Handmade and Personal: A Companion Piece to Here, Mom (A Video Art Project)

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For my mother, Patricia Jean, a woman of many abilities and lives.

I could not have reached this project’s accomplishments without strong direction from setting goals and sticking to a path. I owe a great deal of this work to my advisor, Professor Jennifer Caruso and my partner, Nils Lindahl.

I owe tremendous gratitude to the prospects of collaboration. I could not have made this project without having an artistic partner or the remarkable subjects that are my mother, my family, and friends.

In addition, the intellectual background of this project could not have been completed without the interdisciplinary focus and dedication of the Master of Liberal Studies program, either.

I thank Altered Esthetics, too, for their confidence, and The Southern Theater for their partnership.

Thank you, April Knutson, for your time editing this paper.
The absolute necessity to raise these questions in the world: where, when, and under what conditions have women acted and been acted on, as women? Wherever people are struggling against subjection, the specific subjection of women, through our location in the female body, from now on has to be addressed. The necessity to go on speaking of it, refusing to let the discussion go on as before, speaking where silence has been advised and enforced, not just about our subjection, but about our active presence and practice as women. We believed (I go on believing) that the liberation of women is a wedge driven into all other radical thought, can open out the structures of resistance, unbind the imagination, connect what’s been dangerously disconnected. Let us pay attention now, we said, to women: let men and women make a conscious act of attention when women speak; let us insist on kinds of process which allow more women to speak; let us get back to earth – not as paradigm for “women,” but as place of location.

- Adrienne Rich

From Notes Toward a Politics of Location

The cathexis between the mother and daughter – essential, distorted, misused, is the great unwritten story.

- Adrienne Rich

From Of Woman Born: Motherhood as Experience and Institution
A Film and Video Artist’s Manifesto

By Jes Reyes

There is no order to this manifesto. Any declaration I have written does not precede another. Because I am growing as an artist, I am referring to the manifesto as “working”.

Be naïve and playful with film production and film structure.
I will be curious and technically open-minded and unlearn what I know about making films. If I think I have to make a film a certain way, I will never make a film how I truly want it to be. Therefore, I will resist following conventions; instead I will experiment with form.

Build a relationship with my subject.
I will be cognizant of the representational and relational dynamics and implications that film is capable of and will stay committed to the subject(s) of the project. I will not be careless with my camera or with what I put on screen, and the personal should never be far from my artwork.

Communicate creatively, critically, and rhythmically.
I will write with sounds and moving images. I will film so that my form becomes content and vice versa. If I make films that wrap around an idea, the narrative will transpire. I will attempt to involve my audience by producing emotion, inspiring feeling, and inviting contemplation.

Look to filmmakers who inspire.
Don’t look to directors, look to artist filmmakers. I will look to filmmakers like Agnès Varda for matters regarding film-writing and film aesthetics, in order to draw out my own personal artistic style. I will admire Marie Menken’s somatic approach to filmmaking and remind myself of Stan Brakhage’s transcendental nature. Thus, I will look to filmmakers who use the camera as an extension of their mind and body.
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INTRODUCTION

On a Saturday morning in May of 2013, I sat down with my mother to talk about her childhood. This was the first of three intentional conversations with my mother. Our conversations were recorded and are now archived. These dialogues, along with my own reflections, home movies, and various personal moments and images have been used to create Here, Mom, a lyrical video essay, and my final project for a Master’s Degree in Liberal Studies.

In order to discover a way to tell our story as mother and daughter, I had to get to know her better. There was a time when it wasn’t easy to say, “I love you” to my mom. Much of my life as her daughter has been difficult and emotionally overwhelming. It has been hard now, to come up for air, when most of our early life together was painful and confusing. Yet during our hard times, my adoration for her remained. She has always been the strongest person I have known. As I have grown older, I have wanted to remember our past we shared, not to confront it, but to explore how our past has affected our present lives. We have both aged, and as we have aged, we have grown closer.

A goal of this project was to investigate an area in women’s lives that I am curious about: the relationship between mothers and daughters. I sought to represent a daughter’s search to know the woman who is her mother. The aim was to represent the complexity of my relationship with my mother while also showing simple, meaningful moments from our life. Unfortunately, as Karen Payne describes in Between Ourselves: Letters Between Mothers and Daughters, “Historically, the mother-daughter relationship, like other relationships between women, had been either trivialized or ignored,” and, “under such circumstances, a mother and daughter might have a hard time perceiving their relationship as anything special, whatever their bonds of affection” (xv). Even during our most trying times as mother and daughter, she has been the most important person in my life. I did not want to ignore our relationship and its significance within my work as an artist, nor did I want to trivialize it. Rather, I wanted to convey everything special and difficult about it. Thus, my project aims to strengthen the importance of women’s relationships, not just for women in general, but also for a larger cultural framework.

I aimed to tell our own mother-daughter story. I revisited my past. I collected home movies, family photos, and conducted interviews with my mother. I went back to the places and homes of my childhood to immerse myself in the act of remembering. I engaged myself with the
memories and emotions that come from looking back. Most importantly, I collaborated with my mother to collect raw material from our own lives. This part of the project was the most meaningful for me as I learned more about my mother’s story, which greatly increased my connection to her.

My mother’s life has not been easy. The difficulties of her physical and mental health and parenting young, beginning in her teen years, were demanding and complicated. My childhood and adolescence were personally challenging with my mother. There have been many times I wanted to run away from the problems that came along with having a relationship with her. As she has aged, her physical health has worsened and she is terminally ill now. I have become invested in knowing her better and the life she lived as a woman. In reconciling myself with our arduous past, I created Here, Mom was an opportunity to strengthen our relationship.

This paper serves as an introspective commentary on the conceptualization, development, and realization of this experimental art project. It is the how, what, and why of my artwork. The intention of this project was to prepare myself professionally as a filmmaker and video artist. I have been successful at learning specific skills regarding making film, but I also accomplished two additional goals. First, I learned to think critically about my work by adopting certain analytical methodologies to my approach as an artist. This informed my perspective on filmmaking and shaped my artistic style. Second, I became a film festival curator, as a requirement of this project was to have my artwork publicly shown. By working with Altered Esthetics (Ae), a local arts organization and gallery, I developed a film and video arts program, and premiered Here, Mom on July 25, 2014 at the Ae Art House Film Festival. I applied my research and interest in interdisciplinary arts as well as my studies in curatorial practice to situate my film within a line-up of other experimental media-based works, while also displaying an understanding and skill in film programming and exhibition. Thus, my artistic skill developments, as well as the exhibition aspect of this project, became deeply linked.

