

Event Transcript –

September 8, 2020

Performance-in-Place: Hotline - Conversation between Aliza Shvarts and Sara Reisman

Sara Reisman:

So we get started?

Aliza Shvarts:

Yeah.

Sara Reisman:

Okay. Welcome everyone to tonight's program, *Performance-in-Place: Hotline*, a conversation with Aliza Shvarts. Call 866.696.0940 for *Hotline*. A quick introduction for those who are joining for the first time. My name is Sara Reisman. I'm the Executive and Artistic Director of the Shelley & Donald Rubin Foundation. In May of this year, we launched a virtual series, *Performance-in-Place*, which features new and newly reworked performances by artists, choreographers and writers including Latasha N. Nevada Diggs, Alice Sheppard, Eileen Myles, Maria Hupfield, Baseera Khan, and others.

Every three weeks on Tuesdays, we host a performance by one of these artists, which will then be shared on our website and via social media channels for further distribution. Upcoming *Performance-in-Place* events include *Disappearing Acts @ 50* by Latasha N. Nevada Diggs on Tuesday, September 22nd from 6:00 to 7:00 PM Eastern Standard Time and *Waste of a Nation* by Baseera Khan on Tuesday, October 27th, from 6:00 to 7:30 PM Eastern Standard Time.

In other news, we'll open our upcoming exhibition, *To Cast Too Bold a Shadow*, a thematic exhibition that examines culturally entrenched forms of misogyny as a means to understand the dynamics between sexism, gender, and feminism. This exhibition celebrating the 100th anniversary of women's suffrage features artists who have positioned their practices as acts of resistance in the face of oppressive societal conditions. Artists include Furen Dai, Tracey Emin, Anetta Mona Chisa & Lucia Tkacova, Hackney Flashers, Rajkamal Kahlon, Joiri Minaya, Yoko Ono, Maria D. Rapicavoli, Betty Tompkins, Mierle Laderman Ukeles, and of course Aliza Shvarts whose work altogether collectively challenged the constraints women have endured across economic, cultural and political lines.

So those are some upcoming things.

The exhibition will be open by appointment starting October 15th. We all know that's a big deal. So pending any changes in terms of reopening guidelines, please visit The 8th Floor website, www.the8thfloor.org, for updated information on events and to reserve a time to visit the exhibition.

Tonight's program includes ASL interpretation and captioning. In this first part of the program, before we open up the discussion to the audience, I ask that you set your sound to mute, to

reduce background noise. And it seems that everybody has done that. Around 7:00 PM, we'll open up the conversation for questions. At that point, we ask that you use the chat section just to flag for us that you'd like to ask a question and then I'll invite you to speak. I won't speak for you, unless you'd like me to.

So in advance of introducing tonight's program and Aliza Shvarts, I'm going to deliver a two-part land acknowledgement. And you might ask why two parts. You'll see why. Part one... we're gathered virtually in locations at once, New York City, including Manhattan, Brooklyn, I see Baltimore, I see... I don't know where else, but many places. Most, if not all are unseated lands. As this event is organized by the Rubin Foundation, I have chosen to address the specific site where offices are located near Union Square. Thereby acknowledging the Lenape community, past and present, as well as future generations. The Shelley & Donald Rubin Foundation on The 8th Floor acknowledge that we were founded upon exclusions and erasures of many indigenous peoples, including those on land the Foundation is located. This acknowledgement demonstrates a commitment to beginning the process of working to dismantle the ongoing legacies of settler colonialism, a commitment that I think many of us agree as we come all the more poignant in recent months as political upheaval has already resulted in transformative activist engagement across the country.

Part two. The second one part of the land acknowledgement comes from Carmen Papalia, who some of you might know is an access activist. But it's actually written by Joel Carter Assistant Professor at the University of Toronto's Center for Drama, Theater and Performance Studies and Indigenous Studies. Carter writes, "Zoom has erected its headquarters in San Jose, California, while Skype has erected one key arm of its operations in Palo Alto, California. This is a traditional territory of the Muwekma Ohlone, tribal nation. Current numbers of this nation are direct descendants of the many missionized tribal groups from across the region. We who are able to connect with each other via Zoom and Skype are deeply indebted to the Muwekma Ohlone people. As the lands and waters, they continue to steward now support the people, pipelines and technologies that carry our breaths, images of words, across vast distances to others.

As I engage in written communications such as this email... So this is hypothetical. I personally acknowledged the debt I have incurred... That's not hypothetical. And that is a mass thing each time I open my notebook. We are all indebted to those peoples and communities with waters and lands have been poisoned as a result of the extraction of metals and rare earth elements required to fabricate the machinery through which we speak, here from, view each other. We're indebted to those peoples whose working lives, youth, and vitality have been spent in unsafe spaces and intolerable conditions. For that many citizens of the so-called developed world might have easy access to these related devices. As we encounter each other each day through our email accounts, our messaging apps, our virtual meeting rooms, and chat rooms, let us strive to remain mindful of the incalculable debt that we owe. Thank you."

So onto tonight's program. Conceived in response to the invitation to participate in *Performance-in-Place*, Aliza Shvarts' *Hotline* is an interactive performance that's distributed over a voicemail tree. That's a new one for me. From sex hotline, suicide crisis hotlines, psychic hotlines to tip hotlines, the anonymous telephone call is the poignant example of intimacy without proximity. Shvarts, appropriates, the somewhat dated faceless technology, I would say very dated, but that's

me, to consider what makes the line hot? What kinds of things do we ask each other, confess to each other, or create with each other in the absence of an image? Or we could say, or yeah, of our faces, our portraits, right?

That is, when is our mediation absolute? What kind of connection does the face preclude? And then the voice allow. Building on, Shvarts' current work, which focuses on the power of testimony and the circulation of speech in that digital age, *Hotline* explores the voices with the metronome of the body and a metaphor for political agency. Beginning with a phone number, this asynchronous performance allows participants to choose from a set of options to advance, a choose your own adventure style narrative. At that very end of the experience, participants, and that could be, you can leave a message which will eventually be made public as documentation for the performance. So do know that if you leave a message, it's going into the work.

Sara Reisman:

The phone number 866.696.0940 can receive calls 24 hours a day through Saturday, January 23rd, 2021. That's the closing of our exhibition *To Cast Too Bold a Shadow*. *Hotline* is also part of, Shvarts' Fellowship at A.I.R. Gallery, which opens Thursday, October 15th, or it's on Zoom October 15th to November 16th in which they'll be a physical installation *Hotline* featuring documentation from the ongoing interactive performance. And just to note... *Hotline* international callers, if the toll free number doesn't work on your phone, try Skype.

And so now it's my pleasure to introduce, Aliza Shvarts. Aliza Shvarts is an artist and theorist who takes a queer and feminist approach to reproductive labor and language. Her current work focuses on testimony and the circulation of speech in the digital age. She received a BA from Yale University and a PhD in Performance Studies at New York University. She was the 2014 recipient of the Creative Capital Warhol Foundation Arts Writers Grant; a 2014, 2015 Helena Rubinstein Fellow at the Whitney Independent Study Program; a 2017 Critical Writing Fellow at Recess Art; and a Joan Tisch Teaching Fellow at the Whitney Museum of American Art between 2015 and 2019. She is currently a Fellow at A.I.R and a 2020 Artist Fellow at the National Arts Club. Let's hope they reopen soon.

Her artwork has been shown across Europe, Latin America, and in the US, [crosstalk 00:08:34] including Tate Modern in London, Contemporary Art Futura Prague, the Athens Biennale, Universidad de los Andes in Bogota, Universidad de Chile, Sculpture Center New York City, Participant INC. New York City, LACE Los Angeles, the Sloop Foundation in Philadelphia, and Artspace New Haven.

Current and upcoming solo exhibitions include *Reported*, which recently closed at Art in General, which surveyed the last decade of the practice and art book a new commission on view later this year at A.I.R. Is that the title, still?

