban environment does not come without consequence. If the suburbs represent a construct of safety in response to perceived danger in the form of queerness or other

threats to heterosexual norms, then a space built, experienced or observed contrary to that culture of protection would represent a counterculture that embraces risk.

“Bug chaser” is slang for a supposed² HIV-negative queer man who seeks out HIV-positive sexual partners to engage in intercourse without a condom (or “bareback”) with the ultimate intention to induce seroconversion. These men often engage in social networking online to seek out risky sexual behaviors as mechanisms to promote perceived community, allowing them to create an amorphous identity that exists in the current shady underbelly of queer sexual liberation.

The culmination of my previous series, *Bugchaser* (2008), was the video “Bugchaser: Protective Measures,” which inspired nascent stages of this thesis and became a foundational component of the exhibition (*fig. 1*). The original *Bugchaser* series promoted self-examination for queer men within the context of their communal interactions. The work at that time was introverted, self-conscious, and about ambivalence. I represented queer men solely for their darkness, daring and prowess. I explored and spoke in consideration of a community with which I largely came to identify—for as flawed as their mechanisms were, in maintaining

² I say “supposed” as a disclaimer to suggest that not all bug chasers are actually HIV negative. Some never get tested and therefore might not know their true status.

healthy intimacy they were my brothers and fathers. There was, however, something lacking in the absence of pretext for the existence of the bareback subculture and in particular, my empathy toward it.

It has now become necessary to extend the investigation outside the borders of the subculture. Looking closely at these designations, both cultures (suburban and bug chasing) have built and defined their own intimate spaces that are, in the most fundamental ways, contrary to the other. My personal attraction to this subculture has direct antithetical correlations to my suburban upbringing (the use of the prefixes, "sub" and "counter" support the oxymoronic value of "antithetical" and "correlations"). As a result, *Bugchaser: Protective Measures* is extroverted and somewhat bellicose, demands reflection amongst a larger public, and points to the ways in which certain public authority or dogma fails.

Using photographic installation and new media, *Bugchaser: Protective Measures* examines risk in response to perceived danger as engaged by what the work exposes as "counterpublics," which are defined by Michael Warner:

...a public exists solely by virtue of being addressed [whereas] counterpublics are... formed by their conflict with the norms and contexts of their cultural environment, and this context of domination inevitably entails distortion....Mass publics and counterpublics...are both damaged forms of publicness...³

The suburban environment's collusion in the disparate relationship it bears to "the Other" therefore renders itself a counterpublic. This is most interesting as the middle class environment is typically representative of a general public. By combining bug chasers and suburbia in this body of work, I force a comparative engagement despite the exclusive definitions of each group. In other words, I am projecting queer men's more troubling responses to the repressive forces of HIV / AIDS and heteronormative power structures *onto* the suburban environment's latent complicity with such responses as experienced through my coming of age. I implicate middle-class suburban culture for its failure to provide productively inclusive solutions to community building and intimacy dilemmas that I experienced, especially in the context of my queerness and gender nonconformity. By exploring unique elements of both counterpublics, I bring a more complex understanding of their (real or imagined) relationship to one another.

Art is capable of describing what cannot otherwise be logically articulated. The visual positioning of contrary mechanisms plays an essential role here. "*Protective Measures*" could imply either the elaborate

³ Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York: Zone Books Distributed by MIT Press, 2002), 56-57, 67. Please refer to Warner's book for a more in-depth analysis. I will also expand upon my usage of the term "counterpublic" in Chapter 1.

devices that contemporary suburbia employs to cope with danger, or the sanctification of what some queer men perceive to be the inevitable (or more abstractly, protection of the freedom of sexual expression). As Tim Dean writes, “By embracing risk one eliminates risk, in the tautological sense that seroconversion alleviates the perpetual worry about HIV infection.”⁴ Through representing bug chasers alongside suburbia and their relative demeanors in response to perceived danger, I question modalities of protection and expressions of intimacy that are practiced or scrutinized by both categories. Ultimately, my intention with this work is to uproot conventional notions of intimacy as viewed by the suburban middle-class and to destigmatize the unconventional by accosting boundaries that fruitlessly divide.

⁴ Dean, 69, 92.

CHAPTER 1: OPPOSING WORLDS

Elucidations On Risk

Like the movement from the complex act of decisive HIV transmission to simple illustrative verbiage, my exploration of the actual behavior of bug chasing utilized metaphor in an attempt to humanize an otherwise irrational concept. What I had not explored in earlier work was the non-sexual pretext, of which I found the perfect sampling rooted in my upbringing. Suburbia is particularly important here for its neglect of anything remotely sexual. Comparing suburban imagery to images representing individuals whose sole ideology embraces defiance against common reactions to fear comprises an allegory for the preemptive prevention of risk as it has been erected by groups who utilize rural expansion as a way to preserve supposed safety, exclusivity and propriety.⁵ The structure of the suburban landscape provides protection in the form of isolation and separatism. I focus on the barriers that prevented me from accessing men with

⁵ For a historical context see Robert M. Fogelson, *Bourgeois Nightmares: Suburbia, 1870-1930* (Kansas City: Sheridan Books, 2005), 117-137; and Frederick Lewis Allen, "Suburban Nightmare," in *The Suburb Reader* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 228-230. For a more artful rendition of this subject, see, *Far From Heaven*. Directed by Todd Haynes. Produced by Jody Allen. Performed by Dennis Quad, Dennis Haysbert and Jullianne Moore. 2002. For a more contemporary view see Alan Wolfe, "The Homosexual Exception," *The New York Times*, February 08, 1998.

whom I aligned my sexual identity as well as the solutions those men have developed in using and rejecting certain other barriers.

