

The Analogical Sublime

My name is Sheila Donovan. I am a multidisciplinary artist, researcher and teacher from the United States of America. I've lived in France since 2013. I decided to pursue a VAE as preparation for doctoral studies, where I hope to develop a research-creation project within an art and science program in Paris.

For this VAE defense, I have chosen to present an overview of my evolution as an artist, my experiences and reflections, and the conceptual framework underlying the works presented throughout my website. I decided to separate my practices in this text by chapter, when discussing the distinct mediums I am working in. However, these practices developed simultaneously, and therefore share overlapping timelines. After each chapter heading, you will find links to the pages containing examples of works from the practice under discussion.

The **Analogical Sublime** is a concept I introduce here to describe both my artistic approach and the framework of this presentation. The term draws on the double meaning of "analogical": analogy, or the comparison between things, and analogue, a continuously variable signal. I use analogical to reformulate the sublime, a term situated in the history of art, as an overwhelming existential moment brought about through a confrontation with nature or art. In my work, the sublime emerges in the artist through analogical processes in which experience, memory, and perception are continuously integrated across varying intensities, producing shifts, transitions, and transformations of state. At its core the concept examines creation itself as something intrinsic, relational and continuous for those of us who are compelled to engage in it. The Analogical Sublime therefore describes not only a mode of aesthetic experience, but also a method (process) of attending to relationships between people, materials, memories, and environments.

Much of my work has been produced under conditions of urgency, primarily at home and with whatever materials were available to me. Like many artists, I have always held full-time jobs to support my artistic practice, and time has often been a precious and limited resource. Doubly, as a foreigner and a parent, I have found strategies to build a practice through a somewhat integrated state of flux, adapting to a different culture, learning a new language, and being available to my child. Necessarily, this mode of living and economy of working influence the subjects I attend to in my practices.

My experiences as a worker outside the art world have had an influence on the methods, the materials and the framing of my artwork and my pedagogy. In New York City, I worked first as a social worker and later as an investigator of police misconduct. I subsequently worked in Los Angeles as an investigator for a labor law prosecutor. These jobs put me in close contact with people who were fragilised by social and economic conditions, often having experienced deep trauma, resulting from poverty, marginalization, and alienation. My common function in these roles was to document personal narratives which sometimes initially emerged as fragments of memory or stories with missing information. These years spent conducting interviews allowed me to deeply consider the formulation and use of questions to better document a person's testimony. This practice of questioning has become fundamental to my pedagogy, my research interests, and how I make art.

1. Performance Roots

<https://x80.org/sheila/performance>

Background

I began performing in community theater at the age of seven in my small town in Massachusetts. I do remember my first time looking down onto the stage from a catwalk, awestruck and feeling a very strong desire to spend my life there. I was drawn to every aspect of theater: the stage, the backstage, costumes, singing, prop-making—pretending to be someone else and moving and speaking as I imagined they might, using my **body and memory**. I also valued the **collective** dimension of this activity: being among others who shared this sensibility. It was joyful and unpredictable.

While studying theater at a liberal arts college in Ohio, I became increasingly involved in **experimental** practices, after growing disillusioned with the psychological theater and realism introduced to me in high school. This shift was shaped in part by a personal experience of illness at nineteen, which required facial surgeries, followed immediately by a period of study in Moscow. There, I encountered both difficult material conditions and the legacy of the Russian avant-garde including the teachings of **Vsevolod Meyerhold's** Biomechanics and **Michel Chekhov's** psycho-physical techniques. These experiences reoriented my relationship to performance.

Constructing fictional psychologies or reproducing recognizable human situations no longer seemed important to me. Instead, I became more invested in performance as a means of **investigating perception, memory, and gesture**—particularly in relation to **historical forms, media, and technology**. I came to understand the stage not as a space of control and simple representation, but as one of intensified awareness, where voice and body could serve as means of **collectivizing memory and imagination**.

Laboratory Theater Company 2001-2012

In 2001, I moved to New York City and co-founded the **Laboratory Theater Company** in Brooklyn with the dancer Yvan Greenberg and the composer Corey Dargel. Working in extremely **modest conditions**, often rehearsing in a bedroom, we developed a **collaborative practice** that integrated text, music, and choreography. Our work frequently drew on appropriated materials from modern and postmodern traditions, which we recomposed through performance. Using a **collage of narratives**, and engaging with contemporary philosophical and cultural questions, our works were noisy, colorful and queerly ironic.