Aliza Shvarts:

It's actually been changed to, *Hotline*, since-

Sara Reisman:

Hotline. I had to say that, right. Okay.

So her writing has been published in *Whitechapel: Documents in Contemporary Art Practice*, *The Feminist and Queer Information Studies Reader*, *TDR the Drama Review*, *Women and Performance* and *The Brooklyn Rail*.

And there are awards. Awards include a 2008 Lloyd Mifflin Prize for English at Yale, 2017 Franklin Coley Dissertation Award from NYU, and a 2019 Young Scholar Award from the International Association for Aesthetics.

She has taught at NYU, Barnard College, Parsons School of Design, the Pratt Institute. And is currently full time faculty in the MA, Contemporary Art Program at Sotheby's Institute of Art, New York.

She's also been a guest commentator, wait for it, on MTV.

So welcome, Aliza. Welcome.

Aliza Shvarts:

Thank you.

Sara Reisman:

Please, and make some motion to welcome, Aliza.

Sara Reisman:

So I think the way we're going to start this... I actually had this written out and then I had to rewrite my notes. But the way we're going to start this is, Aliza, has a pretty fancy presentation, right? And then we're going to do questions. And at a certain point, let's see, by seven o'clock, as I said, we'll try to open up the discussion to all of you. Though not all at once.

Sara Reisman:

So welcome, Aliza. Thanks for being here.

Aliza Shvarts:

Thanks for having me. I am super excited to talk about this piece with all of you. It's a piece unlike anything I've really made before, because it is using technology that I think a lot of us are reacquainting ourselves with. Especially millennials like me, who sort of were stuck at the telephone for the sake of text, but that is the old fashioned telephone that we used to hold up to our head.

So maybe I'll jump to my PowerPoint presentation. William, if you'll share the screen, we can get into that. I thought for the talk, I might discuss a little bit of the kind of thinking and inspirations behind the work place that's from the work, and then strongly encourage you to all call the hotline yourselves. And if your feelings are so inclined to leave a message.

So the sort of teaser image that I've been using for the work, and it's a strange work to try and think about in visual terms because it's non-visual. For the most part, as Sara said, takes place through a voicemail tree. Entirely on the phone. Is this one that you see, here. And this is actually a reference to a piece I'm going to talk about just a little bit, Lygia Clark it's in reference to *her B Shows*. But this is the phone number. Please do, again, after the talk, give a call.

But let's advance to the next slide. And I'll just talk a little bit about some of the dense language that I put to this piece. So Sara already read this out. This is the description of the work, and I actually wrote it before I made the work itself. Before I wrote out the actual script. And one thing I was thinking about, as I'm sure we've all been thinking about, for the past six months is this idea of intimacy without proximity. How do we maintain intimacy? How do we maintain relations in this moment when we're all socially distanced from each other. Not just, not seeing each other in everyday life, but also not used to circulating and traveling like perhaps many of us used to do. So how do we maintain connection when we're suddenly being made aware of how tenuous and how much distance is actually part of those connections?

This idea of intimacy without proximity, I will say is also an idea that I took from A.I.R. Gallery, where I have the Fellowship. They started a sort of online project called *Intimacy Without Proximity* in response to the pandemic. So this was also an idea that came out of a kind of collective thinking and grappling with this question of intimacy. But I was also interested in more than intimacy. I was interested in this idea of a line. The telephone line, somehow embodying emotion or aspect. This idea that even in the 21st century, we have so much technology available to us, hotlines still exist and they still exist for specific purposes. So I began asking myself questions around, what made the line hot? And the research that I was doing around hotlines... And I can talk a little bit more about that in the Q and A if it's interesting.

I found that they sort of date to the 1950s. They really started proliferating in the 1970s. And even though the sort of tech boom of the 1990s left them behind and the kind of payday of hotlines is perhaps over, they still do exist for quite a number of functions. And I started asking myself, what is it about their function that necessitates this at handness of the telephone? Why is it that there are certain events in our lives that make us want to pick up a phone instead of writing an email or making a video chat or stepping outside and seeing someone? It seems to me that is a kind of tension between both the haptic quality and embodiment of a voice on the phone, as well as the anonymity that the phone allows that suits certain circumstances.

So I started to think a little bit more deeper about what those circumstances could be. And interesting to me as an artist was the fact that this supersedes the use of the image. If Zoom is a way that we can encounter each other face to face, and we sit in front of a screen and the screen looks back at us, this is very similar to the way in which we encounter a lot of types of art. Art on a wall, for example, has a similar kind of face to face quality. But the thing about a voice on the phone is that it doesn't necessarily have a visual image. It's something that we bring from this relationship of being in front of us to a more proximate one, where we bring it up to our actual bodies. So I was thinking about this question of what the absence of an image allows.

Let's go to the next slide.

I also started thinking about this idea of a voice. A voice is something that has both a bodily as well as a political connotation. Especially right now, we can think about how certain kinds of movements, certain kinds of, sort of protests are about giving voice to certain kinds of publics and certain kinds of causes. So here's thinking about how voice is both something that we have. It's a metonym of the body. It's a part of ourselves. As well as perhaps a metaphor for political agency. So again, the disembodied voice is maybe something that can function in both of these registers.

Let's go to the next slide.

So I'll just set this clip up before we play it. I'm going to talk now about some of the inspirations for the piece. Like many of you around April, I started getting really exhausted about being on Zoom. And I thought about this scene from *Tongues Untied*, which is a film by Marlon Riggs from 1989, but I've always found really fun and also kind of erotic. It's a scene that you'll see in a minute that sort of shows us that relationship between the voice being part of the body, as well as something that stands in for political agency. And I won't give too much away before we watch it, but the two come together, I think in a really interesting and concise way in the film clip. So let's go ahead and watch that.

William:

Aliza, I'm going to switch. Okay?

Aliza Shvarts:

Yeah.

Tongues Untied:

You've reached, black chat. Your hotline to the best black numbers. You want to connect with a Banjee Boy, press one. For versatile butch queen, press two. We'll look into commit mind and body to be cheap, press three. Don't be a shy guy, make a choice and meet that special man. Good choice, now leave a message, you have a minute after the beep.

BGA black gay activist, thirty-ish well-read, sensitive, pro-feminist seeks same for envelope licking, flyer distribution, battle assembly, demonstration companion, dialogical theorizing, good times, and hot, safe sex.

Why do we go home alone, clutch pillows and journals and single beds. Push ourselves to a degree for the cause, if we can't reap the benefits. I don't want to wed the movement. Do you? End the silence baby, we could make a serious revolution together.

Aliza Shvarts:

Great. So what I love about that clip is the way in which Marlon Riggs asks us to think about this question of social connection and erotic connection. How political action doesn't take place exclusively through protest in the streets, but also it's actually something that happens through relations and primarily the relations we make that might seem to be beside or outside productive political work. I love that line and I've actually seen it on T-shirts before. 'I do not want to wed

the movement.' And this is something that I think could be really useful for us to think about in this moment where so many of the technologies available that we have to connect with each other, are technologies of work. For example, Zoom is something that exists as a meetings platform. So how can these not only be adapted to nonproductive or social ends, but also be made more relational.

And again, I think that there's something that's kind of at least, again, for me I wasn't, I admit it, a person who ever experienced firsthand this kind of telephone dating that we're seeing, here. But the telephone, at least, for me seems this kind of romantic idea of connection. Precisely for what it would hold. It creates, I think extends this promise of connection, as well as maintaining a certain kind of anonymity. So again, it's about intimacy through distance and intimacy in proximity, but it's something that's creating that through the concept of withholding. You're not giving away everything and primarily not giving away this kind of my medic identity we associate with the image.

So let's go to the next slide.

Another inspiration for the work was this book by Carmen Maria Machado. I actually first heard it on a podcast. I heard a reading of an excerpt. And the excerpt was from a chapter. The whole book is a memoir that's a kind of choose your own adventure narrative. So, that's what you see written the on the screen, right there.

