

THESIS: The Program by Ryan Zweber

Artist bio

Ryan is a creator of visual culture. While their work is primarily sculpture, performance, and installation, Ryan will make with anything they can get their hands on. As an individual Ryan values community and integrity leading to an artistic practice that exposes and comments on trauma, safety, and interpersonal connections surrounding the human body.

Thesis abstract

Here I break code silence on the troubled teen industry by creating art as my testimony of my kidnapping, enslavement, and brainwashing in a cult based boarding school to bring awareness and further the obliteration of the program* through my loudest voice: My Creations. Through making these sculptures I grieve. Through sharing with you I begin to radically accept this is my truth, my reality, my trauma. In this exhibit you see two full sized bodies, chainmail, a gravel pit, two miniature figures, written daily accounts from inside the program, clothing, and photos, and can hear audio.

Content Disclosure:

In this exhibit and the story of it, I explore my deepest traumas. I cannot presume how this may simulate your body's response in relation to your traumas. I can however be sure that what you will feel is valid. We are approaching conversation about every imaginable form of abuse against children under the hands of the Troubled Teen Industry. Please take care of your needs first before considering my needs.

Thesis Proposal SP2020

While my work is primarily sculpture, performance, and installation, I will make with just about anything I can get my hands on! As an individual I value community and integrity leading to an artistic practice that exposes and comments on trauma, safety, and interpersonal connections surrounding my human body.

It is important to me to hint at the extensive processes for creating as a form of meditation or therapy. Sculpturally this is done by capturing all of the months leading up, all of the energy I put into each piece, scanning and rendering another my body, cutting and stacking every layer, meticulously surrounding each layer with a ceramic coil, glaze formulating crystals to grow on the inside, the sound of it shattering on the warehouse floor echoes through its presence.

When Performing, my meditation can also come through throwing more than my weight in jello into a bathtub, cup by cup for hours, letting it live, grow, perform, thrown into the street, thrown at your friends. Shouting repeatedly in a crowd "there are some things I need you to know!" Tell me something I need to know and I'll feed you a bite of my human jello mold.

In performance, influence is drawn from Yoko Ono's structure of participatory deconstruction in Cut Piece, where the audience exponentially cut her clothes off as she sat on stage. I pull from her rebellion in Bed In. Poise as she refuted her patronizers. Unswayed by the disapproval of others.

Thematically I relate to Rebecca Horn and her body modification wearable sculptures as rhetoric for isolation and illness. This can be seen in her pieces such as Overflowing Blood Machine and White Body Fan. We both use medical diagrams and personal archives of the human body's natural limitations to inform our practices.

For my thesis I am proposing to create a body of work as a testimony of my kidnapping, enslavement, and brainwashing in a cult based boarding school. Trigger warning, I have begun. there are some terms to note throughout that will be marked with an asterisk* and defined on the last page.

I suppose you could say my line of inquiry began in January of 2014 when I was kidnapped. Stolen from the living room of my childhood home by three people posed as police officers and their large dog, smuggled into a dark blue Subaru SUV and across 3 state lines. Or you could say my inquiry began almost two years later when I began my escape. The in-between years filled with every imaginable form of abuse and process*.

I don't remember when it got bad. I don't remember if it was ever not bad. I have been brainwashed too far to remember much of anything pre-program*. I remember days as numbers, as pages I was forced to write. As green or grey.

Much of my research is based in personal accounts, shared memories, and private files. I have gathered and analyzed my hoard of program* memorabilia: daily accounts in thousands of journal pages, my uniform, mail, emails, photos, coping box. I have been in contact with several online support groups for program* survivors.

Furthering my inquiry is video documentation from the Montana State Legislature of some of my close allies from program* publicly testifying against the program* that stole us, sold us, betrayed us. Articles published in Missoula Montana's newspaper and lawsuits filed against WWASP* also aid in my research. Documents of testimonies from fellow survivors, friends, family members of current and past victims, and allies of deceased program* kids were shared with me privately. Inquiring furthermore when video testimonies with more familiar faces were released publicly.

