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BFA Project 2022

April 16, 2022

*Emilycore*

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*(a brief explanation)*

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This document serves as a supplement to the album *Emilycore* (2022) and outlines the aesthetic values, ideas, and inspirations that inform my musical work. These ideas and theories are solely related to the personal emotional realities that inform *why* I make music. There is no content in this paper about *how* my music functions in a mathematical or music theory oriented context. Although music theory is a great utility for musical problem solving, I do not utilize theory in any other way, and as it does not directly inspire my ideas, writing about it would distract from the concepts and processes that do. Furthermore, the aesthetic concepts described in this work, although referential to the writings of Bessel van der Kolk, Julia Kristeva, and Stephen Wanhg, are situated within my personal experience of trauma processing and how such processing informs my practice. I will also outline personal experiences I have had with being a consumer of media, including the films of the New French Extremity movement (particularly *Martyrs*), the sci fi of Cronenberg, and the early 2000s MTV franchise *Jackass*, because these films relate deeply to my own processing of trauma. Due to the role of the aforementioned media in my practice, I consider these moving image works

the greatest influence and inspiration for *Emilycore*. This is not a paper in defense or in service of a thesis or argument. I am only attempting to accurately and honestly frame my aesthetic influences by relating them to one another in order to explain how they inform my work.

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*(willfully transgressive)*

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The film movement called the New French Extremity was originally described by film critic James Quandt as “...a cinema suddenly determined to break every taboo, to wade in rivers of viscera and spumes of sperm, to fill each frame with flesh, nubile or gnarled, and subject it to all manner of penetration, mutilation, and defilement” (Quandt 1). This impulse for the depiction of unrelenting brutality was presented by Gaspar Noé as his attempt to show that man is simply an animal, which the director explained defiantly during his press for the film *Irreversible* (2002). Despite Noé’s assertion that his films have some kind of value for humanity, Quandt lamented that these “Images and subjects once the provenance of splatter films, exploitation flicks, and porn–gang rapes, bashings and slashings and blindings, hard-ons and vulvas, cannibalism, sadomasochism and incest, fucking and fisting, sluices of cum and gore--proliferate in the high-art environs of a national cinema whose provocations have historically been formal, political, or philosophical”(Quandt 1).

I bring up these two ideas—worth and worthlessness—in relation to the value of depictions of extreme violence in art to simply say that I don’t care about either of these positions. I do not find it personally useful to view films through the lens of art history or

fine art practices. In the context of films and media, I am not personally inspired by representation and discourse, but rather syntax and that which falls outside of the boundaries created by syntax (this is only true in relation to media, not politics or the affairs of the world at large). To this end, I do not experience any of the films of the New French Extremity as works of art, but as entertainment. Entertainment, according to Merriam-Webster, is “something diverting or engaging.” To that end, the depictions of extreme violence in these films, such as *Martyrs* (Laugier, 2008), serve as a way to divert my own attention away from my body and to the depictions of other bodies, far removed from my own. In the same breath, I pray the music I make and perform in live settings serves a similar effect—the diversion and loss of one’s body via the activity of engagement—the act of dancing. I do not use the word prayer lightly, and mean it literally. The exact reason for the use of this word I refuse to divulge, as I do not feel the need to attempt to explain concepts that are far larger than written language, or to justify my experience of being alive. In my life, music is “The light which...is not spatial, but ... is far, far brighter than a cloud which carries the sun.” (qtd. in Newman).

The prayer of my music exists and gives me immense power. The axis of this power is the potential for healing, which arises through the feeling of agency. “Agency starts with what scientists call interoception, our awareness of our subtle sensory, body-based feelings: the greater that awareness, the greater our potential to control our lives. Knowing *what* we feel is the first step to knowing *why* we feel that way” (Van der Kolk 97-98). Although Van der Kolk provides wonderful guidance in his book (*The Body Keeps the Score: Mind, Brain and Body in the Transformation of Trauma*) on how to relearn the act of feeling primordial sensations that give life its full flavor and aid in

executive function and personal safety, I am interested in a more basic kind of feeling: That of dancing, and the effect of rhythm on the body. By making music with heavy percussive elements, I am able to produce immediate and undeniable sensations in my body. This is what I mean when I say that music literally gives me power and agency.

Additionally, music can serve as a way to override the effects of trauma, which are extremely physical. "...Traumatized people chronically feel unsafe inside their bodies...constantly bombarded by visceral warning signs, and, in an attempt to control these processes, they often become expert at ignoring their gut feelings and in numbing awareness of what is played out inside. They learn to hide from their selves" (Van der Kolk 98-99). *Emilycore* is organizationally oriented from the desire to place my music in contexts that allow for freedom of movement, and to encourage the expression of joy that comes with movement. I strive to make music that can allow folks to orient themselves in physical space in a literal way, as dance necessitates a kind of repeated touch with the ground the dancer moves upon. I see this in relation both to therapeutic bodywork and horror films: "People who are terrified need to get a sense of where their bodies are in space and of their boundaries. Firm and reassuring touch lets them know where those boundaries are: what's outside them, where their bodies end" (qtd. In Van der Kolk 218). This quote by somatic therapist Licia Sky is nearly identical to Julia Kristeva's ideas about how the experience of horror works on a subject.