So when you get to this chapter, you turn to the first page and it would say, "Page one, you wake up in the air is not bright, the room glows of the kind of effervescent contentment, despite the boxes and clothes and dishes. You think to yourself, this is the kind of morning you could get used to. When you turn over, she's staring at you, the luminous innocence of the light curdles in your stomach. You don't remember ever going from awake to afraid so quickly. You were moving all night. She says your arms and elbows touched me. You kept me awake. You apologize." And then there's the choose your narrative part. "If you apologize profusely, go to page two. If you tell her to wake you up next time your elbow touches her in your sleep, go to page three. If you tell her to calm down, go to page five." And this entire chapter progresses like this, in the sort of circular motion. And through this form, it really mirrors its content, which is a memoir describing an abusive relationship between two women.

And what I really like about this kind of narrative style, which becomes quite performative. It's really the sort of bolded part to me really reads like a performance score. Is that it actually mimics in the way it asks us to move through this text and read this text, that feeling of feeling trapped in a certain kind of cycle.

So there's a way in which I think this kind of structure, the choose your own narrative, sort of format allows us for not only to experience a question, an idea of agency, we get to choose, we get to consent, we get to make choices, but also the limitations of that agency. One of the sort of axioms about feminism that I really love is that, it's a way to give us a handle on what it means to make choices and conditions, not of your choosing. And I feel this idea of making choices and conditions, not of your choosing, is a great summation of what political work can look like, and what grappling with histories of power can look like. And here, I think what's so fantastic about

Carmen Machado's novel is that it really gives us that as a kind of live experience as we make our way through the text... that as a kind of live experience as we make our way to the text. As a reading practice, what does it mean to both feel yourself making choices and then feel the limitations of that kind of agency? Which in many ways, and this gets to something I'm sure we'll talk a bit more about later, it gets to the limitations of consent itself. What does it mean to consent in a context or to withhold consent in the context that you don't choose? Certainly here, this question of agency becomes more complicated. Let's go to the next slide.

Great. As I mentioned, there is a reference in the little teaser image I made to this piece by Lygia Clark. This is actually one of a series of pieces that she called her *Bichos*, which in Portuguese mean "creatures." They're quite small sculptures. I'm sure many of you have seen them on display in various museums. The thing that's really interesting about them is that they move. All of the little edges that you see are actually hinges and these *Bichos* can be moved and manipulated in certain ways. When I saw these on display at Lygia Clark's retrospective at MoMA, they had this quote from her on the wall, which has really stuck with me because it becomes a really interesting way, I think, for thinking about the life an artwork takes on. She said that she was often asked how many moves an individual *Bicho* could make, right? Are there 10 moves, 20 moves, 100 moves? She would always say that, and this is her speaking, "I don't know and you don't know, but it knows."

I love this as a way of thinking about what kind of life artwork takes on. Certainly this connects to ideas that we inherit from post-structuralism, the death of the author, and things like that. Once you put an artwork out there, it really takes on a kind of life of its own. This idea that you, the maker of the work, should be the authority on it, should know it becomes undermined and troubled. That actually, I think, took on a very practical notion for me in making *Hotline* because I don't know, and I'll talk a little bit about this when we get to the next page, I don't know how many options there are as possible pathways through. It became this really enormous narrative writing project containing twists and turns inside which I, myself, can't quantify.

In some ways, I think that this is the kind of promise that we want to believe in from a hotline itself. Or, we could say the idea of telephonic or mediated connection. I think a hotline, regardless of its function, has a kind of promise it extends, which is that it can do something that we ourselves can't do on our own. There's a reason to call it, and you might not know the reason, but there's this trust you have in this act of attempting to relate. That whatever's on the other end of the hotline, it knows something that you don't know and I don't know.

Even as someone who made this particular *Hotline*, I can feel myself when I engage with it kind of falling into that promise of connection. I think that that's maybe what's so romantic or so alive about the telephone, is this possibility of a way to connect to other people. Because it withholds so much, because it withholds the image, it withholds the identity of the person. Because it's really just this voice, which has both the materiality of the body, as well as a totally disembodied quality proximate in your ear. There's a way in which it extends this promise of authority on one hand, but at the same time, the kind of mystery romance of connection on the other. That for me is exactly the kind of promise encapsulated in the *Bicho*, in the creature. That's what we want art to be in so many ways, this kind of creature that knows things, but you and I don't hold alone. Let's go to the next slide.

I know that this is very, very small and that you can't really see all the things written, but this is the diagram of the hotline itself. For those of you have called, you might know this already. There are five possibilities that are immediately presented to you at the *Hotline*. You get to choose what kind of hotline you want it to be. It can be a crisis hotline. It can be a tips hotline. It can be a sex hotline. It could be a psychic hotline. Or, if you don't know what kind of hotline you want it to be, there's a fifth option that helps you figure that out.

I tried to design it so that after that initial choice, there are at least three more choices that you had to make before you came to the end of your experience, whether that was in a voicemail or sometimes... It's interesting. I think about this as the kind of capriciousness of the hotline itself, this kind of feminine voice that you hear on the phone. Sometimes it won't give you the option to leave a message. It'll just cut you off. It'll just expel you from the whole system.

Of course, you can manage to get through the system with less choices than that. I think probably the minimum is one. There's one choice that will take you straight to a mailbox, but you can also, I know this is really hard to see, but you might be able to see that there are little lines connecting boxes that are a bit lower on the screen back to ones that are to the side. There's loops that you can get into. I think that you could potentially remain inside the Hotline for as long as you desire to, in terms of making choices. You could potentially connect with a set of new accidental or intentional loops to all of the different systems, or to all of the different hotline tracks and just go back and forth between them. It's very much a kind of choose-your-own-adventure narrative.

The other thing that it will say is maybe interesting about the process of making this work and perhaps interesting for you as a viewer, listener, I guess, in this case, hopefully for experiencing it is that it very much takes shape in response to your choices. I wanted these choices to be accurate or to feel relevant, even if you didn't necessarily want to give any kind of personal information about yourself. So, the *Hotline* instructs you, especially when you get to the voicemail part, to stay anonymous. My idea behind this, and indeed, I think a lot of the success of early hotlines, at least in the 1950s when crisis hotlines first emerged, was this idea that they could both provide human connection while maintaining anonymity.

The conditions that you encounter, the questions that the voice will ask you, or the situations that she'll describe are both specific to the kind of hotline your experience, so specific to a psychic hotline say, or a crisis hotline, but also general enough that there isn't necessarily a particular crisis that has to be happening for this to make sense as a narrative that you're engaging with. I know this sounds kind of abstract, but I'll play you some clips from the Hotline and maybe get into it in a little bit more specificity. Let's go to the next slide.

This is just a slide that gives you a sense of the interfaces that are behind this as a non-visual work. It's interesting because it also made me, in making this piece, very aware of the spatialization of information. I didn't actually have a great idea of how you go about writing a choose-your-own-adventure narrative. It felt very much like programming because each branch you create creates parallel narratives that are happening, and if you have different layers of branching, you might be writing many, many stories side by side. I became very aware of, and this is why it felt a bit like programming, the kind of binary nature of these things. So, you would

go down one path or another path. In this way you kind of multiply the voices that you're dealing with, trying to keep track of each one.

The actual script itself became this very massive 6,000 word document. It's just a screen grab of it over there. I started getting really aware of the kind of limitation of word processing as an interface, right? There's a narrative logic to how normally we write in a Word document that really didn't fit so well trying to write something like this, the kind of single page, single screen gives us a really particular frame for what narratives are. Really, it's about a single voice. In trying to write this, I became really aware of how limited that single voice perspective is. I just became aware of a framework that I never really understood operating. Then what you see on the left is the actual voicemail tree. So, I just used readily available commercial software to build this out. In the kind of commercial parlance, this is something called an auto-attendant.