For example, our first work titled *Seven Deadly Pleasures* brought together lines from the play **Woyzeck**, with imitations of **Pina Bausch** choreography and pop songs written with lyrics adapted from **Goethe** poems. In 2003, the piece took part in the Fuse Festival "The NYC Celebration of Queer Culture." It was reviewed by the Village Voice's Alisa Solomon who wrote

...the Laboratory Theater's *Seven Deadly Pleasures* may have been the queerest piece seen last week—at least in the sense Stefan Brecht invented some 25 years ago, when he coined the term "queer theater" to describe the ironic, weird, experimental, anti-dramatic, and compelling work of such artists as Ludlam, Jack Smith, John Vaccaro, and Hot Peaches. A lounge act demented by German Expressionism (or is it the other way around?), *Seven Deadly Pleasures* presents Heinrich (Corey Dargel) and Elsa (Sheila Donovan) in concert, sort of. Often the agonizing pair doesn't get around to performing a song they've just introduced, as they plunge into aggressive Pina Bausch-like choreography or race to a bottle of bourbon on the floor of the stage and knock back a shot. When they do stay at the mics, they can't remember the words or keep up with a prerecording. When they actually sing—the driving music is by Dargel, the words adapted from Goethe—they soon interrupt themselves, as if the beauty of a single phrase would be too much to bear."

In addition to avant-garde queer film and performance, we were also influenced by experimental companies such as the **Wooster Group**. We tested our own interpretation of choreographic methods developed by practitioners from modern and postmodern dance such as chance operations in the work of **Merce Cunningham** and using plain language to document abstract movement like **Trisha Brown**.

Over eleven years, we created eight works, developing an approach that privileged precision of gesture, timing, and composition over technical virtuosity or production value. A truly collaborative group with up to 5 members at any given time, we would read together, share writings and experiment to create music and choreography throughout the rehearsal process. After having performed at numerous off-off-Broadway venues such as **Dixon Place**, **Here Arts Center**, **PS122** and the **Brick**, I left the group in 2012 to move to Los Angeles and focus on other projects.

Collaborations in France 2012-present

In 2012, I began a collaboration with **Phoenix Atala**, and we created *Talk Show*, a performance structured as a staged interview exploring American cultural clichés through autobiographical narration, a reframing of my life story. After touring the piece and performing at such venues as the **Centre Pompidou**, **MacVal**, and the **TNT** festival, I relocated to France in 2013. In Paris, we continued to work together, creating a work titled *Portrait du Groupe* in at the **T2G** Théâtre du Gennevilliers, with local amateurs. This work explored individual and group identity through the creation of a simple choreography illustrating the information we gathered during our weeklong workshop and discussions.

Since then, I have worked with several artists and companies, notably **Marie Losier**, **Samir Ramdani**, **Vincent Lamouroux**, **Jérôme Bel**, and **Pascale Murtin**.

My work as Jérôme Bel's assistant introduced me to a more explicitly **conceptual framework**, grounded in the **history of dance and attentive to spectatorship, duration**, and the **encoded history of representation**. For the piece *Gala*, I participated in the development as **choreographic assistant** and as a **performer** in the Paris cast. Then, traveling with a second assistant, toured the work internationally with local casts for five years, casting from a distance then remounting the work in cities such as **Düsseldorf**, **Salzburg**, **Lisbon**, **Moscow**, **Hong Kong**, **New York**, **Los Angeles**, among others. After having worked in these various international contexts, in 2019, while

the company was transitioning to more ecological work conditions without the use of airplanes, I wrote Gala's **protocol**. During the same time, I began working on the piece *Isadora Duncan* as an assistant choreographer participating in its development, and then traveling by train and boat around Europe and performing with the dancer **Elisabeth Schwartz** in such cities as **Berlin, Hamburg, Warsaw, Bergen** and **Oslo**.

With Jérôme Bel's work, the **processes of transmitting a work** became central to my artistic and pedagogical thinking. Having met and worked with so many people from around the world, my communication necessarily became more supple. Face to face working within a group meant finding a delicate balance of instructing, proposing, doing, and reacting. Whereas, the protocol had to stand on its own but could not trap the work into a rigid form. It had to be a guide to an interpretable experience that nonetheless retained the intentions of the artist. This newfound interest in protocols led me to deeper research into artistic scoring, and to begin using them in my classes.

In parallel, with **Pascale Murtin**, I wrote **harmonies for guitar and voice**, and was encouraged to perform my foreignness as an American, in songs that played with bilingual puns, idioms and misunderstandings. Together we performed at the **CND Pantin**, the **Laboratoire d'Aubervilliers**, and le **POC** (Pôle Culturel Alfortville), among other venues.