The aim of my MLS program was to also grow intellectually, artistically, and professionally. I wanted to expand the research and creative work I began as a undergraduate at California State University, Long Beach, where I studied Women’s Studies and Film and Electronic Arts. I crafted a graduate program that merged my academic concentrations in film and feminism. Through my studies, I grew inspired to conceptualize and produce an artistic project that displayed links to these interdisciplinary curiosities. I wanted to create a piece of
work that represented for me my values and intentions, both as a film and video artist as well as a feminist. My motivations blended my interests in the cinematic arts with feminist film theory and creative writing. I had three specific objectives for my project:

i. To work within an artistic medium that allows one to explore the fragmentation of the past and how memories and experiences take shape within our present realities;

ii. To enrich and expand my understanding of the representational and social language and possibilities of film and apply them on and off screen;

iii. To merge the visual form of cinema with the literary form of memoir by enacting experimentation with the video essay format, all to expand the definition of the documentary film form.

Achieving these objectives required that I conduct a series of independent study courses on a variety of experimental visual and literary artworks and styles that use the first-person form. The aim of this research was to inform and shape the methods I would eventually engage with on my own as I made my final creative work. I initially looked at literature that explored memoirs and madness, then to surrealist works by women. Finally, I researched the filmmaking style, techniques, and methods of French filmmaker Agnès Varda. In further courses, I looked at others such as Jonas Mekas, Stan Brakhage, Marie Menken, and Sadie Benning to get a sense of what I liked and what diarist, lyrical, and somatic film forms and techniques I was most drawn to.

As I formed and conceptualized this project, I began to study feminist reading strategies that influenced ways in which feminists speak about and address topics related to women’s lives. This research explored the roots of feminist literary criticism, the use of metaphors in women’s writing, and the ideas behind feminist theories of reading and writing. I also examined the theme of subjectivity and gender in literary texts. Reading and analyzing film with a feminist lens was also a component of this research.

I defined my own filmmaking practice when conceptualizing Here, Mom by writing a short manifesto, which I shared at the opening of this paper. The manifesto was a method formed out of the theoretical and analytical foundation of my work and informed and shaped my artistic approach. The manifesto outlined filmmaking policies that would guide me during the creation of my project. The manifesto’s purpose will support me after graduate school, serving as a filmmaker’s doctrine, reminding me of my goals and directing me forward.

Here, Mom runs 11 minutes and 11 seconds and took two years to make. I see this paper as the companion piece to the film. I hope that any one who reads it will have watched my film first, as I describe and explore its processes. It articulates my motivations and intentions as a
filmmaker and provides background on my artistic methods and theories. My film’s personal and handmade aesthetic comes from a specific emotional place, and many layers of research went into its conceptualization.

In Agnès Varda’s *The Beaches of Agnès*, a cinematic memoir, the filmmaker says: “Memories are like flies swarming around me and I’m not sure I want to remember.”

Confronting the past requires a level of strength, perseverance, and introspection. Varda communicates the fine line one walks when creating a work of memoir. It is an uneasy feeling, but it is real and honest. I may not be sure I want to remember my life with my mother, because it is dark. But it is necessary for our relationship that I do.

I do not know how to tell the story of my mother and me without conveying the emotions attached to our relationship. I do not want to show our specific pains or the intricate details of our lives. I want that to remain private. Rather, I want to convey the tone of our relationship. It is the mood and tenor of *Here, Mom* that creates the film’s overall meaning and feeling. The film is sewn together piece-by-piece through sound, text, and image; it is within these layers where I express experience.
CHAPTER ONE
FOUNDATIONS AND CONCEPTUALIZATION

The Video Essay: Experimenting with the Form
Language, for me, is thought. And writing is how we think. But that’s the sticky part, that word – writing. What it means to write is changing before our eyes.
– John Bresland

The video essay combines the visual nature of film with the personal voice of the essay. It is formed through a process of layering the text with images and sound. The essay-film is an inquiry explored. The initial question may not be answered fully, but the exploration opens up the possibilities for different understandings about what is being asked or wondered upon. All of this is a process in writing, but not in the traditional way, and it requires an interdisciplinary approach and perspective.

In 1992, Phillip Lopate, an American film critic and essayist, likened the essay-film to a centaur. In his paper, “In Search of the Centaur: The Essay Film,” he explained the essay-film hybridity and indicated that the form must have the following qualities:

1. An essay-film must have words, in the form of a text, spoken, subtitled or intertitled.
2. The text must represent a single voice. It may be either that of the director or screenwriter, or if collaborative, then stitched together in such a way as to sound like a single perspective.
3. The text must represent the speaker’s attempt to work out some reasoned line of discourse or problem.
4. The text must impart more than information; it must have a strong, personal point of view.
5. The text’s language should be as eloquent, well written and interesting as possible. (19)

Lopate equates each quality in the essay-film to the literary and personal voice components of the essay. In terms of these principles, the video essay is not much different from the film essay. Both forms are in first-person. Both forms pin down thoughts and are inspired to work off of those thoughts. What separates the video essay from the film essay is its format. I did not create Here, Mom on celluloid. Instead, it was created with digital video and it was screened and presented digitally.
In *On the Origins of the Video Essay*, John Bresland offers an eloquent definition of this form:

We’re calling it the video essay. Because most of us experience the motion picture as a video, not film. Film is analog… Film requires a shutter to convey motion. That shutter…is what distinguishes film from video…from the way it’s consumed (on mobile devices, on planes, as shared links crossing the ether) is now being carried everywhere, the way books and magazines once were. And there’s a certain texture to video, a telltale combination of compression artifacts, blown-out white and noisy blacks that isn’t pretty. But it’s not ugly, either. It’s real. (It may even be, as Don DeLillo once described it, realer than real.) The video essay. Video from the Latin verb *vidēre* – *to see*. Essay in the Greek sense, *meaning to ask*. In the Japanese sense, *to quicken the heart*. In the French sense, *to try*. I can think of no better way to take on the problems of being alive right now than to write this way, with a pen in one hand and a lens in the other (3).