Every time you call a company and you speak to a non-person, you were engaging with an auto-attendant and most of them allow a kind of infinite nesting of different menus. Normally that's not something companies took huge advantage of, they want to direct you to the right person sooner rather than later. But what was really interesting about this, seeing it spatialized through the software, is the way in which it really does give you a sense of the kind of webs of bureaucracy that we're engaging with and we attempt to reach out. The ways in which actually also, that web can be built out in such a robust way that it creates a kind of alternate platform for writing. Making the piece was very much a toggling between these two different interfaces you're seeing here.

Though the piece itself is non-visual, it's really a sound piece, and then I'll just say it's something I've been calling an asynchronous performance. For those of you who teach, or those of you who are in school, you might know a lot about the push towards asynchronous classes or asynchronous lectures. This idea that you could somehow present information for your students to do or engage with outside of that live encounter of teaching. For me, this has been a real struggle, trying to figure out what asynchronous pedagogy could look like. But, I started to think if asynchronous pedagogy as possible, which is itself a kind of performance, certainly asynchronous performance as possible. Actually, perhaps we're engaging with asynchronous performance all the time insofar as we're engaging with work that takes place over time, that has a relationship between choice and action, but isn't necessarily taking place in a way that's live at the same time, within the same temporality for everybody engaging with it.

Now I might move along a little bit more to show you two specific parts of the *Hotline*. Let's go to the next slide. So this is the first voice you would encounter. If you call the hotline, it will ring once and then you'll hear this. We're going to play the video file, but what the voice is saying is also written there on the screen, if you want to follow along. William, will you play the sound file?

Hotline Automated Voice:

Welcome. You have reached a hotline. You are at a moment of unprecedented technological connectivity, yet something falls short in your simulations of face-to-face interaction. Something exhausts you despite increasingly sophisticated mediations. There is a quality that remains missing from your attempts to connect. A *Hotline* is a simple promise that something is here for

you at the other end of the phone. What that thing is, however, is up to you. This hotline takes shape in responses to the choices you make as a caller. At no point will you be connected to a human. Press one if you want this to be a crisis hotline. Press two if you want this to be a tips hotline. Press three if you want this to be a sex hotline. Press four if you want this to be a psychic hotline. Press five if you are not sure what kind of hotline you want this to be.

Aliza Shvarts:

Okay. The first choice you make in this asynchronous performance is to choose the kind of genre of hotline that you want. This came out of me doing some research around the kind of hotlines that exist, the kind of hotlines that used to exist and still exist, and trying to figure out how I might quantify all of them, because there's so many different kinds. There's a hotline to call around Thanksgiving with all of your turkey questions. There's hotlines that have to do with things that are much more serious, like health crises. There's tips hotlines that the police run. There's so many different kinds of hotlines. Yet, I tried to kind of distill what certain swabs of them had in common and then create a narrative around each of those things that highlighted that kind of pure form of the hotline.

But of course, that itself is a really fraught endeavor. It's hard to say that there's a pure form of any particular kind of anything, but I tried to distill this as kind of performative project what each hotline was really offering. So, if we go to the next clip, this is what you get to if you press five, which is when you're not sure what kind of hotline you want it to be. I thought that this was a useful one to talk about because this gives you some insight into the logic of distillation. So, let's listen to this one and then I'll describe a little bit, just go into a bit more depth about what you're hearing. Let's go ahead and play this clip.

Hotline Automated Voice:

You have a need that you cannot articulate, which is what makes it difficult to fulfill. Of course, these kinds of silent needs can be an engine of creativity. They can push you to challenge representational conventions and ultimately invent new forms. There is power also in resisting the drive to articulate, to let needs sit with you as a silent demand. In either case you present a unique challenge for a hotline. Press one if you want to try and articulate your need. Press two if you do not.

What is it that we do when we put a need into language? What power do words have to heal us or deliver us or transform us? There is certainly a limitation to language, even a danger. We might not know our feelings before we articulate them. Words might produce our interior life rather than simply reflect it, but it is arguably the premise of art and of politics that we should try and put our feelings into language or some other system of representation. So, please try. Press one if you want someone to witness you. Press two if you want to participate in an information exchange. Press three if you want to fantasize. Press four if you want to feel your power to call. Press five to go back.

Aliza Shvarts:

We hear in this clip is what happens when you press five. You're not sure what kind of hotline you want it to be. Then, what happens if you press one, which is that you, despite not knowing

what you want this to be, want to try and articulate some kind of need. I was thinking about this as being the kind of primary entry point into any mode of communication. Whenever we reach out through some kind of mediated communicative means, whenever we pick up the phone or open an email or open a text message, there's this idea that we're trying to articulate a need, we're trying to connect in some way. I think what's interesting and maybe the most relational aspect of these kinds of mediated connections is that you can make them, even if you don't necessarily know what your need is. You can reach out and not need to know why you're reaching out or what motivates you to reach out, and that doesn't undermine the success of reaching out. You still connect.

I thought this idea of the kind of formless need was something that was really compelling. Then I thought that this becomes a way to try and, again, get to this idea of what it would mean to distill what happens on a hotline. So, the five options that you see at the bottom are my distillations of the five different... Or sorry, four different hotlines, really, that you have the option of engaging. I started thinking about why someone in crisis might call a crisis hotline. Certainly, I'm sure many of us know this, it's not quite the same as calling someone who can call anyone to help you. When you call a crisis hotline, you can remain anonymous and there's not necessarily the promise going to send help. So what is the function of them? What is the purpose?

I started thinking that really, it wasn't about this kind of action oriented goal of receiving some kind of help either through the forum of some kind of authority, be it the police or a medical authority or something like that. It's really about having someone witness you. So, I was thinking about how, really, the crisis hotline in a lot of ways is about this act that's a little bit more amorphous, which is this question, an almost paradox of what it means to witness someone anonymously in this non-visual medium of the telephone.

When I was thinking about a tips hotline, and again, this can be a police tips hotline, or this could be the Thanksgiving Turkey Tips hotline, or customer service tech support hotline. There's lots of ways in which tips hotlines exist. This is really about information exchange. Either you need to know something or you have something that you want someone else to know. So this, I think, is a kind of very different form of interaction than the first kind, which is witnessing.

Then, when I was thinking about sex hotlines, and here I was really thinking about that Marlon Riggs clip and what it means to try and find sexual intimacy or romantic intimacy on the telephone. I think a lot of that is about this idea of fantasy, especially now. These kinds of hotlines do still exist to some extent, even though we have the entire internet at our disposal. Any kind of visual pornography or dating site or dating app that you want is there for you. So, what's the point of this as a telephonic communication? Again, I think it's about withholding certain information. It's about maintaining intimacy and anonymity. So, it's about this capacity to fantasize.

Then, and I would say in a lot of ways, this is kind of maybe the most interesting hotline, the psychic hotline. This I think is a as a kind of more narrow, but also more established genre. These of course also still exist. I was thinking, why do people have psychic hotlines? I was recently looking into pet psychic hotline on behalf of a friend. She wanted a reading for her cat. So, I also discovered that not only can you, as a person call a psychic, you can also call a pet

psychic who also primarily do their readings over the telephone. So, it's an established psychic medium. I was thinking about this, what is it about the telephone that works? I think very much, it fits the psychic medium, insofar as it's your power to call something. When you go consult a psychic, you're trying to call to some other realm that is mediated, that is at a distance from us. Of course, the telephone becomes a kind of great exercise for that because it becomes a modality to call on your power to call, to call to a great beyond.

So, that's the part that I had prepared. I think I might be a little over time that we had prepared, but yeah, we'll wrap it all up. But, we can go to the next slide. This is the number. Feel free to call. Then I had some other images, which I thought... Sara and I talked a bit about, so I'll maybe turn to you Sara, because I know you have some questions prepared.

Sara Reisman:

Yeah. Maybe let's go back to the hotline number initially. Thinking about this, probably a lot of people, everyone on this Zoom session has had a transformative relationship... Your relationship to the phone has transformed in the course of a lifetime, right? Like for me, I can think back to when we... There are so many things that weren't in play as a child in relation to the phone. But, I wanted to just maybe start with a question about, if we narrow the scope of this kind of discussion to performance art just for right now, what are some of the key differences between a phone being deployed in a performance in the 1990s, and I don't know what year was Marlon Riggs' *Tongues Untied* film?