2019-Present: Distributed Practice

During the past 7 years, I have focused on an individual practice. In 2019, I returned to making music and performance work, while also beginning to teach in fine arts institutions. Without a fixed company, I came to conceive of my practice as distributed and relational.

This led me to formulate the concept of *Polyphony as Practice*, a performance/lecture with diphonous voice, viola, and a prerecorded music track made with a recording of an improvised poem by my daughter Aïcha Atala. In this piece, I propose that collaboration is not necessarily a formal process of group creation but rather can be understood as a mode of attention. Drawing on the musical notion of **polyphony**—multiple simultaneous melodic lines—I describe a way of working in which making and listening are inseparable. That what we do is unavoidably tied to our environment, the tools we use, our histories and to the other living beings with whom we share our lives. What we produce is thus always **situated**: shaped by our **past** and oriented toward a **speculative future**. The piece was performed at **Image/Imatge, Beton Salon, Artotèque de Caen** and the **Laboratoire d'Aubervilliers**.

Future Project

I am readying now to propose a thesis, to extend my research through a more explicit dialogue between **artistic practice and scientific inquiry**, particularly in relation to questions of **embodiment, perception, and knowledge production**. I have become increasingly drawn to writers working in the hybrid art-science space such as anthropologist **Tim Ingold**, artist **James Bridle** and biologist **Robin Wall Kimmerer** who all work at the crossroads of scientific and cultural research.

The research-creation project that I will propose questions how scientists studying marine animals engage not only with methods of data collection, but also with forms of attention, imagination, and affect that may not be fully acknowledged within scientific frameworks. What biases, stories and experiences do they bring to this work and how is their work informed by their subjectivity? How is **non-human subjectivity** approached, implicitly or explicitly? What kinds of **sensory and embodied** experiences shape this work? What forms of **attachment** or projection emerge, even when objectivity is prioritized? How are these questions answered in the language that scientists use to describe their work?

At the same time, I am intrigued by the status of **scientific documentation**—such as aerial imagery or sound recordings of marine animals. While these forms of data have specific uses within research contexts, I am curious about how they might be recontextualized through artistic practice. For example, I was quite surprised when beginning my research and looking through both the NOAA archives and those of whale hunting museums. I saw the potential of comparing images of documented whale hunts that were painted or drawn by artists and non artists who accompanied voyages, to contemporary videos and photos of whales and whale rescue voyages.

In paintings from the 19th century and prior, hunts are portrayed as heroic battles between man and nature, set on the horizon. In the early 20th century, the perspective becomes close, psychological, as if the artist is inside the whale hunt. Whereas, in contemporary images collected at marine science centers for identification and protection purposes, whales are normally photographed alone or in pairs and from a distance by drones or by people who encounter them serendipitously. The detournement of the artist's gesture, evident in the movement of perspective in paintings is striking, the sudden distance created through the camera feels at once respectful and voyeuristic.

A video of a whale rescue documenting scientists in the throes of chasing an entangled whale can also look like a hunt. Scientist's use tactics borrowed from the hunt to slow the whale down in order to save it, such as the "Nantucket Sleigh Ride", a method of weighing down the animal and riding with them until they tire and slow. Previously used to allow for an easy kill, the practice is used now to ensure the safety of the rescuers and the whale while cutting their entanglements.

And finally, the sound collected through hydrophones and made available in the archives is polluted by ocean noise and glitches. It is as if one is listening through a great amount of interference, the sound of the whale is itself a kind of breaching. The noise conveys the alterity of the underwater world. The right whale's calls have been given names like "upcall" or "gun shot". The term gun shot is particularly striking through the dense underwater noise as it calls to mind both violence and rebellion.

Through this research, I want to investigate technology's ability to shapeshift and look at how it is used to hurt, to harm, or to protect. How do the historical uses of these technologies echo through the human body when they are reappropriated for some other purpose? How might these images/sounds be compared and interpreted in ways that shift perception, activate imagination, or reconfigure our relationship with marine life? And finally, I seek to further develop a practice-based and theoretical approach to performance that engages pedagogy, embodiment, and art/science relations as intertwined fields of inquiry.

2. Sound, the Sublime and Static Funk

<https://x80.org/sheila/sound>

I learned music by listening, imitating, and experimenting alone or with others. First in high school accompanied by my brother, I began with **folk** music, which speaks of travel, sadness, joy, love, death, and war.

In college I started listening more to **punk**, which also speaks of love, of failure, but equally of struggle and freedom. I was adopted into a group of girls who at the time were playing *Bikini Kill* covers in a band called *Boobie Trap*. They left that band and we started a Phil Spector cover band called ***Mink Stole***, named after the actress featured in John Waters films. I was the band's singer.