Despite my desire to create a healing experience for both myself and an audience via the physical and communal context of dance music, I do not usually gravitate to aesthetically soft or pretty musical references (ambient music is always associated with calm or healing, despite the fact that there are plenty of ambient artists

who work with dark and horrific themes!). This aesthetic choice of utilizing “darker” sounds is directly related to my focus on how music can affect one’s relationship to their body and experience of self.

The distorted and pained textures I often work with are my attempt at abstractly capturing the phenomena of abjection, which is defined much more literally by Kristeva in *Powers of Horror: An Essay on Abjection*: “...refuse and corpses show me what I permanently thrust aside in order to live. These body fluids, this defilement, this shit are what life withstands, hardly and with difficulty, on the part of death. There, I am at the border of my condition as a living being. My body extricates itself, as being alive, from that border.” Although Kristeva goes on to talk about how one becomes a lost traveler in the midst of such abjection, beseeched by endlessly collapsing borders and despair, it’s fascinating that here, she states that the body’s life itself derives from that same border, springing up in the chasm of life and death. The aesthetics of abjection, although conventionally considered having to do with evil and death, can create an urgency about living, and if channeled through creation, these aesthetics can ultimately have a positive effect. To this end, I am not interested in whether or not depictions of abject violence are valuable, but interested and invested in their existence itself. How can I turn shit into gold and back into shit so that someone in turn can change that back into gold? That’s *Emilycore*.

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*(gruesome and unbearably intense)*

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To further explore the idea that abjection can lead to beauty and creation, it must be emphasized that abjection lives in a space of in-betweenness. "It is thus not lack of cleanliness or health that causes abjection but what disturbs identity, system, order. What does not respect borders, positions, rules. The in-between, the ambiguous, the composite" (Kristeva 4). I feel very weary of speaking about transness in relation to the idea of "the composite," as that simply reinforces the notion of binaries (and in relation to moving image work, the history and canon of the male gaze, as said gaze is dependent on the divide between object and subject), but instead want to consider Kristeva's idea (found on page 3) that the image of the corpse "...is a border that has encroached upon everything". Following this line of thought, Kristeva posits that the border becomes an object itself. Referring back to the idea that music and its effect on the nervous system relates to agency, the music maker creates a kind of border between themselves and the audience—a living border of dancing, encroaching on everyone's regulatory bodily functions.

There is a reason people use the expression "lose yourself in dance," or "tonight I want to get loose" when referring to dancing at a party or rave. Whereas most borders demarcated by nation states enforce a worldview and agenda (usually in the interest of power and violence), this border subsumes the one who created it in equal measure as those lost in the crowd. Perhaps this border is a protective and insulating one; maybe this border is actually a cocoon.

Additionally, this border is not represented visually—often the exchange of body language and atmospheric shifts at a rave is referred to as "energy," which is quite a vague word. Is the energy from heat, or is it from an electric current sent coming in from

wires, or the tension between magnetic fields? The border that engulfs both performer and audience is not represented by an object—where would you point to gesture to it? In the same vein, the deepest influences on *Emilycore* are moving image works that I consider to capture the essence of non-representational feeling, as opposed to text and explicit narrative themes. These are films that do not pretend to be books or theater, but are deeply filmic in that they seem to almost hyperextend out of the screen, tangible in their making of images and motion.

Sailor Dinucci-Radley, in a recent conversation with director Jane Schoenbrun (*We're All Going to the World's Fair*) for *Letterboxd*, says the following about her experience with film and transness: "Some of my earliest connections to trans-femininity were films where the screen was being re-filmed. I remember watching *Gummo* when I was seventeen and being blown away by Harmony Korine filming the CRT monitor with a digital video camera". The same idea of hyper-liminality can be found in a more visually literal and post-modern way in *Videodrome* (Cronenberg, 1983), with Cronenberg's use of playful fake outs that cause the viewer to realize they have actually been staring at a camera placed extremely close to a television playing a videocassette. *Videodrome* is deeply influential to me because it combines the liminality of abjection with commentary on how television can forcefully control the nervous system, which is a kind of dark reflection to Van der Kolk's writing on how touch and dance might help traumatized individuals relearn their ability to regulate their bodies and physical responses. Here, it is technology's embrace that regulates bodies, not the touch of a dancer.