Aliza Shvarts:

'89, I think it-

Sara Reisman:

'89. So, if we think of 1989 to 2020, what do you think has changed if it's really changed? That's a huge question, but we can reflect on specifics of our own experiences with the phone. I thought maybe from a performance theorist artist's standpoint, you could tell us.

Aliza Shvarts:

Yeah, absolutely. Yeah. I think when you see that clip from '89, the telephone is a more neutral technology in some ways. I was three in 1989, so I'm speculating a little bit here, but 1989, so I'm [inaudible 00:46:03]. I remember when it was just the primary way we contacted each other. When talking on the phone didn't seem like one among several options and not even, when it was not necessarily what it is now, which is perhaps the non-primary option with which we immediately reach out and connect with people. And I think what I really also like about that clip is it shows you the inventiveness of telephones and their interactive capacity in that moment, you see all the things that people were building around telephones, these kinds of dating hotlines. This was a moment where I think a lot of different hotlines kind of took on creative life. And you had a kind of diversification of all the different kinds of numbers you could call and all kinds of different interactions that you could have.

I've only heard of these and I've seen the ads for them, but perhaps someone has had more direct experience, but of course, this is also the moment of the kind of party line, right? This idea that

the telephone could be a way of introducing both familiarity into your life. You can connect with people you already know, but also newness into your life that you could reach someone you don't already know. And I think in the 1990s that actually quickly became superseded by the internet. This was the way that we could connect to people that we didn't already know, right? That we could kind of introduce again, that new form of sociality into our life. Though in terms of performance art, telephones, I think have played a really important role since even before that. One of my friends who is talking to me about the piece mentioned John Giorno Dial-a-Poet pieces.

[crosstalk 00:47:36] Yeah and yeah, this is a fantastic project where you could phone and get a poem on the other end of the phone, which is, again, I think, about this thing we see encapsulated in that moment in the late eighties and early nineties, which is the telephone could be this vehicle to reach beyond your own experience, to get something that you don't already have, to know something that you didn't already know. Whether that's engaging with an artwork, like a poem, or reaching a stranger on the other end of the dating line or a party line or something like that.

I also, and this goes back to sort of what you said Sara, about our personal relationships just changing. I mean, I remember being in middle school and my dad yelling at me to get off the phone because I would just hang out for hours on the telephone with my friends, not necessarily saying anything, right. It was a way of being with each other because you could hear each other, even if you weren't necessarily producing language. I'm actually really curious Sara to know also what your experiences of that transformation were, because that's something I don't experience anymore in the same way.

Sara Reisman:

I think of when I was a kid, I was growing up in the seventies and eighties, and there were a number of phone numbers you could call and I think as a kid, we thought that was really fascinating. So there was a guy who was listed in the phone book who you could call, he was blind and he wanted to talk to people. So we would call him and ask him about his life, he would ask us about our lives and what was strange about it is the same time we were intrigued or kind of titillated by the idea of prank calling, right? If you like call a classmate and pretend to be somebody else, but this was more honest, but it was interesting because we didn't know him and we would never meet him.

So it was just that kind of isolated experience of the phone was interesting. I think there was always this interest in these dating lines, not to meet anybody, but just to talk to an adult. And I realize now that it's good we didn't get very far because I mean, that's kind of every parent's fear right, that their kid is going to get on some chat room and be in danger. But it was pretty, I don't know.

So I think that the big difference now is that there has been a shift during the coronavirus. I think that we now, I'm using the phone much more than I used to, right. Like talking to family, talking to friends, keeping up with people in different places. And I think that's partly because of the isolation that we've all experienced to varying degrees. But I think that there was a kind of dip after, or there's been a recent dip where, I don't know, there was a period probably over the last few years where I barely spoke on the phone. It's like text messages, social media

communication. It's sort of like the phone just sort of receded, email starts to recede, even social media starts to recede and then I'm not really sure what communication I'm using right? and then it goes back to email again and then the phone, so there are these strange cycles.

What I wondered if you could talk a little bit about what you think is lost since we're talking, in a framework of a pandemic. What do you think is lost in terms of nuance and affect in our current condition, which still relies heavily on the phone. Yeah and Zoom, I mean, Zoom is relatively new, but it's become pretty normal at this point.

Aliza Shvarts:

Yeah.

Sara Reisman:

And you're teaching, you've talked to me a bit about teaching. I'll just add this because I think it's interesting that I was teaching last semester and so for the second half of the semester, we had to jump into the Zoom mode and we weren't really monitored. But I understand from a lot of friends who teach in different art schools and elsewhere that they're having to prepare a kind of packaged pre-recorded components of their class for the asynchronous. To do the work asynchronously, which to me seems a bit unfair and also antithetical to the kind of collective experience that would happen in a classroom.

Aliza Shvarts:

Yeah I mean that asynchronous part is really hard, because especially if you're someone who might make films or record yourself as part of that practice, suddenly you're taking all of this kind of, production quality and trying to repackage a different kind of content in it. And if you're like me driving yourself a little bit to exhaustion in trying to figure out how to best do that. But I think what that misses a lot of the time and in some ways this is maybe what I miss from every form of mediated communication that I remember from being a middle schooler on the telephone, just breathing on the line and not really saying anything as well, my friends and I watched TV, did something else and yet still needed to be on the phone with each other. It's this idea of being with each other, this kind of live experience of not necessarily communicating through language, but nonetheless having a kind of mediated co-presence and I know that's a bit of a paradox, but that mediated co-presence is, I think what's really important about the live classroom experience as well.

It might just be me lecturing, I can talk and talk and talk, and yet there's something about bodies being in space together or there being an awareness of bodies in space together that allows a certain kind of interaction that I think is lost when we're just reduced to text. And is also in a strange way, lost when we're just reduced to this kind of face to face image. There's something about the portrait that has us on high alert, like we're all suddenly within the kind of modernist frame of not only the grid and that's the major format that we usually encounter each other on Zoom, but also this, it's kind of this portraiture, right? There's this sort of intense focus on the face and all the things that it communicates, but the face is a really limited medium and interface for communication. There's the rest of the body that I think gets lost.

And I think that leads to this kind of, both alertness and exhaustion that at least I feel, after a solid day of Zoom, which I never used to feel when I was just on the phone in this more, intimate way, I guess, as a person. So yeah, in a weird way, I think there's these spatial dynamics, which maybe in a strange way become alive again, when we're just thinking about the kind of sounds a body makes when isolated from an image. So for me, there's again, that kind of metonymic quality that's captured or becomes highlighted when we remove all of this, when it's just the voice that this I think tends to camouflage or sort of distracts us from.

Sara Reisman:

This. I'm in the dark here, I can't get it any brighter. So it's talking about words only, or you spend a lot of time, you must've spent a lot of time writing the script for *Hotline*. And I wondered if you could talk about how that has that been different, a different kind of writing experience. You recently defended your dissertation and wrote, I mean, I don't know how many pages, but a book right? And so what's the difference, I mean, obviously this is a much shorter process, but what was that like? How did you think about narrative in that framework?

Aliza Shvarts:

Yeah, I mean, honestly, this is probably the hardest kind of writing I've ever done because it's that sort of multiplying of narrative logics through this sort of programming like way of writing a narrative. I don't know, as an academic I'm very aware of how many words, 6,000 words are, that's like a solid academic article in a peer reviewed journal, which takes forever to write.

So, it ended up being quite a lot more writing than I thought it would be when I first set out to make this. And I think it's because when I began this, I immediately found that I was not just writing one story and not just writing five stories, which I had kind of set out to write these five different types of hotlines. It was an endlessly multiplying set of stories that really hinge around these action moment or choices that the viewer gets to make. And a lot of ways it was about setting up those moments, so it became much more like writing a kind of score for performance. It was a kind of text that's not really describing anything, but it's giving directions for potential action, an action that takes place within a set framework that I build. So it was quite exhausting, you can tell, yeah.