In 2001, after moving to NYC, we formed an original band called ***Tallboys***, where I picked up the guitar and a stage name, **Sheila16**. Writing songs collaboratively, we played regularly in local clubs in NYC and on tours in the United States, first in the Midwest then on the East coast. Notably we toured with the band the **Yeah Yeah Yeahs**. With those girls I really felt free to learn to play and create songs through experimentation and perform aggressively with my whole body. Also, for better or worse, being in that band felt like being in a gang, it was an identity. I left that band in 2006 after a dispute while recording an album, a fight over creative control. Here is an example of lyrics from a song titled **Criminal**.

Forgotten dreams,
Radio's future
So much pent up demand
Say yes to Japan
Oh black black magic
It's all a gimmick
Can you taste the sex sugar,
Oh this is such a bore
Don't you buy it,
Don't consume it
NONONONONONONO,
it wasn't me
This is criminal,
It could be fatal
Shangri-la,
Sleepless hysteria

That same year, I had started playing with a couple of drummers from **experimental** bands, Dave Nuss from the ***No Neck Blues Band*** and Aaron Moore from ***Volcano the Bear***. With them, in our band ***Amolvacy***, we worked primarily through improvisation. I was able to release the voice, and stop thinking about words, just scream, sing and play whatever instrument I wanted to make a sound with. At the time I was influenced by the voices of **Yoko Ono**, **Meredith Monk**, **Catherine Ribeiro** and **Yma Sumac**. Finally, without having to define a genre of music, I could escape language and just focus on our collaboration and our sound. We released 2 Albums, ***Ho ho kus*** in 2007 and ***A La Lu La*** in 2009.

I left that group after almost 5 years in 2011, in anticipation of a move to Los Angeles. For several years while moving cities, countries and touring dance performances I did not have another music project, though I played at home when I could and recorded some songs on my own.

In 2016, I began practicing **diphonic singing** after I had my daughter in France. Feeling isolated while learning French, I remembered an American cowboy song, *Lonesome Cowboy* by **Arthur Miles**, whose singing technique, a whistling type of diphonic singing, I was able to imitate. The story is of a man who kills his friend in passionate jealousy and must forever roam alone, a fugitive from himself, a kind of parable about the tragedy that comes from unexamined anger.

At the same time, I was studying **Pauline Oliveros'** *Sonic Meditations* and teaching them/practicing them in classes at the art school. Singing with a double voice became a personal sound meditation with viola and led to the performance *Polyphony as Practice*. The practice of repetition and attention to breath led to new and sometimes uncontrolled changes in sound and powerful, deep sensations within myself. I discovered that the naturally occurring functions of my body when letting go could develop their own composition.

In my current practice, using my stage name **Sheila xvi** (this time using Roman numerals), I use synthesizers to create drones or rhythms. I began playing modular and semimodular synths in 2022. My current instrument is the **Soma Pulsar-23**, which I have played since 2024. Interactive and sensitive, it is a semi-modular rhythm machine that is like something from nature, shifting in subtle or dynamic ways. In my project *Static Funk/émergence subliminales* I work on the threshold between **noise** and form. Using the conceptual framework of an organic process or a thought process, I create the feeling that a rhythm or melody has almost taken shape only to be lost again in noise, making way for new/almost/other forms. I am interested in embodiment, implicating my body in whatever is created by seeking a feeling of movement. I don't always try to control my instrument but to play WITH it, listening for surprises and allowing them to surface in an exchange between noise and form.

I still play acoustic instruments such as the viola or the guitar, and I sing. I sometimes record myself amid the chaos of my child **Aïcha** playing. Sometimes, if she's interested, she participates. I've begun mixing recordings of folk songs with synthesizer tracks—a strange blend, a difficult negotiation. I'm inspired by **Arthur Russell**, who had no problem working with wildly different genres of music; disco, experimental, and folk/country. I want to further develop the connection between American folk songs and prerecorded sound, live noises, and synthesizer.

My various experiences with sound bring me back to the concept of the sublime. Certain sonic practices I have experimented with such as breath, repetition, emergence, shape the way I think about the sublime in its contemporary context. When I think of the sublime in the contemporary sense of the word/world, I don't think of it in the Kantian sense of a pure aesthetic moment limited to a confrontation with the enormity of nature. The image of nature as austere and humans standing far off in wonder and fear is fetishistic and dangerous, it encourages a relationship wherein humans seek to control nature, to dominate it. Many things in nature scare me and create wonder, but I would rather think of the sublime as an overwhelming feeling of awe that emerges through a process of relating and rescaling perception. And I believe that it emerges in us in a contemplative state that it is often more complex and relational.