This form of writing and filmmaking evokes an image of a writer-filmmaker, someone who writes her own text (or borrows it) and goes out and finds and/or shoots footage to find images for it. The process is interactive, where one is engaging with the text and image, assembling while they go along. The writer-filmmaker creates text here and there, films here and there. The video essay form is layered, stimulating, superlative, and significant. I return to Phillip Lopate’s thoughts on the essay film and its cultural relevance: “Right now [in 1992], there is a hunger in film aesthetics and experimental film practice for the medium to jump free of its genre corral, and to reflect on the world in a more intellectually stimulating and responsible way,” (22). As I reflect as an artist exploring format and medium, that hunger continues, particularly within this project.

I chose to make *Here, Mom* in the form of a video essay, but I classify it as a *lyrical* video essay, and this is for several reasons. First, it conveys the emotions attached to my thoughts. I had a desire to create a work that transcended emotion and memoir. Thus, my film is like a lyric poem and is devoted to an image more than an idea, and more to mood, than to concept. Second, as I attempted to work out my particular inquiry, its lyrical quality provided me a way to deconstruct traditional film forms through its non-linear structure. Third, it evoked a handmade quality. Its hybridity was attractive to me, too, with its earnest and non-objective nature. I imagined it as a process of weaving between text, sound, and images. My undergraduate curiosity in screenwriting ignited when I learned about the video essay and its possibilities.
The objective of the lyrical video essay is to also to create a way for the artwork to be experienced, not simply thought about. Like many poems, layering images without a narrative order does this. This foundation was appealing to me, because I wanted to interact with my memories and the fragmentation of my past. I valued the lyrical video essay’s flexibility, its tonal base, and its non-linear structure. The form, perfect for my project, also added further self-reflection into the overall work.

My mother/daughter experience and my moments as my mother’s daughter are heavy and full. I was ready to reveal them. I wondered, “How do I show emotional tones visually?” With video essay, through its poetic elements, I found I was able to express what it is like to be in a relationship with my mother by allowing the camera and the editing process to become an extension of my body. To me, the greatest potential of the video essay form lies in its ability to convey meaning through image and sound, equally. My relationship with my mother, its representation as well as my self-reflexive exploration, thus becomes multi-dimensional on screen, just as it is in real-life. Though the video essay is not a rare form, it is a unique cinematic genre that lends itself perfectly to those who express themselves subjectively.

**Cinécriture: A Practice in Film-Writing**

The principle of free association of different ideas is what I use for a lot of my films. Even though I start out with a clear structure – in *Beaches [of Agnès]* (2008) it is the beaches…that the film follows in a relatively chronological order. But within structure I juxtapose new ideas associatively. These are mental twists. Oh I have to talk about this! No wait, back again. You could call it a mental zigzag or zapping.

– Agnès Varda

As I approached my project, I understood the definition of the video essay, but I didn’t know exactly how I was going to write my film until I found other artists who experimented with their camera, subjectivity, and the editing process. I connected to Jonas Mekas’ diarist form, Marie Menken’s somatic nature, Stan Brakhage’s “brain movies,” and Sadie Benning’s video statements and diaries. I watched and studied their works until I felt confident to explore my own cinematic voice. However, I found the film practices of French filmmaker Agnès Varda to be the most resourceful. I was attracted to Varda’s method of filmmaking she calls “cinécriture.” It speaks to both her production and communication style as a filmmaker. “I invented the word and now I use it to mean the filmmaker’s work. It puts the work of the scriptwriter who writes, but
does not film, and the director who does the mise-en-scene, back in their respective boxes. The two may be the same person, but there’s often lasting confusion,” Varda explains (Smith 14).

Cinécriture is an intuitive practice in film-writing. However, the process of cinécriture, inspired from an idea, feeling, or theme, should not be confused with the traditional form of screenwriting or scriptwriting. Instead, the film is handmade and sculpted. The project is composed and spun from choices a filmmaker makes when posed to decide on where she should start her film. Other decisions include: who and what to film, what to edit out, what sounds to use, and what locations matter the most. Cinécriture creates both fictional and nonfictional artwork. The practice provides the opportunity for the artist to explore her associative stream of consciousness.

Cinécriture is a process in writing that fundamentally develops the film’s narrative and visual structure and style. Collaboration may exist, but the filmmaker rarely removes herself from any part of the filmmaking process. Those who follow Varda’s method of filmmaking or who are inspired by her practice are “ciné-writers” or “film-writers.” Cinécriture paired well with the foundations of the video essay. I had found my match.

Disordered Subjectivity: A Film is a World of its Own

...Ordered subjectivity is a comfort, but it is also a burden, and we flirt endlessly with what may be outside its limits.

– Nick Mansfield

While I chose to work with the form of the video essay to write my memories and emotions on film, I also challenged myself to write my mood into my film as well. In order to create this on film I had to conceptualize how to convey a sense of disordered subjectivity. I refer to this process as “writing into” or “taking root” rather than “writing onto,” because I aimed to insert myself into my film rather than to display myself on film. By doing this, I remove the objectivity from my project. The process of “taking root” into my project involved research on autobiographical works by women writing about mental illness. Some of these works were Susanna Kaysen’s Girl, Interrupted, Leonora Carrington’s Down Below, and Unica Zürn’s Dark Spring. These memoirs alone were helpful at developing structurally a way to express memory in my writing. What I needed was a way to express it visually too.

The work that was most appealing to me conceptually was the autobiographical visual artwork by women artists of the Surrealist movement. Agnès Varda also expressed in interviews
how the Surrealist movement has influenced her work. The objective of Surrealism was, “of a total art, i.e. of a wide-ranging artistic attitude that cultivated all means of expression, from poetry to music, from drama to paintings, playing down specific techniques and languages in favor of a creativity that was linked entirely to the moods of the individual and that chose, on each occasion, the most suitable medium with which to work” (Gualdoni 7). One who claimed the label of Surrealist also adopted a certain state of mind that worked to express the actual functioning of thought. Surrealism outside of an artistic form was also a movement among those who lived radically apart from mainstream culture. As an artist, I take value in this approach, particularly as a film and video artist working against convention.

Surrealism invites ways for disordered subjectivity to make sense through the use of layered free association. An example of this is the reoccurring use of the self-portrait in surrealist works. The self-portrait became a tool to represent personal complexity:

In the work of women artists, the self-portrait became a telling metaphor for the woman artist’s attempt to resolve the Surrealist polarities of inner and outer reality. Male surrealists overcame the polarity by projecting inner reality, in the form of desire, onto an external being; women artists often turned to the self-portrait as a device for initiating the same dialogue between inner and outer reality (Chadwick 92).