It was catastrophic to grow up isolated from other queer men. As a boy, I longed for a sexual mentor, someone to show me intimacy as it could be felt with another man. Instead, I was sheltered in the barren suburban expanse, a sunburned landscape of false wilderness, lacking in gradation or diversity, so mundane that it was sterile; so unnatural that it was alienating. Ultimately, it was unhealthy. I was made to feel as though my kind didn't exist. In those rare moments when the elusive “faggot” was present, it was through the media under the guise of sickness and disease: Ryan White and “gay cancer.” It is no wonder, then, that I learned to embrace HIV as inherent to my brethren. Risk is simply part of our world. The deeper one invests in it, the more inherently queer and male one becomes, as evidenced by the writings of Jean Genet, Hervé Guibert or Michael Warner. Another way to understand this *je ne sais quoi* is to engage with the artwork of any number of queer men who died in the AIDS holocaust.⁶

One of them is David Wojnarowicz. The notion of boundaries or borders that run between worlds is key in Wojnarowicz's work. His description of “the Other World” supports the comparison that I make between

⁶ Many of these artists are listed in the database *The Estate Project* at <http://www.artistswithaids.org/national/registry.html#visual>.

the bug chasing community and suburbia. In *Close to the Knives*, he describes the other world as a place that exists by virtue of being distinct from the self. It thrives counter to the safety and comfort of autonomous identity:

First there is the World. Then there is the Other World. The Other World is where I sometimes lose my footing. In its calendar turnings, in its preinvented existence. The barrage of twists and turns where I sometimes get weary trying to keep up with it, minute by minute adapt: the world of the stoplight, the no-smoking signs, the rental world, the split-rail fencing shielding hundreds of miles of barren wilderness from the human step. A place where by virtue of having been born centuries late one is denied access to earth or space, choice or movement. The bought-up world; the owned world. The world of coded sounds: the world of language, the world of lies. The packaged world; the world of speed in metallic motion. The other world where I've always felt like an alien.⁷

It is important to note the context from which Wojnarowicz was writing: *Close to the Knives* is a rallying cry from the perspective of a gay man living with AIDS in New York City at the beginning of the crisis (the book was published in 1991; he died of AIDS-related complications in 1992).⁸ Wojnarowicz was also a city

⁷ David Wojnarowicz, *Close to the Knives* (New York: Vintage/Random House Inc., 1991), 87-88.

⁸ Several important works have informed my understanding of this period. Steven Rubin's essay "Gay Images and the Social Construction of Acceptability" gives an insightful retelling of how the government and bureaucracies not only maintained a sense of complacency upheld by the general public, but also fostered an extremely hostile environment against queer artists and persons with AIDS. Steven C. Dubin, "Gay Images and the Social Construction of Acceptability," in *Arresting Images*, (New York: Routledge, 1992), 159-196.

Douglas Crimp's edited collection of essays, *AIDS: Cultural Analysis, Cultural Activism*, Cambridge: MIT Press, 1988, includes Leo Bersani, "Is the Rectum a Grave?," (197-222) written in direct response to the AIDS epidemic from its inception.

dweller writing his observations of, and reactions to, a U.S. public that he saw as completely apathetic to the increasing threat of AIDS and to queer people in general. Wojnarowicz's bellicosity spoke for individuals whose existences were neglected, if not attacked, by the dominant power structure during the early AIDS crisis in America. He focused his attention on sites of conflict and his writing, along with his photographic and collage work, captured the essence of the tension that arises when disenfranchised queer people reject oppressive, heteronormative precedents.⁹

I am interested in the conflicting expressions of intimacies and responses to the risk of facing the Other or the Other World. Wojnarowicz largely refers to himself representing one world characterized by being "otherly:" diseased and sexually marginalized, similar to bug chasers. The Other World, by contrast, is the complacent realm of the mainstream. Wojnarowicz's Other World parallels my observations of suburbia. To live within it is to endure persistent conflict, which means risk is an inevitable constant.

Simon Watney's *Policing Desire: Pornography, AIDS, and the Media* (London: Methuen, 1987), is an eloquent study, combining histories and theories invested in disease, sexuality and the media, in demonstrating the public's misinformation, guided by seemingly malevolent media formats during the 1980s.

⁹ Wojnarowicz, 84-110. For a more visual or creative demonstration of his work see David Wojnarowicz, *Memories that Smell Like Gasoline* (San Francisco: Artspace Books, 1992). I also recommend the work of Jean Genet, in particular *A Thief's Journal* (New York: Grove Press, 1964), for a different cultural take on the dimensions of other-worldliness.

Tim Dean illustrates that intimacy and risk are not problems solely of bug chasers or barebackers, and that they are hardly the only groups to have initiated such troubled solutions to human/viral physiology—especially as it pertains to sex:

The rhetoric of safety engulfing U.S. society and culture leaves us disproportionately terrified of risk in all forms, including the risks of contact with those of different classes, races, sexualities, or nationalities. This rhetoric of safety exploits our terror of the unfamiliar in the service of consolidating class hierarchies, maintaining racial segregation, and intensifying xenophobia.¹⁰

My attempt to universalize the term “bug chaser” serves as a pushback against more closed discourses and cultural practices. I re-contextualize it against the circumstances beyond a remote, specific behavior. Bugchaser then becomes a more complex identity that incorporates elements of memory, time,¹¹ and an objectivity that includes settings and identities or counterpublics that would otherwise remain disparate.

¹⁰ Dean, 190.

¹¹ As in Dean's suggestion that the act of bug chasing could potentially be thought of as an attempt for newer generations of queer men to open up a form of communication with older, dead generations (particularly those lost to AIDS), through the exchange of bio-matter. Dean, 84-96.