I experience the sublime when I watch my 10 year old daughter amongst thousands of women lift her fist for the first time at a women's rights march. I feel it when I witness a student, who has been struggling, make a breakthrough in their work. Kant distinguishes the sublime as a state of admiration, from beauty as a state of love, but I absolutely disagree. I believe that the sublime must come from profound love and a perceived

change of state that is both inward and outward, like a meeting. In nature it is a feeling of overwhelm, like confronting a place where love and death meet, thinking, "I love this and someday it/I will be gone." But it also happens within the confluence of the imagination and the present. Finally, I believe the sublime occurs most often in music.

When I think of music in its contemporary context and how I want to make it, I think of transformation that moves through the sublime. The transformation is physical and psychic and it doesn't necessarily have language. One sound leads to another, in the hopes of passing on to something else again, like questions that follow questions. I like to think of it as a way of working that is both affirming of a moment, connecting the past to the present, and experimental in that it welcomes change.

3. Pedagogy and Embodiment

<https://x80.org/sheila/pedagogy>

I have been teaching in higher education for seven years now, first at the École Supérieur d'Art Annecy Alpes (ESAAA) and currently at the École Nationale Supérieur des Arts Décoratifs (ENSAD). For me learning and teaching go hand in hand. Because when I learn something meaningful, I want to share it. I have taught in various working contexts; as a volunteer in high school, a tutor in college, as an investigator training new colleagues, as a teacher in afterschool programs, and as a choreographer transmitting artworks to a cast of performers or in writing a score.

All of these working experiences, however modest, have shaped how I teach in higher education. As an arts and language educator, I try to encourage and evoke students' latent curiosity and support critical thinking by creating an environment that nurtures reflection and group discussion. I use materials most familiar to me such as artist's protocols, choreographic and theater exercises, music and musical instruments, science fiction literature and theoretical texts in the various courses that I teach. These tools create context and are starting points for action and exploration.

I treat teaching as an artistic act and choose my materials curatorially. This means that I gather materials often across disciplines, and think about how I might introduce them in an order that makes sense, as a kind of dramaturgy that clarifies their relation and provokes a response. I think of my time with the students as being distributed into different forms. I propose something actionable for each class whether it be articulated as a protocol or an experiment. My goal is for the students to make and build connections with the materials and with each other, while developing their own line of inquiry and means of expression.

For example: *Speculative Listening*

Inspired by the work and reflections of Sun Ra, a key figure in the development of **Afrofuturism**, and by Pauline Oliveros's concept of **Deep Listening**, this class offers a non-linear exploration of music history through both well-known and lesser-known artists and practices.

During a few classes, for example, we explore the concept of the **acousmatic** developed by **Pierre Schaeffer** in the formulation of **Musique Concrète**—listening without seeing the source of a sound—the goal is for students to become familiar using intuitive vocabulary for describing sound. Over several sessions, we focus on noise and musique concrète. We begin by reading Luigi Russolo's *The Art of Noises* and discussing both its historical context and the vocabulary Russolo develops to describe non-musical sounds.

To introduce the acousmatic experience, I lead an exercise in which students close their eyes while I perform a series of sonic actions using objects already present in the classroom, such as dragging a chair across the floor. When the students open their eyes, they are asked to describe what they heard, beginning with the qualities and sequence of the sounds before speculating about the actions that may have produced them.

Students are then asked to make a sound recording and bring it to class. Over the following sessions, we listen to these recordings together, attempting to identify their sources and circumstances. Each student is then invited to explain their recording process and discuss the choices they made. Through this exercise, students become more attentive to the ways sounds are perceived, interpreted, and contextualized, while developing a richer vocabulary for listening and description.

Many of our current tools for interaction, such as social media and AI in particular, experienced alone and anonymously, can be alienating. As James Bridle in *Ways of Being* writes, “We use our machines, often without really understanding what it is they’re doing, and uncritically accept the world they present to us. They come to define our reality and to erase the awareness that other realities even exist.” They can simulate human exchange, offer representations of fulfilled desire, divert us, or provide an inert and temporary escape from loneliness. If exploited skillfully they can be useful in research and autodidactic learning. But they cannot replace human contact and creative exchange. This contemporary situation is on my mind when I formulate teaching strategies.