The self-portrait appeared obviously in works by surrealists Frida Kahlo and Leonora Carrington. Kay Sage, however, constructed spaces and landscapes that were self-referential. Louise Bourgeois made sculpture inspired from people and events from her past. Female surrealist artists thematically delved into identity, and that is what sets them apart and made their work extraordinary. During the conceptualization process of my project, I looked directly to these forms of self-portraiture to determine the overall aesthetic of my artwork, as the video essay on many levels is a form of self-portraiture. Between my path of researching memoir-based writing and studying self-portraiture, I began to structurally develop my project.

I could have easily begun the narrative of my project within a linear structure. I could have started by telling the story of my mother objectively by starting from the beginning. However, that is not how I remember. My memories come to me in flashes or through moments of free association. My memories are layered and packed down. They are moody and emotional. When I remember one moment in my life, other memories appear. Sometimes I know beforehand what memory will come about. Sometimes I do not. Therefore, I embraced the idea of conveying a sense of a disordered subjectivity in my project. I imagined my memory in the form of a moving
collage, layered onto a timeline that did not necessarily have a beginning or an end. Instead, it flowed like a stream of consciousness. Disordered subjectivity as a form and conceptual approach to storytelling identified ways to display my thoughts, moods, and emotions on film. Getting to the root of a story or that of a person is not always clear-cut. To get it right, to show truth, non-linear storytelling felt like the best approach for me. It appeared to be the form I could use to express more without having to actually say too much.

**Feminist Footings: Putting Theory into Practice**

Write your self. Your body must be heard. Only then will the immense resources of the unconscious spring forth. Our naphtha will spread, throughout the world, without dollars – black or gold – non assessed values that will change the rules of the old game.

– Hélène Cixous

The video essay appeared a natural form for me to engage with, too, because it possesses a consciousness and production method that engages with components from feminist film theory. Feminist film theories examine film history, particularly women’s presence, role, and use in cinema. As feminists answered their own questions on problems found in film conventions, such as underlying issues in representation and spectatorship, ideas on how to challenge traditional film form were brought forth. It was thought that traditional narrative cinema (i.e. classic Hollywood films) created onscreen a false reality, and that these representations created and perpetuated patriarchal ideals of masculinity and femininity, ultimately supporting problematic mainstream ideas on gender. “Film was as much productive of as it was a product of ideology, and furthermore, that – in the same way Althusser theorized that the subject was a construct of material structures – so too was the spectator a constituted subject when watching film” (Hayward 115). Significant thoughts on these issues developed film practices that aimed to deconstruct and offer solutions to artists who desired alternative ways to engage with the medium of film. I identify as one of those artists.

I am a film/video artist who understands the issue and implications of gender representation in film’s history and views dominant cinema’s (narrative film) construction of women on screen as a symbolic object of fetishized desire. I see that she has been written into the framework and rarely written for. How do women get framed on screen? How do women’s stories and thoughts get conveyed on film? These are questions I have had for a long time. These questions form the
basis for how I interact with the medium of film, both as a filmmaker and a spectator. I was particularly conscious of these questions while conceptualizing *Here, Mom.*

It was important for me to start this project with a feminist perspective and write from a centralized and personal space. I formed theoretical and foundational links between the practice of essay writing, the lyrical poem, the video essay, and feminist film theory. These theoretical connections contributed to the conceptualization of my project, particularly the part of the project where I began to develop my subject and my ongoing artistic intentions and objectives. This process spurred questions and curiosities in me that explored how I could interact with the camera as well as with the subject of my project. I came to know from my research that I could use the camera in a subjective way rather than in an objective way. Figuring out how to visually do that became an ambition of this project. I relied on feminist film theories as well as feminist reading strategies to develop my framework.

Laura Mulvey’s work on the male gaze was approached repeatedly while conducting research for this project. Mulvey’s theories, applied to mainstream narrative film helped establish feminist film theory as a legitimate field of study. Her films, similar to her writings, interweave the position of women in relation to patriarchal myth, symbolic language, and male fantasy. Mulvey’s “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema” (1975) continues to be relevant when comparing and contrasting representations of women on film. Her article has been a positive influence on the study of psychoanalysis, broadening it in a way to provide insight into the patriarchal unconsciousness that has been pervasive in classic narrative film form. It focuses on a concept that theorizes how the viewers of narrative cinema see through the eyes of the male gaze, a phenomenon first and best exemplified by old Hollywood films of the 1930s, 40s, and 50s. By utilizing Sigmund Freud’s idea of *Scopophilia,* the pleasure in looking at a person as an erotic object, as a crucial part of traditional filmic pleasure, Mulvey is able to articulate how Woman on screen traditionally has been a constructed, passive, and objectified subject, and is only seen in the context of her male protagonist counterpart. The camera’s eye in this context has been constructed to look and watch her.

Even to this day, as we have come to know it, the mainstream narrative film’s language and structure has been defined, used, and valued based upon phallocentric terms and fantasies. Mulvey explains that the conventions of mainstream film portray, “a hermetically sealed world which unwinds magically, indifferent to the presence of the audience, producing for them a sense
of separation and playing on their voyeuristic fantasy” (806). She states that the structure of classic narrative film creates a voyeuristic fantasy that subsequently forms an implicit identification process in the viewer, which perpetuates Woman seen as an object. This filmic language, normative and reducing, has motivated feminists to show that there is something else to desire; that there are other kinds of films to be made which can be both pleasurable and engaging without sinking women into dichotomous and shallow positions. Criticisms of “Visual Pleasure” often comment on Mulvey’s lack of insight into spectatorship.¹ I find, though, that she ends her analysis by clearly advising ways in which women can interact and challenge film, all in order ultimately to enjoy film. “The first blow against monolithic accumulation of traditional film conventions (already taken by radical film-makers),” she states, “is to free the look of the camera into its materiality in time and space and the look of the audience into dialectics, passionate detachment” (816). A film thus communicates off of a triangle: the film itself, the filmmaker, and the film viewer, and all should be engaging with one another.