Breaking Down Barriers

The imagery in *Bugchaser: Protective Measures* depicts barriers, both physical and ideological, in order to conjure those elements that the borders are designated to keep apart. Suburban landscapes delineate physically constructed boundaries like walls, roads, fences, and parking lots; manipulated natural elements such as shrubs, foliage and water; and pristine interior spaces with framed family portraits, big screen televisions and computer monitors, all of which are things that purport to keep inhabitants safe and separate. The photographs of suburbs are paired with imagery of bug chasers, representing a seemingly carefree yet conflicted relationship with presumed “safety” boundaries, resulting in the consequential embracing of HIV. Condoms, computer and TV screens showing porn amid chaotic surroundings, nudity, and illicit drug use illustrate the way that bug chasers exploit, defy or reject boundaries outright. The physical delineations of the suburban landscape contrasted against those behavioral boundaries rejected by the sexual risk-taking queer culture as well as the virtual catalysts that are an inherent part of a bug chaser's

utopia demonstrate a complex inter-relational juxtaposition. All interactions with barriers represent disproportionate acts of resistance in response to the distinct nature of the other.¹²

Warner describes how group identities are formed and maintained in the context of access to communication:

The bourgeois public sphere consists of private persons whose identity is formed in the privacy of the conjugal domestic family and who enter into rational-critical debate around matters common to all by bracketing their embodiment and status....A public is a space of discourse organized by nothing other than discourse itself....Counterpublics of sexuality and gender... are scenes of association and identity that transform the private lives they mediate.¹³

Warner's study is a foundational approach without historical biases or limitations to understanding the ways that groups form and communicate. In this regard, any group or identity and its mechanisms brought forth in *Bugchaser: Protective Measures* could be termed a public or a counterpublic, observed by the relationship between proximate imagery. This is in contrast to past, liberal-leaning tendencies to separate public from private.¹⁴ My interest is in the antithesis to these tendencies, choosing instead to render the

¹² The themes presented should be considered in the wake of the gay civil rights movement's failings (see Michael Warner, *The Trouble With Normal: Sex, Politics, and the Ethics of Queer Life* [New York: Free Press, 1999], 61-80), the history of AIDS, and the fleeing of privileged individuals from urban centers into the suburban landscape over the course of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

¹³ Michael Warner, *Publics and Counterpublics* (New York, NY: Zone Books Distributed by MIT Press, 2002), 67-74 & 56-63.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, 39-44.

otherwise private bug chasing into public discourse and force an entanglement. The barriers within these images are therefore accosted, broken down and exploited. In support of this pursuit it is apt to recognize the bourgeois fear, avoidance and neglect that I experienced growing up as counter to inexorable sexual desires, resulting expression of those desires and the surrounding discourse. In other words, the public discourse regarding sex in any form, queer or otherwise, has been countered by the suburban construct and provides an opportunity for me to exploit its enforcement of silence in favor of a more open expression of sexual desire.

It could be argued that the suburbs were built upon the very same liberal ideologies that Warner argues have inhibited the gay rights movement,¹⁵ which suggests that privacy, in effect, is more harmful than useful. I defy the mandate that queer behaviors remain private and therefore prone to the very consequences that the suburban public propagates. Instead of being neglectful and/or silent, let us candidly stare into the spaces where bug chasing and suburban counterpublics exist to see where the similarities and differences unfold. My visual thesis exploits potential respective relationships that individuals might bring to the work in the context of the common setting (the art exhibit/installation) and the artist's hand.

¹⁵ Warner, *The Trouble With Normal*, 81-148. Warner adequately illustrates the damaging nature of the same sex-marriage debate/movement, pointing to its limitations and alternative goals for queer rights.

The boundaries between the publics and counterpublics are complex. One common element is their respective functionalities to risk. I disrupt the viewer's tendency to identify with either one world or another by blurring the definitions of what is risky. An overly aestheticized portrait of a suburban home is placed next to an ominous depiction of the back of another house—perhaps the same house—shrouded in darkness, foliage, and debris. The men depicted struggle with both the conception of condoms-as-requirement¹⁶ as well as the limitations of the Internet (or evolution of sexual institutions¹⁷). These juxtapositions suggest an intricate narrative. Who identifies with which setting? What happens when a still image from the sub-cultural medium of queer, hardcore bareback porn is forced into the suburban sphere?

.....

I met People and saw things that I would never have seen if I would have been in the heterosexual world, which is more codified, very codified, and this world was not codified because... well it was as old as the hills but it was so completely new. You see hysterical things... I don't know where to even begin...I mean one of my lovers was a mass murderer...¹⁸

¹⁶ Dean, 2-4.

¹⁷ Ibid, 185-187.

¹⁸ "Secret Papist," *Derek*, DVD, directed by Isaac Julien, (2008; New York, NY: Kino International, 2008).

Derek Jarman was speaking about the codification of norms, which seemed to him to be primarily characteristic of the straight world, while the contrasting world is characterized by hysteria and murder. Today's straight world includes homosexuals, which is evidenced by the marriage movement. In fact, as Warner points out, marriage is not a queer or necessarily even a gay movement. Rather, it is a straight movement, or a movement for lesbians and gay men to become more straight and less queer.¹⁹ For my purposes, it is likely that many gay men and lesbians who are pro-marriage would fit within the codification of the suburban counterpublic, whereas bug chasers have created their own, distinctly codified counterpublic akin to the non-codified world that Jarman referenced.²⁰ My interest is to focus on the behaviors and structural manifestations (and surrounding discourse, or lack thereof) respectively, brought forth by the counterpublics that I illustrate, and how they interact. I zero in on the coping mechanisms (in response to danger) of individuals who utilize those structures and behaviors, and ultimately make a cohesive statement about the effectiveness of those specific elements by bringing forth the observations of their counterparts. As Warner has established, identities are shaped and influenced by the discourses surrounding them and vice versa but they are separate entities. Behaviors are enhanced through the relative

¹⁹ Warner, *The Trouble with Normal*, 143-147.

²⁰ Ibid. See also Dean, 84-89.

discourse but do stand alone in the absence of observation. My goal is to manipulate the observation so that the discourse veers off course from the status quo.