The experience of embodiment is therefore important to my teaching; that special relationship of having a body in relationship to other bodies and to spaces inside or outside of the classroom. I do believe embodied learning experiences through a convergence of the senses and through meaningful actions can enrich our perspective and our language. Experiencing things together gives us the opportunity to relate thought and language to a precise shared moment.

For example: *Future Rituals*

The *Future Rituals* class was conceived during the COVID-19 lockdown as a way for participants to work together and reconnect with the outside world. Initially focused on exploring the relationships between ritual and art, intention and action, the project gradually identified certain actions as potential forms for performance.

The first iteration took the form of a ritualized one-on-one fight performed within a space created and held by the group. Emerging from a desire for physical contact and a need to reclaim our bodies after a period of isolation, the project developed into a site for hand-to-hand combat. Through the process, participants learned to engage physically with one another through generosity, communication, and consent. The resulting performance, presented at **MAC Lyon**, functioned as a healing ritual that addressed the experience of separation and reconnection.

It is also important to me to reject systems of authority and domination in education while acknowledging the inherent dynamic of power that pervades teacher student relationships. I believe we must avoid coercive tactics, mistaken for motivational tools, in education. I reject a transactional relationship between student and teacher, where a student receives something from a teacher and must file it away in order to repeat it later. I

believe that through embodiment, whether through the senses, the voice or actual movement, students learn through deep reflection that responds to direct feeling and intuition.

Our locus is our body. Without exploring that central point from which things are experienced how can we abstract or project ourselves somewhere beyond it without losing ourselves entirely? The contemporary world is staged for an adaptive state of disassociation, the feeling we must separate ourselves in order to protect ourselves. Education must be rooted in the building of trusting relationships with other humans and with other living beings in our environment, in our communities, through shared experience.

As **Paulo Freire** writes in *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*, "Education is thus constantly remade in the praxis....problem-posing education, which accepts neither a "well-behaved" present nor a predetermined future—roots itself in the dynamic present and becomes revolutionary."

A large part of teaching is formulating questions, and teaching how to formulate questions and then rather than providing or anticipating conclusions, allowing the group to follow a line of thought. As Freire points out it is not about reaching a fixed point of permanence, an endpoint determined by a quantified moment in time, it is allowing the subject of a class to live its own life through the group, becoming actionable or leading to some other more salient subject, not ending but creating new beginnings.

For example: *Action, Time, Vision and Feeling*

This class was originally titled *Who? What? When? Where? Why? How?* (WWWWWH?????). It is structured around the exploration of the artist's protocol or score. Students are introduced to a range of artists, many associated with the Fluxus movement, as well as other works that can be approached as scores.

For example, over several sessions, we explore the use of the floor plan. We begin by discussing what a floor plan is and how it is used in choreography. After watching a film of Samuel Beckett's *Quad*, students analyze the work's structure, directions of movement, and timing. Based on this analysis, they create a speculative score, either graphically notated or textual.

The students then draw the floor plan in chalk and experiment with it in groups until they feel they have accurately reconstructed it. They discuss the differences between their initial analysis of the work and their embodied experience of performing it.

In the following session, students are introduced to the film and graphic score of **Lucinda Childs's** *Calico Mingling*, a more complex choreographic score. They discuss the relationship between what they observe in the performance and its graphic encoding in the score. Each student then develops their own floor-plan proposal and experiments with its enactment, directing their classmates while modifying the plan in response to the experience.

The goal is to encourage students to make deliberate decisions about what is specified and what is left open to interpretation in their scores, and to realize a precise artistic intention.

While observing others working through a process, we cultivate patience and challenge fixed perspectives. We hold space for potential inspiration. Patience in a pedagogical context is attentive waiting ...it is sometimes being silent, letting things happen, a flow, watching who leads, who hides, sometimes leading focus back to the subjects by asking a question, sometimes allowing the subjects to move elsewhere. They may determine a stronger objective, perhaps one the teacher had not thought of or prepared.

In **Fred Moten's** *Anassignment Letters* he writes, *Because what if intellectual practice is irreducibly chor(e)ographic? What if you have to move in order to map? What if reflection is also a matter of reflex? What if the animation of flesh is fundamental to reflection ? What if reflection and reflexion and refreshment and refreshment are one in the same? Deeper still, what if the movement in question is, at once, collective and in concert, but also disruptive or deconstructive of the idea of a certain coherence or integrity of the single body/being?- from Stolen Life*

In this essay, Moten addresses the problem of the assignment in education, about how one assignment leads to another assignment, as a pretext for a fixed coercive relationship that fulfills an administrative function and is alienating. He instead formulates learning as fugitivity, something that moves away and stays open, moving in order to map. Like Freire he is talking about how education can make change possible. Again, the body is central to this argument, but here he emphasizes that perhaps even the body itself is not singular in the context of learning. He formulates a teaching practice that does not reject subjectivity (that of the student or the teacher) but suggests that there is perhaps something more, something better, in something common.