Mulvey’s analysis is structured both throughout the act of looking back and seeing film with open eyes. I quote Adrienne Rich, as she would call this kind of practice “writing as re-vision”:

Re-vision – the act of looking back, seeing with fresh eyes, of entering an old text from a new critical direction – is for us more than a chapter in cultural history: it is an act of survival. Until we can understand the assumptions in which we are drenched we cannot know ourselves. And this drive to self-knowledge, for woman, is more than a search for identity: it is part of her refusal to the self-destructiveness of male-dominated society. A radical critique of literature, feminist in its impulse, would take the work first of all as a clue to how we live, how we have been living, how we have been led to imagine ourselves, how our language has trapped as well as liberated us; and how we can begin to see – and therefore live - afresh (Rich 18).

Mulvey’s legacy, her insights into mainstream film’s problematic gaze, is a motivator and perspective that cannot be lost, because even if some feminist filmmakers are breaking ground, for example Miranda July, they continue to remain on the margins. A revision and restructuring of narrative film continues to be needed as feminists continue to struggle to locate value amongst mainstream’s uniformed narrative film. Where does one start to make change?

“Free the look of the camera,” Laura Mulvey suggested in, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema.” “How does one do that?” I wondered. I found an answer in Hélène Cixous’s, “The

¹ Mulvey’s article from 2004, “Looking at the Past from the Present: Rethinking Feminist Film Theory of the 1970s,” is a follow-up essay where she personally responds to how she hadn’t responded appropriately to women’s pleasure when watching classic narrative cinema.
Laugh of the Medusa.” This article calls women to writing, as Cixous identifies that women have historically been limited to sexual objects for men. Subsequently, women have been prevented from expressing themselves and their sexuality. What Cixous argues is for women to “establish a point of view (a site of difference) from which phallogocentric concepts and controls can be seen through and taken apart, not only in theory but also in practice” (Jones 248).

“Woman must write herself into the text – as into the world and into history – by her own movement,” Cixous writes (875). Her proposal asks that women write through a reconnection to their lived female body. By doing so, Cixous anticipates the emergence of a feminine mode of writing that emphasizes the importance of subject-positions. It is a process of reclamation and a method that rejects boundaries. It provides an alternative to the masculine logocentric mode of writing, focused on polarization, linearity, and hierarchies. It is a mode that changes how to write our subjects as well as how to write subjectively.

When I used this method, it shaped the world of my project. For example, sections of my film are layered with montages of home video footage. I formed a collage of my mother; these images of her display alongside a melancholy and pensive soundtrack. I attempted to convey a particular personal resonance within these segments of my film. I did not write myself, but instead wrote from my self. I imprinted myself into my film in a way that was subjective without necessarily saying specifically “I” or “me.” I find I communicate and convey effectively the tone and intention of my project in the moments where I don’t say anything. Instead, I depend on the sound and images to speak. The result of this is an impression of my emotions and thoughts laid out visually on film. I think of these spaces in my film as a “politics of location,” a term coined by Adrienne Rich. “To write ‘my body’ plunges me into lived experience, particularity: I see scars, disfigurements, discolorations, damages, losses, as well as what pleases me” (449). This method towards writing is both liberating and challenging. It is an unhinging and powerful creative approach.

Cixous, as well as Rich, approaches women writing through the body as a form of writing from the self. This can be interpreted as limiting. Since women have historically been defined by their bodies, asking women to return to their bodies and to write from their bodies can be read as essentialist. The argument is that Cixous asks women to begin where they have been located, within their feminine bodies. However, Cixous (as well as Rich) invites women to use language creatively and differently when writing from the self, as they envisioned this approach as
unpredictable and limitless. By seeing the female body as boundaryless, Cixous argues, “there is no general woman, no one typical woman” (876). What springs forth are insights that open up possibilities for expression and thus possibilities for women to be, see, and know in ways that have been historically repressed from their being. When applying this framework to my work as a filmmaker, my goal has been to change how the camera looks. When I write from my body with my camera I am transforming the way it sees. My camera’s eye becomes composed of a voice rather than solely a gaze.

**Art is the State of Encounter**

Unlike most art, film is not individual privatized experience (neither in production nor showing) but rather a group activity that crosses boundaries – not ‘just’ culture or ‘just’ entertainment, or ‘just’ daily life. Film has a potential for synthesis (between art, life, politics, sex, etc.) that the other arts rarely approach.

– B. Ruby Rich

I conceptualized the subject of my project by tapping into all of the resources and research before me. I laid it all out and asked myself: what is important to me as an artist? I looked to the closest thing to my heart. At first, I thought it was California and my longing to return home. As I began to explore those feelings, my life with my mother was revealed. I love my mother in all of her complexity. I knew that my film had to be about my mother and our relationship. The landscapes of California and Minnesota developed as the backdrop to our story, as I envisioned waves and snow as visuals to describe metaphorically the conditional and emotional tones of our relationship.

Realizing that my project was going to involve telling the story of my mother raised questions about how I could create a story around her without objectifying her, stereotyping her, or exaggerating her. Thus, I worked to conceptualize a film that understood film’s social components. I was intrigued with film’s ability to encounter both subjectivity and collaboration. Within this project I was not interested in the divisions of labor that filmmaking has been known for. I did not want to collaborate on making a film by developing a crew. Instead, I was interested in ways collaboration created meaning or images. I wanted to shape my film with someone. So, I asked my mother to collaborate with me on the project. She said, “Yes.” As an ethical choice, I decided it would be best practice to conjure our history and present realities together.
Since I was going to rely on making meaning and creating film footage by using a collaborator, I looked to Relational Aesthetics, an art theory on form, to help develop my understanding of “inter-subjectivity.” This identified for me a way I could interact with the idea of how the human is a social being, when approaching both my form of filmmaking, the video essay, and my desire to make a contextual self-portrait. I think this paired well with the foundations of my project, because while I am interested in producing meaning while remaining in the space of the first person, I am also interested in relational art, “an art taking as its theoretical horizon the realm of human interactions and its social context, rather than an assertion of an independent and private symbolic space” (14). In other words, I desired not to necessarily act as the center of my project, particularly because this project was not only about me. I instead acted as my project’s catalyst. Once I began to make this connection, I visualized a bridge between Relational Aesthetics and the video essay form. I could see that the video essay could work well in collaboration, especially in pairs, and still express from my perspective. This excited me because I do not see making and viewing film as a solitary practice, even if I am the only one toiling away at creating the final version of a film. There is always the audience, there is always the subject, there is always the filmmaker, and there is always the camera.