CHAPTER 2: DISTINGUISHING THE IMAGE

Amateur To High Aesthetic

Bugchaser: Protective Measures is a combination of still photographic imagery (both appropriated from the Internet as well as captured through digital rendering), video representation and installation. I began by employing the snapshot aesthetic to explore and sketch my ideas. The final presentation was exhibited as an installation of digitally rendered images and moving media. The images in the slideshow and on the composite television and computer screens were taken from real-life encounters, from queer social networking websites, and from amateur-style bareback porn (*figs. 2 & 3*). Much like Nan Goldin utilized firsthand depictions of her intimate relationships presented in public slideshows,²¹ the exhibition of these images, along with the videos, represents the frontlines of my investment in the world of bug chasing. Through my process as the interrogator behind the lens as well as the performer in front, I evoke the bug chaser in all its forms. It is largely unimportant from where any one individual image came; ultimately the focus is on the behavior. The aesthetic is merely a device to deliver the audience into the practical modes by which these behaviors are practiced and shared.

²¹ Nan Goldin, *The Ballad of Sexual Dependency*, New York: Aperture, 1986.

Much of today's social interaction, even the most intimate of encounters, occurs virtually. Queer communities of sexual risk rely on these virtual sites and the corresponding imagery for identifying one another. The images displayed on sex-based community websites like adam4adam.com, nastykinkpigs.com, bnskin.com, barebackrt.com, and many others, depict types of imagery that are collectively dedicated to depicting queer, male bodies of various builds, as well as representing explicit sex acts, drug use, and (at least the idea of) viral exchange.

There is an undoubtedly performative quality to the images representing bug-chasing culture of which I take advantage and, at times, mimic. Performance is a crucial component of my work. Through sharing moments that were originally engaged with her most intimate counterparts, Goldin created with her audience a communal surface intimacy by opening herself up to an audience for one night. It was an exhibition of raw and exorbitant measures meant to promote deep, emotional connection with acquaintances and strangers. In my interactions with men in the bareback/bug chasing culture, I engaged in the most intimate of acts with strangers, knowing full well that it was a personal and academic exploration that would be shared online. The collection of these images was not clandestine. I made sure to hand out my business card, with the image of a dead bug, along with my website and contact information, to each of the men that I engaged (*fig. 4*).

The Surface As Conduit

My use of seemingly penetrable, flat surfaces is significant and is most usefully employed through installation that is similar to Web-interfacing, video and appropriated web imagery. By displaying the suburban images in sets, I provide fluidity between imagery and concepts. My use of a variety of media contributes to a progressively more dynamic experience as the viewer explores the installation. Framing, manipulation of space, and the use of both physical and conceptual boundaries all add to the experience.

All of the videos in *Bugchaser: Protective Measures* are moving self-portraits. My body serves as a reminder of the artist's hand in controlling the environment while I repeat the same gestures over and over again. I frantically attempt to place condoms on my hands, my feet—anywhere other than my genitals, which are never really even acknowledged other than being visible. Sex and sexuality are copiously explored here but through indirect means, such as ostentatious (perhaps even irrational) behaviors in response to objects intended for use during sex acts (*fig. 5*).

Noted film scholar Linda Williams has described pornographic films as, “important precisely in their engagement with acute bodily sensations...”²² She anatomizes the moving pornographic image and its impact on our understanding of what has come to be described by some as obscene. In short, Williams provides a fluid history of pornography with particular consideration of physicality. Historically, porn has been a form of representation that caters to desire while rendering an unsettling affect on certain publics. Ultimately, she develops a case for the relationship between visual language and its ability to penetrate beyond the surface of the given instrument of projection.²³

The use of instrumentation is key to both my installation and Williams’ study. The history that she pursues begins with simple, hand-held paper toys and continues to the more contemporary uses of video projection onto a screen. According to Williams, it was partly because of the evolution of such instruments that our understanding of pornography has become so corporeal.²⁴ I utilize contemporary corporeal instrumentation in both my depictions of the presented themes as well as the actual use of those instruments within the installation. The videos and computer slideshow bring the audiences’ physical bodies into the work.

²² Linda Williams, “Corporealized Observers: Visual Pornographies and the ‘Carnal Density of Vision,’” in *Fugitive Images: From Photography to Video* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), 3-41.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

Each suburban interior features a television or computer screen within the original setting. My appropriations from pornographic video are a mark within the space that provokes corporeal sensations because of its sexual nature. I ask the viewer to consider these spaces in the same way that they might consider pornography as enticing to the body. The viewer may then ask: What are the corporeal sensations accessible through these devices? Are they transferable throughout the rest of the imagery? Furthermore, the pornography is hardcore and queer and therefore innately defiant of conventional propriety. In this way, I complicate the viewer's comfort and desire by marking the intimate spaces of suburbanites with the defiant culture of queer bug chasing. I have forced entry into these homes similar to the way Dean describes that AIDS violated the boundaries of gay men's bodies at the end of the twentieth century.²⁵

²⁵ Dean, 112.

CHAPTER 3: THE INSTALLATION

Framing

There is a narrative within *Bugchaser: Protective Measures* that does not venture beyond lived, human experience. I depict suburbia from the perspective of various imagined narrators' views, each residing within the vicinity of the suburban expanse. I rely on six sets of five images to contribute to my narrative and only visualize as far as what any one person might have actually experienced in relation to suburbia or bug chasing culture (with the exception of my intervention).

Common elements such as picture frames and mirrors capture the residents of suburbia and are a representation of ideals. Other frames like walls, windows and display screens contain and witness the world outside. The marks I injected into each home are found within these frames, though they have presumably never *actually* been found within those particular settings. While I put effort into making the composites seamless, it becomes more poignant if the clash of cultures disallows the viewer from believing that the settings were found this way. I want the viewer to question the placement of imagery on domestic media-based instruments. Why is it there? Why does it not seem to fit? In this way, frames also provoke an awareness of the artist's hand (*fig. 2*).

Frames also function to depict the insidiousness of the suburban landscape. By showcasing five unique views and then repeating them through each sequential set, I question the unified perception of the suburban setting. The positioning of each image within the sets is significant. By utilizing repetition, I establish a sense of purpose for each position. For instance, the images in the upper left represent the serene beauty of the suburban home (*fig. 6*).