However, I am not interested in electronic music's relationship to narrative concepts (Cronenberg's work is firmly in the realm of genre fiction) because I am not a writer, and consequently the truest, purist influence on *Emilycore* is *Jackass Number Two: Unrated* (Tremaine, 2006), as the film does not have a traditionally linear narrative structure. Instead, broken up into clearly delineated segments, the film exists in a space between documentary, skate film, prank show, and the bizarre slice of life narratives à la *Gummo* (Korine, 1997). *Jackass Number Two: Unrated* considers the body in a way completely different from *Videodrome*'s narrative of bodies turning on themselves, which presents its protagonist flailing in a sea of technological terror so deep he cannot even tell where the physical limits of his body lie, or whether what his eyes perceive bears any weight to true flesh and blood reality.

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*(its crude, violent)*

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Instead, *Jackass Number Two: Unrated* is a spectacle of *agency* at the highest intensity. Cast members (mostly stuntmen and professional skateboarders) engage in bizarre, ridiculous stunts, often to the point of putting themselves in real harm of death or spinal injury. Johnny Knoxville takes the role of the ringmaster in this circus of juvenile antics, introducing the film with a grin: "Hi, I'm Johnny Knoxville and welcome to Jackass!" Similarly, each time there is a scripted action, the performer in question introduces the segment by saying his own name and the title of the stunt. This nearly ceremonious format highlights the reality that these men are risking their lives for the sake of a juvenile joke, and with their statement of name, verbal consent is given. In this



introductory moment the cast member acknowledges exactly what he is going to do, and shows he understands that it will affect him by identifying his body as his own with the act of naming.

Despite the silliness of much of the stunts, *Jackass Number Two: Unrated* shows a group of men in a rare position—that of physical sacrifice for the sake of joy instead of for the sake of power. This sacrifice exists as one object enveloping both the stuntmen and the audience of the film, as both delight, whether from the stuntman's nature as an adrenaline junky or the viewer's sadistic relief over the fact that the danger on the screen is affecting someone else. In the viewing of these stunts there is an exchange between viewer and screen—motor neurons mirroring the action occurring on camera. This exchange is heightened all the more because of the reality of the film; a warning before every film in the *Jackass* franchise reads: "WARNING: The stunts in this movie were performed by professionals, so for your safety and the protection of those around you, do not attempt any of the stunts you're about to see." Although the warning is certainly appropriate, there is something so beautiful about the fact that in the moment of the warning, the film itself is aware of its own agency and that it might inspire others to literal action.

The liminality of *Jackass Number Two* is highlighted in the moments of the film that are most peaceful. After nearly vomiting from the experience of drinking horse semen, Chris Pontius soberly admits: "I'm ashamed of myself...I really am. I'm completely ashamed of myself." Although Pontius looks crestfallen as he gazes into the camera, the hills behind him are brilliantly sunny and idyllic, and as the shot fades out, Knoxville is beside himself with laughter in the background. These interstitial moments,

usually occurring after something completely sickening has transpired, wherein fade-outs and the strum of a guitar bridge the space between stunts and gags, give *Jackass Number Two* a dreamlike quality. In these moments, set amongst the laughter of friends and the grandeur of the outdoors, the audience is gently reminded that although the stunts are real, it's only a movie.

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*(a brief conclusion)*

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*Emilycore* is a desire to capture the abstract and non-representational way that moving image works can affect the body of an audience while honoring the agency provided to my own body via the act of playing music. By using viscerally physical textures and heavy, percussive sequences, I seek to strike an impulse into those who hear my work, whether at home or on a dance floor. As in *The Pushing Exercise* from *An Acrobat of The Heart*, "...it is all right to "invent" impulses, but, most important, even if you "make it up," as soon as it is happening, treat it just as you would all the "real" surprises... They are all movements received from the outside and reacted to from within" (Wangh 91). I pray that if I bombard someone with enough impulses, they might be moved to create some of their own to whatever end might serve them in healing, life, and in love. Unlike the provocateurs and self-made philosophers of the New French Extremity who use heightened violence and intensity to the aim of "waking up" a supposedly sleepy public, *Emilycore* is a prayer to those who have been hurt to move their bodies, even if just for the sake of a small distraction. *Emilycore* is not art, nor is it a thesis, nor a rulebook. *Emilycore* is entertainment.

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*(thank you)*

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*Emilycore* is indebted to the friends I first watched messed up movies with, including Chan Arthur, Micah Dillman, Zoe Nyman, and Olivia Vincent. This supplementary paper was only feasible due to conversations about physicality with Dallas Havoc. The idea of non-representational trans cinema brought to my attention by Sailor Dinucci-Radley was also crucial. Thank you Olivia Popejoy and Curtman Hurry for encouraging me and being so kind.

*“The idea is to improve somebody’s day. That’s how I’ve always viewed my job. I’m a distraction therapist.”*

- Steve-O

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