Using the theoretical approach and perspective of Relational Aesthetics created a deeper element to my project, which was confirmed as I began production for Here, Mom. It also reinforced my goals to alter the way the camera has been used to structure traditional narrative cinema. Relational Aesthetics provided ways to play with the way the camera looked. For example, when I used my camera to make footage, I used it to express myself. I filmed ocean waves, palm trees, and my feet while walking along a sandy beach. Instead, my mom talked to the camera. She investigated the camera. She looked into its eye while she was recording and faced the camera head on. I used a combination of this footage in the film, because I wanted to show the various ways we interacted with the same tools. In either scenario, we were taking control of the way the camera looked as well as how we related to its presence. We were truly writing from personal and direct places. It is both this experience of making art together and the actual product I created, a project that I couldn’t have completed without my mother, which represents its social context and feminist elements. As I merged and edited the images together, meaning was developed collectively.
Fig. 1. Reyes, Jes. Here, Mom. 2014. Video Still.

Fig. 2. Reyes, Jes. Here, Mom. 2014. Video Still.
Fig. 3. Reyes, Jes. *Here, Mom.* 2014. Video Still.

Fig. 4. Reyes, Jes. *Here, Mom.* 2014. Video Still.
CHAPTER TWO
PRODUCTION AND POST-PRODUCTION

Making *Here, Mom* consisted of three components. First, I started the project by conducting three intentional conversations with my mother. I talked to her about her life from childhood to the present. During these conversations, we also candidly talked about our relationship. Second, I returned to places from my past such as Southern California, to gather footage for the film and explore my memories. I looked at both my one-on-one with my mother and my travel as personal research and study required to fulfill the memoir-related goals regarding this project. The third part of making *Here, Mom* was the editing process.

As I embarked on my project, I developed a budget for *Here, Mom*, determined its location shooting, and decided on how I would film it. I personally financed the project and bought outright my cameras, memory cards, and editing software. I decided that I did not want to borrow or rent my filming equipment, because I wanted to have cameras after production that I would care for and use again. I bought two Canon digital cameras capable of recording my film and taking me into other projects after graduate school. The first camera was the Canon Vixia HF M301, a flash memory camcorder; the other was the Canon T3i, a DSLR camera, with which I could shoot both film and photographs. Both cameras were perfect for this small-scale project. They were both intuitive and compact. I weighed out the pros and cons of owning these cameras. A negative was that equipment was relatively costly. A large portion of the budget for this project went directly to my filming equipment. I felt it was an investment, though, as the pros to owning your equipment are having production tools that are readily accessible. I also learned in detail how to care for my cameras. Owning my cameras also allowed me to spend time experimenting and getting familiar with the camera’s technology. Over time, I developed a personal connection to my cameras, and as I grew to know my cameras better, the more natural it was for me to work with my cameras as an extension of my body. In the end, I concluded that it was an important investment.

Once I secured my cameras and other necessary tools, I started meeting with my mom. On May 25, 2013, I set up my cameras, pressed record, and began talking with her. Here, I was recording conversations that would inform the content of the film, but not producing images for the film itself. I also wanted to collect resources that I could refer back to when I began writing
and editing the film. These conversations were the initial phases into exploring my past. I also kept a film diary during this stage of my project so I could keep track of my ideas and reflect upon my experiences of meeting with my mother. These intentional conversations at times were difficult. They were also thought-provoking. Here is an example of a journal entry:

On Sunday, June 23, I visited with my mom. I think this may have been the most personal conversation for me, because we talked in great lengths about time in California, when I was becoming my own person…or at least attempting to. I had some ups and downs growing up, as did my mom. Even as a parent though it did not seem like my mom’s ups and downs gave way for at least one minute, and she was often moving from one thing to another, stress after stress, trauma after trauma. And this impacted me, a great deal, because while my mom was on a roller coaster, her health was severely mismanaged, causing harm to her body and mind. I was the closest person to her, she says. Thus, I received the brunt of her moods.

This brings me to how my mom has experienced memory loss. From a couple of strokes to poorly managed diabetes, how she remembers is not the same as it once was. It seems like she couldn’t hold back the tears when we touched upon some conversation regarding my childhood. She couldn’t recall an experience that we both shared that I thought was crucial to our relationship and that has haunted me to this day. Because she couldn’t remember, and although medical complications have impacted her cognitive functioning, I was convinced yet again that memory is subjective. A moment that is significant to one person could be a passing thought to another; or completely nothing; or unfortunately lost to time. As for now, having these talks with my mom is on hold until August. I am working on finishing up my shooting schedule.

As I reflect on the above entry now, I see this stage of the project as more than just making a film. What I was creating with my mother was an experience. Remembering with her, regardless of whether each of us remembered it differently, was becoming a collective activity, which ultimately was shaping and preparing me for the second stage of production.

On July 12, 2013, I traveled to Southern California for two weeks. I returned to what I refer to as my homeland. My time in California was a form of revisiting. It was an immersive experience that produced various moving images for Here, Mom. What I particularly enjoyed was capturing footage of my old neighborhoods. I attached a camera to the windshield of my rental car so that I could eventually match footage to voiceover. I begin my film with one of
these drives. Just as the scene fades, I am turning onto a street that my mother used to live on. It was important that I could show visually what this neighborhood looked like, especially as it appeared, particularly because of the intention of my project. It metaphorically represented for me my path in reflection, as it was my trip back to Southern California during the production of *Here, Mom* that had the most impact on the film’s overall handmade and personal quality. I had no crew during this time. It was just my camera and I. It is this work that helped me explore my past in ways that inspired my emotive representations on screen. As I physically returned to the places of my childhood, specific memories were generated. Though what I remembered and how I represented it onscreen was fragmented, my emotions tied to these places were consistent.

While my childhood is tied to Southern California, my mother lived and grew up in North St. Paul, a suburb with a small-town vibe, just twenty minutes from St. Paul, Minnesota. On a Sunday, when most shops are closed, I found myself walking along 7th Avenue, North St. Paul’s downtown area. I wasn’t there to shop. I was there to imagine my mom walking along this street in the 1970s, being young and free, as she expressed to me how 7th Avenue was a significant place of her past. There was a time when I used to walk down this street, too, somewhere between the ages of two and five. But my time on 7th Avenue is nothing compared to my mother’s experience. This is where she used to socialize, buy her liquor, meet family, and eat dinner. It was the street where she met my biological father. Apparently, my grandfather owned one of the many bars along this avenue. I felt transported in time while I walked down 7th Avenue. I felt drawn in. I felt our memories intertwine. I thought about her recollections, but I also sought to experience my own process of recollection. I remembered going to a parade on 7th Avenue. Everything else that I tried to remember was a blur. The street felt familiar, but I couldn’t rely on my personal memories as a reference. Instead, I just took in the space to physically place myself within my mother’s memories.