I supposed then, realizing the eradication of my youth went public, that it was time I began addressing this amongst my family and close friends. After years of being put on silence* and further hushed by guilt, shame, and other people, I refuse to be silenced ever again. So here I am rereading all of my journals, sorting every piece of anything from that time of my life, organizing data, finding myself, and finding ways to share it with you.

I will be focusing primarily on my time as a level 1 on black cloud, recreating the space where I spent months in solitary confinement, inside the already isolating experience of program. The more you want to know, the more you will have to work for as you move through my space. I will be articulating first hand experience through researching and archiving years of my life. Through collective memories and recontextualizing emotional adaptations I will validate trauma.

I will be using 3D body scanning technologies to render accurate iterations of myself. The clones will be 3D printed, laser cut by layer, meditatively stacked, surrounded. These figures will vary in size and body position as they move through the installation space.

The space will come together with placement interaction and ceramic chain. I intend to make two large scale, potentially life sized, clones of my body. One may be lying on the floor with their teddy bear in an eerie black cloud* hallway. The other figure

will be pulling ceramic woven chains over their back and through the space. Some small clones, 3D printed action figures, will be climbing up a small scale gravel pit.

The physicality of my collective will be installed as evidence atop the gravel pit, in shrine-like cases, access limited, adjacent to the sculptures. This informs the viewer through defining vocabulary used, grounding the experience in time, space, and relation. After reaching the dead end where my archive is installed, the viewers must turn around and walk back through my sculptures, redefining context.

I have created a safe space to explore and evoke the necessary evils to channel into my body of work. I have arranged and gathered resources and equipment needed to build my intended sculptures i.e. laser cutters, 3D scanners, kilns, etc.

By this point hundreds of people are speaking out across various platforms with #breakingcodesilence and #troubledteenindustry. I propose a body of work that will be a testimony of my kidnapping, enslavement, and brainwashing in a cult based boarding school to bring awareness and further the obliteration of the program* through my loudest voice: My Creations.

Thesis Defense FA2020

Hello

I am Ryan Zweber

Welcome to my thesis or as its better known my shit show, or the official title: The Program.

I think it's fair to say I've struggled a lot with figuring out how to talk about this. Not just in relation to this work but my topic in general. How to casually address, to people I don't know, my life's complex trauma. To expose my deepest fears. To tell you in a way that you will understand and care about what has happened to me.

Before I begin I want to reiterate the content disclosure on the door as many of you are joining us remotely. In this exhibit and the story of it, I explore my deepest traumas. I cannot presume how this may simulate your body's response in relation to your traumas. I can however be sure that what you will feel is valid. We are approaching conversation about every imaginable form of abuse against children under the hands of the Troubled Teen Industry. Please take care of your needs first before considering my needs.

What I need from you now is to listen. To acknowledge my truth. Please know that I am coming to you from a place of anger, hurt, and weakness just as much as I am coming to you from a place of love, embrace of myself, and strength.

I need you to not allow this information to change who I am to you, but give you an understanding of what I bring with me.

Nothing scares me more than how I've become. Not who I've become, but how I got here.

In January of 2014 I was kidnapped. I was 16. Stolen from the living room of my childhood home by three people posed as police officers and their large dog. They took my shoes, my bag, my phone, everything. Then smuggled me into the very back seat of a dark blue Subaru SUV and across 4 state lines.

After making many disorienting u-turns they dropped me off at this cabin in the woods to stay “just for the night” and they'd be back in the morning.

This place I would come to know as the program. A legal, for profit, child trafficking and enslavement business, under the farce of therapeutic behavior modification, and lacking regulation under the guise of religious practice.

When the transporters, or kidnapers, brought me inside I was introduced to someone they called my big sister and taken to a bunk room full of other children. At promptly 6am the next morning I was physically dragged out of that bunk. They made me take off all my clothes, shower, and have my body inspected by a staff member.