Catherine Opie's photographic series *Houses* depicts lavish homes in Beverly Hills, California, which she related to her earlier studies of queer subjects:

You only have the information of the facade. And the only information you have in the Portraits, too, really, is the facade of the person... Those two bodies of work have a really interesting relationship to each other because they are both about portraiture and perceptions we bring to a given subject. It is still about being an individual but within the construct of community."²⁶

By her description, the houses convey a strong sense of identity (*fig. 7*). She is, in fact, exploring the owners' identities, compared with the subjects of her other imagery, as well as the audience. My house portraits, too, serve as metaphors for one set of identities compared with another. In both our work, various techniques keep the inner contents of the home from the viewer. The composition of Opie's houses directs focus on the

²⁶ Opie, Catherine. *Catherine Opie: American Photographer*. The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation. 2009. http://web.guggenheim.org/exhibitions/exhibition_pages/opie/exhibition.html (accessed 2008/2009).

exterior entryway. The artist cropped most of the house out of the image altogether, which exaggerates scale and intrigues through exclusion. Opie's houses are more representative of the abundance of the rich while her portraits epitomize gender and sexually marginalized people. My images are invested in a similar, more immediate interaction by comparing the suburban bourgeois with subversive queers.

I used an architectural tilt-shift lens to capture house exteriors. The effect narrows the eye to a cropped, horizontal field of vision, invoking a dream-like quality for which the focus is then limited to the entrance level. The blurring effect intends to manipulate. Instead of the enormity suggested by Opie's cropped mansions, my miniaturization of the suburban home creates a treasured model, representing middle class value in its attempt to augment itself.

Intimacy jumps between authenticity and fabrication, an added element of consideration. Fabrication becomes much more apparent in the still images of suburbia. I make no qualms about my use of high aesthetic or pristine beauty. These images were shot using high-dynamic range techniques and edited with the intent to seduce the viewer. Rich color, high contrast, and accessible compositions cater to easy viewing so that the themes are more engaging. My landscape images focus on suburban integration or conflict with natural elements. Most rely on trees, weeds, grass, and sky in contrast to the more constructed elements of

suburban homes. I manipulate the captured image to digitally enhance the hyperbolic qualities and to play with scale.

Featuring the entirety of the home also highlights the remoteness of each property, exploiting the isolation of the suburban lifestyle. Ornamentation and style serve as reminders of a perhaps innate desire for individuality. These are reminders only of thin attempts at remaining unique and hidden. Each house is overwhelmed with foliage and denoted by a house number. Both are symbols of conformity, of being restricted by the surrounding natural environment, and being reduced to a simple number reminiscent of a large, impersonal system. The trees are also a reminder of suburbia's failure to successfully coexist with nature. The homes ineffectively hide behind the trees while the abundant branches and sky meld into heavy, almost crushing weights. The lawns, driveways and sidewalks too become softened and seemingly unable to support the hovering mass, rendering further isolation for the home. (*fig. 8*).

The images within each set in the upper right and lower left positions (*figs. 9 & 10*) represent the exterior settings of suburban landscapes beyond the home. They portray the framed shards and shadows of suburban structures, hidden behind and supported by fences, rugged foliage and tall shrubbery, long expanses of grass and concrete, rusted and decayed remnants of previously utilized barriers, and even

barbed wire. These images are most reflective of theories regarding bourgeois understandings of health and disease, formulations of intimacy, and the subsequent power relations that result.

Susan Sontag's *AIDS and its Metaphors* (1988) is a crucial document that adds to an argument made by many contemporary scholars. Historically, systems of power rely on metaphor in the response to and subsequent prevention of impending danger. This leads to a hierarchical conditioning of certain social groups based on behaviors that are either conducive or detrimental to that system of rank as established by those in power.²⁷ Stated in terms of Warner's discourse on publics and counterpublics, the vernacular of the middle-class and its suburban setting is a defining trait of the suburban counterpublic. Individuals who do not conform to the rigid, supposedly health-minded, controlled public of suburbia are forced out of it by virtue not only of their social identities, but also of the conditions of their physical bodies (which also might contribute to social status). Disease becomes a justification for the expulsion, or preemptive exclusion of individuals from the suburban experience.

Focusing on uses of metaphor by the ruling class, Sontag demonstrates the conduit by which this movement occurs. With consideration of Michel Foucault's analysis of the spatial relations of cellular composition

²⁷ Susan Sontag, *AIDS and its Metaphors*, New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1989.

within the body,²⁸ Sontag explains how medical narratives utilize the vernacular of military strategy and assessments of appearance to qualify value. “Underlying some of the moral judgments attached to disease are aesthetic judgments about the beautiful and the ugly, the clean and the unclean, the familiar and the alien or uncanny.”²⁹

The images in the lower left corner of each set represent the perspective of the suburban pariah. They were shot to exaggerate the feeling of exclusion. As the photographer, I was crouched and hidden away from view instead of standing in the middle of the street (as I was for the house portraits). I imagined these images to be seen from the perspective of a lurking figure that resides in the overgrown, dirt- and clutter-filled outskirts, just outside the barriers protecting suburban landscapes. The part of me that took these photographs does not feel as though he fits within suburbia in any way. He sees some idea of what suburbia is for some people, or what it is set up to achieve, but it isn't a place that is accessible other than across a menacing field of vision (*fig. 9*).

The images in the upper right corner invoke a similar idea, though they are imagined from within the suburban boundaries. The part of me that took these images does in fact reside within suburbia but still

²⁸ Michel Foucault, *Birth of the Clinic*, trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith (New York: Tavistock Publications, Ltd., 1973), 1-22.