After I returned from California, I began the writing stages of my film. I digitally transferred home movies and began writing my voiceover. I collected family photographs. Before I left for California, I loaned a Canon camcorder to my mother. It was important to have my mother film her own footage for the project. I wanted her to be an active subject in my film. I didn’t want to talk about her in my film; I wanted to talk to her. I wanted her to talk to the camera as if it was I; I wanted her to explore the camera. I wanted the process to be reciprocal. Most of what my mom filmed on her own is in *Here, Mom*. She made valuable footage that I had
nothing to do with. She too found herself intentionally alone with the camera in ways similar to mine. As I explored this footage during the editing process, after returning from California, I began to write the poetic text of my essay. I found myself speaking directly to my mom in my writing. As I reworked my essay, a love letter to my mother emerged. I attribute this to her involvement in this project. Her support went a long way.

Similarly to writing the text to my film, the editing of *Here, Mom* went through various stages and versions. I would edit segments together and separately and then merge them into a timeline, matching these segments to my voiceover. When I finally had it arranged, it ran 11 minutes and 11 seconds. The numerology of this caught me off guard. I recalled an expression that I often say: “It’s 11:11. Make a wish.” It may sound hokey, but I felt I landed on a coincidence in serendipity that I couldn’t deny. I re-engaged my mother at this stage by having her watch the film. It was difficult for my mother to not immediately start crying when the film began. She watched it all the way through. She approved the film; she felt I accurately depicted our relationship. This was my final measure. *Here, Mom* was ready for exhibition.
Fig. 5. Reyes, Jes. *Here, Mom.* 2014. Video Still.

Fig. 6. Reyes, Jes. *Here, Mom.* 2014. Video Still.
CHAPTER THREE
EXHIBITION

The intention of this project was to prepare myself professionally as a filmmaker and video artist. I have been successful at learning the specific skills of filmmaking, but I also accomplished an additional goal with this project. I became a film festival curator.

A requirement of the MLS program was that I show my final creative project publicly. I was immediately attracted to this condition. Because I am a self-motivated and visionary person, I was excited at both the challenge of this obligation, as well as its prospects. I envisioned that my film could be displayed either as an installation project or as part of a larger festival of film and video works. I developed and conceptualized plans for how each method could be accomplished and which method could be best.

My project could be installed in two different ways. First, I could see my film screen on a vintage television placed in an environment replicating a corner of a 1980s living room. In front of the television would sit a recliner and a side table. On that table would sit a lamp, headphones, and remote control. On the walls of this living room would be framed photos of my family. Due to the film’s intimate and diarist nature, one viewer at a time would watch the film. Instead of the viewer’s walking in on the middle of the film, they would press play to watch the film as a whole. I also envisioned an installation where the project would play within a three-or-four channel video installation. My project would show in sections on these channels. This setting would create, visually, the way memories appear to us fragmented, and how the past presents within present time. And while I liked the way this setting would reproduce visually the way memories appear, I found that in this scenario I would lose the foundation of my project’s video essay format. The film would have had to be re-edited into an altogether different project, which I did not want to do.

My other idea was to develop an experimental media arts film festival, a platform on which to present this film. This way, I could exhibit Here, Mom in its video essay format while also creating a program where the film could fit within a line-up of other experimental media. Fortunately, while I was working on my film I was also completing a curatorial internship with Altered Esthetics (Ae), a local arts organization and gallery of the Twin Cities area. I had been
co-curating *Ae Without Walls*, a pop-up exhibition tour that traveled the Twin Cities. The flexibility and creative demand of this internship provided me with the opportunity to move forward and organize a film festival. The 1st Ae Art House Film Festival was born, and I found a home for my short film *Here, Mom*.

The Ae Art House Film Festival consisted of a two-hour screening of 17 films and videos. While the majority of the artists were local, we also received works from national, as well as international, artists. Fifty percent of the artists exhibited were women. I learned the ins and outs of planning, curating, and executing a small-scale independent films arts festival. I also learned about partnering with other cultural nonprofits. The Southern Theater, located on the West Bank, was eager to work with us and volunteered their space to us. National Camera Exchange loaned a projector for the event. This was helpful, as the film festival had no budget. Artists had no submission or exhibition fees. There was no admission charge for the festival and it was largely marketed to artists of the festival, with some flyer promotions and a write-up in Vita.mn, a local guide to the arts and entertainment in the Twin Cities. Enthusiasm over the event brought in over one hundred attendees. After the success of the event, Altered Esthetics invited me to return for a 2nd year to curate the Ae Art House Film Festival as an ongoing annual event. The Southern Theater will partner again to ensure that the film festival has a home. Through this curatorial project, I both satisfied the requirements of my final creative project, and created a lasting partnership with two local arts and cultural institutions.

Executing a film festival connected me to an audience, other film and video artists, and established and strengthened my skills in exhibition-planning for film and video-related events. It was important that I add to the local film culture and community, because I don’t see myself as a one-time curator. I did not develop the Ae Art House Film Festival for the sole purpose of presenting to my peers. I am not only an emerging artist; I am also an emerging contemporary art curator, and organizing a film program merged my career paths. I prepared and organized the festival so that I could establish myself as an artist-curatorial. Being an artist-curatorial means that I function in a dual role, where I am taking on a more critical and pedagogical function beyond my artistic intentions. This hyphenated role strengthens and expands my voice as a filmmaker within film culture, but also within contemporary art. This is one of the reasons I minored in museum studies, with focuses in contemporary art and audience engagement. As an artist-curatorial, I am working to create and advocate culture, but also sustain it.
CHAPTER FOUR
INSIGHTS FROM AN EMERGING FILM AND VIDEO ARTIST

As an emerging artist, staying true to my vision and voice is important to me. Much of my graduate school education has reshaped what I previously had been taught about filmmaking. I have been making filmmaking work for me so that I can produce and create film and video works that truly express my voice. Graduate school helped to correct the negative experience of my previous education. As an undergraduate in film school, I had felt as if I were in finishing school that prepared me to work within mainstream cinema. Rather than being inspired to make films, I felt increasingly fearful about the process. This surprised me, because I had gone to film school to be inspired and learn artistic methods and forms.