Over the next few weeks I was ordered to sign my rights away, force-fed foods against my dietary restrictions, denied any and all contact with the outside world including my family. They ripped out my belly ring. Not took out, ripped out.

So scared of where I was, I hoped my kidnapers would come back for me like they said.

I used to write letters to someone back home every single day for the first six month. I tried to send them from church, the library, on long silent marches past the post office. I had two bulging full manilla envelopes full.

Then I realized no one was coming for me. No one was looking for me.

Around 10 months into my kidnapping, I was convinced it was my fault.

I spent a lot of time fantasizing death.

Within a year I had fully denounced all people other than my abusers. I wrote in my mandatory journal on day 350 titled Friends are fiction “The only relationships I will have are with trained professionals in the art of fucked up kids, the ones who have been required to know me, the only friend i've ever had, the creator of all shit that is.

It was then that I was put on black cloud. Where the program confined me in isolation for nearly two months.

It was there that I created new personas in my journals, each having their own handwriting, some recurring. I didn't want the real me to be me right then.

Black cloud is the time I have chosen to focus on depicting for my thesis show, recreating the space where I spent months in solitary confinement, inside the already isolating experience of program. This is my testimony of my kidnapping, enslavement, and brainwashing in a cult based boarding school as a child. The abuse was so normal to me. I begin believing and enforcing the program's beliefs.

There are some things I need you to know about the program in order to understand the work:

Black cloud* fullest form of isolation. No contact or interaction, small corridor, often left unfed, in a hallway, tent, locked room, must be on silence at all times

On silence* being forced to be completely silent for extended periods of time, including sounds of coughing and crying. From this term comes the breaking code silence movement you may have seen on instagram or in the paris hilton movie.

(The) Program* a hidden institution and its belongings, for-profit, mostly unregistered

Process* daily cult exercises framed as therapy to further the program's agenda, often in groups, violent, and intentionally demeaning, using many verified tactics of brainwashing and mind control

Levels*

1 resistant to program

2 open to program

3 showing initial change

4 internalized program

Status in the program is based on levels. Levels dictate everything, what you wear, when/what you eat, when you go to bed, even when you can use the bathroom. The vote up process is excruciating and cruel.

White Board* Active Refusal, caused by having 4+ write ups in a week, level drop, cheating, etc. being on white board automatically adds another write up for the week and further punishment based on the incident. Example caught planning to run, put on a leash

Write up* punishment consisting of 10 "hills" and 2 hours manual labor each. Write ups can be for anything from having a fallen sock under your bed, or letting someone borrow your shampoo, to getting in a fight, literally anything

Hills* are done in the gravel pit, the physical distance of each hill is about 1/4 mile but it's loose gravel so with every step up the mountain you slide back at least half. 10 hills must be completed in under an hour or the remainder will double, keep in mind that most weeks you would have more than one write up

So how the fuck is this still running?

As I mentioned briefly, upon arriving at the program all human rights are stripped away. I am often asked why I wouldn't just tell my parents or run away. But you see I was so heavily censored. All mail was screened. If I tried to expose the mistreatment, the letter just wouldn't be sent or I'd be harassed into rewriting a productive email. This often came with claiming religion or being forced to take accountability, the blame, for the trauma inflicted on us kids at the hands of program staff. By the time you are allowed contact with your parents, still censored and monitored closely, the brainwashing has taken too far an effect to be confident in disclosing the abuse.

I don't know how to communicate to you just how bad it was. I can tell you that while I was there one girl jumped off the top bunk in hopes of breaking her arm to be taken to a hospital where she would tell the doctors of our mistreatment. Another girl induced a seizure in herself, one drank bleach, once again in hopes of medical treatment. Many ran away or at least tried. But there are literal bounty hunters employed by the program to catch runaways. And if you make it far enough without being shot or eaten by a bear or cougar, the punishments for running are severe. Not everyone survives.

Aside from the physical and sexual abuse we endured at the hands of pedophiles and unlicensed therapists that I still cannot really bring myself to talk about, we endured so much mental abuse from the director. Once a week the director would come force processes on us derived from a 1970s cult called Lifespring.