²⁹ Sontag, 41.

cannot access the home, the ultimate suburban goal. These photographs hold a particular kind of beauty, but it is controlled—less by the artist and more by the property owners. Vast distances and shrubbery act as the impediments that frame the suburban house. One cannot help but feel conflicted by the isolation and fear that the suburban landscape reveals. The images express what is now becoming a familiar dictum: *You might live here, but don't get too close (fig. 10).*

All of the images within each set represent the inadequacies of suburbia and the smokescreen that the suburban landscape provides for many. The images in the center of each set bring forth more pointedly exactly what it is from which suburbia shuts itself away. They depict similar interiors as the images at the lower right, only they are shot through a condom filter. As Sontag pointed out: "...AIDS is understood in a premodern way, as a disease incurred by people both as individuals and as members of a 'risk group'—that neutral-sounding, bureaucratic category which also revives the archaic idea of a tainted community that illness has judged."³⁰ As diseased outsiders, going to such extremes as to wear condoms over our entire bodies, it is all we can do to truly access the most intimate spaces of clean and healthy suburbanites—not through their TVs and computers, but to actually stand there, in the manufactured flesh (*fig. 11*).

³⁰ Ibid.

Corporeal Portals

Bugchaser: Protective Measures incorporates video and installation techniques to enhance the audience's sensory experience. Three videos and a bedroom installation make up the final elements of the exhibition. Two 8x8-foot booths wrapped in black fabric each contain a television screen with headphones and a one-person bench. In the context of queer male cultural history, the booths are reminiscent of theater backrooms and video booths that were (and remain for some) the sites of in-person, anonymous exploits for queer men before the Internet became their primary source of networking. The benches are appropriated from suburban classrooms of the early 1900s, suggestive of lessons taught to those pioneering residents.

The interiors, lit only by the screens, are carefully placed a few feet in the front of the televisions and situated so that when a person enters the booth, the viewer can see only the bench, but cannot see the screen itself unless the viewer ventures in to sit on the bench. I control the space so that it is difficult for the viewer to have a shared experience with anyone or anything other than the video of a man interacting with condoms (*figs. 12-15*), creating a forced, isolated intimacy.

The first video utilizes a layering technique suggestive of a frenzied state while the second uses slowed timing, so much so that at moments, it is unclear whether or not it is a moving image at all. The variance in timing enhances the visceral quality of the moving images. By contrasting two seemingly identical environments through different video effects, I manipulate the viewer's senses. Together, these videos represent the character's chaotic or confused state and provoke an empathic sensory experience for the viewer (*fig. 16*).

The third video, "Bugchaser: Protective Measures," is projected on a wall that the viewer cannot access without first passing the still images and booths. I intentionally control the environment so that the audience's experience will build as they move through the exhibition space. This forces the viewer to take on the perspective of the bug chaser. The video displays condoms being placed over the camera lens while in the background my figure feverishly struggles with finding a purpose for the prophylactics on his hands and feet. This is more narrative-based than the other two videos and establishes an abstract chronology that moves between self-interest and confrontation. It also most effectively ties the still imagery to the rest of the work because in this video, the condoms are not simply placed on the figure, they are also placed on the lens by a third figure. (As in the central still images of each set, this is suggestive of covering the viewer in latex.) This figure is mysterious and mostly unseen while continuously putting condoms over the lens. At one

point, the shadowy caricature leans toward the audience in a contentious stare that becomes uncomfortably long. He is (and I, as the artist, am) challenging the viewer to find meaning in the use of this manufactured skin—if not meaning, then certainly the potential for intimacy (*fig. 1*).

The third video is a domineering presence, overlooking the other work while guiding the audience to the final component of the exhibition: the bedroom installation. It also creates an auditory resonance that follows the viewer throughout the space. The popping and snapping sound of my figure engaging with condoms leaves an uneasy trace. The sound infiltrates the relationship between the viewer, the still image and bedroom installation, creating a corporeal experience and forcefully imposing itself upon the viewer's intimate relationship with the work.

The final component of the installation is a separate space built to represent a bedroom. A bed sits in the center of the space with a small nightstand, which holds a lamp reminiscent of those featured in the suburban interiors. On the bed is a laptop computer displaying *the bugchaser* slideshow. Similar to the television in the booths, the laptop faces away from the entrance, forcing the viewer to make a decision to enter, or not. The flickering light from the slideshow reflected on the mussed bedding beckons the audience into the space. If they chose to appease their curiosity, they become part of the installation in the bug

chaser's most intimate space. Based on what they find on the screen, in some small way, they themselves become the bug chaser. This is the final demand for alterity that *Bugchaser: Protective Measures* makes on the audience and the most artistically corporeal gesture that I can provide (*fig 17*).

Conclusion

If the viewer has a chance to observe suburban boundaries—contextualized by me, as a queer man—set against the ends to which some queer men will go in order to defy other enforced physical and social boundaries, then perhaps a dialogue will open up questioning current solutions to dilemmas of danger and risk. Ultimately, my intention with this work is to uproot conventional notions of intimacy as conscribed by the suburban middle-class and to de-stigmatize unconventional behaviors by challenging boundaries that needlessly divide. I have taken liberty with metaphor and used it in an attempt to reverse some of the damages brought forth through historical practices. I like to think that *Bugchaser: Protective Measures* represents what Susan Sontag implored of her readers:

For the time being, much in the way of individual experience and social policy depends on the struggle for rhetorical ownership of the illness: how it is possessed, assimilated in argument and in cliché. The age-old, seemingly inexorable process whereby diseases acquire meanings (by coming to stand for the deepest fears) and inflict stigma is always worth challenging, and it does seem to have more limited credibility in the modern world, among people willing to be modern—the process is under surveillance now. With this illness, one that elicits so much guilt and shame, the effort to detach it from these meanings, these metaphors, seems particularly liberating, even consoling. But the metaphors cannot be distanced just by abstaining from them. They have to be exposed, criticized, belabored, used up.³¹

³¹ Ibid, 93-94.

By expecting more from our metaphors, more from our forms of representation, and more from the people who use them we begin to rely more on alterity and less on simplified, knee-jerk responses based on false histories. Harm and risk are unavoidable as is the need for intimacy, and our metaphors do not have to be exclusive to the structures of public discourse, or limited to the self-defeating actions of people on the fringes. The creative spirit promotes more abundant and inclusive dialogues, as it does with *Bugchaser: Protective Measures*.