I wanted to be a film artist. I wanted to be free with my camera. I wanted to be able to use film as a medium to explore ideas. However, I was taught how to work with the hands and minds of others who follow the logic of classic narrative cinema. This type of instruction perpetuated a connection between phallocentric logic of linear storytelling and market-based production values. I grew more afraid to experiment during this time. I lost most of the curiosity and creativity that led me to both love films, and want to make films. What if no one valued the film I was writing? Would this film make me go bankrupt if I were to make it myself? How could I make a film if I could not even pay my own rent? These anxious questions would go on and on. I became more obsessed with what was stopping me from making a film and less aware of the resources already available to me that could help me make a film. The latter seemed the most important, and ironically, were always harder to grasp. Because of this, I often thought about whether I had chosen an art form that was right for me. How can someone who loves film so much, who wants to make a film so much, be afraid of making film? The answer to this question took me many years to figure out. I began to understand that it was not exactly fear that was stopping me from making film; it was dislike and discomfort with the ways in which I had been told to make film.

My path in graduate school has reconfigured what I know about the filmmaking process and how I can make it work for me, as all of us as writers and artists must always find our way. Graduate school for me has been a process of unlearning mainstream filmmaking. I have been learning a new sensibility towards film, an outlook that I have desired for a long time. I have
built a love and appreciation for digital video. My take-away from this realization is not to unlearn the importance of film as an art medium, but to unlearn perceptions of what a film should be. Instead, I approach film as what it could be. As a film and video artist, that is a freeing notion.

In addition to this, my graduate education brought me closer to film editing. I had no idea that I would like the process of editing, mostly because editing a film is procedural and clunky. It is also time-consuming. I had this preconceived idea that I would lose myself and my voice during the editing process, as editing a film finds someone sitting at a computer for hours, importing and arranging footage into a timeline. From an observer’s point of view, it can appear impersonal and technical. It requires a great deal of concentration and knowledge of the editing software. But what it also requires is a commitment to the project. What I came to realize and experience while in this role is that the editor is also the author. She is a hybrid, both the filmmaker and writer of the project. The insertion of images and where to place them is similar to the structure and method of writing. However, the author of the video essay or experimental media is creating a moving collage. Writing in this form is not print-based; it comprises itself in images and sounds. And within those layers of image and sound, the narrative meditates on something important to the author. In this context, as a film and video artist I imagine myself standing alone with a backdrop of my images playing behind me. In one hand is my camera. In the other is my computer. I can’t have one without the other, and that includes me. By allowing the camera and the editing process to become an extension of my body and of my mind, I awoke the poet and memoirist in me.

Before I made *Here, Mom* I made two other short films: *Yellow House* and *1945*. I simultaneously worked on a collaborative project, called *A Mind of Winter*, also a video essay, with poet Katie Rensch, an MFA candidate at the University of Minnesota. All films were used to explore collage form, the handmade, personal, and collaborative aesthetic and philosophy of my work, and learn the process of exhibiting my work. This course of action established my portfolio as well as prepared me when I began the writing and editing of *Here, Mom. Yellow House* premiered as part of Artists in Storefronts 5: Cineteca (December 2013). The video played silently for 24 hours, along with other artists’ film and video works, in a storefront window. *A Mind of Winter* was recently selected to take part in the MNTV 2014-2015 season. A partnership between Twin Cities Public Television (TPT), the Jerome Foundation, Independent Film
Program Minnesota (IFP MN), and the Walker Art Center, MNTV selects the best of Minnesota-made film and video and then exhibits the works annually on TPT, where the films eventually screen permanently online on TPT’s website, and subsequently are installed for a duration of time at the Walker Art Center.

I owe a lot to my work with the project by referring to my ongoing artistic principles and intentions. At the beginning of this paper I shared a manifesto I had written. I wrote this manifesto for various reasons. One of these reasons is to ensure that I have a moral statement to refer back to, if for some reason I get off track or lose artistic focus. These statements, grounding and assertive, work to remind me what my motives are as a film and video artist. I wasn’t always sure my intentions as an artist were going to work. I showed myself though, through my work on Here, Mom as well Yellow House and A Mind of Winter, that my work matters and appeals to others too. That alone is reassuring and motivates me to create new work.

I will continue to find a home for 1945, but as for now I am content with where my graduate education has taken me. At one time, I felt Here, Mom was a work-in-progress, but now, in the form in which it exists, I wouldn’t change anything about it. I may work towards exhibiting it as an installation, but that is the only thing I would do differently with my project. Needless to say, I am ready for new things. I am motivated to continue expanding my work and portfolio, both as an emerging film and video artist as well as a contemporary art curator.
CONCLUSION

There are things that are not sayable. That’s why we have art.
– Leonora Carrington

It has been more than two years since I first sat down with my mother to talk about her life. She is in a different place now, as her health has grown worse. As I write this, she is in a nursing home, terminally ill, and receiving hospice services. Currently, we are going through a trying time. As I reflect on this project, while in the current stage of our relationship, I remain awed by the experience of making this film with her. I am reminded of a line from my film where I speak to her; “But here, mom, you are here with me, even as you step away.” As hard as these times are, these explorations between the past and the present have brought my mother and me closer. She will always be with me.

I am thankful and proud of this short pensive film that runs 11 minutes and 11 seconds. Film’s collage-like art form provided me ways to explore emotive qualities and my fragmented memories. I believe that is why the medium of film was perfect for this project. Because I used the video essay format, techniques taken from writing from the body, and followed the film practice of cinécriture, all of the rolling emotions tied to my relationship with my mother became less difficult to talk about. I have found a language that I can speak in that can express things that are not always sayable for me, yet were critical to my voice as a person and artist. These methods offered me a way to explore my ideas, thoughts that have been difficult to explicate only in words, but were important to express. The love letter I created for my mom was a journey. Every step has led me here, to this place where I can look back to reflect on this experience as well as to identify ways this project has prepared me for my professional desires as a film and video artist.

With this project, I started off with an idea that ultimately turned into a passion. It was an engaging act inspired out of a dream. Within all of my repetitive mouse clicks and time spent rendering footage, I created Here, Mom, a labor of love, and a project of great interdisciplinarity and intimacy.
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