I mention Freire and Moten as theoretical inspirations for my teaching but I am moved and inspired by so many other teachers and their practices, artists/theorists/teachers who are known to me personally as collaborators/friends/advisors or through their protocols, writings, or through their students who have spoken fondly of them. To name a few there are **Pauline Oliveros, Tony Conrad, Beth Stephens, Vir Andres Hera, Thom Donovan, Julie Portier, Maxime Thieffine, Anne Kawala, Jagna Ciuchta, Tim Shaw, and Elisabeth Schwartz.**

4. Painting as Witnessing, Witnessing Witnessing

<https://x80.org/sheila/painting>

*Animals whales
domestic or household cats and spiders
ancient animals
Horseshoe crab or coquille saint jacques*

*Trees, plants, grass, or bark
My daughter
Hands, backs of heads, a torso
Appliances, fans, microwave
Toys*

*A Big Fan
Sleeping girl with horseshoecrab on her face on the beach*

In 2023, I had the idea of making portraits of whales. I began painting whales while researching the online NOAA archives and finding their photos documenting whale sightings. I had the idea that portraits validate a singular identity. I liked the idea that it would be difficult or awkward for me, since I had never painted before, perhaps like a scientist. I started by making my paintings from photos not as copies but rather thinking of what I was doing as a form of witnessing (as an artist) a witnessing (that of a scientist), a witnessing (that of the animal who perceives the world from their environment) as a form of interpreted testimony. I started painting without any formal training or guidance.

Painting quickly opened up a world of visual fantasy for me. The process of learning to paint was indeed sublime. Sublime as a verb, is active rather than passive, it is a passage with a gap much like learning. In chemistry it is a movement that skips over a state of being, from solid to gas. I would find from one painting to the next, my intentions became stronger and compositional vision clearer. What does the verb sublimate or "to sublime" have to do with the use of the word sublime as a noun when it describes how we relate to seeing, hearing? It is a shift in focus, the attention drawn to a sudden and intense sensitivity. The sublime is the state of the witness who has been changed, activated, shifted from a path/thought that was parallel or perpendicular, definitively separate or crossing, to something oblique, questioning, elevated or suspended.

Before starting to paint, I did not think a lot about the painting medium. Not that I didn't like paintings, I just didn't feel compelled to know more. I was moved by **Ethel Adnan's** bold but gentle use of color, and **Paul Klee's** use of arrows and different textures in his work. But my greatest exposure to painting and painters in their process came as a teacher at the beaux arts where I saw students learning to paint and witnessed my colleagues counseling them. Witnessing the students in this process, created a great desire in myself to try. And when I did, I was surprised to find how painting affected my body, slowing my breathing and demanding

a different attention to space. But also, my mind woke up to a fuller visual imagination and it became a preoccupation.

I asked for advice on my painting from a friend and colleague, the artist Maxime Thieffine, who encouraged me to start painting without using models. I started experimenting with different scales and energies. He also offered me references to painters such as **Katherine Bradford, Joan Browne and Forest Bess**. Other friends, upon seeing my work, told me to look at the surrealists. I found that some of my themes and gestures resonated with those of **Toyen** (backs of heads, out of scale hands) and **Jacqueline Lamba** (turning movement, accumulated brush strokes). Jagna Ciuchta encouraged me to look at contemporary painters such as **Nicole Eisenman**, for her figurative and narrative work and **Michael Hermitage** for his connection to his materials and territory. I also found kinship in the work of **Isa Genzhen** with her use of tape and exploitation of the floor in her installations.

In my compositional method I began to combine and build relationships between figures, textures and landscapes. These compositions often come together in my head, first as a flash with two subjects relating to each other, then with other images invading the composition. Separately, I have seen these images, in real life or through different forms of media. But their reappearance in my imagination is more like a daydream than a night dream, they follow a thought process and change my emotional state. The sublime shift is in the work itself, that of putting them together as one artwork. Multiples becoming one, one becoming multiple. Tying my consciousness, my memory to its original vision, the site or sighting of each thing.

The figures in my painting leap into a network of relationships that adapt to the page as I'm working, exposing my personal world of interconnectedness and fantasy. For example, I start to paint the back of a head, but it turns into a volcano, a giant hand points to it, framed by a jungle with white light passing through the leaves, death in the form of a skeleton watches from a beach towel in the forefront.