Sara Reisman:

And so you're taking this too, you're presenting this in a physical kind of manifestation at A.I.R. Gallery that will be on view from October 15th through November 16. Maybe before we look at that installation, you could talk a little bit about, there are two works. We have our exhibition coming up, *To Cast Too Bold A Shadow*, and I'll just say a little bit about it right now.

Sara Reisman:

It's an exhibition. It's the fourth in a series of exhibitions on kind of dealing with different forms of revolutionary action and activism in daily life. *And To Cast Too Bold A Shadow* is a quote from the late feminist poet Adrienne Rich, a poem called "Snapshots of A Daughter-in-Law". And so one of the things, well Aliza has two works in the exhibition. One is *Anatomy*, which is based on a piece called *Anthem* and then another artwork called *Homage*.

And maybe we want to go to, if William, you can show us an image from *Anatomy*. That's an artwork that in the form it will take up The 8th Floor. So maybe I can describe the pieces as I know it, but it's an artwork that indexes the kind of visual symbols that come, are drawn from rape kits, from different States across the United States.

So rape kits or evidence kits are used as a way of kind of understanding the kind of injury of somebody, who comes to the police, right? So you have these kits, but they vary from state to state. And there's this strange thing that it's like the body, the details of the body vary widely in ways that are problematic. But I think what you, I don't know, I don't want to say at all, it's, it's your work, but I think the piece is interesting because what you've done from, William if you could take us to the image of *Anthem*, that's an installation at Sculpture Center.

Aliza Shvarts:

That was [inaudible 00:58:36]. What you were just seeing was *Anthem*, which is the full kit. And then this is the mockup for *Anatomy*, which will be just the diagrams.

Sara Reisman:

Okay and so I think what's what I find interesting in these two works is that what you point to, at least in our conversations about the work is the idea that there's all kinds of information that is captured. So it's diagrams of the body, different parts of the body, which like I said, vary depending on what state you're in, but there's also this lack of acknowledgement or kind of recognition of what it means to be non binary, right? So in terms of gender identity, and there's also this lack of potential for consent to be tracked, because in a way that is sort of, that is the essence of why, like what's at stake with sexual assault, that consent has not been kind of right.

And so it's interesting that you've taken the version, the first version is *Anthem* and you have actually text-based documentation that these kits are kind of unfolded, people can look at them. And then you have a second version coming to The 8th Floor called *Anatomy*, and that's really just focusing on the form. Do you think there's any way that you've kind of moved in this direction away from language that has to do with what's happening in the world? Or like why do you think you're moving away from language with this piece?

Aliza Shvarts:

That's a good question, I mean, a lot of my work is really language based. The curator at the Art in General show Laura Ptak used to like to joke with me, like I like to torture people and make them read, which is true, I do like that. [crosstalk 01:00:17]

Sara Reisman:

Yeah I've read because of you.

Aliza Shvarts:

I mean that's the thing I can offer, but I think I became interested and I think I've always been interested in, not just language, but really the way that language acts on bodies. And there's a contradiction there because we think about bodies figure to representation as being non-linguistic or pre-linguistic and language being this kind of disembodied thing. But one of the, I'd say sort

of inherent propositions of performance theory is that those two things are intimately connected. Language is constitutive of actions and bodies and bodies themselves have the capacity to mean and signify that they, aren't pre-linguistic, but actually bound up within a system of representation.

So I first became interested in rape kits for lots of reasons. I've actually been working with them on and off for over 10 years. My Master's thesis in Performance Studies has a section on rape kits. But more recently I became interested in them thinking about them as sort of objects that contain somebody's speech they're objects of testimony they exist because they're meant to speak for an experience of a survivor, which the survivor, for many different reasons, but reasons that are all sort of bound up with structures of heteropatriarchy white supremacy, the survivor cannot testify to herself or is not believed when she does.

So it's transport forming this lived experience of the body into this more believable, more objective form of language and forensics. And yet exactly as you're saying, Sara, the very thing that cannot be contained within a rape kit, no matter how comprehensive they are, and all the different rape kits are quite different state to state, is the presence or absence of consent. Only the survivor themselves can testify to that. So in a lot of ways, no matter how good rape kits are, they always become redundant because the very thing that is the heart of the crime is something that they cannot speak to the reality of.

Sara Reisman:

Right.

Aliza Shvarts:

And then in making this, I started to get interested in the diagrams. They're very strange, a lot of them are quite abstracted. Most of them are, sort of cisgendered, have a strange amount of detail. A lot of them include very little detail, especially for an anatomical diagram that will include something like a hairstyle, which I think implicitly functions to code the body white. So they're also kind of moment of fabrication, the moment where your bodily experience becomes abstracted onto this form, which is meant to represent you but might have quite a few obstacles in the way of accurately representing you. So it's a kind of a moment of deep abstraction, which I would say verges on perhaps complete fabrication, the thing the kit is supposed to protect against.

So I think I moved into this kind of non-linguistic space as a way to understand this language of figuration and a lot of ways that's kind of what *Hotline* is about as well. This idea of speech being made to act on a body is what we see in forms like rape kits. We can think of them also as kinds of scores, they're scores that choreograph actually the action of two bodies, the body of the survivor and the body of the nurse practitioner, who's performing the exam. And in a lot of ways that kind of choreographic function of speech, that way that speech becomes something that incites the body to action or opens up avenues of action for the body is the very mechanism that makes *Hotline* work well, in quite a different way.

And in both situations, I think they give these kinds of systems of constraint. You are consenting

or not consenting to things, you are making choices in conditions, not of your choosing and actually conditions that you have no control over whatsoever. And in *Hotline* that hopefully happens in a kind of fun way that, is a sort of comical experience of the computer, but in *Anatomy* and in *Anthem*, both of these pieces dealing with rape kits, these are quite dire systems and those constraints are not necessarily something that you can see beforehand.

Sara Reisman:

Right, so you kind of touched on it, but *Hotline*, how does *Hotline* address consent? It's like we're given a set of constraints and we have to make choices within that, so-

Aliza Shvarts:

Yeah.

Sara Reisman:

somehow versus, I mean we're dialing up, so that's a form of consent in itself, right?

Aliza Shvarts:

Yeah, I think it's kind of a way where consent and complicity become blurred a little bit, call your game for this experience, the more you press buttons, the more you consent to go deeper and deeper. If you leave a message, it's said to you in the message that this will be used as documentation later, so please stay anonymous. So you consent to put your voice into the piece and to give me that content in some way, and you might not feel, I mean, hopefully it's fun and hopefully it's comical but you might feel friction in that process, much in the way that we feel friction when we call a customer service hotline and are choosing to be there and yet we, don't necessarily enjoy that experience or, there's friction in that experience. And yet nonetheless, we're complicit in the kind of maintenance of the system that causes us as the caller in that context.

Sara Reisman:

So we did have an image I think there's one more image to show. Yes so also in the exhibition, *To Cast Too Bold A Shadow*, is a piece that I love and I just finished writing the essay for the exhibition, which is why I'm a little bit vague right now, but until very early this morning, but this piece, *Homage*, for me is something I wish I've had throughout my life as an adult. Do you want to set it up Aliza or should I? [crosstalk 00:01:06:14].

Okay so this is, the title is *Homage* and it's an homage to Adrian Piper with her series of *Calling Cards*, which can be used essentially to call out a stranger who makes some presumption about a woman, a woman of color. Okay, so Adrian Piper made them, you can produce them for exhibitions, but they basically are a response to somebody who makes a racial slur or a sexist comment. It's a way of basically saying, "stay away" or "I heard what you said, and I hope that you didn't intentionally say something racist, but I have to point it out".