Epilogue

This work evolves from and explores the innumerable ways that humans find to express the need for contact. I continue to experiment with various uses of metaphor, forming complex questions in the hopes that my work contributes to breaking down the boundaries that keep people from discovering creative solutions to dilemmas surrounding intimacy. Experience promotes empathy, which in turn allows for creativity and ultimately understanding.

My self-expression navigates through treacherous landscapes, observing all forms of expression, between articulate anger and lost ambivalence. Let this thesis stand as a trace of that movement in hopes that others might better understand the unrelatable. My personal evolution from young, scared suburbanite to ruthless, self-destructive bug chaser isn't extraordinarily unique from a macro perspective, which is the ultimate irony of this work. The rhetoric of the suburbs and bug chasers alike is communicative methodology for finding ways to connect or disconnect, depending on the respective mode. On a very human level, this particular method and the visual illustrations that accompany it are necessary for all human evolution. We behave in ways that only make sense to our individualness and yet our intimacies have repercussions for all, or so "they" might have "us" believe.

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figure 1



figure 2

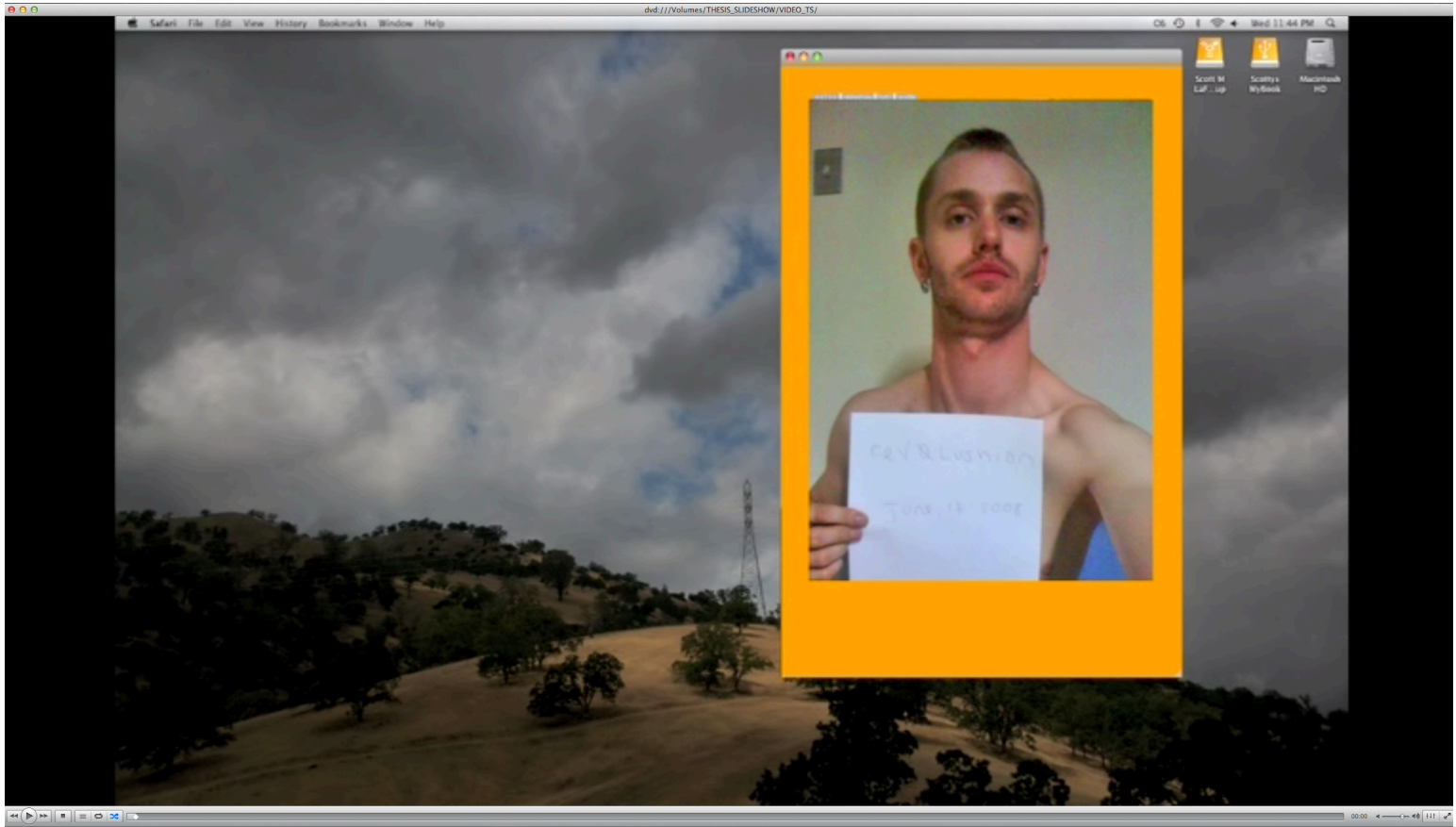


figure 3



figure 4



figure 5



figure 6



figure 7



figure 8



figure 9



figure 10

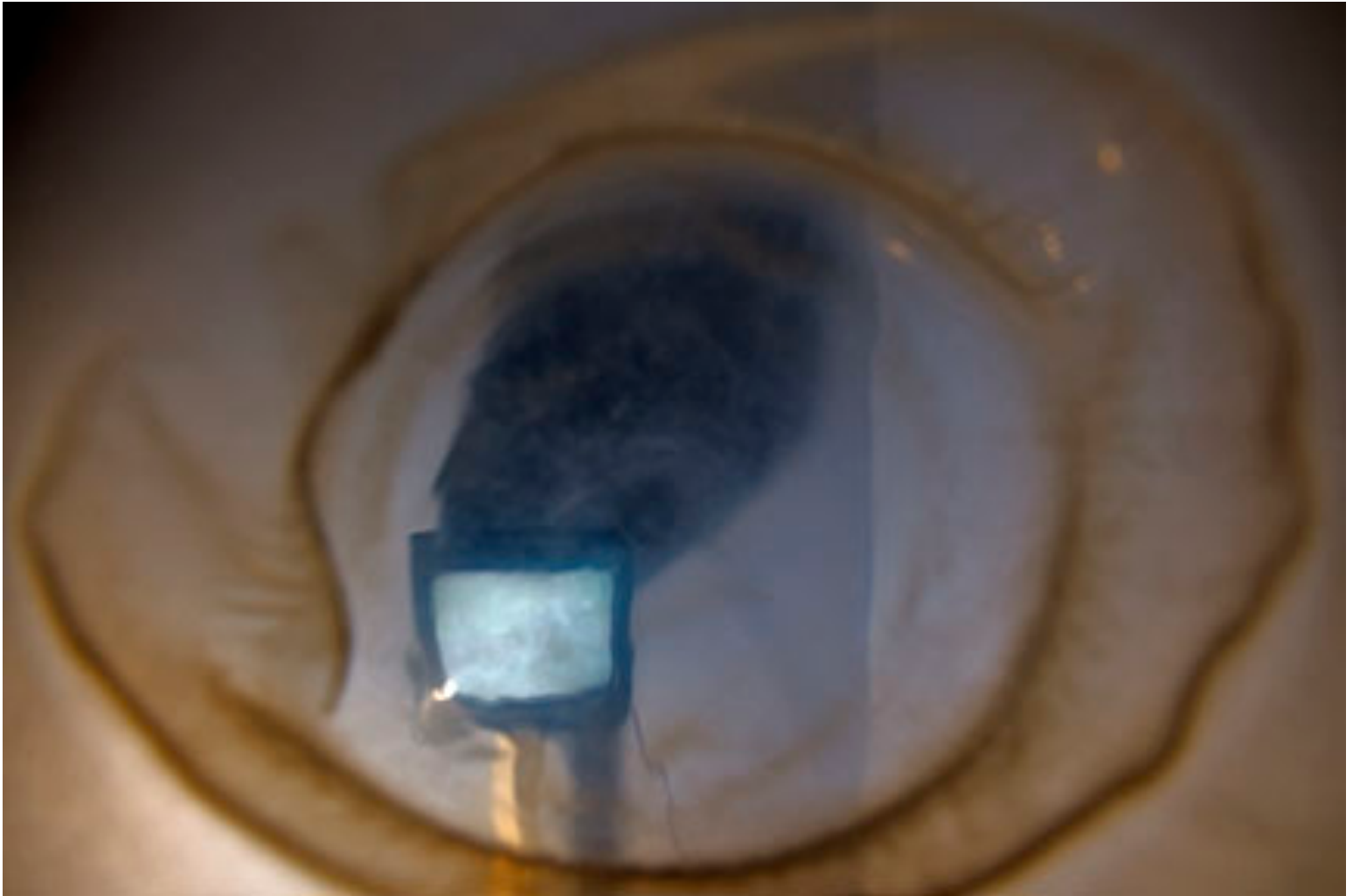


figure 11



figure 12



figure 13

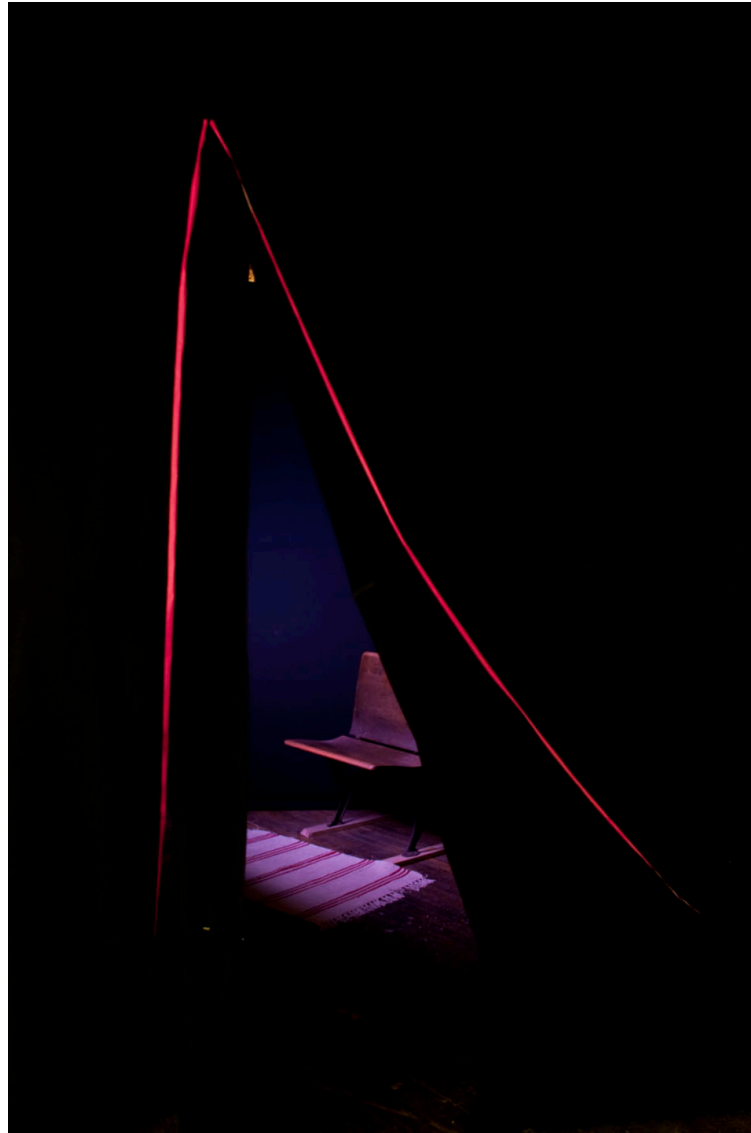


figure 14



figure 15



figure 16



figure 17

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