In many of my paintings we are witnessing someone witnessing. Recreating the sensation of confronting something strange and ambiguous, or of trying to guess what another being is thinking as they watch something. I think this brings to light the trouble of communicating experience, of putting things into words. I often depict humans and animals as turning away or with their eyes closed or hidden. I do not want the viewer to formulate a relationship directly with the subjects in the painting, impose an affect or create a character.

As I continue, I am interested in what happens to surfaces, with respect to the paper and paint but also as a subject of the paintings. How when something is laid upon another thing it changes it. The one thing becomes the landscape of the other or becomes the thing holding it up in the painting. Perhaps it is another analogy for polyphony. When painting I break down bordered surfaces into their textures, their implicit movement through the brush stroke. Sometimes a surface expands, fans out, swirls or emerges from somewhere giving directional energy. And sometimes the surface is broken up into lines, dashes and separated into parts by borders that are clear, broken or blurry. These are irregular motifs, repetition transforming as it repeats.

5. Film as archive; from still to moving

<https://x80.org/sheila/film>

Making videos is new to me. Though I have taken videos of myself for the sake of documenting experiments during the development of works, I had not thought of this medium as one I would like to work in and expose until 2025. It has become a way to bring together music and image, a form of curation using fragments I, or others, have captured on my phone or computer and that I later rediscover. The process is like making a collage from my personal archive, digging up material that I hadn't found any reason to expose in the past, but that I also haven't decided to erase. What these videos reveal are the structures that I abide in and create from, heterotopies such as the domestic space in which I make my studio, or in an airplane, or the grocery store where my daughter takes photos of packaging, or the streets in my neighborhood and the birds that inhabit them. I think putting these images to music exposes new relationships made from connecting one time to another.

The music comes from a store of home recordings and phone recordings that I have accumulated over time. I select pieces because they match the duration, tone, or rhythm of a video, and the pairing mutually enhances their value. Like remembering the feeling you had when you took the video, usually some combination of intrigue and joy, and trying to find the precise nuance of that feeling in sound.

The photos and videos I take are captured spontaneously. Sometimes I film videos that are already playing on another screen or my computer—recording an image a second time, reframing it, translating from one technology to another, giving it a new texture, interpreting it. Another form of witnessing, the resulting document is not coming from a primary source but from a reference, a situation of watching. This becomes a way of documenting the experience of seeing something again: something I may have forgotten, now encountered differently.

I am drawn to unstable framings—images that drift or tilt. They suggest a kind of urgency, a form of attention tied to the body of the person filming which is outside the frame, inattentive to the camera. This method also reveals the material conditions of viewing: reflections, glitches, flashes of light, dust, and traces of touch on the screen.

This feels honest to me. It is what an archive is like—handled and imperfect, though chosen, partially obscured, sometimes degraded, yet still cared for and enduring.

Conclusion

The sublime is not a feeling that I need to seek out, or a place I need to occupy in order to feel something strong, it is a transformation that suddenly emerges in me, and demands me to reorient. It may mean changing how I make things or how I speak about something. And though it builds over a long period of time, an almost subconscious process of making connections and working intuitively, when something finally manifests, it appears suddenly. Like everything else we deem mystical or unknowable it is the experience of creation itself that brings us there, as an actor or as a witness.

And so, this concept of the Analogical Sublime is wrapped up in everything I have done; coming from different impulses that nonetheless connect through a constant but variable energy. My early experiences in groups collaborating on works, prepared me to adapt to another country, where teaching communication and art deepened my commitment to research. My more recent work in visual mediums is connected to my need to work independently and the inspiration that I gleaned from watching my students learn. Working on paintings has changed how I work with sound, because I have begun to think more about sound in terms of form and materials. Finally, working on film is a way to approach my personal archive of accumulated images and sound.

Preparing for the VAE has been extremely valuable to me because it has given me the opportunity to look at my entire life working in art and to think about how I would like to proceed. Many times I have felt that I am making art in a mode of survival, while navigating personal economy and human relationships with little time to reflect upon the progression between different forms and ideas. But with this time devoted to writing about my past, I have gained a deeper understanding of the path my work has taken and how I would like to continue in my thesis. And I feel that I better understand the importance of the synthesis (collision?) of living and art making that happens in my work and that I would like to continue to integrate into my practice.

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<https://freemusicarchive.org/music/Amolvacy/>

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Meredith Monk, *Do you Be*

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=89I-4wtz3uU&list=RD89I-4wtz3uU&start_radio=1

Catherine Ribiero + Alpes, *Ame Debout*,

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