So these were made between 1986 and 1990, and I believe it's considered an ongoing series, but I only know of two of them. And so Aliza's *Homage* is an homage to Adrian Piper, but it's about the institution of marriage. And I think you can all see on the screen, the text that is printed on a

card. And so it's actually printed twice on the right, it'll be a kind of raised and embossed print. That'll be a takeaway in the exhibition and on the left is a clearer version of it just in bold face. So can you maybe tell us a little bit how you came up with this language and have you sent it in as an RSVP for a wedding invitation number?

Aliza Shvarts:

Nobody invites me to their weddings, so I haven't yet had the opportunity. Though I think the truly advanced move would be, you can take one of these at the exhibition, they're takeaways, so they're meant for you to have, but I think the truly advanced move to be is to send it, not just to weddings that you're invited to as a RSVP card or in lieu of the RSVP card, so it seems kind of nice you're giving them an artwork, but you know, it's also quite aggressive, but actually to send them to weddings that you are not invited to, but I have yet to do that, but I have ambitions one day to do it.

So the text itself very much mirrors the structure of Adrian Piper's *Calling Card Number One*. So it's the same kind of formatting and sort of break down as hers, but rather than talking about the structure of white supremacy and racism or the structure of heteropatriarchy as she experiences it and calling it out, it's talking about the structure and institution of marriage. So it's sort of framing this in a way that, and this is perhaps the homage part, it's a way of creating a moment of visibility where no visibility is offered and no sort of encounter is presumed. So when she would pass these out, it was a way of asserting herself, for example, with the case of *Calling Card Number One*, as a black woman, standing in a space inhabited by white people and she's quite light skinned, so often, and she says this in the card, she would not be recognized as a woman of color. So this is a way of asserting that no, no, no, a person of color heard you make that racist comment. And I am indeed here. So I started thinking about this kind of act of aggressive or insertive visibility as a queer person. When people invite you to their wedding they do it in good faith. They'd want you to celebrate, but actually marriage has a long history of really being a kind of economic institution premised on the subjugation of women. So there's lots of critiques of marriage about how privatized care and sort of all of the ways it wraps up into this social and economic unit, the kinds of reproductive care activities that we might otherwise ask the state or ask a broader community to perform.

So I thought that this was a funny way of asserting visibility around that as a queer person, and in a lot of ways it actually also I think still hinges on this relationship between language, the speech and action. What I love about Adrian Piper's piece is that it really centers on something called interpolation. So she calls you as a viewer. When she hands you that card, she calls you out. She's interpolated you into a live encounter with her where you have to see her, see her as a woman of color and grapple with what you said has repercussions, violent repercussions perhaps, on who she is on this person and body standing before you.

And in the same way, I think that this kind of interpolation is what happens in this mode of address of the card. So it's a kind of moment of visibility, but you could say a lot of ways interpolation is what happens when you call the hotline. When the hotline says you, a second person pronoun, it calls suddenly you into a live encounter where your body is suddenly implicated in this way that perhaps it wasn't before within this sort of structure of language.

Though again, even though this one is quite aggressive and it's also meant to be kind of funny. So this one is I'd say a hopefully more pleasurable chapter of that.

Sara Reisman:

Makes me happy. So I want to thank you, Aliza. We do have a question from Liz Powell who I'm going to ask if they can-

Liz Powell:

Hey, can you hear me?

Aliza Shvarts:

Yeah.

Sara Reisman:

Yes, it's fine.

Liz Powell:

Hi Aliza, it's great to hear about your work from the source. I have a question for you. So I associate accruing kind of a massive phone bill when calling these hotlines back in the '90s. I was wondering if maybe speak to the monetary and transactional cloud that can sometimes follow these relationships when you call these numbers, and you know maybe how that impacts not only the experience, but the expectations that a caller may have since it may mold more into a business transaction?

Aliza Shvarts:

That's a great question. And also brings up an important element of the hotline, which is that it is a toll free number. So in fact the service that I use... Well, not me actually. The 8th Floor is paying for that for us to use monthly. So when you call the hotline from wherever you are, and this is true also ideally if you're calling internationally, this is why sometimes it doesn't work and you have to use Skype. There's no charge that you incurring, it's free for you, it's toll free. But that of course is not the origin or the point of hotlines, especially I think in this moment in the late '80s and '90s when these really were kind of moneymaking mechanism. First there was 900 numbers then later there were 800 numbers where you would give a credit card.

And these were I think the kind of costs that vary correctly people who owned these numbers would speculate that people would pay for the cost of connection. It's something that we as consumers of these technologies in those moments, we're willing to exchange for this promise, which usually I think is the promise of fantasy, if you're thinking about sex hotlines, but with psychic hotlines is I think this promise of feeling our own power to call on something. That we can call and it can be met. It has an effect.

So even though my hotline is toll-free, it perhaps I think builds on that legacy of exchange. And certainly one thing that's free, but also not free is the investment of time. If you're having an experience with the hotline you're investing your time, you're spending time. The metaphor is we

have to even talk about time or monetary metaphors. And in a way I think telephonic technology really highlight for us that relationship between time and money. So it used to be that you would pay as a 900 caller or 800 caller for the hotline. You are not paying it, it's free, but certainly that exchange of value is still operative. And in some ways may be necessary for the experience to be meaningful.

Sara Reisman:

Well, I mean that's always the thing people say. It's like if you don't pay for it, it doesn't have value, but I'm not sure I agree with that, because you would be paying with time, if not money.

Aliza Shvarts:

Right. You invest.

Sara Reisman:

And so the transaction too, just to build on what Liz brought up is that you're asking people to leave a message at the end of the tree, sort of that branch as it were. And I wondered... well, first of all, if you've received any messages, I don't know if you would tell them, but if you could characterize them, it would be interesting to know what kind of messages people are leaving.

Aliza Shvarts:

Absolutely. So by far and away, the most popular kind of message is the message from the psychic hotline. And the psychic hotline, I won't go into too much detail, but it's focused on something called psychometry, which is this belief that you can read an object. You can touch an object and you can read, and it's energy, something about the person who used to have it, something about the life of that object. And there's lots of different ways people go about it, but what really interested me in psychometry is the fact that this is what we as artists do and what art historians do. We also believe that we can read an object, that you can find value in it, just by looking at it, touching it. You can know things that you did not know before.

So the psychic hotline messages have been really fantastic. People have been doing amazing psychometric readings of various objects at the prompting of the hotline. And I think that I didn't expect those to be the kind of most popular form, but it makes sense to me that they are because we're an art audience largely that are interacting with this. So even in this totally disembodied experience, we still get returned to that belief in the object. That the object has some kind of value in some kind of secret that we can know.

Sara Reisman:

So are there questions for Aliza from the audience? Okay. Nova. Hi Nova, how are you? You need to unmute.

Nova:

Hi.

Sara Reisman:

Hi. Great to hear you. I can't see you.

Nova:

Yes, I know. I'm completely in the dark here. It's like the lights are dimming, but thank you. That was amazing. And I have called the hotline a couple of times and I am a big chicken. So the first way that I did it was to say that I didn't know what I wanted. That was the choice that I made for the first time I called. And what did I do? I think I got to the point where I think it asked me... Please, correct me if I'm wrong, but it asked me, "Well, can you try to articulate it?" Or something like that. And I sort of said, "Well, I don't know." And then it's it ended with, well, there isn't really anything we can... that I can do for you or that we can do for you, but it was sort of like I affirm and respect you, but there's nothing I can do for you.

And I thought that was really interesting because my first experience with it was that it was 30 seconds long. I was like, Whoa, I got to the end. And it made me curious whether you had any kind of rules that you set out with for the writing of the text. This is not at all a critique. In fact, I thought it was really interesting, but I was sort of expecting it to be circular in this way that sometimes therapy kind of reflects things back at you and never says right or wrong and this kind of thing. So I was really curious about the places where it became... where it made decisions or it made statements or became sort of maybe more manifesto like even. I thought that was really fascinating. I'd just love to hear you talk about that.