Lifespring was a private, for profit, New Age-human potential organization that trained more than 400,000 people within its first few years. Various academic articles published in psychology journals characterized Lifespring's training methods as "deceptive and indirect techniques of persuasion and control", and featured allegations that Lifespring was a cult that coerced members from leaving with attack therapy. The phrase "There is no hope" is a fundamental principle of Lifespring's persuasion.

Lifespring was sued many times for inflicting trauma on adults. Adults who had paid money to be willing participants in these processes. These same processes are still being used on emotionally vulnerable children today.

While Lifespring has changed their name several times to avoid regulation, they were eventually shut down and no longer deliver trainings directly. However 75 independent companies across 9 countries offer replicas or training employing many of the cult's methods and even hire staff members from the original cult. Amongst these are Discovery, Synanon, and Wwasps.

Discovery uses written processes directly derived from Lifespring. Synanon, initially a drug rehabilitation program, became an alternative community claiming to center on group truth-telling sessions. This became known as the "Synanon Game" an abusive berating of your self limiting beliefs. Synanon officially disbanded in 1991 due to members being convicted of criminal activities including, murder. It lost its tax-free status with the Internal Revenue Service due to financial misdeeds, destruction of evidence, and terrorism. The Synanon church has been academically called one of the "most dangerous and violent cults America had ever seen".

Wwaps is where discovery and synanon still practice and force processes.

WWASPs* stands for Worldwide Association of Specialty Programs (and schools). It is an umbrella corporation of independent institutions associated with teen behavior modification programs, boot camps, wilderness survival, and therapeutic boarding schools.

The un-regulation of wwasps opened the door for even more problematic revivals of the cults practices. There was a board of legislators appointed to regulating these programs. However all of the members on the board were actually owners of programs. Thus virtually no regulation. And when lawsuits were filed they were immediately shut down and hidden.

Lifespring led to resource realizations. Research realizations branched off to wwasp. Wwasp parented several programs. Amongst these was cross creek. Cross creek led to spring creek, the parent program of the one I was in. Spring creek was owned by known pedophile twins, the Pullans.

Spring creek's curriculum included a points and level system that punished noncompliance. Extremely non-compliant individuals, level one active refusers, were often kept in solitary confinement or transferred to a Mexican program known as High Impact, which was later closed by the Mexican Government due to allegations of child abuse.

At its peak enrollment, Spring Creek Lodge Academy housed over 500 students and employed about 200 individuals in various positions, making it the largest employer in the county at that time. Publicly Spring creek claimed to close due to an extreme drop in enrollment, several lawsuits, licensing issues, and oversight controversy. In actuality it closed after several on-property child suicides.

Spring creek is the parent program of the program I was enslaved to, Clearview horizons. And it doesn't stop there. While clearview is still running, they already have 2 sub programs open today, Reflections and old west academy.

So here my work begins: Being on Black Cloud isolation at Clearview Horizons, the program that stole me, sold me, betrayed me. A child at Clearview Horizons, being abused and berated by Michelle Manning, Michael Lindeman, Kimberly Sparks, and countless staff. Here is how I show you:

In this exhibit you see two full sized bodies, chainmail, a gravel pit, written daily accounts from inside the program, clothing, and photos, and can hear audio. I pretty much stuck exactly with my proposal.

My process of making begins with having my body 3d scanned. Both full scale bodies are me. 3D scans of me, sliced, laser cut, and stacked. Each body contains about 300 pieces, nearly 600 pieces total, coincidentally similar to the amount of days I was in program. I meticulously stacked the pieces to transfer the energy of traumas I hold in my live body into each layer.