Aliza Shvarts:

Yeah, absolutely. Yeah. And that's actually one of my favorite kind of... and probably one of the shortest pathways through is to get to the point where she just kind of gives up on you. And that's largely because there's only one thing, because you never reach a human, powering this hotline, which is you. It sounds like you're talking or can feel like you're talking to this computer to me via this computer in so far as I have told the computer what to say, but actually the only tangential entity navigating this is you. So really the whole thing is a kind of mirroring as a process of what you put into it. So in some ways, and actually someone has made the point to me too, that it's kind of like Lacanian analysis where you fill this silence with you, and you get neared back to you.

But unlike analysis, there's a limit. Sometimes it has to end. And I think that those moments where I built in these kinds of more abrupt, and in some ways quite capricious and punishing endings are the most fun because what happens there is something that your analyst isn't allowed to do, where they give up on you. The hotline can give up on you. If you're not putting anything in, if you're withholding, you can withhold up to a point, but at some point the bubble bursts and you get kicked out of the system. So there's a couple moments like that, where there's these dead ends, and they dead end in different ways. They're not all these cutoffs, but I think that those moments were really interesting for me to make, because I think it shows there are places where I could play with the limitation of mirroring.

Aliza Shvarts:

I could have done that... Probably I could have built in more things that would allow you to make more choices that reflect back to your choices. But there was something really fun about

removing the capacity for choice at a certain point. That at a certain point making a caller bear the consequence of a certain pattern of withholding, where they get kicked out of the whole system. So there's something kind of... I think in a lot of ways there's something personifying about that. It feels to me like it gives the hotline and kind of personality. She's moody, she'll kick you out if you don't put enough in.

Sara Reisman:

Giving her intelligence. So other questions? What I'll ask just in the meantime, is... so we have this artwork that's in the ether, it's on a phone line. And it maybe we'll have to test how many people can be on it at once. But I wonder what's the difference between... how is it going to be realized at a gallery? I think there was an image on screen at some point, but are there different features that would draw somebody to the physical space of the gallery?

Aliza Shvarts:

Yeah, that's a great question. I mean it's very much still in process figuring that out. And part of that process is trying to figure out what's possible in this moment of social distancing. There's certain limitations to how many people can be inside a space. There's certain limitations that I think are wise just set about what could be interacted with what could be touched. And with this piece, because it's relational, it's quite a harsh limitation because the desire I would have would be for people to be able to have this physical experience of picking up a phone, bringing it to their face. But I don't think that that's something that's quite wise in the moment. So a lot of the constraints of figuring this out as a physical space is to think about what the physical encounter can do, especially if you're alone in that physical encounter, which I think is... ideally you don't really want to be in there with a lot of other people that the piece itself does not accomplish as this thing in the ether, this hotline.

What are you seeing? What kind of site are you visiting when you go to the site of the installation? So the main thing that you get there, or what you will get there is the experience of being spoken back to. So that's the only place that you'll be able to hear the messages that people leave. So there's a kind of... In the same way that I think a telephone is itself about withholding information, withholding visual information for the sake of a voice, there's a way in which the installation itself is going to mirror that. So there's a withholding of information in the piece, which is that you won't be able to access these messages that people leave unless you physically visit the site. The way that it's installed, and you might've seen that image was the last one. It's not that. It's just a mock up so it's not that exciting.

It's probably going to be this sort of space of darkness. So again, there's going to be a withholding of visual information, but there is going to be, and I think this is what you get when you call a hotline, a kind of heightening of the effect of drama, a building of intensity, which I think spatially will happen by creating this darkened room that is lit by a red spotlight. So what you'll ideally encounter is you'll enter this dark and room. There'll be this red spotlight highlighting a red phone on a pedestal. One of those old fashioned hotline phones, the kind that we all imagine to be on the president's desk with the nuclear codes and whatever. And right now the concept is to have the phone receiver off of the cradle, and to replace the bottom of where you would speak into with a speaker.

So when you move physically close to the phone, that's when you can hear the messages of other people playing. So it's itself also this site of connection. It's one that demands proximity. You won't be able to hear it if you're standing in the doorway, you actually have to come close, but it's again a limited proximity. So it's not the experience of having it in your actual hand or moving it close to your body. But who knows what the constraints will be. I know that that was another fun element of getting this opportunity from The 8th Floor. It's a real constraint to try and figure out what interactive art looks like now, what performance looks like now, what social practice looks like now. All of these things which so many of us have understood is operating with certain things that we take for granted, like togetherness, are now really being challenged.

So that itself was really a fun puzzle to begin to work out. And I think in some ways looking to the technologies that are already available, it can be a good way to do that.

Sara Reisman:

We have time for one or two more questions. I see that Liz Powell has another question if there's not one more just looking around the Zoom room. So Liz's question has to do with voice, which I think is intriguing because Aliza, you just spoke about a speaker in the cradle of the phone. Liz, do you want to ask your question?

Liz Powell:

Yeah, sure. Sorry to take up all the question space. Aliza, I'm curious that that robot voice really hits an emotional note for me. It's robotic sometimes, but then there are hints of it being human in some of those moments of its inflection. So can you maybe just address how you decided how you wanted your voice to sound on the hotline?

Aliza Shvarts:

Yeah, so I knew I didn't want it to be my voice. I wanted it to be using the existing architectures that are already part of these systems. And sometimes in I think fancier systems there's more options for robot voice. Probably all of us have experimented with Google voice at some point, so you know you can do different accents and there can be different voices and things like that. This system only had two options, a masculine voice and a feminine voice. And actually, if you get into some of the depths of the hotline, there are some moments of the masculine voice. And there are some things, if you really get into some of the depths that aren't a voice at all but other kinds of bodily sounds that are recordings.

But I was really interested in playing with that constraint because presumably, and there's been a lot of writing about this, there's something about this kind of feminine voice that conveys some kind of sense of productivity to us. There's been a lot of writing about the feminization of the internet. And you can think about how all these voice activated technologies like Siri and Alexa. There's probably more I'm forgetting. There's a reason why we're comfortable with bossing robotic women around. It has to do with how we understand certain kinds of relationships between gender and power.

There's also a reason why sometimes masculine voices are used to convey a sense of authority, to

convey a sense of perhaps calmness to control. So I was interested in it. The piece gets into this a little bit more, I guess I can give it away. This isn't the sex hotline option for those of you interested in more of my thoughts on this, there's a way in which these voices, no matter what they're saying, are already telling us something in so far as they convey a kind of affect that we have a lot of presumptions around, and those presumptions have to do with the relationships between gender and power.

So I was really interested in using that as a constraint for the piece. It's also interesting that the technology that these things use has advanced a lot. I mean, for those of you who remember earlier robot voices from even five years ago, they didn't have nearly the inflection that they do now, and that's because the AI has really improved. At the same time it glitches a lot. It's not perfect. And I think those moments of glitching are also quite meaningful because it's the moment where we see a limitation. We know that what the voice is saying is saying it incorrectly. And it's in that moment, I think there's something that's kind of interesting produced. That we're the one who knows even though the voice is telling us this thing. So yeah, for me, it was a kind of productive constraint, but it speaks to I think a lot of the things I'm really interested in as a feminist artist, which is the ways in which voice, gender, power, all intersect in these often coded ways.

Sara Reisman:

So eventually we know that's your original framing of the talk.

Aliza Shvarts:

Yeah. And that's I'd say the interesting thing about the piece. The only thing you ever find out from a hotline or from my hotline at least is something you already know going in, even though you get to not know in the encounter.

Sara Reisman:

So we've just hit 7:30 and I think we're going to close the talk. Aliza, thank you so much for putting your work forward and for engaging in this commission, this invitation to make a new work. We're excited to see it play out over the next month and invite all of you to call, call early, call often, sort of like voting. Have a great night and hope to see you at our next event on September 22nd with Latasha N. Nevada Diggs. Thanks everyone.

Aliza Shvarts:

Thank you everybody. Thanks so much for coming. Bye.

Sara Reisman:

Bye.