The first body you see upon entering is laying down, depicting a teenage me in solitary isolation, confined to a hallway nearly surrounded by locked doors. Some days I would be tied to a bench there. Other days I just sat there, laid there. I became part of the floor. No one could or would look at me

The other full scale figure is seen standing, walking and performing laborious punishment. Originally this was inspired by an image of me. This day I made a flower crown to feel some sort of normal just in time to get abused for picking flowers. Here I am seen doing a daily task. Level ones take out the trash and get harassed in the process. I refused to take my crown off during my punishment.

I am dragging ceramic chainmail not only to show the weight of these punishments, but to show the comfort I had to build for myself as a child. Like a blanket I wove hundreds of loops. Like shackles I am tied to this experience yet I craft something new out of the dirt. I am an overcomer.

The gravel pit is to show the scale and intensity of the hills as punishment. I truly could not accurately recreate this because of gravity. You see, the gravel pit where we ran hills at, had a literal caution signed sinkhole that I'm told can be seen from google earth.

They used to make us fill potholes with that gravel too. Forced child labor in over 100 degree weather and below freezing weather. Us kids would shovel, wheelbarrow, and fill holes all day. Building this gravel pit was triggering at first, loading all that gravel into a shopping cart like a wheelbarrow. Then moving the gravel became cathartic. Knowing that I will always be more powerful than any punishment they could ever force on me.

Depending on how much you read, the journals will give you insight on day to day life. I remember days as numbers, as pages I was forced to write. As green or grey. Here you may see why. I questioned whether or not to choose specific pages or allow the viewer to flip through. I worried that if you flipped to certain pages you would think this place was great. Because the way my brainwashing played out. I chose to allow you to flip through freely because I think it's important you know just how brainwashed I was so much so that I began believing and endorsing my abuse. Some days I'm prophetic. Some days I'm sad. Some days I'm angry. Some days I feel absolutely nothing. All of those days are valid.

As for the clothing you see, my uniform and grays. It is important to show just how small I was when this happened to me. How tiny my uniform is. Because I was a child. A child.

The audio playing allowed through my exhibit is a recorded conversation between myself and other program kids. We talk about the program, how badly we are affected now, how we try to cope, our love for each other, our anger, our sadness, everything. It is important to recognize just how deeply and daily affected we are.

I intended to share audio directly from court documentation and trials against the program. I considered sharing audio testimonies and show newspaper articles. I decided that me and my story are enough and that kind of violence and exposure was unnecessary.

Much of my research is based in personal accounts, shared memories, and private files. I have gathered and analyzed my hoard of program memorabilia: daily accounts in thousands of journal pages, my uniform, mail, emails, photos, coping box. I have analyzed court documents, lawsuits, legislative bills, and newspaper articles.

But most importantly I live it. I was physically locked in the program for 20 months. Yet I am still stuck there every day and night.

I heard once that as artists we are the creators of visual culture. And I took that personally. I create for awareness, to educate, I create for community and connection, I create for fun, to express. I create for what I cannot say with words. I create because I literally cannot not make. I made this body of work because it seemed more imaginable than justice. It was far more tangible than a good nights' rest.

Ideally this work would be easily accessible. Perhaps in multiple cities with an online virtual tour option. There would be a takeaway with links to resources, safe places, free mental health care, mutual aid networks. Hopefully eventually there will be more google searches about restorative justice for the survivors and victims of the program than search results for open programs currently enrolling with pedophile unlicensed therapists. We need more preventative transparency of institutions, more genuine community care. The troubled teen industry needs to be exposed and destroyed. Creating about it, continuing the conversation, is all I know.

As defeating as it felt that many of you cannot physically come see my work as I intended, I feel successful. Even the fact that I can talk about this now is a success. Getting through all of this and remaining sure of my boundaries is a success.

After years of being put on silence* and further hushed by guilt, shame, and other people, I refuse to be silenced ever again. This work may never be finished.

Here I am breaking code silence on the troubled teen industry by creating art as my testimony of my kidnapping, enslavement, and brainwashing in a cult based boarding school to bring awareness and further the obliteration of the program* through my loudest voice: My Creations. Through making these sculptures I grieve. Through sharing with you I begin to radically accept this is my truth, my reality, my trauma.